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“A Vagabond with a Purpose”: Claude McKay and His International Aspirations

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**Abstract:**

*The essay examines Jamaican-born poet and novelist Claude McKay 's search for an original form of literary and political expression. Although he first started this search with Jamaican volumes of poetry, his ongoing search for justice and equality led him on extensive journeys around the world. In the course of which he also came to engage with non-English European literature and to view especially the Russian and Irish literary renaissances as possible models for the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s he had been involved in. Both his travels and his dealing with new literary influences enabled him to view the black diaspora from a wider perspective and from there from there renegotiate his Caribbean consciousness.*

**Keywords:** Claude McKay, Jamaica, travels, black diaspora, literary consciousness

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It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Like a multicolored shell that enables an ear to hear the noise of the ocean, the voice of the human ocean—the hundreds of millions of people liberated from colonialism—is heard in the talented poetry of the big and the smallest West Indian islands.

—E.L. Gal'perina, *Vremya Plameneyuschih derev'ev: Poeti Antil'skih Ostrovov* (*The Time of Flamboyant Trees: The Poets of the Antillean Islands* [my trans.]

In this essay, I analyze the importance of Claude McKay's Jamaican beginnings and international travels in his search for an original form of literary expression. Although he first started this search in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), his two Jamaican volumes of poetry, his long travels abroad enabled him to see the problem of the black diaspora in a wider perspective and facilitated the growth of his Jamaican consciousness. While Ray, the Haitian writer and protagonist of McKay's first two novels, reads *Crime and Punishment* and refers to Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev as creators of genuine art in *Home to Harlem*, in *Banjo* he conducts a more complex, longer-lasting dialogue with his literary master, Leo Tolstoy. Bitá Plant, the protagonist of McKay's third novel, *Banana Bottom*, continues the search for a particular Afro-Caribbean identity started by Ray in North American and French settings. In the final novel, there is no longer a surrogate dialogue with Russian writers, but a practical application, an actual integration of the educated colonial with the common Jamaican people and their culture. McKay's Jamaican beginnings, search for justice and equality, extensive journeys around the world, and engagement with nineteenth-century Russian writers in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* left a mark on his fiction and facilitated his formation of national Jamaican consciousness and sentiments.

The writer's two autobiographies, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (published posthumously in 1979) reveal and illuminate many aspects of McKay's poems, novels, and short stories. While *A Long Way from Home* focuses on his international experiences as a black writer in the United States, Europe, and North Africa, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* discloses his Jamaican background and inspiration. The title of *A Long Way from Home* is taken from an African American spiritual with the opening line, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home" (LeSeur 300). Yet the man of motion that is seen in McKay's first autobiography is neither a representation of the rootless drifter nor an endless seeker in quest of his identity. Instead, his worldwide travels play a significant role in the formation of a national consciousness shaped by his

engagement with the important political and social issues of the twentieth century. As such, the journey provides McKay with an opportunity to express the international consciousness of the black diaspora as he does in *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), the novels he wrote during his expatriate years in Europe. However, in *Gingertown* (1932) and *Banana Bottom* (1933), his subsequent works written in Africa, he returns to the Jamaican landscape and its people. Whereas in his first autobiography, *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, McKay attempts to reconcile his internationalism with his desire for cultural belonging, in his second autobiography and in the poetry and narrative devoted to his homeland, he shows his ultimate preference for a national identification.

Even though McKay was born in a country with an educational system that encouraged native Jamaicans to accept the superiority of British cultural and literary forms and standards, from early childhood he possessed qualities that prevented him from becoming completely submerged in the foreign culture. He delighted in listening to stories about his Madagascar ancestors who managed to stay together by declaring a strike on the auction block (Eastman). The perseverance and inner strength of Mrs. McKay's ancestors had a profound impact on young Claude.

While most of the previous West Indian writers found their muse in the beautiful landscape of the region, McKay was the first one to turn to Jamaican culture as a source of his inspiration. In his Jamaican poetry, he expresses the everyday reality of the common people in a language created by them. Despite the wide acceptability of the British cultural standard in the Jamaica of his time, McKay turned to Jamaican indigenous language and culture. *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* are "pioneering attempts by a black West Indian to portray realistically the life of his people" (Cooper, "Introduction" 5). It is no wonder that these poems sold over two thousand copies; won the Mulgrave Silver Medal, a prize established by a British family for the best representation of Jamaican literature; and made a significant contribution within the Jamaican context.

In *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, McKay demonstrates his intimate knowledge of the peasants' lives and celebrates their rural, Afro-Jamaican origin. He shows the country as a beloved agrarian motherland that suffers greatly from the white man's interference. McKay realistically depicts the life of a peasant who is annoyed and disturbed by the white man's presence. He clearly expresses his sympathy toward the exploited. Most of the poems of *Constab Ballads* are directed against the Kingston policemen and their hypocrisy and arrogance. McKay describes a cruel world in which the justice system does not protect the oppressed that inhabit the lowest rung of the social ladder.

McKay's formative years on the island and his Jamaican literary beginnings influenced his subsequent work. According to Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* reveals McKay's "inspiration and foundation of self and art" rooted in Jamaica (87). Winston James agrees with her in his discussion of McKay's intellectual, cultural, and political formation on the island and the writer's formation of "lifelong concern with racism, color, class, justice and injustice, oppression and revolt" (29). As his Jamaican volumes of poetry demonstrate, McKay is ahead of most other Anglophone Caribbean authors of that time. Written at the beginning of the twentieth century, they deal with such concepts as West Indian society, self-discovery, and self-definition, Caribbean themes that only later became the primary focus of Caribbean literature.

The writer's search for justice and equality started in Jamaica and continued in the United States. When the poet landed in Charleston, South Carolina in the late summer of 1912, he was not prepared to encounter a racial segregation system that "effectively denied blacks any social or civil intercourse with the white majority except as menials or supplicants." [1] He describes his surprise, horror and defiance of North American racial prejudice in the following way:

I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction—color and race being hardly taken into account.... At first, I was horrified, my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it all. Then I soon found myself hating in return but this feeling couldn't last for to hate is to be miserable. (McKay, "Negro Poet" 275–76)

In the United States, McKay turned to reading and writing as forms of protest against the injustices he witnessed. During that time he also realized his desire to analyze the problems of the black diaspora from an international perspective. Even though completing his education had been his original intention for going to the United States, after a few years of study at Kansas State College, he became possessed by an urge to travel:

The spirit of the vagabond, the daemon of some poets, had got hold of me. I quit college. I had no desire to return home. What I had previously done was done. But I still cherished the urge to creative expression. I desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. And so I became a vagabond—but a vagabond with a purpose. I was determined to find expression in writing. [2]

In a conversation with Frank Harris, an editor of *Pearson's* magazine, McKay admitted that "the dominant desire to find a bigger audience" had been on his mind when he went to the United States because he felt that in Jamaica he was "isolated, cut off from the great currents of life" (LW 20). Even though he never mentioned a racial motive for leaving, it is possible that McKay's

professional future would have been limited there since “doors which would have been shut to an equally talented Negro were open to the white-skinned de Lisser” (Ramchand 56).

McKay’s inclination to rebel against injustices, already manifest in *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, increased in the United States. In 1917, he turned to Africa in search of an African American identity as well as his own. By the spring of 1919, he was ready to proclaim his revolutionary politics in his literary work. This he did by publishing his poems in *The Liberator*, a magazine in which he could both promote the cause of social justice and find himself as a writer and artist. His famous poem “If We Must Die” became a call to African Americans to stand brave before their white oppressors, and it came at a time when they needed this message most. With the appearance of “If We Must Die,” black people unanimously declared McKay a poet (LW 31). The poem “forced its way” into African American pulpits, clubs, schools, and mass meetings (LW 227). At the moment of writing, McKay was not aware that he “was transformed into a medium to express a mass sentiment” (LW 228), but he soon became known in New York as a militant black poet.

After the publication of his poems in *The Liberator*, McKay continued his world travels. He spent seven years in America and arrived in England in the fall of 1919. England became another site of political and professional growth. It provided McKay with an opportunity to publish *Spring in New Hampshire*, the book of poetry in which he expresses nostalgia for Jamaica, his homeland. While living in London in 1920, McKay wrote “I Shall Return,” a poem that shows Jamaica’s special place in his heart and mind that none of the other new and interesting places could fill:

I shall return to loiter by the streams  
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,  
And realize once more my thousand dreams  
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.  
I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife  
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes  
That stir the hidden depth of native life,  
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes.  
I shall return. I shall return again,  
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain. [3]

After several years of separation from Jamaica, McKay remembers it fondly and hopes to return one day to a country that could cure his emptiness and hurt. The poem shows love, longing, and patriotism for Jamaica that is devoid of imperial sentiments.

Despite the nostalgic feelings for Jamaica that “I Shall Return” reveals, McKay did not go back to his homeland after his sojourn in England. Disappointed with England, he returned to the United

States in 1921. There he resumed his association with *The Liberator* and continued to contribute articles, book reviews, and poems to one of the most radical magazines in the United States. During these years, he composed poetry that represented his understanding of the black dilemma in Western culture. The anger and alienation that McKay felt in an unfair world dominated by whites, the world in which the black race was denied humanity, justice, and equality, found an expression in *Harlem Shadows*, the book he published in the United States.

After the publication of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay decided to visit the Soviet Union and to see the results of the 1917 revolution for himself. Russia “signaled” and he responded with the search for new understanding and knowledge. In 1922, McKay left for Russia in the hope that he would find evidence that equality and justice were actually taking place under socialism. Even though he was not a member of any official Communist Party delegation that traveled to Moscow, he shared a belief in international communism and an enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution. Once there, he had to obtain permission from Comintern authorities to attend the Fourth World Congress of the Third Communist International as “an unofficial delegate-observer” (CM 173).

Despite the efforts of American communists to prevent McKay from attending the congress, the poet won the right of “a special delegate” (CM 174). His vindication resulted from two sources. First, Sen Katayama, the leading Japanese communist, confirmed McKay’s knowledge of the black working class and convinced Comintern officials that the poet could speak authoritatively about the potential role of blacks in the international communist movement. Second, the Russian people on the streets found his color, height, smile, and laughter to be attractive (CM 174). As McKay writes,

never before had I experienced such an instinctive sentiment of affectionate feeling compelling me to the bosom of any people, white or colored. And I am certain I never will again. My response was as sincere as the mass feeling was spontaneous. That miraculous experience was so extraordinary that I have never been able to understand it. (LW 167)

As “the first Negro to arrive in Russia since the revolution,” he considered himself to be a “black icon” and “an omen of good luck” (LW 168). “Never in my life,” he admits, “did I feel prouder of being an African, a black....From Moscow to Petrograd and from Petrograd to Moscow I went triumphantly from surprise to surprise” (LW 168). Even bourgeois readers were interested in his poetry. As a token of appreciation for him as a poet, an anti-Bolshevik Russian professor who worshiped Pushkin’s books gave McKay a photograph of the Russian poet as a young boy with clearly visible African features. Throughout his life McKay thought of this portrait as one of his few most precious treasures. [4]

Even though McKay enjoyed a warm personal acceptance and appreciation by the Russians, he never totally committed himself to Soviet ideology. As he wrote James Weldon Johnson in a letter dated May 8, 1935, he went to Russia as “a writer and a free spirit” and he left the same. [5] When he left Russia, he was determined to become a writer and a spokesman for his people:

I left Russia with one determination and one objective: to write. I was not received in Russia as a politician, but primarily as a Negro poet. And the tremendous reception was a great inspiration and urge to write more. I often felt in Russia that I was honored as a poet altogether out of proportion to my actual performance. And thus I was fired with the desire to accomplish the utmost (LW 226).

McKay’s warm, affirmative reception during the period of the Third International influenced his political and literary development. This experience facilitated his awareness of himself as a representative of the black race who stood not only for African Americans, but also for the black diaspora of European imperialism in Africa and the Caribbean islands. The visit provided inspiration for creating a new, liberating kind of art in the writings that followed.

After Russia and a brief visit to Germany in the fall of 1923, McKay journeyed to Paris, an emerging site of African American intellectual life of that time. Living abroad and seeing from that perspective how the black intelligentsia wanted to please the whites rather than serve their own people provided him with an opportunity to express his opinion in a different way:

For my part I was deeply stirred by the idea of a real Negro renaissance.... The Russian literary renaissance and also the Irish had absorbed my interest. My idea of renaissance was one of talented persons of an ethnic or national group working individually or collectively in a common purpose and creating things that would be typical of their group. (LW 321)

Being free from the attitude of the black elite, McKay was able to compose *Home to Harlem*, a novel in which he describes the life of common black people of Harlem. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson dated April 30, 1928 he states,

In writing *Home to Harlem* I have not deviated in any way from my intellectual and artistic ideas of life. I consider the book a real proletarian novel, but I don’t expect the nice radicals to see that it is, because they know very little about proletarian life and what they want of proletarian art is not proletarian life, truthfully, realistically, and artistically portrayed, but their own false, soft-headed and wine-watered notions of the proletariat. With the Negro intelligentsia it is a different matter, but between the devil of Cracker prejudice and the deep sea of respectable white condescension I can certainly sympathize, though I cannot agree, with their dislike of the artistic exploitation of low-class Negro life. We must leave the real appreciation of what we are doing to the emancipated Negro intelligentsia of the future. (CMPJ 13-38)

In *A Long Way from Home*, he further elaborates on the reason for “so much genteel-Negro hostility” against *Home to Harlem* and Langston Hughes’s “primitive Negro poems” and criticizes the black intelligentsia he met in Paris who were “Harlem-conscious” not because they understood “Harlem’s intrinsic values as a unique and popular Negro quarter,” but because “white folks had discovered black magic there” (LW 322).

Rather than associating with white French people, the writer found a communal sense of kinship among ordinary Africans, West Indians, and African Americans he met in Marseilles. In one of his letters to Langston Hughes written in France, he expresses his fascination with this French city:

Marseilles I really love more than any place in France. It is the most vivid port I ever touched. Wonderful, dirty, unbeautiful, rolling in slime and color and hourly interest. There all the scum of the sea seems to drift on to natural soil. I love it more than any of the English, American or German ports. [6]

There McKay had a chance to live among the African diaspora and to spend time with dockers and sailors from Dahomey, Senegal, and Algeria (LW 277). In the Vieux Port, an exciting place where he rented a room, he met the poet and later politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, a “Negro leader among the Communists” and “a tall, lean intelligent Senegalese” to whom he promised to write the truth about the Negroes in Marseilles (LW 278).

While the greatest part of *Banjo* was written in Marseilles, by the spring of 1928 McKay had to escape the French city in order to finish it. Barcelona, a place that took his breath away, became his next abode. In the letters he wrote to James Weldon Johnson between 1928 and 1931, he states,

Perhaps you know Barcelona—a beautiful city and it is a happy change after France and more to my fancy, but I am working so hard I haven’t had a chance to enjoy anything yet.

If you ever come to Europe soon, you must be sure to visit Spain. I am sure that both you and Mrs. Johnson will be charmed by it. It is the only European country that touches me emotionally.

Barcelona was to me the most inviting town and it has lovely suburbs. And all along the Catalunian coast down to Valencia are the most beautiful port towns and villages of brown-gray and soft creamy color that I have ever seen anywhere. (CMPJ 13-38)

While he intended to spend just three days in Barcelona when he went there with a Senegalese boxer early in the summer of 1928, he ended up staying in Spain for three months (LW 295–296).

*Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* are authentic writings significant in African American and Caribbean contexts. McKay’s first novel is not about the black elite that strives to become like whites in their

way of life and thinking. Instead it is a story of the serving class—longshoremen, housemaids, porters, waiters, cooks, and washroom attendants. His second novel is a realistic depiction of a difficult life of seamen and drifters of all races and nations who come in contact with each other in Marseilles. While in *Home to Harlem*, McKay makes an effort to come closer to common African American people and their backgrounds, in *Banjo* he describes the difficult life of the African diaspora in Marseilles and creates a sense of their collective identity.

McKay's search for a particular African American and Caribbean identity that started on the pages of *Home to Harlem* and continued in *Banjo* can be perceived as his coherent attempt to articulate the personal problems of the black intellectual and create a type of writing rooted in African culture and traditions. Similar to Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, who strove to portray the Russian people of the nineteenth century truthfully, he worked towards a unique and distinctive depiction of the Caribbean and African American masses of the twentieth century. A return to the "native soil" and respect for his own people and culture are some of the tendencies that he shares with them. The "penitent nobleman" desires to come close to the masses and becomes creatively active in the Russian literature of the nineteenth century. Ray in *Home to Harlem* similarly gains strength through contact with the cultural treasure of Africa and with ordinary black people.

McKay's search for justice and equality was not just geographical. While he spent time in the Soviet Union, France, and Spain and learned a lot from these "logical steps" (letter to James Weldon Johnson, May 8, 1935, *CMPJ* 4-419) of his pilgrimage, in Morocco he turned to Islam in his spiritual search for equality between blacks and whites. In another letter to James Weldon Johnson dated May 25, 1931, he adds, "I am seriously contemplating becoming a Moslem. The social side of the life that is blind to racial and color prejudices appeals to me greatly and as the religion is mostly great poetry, I can conscientiously subscribe to it, as a poet" (*CMPJ* 13-38).

McKay felt as color-conscious as he had felt twenty years earlier when he wrote his "bitter poems on race questions" (*CMPJ* 15-455). Unlike the United States, Morocco gave him "something he had not found in his native West Indies, not in Harlem and not in France," for the Moslems of Morocco made him feel completely without color consciousness for the first time in his life (*CMPJ* 15-455). In a letter to Max Eastman, McKay wrote that no place had satisfied him as much as Morocco since he had left home, for there were "many things in the life of the natives, their customs and superstitions, reminiscent of Jamaica" (*CM* 271). In a letter to W.A. Bradley, he stated he was ready to write "the Jamaican book—dealing with the religious customs and social life of the peasants" for he was feeling "very religious" among the Moslems (*CM* 271).

The community solidarity and sovereignty that McKay found in Africa inspired him to depict the beauty of the Jamaican countryside in the prose he wrote there. The African setting encouraged him to return fictionally to a Jamaican community not only in *Banana Bottom*, but also in *Gingertown* and *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, books in which he included “Truant,” “The Agricultural Show,” “Crazy Mary,” “When I Pounded the Pavement,” and “The Strange Burial of Sue.” All of these stories are somewhat reminiscent of the writer’s experience in his homeland. Even though the setting of “Truant” is New York, in *My Green Hills of Jamaica* McKay still places it under the title “Jamaican Short Stories.” Barclay, its main character, is a West Indian peasant boy who feels like a prisoner within “the huge granite-gray walls of New York.” [7] He nostalgically remembers his native home, as he is trapped in the intricate life of this city:

Dreaming of tawny tasseled fields of sugar-cane, and silver-gray John-tuhits among clusters of green and glossy-blue berries of pimento. The husbands and fathers of his village were not mechanically-driven servant boys. They were hardy, independent tillers of the soil or struggling artisans.

What enchantment had lured him away from the green intimate life that clustered round his village—the simple African-transplanted life of the West Indian hills? Why had he hankered for the hard-slabbed streets, the vertical towns, the gray complex life of this steel-tempered city? Stone and steel! Steel and stone! Mounting in heaven-pursuing magnificence. Feet piled upon feet, miles circling miles, of steel and stone. (G 152)

Barclay feels that he is a slave to New York. Only in moments when he is “lost in the past” can he remember the sense of freedom that he experienced as a West Indian peasant. City life intensifies in him the fond memories of his village:

Yellow-eyed and white-lidden Spanish needles coloring the grassy hillsides, barefooted black girls, straight like young sweet-woods, tramping to market with baskets of mangoes or star-apples poised unsupported on their heads. The native cockish liquor juice of the sugar-cane, fermented in bamboo joints for all-night carousal at wakes and tea-meetings. (G 159–60).

Whether in New York or Kingston, the city destroys a sense of individuality and personal freedom. Like Barclay, who feels a prisoner of New York, the narrator of “When I Pounded the Pavement” is “the son of peasants” who had grown up in an environment of “individual reserve and initiative” (G 208). In Jamaica’s capital, he is “thrown among a big depot of men of different character from bush and small town to mix in a common life with them” (G 208). When the narrator becomes a city constable, he is not happy with this profession because he inherits “the peasant’s instinctive hostility for police people” (G 211). Contrary to the city, McKay’s rural Jamaican village, with its own rights and regulations, is a much happier place where one can find a sense of community. The

writer's retrospective view of a unified, agrarian, and harmonious Jamaican way of life becomes an inspirational setting.

In *Banana Bottom*, his last novel, McKay develops the ideas first initiated in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* even further. Bitá Plant, the protagonist of the third novel, continues the search for a particular Afro-Caribbean identity started by Ray within North American and French settings and completes it in an authentic Jamaican environment. If in the first two novels, Ray's engagement in a surrogate dialogue with Russian writers simply leads to a discussion of the importance of African heritage within a Caribbean identity, in *Banana Bottom* there is an action, an actual integration of an educated colonial into common Jamaican society and the Afro-Jamaican culture it represents. The heroine's uprooting from the nurturing Afro-Jamaican soil leads to her fervent attachment to its cultural and spiritual values. In his last novel, McKay actually applies the example of the Russian authors to an Anglophone Caribbean context and resolves the psychological dilemma of his previous novels.

The writer's international travels and experiences illuminated his understanding of the importance of black consciousness and convinced him that African Americans had to unite and learn how to rely upon themselves in order to achieve their goals. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson dated April 15, 1935, he writes,

I learned very much abroad, especially in Africa. And I am certain that Negroes will have to realize themselves as an organized group to get anything. Wherever I traveled I observed that the people who were getting anywhere and anything were those who could realize the strength of their cultural groups, their political demands were considered and determined by the force of their cultural grouping: it was the same underlying principle in Communist Russia as in Fascist Spain and democratic France and England and in "protected" Africa. (*CMPJ* 13-38)

In an earlier letter to Max Eastman dated September 1, 1932, he states, "My attachment to Tangier is sort of spiritual looking backwards." [8] His African experience provided "the kind of deep-seated, traditional community self-sufficiency that he had known as a child in the hills of Jamaica" (*CM* 272). He returned to the United States in January of 1934 convinced that American blacks could learn a lot from the minority groups in Europe and North Africa: "In [McKay's] opinion, international communism had failed, and blacks should concentrate on strengthening their collective group life and promoting democratic government at home in order to be in a position to meet all eventualities" (*CM* 306).

As a result of these experiences, especially his stay in Morocco, McKay understood the importance of black peoples' self-realization as an organized, self-sufficient, and self-reliable cultural group. In

a letter to James Weldon Johnson dated April 3, 1937, he stated that the three years of living in Africa were like “studying three hundred years of life there” (*CMPJ* 13-309). In the same letter, he also criticized the tactics of orthodox communists for their “aim to suppress independent thinking and opposition opinion”; as “a member of a minority group which was the age-long victim of intolerance,” he refused to embrace communist intolerance (*CMPJ* 13-309).

McKay’s interest in Islam as a way to find unity and equality among different racial groups was similar to his attraction to Catholicism, the religion he turned to by the fall of 1944. In “Right Turn to Catholicism” he writes,

Jesus Christ rejected the idea of any special, peculiar or chosen race or nation, when he charged his apostles: Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel. Not the gospel of Imperialism, Feudalism or Capitalism, or Socialism, Communism or a National Church... I find in the Catholic Church that which doesn’t exist in Capitalism, Socialism or Communism—the one true International of Peace and Good Will on earth to all men. (*CMPJ* 9-298)

In another article “Why I Became a Catholic,” he explains the role of color and race in his decision to become a Catholic:

Like the Mohammedan religion today, there never was any race and color prejudice in the Roman Catholic Church from its beginning up until the Reformation.

It is said that three of the early popes were Negroid. In the Schomburg library in New York there is the photograph of the nephew of a pope—duke—who is unmistakably Negro.... But, as I have said, there was no race or color prejudice in the world of the early church, and so it was not necessary or important to mention the color or race of any of its protagonists. (32)

McKay joined the Roman Catholic Church on October 11, 1944, despite pleas from Eastman to be faithful to his commitment to rationalism (Griffin 41). At the end of his life, he discovered “a humanism and spirituality” that gave him “inspiration and brotherhood” (Goldweber 13). Even though one may not agree with McKay’s assessment of Catholicism, one can “scarcely characterize his conversion as inconsistent with his life” (Hillyer 357). In a letter to Max Eastman dated June 30, 1944, he wrote, “by becoming a Catholic I would merely be giving Religion the proper place it had in my nature and in man’s nature” (*CM* 360). In the Catholic Church, the writer found “that sense of wholeness very important to him” without a compromise of his individuality (Hillyer 357).

McKay’s “Cycle Manuscript,” a collection of poems that has been published in his *Complete Poems* (2004), is an important document that sheds light on the poet’s reflections at the end of his

life. Once again these poems show McKay's feelings of alienation and inner conflict. In "Cycle 1," he explains how his function as a black poet is similar to that of the crucified Christ:

These poems distilled from my experience,  
Exactly tell my feelings of today,  
The cruel and the vicious and the tense  
Conditions which have hedged my bitter way  
Of life. But though I suffered much I bore  
My cross and lived to put my trouble in song  
I stripped down harshly to the naked core  
Of hatred based on the essential wrong! (CP 241)

Even though McKay encountered prejudice and discrimination as a black writer, these sufferings did not break his spirit. Instead, he condemned these injustices in his poems, novels, short stories, autobiographies, and articles. Once again, this poem shows him as a free spirit who can "soar with unclipped wing, / From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things" regardless of what any "white or black" critic might say about him (CP 241). No one can stop him from telling the world exactly what he wants to say. When he states that he never "cared a damn / For being on the wrong side of the fence," he unquestionably refers to the Negro elite (Griffin 45). As this poem reveals, McKay did not relate to the black intelligentsia; rather he associated himself with the black masses:

Even though I was as naked as a lamb,  
And thought by many to be just as dense  
For being black and poor, I always feel  
That all I have and hold is my own mind,  
And need not barter for mess of any kind. (CP 241)

While the black people of Jamaica, the United States, Europe, and Africa encouraged him to take pride in his African heritage, until the end of his life he remained suspicious of the Harlem Renaissance elite. His idea of cultural or literary renaissance as that of "talented persons of an ethnic or national group working individually or collectively" to achieve a common purpose and to create "things that would be typical of their group" differed significantly from that of other writers and intellectuals who regarded the Harlem Renaissance as "an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of smart Negro society" (LW 321). In "Cycle 41," McKay explains why the black elite and politicians would not praise him:

No lady of the land will praise my book.  
It would not even be brought to her attention,  
By those advising where and how to look  
For items which make favorable mention  
Because my writings are not party stuff,  
For those who follow the old trodden track.  
There are nothing of the tricks—the whine and bluff,

Which make politicians jump to slap your back! (CP 263)

A politician would never admire McKay for his writing because in it he shows “the Negro stripped of tricks, / As classic as a piece of African art/ Without the frills and mask of politics” (CP 263). The poet cares much more about the realistic portrayal of the black masses than about his acceptance by the black elite. He further develops this theme in “Cycle 47,” where he stresses the importance of the black working class in the Harlem Renaissance:

They hate me, black and white, for I am never  
Afraid to say exactly what I think,  
They hate me because I think, and will forever,  
Of the common Negro wallowing in the sink. (CP 266)

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He states that African Americans can only be saved as a “unit,” and “better Negroes cannot rise alone” (CP 266) without the masses. Once again he ridicules those blacks who were striving to become white:

They who imagine they can save their soul  
By thinking white and hating black will find  
That in the end they cannot attain their goal;  
For though they see, yet they are really blind.  
We will be lifted up with our own masses  
Or be kept down as slaves by the white classes. (CP 266)

He fights for justice and equality on behalf of the black working class for he can relate to their sorrow and misery:

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel,  
Binding me like a heavy iron chain,  
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal,  
Because I know the keenness of the pain. (CP 260)

McKay did not come to know the masses of the African diaspora in an academic way. Instead, he intimately acquainted himself with them by “talking to black crowds at meetings, not in a bohemian way, by talking about them at cafés” (LW 228). His knowledge of their hardships and sufferings came from his personal experience: “I knew the unskilled Negro worker of the city by working with him as a porter and longshoreman and as a waiter on the railroad. I lived in the same quarters and we drank and caroused together in bars and at rent parties” (LW 228).

When he tried to cure their pain in his writings, he did not have to create his protagonists from “an outside view,” for he knew the inner lives of his characters from his own close everyday association with them (LW 228). Until the end of his life, he remained faithful to the belief that the African American community could not solve its problems without the working class. He became “the first

intellectual to link the frailty of the Negro Renaissance to the failure of those in the forefront to forge a synthesis between a community collective soul and loftier social and political goals” (Griffin 49–50). In his poems as well as his novels, short stories, articles, and autobiographies, he creates his black characters without “sandpaper and varnish” and articulates the bonds of kinship that he feels with them (*LW* 228).

McKay’s autobiographies disclose two sources of the writer’s formation. One is that of his connectedness to Jamaica, its culture, and its community, and the other is that of his international inspiration. Even though he considered himself to be a “poet without country,” someone with an “international mind” (letter to Langston Hughes, *LHPJ* 109-2042), who was “always obsessed with the idea of universality of life under the different patterns and colors and felt it was altogether too grand to be distorted creatively in the interest of any one group” (letter to James Weldon Johnson, *CMPJ* 13-30), his deep sense of belonging to the Jamaican community is evident in his narratives. As Wayne Cooper correctly states, in *Banana Bottom*, McKay’s final novel written in Morocco, the search for the psychic unity and stability that began in *Home to Harlem* “came full circle to rest again in the lost paradise of his pastoral childhood” (*CM* 282). The writer’s pioneering articulation of the problem of Jamaican identity found expression in his writings. While his long travels abroad enabled him to see the black diaspora in a wider perspective, he was to express particular Jamaican issues and concerns in his poetry and prose. His life abroad provided not only material for his literary work, but also exposed him to the major political and social issues of the 1920s and 1930s. As McKay’s international consciousness grew as a result of his travels in the United States, England, Russia, Germany, France, Spain, and Morocco, his national Jamaican consciousness also increased.

## End Notes

- [1] Cooper, *Claude McKay* 64 (hereafter cited as *CM*).
- [2] McKay, *Long Way* 4 (hereafter cited as *LW*).
- [3] McKay, *Complete Poems* 167-68 (hereafter cited as *CP*).
- [4] *LW* 169–70. I found this portrait in the James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature and Art, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, while doing my research there in the summer of 2004.
- [5] Claude McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature and Art, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 4, folder 119 (hereafter cited as *CMPJ* and followed by the box and the folder numbers).
- [6] Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature and Art, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 109, folder 2042 (hereafter cited as *LHPJ* and followed by the box and the folder numbers).
- [7] McKay, *Gingertown* 152 (hereafter cited as *G*).
- [8] Claude McKay's Letters to Max Eastman from 1928 to 1934, The Lilly Library, Indiana University.

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