Etheridge Knight and Shane McCrae: A Comparison of the Theme of Poetry as a Means to Freedom from Imprisonment in Two African American Poets

Etheridge Knight and Shane McCrae: A Comparison of the Theme of Poetry as a Means to Freedom from Imprisonment in Two African American Poets

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Abstract

This thesis will compare two contemporary African American poets, Etheridge Knight and Shane McCrae, and compare their respective treatments of the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment? We attempt to answer this question by demonstrating: how each poet uses poetry to describe imprisonment from a different perspective; how each poet focuses on certain aspects of imprisonment; and how each poet's work may or may not be a liberating force against the prisons they describe. We examine how racism and white supremacy in America factor into the nature of the prison for these poets. We look at Knight's *Poems from Prison* (1968) which provides a realistic view of prison life in the 1960s and McCrae's *In the Language of My Captor* (2017) which fictionalizes the historical persona of Ota Benga, who was a Mbuti man imprisoned in a cage with orangutans and put on display at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. We argue that, for these poets, and in these works, poetry provides only limited liberation from imprisonment.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Catherine Rhodes was born in New York City. She is a lifelong learner and a prolific but, as yet, unpublished poet. Rhodes matriculated from Gordon College in Wenham, MA, where she majored in Political Science and graduated magna cum laude. After college, Catherine worked as a computer programmer and progressed through her career to Information Systems Program Manager. She has provided leadership on several large, complex technology projects for many prestigious clients, including California Institute of Technology, Jet Propulsion Labs (NASA), and Harvard University. She looks forward to receiving her master's degree and to walking in her crimson cap and gown in May 2024. She is also proud that this publication will enter the annals of esteemed scholars at Harvard.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Michael, my grandchildren Kaileigh and Mikey, my nephew Mikey, and to my family who have supported me in this effort over the past many years, particularly my beloved mother, Rita, and my siblings, Susie and Tommy, who passed this year, but whom I know will be watching me graduate in May.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Poetry's power is both local and limitless — it happens person by person, but it often reverberates in and through each person in such a way that the people poetry happens with (it's always with, never to) become new people, and whatever they do next and forever they do as new people.

—Shane McCrae[1]

This thesis will compare two contemporary African American poets, Etheridge Knight and Shane McCrae, in order to determine their respective treatments of the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment? We will attempt to answer this question by demonstrating: 1) how each poet uses poetry to describe imprisonment from a distinct perspective; 2) how each poet focuses on certain aspects of imprisonment; and 3) how each poet's work may or may not be a liberating force against the prisons they describe. The comparison of the works of these two poets is important because it helps us to understand the perceptions of African American poets regarding the power of poetry to help achieve freedom from imprisonment and to understand the nature of the prisons they describe in their works.

[1] Quoted from an interview with Cate Lycurgus.

First, we will demonstrate that Knight provides an implicit perspective on imprisonment from first-hand, personal experience that he gained while incarcerated in an American state penitentiary in the 1960s and how his readers can experience the effects of his speakers' imprisonment implicitly through Knight's poetic descriptions. We will compare Knight's perspective with McCrae's to show that McCrae provides an explicit perspective of imprisonment from the vantage point of a historical persona, and this poet then draws the reader into the persona's prison through his use of form, so that the reader can experience imprisonment explicitly, in the same manner as McCrae's captive speaker.

Secondly, we will demonstrate that Knight focuses on the aspects of imprisonment that illustrate the harsh realities of imprisonment in America in the 1960s. He focuses on the aspects of prison that give the reader a true sense of the ugliness, suffering, loneliness, and violence that prisoners face behind the concrete and iron that pens them in. We will then compare Knight's rendered aspects of imprisonment with examples from McCrae's poetry, which depict the loss of personal freedoms, such as loss of identity, loss of privacy, loss of family, and loss of language that his historical persona experiences as a human forced to live inside a monkey cage in a zoo. While Knight's depictions provide a look into the real life of an American prison and shares graphic and realistic images of the horrors of imprisonment as well as glimpses into Knight's personal fight against racism, McCrae offers a view of racism and white supremacy from a fictionalized rendering of the thoughts of a Mbuti man who actually was caged with orangutans in the 1900s in New York City. McCrae's portrayal of the prison focuses on an intellectual engagement with the reader so that the reader can ascertain the nature of

the prison through immersion in the language that McCrae uses to describe the historical persona's struggles.

Finally, we will compare and contrast how each poet's work may or may not be a liberating force against the prisons they describe. We will demonstrate that Knight's work does not offer a clear escape from imprisonment, rather, scholarship falls on both sides of the argument, and, though his poetry does offer momentary freedom from the horrors of prison through the imagination, this freedom is hard-won and fleeting. We will then look to McCrae's work, which, not unlike Knight's, demonstrates that poetry can provide only a hope of freedom from imprisonment, and this freedom is not guaranteed. Freedom, for McCrae's captive, takes the form of the reader's increased knowledge of this incident of racism and white supremacy from the past.

As a result of this analysis, our claim is that, based on the works we have examined and their associated scholarship, for Knight and McCrae, poetry can be a liberating force, but any freedom afforded by poetry is constrained. Consequently, their poetry provides only limited liberation.

A Note on Thesis Structure

As to the structure of this thesis, we will look first at Etheridge Knight and then at Shane McCrae. For Knight, we will provide a detailed background, an analysis of some of the wealth of scholarship available on his poetry, and a close reading of select poems from his collection, *Poems from Prison*, chosen because Knight wrote the collection of poems while incarcerated, and they provide perspective on the nature of imprisonment and poetry's potential to provide freedom through the imagination. We will then turn to Shane McCrae and describe his background. Because McCrae is a contemporary author,

publishing only within the last 20 years, scholarship consists largely of book reviews and interviews. Hence, we will review several published interviews that McCrae has participated in, in order to provide an understanding of him as a contemporary poet and his views on poetry. These interviews also provide an understanding of how McCrae constructs his poetry and discusses his use of historical personae and his use of form, which are key to our close reading of his poetry. We will then perform a close reading of poems from the first section of his collection, *In the Language of My Captor,* chosen because they depict imprisonment and the potential ability for poetry to provide escape through a fictional portrayal of the historical persona of Ota Benga, a South African Mbuti man, who was imprisoned inside of a monkey cage and put on display in New York City in the early 1900s. We will then look at scholarship on McCrae to expand our understanding of the nature of the prison in McCrae's work.

Finally, we will compare and contrast the two poets' treatment of the topic: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment?

Chapter II.

Etheridge Knight

In this chapter on Etheridge Knight, we will provide: 1) a detailed background on the poet; 2) an analysis of some of the wealth of scholarship available on his poetry; and 3) a close reading of select poems from his collection, *Poems from Prison*, chosen because Knight wrote them while incarcerated, and they provide first-hand experience of the nature of imprisonment and poetry's potential to provide freedom from the agonies of prison. We will describe Etheridge Knight's treatment of the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment? We will do this by showing: 1) his perspective when using poetry to describe imprisonment; 2) the nature of his prison and some of the aspects of imprisonment that he describes in this work; and 3) his conclusions on how poetry may or may not be a liberating force against the confines of prison.

First, let us present a background on Etheridge Knight.

Background on Etheridge Knight

Etheridge Knight was an African American poet who was born in Mississippi in 1931. He grew up during the time of segregation in America. His mother was a poet and songwriter who was educated in the fine arts. His father worked as either a construction worker or a railroad worker and moved around Kentucky and Indiana to find work. Knight maintained an 'A' average and was the valedictorian of his junior high school class (Collins, *Understanding Etheridge Knight* 3). Although he was a brilliant student,

Knight dropped out of school and joined the Army in 1947. He was deployed to Korea where he suffered an injury and became addicted to drugs and alcohol and was discharged in 1957. After leaving the Army, Knight used heroin and began to commit crimes (Premo 248). He was "incarcerated for armed robbery in the Indiana State Prison for eight years, from 1960 to 1968" (Collins, "The Antipanopticon of Etheridge Knight" 580). There, he wrote poetry and published *Poems from Prison* in 1968. He continued to write books of poetry after he was released from prison, publishing a total of five books. A book of unpublished poems was published posthumously in 2022, *The Lost Etheridge*. Knight received numerous literary awards. He received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and also from the National Endowment for the Arts. He earned the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America for his achievements in poetry. Etheridge Knight struggled with his addition to heroin until his death at age 59.

During the 1960s and 1970s in America, a social movement known as the Civil Rights Movement formed as a call to action against racism, segregation, and inequality for Blacks in America (Andrews 470). That social movement fostered a literary movement referred to by scholars as the Black Arts Movement, which, in turn, initiated the concept of the Black Aesthetic. This historical and cultural period saw the advent of the Black artist as painter, sculptor, musician, author and poet. Etheridge Knight was a major poet of this time (Andrews 471). He was a proponent of the Black Aesthetic, which propounded a call to radical, social activism from African Americans through all available and newly created literary channels (Baraka 5). A prolific poet and speaker, Etheridge Knight's strong body of work offers a view into his perspective on poetry and imprisonment and the ability of poetry to provide freedom from imprisonment.

As stated above, we will now turn to an examination of the scholarly literature available on Etheridge Knight to glean scholars' findings on Knight's perspective towards our thesis question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment?

Scholarly Literature on Etheridge Knight

In this section we will look at the wealth of scholarly literature published on Etheridge Knight in order to shed light on the two questions stated above: 1) what can we glean from scholarship on the aspects of imprisonment that Etheridge Knight shares in his works; and 2) what can we learn from scholarship regarding Knights perspective on the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment?

Let us look at the nature of Knight's prison.

Aspects of Imprisonment Identified in Scholarly Literature

First, let us examine scholarship that discusses Knight's attempt to use poetry to seek freedom from social injustice against the Black man in America. As Michael Collins points out in his book, *Understanding Etheridge Knight*, "Knight's most obsessive theme … is not incarceration but the all-American one of freedom." "[Knight] aimed to create a revolution in American thought, warped as it is by conceptual survivals from the age of slavery." In Collins' treatment of Knight's poem, "Things Awfully Quiet in America (Song of the Mwalimu Nkosi Ajanaku)," he explains that "Knight is writing here of a revolution in correctional culture. He wants to raise a "Ruckus" that will shout down the culture's quiet, half-conscious endorsements of the killing of "our sons … [i]n the many, many prisons in America," a ruckus in which the oldest equation —"Power equals Law equals Right as defined by whoever has got the guns" — no longer holds"

(*Understanding Etheridge Knight* 2). In his article, "The Literature of the American Prison," author H. Bruce Franklin, who describes America as a "prison house of the Black nation[,]" (60) explains Knight's poem, "For Freckle-Faced Gerald," as "expressing a broad political vision." Gerald, a Black prisoner who is the victim of prison rape, is a "victim, defined as the criminal, [who] literally lies crushed at the bottom of U.S. society" (71). As Steven Tracy points out in his article, "A MELUS Interview: Etheridge Knight," Knight said, "Poetry in the world, all art, is essentially revolutionary because it essentially appeals to freedom" (17). This analysis serves to define the nature of the Knight's prison as one that involves racism.

In continuation of this theme, other scholars have identified in Knight's work that he views prisoners as slaves, cut off from their past. David Seelow, in his examination of "The Idea of Ancestry" poem, claims that the poem "establishes a boundary between prison and the world" and that Knight equates prisoners to slaves (161). Eugene Redmond concurs with Seelow, explaining that Knight is cut off from the future and the past in the same poem (Redmond 385–6). Lauri Ramey also agrees, stating that, as a prisoner, Knight's speaker in this poem is cut off from his past and can only "imagine" his ancestors (226). Another scholar, Steven C. Tracy, extends this scholarship in a published interview with Knight wherein he quotes Knight's description of imprisonment as "a very oppressive, painful, alienating world. You've been, not exiled, you've been in-ziled. You've been cut off from your community" (Tracy 21). Therefore, this evidence demonstrates that these scholars find that one of Knight's most acclaimed poems establishes a slave-like separation from one's past and one's family as key elements of imprisonment that Knight includes in his collection, *Poems from Prison.*

An additional aspect of imprisonment that we find in scholarship on Knight is from Michael Collins. In his book, *Understanding Etheridge Knight,* Collins observes that Knight defined freedom as the "ability to choose among possible futures" in his poem, "Freckle-Faced Gerald" (53). Collins furthers his claim by quoting "The Innocents," wherein the poet describes the character Peck's "destruction of … possible futures" due to his prison sentence of life in prison (55). From Collins' analysis, we surmise that imprisonment, for Knight, included the aspect of the inability to determine one's own future.

Thus, based on the scholarship of the above-mentioned scholars, we have identified two aspects of imprisonment that can be attributed to Knight's poetry. First, they observed that a slave-like separation from one's past, one's family, and one's community are key aspects of imprisonment found in Knight's poetry, and second, they found that the inability to determine one's own future is a key aspect of imprisonment found in Knight's poetry.

Let us now turn to our second question for this section., does scholarship on Knight provide any insight into the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment?

Scholarship on Whether Poetry Can Provide Freedom From Imprisonment

In this section, we will examine scholarship on Etheridge Knight's poetry that will shed light on Knight's perspective on whether poetry can provide an escape from imprisonment. First, we will examine scholarship that holds that Etheridge Knight's work shows that poetry *does* afford an escape from imprisonment. Then we will look at

scholarship that supports the opposing argument: Knight's work shows that poetry can be a liberating force, but it has its limits.

First, we will discuss scholarship that argues that Knight's poetry can provide freedom from imprisonment.

Poetry Can Provide Freedom From Imprisonment

The first scholar who states that Knight's poetry *does* provide freedom from imprisonment is Patricia Liggins Hill, who expresses in "The Violent Space: The Function of the New Black Aesthetic in Etheridge Knight's Prison Poetry" that, "Knight's prison poetry … liberates the minds and spirits of his readers, and of his people as a whole" (119). Hill's observation that Knight's poetry provides "liberation" suggests that Knight's poetry can provide freedom from imprisonment since liberation equates to freedom. Another scholar, Cassie Premo, agrees with Hill's conclusion that Knight is able to escape his prison walls through his poetry in her reference entry entitled, "Knight, Etheridge," in *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, "[T]he theme of prisons imposed from without (slavery, racism poverty, incarceration) and prisons from within (addiction, repetition of painful patterns) are countered with the theme of freedom. His poems … testify to the fact that we are never completely imprisoned" (248). Premo also claims that one of Knight's poetic characters attains "freedom of consciousness that persists in spite of prison" in "He Sees Through Stone." She refers here to Knight's speaker, who describes an elderly man who still keeps his "vision — ability to think, imagine, and dream" even though he is serving what appears to be a life sentence (248). She goes on to say, "Knight died at age 59 from lung cancer, yet through his poetry, he continues to testify to the power of freedom, and human

capacity to envision it even while in prison" (248). Premo's and Hill's observations regarding the ability of Knight's poetic characters to attain freedom despite their various forms of imprisonment support the argument that Knight's poetry can be a liberating force.

Thus, we have demonstrated scholarship that finds that Knight's poetry can provide freedom from imprisonment. Now, let us look at opposing views in scholarship regarding this topic.

Poetry Cannot Provide Freedom From Imprisonment

The first scholar we will look at who finds that Knight's poetry *does not* provide freedom from imprisonment is Michael Collins. In his book, *Understanding Etheridge Knight*, Collins indicates that in Knight's poem, "Hardrock," from *Poems from Prison,* Knight provides "a chronicle … of an antibirth: of a permanent walling up of any possibility of psychological or spiritual rebirth, or any sort of emergence from prison" (99). Collins also states that Knight was "on the run from a concentric set of prisons designed to keep black males like himself away from a proper set of opportunities" (55). Collins' observations suggest that imprisonment is a permanent, inescapable condition.

A second scholar who agrees with Collins' position that Knight did not portray poetry as a means of freedom from imprisonment is Jean Anaporte-Easton, who states in her article, "Etheridge Knight: Poet and Prisoner. An Introduction," that Knight never fully succeeded in gaining freedom from incarceration (944). Quoting an interview that Knight participated in with Charles H. Rowell, Anaporte-Easton states that, even after he left jail, Knight still viewed himself as a prisoner, and she includes a quote from Knight, who said, "In all the real senses, I am still a prisoner" (944). She interprets Knight's

words to signify that he was still a prisoner to "cultural assumptions and values" and an "interior emptiness[,]" and that "poetry could not save him" despite "his own commitment to poetry as a means of social and spiritual healing" (941-3). Anaporte-Easton's observations that Knight did not achieve freedom from many forms of imprisonment speaks to whether or not Knight himself ever achieved freedom from imprisonment. However, her conclusions also support the argument that poetry is not liberating force, because, from her perspective, despite the fact that he was a renowned poet, his poetry could not provide freedom from imprisonment for him. Therefore, both Anaporte-Easton's and Collins' arguments support the claim that poetry cannot provide freedom from imprisonment.

In conclusion, per our review of scholarship, there appears to be evidence on both sides of the argument as to whether poetry has the power to provide freedom from imprisonment. Some scholars find that Knight's poetry does afford freedom from imprisonment. Others, however, find that Knight's poetry does not provide freedom from imprisonment.

In conclusion, based on the scholarship investigated above, we claim that, as it relates to the poetry of Etheridge Knight that these scholars have discussed, poetry is a liberating force, but it has limits. Poetry does provide some escape, but this freedom is ultimately impermanent. Also, we find that the nature of the prison for Knight includes aspects of racism and social injustice.

Let us now turn to a close reading of Etheridge Knight's poetry in attempt to shed additional light on the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment?

Close Reading of Etheridge Knight's Poetry

As stated above, this section will examine Knight's treatment of the theme of imprisonment through a close reading of a specific primary source, namely, Knight's *Poems from Prison* (1968). This critically acclaimed publication showcases the poetry Etheridge Knight wrote while he was incarcerated in Indiana State Prison. *Poems from Prison* is Knight's first published book of poems. We will perform a close reading of "To Gwendolyn Brooks," "To Make a Poem in Prison," and "Apology or Apostacy?" Our close reading will expand the scholarly literature and arguments we have touched on thus far, by discussing: 1) Knight's unique perspective on the theme of imprisonment; 2) the nature of the prison and the aspects of imprisonment discussed by Knight in the selected poems; and 3) how these poems contribute to the discussion of whether poetry may provide freedom from imprisonment. We will also touch on poems that show Knight's fight against racism.

First, we will discuss Knight's unique perspective on the theme of imprisonment. As discussed earlier, Knight was in jail for eight years in the Indiana State Prison (Collins, "The Antipanopticon of Etheridge Knight" 580). Knight's experience as a convict in a maximum-security prison placed him in the unfortunate position of having first-hand knowledge of the horrors of imprisonment. In the following close reading, we will see aspects of imprisonment through Knight's speakers' eyes, which Knight wrote while seeing similar things with his own eyes. Readers of this poetry, therefore, experience the world of incarceration implicitly through Knight's speakers' personal experiences, which are reflected in the following poetic descriptions of life behind bars.

Next, we will look at the three poems mentioned above to ascertain both the aspects of imprisonment that the poet, Etheridge Knight, describes in the poems and how these poems contribute to the discussion of whether poetry may provide freedom from imprisonment.

First, let us look at the poem:

TO GWENDOLYN BROOKS

O Courier on Pegasus. O Daughter of Parnassus!
O Splendid woman of the purple stich.

When beaten and blue, despairingly we sink
Within obfuscating mire,
Oh, cradle in your bosom us, hum your lullabies
And sooth our souls with kisses of verse
That stir us on to search for light.

O Mother of the world. Effulgent lover of the Sun!
Forever speak the truth. (30)

In this poem, Etheridge Knight is expressing that poetry can bring escape to those who are imprisoned. With the words, "soothe our souls with kisses of verse" the speaker lauds the soothing role that poetry plays for him. In the next line, the speaker states that the poetry will "stir us on to search for light." Knight's speaker is suggesting that poetry, presumably the poetry of Ms. Brooks, "stir[s] us" — the incarcerated prisoners inside the jail cells — to seek "light." Light is the opposite of darkness, the opposite of the "despair" that the speaker describes in line 3, and the opposite of the "obfuscating mire" of line 4.

The images in lines 4–6 of the "cradle in your bosom" and the "hum" of "lullabies" bring to mind a mother holding her baby and rocking him to sleep with her quiet song. The meter of these three lines is largely iambic, striking a gentle rocking rhythm that

matches the rocking action of the imagery. The dominance of the "s" sounds in "bosom," "us," "lullabies," "soothe," "souls," "kisses," "verse," "stir," "us," and "search," all contribute to the poet's purpose of expressing the "sooth[ing]" power of poetry.

This close reading of Knight's poem, "To Gwendolyn Brooks," supports the argument that poetry can provide freedom from the pains of imprisonment because it demonstrates that, even while imprisoned, one who listens to poetry can see beyond the "despair" and "search for light." Let us look at a second poem:

HE SEES THROUGH STONE

He sees through stone
he has the secret eyes
this old black one
who under prison skies
sits pressed by the sun
against the western wall
his pipe between purple gums

the years fall
like overripe plums
bursting red flesh
on the dark earth

his time is not my time
but I have known him
in a time gone

he led me trembling cold
into the dark forest
taught me the secret rites
to make it with a woman
to be true to my brothers
to make my spear drink
the blood of my enemies

now black cats circle him
flash white teeth
snarl at the air
mashing green grass beneath
shining muscles
ears peeling his words

he smiles
he knows
the hunt the enemy
he has the secret eyes
he sees through stone (13)

Here, we see that the syntax in this poem helps to provide a sense of never ending or boundlessness. Only the first word of the poem is capitalized, and then Knight employs no punctuation whatsoever. This lack of punctuation also evokes a sense of nothing holding the words in, which contributes to a sense of freedom. The speaker is observing an elderly, toothless, Black prisoner, "the old black one[,]" who is being harassed by young Black prisoners, the "black cats[.]" They "circle him" and "snarl" at him. The speaker "knows" that the elderly man "knows the hunt … the enemy[.]" This indicates an omniscient speaker who knows what the elderly man is thinking. The elderly prisoner smiles, which is the antithesis of the reaction most people would have when they are at a disadvantage in a potential altercation. The old prisoner's smile suggests that he has escaped from his current situation, albeit only in his mind. The speaker says that the elderly prisoner "sees through stone[.]" Therefore, the speaker is implying that the prison walls do not contain the elderly man. Therefore, in this example of Knight's poetry, the poet seems to be successful in utilizing poetry to provide a means of freedom from imprisonment through the imagination, which is a limited liberation.

Let us look at a third poem:

TO MAKE A POEM IN PRISON

It is hard
To make a poem in prison.
The air lends itself not
To the singer.
The seasons creep by unseen
And spark no fresh fires.

Soft words are rare, and drunk drunk
Against the clang of keys;
Wide eyes stare fat zeroes
And plead only for pity.

But pity is not for the poet;
Yet poems must be primed.
Here is not even sadness for singing,
Not even a beautiful rage rage,
No birds are winging. The air
Is empty of laughter. And love?
Why, love has flown,
Love has gone to glitten. (19-20)

Looking at the rhythm of this poem, we find that a number of the lines begin with a stressed syllable. The lines are of differing lengths, between 3 and 10 syllables. The trochaic nature of the rhythm provides a sense of hardness or toughness, and the lack of consistency in the line length dispels any sense of songlike qualities. In the poem's diction, we see the repetition of the words, "rage" and "drunk." This indicates that the speaker's focus is on some of the terrible aspects of prison life. Also, the beginning sounds of most of the poem's words are the hard sounds of "c" and "g" and "L" and "t." This diction also gives the poem a sense of grittiness and unpleasantness. This trochaic rhythm, the widely varying line lengths, and Knight's diction project a sense of disharmony and discord throughout the poem.

In contrast, however, in the last word of the poem, "glitten," we see a turning away from the overall grit of the poem expressed prior to this point. The word, "glitten," appears to be a made-up word, a flight of fancy, so to speak. This divergence from the conventions of the language suggests that the speaker is escaping the unpleasant realities of his confinement through the pleasant properties of this example of poetry. The message of this poem is reflected in the first line, "It is hard / To make a poem in prison."

However, the outcome of the poem is that, despite how hard or gritty prison life is, the author was able to create this poem while in prison. The close reading of this poem supports the argument that poetry can be a liberating force, but it has its limits.

Let us look at a third poem from Knight's *Poems from Prison*:

> APOLOGY for APOSTASY?
>
> Soft songs, like birds, die in poison air
> So my song cannot now be candy.
> Anger rots the oak and elm; roses are rare,
> Seldom seen through blind despair.
>
> And my murmur cannot be heard
> Above the din and damn. The night is full
> Of buggers and bastards; no moon or stars
> Light the sky. Any my candy is deferred
>
> Till peacetime, when my voice shall be light,
> Like down, lilting in the air; then shall I
> Sing of beaches, white in the magic sun,
> And of moons and maidens at midnight. (30)

In this poem, Knight poses a question in the title, "Apology for Apostasy?" One could read "Apostasy" here as a metaphor for abandoning the creation of poetry. Although poetry is a "[s]oft song," the speaker must apologize or explain that he cannot sing or write poetry all the time. Instead, there are times when he must abandon poetry. During times of anger or despair, the words cannot come. During the dark prison nights, "full / Of buggers and bastards[,]" the speaker's "voice" is silenced. His "candy" is deferred. One can read the use of the word "candy" as a metaphor for the creation of or recitation of poetry, "So my song cannot now be candy" could be read as the speaker's words cannot be sweet at this time. The sweetness of his song, is "deferred[,]" and the "lilting" "soft[ness]" can only return when "peacetime" comes. Only then can the speaker "[s]ing[,]" and only then can his "voice" be heard "lilting in the air[.]"

The meter of this poem reflects the message of the poem, that is, that poetry can provide escape from imprisonment, although this escape may be delayed. The beginning of the poem is trochaic or forceful, but as the poem progresses, it moves away from the trochaic or caustic meter to end on an iambic or soft, rhythmic meter. The first four lines, which make up the first stanza, each begin with trochaic meter, stressing the first syllable of each line. The entirety of each of these four lines then continue in a trochaic rhythm. In this first stanza, Knight's speaker is lamenting the death of "[s]oft songs" amidst the "poison air" and the depths of "blind despair" within the prison. The first two tough-sounding stanzas are followed by the last and more pleasant stanza. In this last stanza, we find "light" and "beaches" and sunshine and "magic." As we can see, in this poem, Knight showcases a dichotomy of sound, first rough, then soft. This dichotomy reflects the message of the poem, which is that sometimes poetry or softness can win out over the roughness of prison although that escape may be delayed.

Knight offers juxtapositions for the eyes, the ears and the nose in this short poem. For the eye, the reader first witnesses complete darkness in the "night" with no "moon or stars" to "[l]ight the sky." He then juxtaposes the black night with the "white … magic sun" and "moons … at midnight" of the final two verses. For the ear, the reader first hears a loud cacophony of "din and damn" that drowns out the speaker's "murmur" of "songs[.]" The poem then ends with the speaker's "voice … light, / Like down, lilting in the air" and "sing[ing.]" Finally, Knight evokes the reader's sense of smell, which is first assaulted with the "poison air" that kills the "birds" that enter the prison walls. Yet, at the end of the poem the author calls to mind the beach, which can conjure a more welcoming scent.

Knight's diction in the poem emphasizes a struggle between opposing viewpoints. He employs negative words such as "poison," "rot," "despair," "dim," "damn," "buggers," and "bastards" and juxtaposes these with more positive words, such as, "soft," "songs," "roses," "beaches," and "maidens." This juxtaposition further enhances the natural struggle that is the theme of the poem: sometimes one can escape the reality of prison through poetry, and sometimes one cannot.

All of the juxtapositions of human senses depicted in the poem enhance the opposing viewpoints on the topic: there are times when poetry can offer solace and a form of escape with songs of "beaches" and "maidens at midnight," however, there are times when poetry cannot provide any solace at all. The writing itself of this poem, written as it was within the walls of prison, is wrought with struggle between the senses, the diction, and the meter. The poem, then, explains that even the poet must abandon his "candy[,]" his poetry, under the weight of all that would fight against it in prison. Yet, Knight did produce this highly acclaimed poem amid and despite the terrible environment that he had to endure. Therefore, the very existence of the poem challenges the poet's well-wrought "Apology" and proves that a prisoner can produce great poetry in prison. At the opening of this collection of poetry, in "Cell Song," Knight's speaker asks, "[C]an there / anything good come out of / prison[?]" (11). Here, in the last poem of the collection, Knight answers his initial question, which is ironically titled as a question, "Apology for Apostasy?" by showcasing to his readers the good that has come from prison: the "sweet" "candy" of poetry, which offers a form of escape, a momentary freedom, from the horrors of imprisonment (30).

Next, we will explore three poems from *Poems from Prison* that point to Knight's support for the Black Aesthetic, which supported a call to action against racism, segregation, and inequality for Blacks in America (Baraka 5).

FOR MALCOM, A YEAR LATER

Compose for Red a proper verse;
Adhere to foot and strict iam;
Control the burst of angry words
Or they might boil and break the dam.
Or they might boil and overflow
And drench me, drown me, drive me mad.
So swear no oath, so shed no tear,
And sing no song Blue Baptist sad.
Evoke no image, stir no flame,
And spin no yarn across the air.
Make empty anglo tea lace words—
Make them dead white and dry bone bare.

Compose a verse for Malcolm man,
And make it rime and make it prim.
The verse will die—as all men do—
But not the memory of him!
Death might come singing sweet like C,
Or knocking like the old folk say,
The moon and the stars may pass away,
But not the anger of that day. (27)

In this poem, Knight is eulogizing Malcom X, a famous African American spokesperson against oppression of Blacks in the 1960s who was assassinated in 1965. Knight here expresses his admiration for Malcom and does so in iambic meter, as he indicates on line 2, in order to avoid "stir[ring] any flame" and avoiding "angry words" that might bring him harm. Knight's use of pentameter in this poem, unlike most of the other poems in this collection, and his phraseology of "empty tea lace words" and "dead white and dry bone bare" poetry expresses satirical disdain for the formal traditions of poetry. The

subject matter of the poem reflects his disdain for the racism that may have killed his friend and compatriot, Malcolm X.

ON UNIVERSALISM

I see no single thread
That binds me one to all;
Why even common dead
Men took the single fall.

No universal laws
Of human misery
Create a common cause
Or common history
That ease black people's pains
Nor break black people's chains. (25)

In this poem, Knight, is speaking to the racism that he suffers as a Black man in America. He expresses that he sees no solution to the problem in his time. Nothing can ease the misery of the Black person's misery, from Knight's perspective.

Let us look at another poem that speaks to the nature of Knight's prison.

THE WARDEN SAID TO ME THE OTHER DAY

The warden said to me the other day
(innocently I think), "Say, Etheridge,
Why come the black boys don't run off
Like the white boys do?"
I lowered my jaw and scratched my head
And said (innocently, I think), "Well, suh,
I ain't for sure, but I reckon it's cause
We ain't go no wheres to run to." (18)

In this poem, Knight demonstrates that Black men, unlike white men, did not have any real life outside of prison. They had few prospects to lure them away from jail. His speaker adopts the monologue format to provide a view for the reader into the thoughts of the speaker, not unlike we will see McCrae do in his poems that we will look at.

These three poems describe the nature of Knight's prison as one wrought with racism. They also point to the inability of poetry to provide any source of freedom from imprisonment.

Next, we will conclude this chapter.

Conclusion on Etheridge Knight

In this chapter on Etheridge Knight, we have learned about Etheridge Knight's troubled background of imprisonment. We have also seen what scholarship on Knight has observed regarding Knight's prison imagery in his poetry. This imagery describes imprisonment from the first-hand perspective of the poet who spent eight years in a state penitentiary providing readers an implicit view of prison life through Knight's speakers' eyes. We have seen the violence, loneliness, noisiness, and ugliness of prison life. We have also seen evidences of Knight's personal struggle against racism through his poetry.

We have seen the poetic devices that Knight employs in his work to help the reader to understand Knight's unique perspective on imprisonment and the power of poetry to provide a limited source of freedom from imprisonment. In our close reading of poems from *Poems from Prison,* we have seen how Knight's use of syntax, imagery, diction, and other rhetorical devices help us to understand, not only his perspective of what imprisonment is, but how his approach to the construction of his poetry helps us to understand his perspective on the power of poetry to offer an escape or a sense of freedom from the confines of imprisonment. We have shown how Knight uses juxtaposition to emphasize the struggle to achieve freedom through language and the imagination. We have shown that in the works we examined, Knight points out tensions

and struggles that his speakers' experience while in prison and how they attain limited freedom through the imagination. It is a hard-won freedom, often wrought with struggle and tension. We have also seen that the nature of the prison includes the horrors of incarceration, the loss of family, the loss of potential futures, and the pains of racism on Black men in America in the 1960s.

Therefore, we claim that in the poems we have examined, Knight's work demonstrates that poetry is a liberating force, but it has limits.

Chapter III.

Shane McCrae

This chapter offers important information in terms of how Shane McCrae thinks about language and the power of poetry. We will first supply some background on this poet and then demonstrate some important aspects of how McCrae thinks about poetry. We will paint an intellectual landscape that will provide a sense of the breadth of what he is considering as a writer, apart from his content, which we will cover in the next chapter. McCrae has participated in several interviews wherein he shares his thoughts on his poetry and his creative process. In this chapter, we will present his thoughts from these interviews on three major aspects of his poetry: 1) the use of form; 2) the use of historical figures; and 3) the transformative nature of poetry.

First, let us discuss Shane McCrae's background.

Background on Shane McCrae

Shane McCrae is a biracial American, born in Portland, Oregon in 1975, to a Black father and a white mother. His early years were full of tragedy, per an interview he held with Tristran Fane Saunders, published in the newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, in London in 2021. In the article, McCrae is quoted as saying, "I was raised by white supremacists, and … I was kidnapped into that situation[.]" The quote from McCrae continues:

> When I was three years old my grandparents — my mother's biological mother, and her adoptive father — convinced my father to let me go with them for a weekend. After the period that I was supposed to be with them expired, my father went to my grandparents' house to find out what was going on — and the house was empty. There was no sign of where they

> had gone. He contacted my mother, she said she had no idea. It turns out that they had taken me to Austin, Texas … [B]ecause they didn't want me to be raised by a black person. They just didn't want me to be black. (Saunders)

The article continues:

> My grandmother wrote on my birth certificate that I was white — she didn't tell me this until I was, like, 15. But she couldn't rewrite reality. I always knew I was black — I was growing up in Texas around almost entirely white people, so I was treated very diferently (sic). I was called a lot of racist names, I didn't have very many friends, I was physically attacked a lot. (Saunders)

The article goes on to describe McCrae's grandmother as a Nazi sympathizer and covers McCrae's reunion with his Black father when he was 15 years old. He spent most of his life ridiculed by his schoolmates in Austin, where he grew up, and where he was the only Black student (Saunders). The result of McCrae's tumultuous formative years has been that McCrae has a unique poetic style and a unique perspective on the subject matter he chooses for his poetry.

McCrae earned a Masters of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa, and he received a Doctor of Law degree from Harvard Law School in 2007 (Chiasson). He has written several books of poetry including *In Canaan* (2010), *Mule* (2011), *Blood* (2013), *Nonfiction* (2014), *Forgiveness Forgiveness* (2014), *The Animal Too Big to Kill* (2015), *Sometimes I Never Suffered* (2020), *In the Language of My Captor* (2017), *The Gilded Auction Block* (2019*), Cain Named the Animal* (2022), and *Pulling the Chariot of the Sun — A Memoir of a Kidnapping* (2023).

His book of poetry, *In the Language of My Captor* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017), won the 2018 Anisfield-Wolf Prize for Poetry and was also a finalist for the National Book Award, William Carlos Williams Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. McCrae also received the Lannan Literary Award, a Whiting Writer's

Award, a fellowship from the NEA, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is the Poetry Editor at Image Journal, an on-line publisher. He lives in New York City and teaches at Columbia University. One of his main focuses in his books of poetry is an interest in history, historical systems of oppression and enslavement, and white supremacy. McCrae's body of work provides a wealth of material to allow us to ascertain his unique perspective on the theme of imprisonment, which for McCrae, like Knight, includes the historical lack of freedom for Blacks in America.

Next, let us discuss McCrae's perspective regarding his poetry.

How McCrae Thinks About Poetry

As mentioned above, McCrae has participated in several interviews where he shares his thoughts on his poetry and his creative process. In this section, we will present his thoughts from these interviews on three major aspects of his poetry: 1) the use of form; 2) the use of historical personae; and 3) the transformative nature of poetry.

Let us turn first to McCrae's use of form.

Form

McCrae uses form to immerse his readers in his poetry. His unique approach to form engages the reader and helps the reader to have an explicit experience, sharing the experiences of the speaker.

Let us look at McCrae's perspective regarding free verse vs. formal poetry.

Free Verse and Formal Poetry

In a 2019 interview with McCrae, Dan Chiasson described McCrae's unique use of form:

> McCrae's poems often read like transcripts, their style a flustered but necessary shorthand. He almost never uses conventional punctuation; instead, over the years, he has honed a signature repertoire of devices. Sometimes he pitches language headlong over his line breaks, only to halt it, in the next line, by oddly scattered caesuras and slashes. Because his style is so distinctive, he's a presence even when he's not the principal subject: the voices in his poems are hammered into his style. (Chiasson)

We shall see evidences of these qualities throughout this chapter.

Shane McCrae has grappled with his approach to poetic form over the course of his career. In an interview with Jessica Mesman in 2019, he shared that, "All through my MFA, I wrote in free verse, but I always felt that the poetry was much bigger than me, and one way to respect it is to understand its history." During the interview, he described how he read the western canon including Spencer, Montagne, and Shakespeare and "fell in love with" their formally structured poetry. He added that he came to a point in his career when he felt, "If I were to take the art seriously, I need to learn this stuff" (Zucker). By this, he meant that he needed to learn how to write in a more traditional poetic form as opposed to free verse.

When McCrae first broke away from free verse, "[He] wrote a lot of sonnets" (Zucker). McCrae did not provide a specific timeframe for when this occurred. He furthered his discussion of sonnets in an interview with James K.A. Smith, where McCrae described how working within the confines of formal poetry helps him to think:

> I came to a sense of myself as a Christian around the time I came to a sense of myself as a formalist poet. My relationship with theology and my relationship with poetry are, in some ways, both searching for ways to think, spaces in which to think. When I started writing sonnets, it became

> much easier to think in poetry; whereas when I was surrounded by what people think of as freedom and could make whatever decisions I wanted — my lines could be as long or as short as I wanted and bear no necessary relationship to each other — it was very difficult to do any kind of thinking. I was constantly worrying about the wrong things.
>
> I tend to think of theological questions as doing that sort of mental work. Theology is another space in which it is possible to think, because there is a framework against which my thoughts are bouncing and by which they're being shaped … I know, generally speaking, how a sestina works; I can kind of talk about it. But how I think through my relationship with those parameters is new every time I encounter them. It's shaped by the sestina being what a sestina is in some abstract way. And so I can approach it and think about it, and it thinks back. That's how it works for me. (Smith)

For McCrae, the boundaries of formal poetry help him to think. McCrae elaborated on his thoughts on the boundaries of formal poetry as an aid to his ability to think in an interview with Derek Gromadzki in 2016:

> I suspect I think better in poetry [than prose] … This might sound counterintuitive, but I think the occasionally greater fluency (or what I, at least at the time, think of as a greater fluency) creates, mysteriously, more push back, though it is a more rapid push back, and my mind, such as it is, has to race to maintain its position. And that racing makes, sometimes better thinking. (Gromadzki)

Further explaining how boundaries help him to think, in another interview with Corinne Segal in 2016, McCrae said, "It's easier for me to focus when certain questions have already been answered for me when I'm going into the poem … It gives me something to push against." He also explained to Rebecca Pinwei Tseng in 2021, "I like that working in metrical forms gives me a set of parameters against which I can push. Something pushes back. I need that kind of resistance to get me to think about things I would not otherwise think about" (Tseng). To Jessica Mesman he said, "I am helped to think by form, I suddenly am aware of the possibility of thinking. As in free verse, I feel just generally lost and so it feels like a much smaller space." He also said, I think I would

be in the midst of panic all the time if I were writing free verse, whereas form helps me to think" (Mesman).

McCrae told one interviewer in 2019 that he is "fastidious" about meter and refers to himself as a "metricist[,]" albeit one who is "extremely basic at it" (Vuong). He goes on to tell her, "I'm very interested in staying in parameters, say pentameter or whatever." "I've worked very hard for this thing[,]" and "I'm doing it very right based on lots of years of close study" (Vuong). He concludes with, "The more I practice meter, the more I study it, the more I work at it, the more I have access to various sonic effects and rhythmic effects that I find exciting" (Vuong).

In a 2021 interview with Rebecca Pinwei Tseng, McCrae describes the evolution of his relationship with meter, "I allow myself some freedoms that I maybe didn't allow myself in the beginning. I'm still strict in a lot of ways, but I'm thinking about particular relationships between rhymes and so on, rather than form, differently" (Tseng).

In conclusion, McCrae adopted traditional poetic form over free verse because the barriers prescribed by formal prosody afford him the ability think more readily during his writing process, and he considers himself a metricist.

Next, let us look at McCrae's unique use of the virgule.

The Virgule

"Blurring these boundaries [between free verse and metrical form] is important in [McCrae's] poetry," as he stated in his 2016 interview with Corinne Segal. To accomplish this "[b]luring of boundaries[,]" (Segal) McCrae "utilize[s] slashes and small

bursts of white space along with traditional meter (usually — my new manuscript might have some prose), line breaks, and stanza breaks to regulate my music, such as it is" (Lycurgus). To further explain this, McCrae says,

> If I can quote myself, I explained whatever it is I'm doing once for *No Tell Motel*, and I still think it's the clearest I've ever been about this: "I don't write free verse poems — mostly because I can't. But I am interested in the musical effects achievable with free verse. [My use of the virgule is a result] of my attempts to create a meter that is simultaneously formal and free, and to think, for musical purposes, at the level of the verse paragraph rather than the line. As a consequence, the metrically important unit is the verse paragraph — e.g., a traditional sonnet has seventy feet (5 feet per line x 14 lines), and since what matters when writing in this way is the total number of feet (and, of course, the poems do rhyme, though some of the rhymes are very slant, and don't follow a regular pattern), individual line lengths can vary, so long as the thing has 70 feet at the end … Where a line 'ends' metrically is denoted by a '/' if that point falls anywhere other than the actual end of a line, and generally where each new line 'begins' metrically is denoted with a capital letter (the only exception being when a line begins mid-word). (Gromadzki)

McCrae reiterated his focus on the verse paragraph during an interview with Emily Temple in 2017, stating that "with the first section [of *Captor,]* I allowed the shape of each poem to be determined by its initial stanza — if that first stanza had, say, 17 feet, then every stanza after it would also have 17 feet" (Temple).

He also said, "Although I know the virgule creates a pause, and even functions as a little wall (and I struggle against these qualities), I am using it as it is used by critics and compilers" (Gromadzki). "I thought, if I took [the virgule] out of poetry criticism and stuck it in my poems with the exact same thinking, I could use that to indicate where the line would end for metrical purposes" (Segal). Rachel Zucker summarized McCrae's "blurring" of forms in 2016 by saying to him in an interview, "[You] invented a new form of sonnet."

In summary, McCrae stopped writing strictly in free verse sometime along his road to developing his unique style, but admired the "musical effects achievable with free verse[,]" so he "create[d] a meter that is simultaneously formal and free" and wherein the metrically important unit is the verse paragraph" (Gromadzki). The six poems that make up the first section of *In the Language of My Captor* follow this form.

Next, let us look at McCrae's limited use of punctuation in these six poems.

Lack of Punctuation

McCrae shared his thoughts on his decision to eschew punctuation in his poetry during an undated interview with Cate Lycurgus:

> For me, a lot of my feelings begin with or through music and the "forms of fracture/ fissure/ slash" you mention are mostly musical devices. Since I don't use conventional punctuation — or haven't used conventional punctuation in most of my books. (Lycurgus)

He goes on to say:

> In a way, my decision to abandon punctuation (I don't think of the slash as punctuation, although I know other people do, and I imagine it, strictly speaking, probably is punctuation) was somewhat arbitrary. Before I started writing the poems in Mule, my poems were over-punctuated, and at the end of every line I had to remind myself that I didn't need to add a comma. When I abandoned punctuation — and with it free verse and, at the time, regular use of conventional syntax — I felt like I suddenly discovered my own voice, or maybe "sound" would be a better word, and so I think more of me is in every poem I write now than had been the case ten years ago. I feel I have more freedom with regard to tone of voice and modulation when I don't use punctuation — commas are so heavy! Question marks are so heavy! (Lycurgus)

To summarize, abandoning punctuation allowed McCrae to discover his own voice and his own sound.

In addition to allowing McCrae to formulate his unique poetic voice, the lack of punctuation also affords McCrae an opportunity to engage his readers. In the interview above, McCrae said:

> — and I also both hope and believe the lack of punctuation creates more space for the reader to enter the poem. The reader has to determine, at every moment, what tone of voice the poem's speaker is using, and whether what was just said was a question, etc. Hopefully, that helps the reader maintain his or her engagement with the poem. (Lycurgus)

The lack of punctuation, then, not only affords McCrae more freedom in the modulation of the sound of the poems, but it encourages the reader to make mental decisions while reading as to the speaker's tone of voice and the sentence structure. As we shall see, this increased reader engagement will help to dismantle the prison that McCrae describes in the work we will be looking at.

McCrae goes on to describe other advantages of the lack of punctuation in his interview with Lycurgus. He states that "most of [his] poems are dramatic monologues, and I like to think the lack of punctuation signals a speaking voice" (Lycurgus). We will see that the speaker in the six poems uses dramatic monologue and speaks to his audience to describe his plight.

In summary, McCrae crafts his poems with deliberate disuse of punctuation, and he chooses to do this to create his unique poetic voice and to engage the reader.

Musicality

Despite a lack of punctuation, McCrae does pursue rhythmic qualities in his poetry. In his interview with Lycurgus he mentioned that the lack of punctuation allows his to "utilize the rhythms of speech and the rhythms of thought, and [he] like[s] to place

them beside each other in poems, as parallel musics" (Lycurgus). In his 2016 interview with Derek Gromadzki, McCrae elaborated, "I believe rhythmic sensibility is always a product and extension of language, defined broadly, among other things … I do try to incorporate particular rhythmic and generally sonic motifs I discover in music as such." In his 2021 interview with Tseng, he said:

> Poetry is trying to communicate via tension between sound and meaning. Whatever it wants to say to you is not just words themselves, but how those words sound and how considering the sounds of words interacts with the meaning of words. Sometimes there's harmony and sometimes there's dissonance between sound and meaning, but poetry is the art that focuses especially on the sound of words. (Tseng)

In summary, McCrae employs meter to achieve musicality in his poetry, but he sometimes creates dissonant harmonies between the words and their meaning. We will see this in our close readings.

Let us now discuss McCrae's writing process.

Writing Process

Further describing his approach to poetic musicality, McCrae also touched on his writing process during an interview in 2020 discussing poems from his book, *The Gilded Auction Block* (2019). "What'll get a poem going for me is a certain music and [the] first line occurred to me right before I went to bed … then I wrote the rest of the poem all in one sitting. [T]he line … hops along and sort of sings." "There was a musical jumpiness to it that I really enjoyed" (Byrdlong).

Discussing his writing process as one that stays within the lines of form, "[I] start writing and the subject reveals itself as I go along and hopefully some kind of sense reveals itself. Eventually, I know what the subject is or what a subject might be, and I

have to figure out how to continue these things in a meaningful way within the form. If I want to say a particular thing, I also have to meet the requirements of a particular meter and maybe a rhyme" (Tseng). "In some ways, subject matter [is] secondary" (Segal). McCrae further discussed this:

> [W]hen I actually do write, I'm completely absorbed by what I'm doing and I feel incredibly happy, and usually I'm thinking about sound and meter, in part to distract myself from thinking too much about what I want to say, which I can always see, nevertheless, just beneath the thoughts about sound and meter, just out of reach, thank goodness" (Lycurgus). "I concentrate on the logic of the poem itself as a thing, rather than the message of what the poem is doing," McCrae said (Segal). However, McCrae clarifies, "I wouldn't want to divorce form and content. (Gromadzki)

In summary, McCrae focuses on the rhythm and logic of a poem before he thinks about content. McCrae has also said, "The poem starts in a place that it swerves violently from" (Segal). Further describing his writing style, McCrae said:

> I feel, at least, like I'm always writing — what I think is actually happening is that I am always laying the groundwork for future poems. However, a few days ago I finished a poem I had been trying to finish on and off for about two years, and I noticed that as soon as it was done — as soon as I felt the spark I feel when I finish a poem (which is not to say, not at all, that my poems generate sparks for anyone but me, nor even to say that they consistently generate sparks for me, but I do feel a particular burst of energy when I've finished a poem) — I felt as if a very tiny, painless but irritating sliver had been removed from my mind, and I realized that sliver had been there since I finished the first draft of the poem, which seemed complete but wasn't good, two years ago. So poems — both poems to come and poems I'm working on — are always taking up space in my mind. But, despite this, I don't know how I ever manage to get a poem started, though I can certainly locate the sources for at least a few of my poems — most of the time, in fact, I feel suspended between the impossibility of starting the next poem and the necessity of writing it. (Lycurgus)

Here, McCrae shares his writing process, which will inform our close reading of his works.

Next, let us discuss McCrae's use of historical personae in his poetry.

Historical Personae

In this section we will look at McCrae's use of historical personae by analyzing his comments made during various interviews.

During an undated interview with Cate Lycurgus, McCrae said:

> I have often spoken through historical personae — and I'm not sure how to square my willingness to do so with my aversion for speaking for others. I suppose maybe I square that circle this way: When I am speaking through historical personae, there's a record that can — and hopefully will — be consulted by the reader, and by comparing the poem to the record the reader can determine what liberties I've taken. But when I'm using "we" to include people with whom I have personal relationships, there usually isn't a record, and when there isn't a record to consult I feel uncomfortable speaking for anybody but myself.[2]

To summarize, McCrae has "spoken through" historical personae, but he feels most comfortable doing so when an independent historical record exists that readers can consult, and thereby, fully comprehend any liberties McCrae takes when fictionalizing these people. This is important to this thesis because McCrae based the speaker of the six poems we are investigating on the historical persona, Ota Benga. The book publisher, Wesleyan, has provided a reading companion to *In the Language of My Captor,* which provides references to published works that speak to the identity of *Captor*[3] *'s* historical personae, such as Emily Temple's interview in *Lit Hub.*

Later in the above interview, McCrae discusses one rational he has for writing about historical personae:

> I myself am no good at writing directly from (and I am including "about" in that "from") the present moment. But when I am writing about historical events that can be read as being indirectly "about" the present moment, I find it helps to keep in mind that the actors in those events, about whom I am writing, were human just as I am — both those behaving

[2] The readers companion can be found here: http://wesleyan.edu/wespress/readerscompanions/.
[3] For the purposes of simplification, the title *In the Language of My Captor* is abbreviated as *Captor*.

> well and those behaving poorly — and that, had I been among them, I would have been the worst among them. (Lycurgus)

Here, McCrae alludes to situations where the historical events he writes about may be "indirectly" related to current events. In a 2016 interview, McCrae expands on his use of historical personae as an alternative to confessional or "reflexive first-person" methods:

> I think that the moment we're living in offers the best opportunity we've had in a long time in that a lot of things having to do with identity politics are being talked about in poems. The only problem there is that a lot of the time these are being talked about in confessional modes. But, if your concern is getting away from the confessional type of poem, then talking about history, while not talking about it in a reflexive, first-person way, is one means of doing so. I realize that's a very self-serving thing to say because that's exactly what I do. But I have a much more difficult time talking about contemporary atrocities in a way that's focused just on the present from one perspective alone. Possibly because I am black, though other black writers do this just fine. It's just part of my way of being black. If I want to talk about these issues now, I need to step back into their history. (Gromadzki)

McCrae chooses to use historical personae when he "talk[s] about" current issues because he prefers to talk about contemporary atrocities from an alternative perspective. This is important because many reviewers of *Captor* interpret the poems we will look as speaking to current issues in America, such as racism and white supremacy.

McCrae has also said, "The history I deal with I try to deal with … as one person amid a million equal inheritors" (Gromadzki). By this we argue that he means that we all may inherit the same history that he does, and his is but one perspective on past events.

This section has helped us to understand McCrae's use of the historical persona. We have learned that he approaches discussions about "atrocities" of the current time by looking back into the past and speaking through historical personae. We will discuss this in more detail in Chapter IV.

Let us now turn to a discussion of McCrae's thoughts regarding the transformative nature of poetry.

Transformative Poetics

For Shane McCrae, "Poetry is a revolutionary force, because it is a force for renewal" (Lycurgus). From McCrae's perspective, poetry has the power to transform both writers and readers.

Let us look first at the transformation of writers.

Transforming Writers

From McCrae's point of view, poetry can transform the people who write poems. In one undated interview he says, "Poetry's power is both local and limitless — it happens person by person, but it often reverberates in and through each person in such a way that the people poetry happens with (it's always with, never to) become new people, and whatever they do next and forever they do as new people" (Lycurgus). McCrae elaborates on what he means later in this interview when he says, " I am most free when I'm writing because I am a writer — when I'm writing, I am most who I am, and therefore I'm most free. I think writing can help everyone be more free, however, even folks who are not writers, insofar as it helps them to be more receptive, both to themselves and others" (Lycurgus). He expands on this further when he says, "Similarly, the act of writing a poem is a struggle toward the momentary freedom ideal for the writing of poems … I believe … the act of writing helps a person to appreciate openness and freedom." Writing poetry, then, changes poets and non-writers by making them

"new," more open-minded, and "more receptive" people. McCrae's perspective here will be key to our analysis of *Captor* when we investigate its transformative potential for its readers.

This section has helped us to understand McCrae's position regarding the transformational potential of poetry for both poets and their audiences.

Let us now look at the transformation of readers.

Transforming Readers

McCrae believes that poetry has the power to transform readers in a positive way. In an undated interview, McCrae shared his thoughts on this:

> I would like poems to do what we've been talking about — for the poem to do whatever it can toward holding itself open in a relationship with a reader. When my first book was being published, all I wanted — and I still want this — was that it would be useful to somebody. And for me that meant maybe somebody killed a spider with it, you know? However it is useful, that's exciting to me. Poems can be useful by requiring of one, if one wants to have a relationship with a poem, that that relationship stays alive, that it stays vital. Engaging with poems in that way helps people stay vital. It helps our minds stay alive. And I think that as long as human beings keep their minds alive, they tend towards treating each other better. (Smith)

To summarize, McCrae wants his poetry to be "useful," and he fosters an open relationship with his readers. He feels that, if readers choose to engage with poetry, it can help to keep their minds "alive," and this could lead to them "treating each other better" (Smith). As McCrae said, "Most of my work, I sometimes think, is an effort to arrive at more love, even though I suspect it doesn't often seem that way" (Lycurgus).

Another reviewer of McCrae's work commented on the power of McCrae's poetry to transform readers. In a 2017 book review of *Captor*, Ryo Yamaguchi said:

> McCrae is a skilled stylist, and the sections in verse exhibit his refined feel for the dynamics of syntax, lineation, and punctuation, including his signature use of forward slashes. By organizing plain-spoken language through these various techniques for arranging its grammar, McCrae is able to charge that language with a kind of gyroscopic momentum, a dynamism of expositional thinking that almost always arrives at powerfully felt revelations. (Yamaguchi)

According to Yamaguchi, McCrae is successful in transforming his readers by helping them to arrive at powerful revelations.

McCrae also shared his thoughts on poetry's power to inform political discussion. In a 2019 interview, he said, in reference to his book, *The Gilded Auction Block* (2019) "I hope that [this book] might make some positive contribution to the discourses about Trump and about America" (Ripatrazone). In another interview with Jonathan Farmer in 2018, Farmer said of McCrae's poems in *Captor*, "[I]f they do not turn injustice into justice, they do turn it into a power worth cherishing" (Farmer 7). Both of these quotes point to the potential power of McCrae's poetry to transform its readers.

This section has helped us to understand McCrae's views regarding the transformative power of poetry. It has also shared the viewpoints of some of his interviews and reviewers on this topic. This analysis will be crucial to our interpretation of *Captive* in Chapter IV.

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a view into Shane McCrae's thoughts and some of his interviewers' and reviewers' thoughts on his poetry in terms of form, historical personae, and the transformative power of poetry.

Chapter IV.

Examination of Shane McCrae's Poetry

This chapter will examine McCrae's treatment of the theme of imprisonment through a review of available scholarship and a close reading on McCrae's collection of poems, *In the Language of My Captor* (2017). We selected this book because its content matches best with our thesis topic, which is to determine the answer to the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment? This collection of poetry is divided into four sections, the first is a set of six related poems with the same speaker, who is fictionalized but wrought from a historical persona, who conducts monologues about his dire situation as a human prisoner inside a monkey cage. The rest of the book contains a memoir prose poem, a set of sonnets on another historical persona, and a final short concluding section. We will focus on the first section because these six poems speak directly to the theme of imprisonment and the ability of poetry to provide liberation from said imprisonment.

The first section of this collection is comprised of six poems, "His God," "Panopticon," "Privacy," "What Do You Know About Shame," "Privacy 2," and "In the Language." We chose to focus on these six poems because they are, in McCrae's words, "about freedom" and "captivity," which is, as mentioned above, the focus of this thesis (Lycurgus). The six poems form a "tiny play" to use McCrae's words, consisting largely of monologues spoken by a Black man imprisoned in a monkey cage at a zoo (Karnazes). We will conduct close readings of the poems and consult available scholarship related to the collection as a whole and to the six poems. As we have done with our analysis of Etheridge Knight's poetics, our analysis of Shane McCrae's poetry will discuss three main topics regarding the selected poems: 1) McCrae's choice of a unique perspective on

the theme of imprisonment; 2) the nature of the prison and its corresponding aspects of imprisonment that McCrae portrays; and 3) how these poems contribute to the discussion of whether poetry may provide freedom from imprisonment. Our argument, in answer to these questions, is that, in these six poems, McCrae employs a historical persona to display a prison and then immerses the reader in the prison from multiple perspectives to offer avenues of escape that could potentially dislodge the prison. McCrae places the onus on the reader engage with the poetry, and we will demonstrate how McCrae uses poetic form to accomplish this.

First, let us examine the topic of perspective.

Perspective

One of the key features of McCrae's application of perspective in these six poems is that he employs a historical persona to provide a unique viewpoint for the reader.

Historical Personae

As mentioned in Chapters I and III,, McCrae has created a fictional version of a historical persona as the speaker in this set of poems. McCrae told one interviewer in 2016, "[T]his book does [the] job of inhabiting the voices of others, and of inventing or reinventing those voices … [, and does the] job of making actual characters." (Gromadzki). McCrae is quoted in an interview with Emily Temple of Lit Hub in 2017 stating, "the speaker of the poems in the first section of the book was born when I happened to glance at the cover of a book about Ota Benga" (Temple 4). When asked, "How did you choose the personas that you inhabit in this book?" McCrae answered, "I didn't consciously choose to write about them so much as I felt like I couldn't choose

[not] to write about them … In this way, discovering personas, for me, is much like writing poems; I have to be available for it to happen, and sometimes it does" (Temple).

Ota Benga was a Mbuti man who was captured in Africa's Congo in the early 1900's. He was then sold to a man who ran what came to be known as the Bronx Zoo in New York City. The zoo created an exhibit of the Mbuti man by caging him up with an orangutan in their Monkey House. (Newkirk xvii-xviii). Ota Benga stood at 4' 11" and weighed approximately 100 pounds. He was in his early twenties when he was caged and on display in the zoo. Several articles ran in the *New York Times*, and Ota Benga was a world-wide sensation (Newkirk xvii-xviii). The Bronx Zoo published an apology in 2020 (Jacobs). Readers of this poetry, thus, experience McCrae's version of imprisonment explicitly through McCrae's speaker's experiences. McCrae does point out that his rendering of this historical persona is fictional. In an interview with Andrea Francis in 2013, wherein they discussed his upcoming collection, *Blood,* which contains poems rendered from interviews with slaves "from the Federal Writers' Project,["] he said, "Nor is my thinking about nonfiction very sophisticated. For the most part, I think the stories of other people are holy, if not sacrosanct, and shouldn't be retold lightly. But I don't have access to the truth of anybody's story, not even my own" (Francis). This gives insight into McCrae's use of the historical personae in *Captor.*

In the following section, we will investigate the nature of the prison and the aspects of imprisonment McCrae highlights through his speaker's eyes.

The Nature and Aspects of the Prison

Although McCrae never comes right out and says it, either in his published interviews or within these six poems, he does provide some hints as to the nature of the

prison he is referring to in this set of poems. “[W]hen I am writing about historical events that can be read as being indirectly “about” the present moment, I find it helps to keep in mind that the actors in those events, about whom I am writing, were human just as I am” (Lycurgus). In an Article by Victora Vrana in 2019, she discusses this book and the topic of historical persona, “Ultimately, the “language of my captor” (sic) of the collection’s title effectively creates distance between the poet and his subject, and between readers and that which we often want clearly spelled out, complicating standard assumptions about the ethics of the past and present” (Vrana 46). She goes on to say, “McCrae depicts all of these histories as equally and foundationally American, underpinned by shameful impulses that connect us all and thereby require us to engage in collective reckoning” (Vrana 47). Later she says, “The “refuge and consolation” offered by grappling with the past rather than the present for McCrae might feel to some like an evasion of the necessity of using art to counteract present horrors” (Vrana 47).

McCrae spoke in 2013 about some of his reasoning behind writing about historical personae in his poetry:

> For me, writing into history is a way to grapple with the terrifying certainty of the present. That is, the more one studies and writes with history, the more one discovers that apparently large and important human developments — a log of things most people would call “progress” — are superficial. And I’m trying to be careful with that word — the changes are surface-only, but surfaces are important; but still, the changes are surface-only. What I mean is: racism, homophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and religious intolerance are really all forms of tribalism — sexism and ageism, too, but whereas racism, homophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and religious intolerance are ways of partitioning one’s own tribe from other tribes, sexism and ageism are ways of maintaining established power structures within one’s own tribe. (Schoonebeek)

Here, McCrae describes various bigotries and ways of maintaining established power structures, which helps to define McCrae’s prison.

As McCrae also said, in 2016:

> I have a much more difficult time talking about contemporary atrocities in a way that's focused just on the present from one perspective alone. Possibly because I am black, though other black writers do this just fine. It's just part of my way of being black. If I want to talk about these issues now, I need to step back into their history. (Gromadzki)

McCrae's references here to "atrocities" and the "terrifying certainty of the present" suggest that the historical persona may be a means for McCrae to "step back into … history" and present the reader with an opportunity to self-determine whether McCrae is making a reference to "contemporary atrocities" (Gromadzki). According to one reviewer, by retelling Ota Benga's story, in a manner of speaking, Shane McCrae is bringing new awareness to some of the "racial ideologies that endure today" (Newkirk xvii).

This understanding of how McCrae thinks about the use of the historical persona informs the reading of these six poems by illuminating that the speaker may be more than just a depiction of a historical figure in a cage. McCrae may be referring to racism or white supremacy in America today.

Next, we will look at how McCrae provides the image of poems' prison.

Building the Prison

McCrae begins his set up of the poem's prison in the first stanza of the first poem, "His God," with the speaker's words:

> I am the keeper tells
> Me the most popular exhibit
> You might not think this cheers me but it does
> I'm given many opportunities *(Captor* 3)

In the second poem, "Panopticon," the speaker continues:

> The keeper put me in the cage with the monkeys
> Because I asked to be
> Put in the cage with the monkeys
> Most of the papers say the monkeys *(Captor* 5)

Therefore, by the first verse of the second poem, McCrae shows the reader that the speaker is a man trapped inside of a monkey cage, and we see that McCrae has established the prison that will house the captive over the course of the six poem section. Throughout the six poems, the speaker conducts a dramatic monologue that draws the reader's attention while he shares his experience as a man imprisoned within the monkey cage. Through his monologues, the captive descries the nature of his prison to his audience, McCrae's readers, in terms of the loss of personal freedoms. We will discuss the loss of identity, family and languages below.

Let us first touch on the loss of identity. Although the speaker spends a lot of time in dialogue with the keeper throughout the six poems, the keeper never addresses him by name. We see only text such as, the following from "What Do You Know About Shame:"

> Last night the keeper staggered to my cage / Weeping
> he said his wife
> Was leaving him
> And he would never see his son
>
> Again I said I did not understand
> Why he would never see his son again
> He said he was ashamed
> And his // Wife was ashamed (*Captor* 8)

These two stanzas are representative of all six poems in its example of the dialogue between the caged human captive and the zookeeper. There is an almost familiar repartee between the two, as evidenced in the first line of the second stanza shown above, "Again I said I did not understand[.]" It appears that this is not the first time this discussion has

taken place. The captive must repeat that he does not understand the keeper's problem. In fact, McCrae repeats the word phrase, "Again I said[,]" later in this poem, which substantiates our claim that the captive and the keeper are well acquainted. Yet, despite the seeming familiarity between the two men, the keeper never addresses the captive by name. This evidence points to the loss of identity as an aspect of imprisonment that McCrae highlights in these poems.

Another major aspect of imprisonment that McCrae touches on in these six poems is the loss of privacy. In fact, three of the six poems address the loss of privacy. One of the poems is entitled, "Panopticon," which is the same term that Michael Collins used in discussing Knight's prison poetry. Collins explains that panopticon is a term used to describe a design for prisons from the 1800s, which situates the prison cells in relation to the guard locations in such a way that every prisoner can always be seen (Collins, Antipanopticon 581). In his poem, "Panopticon," McCrae points out that the spectators come to see the captive and the monkeys, but the captive turns the spectators' voyeurism back towards them:

> And that's my explanation / I am
> their honest mirror
> I say *Whether you're here*
> *To see me or to see the monkeys*
>
> *You're here to see yourselves*

In addition to the absence of privacy that "Panopticon" describes above, McCrae includes two additional poems discussing the loss of privacy, the first entitled, "Privacy," and the second titled, simply, "Privacy 2." The fact that he includes two versions on the same topic highlights loss of privacy as a key component of the nature of the captive's prison.

In both of these poems, the captive is on display, and he has no privacy. In conclusion, loss of privacy is a key aspect of the nature of the captive's prison.

Another aspect of imprisonment that McCrae describes in these poems is the loss of family. In the same poem as above, "What Do You Know About Shame," the captive describes his loss of family as he continues his discussion with the keeper who is distraught over his wife leaving him:

> and she was going back to
> Her *people* was his word
> and / Taking the child
> I said I did not understand
>
> Why he would never see his son again
> Again I said there would be no
> Ocean between his son and him
> No bars
>
> Between / Him and the ocean
> if there were an ocean (*Captor* 8–9)

Although the speaker is careful not to confront the keeper yet (he does so later in the poem) the captive is pointing out to the reader that he has a family that has been separated from him by the bars of the cage and by an ocean. The obtuseness of the keeper to realize the cruelness of his complaining about losing his family to this man in the cage is indicative of his unwillingness to accept him as a fellow human being, as is, of course, the fact that he put the man in the cage in the first place. This points to loss of identity as a key aspect of the captive's prison. It also hints at the history of racism and white supremacy in America, although the captive never mentions the race of the keeper or the location of the zoo.

In another of the six poems, McCrae also points out the loss of family as an aspect of imprisonment. In the poem, "In the Language," the speaker says:

I *cannot* talk about the place I came from
I do not want it to exist
The way I knew it
In the language of my captor (*Captor* 13)

Later in the poem, the captive describes his experience while meeting the men who brought him to this cage:

And so at first I thought the white men / Were ghosts
one spoke my language
And said that he had spoken to my father
I did not fear them (*Captor* 14)

The captive's father remains in his home, across the ocean. He is the son who has lost his father. The keeper fears losing his own son, but he has no regard for the man in the cage who has lost his father. Thus, we have shown that in these two poems, McCrae describes the loss of family as an aspect of imprisonment that the captive experiences. These passages also point to other losses of personal freedom such as country and language.

As regards the loss of language, we see in the above two passages that the captive alludes to "the language of my captor" and to "my language[.]" The captive's original language is different from the people who brought him to this cage from his home. Later, in the same poem, the speaker says:

but // I did not think my people
Superior to other people before
The keeper's language has infected me
I knew of // Few people (*Captive* 13)

In addition, the speaker says that he is not speaking in his own language in the first verse of this poem when he says, "I *cannot* talk about the place I came from … In the language of my captor" (*Captor* 13). The captive has, instead, adopted the language of his captor.

In this section we have discussed the aspects of the prison of McCrae's captive. We have seen that the nature of the captive's prison includes the loss of identity, the loss of privacy, the loss of family, and the loss of language.

Let us turn now to a discussion of scholarship on the nature of McCrae's prison.

Scholarship on the Nature of McCrae's Prison

Because Shane McCrae is a contemporary author, peer-reviewed scholarship on his work is limited. Therefore, we have consulted book reviews, interviews, and podcasts to garner as many perspectives as we could on McCrae's poetry. Below, we will present what this investigation has rendered regarding the nature of the prison that McCrae constructs in the first section of *In the Language of My Captor.* The results of this inquiry will assist us with our investigation into whether his poetry offers freedom from this prison. What we find is that the reviewers, interviewers, and scholars offer several descriptions of McCrae's prison. These interpretations include racism and white supremacy as major components of McCrae's prison. Although McCrae does not overtly describe this collection as one about racism or white supremacy in the scholarship we have reviewed and cited, the authors cited below are, personally, very clear in their interpretations of the prison that McCrae describes in this set of poems.

One of the main aspects of the nature of the prison that the authors put forth is that of racism. Many authors describe the nature of the prison in this volume, and in these six poems, specifically, as a racist prison. Ryo Yamaguchi (2017) offers an overarching theme for the book, as a whole, when he states that McCrae "traverses in poems about race and power" (Yamaguchi). He describes the first section, the six poems we looked at,

as “Serv[ing] as a philosophical overtone for … these issues.” He also says that the captor “has presumedly just learned English, and his adoption of the language feels like an introduction into the American racial hierarchy.” He goes on to say, McCrae “articulate[s] richly nuanced understandings of race and racism as they operate at the crucial intersection of public history and private experience” (Yamaguchi). Rob McLennan (2017) agrees that the “poems [in the book] … are centered around racial tensions — cultural, historical and deeply personal … articulating a sequence of abandonment, dislocation and system racism” (McLennan).

Valerie Duff-Strautmann points to white supremacy as the nature of the prison and claims that McCrae’s book, *Captor,* reminds her of “the Romanian poet Paul Celon writing in German, his first tongue, but also the language of the Nazi system responsible for the death of his parents and his two years of imprisonment in a forced labor camp” (Duff-Strautmann 1). Victoria Vrana makes an equally strong claim regarding white supremacy as a key component of the prison McCrae describes, when she states, “The living death of white supremacy … dominates” the book (Vrana 43). She goes on to say that “each of McCrae’s persona poems demonstrates how exploiting oppressed peoples for entertainment has been fundamental to American history and the reinscription (sic) of living death” (Vrana 43). She furthers her interpretation with, “These pieces unsettlingly situate that captivity in no particular era, reminding us that imperial conquest has always included capitalist exploitation of black bodies, merely taking different forms over the centuries” (Vrana 44).

In conclusion, scholarship on McCrae ascribes racism and white supremacy as major components of the prison that his captive describes in *In the Language of My*

Captor. Our contribution to this discussion is that McCrae has not specifically denoted racism or white supremacy as a specific aspect of the nature of the captive's prison. Rather he lets this conclusion be "sub-textual and reader dependent" (Gromadzki). The speaker in the six poems, for example, never says that he is Black or that the keeper is white, although he infers it in many ways. As noted earlier, McCrae has written these six poems in a style that invites the reader to engage with the poetry and draw his own conclusions as to the nature of the prison. As noted earlier, McCrae employs the historical persona in order to address current issues by describing the past behaviors of humans, but he leaves the final judgement to his readers.

Let us now look at evidence regarding the ability of McCrae's poetry to provide freedom from imprisonment.

Poetry Can Provide Freedom From Imprisonment

In this section, we will present evidence from available scholarship of McCrae's work, as well as evidence from close readings of the six poems, that support the argument that poetry can help to provide freedom from imprisonment. We will show how McCrae deconstructs the prison and sets the captive free, in some ways, through his use of multiple poetic devices that encourage the reader to engage with the text multiple times and from multiple perspectives. As we shall see, McCrae employs several methods to engage and immerse the reader.

Let us look first at reader engagement as a means to freedom from imprisonment.

Reader Engagement Contributes to Freedom

As McCrae told one interviewer in 2016:

> This book is … a more focused exploration of a particular subject. I tend to think about this book in terms of captivity, in terms of exploring different kinds of captivity and putting forward a token of escape. (Gromadzki)

These six poems provide "token[s] of escape" because, as we have seen, McCrae's use of form opens up the poems so that the reader may immerse himself into them and experience and re-experience what the historical persona is experiencing. McCrae says, "[R]eading and writing teaches freedom. When a person is reading most actively, his or her mind strains to push beyond the boundaries of the world it knows and understands — static knowledge is a kind of prison" (Lycurgus). Therefore, the poems, by forcing the reader to re-read them, causes him to move beyond the prison of "static knowledge," thereby contributing to the dismantling of the prison by increasing their knowledge. As McCrae said, "I am … a part of making the coming freedom my book seems to believe in" (Lycurgus).

As McCrae has said, "I would like poems to do what we've been talking about — for the poem to do whatever it can toward holding itself open in a relationship with a reader" (Smith). For example, we will find that at times, the reader must determine for himself whether or not a question has been asked. In McCrae's words, this thinking required of the reader "helps the reader maintain his or her engagement with the poem" (Lycurgus).

Let us next discuss the methods that McCrae employs to immerse and engage the reader.

Methods of Engagement

McCrae employs many methods within these six poems to engage the reader. We shall demonstrate his use of: 1) hidden form; 2) lack of traditional punctuation; 3) use of virgules and caesuras to expose hidden form; 4) multiple possible meanings; and 5) tension between the meter of the line and the meaning of the line.

First, let us look at McCrae's craft of hiding the poetic form of his poetic lines.

Hidden Form

As explained earlier in Chapter III, McCrae employs the rhythms of formal poetry in a somewhat hidden manner by breaking lines on the page in non-traditional ways. The six poems all appear to be constructed largely of quatrains, but they are not metrically constructed this way. What appears on the printed page does not match the musicality of the poems. Although the lines in all six poems appear very much like quatrains on the page, upon close inspection, we find that McCrae employs enjambment and then adds caesuras and virgules to break lines where the hidden meter ends, which is often not at the end of the printed line on the page. The first two lines of the first poem in the collection, named, "His God," demonstrates this. "I am the keeper tells / Me the most popular exhibit" (McCrae, *Captor* 3). The rhythm of the words carries the reader directly beyond the first line into the second line to end the line metrically after the word, "Me." This immediately throws the reader off and encourages the reader to look beyond the confines of the printed line and draw his own conclusions as to where the end of the metrical line actually is. As we see here, McCrae engages the reader immediately and provides an explicit experience. This is an immersive experience that the reader can choose to engage in or choose not to engage in.

Below is another example of this from “Privacy:”

> In the phrase *In the privacy*
> *Of one’s own home* / I understand
> he thinks he means a kind of
> Militarized aloneness (6)

Here McCrae employs enjambment from the first line to the second line and then inserts a caesura and a virgule on line 2. The scansion of this poem, as printed, is:

> uu/ uu/ u/
> u/ u/ u/ u/
> u/ u/ u/ u
> / uu/ u/ u

However, when one recasts the lines to expose the hidden form, the scansion becomes:

> uu/ uu/ u/ u/ u/
> u/ u/ u/ u/ u/ u

which results in two pentameter lines. What appears to be a four-line stanza is, in reality, a two-line stanza following a pentameter meter. When one takes this into account in the reading, he recognized the musicality of the lines as well as the slant rhyme of “home” and “alone[.]”

As mentioned in Chapter III, McCrae states that, “Where a line ‘ends’ metrically is denoted by a ‘/’ if that point falls anywhere other than the actual end of a line, and generally where each new line ‘begins’ metrically is denoted with a capital letter (the only exception being when a line begins mid-word)” (Gromadzki). The reader is faced with what appears to be a run-on sentence and must backtrack and re-read the lines to make a determination as to its meter, which can influence interpretations of meaning. This is McCrae’s intention. As he told one interviewer in 2016, “I thought, if I took [the

virgule] out of poetry criticism and stuck it in my poems with the exact same thinking, I could use that to indicate where the line would end for metrical purposes" (Segal). However, a reader reading this poem for the first time may not be aware of McCrae's stated reasoning behind his use of the virgule and selective capitalization. The reader needs to read and re-read to perceive the hidden meter. The need for this deep engagement by the reader supports the argument that this poetry helps to provide freedom from imprisonment by widening the reader's knowledge, which helps destabilize the prison.

The next section will discuss McCrae's use of punctuation. As we shall see, McCrae chooses to use little punctuation in these poems as a means to engage and immerse the reader.

Lack of Traditional Punctuation

As stated above, McCrae said, "[T]he lack of punctuation creates more space for the reader to enter the poem. The reader has to determine, at every moment, what tone of voice the poem's speaker is using" (Lycurgus). McCrae's absence of punctuation opens his poetry up for the reader to become immersed in the poems. In a close reading of these poems, we find that McCrae employs no periods, question marks, commas, em dashes, semi-colons, or quotation marks, which are the punctuation marks that readers rely on to know where to pause in reading, or whether a phrase is a question or a statement, or to interpret the voice, tone, and meaning of the poem. McCrae eschews these punctuation marks. Rather, the only punctuation marks evidenced in these six poems are apostrophes to signify a contraction or possession, virgules, also referred to as slashes '/' and an

occasional dash '-.' The example below from the last poem in the set of six poems, titled, "In the Language," demonstrates McCrae's lack of punctuation, which encourages the reader to determine the voice and meaning of the poem:

> The keeper asks me why I
> Refuse him this
> I think to anyone who came from / The place I came from
> It would be obvious
>
> but // I did not think my people
> Superior to other people before
> The keeper's language has infected me
> I knew of // Few people
>
> Beyond the people / I knew
> before and when I met new people
> The first thing I assumed was
> they were just like me (*Captor* 13)

As we can see, McCrae avoids all punctuation in these three stanzas except the virgule and capitalization. This example is additional evidence of McCrae's use of form to invite the reader into the poem.

Let us look now at McCrae's use of virgules and caesuras to expose hidden meter.

Use of Virgules and Caesuras to Expose Hidden Meter

Another example of McCrae's use of form to draw the reader into the poem is his use of the double virgule. The double virgule, '//' functions in a manner similar to the single virgule, except that instead of indicating the end of a metrical line, the double virgule indicates the end of a metrical verse, when that verse does not end at the physical end of a line. The resulting discordance encourages the reader to engage closely with the

poem. In “Privacy 2.” we see an example of enjambment followed by the use of the virgule.

> Those books are not supposed to make me wise
> And yet I think perhaps
> They show me what he means
> By *privacy* // Perhaps
>
> by *privacy* he means / This
> certainty he has that
> The weapons he has made
> Will not be used against him (13)

In these last two stanzas of the poem, we see evidence of how McCrae utilizes form to engage the reader. First, we see a lack of punctuation marks except the single and double virgule. In the fourth line of the first stanza McCrae employs the double virgule. We can deduce that this signifies the end of this stanza because, when we count the number of feet in the stanza, up to but not including the double virgule, we count 13 feet. As McCrae mentioned in Chapter III, in these six poems, he constructed them such that each stanza would reflect the same number of feet as the first stanza (Zucker). In this poem, the first stanza and all of the previous stanzas, 1–5, are each made up of 13 feet. However, on the printed page, we see that first stanza above appears to be 15 feet when we include the word, “Perhaps” which is the last word printed for line 24 of the poem. If we read this word, “Perhaps,” as part of stanza 6, then stanza 6 (the first stanza above) would have 15 feet, and stanza 7 would have only 11 feet. Therefore, McCrae adds the double virgule before “Perhaps” in line 24 (line 4 above) to indicate that this is the first word of stanza 7, instead of the last word of stanza 6, which results in all seven stanzas of the poem consisting of 13 metrical feet, which conforms to McCrae’s documented plan for the form of these 6 poems (Zucker). This demonstrates McCrae’s use of form to

engage the reader, who must read and re-read to recognize the "hidden" form that McCrae so skillfully employs. The reader must also think, and this thinking, this pondering, helps the reader to form his own opinion as to the speaker's message. The poem appears at first glance to be made up of quatrains, but upon closer inspection, McCrae's true form becomes apparent. The reader must engage very closely to ascertain McCrae's intention regarding the form of this poem.

In "Privacy 2," we see another example of enjambment followed by the use of the virgule:

> If he would listen I would ask him whether
> The power / To enforce alone-
> ness and aloneness
> can exist together *(Captor* 11)

This discordance in the printed word and the meter is a reflection of the discordance of the speaker's monologue. The speaker's monologue describes his angst with his situation of being a human prisoner inside a monkey cage at a zoo, and the reader, when immersed in the poems, is also explicitly experiencing the speaker's angst that is reflected on the page. The reader has to think about how the captor, "him" above, is reflected by the speaker's words. The reader must keep going back over the poem. Like the captive, the reader must find his way out of this prison, and that involves re-visiting and re-reading. Also, the use of virgules and caesuras requires the reader to keep paying attention. These elements combine to require the reader to apply careful consideration, which defies quick summary and encourages the reader to engage in the experience of the language again and again. The reader has to keep reliving it, like the captive has to. This supports our

claim that McCrae engages his readers in the poems in order to contribute to disabling the prison.

One reviewer of the book, *In the Language of My Captor,* made observances about the "Privacy" poem that point to McCrae's engagement of the readers:

> and // If he would listen I would tell him
> Where privacy
> Must be defended
> There is no privacy
>
> I have become an // Expert on the subject. (*Captor* 7)
>
> Consider the way he uses simple inversion ("listen" and "tell") and negation ("privacy" and "no privacy") to give analytical motion to the sentence. By contextualizing this truism about privacy within an account of telling and listening, he posits a complex relationship between privacy, truth, and power's willingness to listen. Likewise he complicates our role as audience: perhaps our act of listening is a transgression of privacy? Or perhaps the speaker sacrifices his privacy in order to speak truth to us? Do we, as audience, mirror the captor? Or does our presence offer some avenue of emancipation? Through five short, simple lines, McCrae is able to sketch this entire constellation of questions. (Yamaguchi)

Yamaguchi supports our argument by presenting additional ways that the speaker engages what he refers to as the "audience" and brings the speaker into the poem. As we have seen, McCrae immerses his readers through his use of form. He writes utilizing visually apparent formal structures, but he adjusts these structures through the lack of punctuation and carefully placed virgules and caesuras. The reader must do the work of active re-reading to adjust to the hidden sonics, which causes each reader to provide his own interpretation of the work. McCrae has said that he "wanted to make them [the poems] in a way that people who didn't know they were in traditional meter wouldn't notice" (Vuong). In so doing, he creates an immersive experience for his readers.

Let us look now at another way that McCrae engages his readers through weaving multiple meanings into his poetic lines.

Multiple Meanings

We find an example of this is in "Panopticon," the second poem in this section:

> The keeper put me in the cage with the monkeys
> Because I asked to be
> Put in the cage with the monkeys
> Most of the papers say the monkeys
>
> must // Remind me of my family
> The liberal papers say the monkeys must
> Remind me of my home
> The papers don't ask me (*Captor* 5)

This poem can be read multiple ways. One could read it as, 'The keeper put me in the cage with the monkeys because I asked to be put in the cage with the monkeys.' This interpretation gives the impression that the caged man asked to be caged. Alternatively, one could read these lines as, 'The keeper put me in the cage with the monkeys because I asked to be put in the cage with the monkeys, most of the papers say.' The latter interpretation implies that the newspapers are reporting that the caged man wants to be in the cage and implies that the man may not want to be there. This is especially true when one reads the eighth line, "The papers don't ask me." This is an example of McCrae's use of multiple meanings to engage the reader. Where the reader ends the lines will determine his interpretation of the meaning of these verses.

Now let us look at how McCrae works with tension between the meter of his lines and the meaning of his lines.

Tension Between Meter of a Line and Meaning of a Line

One reviewer of Captor, Jason Gray, pointed out that McCrae has "made attention to the line central to [this] work" (1). Gray continues, "Shane McCrae is hyperconscious of his lines. He often writes in iambic pentameter, but then proceeds to cut lines elsewhere and indicate the end of the pentameter with a slash, achieving a doubling effect that shifts one's reading of the poems" (Gray).

As we noted earlier, in a 2021 interview McCrae stated,

> Poetry is trying to communicate via tension between sound and meaning. Whatever it wants to say to you is not just words themselves, but how those words sound and how considering the sounds of words interacts with the meaning of words. Sometimes there's harmony and sometimes there's dissonance between sound and meaning, but poetry is the art that focuses especially on the sound of words. (Tseng)

We see an example of the dissonance McCrae refers to in the first poem of *Captor*, "His God:"

> I am the keeper tells
> Me the most popular exhibit
> You might not think this cheers me but it does
> I'm given many opportunities (*Captor* 3)

The third line is a line of iambic pentameter, which has a sing-songy rhythm to it. However, the line is stating that the prisoner inside the monkey cage is happy to be in there. The reader, then, is immediately faced with the tension between the rhythm of the line, which follows a happy beat juxtaposed against the meaning of the line, which seems at odds with the happy tone of the meter. The reader must determine the tone of voice for this line. Is it a happy line or is it a sarcastic line? If it is a happy line, then the meaning of the line matches the sing-songy rhythm of the iambic pentameter. However, if the meaning is sarcastic, the meaning of the line is in contention with the meter of the line. The music of McCrae's poetry here is not in harmony, and that causes tension in the

poetry. The tension requires the reader to engage closely with the poem, thereby helping to dismantle the prison. This supports the argument that poetry can be a liberating force, but it has its limits.

Let us now conclude this section.

Conclusion to Poetry Can Provide Freedom From Imprisonment

Below is a quote from McCrae regarding the question of whether poetry can provide freedom from imprisonment:

> Poems can be useful by requiring of one, if one wants to have a relationship with a poem, that that relationship stays alive, that it stays vital. Engaging with poems in that way helps people stay vital. It helps our minds stay alive. And I think that as long as human beings keep their minds alive, they tend toward treating each other well. (Smith)

In summary, this "treating each other well" is the ultimate outcome of dismantling the prison of which McCrae indirectly addresses in this work. By encouraging the reader to engage with this poetry, McCrae is educating the user, immersing the user, and this may help to change their behavior in the future.

Let us now look at evidence that supports an alternate view and suggests that McCrae's poetry cannot provide complete freedom from Imprisonment.

Poetry Cannot Provide Complete Freedom From Imprisonment

There is some evidence to suggest that Shane McCrae's opinion on whether the poems we have reviewed can provide an escape from prison is that poetry *could* provide freedom from the imprisonment he has described in these six poems, but that this freedom is not complete. In an interview with Cate Lycurgus, McCrae described his thoughts on freedom as they related to these six poems:

> The poems in *Gulf Coast* are from my fifth book, *In the Language of My Captor*, which Wesleyan will publish in February of 2017. There are several sequences in the book — and I do think the book as a whole is about freedom, or at least aimed toward freedom — from the perspective of a person living in a human zoo in the United States of America in the early part of the 20th century. He is physically a captive, but he is also in some sense free, or as free as one can be and still be in captivity — his mind is as free as it can be — because he understands both himself and his captor, his "keeper" in the poems, in ways his captor cannot. But his freedom is, of course, problematized by a great many things, and one problem with the idea of a free mind in a captive body is that the mind and its freedom are in large measure determined by the circumstances of the body. Even though the book is about freedom, it is not a book that believes freedom is possible for anybody in America at the present moment — ableism, homophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, and the other bigotries under which we all suffer imprison us all. But the book seems to believe that freedom is becoming possible, that with each generation children are being taught more freedom. (Lycurgus)

Here, McCrae describes the book as being "about freedom" or at least "aimed toward freedom[,]" and he describes the nature of the prison as "bigotries" such as "racism[,]" that imprison everyone, and he says that the book does not believe that freedom is possible at the present moment, but freedom is "becoming possible with each new generation[.]" Here, we see that McCrae supports our claim that poetry is a liberating, yet limited, force against the prisons he describes in these six poems.

Let us now conclude this section.

Conclusion on Shane McCrae

This chapter has examined McCrae's treatment of the theme of imprisonment though a review of available scholarship and close reading of the poems from *In the Language of My Captor*. We focused our reading on the first section of this collection, which is comprised of six poems, "His God," "Panopticon," "Privacy," "What Do You Know About Shame," "Privacy 2," and "In the Language." As stated above, we chose to

focus on these six poems because they are, in McCrae's words, "about freedom" and "captivity[,]" (Lycurgus) which is the focus of this thesis .

As we did with our analysis of Etheridge Knight's poetics, our analysis of Shane McCrae's poetry discussed three main topics regarding the selected poems: 1) McCrae's unique perspective on the theme of imprisonment; 2) the nature of the prison and the aspects of imprisonment that McCrae portrays; and 3) how these poems contribute to the discussion of whether poetry may or may not provide freedom from imprisonment.

In answer to these questions, we have found that for question 1, regarding perspective, McCrae provides an explicit perspective through the use of a speaker who represents a fictional rendering of the historical persona of Ota Benga, a Mbuti man put on display in a monkey cage. McCrae immerses his readers into the poems through his use of form, including his use of hidden form, a lack of traditional punctuation, the use of virgules and caesuras, his employment of multiple meanings, and his creation of tension between the meter of lines and the meaning of lines to encourage the reader to engage actively in these six poems.

In answer to question 2, regarding the nature of the prison, we have found through close reading, that McCrae highlights the loss of human freedoms such as loss of identity, privacy, family, and language as key aspects of the captive's prison. We also examined scholarship on *In the Language of My Captor*, and found that multiple scholars, interviewers, and book reviewers support the view that the set of poems that we focused on express racism and white supremacy as key aspects of the prison.

In answer to question 3, regarding the possibility of poetry to provide liberation from imprisonment, we have shown through an analysis of McCrae's statements during

interviews, and from available scholarship, that poetry can provide some freedom from imprisonment, but this liberation is limited. Poetry is freeing in that it provides the opportunity to educate readers as to the new knowledge of a horrible racist incident from America's past, but it is limited in that, per McCrae, this book of poetry offers only a "token of escape" (Gromadzki) and in that *In the Language of My Captor* "is not a book that believes freedom is possible for anybody in America at the present moment[,]" because "ableism homophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, and the other bigotries under which we all suffer imprison us all" (Lycurgus).

In conclusion, for McCrae, his poetry provides only a limited liberation from the prison he portrays.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we will conclude this thesis, which has compared two contemporary African American poets, Etheridge Knight and Shane McCrae, in order to determine their respective treatments of the question: can poetry provide freedom from imprisonment? We have addressed this question by demonstrating: 1) how each poet uses poetry to describe imprisonment from a distinct perspective; 2) how each poet defines the nature of the prison and focuses on certain aspects of imprisonment; and 3) how each poet's work is or is not a liberating force against the prisons they describe. The comparison of the works of these two poets is important because it helps us to understand the perceptions of two African American poets regarding the power of poetry to help achieve freedom from imprisonment and to understand the nature of the prisons they describe.

First, we demonstrated that Knight provides an implicit perspective on imprisonment from first-hand, personal experience that he gained while incarcerated in an American state penitentiary in the 1960s and how his reader can experience the effects of his speakers' imprisonment implicitly through his poetic descriptions. We compared Knight's perspective with McCrae's and demonstrated that McCrae provides an explicit perspective of imprisonment from the vantage point of a historical persona, and McCrae draws the reader into the speaker/persona's prison through his use of form, so that the reader can experience imprisonment explicitly, in the same way as McCrae's captive speaker. Freedom, for McCrae's speaker/captive, takes the form of the reader's increased knowledge of a specific incident of racism and white supremacy from America's past.

The reader's increased knowledge comes about as a result of their engagement with his poetry and through their resultant interpretive readings. This explicit experience for the reader may or may not cause the reader to be impacted in such a way as to help guide them "toward treating each other better," which is McCrae's aim (Smith). This transformation of the reader through poetry is what may provide a deconstructing of the prison McCrae describes in this set of six poems. In conclusion, Knight *tells* his story of the nature of the prison to his readers implicitly, and McCrae *shows* his story of the nature of the prison explicitly by involving the reader directly in the rendering.

Secondly, we have demonstrated that Knight focuses on the aspects of imprisonment that illustrate the harsh realities of institutional prisons in America in the 1960s. Knight focuses on the aspects of prison that give the reader a true sense of the ugliness, suffering, loneliness, and violence that prisoners faced behind the walls of America's formal prison system in the 1960s. We then compared the nature of Knight's prison with examples from McCrae's poetry that depict the nature of his captive's prison in terms of the loss of personal freedoms, such as loss of identity, loss of privacy, loss of family, and loss of language that his historical persona experiences as a human forced to live inside a monkey cage in a zoo. While Knight's depictions provide a look into the real life of an American prison and share graphic and realistic images of the horrors of imprisonment, as well as the loss of family, and glimpses into Knight's personal fight against racism, alternatively, McCrae offers a fictionalized look at racism and white supremacy from his imagined perspective of a Mbuti man who actually was caged with orangutans in the 1900s in New York City. McCrae's rendering of the nature of this prison focuses more on an intellectual engagement with the reader so that the reader can

ascertain the nature of the prison through immersion in the language that McCrae uses to describe the historical persona's struggles. Each poet presents a look at imprisonment and, to varying degrees, racism and white supremacy, from their personal perspective of a Black man living in America over a span of 70 years.

Finally, we have compared and contrasted each poet's work to determine whether it is or is not a liberating force against the prisons they describe. We have demonstrated that Knight's work does not offer a clear escape from imprisonment, rather, scholarship falls on both sides of the argument, and, though his poetry does offer temporary freedom from the horrors of prison through the imagination, that freedom is hard-won and fleeting. Through his poetry, Knight's speakers struggle to find an escape from their plights as prisoners, and, though Knight was able to write good poetry while in prison, proving that poetry can offer some escape from the harsh realities of prison, this freedom through the imagination comes after significant struggle and tension. We found that, although Knight vacillated between realizing poetry as a liberating force and poetry as an ineffective escape from his personal prisons, in the end, we conclude that his poetry could provide only a temporary and fleeting freedom. We then looked to McCrae's work, which, not unlike Knight's work, demonstrates that poetry can provide only a *hope* of escape from imprisonment and that this freedom is not guaranteed. McCrae does state that poetry is "limitless" and can help people transform into "new people" (Lycurgus). Unfortunately, the freedom these poems seek is currently out of reach, as McCrae indicates *In the Language of My Captor:*

> Even though the book is about freedom, it is not a book that believes freedom is possible for anybody in America at the present moment — ableism, homophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, and the other bigotries under which we all suffer imprison us all. But the book seems to believe

> that freedom is becoming possible, that with each generation children are being taught more freedom. (Lycurgus)

Although freedom is possible, it is unrealized at the present moment for the prison of racism and white supremacy in America that McCrae describes.

As a result of this analysis, our claim is that, based on the works we have examined and their associated scholarship, for Knight and McCrae, poetry can be a liberating force, but any freedom afforded by poetry is constrained. Regrettably, poetry provides only limited liberation. Although their poetry approaches the topic of freedom and imprisonment from distinct perspectives, one from implicit personal experience, and the other from explicit, immersive 'experience,' both poets convey the message that the fight for freedom from the prisons they describe is an uphill battle. Sadly, although nearly 70 years have passed since Etheridge Knight shared his battles for freedom through his poetry, Shane McCrae is still fighting the same battles.

As this thesis has a limited scope, we look forward to future scholarship that may further explore McCrae's treatment of the topic of poetry's liberating power.

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