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“Now it’s all simple:” Ideology and Solidarity in McKay’s Romance in Marseille

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Flynn, Reilly, "“Now it’s all simple:” Ideology and Solidarity in McKay’s Romance in Marseille" (2021). *MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference*. 1.
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“Now it’s all simple:” Ideology and Solidarity in McKay’s *Romance in Marseille*

Claude McKay’s radical novel *Romance in Marseille* prominently features a rag-tag cast of characters from a variety of backgrounds. Each of these characters, regardless of their race, sexual orientation, and disability status, hails from a class that is consistently marginalized and exploited. Through these shared class conditions, a strong sense of solidarity emerges. This solidarity is a crucial aspect of the day-to-day lived experience of each of the characters and comprises a key component of their survival strategies. Every individual expresses their survival strategy in the face of the oppressive and exploitative world differently, and the similarities and differences of them illuminate the complexities and difficulties of postcolonial diasporic African life. Through the seemingly disparate survival strategies in McKay’s *Romance in Marseille*, we see a retreat into communal solidarity, the cornerstone of which is a shared ideology rooted in the experience of post-colonial blackness.

To understand the various survival strategies in *Romance in Marseille*, it is important to define a few key terms and the ideas behind them. First, a *survival strategy* is the set of methods that an individual uses to exist in their social environment. The realities of colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation create a set of conditions that make life in McKay’s Marseille generally unpleasant and insecure. This, paired with the variety of backgrounds and identities of the various characters, leads to an array of different survival strategies. Each strategy has an attached *ideology*, or the lens through which a subject views the world around them and the subjective understanding of how one relates to that world. Marx crucially acknowledged that an individual’s ideology is defined by their external conditions, and when a group of people shares the same material reality, like the African diasporic community of *Romance in Marseille*, a shared ideology emerges (Engels 82). Ideology is critically a social phenomenon that often

manifests in *solidarity*. Here, *solidarity* refers to the common class experience that transcends superficial differences like race, gender, and sexuality. *Romance in Marseille* is particularly striking in its extremely inclusive vision of solidarity. A wide variety of different kinds of marginalized people engage in solidarity through song, sex, and social activity. In *Romance in Marseille*, ideology, solidarity, and the survival strategies are all intertwined and must be understood as responses to the shared realities of capitalistic dehumanization.

The most obvious manifestation of this capitalistic dehumanization in the novel is the omni-presence of sex work, and the relationships of the sex workers to each other and to their means of subsistence demonstrate how ideology manifests in people. In Quayside, sex is complicated because while it is certainly connected to love as seen in Aslima and Lafala's complicated relationship, it cannot be detached from its role as a commodity (Holcomb 188). This is clear from the ambiguity of Aslima's intentions regarding this relationship. Aslima is "one wonderful actor," and at various points in the novel deceives both Lafala and her brutal pimp Titin (McKay 50). The idea that women can never be trusted is repeated throughout precisely because of this blurring between professional and personal sex. Yet despite this law of Quayside, there is still great affinity between the sex workers and their clientele. Aslima and La Fleur, her rival, drink and dance with Lafala and his gang. In the very merry bar scene of chapter twenty-one, the admiration and affection for the sex workers, including Petit-Frère, is palpable and uncomplicated by their professions and sexualities. The inclusive solidarity of the sex-workers overcomes their professional competition. This is even true of La Fleur, who schemes against Aslima ostensibly out of the desire to neutralize a rival. La Fleur regrets her betrayal of her comrade in a show of solidarity, crying when her goal is realized (McKay 129). The sex workers of *Romance in Marseille* sustain a remarkable degree of solidarity that

transcends professional rivalry, and this is rooted in the shared unpleasant material conditions of life in Marseille.

If sex work, or the coerced participation in the dominant and exploitative economic order of Marseille, involves a class-conscious embrace of solidarity, then so too does recreationally indulging in sex work. Lafala's cohorts' participation in sex work cannot be explained as mere hedonism, but as a means of ideological subsistence within their cruel economic reality. Here, sex work shares a similar function to the consumption of alcohol, another ordinary activity in Marseille. The pursuit of pleasure and 'numbing' through commodified sex and alcohol is a coping mechanism for a lived experience defined by exploited labor and economic insecurity. This economic insecurity is clear in the cases of Rock and Diup, who are homeless, and the exploited labor presents itself in the case of Big Blonde, whose difficult work on the docks is physically taxing. In an "imperialist-capitalist society the black subject serves solely as a labor commodity" (Holcomb 182). This is most obvious in the case of Lafala himself who is directly compensated for the literal destruction of his body. Bodily pleasure is a natural response to the harsh conditions of everyday life in Marseille. This is not to say that these men do not directly exploit the sex workers with whom they engage. They benefit from a misogynistic hierarchy of exploitation in which women are dehumanized and commodified. Their participation in this sex work is ideological, and it is a physical manifestation of the ruling class ideology that seeks to divide desperate workers based on gender. This dominant ruling ideology is partially subverted through the inclusivity of the community (e.g. the catering to queer desires) and respect for the sex workers themselves, but the men who visit sex workers are nevertheless interpellated as concrete subjects who uphold the economic order which oppresses them (Althusser 173).

Romance in Marseille offers an alternative survival strategy to passive acceptance of oppressive economic orders. Etienne St. Dominique, an educated revolutionary from Martinique, is a revolutionary Marxist who understands the oppressive social structures which subjugate workers. Through this understanding, he seeks to end exploitation and bring about a new social order rooted in economic and racial equality. This revolutionary ideology is similar to the dominant ideology of the other characters. They both explain the subject's role in the socio-economic order and affect their physical actions, but St. Dominique's revolution offers hope as well as a comprehensive worldview. He reports "I was mixed up in all sorts of feelings before I found myself in this [revolutionary] work. Now it's all simple" (McKay 103). Here, St. Dominique's all-explaining and hope-offering ideology serves a similar function to the apparent hedonism of Lafala and his friends. Both state-sanctioned and subversive ideologies make daily life in an insecure environment more bearable. St. Dominique's base of operations is importantly called the Seamen's and Workers' Club. That name, and the few regular patrons of the club, demonstrate that community is a critical aspect to the practice of ideology. Shared ideology creates solidarity, and this solidarity differs from that explored previously in that it extends beyond class. The president of the Seaman's Club is of an entirely different class than the other characters. A former professor, he is white and middle-class, but his vision of a socialist future trumps this difference via their shared ideology. He tells Lafala that "Marx was a Jew but his vision transcended his race to become an ideal for all humanity" (76). This idealism is complicated by his overt racism, but even this racism acknowledges the importance of black labor and inclusion toward the realization of his revolution. Through the presentation of communist ideologies in *Romance in Marseille*, the notion that shared ideology engenders inclusive solidarity as a survival strategy is strengthened.

The most confounding character to understand through this ideological solidarity model is St. Dominique's friend Falope Sbaye. A "reactionary as always" as St. Dominique affectionately calls him (78), Falope completely rejects his friend's Marxism. He has little respect for working people, especially Africans like himself. He reportedly "gets on better with the bosses than the workers every time," and he is quite proud of the "Arab and Portuguese blood in his family" (75, 78). Falope here seems to be emulating white oppressors. He distances himself from other Africans who are less integrated into the colonial system, and through his clerical work in West African trade, he facilitates exploitative colonial processes. Falope might be compared to the early Senegalese soldiers or other native administrators described in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. These colonial subjects are partially brought into the colonial fold to expedite colonial exploitation, and through this process they become neither fully African nor European. The psychological consequences of this limbo state are devastating and leave the subjects socially isolated and dehumanized (Fanon 84). Similarly, Falope has difficulty connecting to others and does not fully participate in the celebratory solidarity previously described. He challenges the accepted respect for sex workers when he says to Lafala "pardon me for butting into your private affair, but you don't seem to have any idea of your proper position... how could you think of taking a girl like Aslima back to Africa now? You ought to have a colored woman that can stand up against the best European women" (McKay 113). This quote is a nice encapsulation of Falope's character. With his rude interruption, he demonstrates his difficulties relating to other characters socially. Additionally, his assertion that sex workers are less desirable than other women goes against the general beliefs of the wider community. His preference for European women is also consistent with his desire to integrate more into white culture (Fanon 65). This aim is ultimately pointless because with his dark skin he can

never be fully accepted within white polite society (69). Falope is a fine example of how subversive practices like inter-racial inclusive solidarity are undermined by dominant ideology in order to maintain a hierarchical arrangement of social life.

Each survival strategy seen in Claude McKay's *Romance in Marseille* is fundamentally rooted in a shared ideology that arises from the individuals' collective material reality. Despite differences of race, sexuality, and disability status, common location and class reality triumph to create a lively community. With its emphasis on love, acceptance, and fun, this community is quite beautiful despite the harsh, cut-throat world which brought it about. Yet *Romance in Marseille* is not merely a happy celebration of the strength and liveliness of diasporic Black communities. The novel ends in tragedy as the company is broken up by the cruel realities of capitalist life. Lafala's departure, as St. Dominique points out, is not an option for most others, and his decision to leave directly brings the death of his beloved Aslima, and St. Dominique's idealistic revolutionary vision remains unfulfilled. *Romance in Marseille* portrays the breakdown of solidarity, through which it shows that survival strategies are merely coping mechanisms that numb the subject into acceptance of the harsh realities of the modern world.

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