

The “New York State of Mind” of Claude McKay: A Literary Biography of a Caribbean Writer’s Contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and the Creation of the New Negro

Craig Barnes Graham

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**Department of English
College of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico**

Approved by:

Dr. Loretta Collins
Reader

Dr. Nicolas Faraclas
Reader

Dr. Reinhard Sander
Thesis Director

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List of Abbreviations

1. *Amiable With Big Teeth: AWBT*
2. *A Long Way From Home: ALWFH*
3. *Banana Bottom: BB*
4. *Banjo: B*
5. *Home to Harlem: TH*
6. *My Green Hills of Jamaica: MGHOJ*
7. *The Negro in America: TNIA*

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to each and every one of you who walked with me, held my hand or cheered me on along the way. Here's to You!

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge each and every person who in some way or another, helped me to achieve this goal. Thank you!

Abstract

The “New York State of Mind” of Claude McKay: A Literary Biography of a Caribbean Writer’s Contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and the Creation of the New Negro.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth century began to take shape, literary expressions of anti-colonialism, racial equality, black pride, and Pan Africanism began to define the mission and vision of Anglophone Caribbean men of letters such as Claude McKay, the radical Jamaican poet, writer, and traveler who unabashedly challenged the firmly etched repressive lines of disenfranchisement, discrimination, poverty and hate in his literature, politics and international sojourns throughout the course of his life. In my dissertation entitled, I closely examine the invaluable yet often understated positive influence his unapologetic brand of self-love, determination and intrepidity had on black culture, writers, performers, politicians and particularly, the black working class, the group from which McKay hailed and held in highest regard due to its strength, humility and incomparable humanity, within the African Diaspora.

My research seeks to find the answers to the following three questions: Who shaped or greatly influenced McKay’s radical approach to life? How/Why did this way of living become a definitive part of his ethos during the Harlem Renaissance, the Creation of the New Negro and throughout the course of his life? And most importantly, How/Why did his brand of radicalism evolve and manifest at the end of his life?

My findings to these questions have led me to conclude that the life and works and legacy of McKay play an indelible role in the formation of the Black Nationalism,

Pan Africanism, the Black Arts Movement and most importantly, The Civil Rights Movement. And this fact holds even greater truth since the discovery of his unpublished manuscript written seven years before his death, entitled *Amiable with Big Teeth* was found in 2012 at Columbia University. To date, few dissertations have parsed this work in defense of his important legacy as an anti-colonialist, literary pioneer and radical thinker often tarnished by historians who attribute his rejection of Socialism, Communism and conversion to Catholicism towards the end of his life as a glaring sign of inner brokenness and defeat. I argue, on the contrary, however, that his late life decisions were equally heterodox because he used them to further his radical bent, this time working from within world systems such as Christianity, a religion Dr. Martin Luther King would later use to mobilize and rouse African-Americans to fight for their rights non-violently. I also credit the life and times of McKay in the founding of subsequent human rights movements such as the Women's Rights Movements, the LBGTQ movement and most recently, Black lives Matter Movement as well.

Major Themes: Caribbean Literature, Migration, Transnationalism,
The Harlem Renaissance, Race, Radicalism.

Biographical Information

Craig Graham is a native New Yorker who has resided in Puerto Rico, his adopted second home, since 1998. He has taught English at the UPR-Carolina for over ten years and is currently teaching English at the UPR-Río Piedras, College of General Studies, for the first time as well. He enjoys nature, literature, languages, travel, good food, health and fitness, the performing arts, entrepreneurship, empowering others and activism when necessary. His mantra for life is Carpe Diem!

Introduction

Festus Claudius McKay, better known as Claude McKay, was a fascinating Jamaican writer, poet, social activist, and equal rights champion. In 1912, he left the verdant hills of his native land where he had already attained success as an up-and-coming bard for the United States - a young nation especially known throughout the West for its generally positive reception of immigrants - with the illusion of enjoying a similar welcome, developing his literary craft even further, and forming part of a new, vibrant, industrious society.

Upon arrival however, McKay soon ascertained the glaring racial disparities that existed between blacks and whites. Dejected but not defeated by this harsh reality, McKay forged deeper into the dissimilar worlds of black and white, particularly in New York City, both uptown in Harlem during the tremendous optimism of the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic movement that exposed Negro culture to the world, and downtown in Greenwich Village among white literary liberals, political radicals, and bohemians. It is also important to note that McKay's decision to sojourn in New York, the city that shaped much of his political, racial, and literary identity during the decade of the teens, the twenties, and the thirties informs the reader of his "New York State of Mind" while living in England, Russia, France, Spain, Morocco, and ultimately, the United States as well.

Harlem: The Negro Metropolis

McKay firmly entrenched himself emotionally, professionally, and personally in Harlem during his first sojourn just a few years after he migrated to the United States in

1912. Originally founded by the Dutch and eponymously named (originally spelled Haarlem) after a small village in the Netherlands in 1658, Harlem became a rural getaway of sorts for the wealthy of New York City. During the American Revolutionary War, George Washington won the Battle of Harlem Heights, his first major battle in New York on September 16, 1776. In 1873, this area was annexed by New York State to New York City, at which point Harlem, still considered a desirable suburban location, slowly became a fully integrated economic, social, and cultural part of the city. At the turn of the twentieth century however, Central Harlem began to lose its appeal to the predominantly Jewish denizens that sought to escape the influx of working-class whites and the earliest waves of Great Migration blacks who took residence there in search of employment opportunities for a better life.

By 1904, Harlem, or The Negro Metropolis as it was coined by African-American writer, philosopher, educator, and patron of the arts, Alain Locke, commonly known as the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance,” was well on its way to becoming a predominantly African-American residential, cultural, and business enclave. During this time, Caribbean blacks also migrated there. After two years of living and working in various parts of the United States, McKay was enticed by the allure of Harlem. Better known as the New Negro Movement during its existence, the Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that thrived from the 1920s to the early 1930s. It gave concrete form to the visual art, music, literature, and theater of the greatly overlooked African-American experience from slavery to the early 20th century in the United States in ways never expressed before.

This literary biography will extensively examine the preponderance of McKay's literary, political and existential contributions to the Harlem Renaissance and the genesis of the New Negro during the early twentieth century. More importantly however, it will argue the need to recast his then unpopular and/or under-appreciated pro-black stance on black literature, race-politics and socio-economics in America and beyond, as prescriptively urgent solutions to many of the social ills that continue to disenfranchise black people collectively today. The oeuvre of McKay's poetry and prose and, especially, the recently published unfinished manuscript *Amiable with Big Teeth*, discovered by a graduate student in 2012 in the archives of Butler Library (at Columbia University), will comprise the basis on which my argument is built. Numerous supporting secondary sources that underscore themes of otherness, displacement and race such as *Orientalism*, by the late Palestinian scholar, social critic and theorist, Edward Said and *The Souls of Black Folk* by African-American writer, educator, intellectual and twentieth-century luminary, W.E.B. DuBois play major roles in shaping the discourse that defends my argument. In addition, this study is undergirded by research texts such as *Pan-Africanism*, edited by Robert Christman and Nathan Hare; *Claude McKay: Rebel Soujourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, by Wayne Cooper; *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936*, by Mark Solomon; *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America*, by Winston James; *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity*, by Tyrone Tillery and *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, by David Levering Lewis. I employ these text in an analysis of McKay's espousal of Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and black socio-political unity. Lastly, in my discussion of McKay's overarching influence in the creation of the New Negro, I am

informed by a host of primary, secondary and tertiary texts, such as *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, by Alain Locke; *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, by A.B. Christa Schwartz; *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha, Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*, by Gary Edward Holcomb; along with a wealth of articles, essays, short stories and pertinent literary production by both McKay and others.

A direct correlation between the writer's upbringing in colonial Jamaica from the 1890s to the first decade of the 1900s and the importance of race, class, and color there will provide the springboard for his subsequent migration to the U.S. and decision to pursue a career as a writer despite the daunting odds of indigence, discrimination, racism, illness, and social unrest he boldly faced during his relatively brief, yet defining sojourns in Harlem, particularly during his first arrival during the teens, his second return during the early twenties and his last sojourn during the late thirties after having spent almost a decade in Russia, Western Europe, and Morocco.

An examination of the positive effects of displacement will provide a closer look into how McKay, a world traveler, succeeded at circumventing adversity in New York and abroad, at almost every turn. McKay's very personal and successful negotiation of assimilation to both White American and African-American culture will also demonstrate his level of erudition of cultures, people, and the milieu in which both were enveloped.

Resistance is another inextricable literary and political tenet that defines McKay's life and times in Harlem as well. By virtue of his humble yet academically sound education in Jamaica, McKay's unique, often misunderstood outlook on the purpose of literature, politics, life and even race, jarred the minds and emotions of many of the black

and white literati and political intelligentsia who often sought to silence his openly heterodox views on numerous occasions. Never one to capitulate to opposition with ease, McKay also used his writing and ability to cross color and socioeconomic lines as a way to mitigate racial inequality, professional bias, and political stigma during his tenure as a journalist for left-wing New York City periodicals such as *The Liberator* and fraternization with members of the Communist party there. Such unorthodox thought inspired not only African Americans and Caribbean blacks but also the formation of the formidable Pan-African Movement which pretended to unite all people of African descent worldwide.

Finally, the construction of the New Negro, a term made popular during the Harlem Renaissance by Locke, “The Father of the Harlem Renaissance,” referred to American blacks that lived during the turn of the twentieth-century to the mid-1940s will be extensively examined. I argue that McKay is, in effect, the quintessential unsung New Negro who doggedly demanded and fought for political, racial, and social equality both actively and passively despite the odds stacked against him. The New Negro was typically, but not exclusively, of the burgeoning black middle class. He/She was assertive, self-assured, confident and, most importantly, unwilling to endure the brunt of racial disenfranchisement any longer. McKay, unfortunately, is seldom remembered as one of the integral founding fathers of this progressive black movement largely due to his refusal to pander to the overwhelmingly conservative racial, political and socio-economic climate of both white and black America in his literary works. Another significant factor that contributed to the devaluation of McKay’s oeuvre and forward ideologies was the dismissive attitude of the black intelligentsia and many Harlem Renaissance writers,

thinkers or politicians such as DuBois who lambasted McKay after reading *Home to Harlem*, which he labelled an utterly distasteful novel that celebrated the lowliest individuals and lifestyles of those who lived and worked in Harlem.

Furthermore, this investigation seeks to examine the precursory role that McKay has unwittingly played in African-American artistic and social movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and, posthumously, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement, Black Power Movement and, most recently, the Black Lives Matter Movement, with hopes that the diffusion of such information will elucidate his largely obscure achievements and strengthen his legacy.

Background

Claude McKay was born on September 15, 1889. His early years were spent with his parents and older brother Uriah Theophilus McKay who would later play a major role in his personal and artistic development during adolescence. As a young boy, McKay spent countless hours at his infirm mother's side. She inspired him to read and write. At the onset of adolescence, his mother died and he was sent to live with his brother who expanded his horizons through the Classics, English literature, novels, and poetry. McKay was so inspired by the penetrating power of words that he decided to pursue a career as a poet in Jamaica and later as a writer in the U.S.

McKay arrived in Harlem in 1914 after a stint at Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State University. The initial thought of higher education at Tuskegee, one of the nation's premier African-American institutions of higher education of that time headed by Booker T. Washington, African-American educator, author, orator, and political leader, excited

him wildly. McKay enrolled in the agronomy program at Tuskegee Institute but was quickly disheartened by Washington's boot-camp-like style approach to everything from academic instruction to the minutiae of campus life which centered on the oppressive micromanagement of student life and academic instruction, in McKay's opinion.

McKay's stay at Tuskegee, albeit brief, left a lasting impression on him, nonetheless. Washington's belief that poor blacks were just as important to the survival and advancement of Black America as W.E.B. DuBois' "talented tenth" reinforced McKay's belief that empowerment and self-sufficiency of the working class were universal imperatives for the survival of all blacks, be they from the hinterlands of Jamaica where the peasantry comprised the majority of the island's population and the economic backbone of Jamaican society, or the urban and / or rural areas of the U.S., where African Americans historically constituted the cornerstone of the nation's work force.

Blacks lived separate but unequal lives in the U.S. Tuskegee challenged the widely accepted presumption within White America that blacks were inherently inferior to them and, thus, incapable of successfully aspiring to monumental undertakings, such as Washington's successful founding of a higher education institution for blacks administered by blacks. McKay's short stay at Tuskegee prepared him for life as a black man in the U.S., something his upbringing in Jamaica could not do. His Jamaican nationality would not exclude him from the horrors of racism in the U.S. Decades later, McKay would commend Washington's convictions and selfless determination to prepare African Americans for the twentieth century in the passionate, pragmatic way that he did.

McKay lived in Harlem from 1914 to 1919, from part of 1921 to part of 1923 (about one year and a half) and from 1934 to 1943. These years left an indelible mark on his literary endeavors, politics, and world view. As a Jamaican intellectual of the working class, he readily embraced and partook in all aspects of high and low culture in Harlem without ever fully belonging to the African-American community of Harlem, the industrial North, the rural South, the black working class, middle class, upper class, the lettered or unlettered. While McKay struggled as a writer in Harlem, the daily vignettes of decadence, humility, perseverance, and hope inspired his writing. The bustling streets, humble dwellings, raucous nightlife, and hardworking residents also provided stark parallels to his people and homeland. Much of his creative content often reflected on the issues of race, class, gender, black life, justice, and equality. These themes helped classify him as one of the most radical poets of the Harlem Renaissance in 1919 while working as a porter on the railroads and living in Harlem, when he penned the penetrating call-to-arms sonnet, "If We Must Die." This poem roused not only Black America to defend itself during the race riots of The Red Summer of 1919 in Chicago but also unlikely political figures such as Winston Churchill, who read this poem during his address to the American Congress in attempts to solicit American aid and entry into WWII.

McKay's love of poetry dated back to his adolescence in Jamaica where he published *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* in 1912. Both collections were written in Jamaican English, commonly known as Patwa. *Songs of Jamaica* celebrates peasant life and *Constab Ballads* critiques the joy and pain of life under British hegemony while serving on the Constabulary forces. *Harlem Shadows* was written in Standard English in

Paris - the city that attracted and inspired some of America's finest African-American and White American writers after WWI - and published in New York City in the spring of 1922 during his second stay of about a year and a half in Harlem just before leaving for Moscow to address The Third Communist International Conference. It focuses on the feelings of indignation and anger experienced by those who have suffered the caustic effects of racism, inequality, and discrimination like himself. McKay's vehement response to such degrees of hate and repression are unapologetically expressed in this collection. Twenty-three of the seventy four poems rail against such tendencies. The remaining two-thirds address his empathy and identification with the onus of African-American life and the plight of the African-American working class.

McKay also forayed into politics in Harlem. As the African-American population swelled throughout the urban north, working-class whites and African Americans vied for the same entry-level positions. Lack of work compounded by the influx of unwanted Great Migration newcomers exacerbated extant feelings of racial superiority among whites. Growing fears that black labor would eventually supplant them spawned frequent acts of violence and virulent hate in order to thwart collective attempts made by civil rights organizations such as the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League to move African-Americans from the margins to the American mainstream. Upon McKay's second return to Harlem in 1921, a monumental opportunity was made available to him. He diffused his social and political beliefs as associate editor of the leading white liberal periodical of its time, *The Liberator*, where he published the race-conscious essay "How Blacks See Green and Red." In 1922, he furthered his agenda even more in his newly appointed

position of co-editor when he published the essay /social critique “He Who Gets Slapped.”

Life abroad did not lessen his penchant for Harlem and its people. When McKay published *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* in 1940, he had already re-established his residency in his most cherished neighborhood of Harlem for seven years. *Negro Metropolis* captured the true spirit and brio of the New Negro and Harlem. It also provided an in-depth look at the patterns of black migration from the American South, the Caribbean, and Central America to Harlem from 1895 to the mid-1930s by delineating and elucidating the auspicious convergence of the socio-economic, cultural, political, and artistic idiosyncrasies particular to each ethnic group. While *Negro Metropolis* explored the pros and cons of living within a racially polarized community, it also proffered something few of his black peers espoused: the benefits of living happily within a strong, united, segregated black community.

Harlem: Negro Metropolis became McKay’s sum total of scientific study on race, class, gender, nationality, and politics during the advent, height, and twilight of the Harlem Renaissance. His lucid depiction of Jake, the seedy thrill seeker and fast talker, in *Home to Harlem*, and Lincoln Agrippa, the debauched drifter, in *Banjo*, evinced half of his alter ego which put him in direct opposition with many famed African-American political leaders and intelligentsia such as DuBois and cohorts, who considered such fictional characters and the localities they frequented nothing more than a blemish on black society. On the other hand, characters such as the troubled Haitian writer and intellectual Ray, in *Home to Harlem*, and the same Ray, now a beach boy and would-be writer in *Banjo*, revealed McKay’s intellectual alter ego and double consciousness. The

coexistence of both alter egos became one of McKay's most noteworthy literary hallmarks in his novels, poetry, journalism, essays, and short stories, as well.

Marxism/Communism in Harlem

With an auspicious solution to the race problem far from sight, blacks took interest in the ideals of the Communist Party based on the proclamations of Marxism. After WWI, many African Americans saw the benefits of living within the colorblind, classless, racism free society communism purported to ensure. In 1919, Nevis native and journalist Cyril Briggs founded the African Blood Brotherhood, one of the first African-American anti-racial discrimination associations initially founded to secure black self-determination and voting rights for blacks in the South. McKay, like Briggs, was drawn to communism as a means to remedy the current socioeconomic malaise within black communities such as Harlem. Both also placed high regard on the importance of black labor as a form of social and economic empowerment against unflagging racism. Briggs' initiative also aimed to unite black radicals on the issues of colonialism, Black Nationalism, racism, and anti-capitalism by merging class and race consciousness.

As African Americans - men especially - joined the ranks of the Communist Party, McKay and many other party sympathizers developed an affinity for the Soviet Union, the ideological Mecca of communism. Many visited briefly while others stayed for extensive periods of time. In Russia, blacks were not buffeted by overt racism. Instead, they were treated with dignity and respect. Upon returning to the U.S., many of these men continued to fight for equality with a newfound zeal and direction in rural and urban centers such as Harlem. Communism successfully wooed many Harlem

Renaissance artists and writers to its ranks as a means to diffuse its agenda through some of the most educated, open minded, and liberal members of the Negro community.

Interestingly, much of McKay's radical vein ran south of the storied streets of Harlem within the circles of white Greenwich Village liberals, radicals, communists, and bohemians. Many of these individuals created employment opportunities for him at some of the city's most renowned left-wing periodicals, put him in contact with many influential literary figures, sustained his financial solvency when necessary, and supported his literary endeavors. Initially, McKay believed that the solution to the race problem lay in international Communism until he realized that the party's solution for the Negro proved glaringly feckless, short sighted, and disingenuous after having spent more than a decade abroad in Western Europe, Russia, and Northern Africa (1923-1934).

McKay's return to Harlem during the Great Depression of the 1930s did not diminish his compassion for poor blacks nor his passion for using his writing to combat injustice and racism within a social/political context. His greatest contributions to the race problem were arguably made during his tenure at both black and white leftist periodicals. It was there that McKay found a place he could truly call his own. As a staff writer for *The Liberator*, he kept the race problem at the forefront of his journalistic assignments often to the chagrin of colleagues, African-American political figures, and close black and white friends. His sincere desire to enlighten white radicals on the race problem with hopes that a true brokering of a New Deal on race in America would emerge, put him on par with civil rights champions such as Marcus Garvey and DuBois, neither of whom shared McKay's views on how this issue should be approached.

Constant opposition from black leaders such as DuBois and white radicals did not distort his vision of a true egalitarian society that included the full participation of blacks of all socioeconomic levels. Even his personal friend and colleague Max Eastman, the purported consummate radical and editor of *The Liberator* failed to truly prioritize the race problem in McKay's opinion. The hypocrisy and unabashed indifference of white liberals and radicals in regards to this topic became part of what McKay came to despise and rail against at every turn in both Black and White politics in America.

The Creation of the New Negro

The literature referred to in this dissertation will bolster the claim that McKay was instrumental in the creation of the New Negro. *The Miseducation of the Negro* and *The New Negro* by Locke will be used to contextualize the birth and evolution of the New Negro from various social, intellectual, political, cultural and economic vantage points. Moreover, Locke notes that the return of Black soldiers from Europe and North Africa after WWI, for example, marked a new dawn of resistance for African Americans and the ideal milieu for the creation of the New Negro. No longer were these former soldiers willing to tacitly accept mistreatment, marginalization, and oppression at home after having experienced a higher degree of civility and humanity during and after WWI in Russia, Western Europe, and North Africa in particular. American mores and precepts on race were being boldly challenged by an assertive, self-confident, determined male and female: the New Negro. To elucidate this point, various short stories from *Gingertown*, McKay's sole compilation of short stories about life in Jamaica and Harlem, take center stage. Interestingly, the stories set in Harlem, such as "The Prince of Puerto Rico," "Brown Skin Blues," "Mattie and her Sweetman" and "Highball" are based on self-made,

successful, yet flawed New Negroes who fall victim to internal desires or external pressures. Another compiled study *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, an account of the world's largest black community during the eventful years of the twenties and thirties will help this study shape the image of and also provide prime examples of the New Negro.

Similarly, *A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Essays of the WPA*, by Ralph Ellison and Dorothy West, as well as *Other Voices of a Generation*, edited by Lionel C. Bascom, will also be referred to in this dissertation in order to provide a fascinating glimpse into the daily life and ambitions of the New Negro at that time. Lastly, this dissertation considers the following essays from the compilation *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem*, edited by Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani: "Cuban Negrismo;" "Mexican Indigenismo" by David-Luis Brown; "An International African Opinion" by Minkah Makalani; "The New Negro in the Pacific" by Yuichiro Onishi; "A Mobilized Diaspora: The First World War and Black Soldiers as New Negroes" by Chad Williams; and lastly, "Home to Harlem Again: Claude McKay and the Masculine Imaginary of Black Community" by Thabiti Lewis in order to draw parallels between New Negro theory in the U.S. and abroad.

Furthermore, this dissertation will trace the origins of McKay's independent thought or radicalism as many called it at that time. Like his older brother, McKay rejected the validity of Christianity and the belief in a Supreme Being. He also rejected the notion that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Full access to his brother's extensive personal library enabled him to expand his knowledge on a wide array of topics, strengthen his use of the English language, and open the doors of opportunity to a future as a writer abroad. Philosophical texts such as *Literature and Dogma* by Matthew

Arnold, *The Riddle of the Universe* by Hegel, and *The Conflict Between Religion and Science* by Draper and *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936*, and *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* by Winston James provides to this study the impetus for understanding and discussing McKay's radical and agnostic bent throughout most of his life. McKay's conversion to Catholicism, explained in his essay "Right Turn to Catholicism" will play a momentous role in this part of my research.

Having rejected and challenged the constraints of Christianity since his adolescence in Jamaica, McKay also found it easy to entertain the absence of a higher being in communist ideology. According to Free Thought, man should ascribe to science, logic, and reason, not authority, tradition, or other dogmas. In addition, the Christian tenets of abounding love and long suffering provided little hope for many educated blacks disgruntled with the Black church's feeble stratagems for the race problem. As an interest in communism grew within Harlem, so did a non-conventional and arguably dubious religion, similar to The Nation of Islam, begin to take root in *Amiable* where numerous examples of self-empowerment through Islam especially tailored to the needs of Black Muslims in the U.S. deceive The Masses.

Despite the theoretical and moral shortcomings that may have kept McKay from supporting their cause, he shared their unapologetic affirmation of black pride. Like the black Muslims who challenged conventional forms of Eurocentric Christianity, McKay challenged the deeply entrenched literary standard of the African-American testimonial narrative popularized during slavery as a means to appeal to the sensitivity of White America. McKay's works seek to honor poor blacks and shame racial inequality by

placing a face on the black underclass and extolling how it lives. He does not seek to ingratiate or delight white readers by mimicking the classics, English poetry, or prose as the ultimate touchstone of literary excellence.

McKay's literary and intellectual mentor, Englishman Walter Jekyll, had much to do with McKay's stylistic and glaringly anti-Eurocentric thrust. Jekyll had such a penchant for the African folk tales, peasant songs, and poetry of Jamaica that he published them in a book entitled *Jamaica Song and Story*. His first encounter with McKay was during perfunctory research for the compilation of this collection. Upon meeting McKay, he was taken by his literary breadth and special aptitude for poetry. Jekyll urged him to honor his people and his gift by employing local dialect in his poetry over Standard English due to its beauty and authenticity. Mentorship eventually blossomed into genuine friendship between the two. Visits to Jekyll's extensive library became more frequent and poetry readings and writing sessions brought them closer. McKay spent countless hours reading British poetry and novels, writing poetry, and, ultimately, finding his unique voice as a proud, black poet and writer from Jamaica.

Like the peasantry of Jamaica, the working class of Harlem also spoke a local dialect. McKay quickly captured the meanings, sounds, uses, and colors of African-American working class vernacular in Harlem in many of his works. The use of slang, colloquialisms, broken English, and local neology bestows humanity on Jake, the heavy boozing, black A.W.O.L. soldier and main character of McKay's controversial best seller *Home to Harlem*, who in many ways shares McKay's internal and external conflicts of love, life, community, and career. Jake - like McKay - also resembles the New Negro's unwillingness to wait for white society to change. Wisdom and experience taught the

New Negro to effect change proactively. In *Home to Harlem*, Jake's probability for success in the illegal gambling halls, night clubs, rooming houses, and street corners of black Harlem are far greater - and attractive to Jake - than the dismal, degrading, dead end, day laborer positions white employers made available to black males downtown. Harlem provides Jake - and McKay for that matter - the best and the worst of life in New York. It is the only place in the city where the black man - like his white male counterparts downtown - is able to choose his own destiny.

McKay's open mind on sexuality also helped define another aspect of The New Negro. Though never substantiated, Jekyll was rumored to have been homosexual. It is also believed that both McKay and Jekyll maintained a sexual relationship before McKay left for the U.S. Many of McKay's closest male and female friends were also rumored to have been sexually liberated, undefined, or decidedly bisexual or homosexual. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay makes several references to female lesbian acquaintances such as Gertrude Stein and intimate male friends such as Max Eastman, who was believed to have been his paramour at one time or another. Despite McKay's ambiguous sexuality, he never condoned nor condemned sexual preference. Conventional unions of marriage did not seem to bother him either, despite his failed marriage and estranged relationship with his biological daughter. The New Negro - in the arts and letters especially - chose not to reject others on the grounds of sexuality or sexual preference because in doing so, the vicious cycle of discrimination was perpetuated. McKay also did not express a racial preference when it came to choosing an intimate partner in Harlem or downtown. Such free thinking within the conservative American community of that time opened the doors for the emergence of black feminism and the

acceptance of well-respected gay African-American writers such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes to name a few within the black community.

The New Negro envisioned a self-empowered black community. Contrary to what many may believe about McKay, he was not a staunch integrationist. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, he drives home the importance of belonging to a self-governing, economically self-sufficient group which, if properly managed, will eventually gain respect and recognition from the mainstream. According to McKay, Black America should seek to build a strong community devoid of class distinction, rich in social, economic, and cultural wherewithal so that instead of being seen as a burden to white America, it is seen as an asset and hence invited to fully participate in the mainstream.

After McKay's death in 1948 (McKay lived in Chicago from 1943-1948), the characteristics of the New Negro coalesced into the Civil Rights Movement: a collective effort for social change. Chicago remained an important U.S. city in terms of urban pedagogy, public space and the literary arts movements such as the Black Arts Movement which was founded there. On a similar note, Harlem became a hotbed for African-American expression once again. Unlike the Harlem Renaissance, the urgency of the Civil Rights movement sparked the birth of organizations and events often considered to be radical by mainstream America due to the nature of its claims for equal rights. Martin Luther King graced the streets of Harlem with his nonviolent approach to the race problem while Harlem resident Malcolm X organized a more radical brand of protest there and prominent African-American writers such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin were inspired to follow McKay's unapologetic presentation of life in White

America to the praise of Black audiences, who no longer wished to keep undesirable aspects of Black life out of public knowledge.

Works Related to Harlem

Throughout McKay's extensive travels, Harlem remained a driving force in his literary career and personal life. In 1923, McKay wrote the essay "Soviet Russia and the Negro," exclusively for Russian readers interested in better understanding the dismal state of blacks in the United States during the early 20th century, and the great potential Communism could have among them. Later in 1932, he wrote the essay "A Negro to his Critics," in response to the negative reception *Home to Harlem* had received from the black intelligentsia and white detractors, as well. He also drew parallels between the marginalized West Indian, East Indian, and Irish migrants of London to the Southern black, Caribbean, and Central American black migrants of Harlem. Similar disenfranchising parameters existed among French Africans, French Caribbean blacks, and African Americans subsisting in the industrial port city of Marseille, France, as well as in the French and British occupied territory of Morocco where he felt the sting of European hegemony.

Other noteworthy works penned outside Harlem with a close relation to Harlem are *Color Scheme* - written but later destroyed by McKay abroad - in 1925, about race relations similar to those in Harlem. *Banjo*, another novel redolent of *Home to Harlem*, closely examines the colorful lives of black migrant men from Africa and the African Diaspora in the port city of Marseille, and *Gingertown*, published in 1932, is a book of short stories, half of which are set in Harlem. In *Banana Bottom*, published in 1933,

McKay's main character Bitá, champions the virtues of Jamaican peasant life and black unity over white assimilation and second-class citizenry.

Lastly, the most important contribution to McKay's scholarship that I make with this investigation lies in my original analysis of McKay's recently published manuscript entitled *Amiable with Big Teeth*, discovered at Columbia University in 2012. I argue that this text exemplifies his redoubled support of Black Nationalism over western political systems such as Socialism or Communism previously espoused by him. I also claim that this text redoubles his underappreciated, clamorous call for black solidarity while underscoring the auspicious blueprint he created for the emotional, mental, political, and socioeconomic reconstruction of Black New York, Black America, and the Black Diaspora. Lastly, it will serve as a harbinger to social movements of black solidarity such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, the Black Arts Movement which started during the same decade and ended during the 80s, and as of late, the Black lives Matter Movement.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation will be buttressed on the following major theories and theorists: Early Twentieth Century Migration Theory explained in *Laws of Migration* by Ernest Ravenstein; Free Thought based on the philosophy of John Locke, Rousseau and Immanuel Kant; the ideology of Orientalism by Edward Said; Pan-Africanism espoused by DuBois and Garvey in various works written by both individuals; Communism and its origins in Marxism established by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*; and Black Nationalism, also founded by Garvey.

Free Thought is a philosophical viewpoint that stresses the importance of the formulation of opinion based on logic, science, and reason instead of authority, tradition, or dogmas. Free thought in England and Germany became a modern movement towards the end of the seventeenth century. The free thinker opposed the authority of the Church and literal belief in the Bible due to insufficient evidence that merits belief in the supernatural. The incorporation of this theory will enable the reader to fully understand the liberating effect the principles of self-determination, self-identity and free will had on McKay, particularly in Ch. 1 which examines his early formation as a poet.

In 1881, the *Free Thinker Magazine* was published by G.W. Foote. This publication touts an anti-religious stance. Free Thinkers are essentially atheists and consider much of organized religious beliefs to be based in superstition, not facts. Because McKay's older brother subscribed to free thought at that time, it would not be hard to imagine why McKay's pliant, adolescent mind might have found Christianity implausible. Throughout the British Caribbean islands, both free thinking liberals and conservative Christians diffused their beliefs to those who would listen. Most locals chose to follow Christianity, however.

Migration Theory will also ground the reader in the social, economic, and literary factors that contributed to McKay's budding wanderlust and steely desire to succeed as a poet, discussed in Ch.1 and Ch.2, especially. Twentieth-century Caribbean migration patterns to the U.S. are best explained by Ernest Ravenstein, an early migration theorist, English geographer and author of the study entitled "Laws of Migration." In 1891, his findings revealed that people migrate based on economic push/pull factors and much of his work in this field is still considered valid today in Migration Theory. Some of his

findings that will be applied to this investigation posit migration on the push factors that exist within one's country such as undesirable work conditions, low pay, lack of employment and the pull factors which place emphasis on the benefits of migrating to another place such as favorable work conditions, better pay, and a higher quality of life. According to Ravenstein, most migration occurs over short distances and rural dwellers are more migratory than urban dwellers. Before leaving for the U.S., McKay migrated to Kingston, the capital of Jamaica to work as a constable. Most migration occurs in steps and men migrate longer distances than women. After having migrated to Kingston, McKay decided to study agronomy in the U.S.

Orientalism is the third major and undoubtedly one of the most preponderant themes that characterizes the life and work of Claude McKay wherever he went. Initially seen in Ch.1, during his formative years as a voracious reader of world literature, philosophy and poetry, McKay is the consummate "Other" from the moment he dons the constabulary uniform in Kingston as a young man until his last sojourn in the Midwest (U.S.) where he dies a Catholic. The late postcolonial theorist Edward Said critiqued the West's perceptions of the Middle and Far East as arcane, exaggerated and exotic. This term can also be applied to Europe's relationship with Africa or the Americas, as well. Said argues that Orientalism is inherently negative because it implies an erroneous assessment of non-western cultures and invariably places them on an inferior plane to Western cultures.

Since slavery, whites have characterized the physiology, culture and spirituality of blacks on the broad mantle of "otherness." Historically, such classification has disempowered and disenfranchised millions of individuals. During the beginning of the

20th century, for instance, the racial norm in The United States was whiteness. Blackness was undoubtedly outside of the norm and, hence, considered the “other.” In Ch. 2, McKay, experienced life as the “other” in New York as a black man, a migrant, a free thinker, poet, and a communist sympathizer. His experiences in England (Ch. 3) as the “other” continued to define his sojourns. In Russia (Ch. 5), he was exoticized and celebrated (contradicting findings exists regarding this assertion however) for having been one of the first black Party sympathizers many Russians had ever seen in person. In France (Ch.6), his race and socioeconomic status orientalized, disempowered, and relegated him to the same margins that blacks from the French Caribbean and French Africa occupied. Spain (Ch.6), a devoutly Catholic and conservative nation whose citizens embraced him despite his race or agnostic beliefs, caused him to feel a sense of otherness within, largely due to the fact that he had never experienced such humanity and warmth from whites who practiced a Eurocentric organized religion before. And finally, McKay’s western gaze, academic preparation and lifestyle made him the “other” in Morocco (Ch. 7) as well.

Pan-Africanism is another ideology that permeates McKay’s concerns as a bard, a radical, and most importantly a descendant of Africa. And although early signs of McKay’s espousal of this theory as an adult are especially evinced in the first three chapters of this investigation, nowhere is it more noticeable than in France (Ch.6), on the docks of Marseille where he forms close bonds with black drifters from the U.S., Africa and the Caribbean. Pan-Africanism is a theory that seeks to unify all people of African descent worldwide. McKay’s Pan-African espousal in Jamaica (Ch.1) and then New York (Ch.2, 3, 4, 8) also share glaring similarities: McKay embraced Pan-Africanism

wholeheartedly. From his poetry to his political views, McKay subscribed to this ideology by struggling against and denouncing colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, and the legacy of slavery.

Black Nationalism (Ch.3, 4, 6, 7, 8) advocates racial definition and unity regardless of nationality. During the 20th century, this theme was promoted by the likes of Garvey, the founding father of the Back-to-Africa movement and the leading voice on racial unity, economic independence and self-determination. McKay, however, did not believe that the Back-to-Africa movement led by Garvey was a viable option for blacks in America. He did believe and support, conversely, his own unique brand of Black Nationalism, as evidenced in his radicalism, poetry, prose, and culminating in the recently published unfinished manuscript, *Amiable with Big Teeth* in Ch.8.

Communism (Ch.2, 3, 5) represented hope for hundreds of African Americans disaffected by the political system of the U.S. during the 20th century. The possibility of living in a society free of racism or discrimination attracted intellectuals such as McKay who saw it as a solution to the race problem. McKay participated in numerous communist events as a poet and an intellectual in New York, England, and Russia at the risk of deportation, incarceration, the denial of entrance to western nations, being blacklisted professionally, and even death. As Ch.2 documents, McKay's support and involvement in Socialism and then Communism starts shortly after his arrival to the U.S. and subsequent enrollment at Kansas State University where he joins a radical socialist organization. Socialism and Communism continue to enrapture his existence until he sojourns in Communist Russia as an honorary guest of the state where he comes to the realization that the Party cannot or, simply, refuses to prioritize addressing racism in the West in Ch.

5, resulting in his decision to sever all emotional, political, and social ties with Communism and communist Russia.

Chapter Analysis

This investigation consists of an introduction, eight chapters and a Conclusion. In Ch.1, entitled Jamaica, McKay comes of age in colonial Jamaica and sets his sights on becoming a successful poet in The United States. This chapter examines the formative years, seminal literary works and the personal (family and friends), social, cultural and radical influences that shape McKay's self-identity and rouse his burning desire to pursue the literary arts as a profession in the United States.

In Ch.2, Charleston, South Carolina/ Jim Crow, McKay is buffeted by racism of the South, the Midwest, and the North (U.S.) where he makes New York (namely Harlem) his home, literary muse, and springboard into the world of literary arts, The Harlem Renaissance and radicalism. This chapter traces McKay's initial arrival to the United States, the harsh reality of Jim Crow, a brief stint at Tuskegee Institute, and subsequent enrollment at Kansas State University where he is indoctrinated in Socialism and social dissidence. His evolving social conscience also fuels his decision to go to New York City (namely Harlem) after graduating where he uses his poetry as a major form of protest, self-affirmation, social critique, and catharsis.

In Ch.3, Early Twentieth-Century Caribbean Migration to England / Pan-Africanism, McKay arrives in England imbued with a strong desire to combat racial inequality and determined to travel to Communist Russia after the success of his protest poem, "If We Must Die," catapults him to literary fame within the Harlem Renaissance

Movement. This chapter closely examines the effects of Migration Theory in the Anglophone Caribbean islands during the early 1900s and in England where racism, xenophobia, and conservatism were on an uptick. This chapter also follows McKay's push for racial equality in the stories he covered as a reporter for *The Dreadnought*, a white radical newspaper run by English socialist and suffragist Sylvia Pankhurst, a woman who played a key role in helping McKay get to Communist Russia.

In Ch. 4, Harlem Shadows: McKay's second Sojourn, a brief return to Harlem reinvigorates the writer's fighting spirit and determination to visit Communist Russia. This chapter follows McKay's second return to Harlem in 1921 in search of financial support for his trip to Russia. While there, he continues to write poetry and briefly enjoys unexpected accolades and notoriety for his iconic protest sonnet "If We Must Die," written in 1919, in response to the Red Summer of Chicago. He also unwittingly becomes what Alain Locke, "The Father of the Harlem Renaissance," termed, a New Negro. Back in New York, McKay re-establishes friendly ties and finds temporary work with both the white liberal press in Greenwich Village and the black press in Harlem.

In Ch.5, Russia, McKay arrives in Russia and rethinks Communism. This chapter chronicles McKay's momentous arrival in Communist Russia, his overwhelmingly positive reception by the Russians, and the Communist luminaries of that era who precipitate his subsequent loss of faith in the Communist agenda.

In Ch.6, France, McKay is once again placed on the margins, this time, alongside African Diasporic men whose friendship inspires two of his most iconic literary works on black solidarity: *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. This chapter follows McKay's experiences

in France, the purported mecca of Twentieth-Century egalitarianism. This country, ironically, proves to be anything but egalitarian and, hence, his least favorite destination due to feelings of displacement and the harsh reality of racism he experiences on a daily basis due to his race and penurious state. This chapter also underscores the important bonds he makes with fellow African Diasporic black men who, like him, are down on their luck and fettered by poverty and marginalization in the south of France where - inspired by the possibility of black solidarity, - McKay fully embraces Pan-Africanism and pens the novels *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, two thinly veiled nods to this unifying ideology.

In Ch.7, Morocco, McKay finds temporary solace in Morocco and the inspiration to write *Banana Bottom*. This chapter marks McKay's first and only sojourn in Africa, the continent of his ancestry. While there, he feels a visceral connection to the people, land, and customs which are similar to those of his homeland, Jamaica. His health, spirits, and finances also improve before he is ultimately faced with the imminent reality that his political status as a British and not an American citizen, will make it virtually impossible for him to stay there without persecution from both the British and the French.

In Ch. 8, Final Sojourn, McKay returns to the United States where he finds faith, writes the unfinished manuscript *Amiable with Big Teeth*. While there, he rethinks his future amidst the stifling penury, racism, disunity, and duplicity that buffets Black America. This chapter chronicles McKay's last sojourn to the United States in 1934 where he remains until his death in 1948. He also returns to the black literary scene in Harlem only to find that a new generation of writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellis has supplanted him. Nevertheless, McKay continues to live on

the fringes of black and white America while questioning life and exploring new literary possibilities as a Catholic convert. Lastly, he manages to write much of the recently published and unfinished manuscript of *Amiable with Big Teeth*, another novel that thinly veils the virtues of black solidarity on the advent of the Civil Rights Movement.

Literary Conclusion and Investigation's Position

In conclusion, the undertaking of such an investigation has been a labor of love. First, as a native of Harlem, I feel a deep connection to the artistic, social, and political movements that have helped shape the United States, the world, and on a very personal note, my life. Second, I identify with the politics, mission, and vision of Claude McKay. As an African American that “migrated” to the Caribbean at about the same age McKay migrated to the United States, I fully understand the nuanced complexities of being the “other,” espousing Pan-African ideals, assimilation, and resistance in a place that one has adopted as one’s own.

Lastly, this investigation will lend further credence to the Pan-African constant of black unity and argue that Claude McKay is the true embodiment of the New Negro in Harlem, nationally, and internationally as evidenced in his radicalism, poetry, prose and most recent publication of his unfinished manuscript, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, which will be closely analyzed. This investigation will also attempt to counter current xenophobic and anti-migratory narratives that have seemed to sway a large swath of public opinion and social discourse in many parts of the United States and the world. This investigation also aims to contribute to the perpetuation of Diasporic studies as a discipline and the creation of new directions within the field that particularly underscore the under/mis-

represented benefits of transnational and transregional intersectionalities within the literary production of African Diasporic fiction and non-fiction in order to heal the wounds of those of us who continue to grapple with the ill effects of slavery, colonization, rape, and pillage.

Chapter One: Jamaica/Family Life in Clarendon Hills

Festus Claudius McKay, better known as Claude McKay, the Jamaican poet, writer, social activist and equal rights champion came of age in colonial Jamaica where he became a poet and set his sights on greater acclaim in the United States. Born in Upper Clarendon Parish, located in the center of Jamaica, in 1890, according to most accounts (a few others claim 1889 however), to a large family of modest means, the McKay family occupied a significant position in the free, black peasantry. These fortuitous individuals, unlike many of the former slaves, had acquired considerable amounts of land for farming in the hinterlands after slavery was abolished in 1833.

During the following three decades, the white ruling class, threatened by the encroaching numbers of free blacks on the island determined to rise above the widespread poverty and poor living conditions most of them were subjected to, saw it necessary to create a socioeconomic buffer between themselves and the black population in order to maintain absolute hegemony on the island. The “mulatto” population or “browns” as they were fashionably called at that time were the ideal solution to this worrisome problem. The white power structure exploited the “mulatto” population’s burning desire to extricate itself from African ancestry, blood lines and historic ties to blacks from its past in order to acquire white acceptance and a loftier social status on the island. Privileges and gifts such as land and mid-level positions in government were commonly meted out to “mulattoes” in exchange for their continued oppression of blacks and unending loyalty to the white ruling class. Hence, a symbiotic relationship between whites and “mulattos” in Jamaica was forged. Meanwhile, the great majority of black

families of rural Jamaica did not enjoy the privilege of land ownership and upward mobility.

The McKay family did, however. They were one of the few black families of Clarendon Parish that circumvented the racial barriers set before them due to the impeccable reputation of Thomas Francis McKay, Claude McKay's father, who was an ascetic, God-fearing man that promulgated his conservative beliefs and colonial fealty openly. This earned him great respect among both blacks and whites and the nickname "a real black Scotchman... so entirely different from all our coloured neighbors with their cockish-liquor drinking and rowdy singing" (*My Green Hills of Jamaica* 12). According to McKay, his ancestors were of the Ashanti people of West Africa, duly noted for their rich customs and beliefs that endured the slave trade. McKay's father clung proudly to the legacy of his ancestry and devout Christian faith and minced no words when expressing his desire that Claude, his youngest son, ape his morality. McKay recalled the tongue lashing he received from his father for showing interest in one of the young girls in the village in the following quote, "I never did run around with girls, and I've never known another woman besides your mother. And God helping me, I never will" (*MGHOJ* 12).

McKay's mother, Hannah Ann McKay, was very different from his father. McKay described her as "very beautiful... round faced and brown skinned" (*MGHOJ* 22). As a young child, he frequently remained at her side, assisting her in whatever she needed. His preference for his loving mother over his strict father was undeniable. In fact, McKay recalled that "All of us preferred my mother who was so much more elastic and understanding. She was a virtuous woman too" (*MGHOJ* 22). Her ancestors were direct

descendants of slaves who were brought in chains from Madagascar. They were also well known for their strong African family traditions, ties and subversive resistance to white rule in myriad ways both during and after slavery.

The pride his parents felt towards their rich African ancestry strongly influenced McKay's unorthodox views on life. His mother tacitly rejected the traditional social mores that encouraged the perpetuation of sexism by allowing him to openly partake in the upkeep of the domestic front with her. She also cultivated his literary and artistic sensitivities. These acts represented an unorthodox affront to the local way of life and a fine example of passive resistance to male hegemony in Jamaica. In addition, his father's monastic-like lifestyle, piety, asceticism and strong sense of pride in his African lineage were also highly uncommon and unorthodox characteristics in Jamaican men at that time. Both parents undermined the status quo in different yet equally unorthodox ways that set McKay down a tortuous road of self-discovery, intellectual growth and the pursuit of personal freedom and happiness despite the consequences many of his decisions would cost him later in life.

McKay described life among the peasantry in the hinterlands as idyllic. In the opening paragraph of his autobiography, nostalgic exuberance leaps off the page: "My village was beautiful, sunshiny, sparsely populated. It was set upon a hill. Except when it rained or was foggy, it was always bathed by the sun" (*MGHOJ* 1). Despite the economic hardships and uncertainties of agrarian life, the McKays lived comfortably.

Though dictatorial and emotionally distant, McKay's father succeeded in instilling a strong sense of morality and extreme aversion to injustice in him on one hand.

He also contributed to McKay's rejection of the Christian faith on the other. In fact, McKay developed a general disinterest in Western religion altogether and a fondness for Western European philosophies such as Free Thinking, skepticism and agnosticism which placed a heavy emphasis on the formulation of opinions independent of tradition, culture or authority during the remainder of his life in Jamaica and for the majority of his life abroad.

The first major manifestation of unorthodoxy in the young life of Claude McKay was the complicit role he played in supporting his mother's efforts to vanquish sexist gender roles from their home. As a young boy, McKay also spent countless hours tending to his infirm mother who taught him how to read and write. Such behavior went against the traditions of patriarchal society which prided itself on male dominance and expressions of it outside the home. McKay was particularly fond of helping his mother tend to the domestic matters of their home and of the beauty of the natural world unlike his peers who took greater pleasure in the companionship of their fathers. Not surprisingly, these interests displeased his conservative father who disapproved of his penchant for things better suited for the female sex.

Uriah Theophilus McKay

Later, at the age of eight, McKay experienced another life changing event: going to live with his older brother Uriah Theophilus McKay. Uriah played an indispensable role in McKay's intellectual and philosophical formation and liberal views. Uriah McKay was a spiritual and intellectual pillar of his community located on the outskirts of Montego Bay. Having found work as a teacher and choir director at a mission school

shortly after graduating from the highly competitive Mico Teacher's College in Kingston secured Uriah's place among the most influential of the town. Like his younger brother Claude and father, Uriah was an anomaly of sorts. Intellectual superiority coupled with moral authority was traditionally possessed by educators or clergymen. Uriah was both. Therefore, the decision to send Claude to live with Uriah and his wife - most likely with the urgings of their mother, a woman given to education and an admirer of high culture - came as no surprise. Uriah was extremely literate. He had studied the natural sciences, mathematics, music, humanities, Latin and French. His erudition, *savoir-vivre* and maturity made him the perfect guardian for McKay and his home the perfect ambient for his young, curious, pliant mind.

Life with Uriah and his wife suited McKay well. He liked the furnishings, food, books and the attention he received from his brother and especially his sister-in law whom McKay described as "a capable house-keeper and very meticulous. She possessed things that we did not have in the hills" (14). Both enjoyed the other's company. Again, McKay found solace in the presence of a woman, this time his sister-in-law within the domestic realm. In *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, he wrote, "she used to dust and polish... and I used to help her" (14). McKay also preferred her compassion over Uriah's sternness. While helping his sister-in-law tend to the chores one day, he accidentally broke one of her favorite white glass ducks which his brother had forbidden him to touch. When his brother learned of what had happened, he berated McKay to tears despite his wife's useless entreaty that he desist. This event would mark what would later become a pattern of intensely emotional relationships he would sustain with males throughout the course of his life.

Intellectual and Spiritual Formation of Uriah McKay

In *The Story of Jamaica: From Prehistory to the Present*, by Clinton V. Black, the year 1865 marked a momentous new beginning for the island, its people and future generations. In 1865, Sir Peter Grant, one of the most successful governors of Jamaica, brought about positive change to all sectors of the society. Public education was prioritized and improved. A host of schools were built. Mico's Teacher College was one of them. It was funded by monies left by Lady Mico, in 1874, to her nephew in her will which provided that he marry one of her six nieces as a condition for receiving her money or that it be left for the creation of a teacher's college, if marriage were not possible. The latter occurred and a small teaching college was established for training the working class and the poor "to redeem poor slaves." Mico's became one of the first training colleges for teachers on the island. In the biography *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, Wayne Cooper, points out that Uriah formed part of Jamaica's formally trained teachers on the island. He was also of the ilk of great European thinkers that questioned traditional Judeo-Christian religious dogma, practices and beliefs while entertaining the verity of philosophies in vogue such as Darwinism during a time when disbelief in Christianity or the halfhearted promulgation of it had become a common tenet of many highly acclaimed European and American intellectuals. Scientists such as Darwin believed in the evolution of all animal species for survival including mankind and the dubious presence of God due to the inconsistencies of biblical and scientific accounts of the creation of the world and human kind. Uriah also embraced the vacillation between traditional religion and agnosticism of Baruch Espinoza, one of the most highly respected philosophers of the Eighteenth Century.

Uriah especially enjoyed reading British Literature, World History and Western Philosophy, a discipline that undoubtedly ignited his unorthodox views on religion. Nevertheless, his personal espousal of agnosticism did not impede his ability to impart religious, moral or civic instruction to the rural peasantry.

Together, Uriah and his wife provided the maternal, paternal, emotional and academic support that McKay needed to excel in school and thrive intellectually. The purveyance of thought-provoking literary classics, British Literature and especially poetry became his greatest passions. Uriah, unlike their father however, “was very happy”(GH 19) when he saw that McKay had taken an interest in his personal library stocked with agnostic works such as Matthew Arnold’s *Literature and Dogma* and Draper’s *The Conflict Between Religion and Science*. McKay also took special interest in the works of Herbert Spencer, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Kant and Berkeley. McKay recalls that Uriah “loosened up and started to tell me about the great freethinkers of that time” (GH 19) when he saw McKay reading these individuals.

Agnosticism

Agnosticism is the belief that it is impossible to prove the existence of a higher being. Agnostic German philosophers such as Kant, Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer influenced McKay’s unorthodox view on religion in Jamaica which was deeply Christian at that time. Immanuel Kant was one of the most important figures of modern philosophy. Born in Prussia (now Russia) in 1724, he believed that there was no way of knowing whether God existed. In his famed essay, “What is The Question: What is Enlightenment?” Kant considers Enlightenment to be an obstacle or a barrier between the

full usage and complexity of human thought and the expansion of the human mind free of constraints. Enlightenment was seen as a mere extension of religious control over the human mind and body: something Kant was against. And his, widely believed to be an atheist, purposefully hid his true religious identity as a means of self-preservation amidst 19th century Christian zealots in Western Europe. In Hegel's classic, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel distances himself from his early Christian teachings and questions the existence of God. Such iconic philosophical texts influenced McKay's pliable mind on issues such as intellectualism, spirituality, philosophy and agnosticism. When Uriah's wife expressed her disapproval of Claude reading such antireligious texts, Uriah replied, "let the child read what he wants" (*Claude McKay: Rebel Soujourner in The Harlem Renaissance* 13).

The widespread practice and belief in religions such as Kumina, Myalism, Pocomania, and the spiritual material practices such as Obeah/Obi, four distinctly Jamaican, non-Christian forms of worship heavily based on African spirituality and the creative subversion of exclusive faith in Christianity by the individuals that practiced these religions also contributed to McKay's embracement of agnosticism. During McKay's childhood, the belief in West African spirituality, gods, beliefs and practices was firmly entrenched in Jamaican culture and commonly practiced within local peasant communities, which traditionally conserved and revered the vestiges of their African ancestry. These syncretic religions paid homage to African deities - often disguised in Revivalism for example, which evolved out of Myalism - and the African way of life that was wrested from their ancestors during slavery. The oppressive, racist and unfair

treatment many Jamaicans received from Christian institutions, missionaries and officials also created widespread disaffection, distrust and disinterest in Christianity.

Unlike Christianity, or non-Western religion, agnosticism was devoid of racial hierarchy or class, two formidable constants in Jamaica at that time. In *Agnosticism Is Also Faith*, George G. Strem labels Western religion as divisive in the following pronouncement: “Religion does bring people together, but ultimately it is divisive. The history of Christianity is replete with dissension, schisms and fratricidal strife, from the establishment of the Roman Church in the first century A.D., up to the present day” (13). In Strem’s opinion, such division is nothing more than hypocrisy, especially when Catholics and Protestants despise one another just as much if not more than Jews despise gentiles.

Strem, like McKay, also took issue with the intolerance of Christianity. Strem points out that throughout history, religion has been used as an incisive tool of discrimination. African religions in Jamaica, for example, were quickly branded diabolic, evil and, hence, roundly proscribed from society. As a result, these religions were driven underground in the cities and in agrarian communities such as Clarendon Hills where they continued to be embraced by locals and practiced at various capacities as a form of racial and cultural resistance on the island. McKay, a product of rural Jamaica, was very familiar with these religions and accepted their inextricable existence in Jamaican culture.

As previously noted, famous free thinkers such as Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza also played a major role in McKay’s religious views. Spinoza believed that all

religions were anthropocentric or concerned only with God's creation of man and therefore biased. He also believed that true religion was supposed to place man and God on the same plateau because, according to Spinoza, God was all spirit and all substance which meant that everything on earth was in effect equal to God and the Bible was merely a fictional allegory intended to attract The Masses, not condemn them.

Royal edicts precluding racial integration also pushed individuals such as McKay toward agnosticism. It is important to note however, that although blacks and whites rarely interacted on a social level in Jamaica, "The Great Awakening," and "The Second Great Awakening," which took place from 1858-1859 and 1860-1861 respectively, were two periods in which both free black and white missionaries from the U.S. and Britain held tent revivals that successfully converted many Jamaicans to Christianity. Thus the Bible entered Jamaica as an oral text at these events even before literacy became widespread. Despite the growing popularity of Christianity, agnosticism surprisingly flourished in peasant farming communities such as Clarendon, according to McKay who "began talking to the younger set... boys of my age, some older and some younger. Many believed as I believed... Soon there was a young crop of agnostics' way up there in the hills of Jamaica." (*MGHOJ* 45) In addition, rural Jamaican peasants also placed heavy emphasis on man's spiritual connection to religion through land, a major tenet of the Jamaican peasant farmer and West African religions, interestingly. In the biography, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, McKay expresses the inextricable connection he had to his land in the following words, "And then I was born and reared a peasant; the peasant's passion for the soil possesses me" (1).

Finally, the pursuit of freedom also attracted McKay to agnosticism. According to Strem, “The Agnostic devotes his life combating those forces which obstruct human freedom. This is his noblest contribution to humanity in this imperfect world” (58). This resonated with McKay who abhorred injustice.

England

One cannot attempt to understand Claude McKay the poet without acquiring a clear understanding of the role that England played in his literary formation, aspirations and identity. Laurence A. Breiner, author of *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, indicates that during the “eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, poetry from or about the West Indies exemplifies mastery of an inherited medium, an almost automatic trooping of Caribbean experience with British figurations“ (105). Hence, Jamaican poetry aspired to mimic British diction, style, rhyme and meter. It also adhered to the parameters of the traditional British poetic forms of the epic, elegy, narrative, ballad, epigram, romance and ode. British favorites such as satire, pastoralism, heroism and romanticism were also common in Jamaican poetry. Structurally, blank verse, a type of poetry written in iambic pentameter (five iambic feet in a row alternating stressed and unstressed syllables), most famously used by Shakespeare, and arguably the most common form of poetry in the English language at that time, became part of the Jamaican standard in poetry. McKay initially adhered to the principles of English poetry due to his colonial academic formation and the absence of a precedent that challenged or broke traditional standards of poetry on the island.

In *Jamaica Talk*, Frederic G. Cassidy, refers to the English spoken in Jamaica from the time it was captured from Spain in 1655 to the end of the seventeenth century, the very time when slaves were first adopting the language of their new home - we may expect that the kind of English they had to imitate was “colonial”- that is, a speech mostly of middle-class origin but with some admixture of upper-and lower-class features, and drawn from every part of the British Isles and the previously established colonies of North America and the Caribbean. (15)

He went on to say, “In 1883, only 22,000 Negroes out of a quarter million in the island could write. By 1892, elementary education was free and within four years the total number of schools in the island stood at 900, or twice what it had been in 1866 ” (189).

McKay and many of those born at the end of the 19th century benefited from the efforts to increase literacy in Jamaica. By the time he was of school age, the presence of many British missionaries, educators and colonial figures on the island was noticeable. These individuals played a major role in educating Jamaicans on one hand while perpetuating the propagation of British English, white supremacy and colonial rule on the other.

According to James Black, the author of *The Story of Jamaica*, the white population did not always live up to the linguistic standards established by the Crown. In fact, the author states that “the models must have been the speech of those whites with whom they had direct contact: the book keepers, attorneys, overseers, and white servants” (15). This meant that blacks were often exposed to and acquired the linguistic

particularities of poor whites as well. Despite this phenomenon, standard British English retained its prominence and prestige in Jamaica. Proof of this is seen in the Crown's selection of British colonials such as Sir Arthur Henry Blake 1889-98, Sir Augustus William Lawson-Hemming 1898-1904, Sir James Alexander Sweetenham 1904-1907, and Sir Sydney Olivier 1907-1913 as governors to the island. These men spoke the Queen's English and strongly supported the Crown.

Francis Williams

Francis Williams, the spirited 18th century unorthodox Jamaican poet might have inspired the thematic inclinations of Claude McKay. Francis Williams is widely considered to be the first black writer of the British Empire. His incisive prose and poetry on race and colonialism in Jamaica rankled colonial sensibilities. Williams envisaged himself as white on the inside due to his privileged formal education and black on the outside due to his race, the color of his skin and the way he was treated by whites. In his iconic poem, "An Ode to George Haldane" he rails against the unfair racial discrimination that the high ranking military official of the British Navy subjects him to.

"An Ode to George Haldane"

Rash councils now with each malignant plan

Each faction in that evil hour began,

At your approach are in confusion fled,

Nor while you rule, shall rise their dastard head

Alike the slave ship and master shall see

Their neck reliv'd the yoke unbound by thee.”

Phyllis Wheatley

Phyllis Wheatley, the 18th century African-American poet, also influenced McKay. Her works defied the intellectual limits placed on both blacks and women in her poetry and prose. At the age of seven, Wheatley was captured from what is presently known as Senegal and sold to a progressive British family living in the colony of Massachusetts. After recognizing her unique talent as a poet, they encouraged her to continue. Over time, her works matched those of the leading poets of the day and were extolled by important 18th century figures such as John Hancock and George Washington, the future first president of the United States of America, for their high quality, depth, and beauty. Many whites found it hard to believe that a black woman had written poetry of such high quality and some outright refused to accept the possibility that she had indeed written them. Nevertheless, her talent withstood the blatant sexist and racist scrutiny of the late 1700's. Like Francis Williams, Wheatley rendered homage to England with gilded expression, refined diction and emotive verve. Unlike Williams, Wheatley did not address disconcerting racial constraints placed on her due to race. Her use of classically British pentameter, form and diction in reverent odes to the British Empire and British culture made her the first African-American woman to publish her works for profit. And though I have found no evidence to substantiate the following claim, I believe it would be easy to imagine that McKay might have read these works during his intellectual formation. In her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” she expresses praise for having been brought to America.

“On Being Brought From Africa to America”

’Twas mercy brought me from my private land

Taught my benighted soul to understand,

That there’s a God and there’s a savior too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor new.

Some view our race with scornful eye,

“Their colour is a diabolic die.”

Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain [sic].

May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.

This poem, reverent in its praise of England, is a fine example of the type of poetry McKay originally believed appropriate for professional success and for mass consumption.

John Milton

McKay also identified with the poetic declarations of John Milton, the fifteenth century man of letters. McKay, like Milton, often found himself at odds with the corruption of the Anglican Church, the opaque democracy of England and religious intolerance. His most famous epic *Paradise Lost*, relates the seminal conflict Adam and Eve encounter when Satan tempts them to disobey the word of God and fall out of his

favor in the Garden of Eden. In Book X of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the following lines clearly reveal the violation of God's law,

Paradise Lost

The high Injunction not to taste that fruit

Whoever tempted, which they not obeying

Incurred what could they lest, the penaltie,

And manifold in sin deserv'd to fall (Lines 13-16)

And later, Christ's ability to resist temptation on Earth as a mortal man in *Paradise Regained* seen in the following lines of the poem:

Victory and triumph to the son of God

Now entering his great duel, not of arms, But to vanquish the hellish wiles!

The Father knows the sun, therefore secure Ventures his filial virtue,
though untried,

Against whate'er may attempt, whate'er seduce,

Allure, terrify or undermine.

Be frustrate, all ye stratagems of Hell,

And, devilish machinations come to naught!" (Chapter One).

William Shakespeare

Lastly, the poetry of William Shakespeare undoubtedly played a monumental role in the poetic formation of McKay. William Shakespeare was widely considered the greatest man of letters of the English language of all times. Born in 1590 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, Shakespeare was a key figure in the English Renaissance. His plays and poetry are the most widely read and adapted for stage today. His use of the sonnet, a poem that consists of fourteen lines, each with ten stressed and unstressed syllables known as iambic meter, reached England at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Its popularity grew exponentially during that century and, by the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century, the sonnet had become a stylistic favorite for poets in England. Shakespeare, born in 1590, was also greatly influenced by the sonnet. Elizabethan sonneteers, like Shakespeare, commonly addressed themes such as Love, Time, Death, Chastity and Eternity. The sonnet was also used as a vehicle for the expression of intensely personal and emotional feelings. Like Shakespeare, McKay also addressed the conflicts of life, love, gender, tragedy, decisions and happiness in sonnet form. In the poem “A Madrigal,” for example, Shakespeare expresses the conflicts between young and old much like McKay expressed the contrasts between blacks and whites.

“A Madrigal”

Crabbed Age and Youth

Youth is full of pleasance,

Age is full of care;

Cannot live together:

Youth like summer morn

Age like winter weather'

Youth like summer brave,

Age like winter bare:

Youth is full of sports

Age's breath is short

Youth is nimble

Age is lame:

Youth is hot and bold

Age is weak and cold,

Youth is wild, and Age is tame:

Age, I do abhor thee;

Youth, I do adore thee;

O! My Love, My Love is young!

Age! I do defy thee

O sweet shepherd hie thee,

For methinks thou stay'st too long.

Thomas Redcam

Thomas Mc Dermot who wrote under the pseudonym of Tom Redcam, was a Jamaican-born journalist, poet, novelist and editor of Irish descent who influenced McKay immensely. Redcam worked to promote Jamaican literature in all of its forms. In 1899, Redcam created a short story contest in *The Jamaica Times* and a year later became the editor in chief of the paper for the next two decades. *The Jamaica Times* was geared toward middle-class readership, Jamaican culture, politics and local events. Redcam, like McKay, was also a native of Clarendon Parish. He played a major role in McKay's unorthodox thematic and linguistic style of Jamaican poetry and perhaps his visceral preference for black peasant life in all of its facets is in part due to the influence that the Irish Literary Renaissance had on him. Ireland and Jamaica shared two important similarities: both were islands colonized by England and both were oppressed by her. Redcam sought to cultivate Jamaican literature and linguistics.

In 1903, he embarked on a mission to stimulate literacy and national pride by opening the All Jamaica Library, a library and bookstore in one that housed and sold books, novels and novellas about Jamaica as well as issues related to the island at moderate prices. He also penned two novels, *Beckra's Buckra Baby* (1903) and *One Brown Girl and a 1/4* (1909) as well as a compilation of poetry entitled *Orange Valley and Other Poems* (1951), published posthumously.

Beckra's Buckra Baby is considered one of the great literary works of early 20th, century modern Jamaican prose due to its dauntless temerity when addressing the effects

of racism, race, skin color, interracial relationships and interracial children from the perspective of the peasantry. This novel was also instrumental in broadening the dominating linguistic scope of the day from Standard Jamaican English to Jamaican Patois as a legitimate literary form of artistic expression at that time.

In *Beckra's Buckra Baby*, Beckra, a poor little black girl, is accidentally killed by a street car in Kingston when she tries to retrieve the white baby doll given to her by her young white Sunday school teacher Noel, from an older black boy in the neighborhood who wrongfully accuses her of stealing the doll and attempts to wrest it from her. This novel critiques the unfair advantage whites have in Jamaican society over blacks who often vehemently despise and distrust one another.

In *Orange Valley and Other Poems*, however, Redcam lauds the beauty of pastoral Jamaica and Jamaican culture in an unapologetic display of nationalism and anticolonialism despite his British ancestry and the privileges he enjoyed in Jamaica because of it.

Walter Jekyll

Walter Jekyll was another major influence in the formation of McKay's unorthodox literary themes. English expat, Walter Jekyll was born in Surrey, England to an upper-class family in 1849. He graduated with honors from Trinity College in 1872 and, shortly afterwards, received a Master's degree in Religion from Cambridge University. In 1877, he pastored an Episcopalian Church for two years before departing for Malta where he became a Chaplain in 1879. Life as a clergyman did not fulfill him, however, and in the early 1880s, he renounced his affiliation with the church and went to

Milan where he studied music under the famed voice coach Francesco Lamperti and wrote an English-language translation of the maestro's work, *The Art of Singing According to Ancient Tradition and Personal Experiences*, in 1884. A few years later, Jekyll decided to leave Europe for Jamaica to ameliorate his asthmatic condition. Once there, he became enamored with its natural beauty, warm weather, humble peasantry and local culture. In 1907, he compiled the Jamaican folkloric "Anancy the Spider Stories." These stories, compiled into *Jamaica Song and Stories* - largely based on his adventures with humans, animals, insects, royalty and nature- were published in London. Jekyll also documented and recorded work songs and ring games as part of his self-compelled Jamaican culture preservation measures. Like Redcam, Jekyll embraced local dialect as a way to promote and legitimize local linguistic and artistic forms of literary expression.

Jekyll's physical appearance and lifestyle were also unorthodox. In *Green Hills*, McKay recalls meeting a "highly educated man who knew many languages an excellent judge of poetry, prose and painting ... living quietly on the island for some years" (65). Jekyll was considered eccentric in Jamaica. First, he was a white, single, middle-aged man who had come to the hills of Jamaica to live a virtually monastic life surrounded by the black peasantry. Second, Jekyll never "dressed up... He either wore white ducks or brown crash and they were loosely fitted. He always said that he did not leave the terror of dressing up in England to come to a tropical island like Jamaica to repeat the performance" (69). McKay also wrote "one of the strangest things I recall about his attire was that he used to wear gaiters over his brown shoes" (68). Third, he was also a free thinker who had renounced his Christian faith and turned to agnosticism. He published a piercing anti-Christian book entitled *The Bible Untrustworthy: A Critical*

Comparison of Contradictory Passages in the Bible. His religious renouncement not only went against the church, but it also went against the Jekyll family tradition of male clergymen since both his father and grandfather were Anglican pastors.

Jekyll, an English gentleman, harbored animosity toward the British Empire due to its unfair, racist and self-serving politics. This irony provides one of the clearest looks into Jekyll's psyche and innermost musings. Despite his upper-class upbringing in England, Jekyll rejected the superficial trappings of privilege, white supremacy and greed which explains why he sought to promote the use of Jamaican Patois and the emergent works of the young Jamaican poet Claude McKay.

The Unorthodox Trio

Three previously mentioned men played extremely significant roles in the unorthodox views and works of Claude McKay in Jamaica: Uriah McKay, Thomas Redcam, and Walter Jekyll. All three of these men encouraged McKay to envision life through a broader existential lens as far as religion was concerned because none of them placed total belief in a higher being. Instead, they were drawn to the powers of freethinking, existentialism and secular humanism which rejected all notions of supernatural influence, presence or dominance in human life. This explains the absence of theistic references in McKay's works during a time when Christianity and African based religions occupied a secure place within traditional Jamaican society. Redcam and Jekyll also helped shape McKay's non-sexist view of women. Both gentlemen empowered women in their works. Jekyll's compilation of stories about Anancy, the resilient female spider that constantly outwits, evades, and defeats the odds in her

adventures shows his appreciation for female intellect at that time as well as the irreplaceable role she plays in Jamaica. Redcam followed suit in his depiction of Beckra, a young black peasant girl that is sent to live in the city after her father's death, loses her life in defense of her honor, reputation and refusal to submit to male chauvinism. Noel, the other female character in this novel, also exudes inner strength and aplomb as she goes through life without the need or desire of male companionship, something women were taught to believe they needed at that time.

The uplifting of the peasantry in their works and deeds also influenced McKay. All three of his mentors were stewards of local traditions in their own unique way. Anancy stories were African-based folkloric tales that dovetailed African and Jamaican culture within the population that largely spoke a nation language which is a twentieth-century term, coined by Caribbean scholar and poet Kamau Brathwaite, to refer to the non-standard forms of the English language spoken within the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. Prior to meeting Redcam and Jekyll, McKay adhered to the linguistic biases of the local intelligentsia and distanced himself from the use of Jamaican Patois (pronounced and often spelled Patwa) which was considered a "vulgar tongue" and the "language of the peasants." That soon changed after meeting Redcam and Jekyll however. Both admired the richness of what would have been called, during their time, the local dialect and sought to utilize it in many of their emblematic works. Linguists today, however, use the term English Lexifier Creole and the Jamaican population, in general, calls it Jamaican Patois today. Jekyll was unimpressed with McKay's "repetitious" body of "strait English" poems upon reading them for the first time. He was, however, drawn to a poem McKay had written in Jamaican English lexifier Creole. Until

this point, dialect poetry, especially in print form, was nonexistent mainly due to the racist stigma that accompanied the widespread belief that blacks were innately inferior to whites and therefore unable to write poetry. Jekyll and Redcam rejected that opinion and encouraged McKay to write in dialect form under their tutelage.

Periodical Poetry

Deviation from traditional Jamaican literary norms in the poetry of McKay first appeared in the *Daily Gleaner* and *The Jamaica Times* from 1911 to 1912. In the poem, “Agnes o’ de Village Lane,” published in *The Jamaica Times* on October 7, 1911, McKay employed local dialect to express his lamentation for a childhood sweetheart who dies in a brothel years later after turning to prostitution in the following stanza:

“Agnes o’ de Village Lane”

Fancy o’ me childish will,

playin’ now before me eyes

Sadly, I remember still

How much once your love I prize’

As I think o’ you again, Agnes o’de village lane....

but dere came de partin day,

And they took me from you,

dear,

An' de passion died away,
 but the memory was there: Long you've lingered in me brain,
 Plump-cheeked Agnes o' de lane.

This poem is unorthodox not only due to its lamentation of a woman that occupies the lowest rung of Jamaican society as a prostitute but it also employs the use of local dialect that speaks directly to the local black population on gender equality, an issue that very few Jamaican male poets, or Jamaican men for that matter, openly and actively promulgated back then.

The Daily Gleaner

The poem "The Daily Gleaner" describes how this Jamaican newspaper has triumphed despite the challenges the country has faced.

Year o' eighteen thirty four,
 when the collard folks be'n freed,
 In dis Island I appeared,
 Furnishin' a long-felt need.
 jes' a tiny bit o thing,
 Jes' a tiny bit o'sheet,
 But I'm in de forefront since
 And I never can be beat:

Read by white man, read by nigger,?

Every day I'm growin bigger.

From this point of the poem, McKay notes its increasing resilience.

T'rough all sort of pestilence,

Trough de sweeping hurricane,

T'rough de famine an' earthquake,

T'rough de sun an season rain

ai am climbin' right along.

O' me kingsmen far ahead

An' I feel so high above,

Dat I ha' no cause de fear

And in the last stanza, the peace in the paper's heart circumvents and disarms hate.

I am free from petty strife,

For de envious I don't care,

An I feel so high above,

dat I ha' no cause to fear,

Kinsmen dear have come and gone,

I ha' gladly hailed dem all,
 Climbin wit unenvious eyes,
 I have watched dem rise an' fall
 An'continue, each day greener,
 Leadin all The Daily Gleaner.

“George William Gordon to the Oppressed Natives”

In this poem, McKay uses a direct, more virulent form of protest similar to that of an insurrection or a revolt from the first stanza.

O, you sons of Afric's soil,
 Dyin in a foreign land,
 Crushed beneat' de moil and yoil,
 Break, break de oppressor's hand!

In the following stanza, he feeds into the stereotype that blacks are vicious animals that can kill with ease....

Wake de lion in your veins,
 De gorilla in your blood;
 Show dem dat you ha' some brains,
 Though you may be coarse an' rude.

And ... Shake de burden off your backs,
 Show de tyrants dat you're strong;
 Fight for freedom's rights, you blacks,
 Ring de slaves' old battle song!

This protest poem is unorthodox because it does not remotely express idyllic Jamaican pastoralism. Instead, it rouses carnal feelings of anger, revenge, hate, and violence in the most unapologetic and arguably irrational way.

The following year, McKay, goaded by the insistence of Walter Jekyll and Thomas Redcam, published two seminal dialect poetry compilations: *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. These works decried social injustice, racial inequality and economic greed while infusing humanity, praising local culture and heralding the heritage, plight and perseverance of the Jamaican peasantry. These compilations also charted new territory in Jamaican poetry and widened the previously narrow scope of literary expression in verse form.

Songs of Jamaica

In his biography *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, Wayne Cooper draws autobiographic parallels between this compilation and McKay's life. *Songs of Jamaica* encompasses McKay's love of Jamaica, its people and traditions. The major themes depict the daily comings and goings of the Jamaican people, news, special events, and, of course, those that he came into contact with. The poem "Whe 'fe

Do” resembles Schopenhauer’s poem “What can’t be cured, must be endured”; it begins as follows:

“Whe ‘fe Do”

Life will continue so for aye

Some people sad, some people gay,

Some mocking life while udders pray

But we mus’ fashion-out we way

An’sabe a mite fe rainy day---

All we can do.

This stanza speaks to the importance of accepting the ups and downs of life without acrimony. The following three stanzas do the same as well but the fourth and fifth provide a legitimate solution to the demoralization of blacks however.

We jnigger hab a tas fe do,

To conquer prejudice daun in sight;

An’ yett due

To obeah, an tings not a few

Dat keep we progress back fe true---

But whe ‘fe do

McKay takes the liberty to answer the question himself in the following stanza...

God mek de wul' fe black an' white;

We'll wuk on in de glad sunlight

Keep toilin' on wid all our might,/

An' sleep in peace when it is night:

We must strive on to gain de height,

Aldough it may not be in sight;

An' yet perhaps de blessed right

Will never conquer in de fight---

Still, whe fe do?...

We'll try an live as any man,

An' fight de wul as best we can.

E'en though it hard fe understan' Whe' we mus' do.

McKay ends by driving home the fact that being black is synonymous to struggle in the world. This poem is unorthodox because it plants the seed of passive struggle.

This patriotic ode is another subversive poem in *Songs of Jamaica*. It is replete with nationalism and places Jamaica at the center of McKay's patriotism, not England.

“My Native Land, My Home”

Dere is no land dat can compare

Wid you whe'er I roam;

In all de wul' none like you fair,

My native land, my home

Jamaica is de nigger's place

No mind whe' osome declares;

Although dem call we “no-land “race,”

I know we home is here.

Constab Ballads

Constab Ballads is, for the most part, a compilation of unorthodox poems based on his unfulfilling position as a policeman on the beat in Kingston. McKay never aspired to be a police officer but he accepted a position as a Kingston constabulary when the opportunity arose. This position created great inner conflict within due to his allegiance and love of his fellow countrymen and women. As a member of the constabulary, he was

expected to alienate himself from his people and culture as a display of loyalty to the Crown and its colonial agenda. This went against his nationalistic ethos.

“Bennies Departure”

In this poem written by McKay in Jamaica, a heartfelt lamentation commemorates the departure of his fellow constab and intimate comrade, Benny. It also rouses suspicion that McKay and Benner were possible lovers who were separated by their Sargent who disapproved of their odd relationship. This poem is unorthodox due its suspicion arousing content about McKay’s heterosexuality and his intrepid decision to publish it despite the professional and personal consequences he could have faced.

All dat week was cold an’ dreary,
 An’ I worked with heavy heart;
 All my limbs were weak an’ weary,
 When I knew that we would part;
 An’ I thought of our first meeting
 On dat pleasant day o’ june,
 of his kind an’ modest greeting
 When we met dat afternoon;

As one continues to read however, it is very clear that the two were probably romantically involved in the following stanza...

... We were once more in de drill-ground,

Me so happy by his side,

One in passion, one in willbound,

By a boundless love an' wide:

Daily you would see us drinking'

Our tea by de mess- room door,

Every passin' moment linkin'

Us togeder more an' more.

And...

... In de evenin' we went Walkin',

An' de sweet sound of his voice,

As we laughed we kept a talking,

Made my lovin' heart rejoice;

Full of happiness we strolled on,

In de closin' evenin' light,

And...

... Claspin' m our hands togeder,

Each to each we told good-night,

 Dreamed soon o' life's broken ladder

 An' de wul's perplexin' fight

 Then...

 ...Once his cot was next beside me,

 But dere came misfortune's day

 When de pleasure was denied me,

 For de sergeant moved him 'way,

This poem reveals much about McKay's bi-sexual or even homosexual tendencies. Such behavior was seen as taboo and roundly detested by the masses due to the Christian Biblical teachings that spoke against such inclinations and the sexist society that solely placed value on heterosexuality and masculinity in Jamaican culture and especially in the hyper masculine profession of law enforcement. Nevertheless, McKay intrepidly expresses his love for a member of the same sex in spite of the negative repercussions such sentiments could create for him as a constable, upstanding citizen, and fledgling poet.

Another unorthodox poem in this compilation is the two stanza poem entitled "Free," which celebrates his release from the constabulary in the following words:

Scarce can I believe my eyes,

Yet before me there it lies,
 Precious paper granting me
 Quick release from misery.
 So farewell to Half way Tree,
 And the plains I hate to see!
 Soon will I forget my ills
 In my loved Clarendon Hills.

This short, candid poem reveals McKay's highly anticipated release from the force and the long awaited alleviation that would come with it. The unorthodox undertones in this poem clearly contradict the purported sense of happiness and honor one feels when working as a constable if one truly loves his/her nation, culture and history.

“Apple Woman’s Complaint”

In this poem, McKay feels empathy for a middle-aged street vendor who breaks the law that prohibits street vending in order to make a living. She harangues the constabularies for keeping vendors such as herself off the streets in the opening stanza:

While me deh walk 'long in de street
 Policeman's yawnin' on his beat

An dis de wud him chiefta'n say-

Me mus'n car'me apple tray

This stanza reveals the vendor's desire to support herself independently and the Empire's disapproval and suppression of any form of independence in the following stanza:

Ef me no wuk, me boun fe tief

S'pose dat will please de police chief!

De prison dem mus be wan full

Mek dem's 'pon we like ravin' bull.

She continues with a scathing remark that constabls are hypocrites:

Black nigger wukin laka cow

Anwipin sweat-drops from him brow,

Dough him is dyin sake o need

P'lice an dem's headman boun fe feed.

In the end, she clamors to God for help in the following stanza:

Ah Mass Jesus you in love

Jes look don from you t'rone above,

An show me how a poo weak gal

Can live good life in dis ya wul

In “The Bobby to the Sneering Lady,” McKay acknowledges the daunting tasks of the evenhanded, compassionate constabulary men who put life and limb on the line day in and day out.

You may sneer at us , madam

But our work is beastly hard;

An while toilin thus we scarce

Ever get a lee reward.

This stanza establishes McKay’s willingness to correct the erroneous belief held by much of the citizenry that all constabs are nefarious by reminding her that:

Our soul’s jes’ like fe you,

If our work does make us rough;

Me won’t res’ you servant-gal

When you’vev beaten her enough

And later he reminds her that...

In de middle o’ de night,

When blackness lies do’n deep,

Who protects your homes an stores

While de Island is asleep?

... Who keeps watch out in de street So dat not 'in comes to harm?

And in the last stanza, McKay delivers his final blow of admonishment when he says:

Ah! You turn away your head!

See! Dere's pity in your face!

Don't dear madam, bring on me

This unmerited disgrace.

Dialectal Unorthodoxy

Dialectology is the study of varieties of language which can be determined by factors such as geography, class or ethnicity. Jamaican English or Jamaican Patois is the product of the dynamic interaction of speakers of African, Indigenous, and European languages. While most of its words come from English, its linguistic structures can be traced to African Languages. In both *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, McKay chose Jamaican Patois -considered a dialect of Standard English by some and a complete language by others - as the prominent medium of expression with one thing in mind: uniting the people of Jamaica culturally, linguistically and socially. This decision was directly linked to the linguistic resistance to the English and the language they imposed on both slaves and indigenous people on the island. In *Dialectology*, J.K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill have published a series of detailed studies related to the impact that history, socio-economics, geography and science have on language. According to these

linguists, the term dialect is often and erroneously considered to be a corruption or deviation from a norm when, in truth, dialects are not necessarily inferior to a language but, rather, sub-divisions of them.

In hegemonic societies, standard dialects have had social ascendancy over other dialects due to the economic, political and institutional access their speakers have enjoyed. McKay found himself at the center of this language debate/dilemma at the turn of the twentieth century. Simply put, blacks - with few exceptions - spoke Jamaican Patois while whites spoke British English. Educated blacks, such as McKay, were then forced to choose between using Jamaican Patois, the linguistic medium of their family members, friends and community overall or British English, the linguistic medium they learned, mastered and identified emotionally with. Standard British English, the language of prestige and power throughout the British Empire, almost invariably seduced the ambitions of aspiring writers such as McKay who dreamed of success and recognition from local literate circles of Jamaica and within the larger literate world of Great Britain and the British Empire.

McKay, a direct descendant of slaves, was then faced with choosing his audience and purpose for writing since in Jamaica there were only two social classes at that time: rich and poor, black and white. Blacks were largely poor, illiterate in Standard English and of the working class while whites were generally much more economically comfortable and better educated than blacks in comparison. After encouragement from white mentors Walter Jekyll and Thomas Redcam, McKay took their advice. Much of his early poetry takes on the role of the African Drum that communicates directly with the people and bypasses, confounds or irritates the colonials. Nevertheless, his poetry is

written in acrolect form, that is to say, a creole that is closest to English and anyone who understands written standardized English will also understand the majority of dialect words, terms and phrases, from mere deduction or word association or a Jamaican Creole language glossary.

Dialogism

The famed 20th, century Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bhatkin defined dialogic or dialogism as an ongoing dialogue between texts, themes and individuals unlike monologues which do not need such interaction. Such is the case in the early and later works of McKay. Constant communication or dialogue between works reflected much of his personal and professional life. The year 1912 was a defining moment for the poet. Both compilations relied heavily on local Jamaican words, phrases or sayings and are a testament to his love of Jamaican culture. The following “Wan’fe try”- should try, “can”- can’t, “bucce”- the white man, “fe we”- for us, “osnabu’g” rough, thick cloth, once used in the work of slaves, “gill” – money “fuppence”- five pence, “mammee tree”- The west Indian Mamea Americana tree “ru’nate”- ruined “mancha root”- banana tree. “Syrian”- Immigrants from the Middle East who began arriving in Jamaica in the 1890s, “aye”- ever, de-the, unapologetically celebrate Jamaican Patois.

While each compilation stands firmly on its own thematic merits, a unique synergy is created together. *Songs of Jamaica* celebrates nation, identity, heritage and pride. Unity and high praise are proffered to the land, flora, fauna, people, places and history of Jamaica in loving yet honest ways. *Constab Ballads* promulgates unity and pride as major themes. McKay, a conflicted native son and colonial subject, refrains from

overindulgence in mawkish romantic expression that does little more than soothe the ear. Instead, he uses his poetry as a healing art intended to repair the scarred existence of his people and homeland. Consequently, McKay breaks traditional modes of thinking, living and, in this case, the act and intentions behind writing poetry.

Lady Henrietta Vinton Davis

After eight unhappy months as a constable, Walter Jekyll arranged for McKay to be released from the police force. Precisely at that time, he met the Negro (the term used to refer to blacks during that time in the US) soprano and elocutionist Lady Henrietta Vinton, another unorthodox individual, who played a brief but influential role in his decision to go to the United States. Vinton, accompanied by Madame Anita Patti, another accomplished African-American singer, was on a concert tour in Jamaica. Vinton encouraged him to study at Tuskegee Institute, the school founded by activist, educator, author and visionary, Booker T. Washington, a man who had gained much notoriety in recent years for having founded and maintained one of the nation's top higher learning institutions in the nation for Negroes. Davis' vocal ability charmed McKay and her intrepid spirit, wanderlust and vivacity captivated him even more. He completely identified with her resolve and determination to succeed, grow as an artist and achieve her dreams despite Jim Crow America.

In Vinton, McKay saw many of his own personal qualities: passion, drive, and determination. He was well aware of the challenges that women faced growing up in Jamaica, a place that limited female participation in the public arena by relegating women like his mother to the home front. Vinton refused to be confined to such limitations,

however, and McKay admired that. Like Davis, McKay also renounced social mores that were placed on him. One of the most obvious was his resignation from the constabulary which compromised his integrity. Vinton's passion for vocal expression strengthened McKay's resolve to pursue a career in literary arts as well. Vinton also had an indefatigable drive. She tirelessly crisscrossed the United States performing despite the dangers such trips posed for a young, attractive black woman such as herself. Travel, though local, had also been a constant in the young life of Claude McKay who had already experienced life in the rural hills of Clarendon with his parents, in the north west coastal area with his older brother Uriah and his wife and finally, in Kingston as a constable. Lastly, the success Vinton achieved as a renowned singer was a great source of inspiration for McKay who was eager to try his hand at becoming a poet abroad.

Booker T. Washington

Finally, author, orator, educator and presidential advisor, Booker T. Washington inspired McKay to continue to break social barriers, envisage racial equality and to fight injustice. Booker T. Washington was born a slave on April 5, 1856 in Hales Ford, Virginia. From early on, the life of McKay and Washington shared stark similarities. First, both were extremely close to their mothers who strongly believed in the importance of education. Second, neither had a strong emotional tie to his biological father. In fact, Washington never knew his father and although McKay lived with both parents until the age of eight, he and his father were never close. In addition, both had a passion for educating and helping the less fortunate, most disenfranchised members of the black community and both spent their early years in rural communities where large numbers of blacks lived marginalized, disempowered lives.

McKay had admired Washington long before Davis, the soprano, had suggested that he study at Tuskegee. Proof of his admiration of Washington's achievements is evident in his autobiography *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, "The fame of Mr. Washington has spread all over the world and I wanted to be in his school" (82). Prior to meeting Davis, McKay had had little contact with African Americans in Jamaica due to their scarcity on the island and to the disinterest he had in getting to know the few that were there because of their ingratiating behavior toward whites there. McKay echoed this sentiment in the following quote, "Our general opinion of American Negroes was that they were clowns more or less. All those that we saw in Kingston on the street were the happy-go-lucky clowning types who sang 'coon' songs for the white men and they seem to like it... so we had had an entirely wrong impression of the American Negro. Our Negroes even though they were very poor would not sing clowning songs for white men and allow themselves to be kicked around by them" (85). The image of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee were extremely positive on the contrary. During Davis' visit, Mr. Plant, a highly respected educator in Jamaica had travelled to Tuskegee for a conference the year prior and had also highly recommended Tuskegee as a place to study.

McKay needed no further persuasion. He identified with the progressive mission and vision of the institute and its founder. Washington inspired McKay in many more ways as well. When Washington's autobiography was published in 1901, it gained international acclaim due to the success of Tuskegee Institute and Washington's astute employment of non-threatening race politics in the Deep South. McKay employed similar tactics when interacting with white patrons and friends of high social and economic standing in Jamaica. Both adopted what many blacks back then might have considered a

somewhat submissive, servile position when it came to whites in order to further their personal and professional agendas. Lastly, McKay never lost sight of his altruistic goal of improving the lives of fellow Negro men, women and children in any way possible.

America Bound

In 1912, McKay left for the United States despite the unfavorable treatment blacks received there. He recalled, "Going to America was the greatest event in the history of our hills; America was the land of education and opportunity. Even though Miss Davis had told us that it was not a good place for colored people- we all believed in it... It was the land to which all people who had youth and a youthful mind turned. Surely there would be opportunity in this land even for a Negro" (*GH* 85).

Chapter 2: Charleston, South Carolina / Jim Crow

McKay experienced the crude brand of American racism in the South, Midwest, and the North where Harlem becomes his home, literary muse, and springboard into the world of literary arts, The Harlem Renaissance, and radicalism.

After days at sea, McKay disembarked in the port city of Charleston, South Carolina, the second most important port city of the Jim Crow south where he experienced the crudest form of racism he had ever known thus far. Jim Crow Laws fostered racial segregation in all public facilities in the United States from roughly 1876 to 1965. In 1890, the term “separate but equal” was coined in the South as a means to ameliorate the negative image and the detrimental effects these harsh laws would have on blacks nationwide. In the South, these laws enjoyed *de jure* status and led to the disenfranchisement of blacks in nearly all areas of Southern society while, in the North, Jim Crow took on an arguably less harsh *de facto* nature which similarly marginalized and enervated the collective economic, intellectual, political and moral strength of blacks in major areas such as housing, hiring, and banking practices.

McKay could not have chosen a worse year to migrate. McKay’s arrival coincided with Jim Crow supporter Woodrow Wilson, New Jersey Democrat and the first southern born and raised post-Civil War candidate, to successfully run and win the presidential office in the United States. Wilson’s success on the campaign trail throughout the nation and overwhelming support in the South was closely linked to his conservative views on race and desire to restore its glorious past. Wilson was born in 1856 in Staunton, Virginia to parents of Irish/Scottish descent who moved there in 1851

from Ohio because they identified with the Confederacy. As a child, Wilson admired and revered the southern general and Civil War hero Robert E. Lee, whom he once had the pleasure of standing next to as a child and gazing into his eyes.

Upon losing the Civil War to the North in 1865, the South was paralyzed by the substantial dearth of economic activity and unprecedented loss of political leverage it wielded over blacks during the Reconstruction Period from 1865-1877, a brief, yet auspicious period of exponential economic, intellectual and political growth for blacks in the United States. Southern whites, fearful and resentful of both realities rallied behind Wilson and his promise to appoint Southerners to key positions in his Cabinet and in National government.

As McKay made his way to Tuskegee, Alabama and travelled deeper into the Heart of Dixie, support for Wilson adorned town squares, country roads and church bulletins while blatant signs that read Colored or Whites Only reflected the separate, unequal quality of life he too would soon be forced to endure. The unfair disenfranchisement of blacks within the electoral process was another blatant sign of racial discrimination poorly disguised as American Exceptionalism and Democracy at its best was nothing more than a thinly veiled façade of racial hatred toward blacks, something McKay would come to abhor and ultimately reject. Thousands of eligible black voters were victims of violent and/or dehumanizing forms of voter suppression by White Democrats and insidiously stripped of their rights to vote for president through conservative, ant-liberal legislators, officials and institutions. As president, Wilson became well known for racially segregating federal agencies and appointing individuals that shared his views on racial segregation such as segregationist US General Postmaster

Albert Sidney Burleson who became famous for instituting racial segregation in the US Post Office.

In *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, McKay compared race relations in Jamaica to those in the United States in the following pronouncement:

The English do not have laws against intermarriage; they do not have Jim-Crow laws separating Negroes from whites in public places and conveyances; they do not disfranchise Negroes; they do not establish a rule of refusal to serve them in hotels, bars, etc. But in reality all such restrictions more or less obtain in the islands. This is easy. The large masses of Negroes live in such a poverty-stricken condition that they cannot aspire to the better of the British aristocracy of the military and high government officials. Only the members of the entailed mulatto aristocracy can afford to intrude in the privileged area. (45)

McKay also recalls his initial contact with white Southerners: “ It was the first I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race, and my feelings were indescribable...I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter ” (46).

His first trip to the United States provided him little time to acclimate to the new, more rigid social mores and precepts of the United States. The British colonial system, racist in its own right, implemented less draconian measures against blacks who comprised the majority of the population in Jamaica. Racial segregation decreed by law

did not exist in Jamaica though it was practiced by whites to the stifling degree that it was practiced in the United States and especially in the South.

According to McKay, skin color and class prevented the majority of the black Jamaican population from ascending the social ladder more handily than race. Exceptions like the dark skinned McKay family were not uncommon, however. They were part of a select group of blacks that achieved high levels of professional, social and economic success tantamount to the achievements made by their white counterparts on the island. Race, nevertheless, invariably played a large and often stigmatizing role in the destiny of an individual in Jamaica. As in the South, whites in Jamaica constituted the ruling class. Unlike in the South, mulattoes in Jamaica were not considered black but brown. This racial distinction inherently placed them below whites but above blacks in society.

McKay's arrival in the Jim-Crow South did not mark uncharted territory, however. Barbadian slaves had constituted a large portion of the slave population in Virginia during the seventeenth hundreds and even a larger part of the slave population in South Carolina. As a British colony, a steady flow of commerce, slave labor, and exchange took place between South Carolina and the British colonies of Barbados and Jamaica. In fact, South Carolina became "an integral part of the Caribbean universe of exchange and commerce (*Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 9). In fact, according to Peter Wood, South Carolina was "the colony of a colony" (9).

The United States, consequently, implemented a discriminatory social system built on the One Drop Rule which essentially made anyone who had at least one drop of black blood running through his/her veins black. Such practices perpetuated racism and

discrimination and widening the gap between white and black society in the United States even more. These racial differences contributed to McKay's budding radical outlook on life in the United States and short stay at Tuskegee Institute.

Tuskegee, Alabama

McKay commenced studies at Tuskegee Institute under the administration of its founder, the famed educator, theoretician, politician and orator Booker T. Washington, during the fall of 1912. The significance of the mission and vision of this institution and its founder fascinated McKay. Shortly after he had begun, McKay realized that the "semi-military, machinelike existence there" was not for him. Age, artistic calling, and wanderlust top the list of possible motives that heavily influenced his decision to leave. Nevertheless these variables did not sway his love nor respect for Booker T. Washington.

In the following poem, McKay expresses his reverence for Washington and his tireless efforts at Tuskegee.

"In Memoriam: Booker T. Washington"

I vividly recall the noon day hour

You walked into the wide and well-filled hall:

We rose and sang, at the conductor's call.

Dunbar Tuskegee's hymn. A splendid tower

Of strength, as would a gardener on the flower

Nursed tenderly, you gazed upon us all

Assembled there, a serried, sable wall

Fast mortared by your subtle fact and power.
 O how I loved, adored your furrowed face!
 And fondly hoped, before your days were gone,
 You would look in mine too with paternal grace.
 But vain are hopes and dreams! - gone: you are gone,
 Death's hand has torn you from your trusting race,
 And O! We feel so utterly alone.

1916

(Complete Poems of Claude McKay, 130)

In 1916, Washington died. His death impacted McKay and tens of thousands of blacks within the Diaspora who comprehended his mission and the poem above is a clear testament to his brave, selfless efforts. McKay, often critical of African-American leadership, approved and applauded Washington's controversial vision for the advancement of blacks through education and entrepreneurship over civil rights which he believed could only be achieved if blacks attained viable skills, trades and professions, opened their own businesses and became financially and socially independent of White America - especially in the South, where the majority of blacks lived and faced the extremely vitriolic manifestations of racism in the nation – from the late 19th century to the early 20th century in the United States.

In retrospect, Washington became McKay's first radical black mentor and male role model in the United States. Clear resemblance between social, economic, political and intellectual radicals such as Washington, Uriah, McKay's older brother and guardian

as a child and whites such as Walter Jekyll and Thomas Redcam in Jamaica is glaring. All of these men possessed the controversial desire to uplift blacks through education and a genuine love of self, one's culture, history and racial unity.

Red Kansas

McKay travelled to Kansas and enrolled in the agronomy program at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas where he remained from 1912 to 1914. With a burning desire to right the wrongs of racism and now labor exploitation, a social ill he had also grown up seeing in Jamaica as well, he saw firsthand how labor exploitation had become a new form of slavery in both the US and Jamaica. In 1912, Kansas was one of the most radical socialism friendly states of the union. While there, he "became a member of a small group of white students with a socialist bent. They were all sons of poor people, and, while studying at the college, took various odd jobs to support themselves" (*The Negroes in America*, orig trans. note pg xvi.). These students belonged to the growing trend of radical thought that had taken root in eastern and, moreover, southeastern Kansas after the fall of the Populist Movement in 1890, particularly among the southern and eastern European immigrant population. In *The Kansas Response to the Haymarket Affair* by Fred Whitehead, a humanities professor from the University of Kansas writes: "For much of the twentieth century, the state of Kansas has suffered the reputation of being a conservative bastion, yet during the 1880s, through the Populist movements of the following decade, and even until the anti-radical repressions of World War I, it was a dramatic laboratory of social experimentation, free thought and wild political insurgency" (76). Radicals in Kansas commonly joined forces to fight against populist nemesis such as railroad barons, large corporations and anti-union capitalists. McKay, a product of the

rural peasant farmer himself, identified greatly with these individuals and understood their plight. This explains why McKay chose to study in Kansas.

This state had also become the home of the nation's most successful radical newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, published from 1895 to 1922. This weekly newspaper lent support to the efforts of independent farmers, miners, immigrants, labor rights organizers and the Socialist Party of America which was founded in 1901 in Kansas. By 1910, monthly circulation estimated to be around 500,000 made it the most influential and successful radical paper of its kind in the nation.

The Socialist Party of America, also invigorated McKay's hopes of effecting change through politics and public policy. This party grew exponentially from 1900 to 1912 under the dynamic leadership of Eugene V. Debs in 1912. As leader of the party, Debs pushed for social democracy, populism, labor equality and placed the espousal of human rights as the central point of his platform. His beliefs dovetailed with McKay's personal views on race, labor and labor politics as well. While studying at Kansas State, McKay thought very highly of Debs. McKay also applauded the Party's aggressive anti-capitalist agenda devoted to protecting the human and civil rights of factory workers, miners and farmers in the United States. Finally, it also worked to strengthen the working class through the creation of cooperative commonwealth work programs, progressive reform, collective ownership of factories, shops, farms and mines, labor equality and other fringe benefits and incentives geared toward buttressing the working class politically, socially and economically.

Socialists in the United States often placed inequality and poverty on the par with the traditional Marxist concerns of the proletarian class struggle. In this regard, Socialism in the United States took social issues such as poverty, sexism and racism as seriously as labor and economics. This is not to say that the original ideals of Marxism were rejected or eroded over time. Instead, a new breed of Socialism coalesced with traditional views of socialism in order to address local concerns particular to the United States. A fine example of the Socialist Party's adaptation to the needs of the people was the denouncement of racial discrimination, marginalization and preclusion of blacks from the workplace by law.

Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Topeka and Kansas City already had sizable numbers of socialist supporters who busily traveled throughout the region on recruitment campaigns, human rights, anti-capitalist and labor equality fund drives and marches. Such proactive efforts left a positive impression on McKay who, since his adolescent years in Jamaica, was abhorrent to injustice and the violation of human rights but often devoid of the necessary collective support of a likeminded organization, association or group such as the N.A.A.C.P. or the Urban League in the United States, for example.

Work and living conditions for the majority of blacks in the United States remained beneath national standard due to the limited access to employment, bank loans and education made available to them. In terms of work, Black individuals were typically offered the least desirable positions only after having nearly exhausted the possibilities of hiring a white laborer first. Furthermore, blacks were typically paid less than whites for the same jobs despite the level of skill or expertise the black worker may have had.

Another constant was the controversial use of hiring blacks to cross picket lines, replace striking workers and to weaken the overall strength of unions which oversaw and protected the rights of laborers.

Skilled and unskilled black workers in the United States were frequently denied the labor gains they fought long and hard for alongside whites ironically. The black laborer came with the indelible stigma of race and class and was, hence, roundly rejected by white coworkers who, in attempts to climb the social ladder of employment and class, found it necessary to align themselves with the white dominant culture of the land which wanted little to do with blacks. White laborers, discontent with work conditions, pay and other work related issues also found it prudent to marginalize the black worker who they believed would eventually take their jobs in factories, for example. McKay, steeped in the idealism of his youth, believed that socialism was the only answer to this problem. He also believed that socialism would create a symbiotic bond between black and white laborers, employment equality and economic stability for blacks.

Other early socialist influences that left an indelible impression on McKay in Kansas were the numerous grass roots organizations and socialist newspapers, magazines and books that provided radical solutions to the social ills of that time.

It was also during the year 1912 that McKay was introduced to the works of W.E.B. DuBois by one of his instructors at Kansas State University. Almost a decade after it had been published, McKay was “shaken like an earthquake” (*ALWFH*, 109-110) by *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W.E.B. DuBois. This work took a keen look at the black struggle and its origins, obstacles and noteworthy friends and enemies. It also prescribed

ways to ameliorate and ultimately defeat racism, discrimination and feelings of inferiority. DuBois coined the black man's and woman's ability to live within both black and white societies as double consciousness, something McKay had come to master in Jamaica growing up.

After McKay finished a two-year program in Kansas, he went to New York to pursue his ambitions of becoming a poet. While there, he acquired a better understanding of the widespread racial differences that existed between blacks and whites not only in the south but also in the Midwest and the East as well.

Caribbean Migration to the U.S.

Winston James, the author of *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia* asserts that the history of the migration of Caribbean people during slavery and thereafter is one that must be closely studied in order to understand the constant ebb and flow of Caribbean communities and the contributions individuals such as McKay made to a number of civil rights, human rights, political and labor movements in the United States. As previously stated, South Carolina played an intricate role in the creation of an antebellum inter-regional labor system that employed the frequent use of slaves from the Caribbean island of Barbados in South Carolina prior to the 1800s. Such movement greatly changed the cultural fabric of much of the coastal lowlands of South Carolina and Georgia. The culture of southern blacks and that of Caribbean blacks coalesced to form new foods, forms of linguistic expression, syncretic religion, lifestyles and, ultimately, a new gateway to the United States from the Caribbean was established and vice versa.

The 1800s and, particularly, the 1900s saw a major spike in Caribbean migration due to the following reasons: the abolishment of slavery in the Caribbean, the push-pull migratory factors that existed in the Caribbean during that time and, lastly, the ripple effect of the Wars and Industrial Revolution in the United States and Western Europe.

Slavery was abolished in the Caribbean roughly three to four decades on average (depending on the Caribbean island) before it was abolished in the United States, in theory more so than in practice however. McKay's homeland of Jamaica, for example, continued to remain under the hegemonic rule of Britain which maintained a firmly entrenched color caste system that was directly tied to the socio-economics of the island. As in virtually all of the Caribbean islands where slavery existed, whites constituted the privileged class, followed by mulattoes and, lastly, blacks who invariably occupied the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Families such as the McKays were able to circumvent this reality by fervently embracing Christianity and the commitment to the evangelization and dissemination of Christianity within the agrarian hinterlands of Jamaica where much of the peasantry still practiced African based religions believed to be of a demonic nature by the ruling class. Such favor enabled McKay to attend one of the best schools on the island. It also made it possible for him to migrate to the United States in 1912 for post-secondary studies.

The languishing local economy, exacerbated by the decline in the demand and cost of sugar from the region, created severe push-pull migratory factors in the Caribbean. In addition, uncontrollable factors such as drought, hurricanes, floods and earthquakes severely slowed down or even halted the growth of the local economy. The influence of The United States, the rapidly developing economic powerhouse of the

world, excited and convinced McKay that he too could find success there despite the odds.

The Industrial Revolution of the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries also attracted Caribbean men to the United States in search of work. The increase in the number of factories and the growth of industries of various sorts in medium to large Northern cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston and New York facilitated migration. Once there, most stayed in the United States while others opted to seek employment in other countries in Western Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.

World War I, also known as the Great War, undoubtedly provided a means by which Caribbean men could leave their respective homelands. Black men from the Caribbean were allowed to demonstrate their loyalty, patriotism and reverence for England by fighting in WWI.

Caribbean Radicalism: The Origins

The Caribbean is a region that has had a long rich history of resistance to the dominating influences of colonialism and imperialism particularly. During slavery, insurrections and revolts were not uncommon. A perfect example of opposition to the status quo was the success of the Haitian Revolution in 1803. In Jamaica, a tradition of radicalism, or simply a push for economic, social and political change, took its greatest shape within the society of runaway slaves called the Maroons. These individuals risked life and limb for freedom in the impenetrable hills of Jamaica. McKay, like all children growing up in Jamaica was familiar with the legendary folk tales, many of which were

based on the Maroons. In the “Anancy Tales,” Anancy the spider is the main character. She is commonly faced with the dauntingly formidable challenge of overcoming both literal and figurative obstacles. Radicalism in the Caribbean can be seen through the same lens. Both Wilfred A. Domingo and Marcus Garvey, for example, were members of the National Club of Jamaica, a nationalist organization heavily involved in human and civil rights issues. The United Negro Improvement Association, another human/civil rights based organization, was founded by Garvey in 1914, two years prior to his migration to the United States where he and his association continued to fight against white chauvinism and racial injustice. Samuel Haynes of Trinidad, a U.N.I.A. leader in New York, was a former secretary of The Trinidad Workingmen’s Association, a labor equality based initiative that did much to improve work conditions and pay for blacks in Trinidad. Claude McKay, though not a member of an official radical organization in Jamaica, did much to subvert the colonial regime as a member of the highly selective colonial offshoot, the Jamaican Constabulary.

Another major impetus for radicalism in the Caribbean was World War I. As previously stated, the start of this war created a massive surge of support for England in the Caribbean. Black men, full of colonial bravado, eagerly signed up to fight on behalf of the mother country with the hopes that their patriotism, loyalty, and if necessary, their lives would please the Crown to such an extent that it would be moved to improve the lives of its Caribbean subjects who languished in poverty, marginalization and hopelessness. Black soldiers, however, were roundly precluded from most areas of combat during WWI and relegated to the support of white troops. In addition, black troops were disheartened by the racist treatment they received from their white

counterparts who despised and degraded them. The end of the war only served to radicalize many black Caribbean troops even more when they returned to the Caribbean and found themselves in the same or worsened living conditions in the Caribbean with little to no effort on the part of the metropole to allay the problem.

The deplorable treatment troops received during WWI heightened anticolonial and nationalistic radicalism in the Caribbean. As the general population began to learn of the harsh degree of racism that these men were subjected to, animosity towards England, especially among many of those that were already pre-disposed to radicalism, grew. As the desire to extricate nations such as Jamaica from the metropole spread throughout the Caribbean, a new form of nationalism sprouted. For the first time, attention was solely placed on the virtues, concerns and future of the Caribbean island as an independent or near independent nation.

Public figures such as Marcus Garvey and Claude McKay both expressed the importance of creating a strong sense of nationalistic pride and unity only achieved through a solid economic base (*Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*).

Caribbean Radicalism in New York

When Caribbean radicals arrived in New York at the turn of the twentieth century, they scoffed at the blatant racism they were subjected to because they came from countries where such blatant forms of racism such as Jim Crow and segregation were less caustic. These individuals often channeled their desires to improve life for themselves and their loved ones through the creation of economic, social and political organizations, associations or clubs that aimed to advance human and civil rights for blacks in the

United States and, especially, in New York City which was quickly becoming the center of Pan-African protest against racial injustice and the center of the black artistic and intellectual world.

The following characteristics disposed Caribbeans to radical politics in New York: majority consciousness in their respective homelands; political and organizational experience; extensive prior experience in travel and migration; politically protected status in the United States as subjects of the British Crown; somewhat lesser attachment to the Christian faith and Christian churches; and educational and occupational attainments generally beyond the reach of Afro-Americans.

As migrants that lived on islands that were predominantly black, the notion of race consciousness was strong and feelings of inferiority to whites was less common due to the fact that blacks commonly held positions and posts that only whites in the United States could aspire to at that time. Being the racial majority in their native lands also afforded them social freedoms that the African American was deprived of due to Jim Crow in the South and defacto segregation in the North and virtually throughout the rest of the growing nation.

Many Caribbeans also migrated to New York with a solid background in politics, trade unions, nationalist organizations and the like. Such experiences prepared them for the long arduous battles they would fight alongside African Americans for racial equality and political representation. With self-preservation in mind, both groups joined forces to combat institutionalized racism. They created community outreach programs geared towards helping Caribbean migrants, African Americans and African migrants get ahead

in Harlem and in various parts of the city as well. Incidentally, political organizations such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in 1914 by Marcus Garvey, were one of the most emblematic entities of black radicalism in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Garvey was a member of the local trade union and nationalist party in Jamaica for example and Wilfred A. Domingo was another Caribbean migrant who alighted upon the city as a radical. Before migrating from Jamaica, he had played very active roles in pro-nationalist movements in Jamaica as well.

Another factor that greatly influenced radicalism in New York was the fact that many had traveled to other parts of the world and had experienced better treatment there. Many Caribbean men had already tasted the fruits of better pay wages and better work and living conditions in different parts of the world. Black troops from the United States, Caribbean and West Africa, for example, experienced better treatment in France than they did from their own colonially ruled local governments. Others had had the opportunity to study in the United States or in England and had seen lesser degrees of poverty in the United States and a climate of radical tolerance seemed to exist there as well.

Claude McKay's radical views on politics, literary expression, socio-economic beliefs, and race were not directly attributed to any radical or semi-radical political groups clearly evidenced in much of his early poetry written in Jamaica.

In 1912, prior to his departure for the United States, McKay penned the protest poem "Peasant Ways O' Thinkin," a poem that assumed the voice of thousands of black men who migrated to Panama to work on the construction of the Panama Canal, despite

attempts made by self-centered, capitalistic, white planters to prevent them from doing so.

“Peasant Ways O’ Thinkin’

Fe where a better pay we’ll get.

Though ober de law is bad,

An’ dey know no name of God,

Yet dere is nuff work fe we han’s

Reward in gol’ fe beat de ban’s [hunger].

De Freedom here we’ll maybe miss

Our ol’rum an our Joanie’s kiss,

De partlin’ of our little Nell,

De chimin’ o de village bell

...But poo’ness deh could neber come,

An dere’ll be cash fe sen’ back home

Fe de old heads, de bastard babe,

An someting ober still fe sabe.

Harlem: New Negro Metropolis

The history of Harlem or *Nieuw Haarlem*, as it was called by the Dutch at that time, dates back to September 3, 1609 when the Dutch East India Company ship, the “Half Moon,” piloted by Henry Hudson, an English explorer and crew first set their eyes on the land occupied by the Muscoota Indians. From 1609-1664, the Dutch colonized the

island of Manhattan and named it New Amsterdam. The rich, extensive history of Harlem prior to the arrival of people of African descent spanned four centuries and is best expressed in *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from the Dutch Village to the Black Capital* by John Gill in the following paragraph:

The encounters between Henry Hudson and the residents of northern Manhattan in 1609 were but a foretaste of Harlem's future. The clash of words and worlds, the allure of blood, money, the primacy of violence and fashion, the cohabitation of racial hatred and racial curiosity, they have always been part of what uptown means. But, from its days as a frontier outpost, to the time when it seemed like the navel of the black universe, to the era when it became the symbol of poverty in America, Uptown's reputation as the soul of the American century is indisputable; Yet even before the 1920s, when the distinctive beat of Harlem drummers made the whole world march to a new, syncopated rhythm, Harlem featured one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, counting George Gershwin and Houdini as residents. In the nineteenth century, Harlem represented Manhattan's future, as city planners built trolley, elevated train, and subway lines in hopes of attracting a middle class that could provide labor for New York's industrial revolution. Before that, John James Audubon, Aaron Burr, and Alexander Hamilton all looked to Harlem for a respite from the relentless noise, filth, and danger of downtown Manhattan. In the eighteenth century, George Washington capitalized on his intimate knowledge of the area's topography - he had unsuccessfully wooed

Martha's predecessor there years before - to defeat the British in the Battle of Harlem Heights, one of the key early conflicts of the Revolutionary War and Peter Minuit's legendary purchase of Manhattan Island in 1626 took place uptown, not far from the fateful first contacts between Henry Hudson and local Indians in 1609. Through it all, Harlem's contending forces of power and protest, contention and improvisation, greed and generosity, and sanctity and suspicion decisively shaped the American character. In that history lies the map of Harlem's even more complex future, through the precise contours yet brutal imperatives of the race uptown-downtown relationship, of the changing meanings of race and ethnicity, of the swinging dance of social crisis and economic opportunity and particularly of the establishment of the nation's and arguably the world's most vibrant black community of the 20th century. (3-4)

The unofficial establishment of the black community Harlem dates back to 1904 when the extension of the underground subway lines, the massive exodus of working-class Irish, Italian immigrants and well-to-do Jews who sought greener pastures for their families spurred the arrival of recently arrived Great Migration blacks, Caribbeans and even Africans seeking a better life and future for themselves and their progeny.

It is also believed that, from 1904 to 1907, white real estate agents failed to rent block after block of newly constructed tenements and row houses in Harlem to whites. Hence, these properties were turned over to Phillip Payton, a black real estate agent, who saw the growing demand for apartments among blacks in the city. His observations proved correct. In little time, not only did he successfully rent them to these individuals

but he also rented them above the market rate. In addition, the spread of talk of clean and safe streets, parks, wide avenues, new schools, modern homes fully equipped with heat and hot water and private bathrooms for those who could afford it also attracted blacks to Harlem. Hence, the expansion of a more racially homogeneous community slowly came together.

Greenwich Village: Urban Bohemia

Greenwich Village, located in the south western section of lower Manhattan is one of the oldest parts of the city, dating back to the 1600s under Dutch rule. The following brief description of the history of the village during the late 19th century in *The Negro of New York: An Informal Social History* by Roi Ottley reveals that

its detachment from the rest of the city saved it from the fate of the other, once fashionable, downtown sections- from degeneration into a slum peopled with poverty-stricken immigrants. In recognition of its uniqueness in this respect, the Village was known through these years as the American Ward. Although there were 11,000 foreigners, 32 percent of the population, in the Ninth Ward in 1875, no other ward in the city contained so small a proportion of foreign born inhabitants. It was the American element, moreover, which appeared to set the tone of the neighborhood. In 1893, a magazine writer could still attribute “the cleanliness, moral and physical, of the Village” to the fact that it “distinctively is the American quarter of New York. A sprinkling of French and Italians is found within these limits, together with the few Irish required for political purposes;

and in the vicinity of Carmine Street are scattered some of the children of Ham. But with these exceptions the population is composed to substantial, well-to-do-Americans. (10)

McKay's decision to live, work and fraternize in this American Ward, the white bohemian section of the city, almost completely devoid of poverty, immigrants and blacks was a radical decision. Though insignificant it may seem today, it was considered risqué then because it went in direct opposition with the social milieu of that time which had already pushed blacks north of the Village to areas such as the Tenderloin (presently Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea), and San Juan Hill (Lincoln Center Area today) and, of course, Harlem despite the free spirited, open minded, inclusive image associated with this community today.

Bohemianism was another distinct characterization of The Village that originated in France within the artistic community during the early nineteenth century. The term had also become popular in England around the same time and was typically used to refer to the same group of people. Bohemianism denoted the unconventional lifestyles, politics, morality and even sexuality of many artists who tended to adopt unorthodox lifestyles. They often lived within close proximity of each other, thus creating their own unique enclave in major cities. The transient and inconsistent nature of many of the professions held by Bohemians such as writers, actors, singers etc. often prevented them from living traditional lifestyles which typically included settling down in one specific place, integrating, assimilating and adhering to the mores and values of the community in which they lived. Bohemians were also anti-establishment. Many expressed free love and lived

in extreme penury and frugality despite the middle and upper-class backgrounds they came from.

In *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, A.B. Christa Schwartz suggests that The Village was also a place where McKay's homosexuality could be expressed more freely. According to Schwartz, McKay was "perhaps the purest example of the dual identity so common among the New Negroes: Jamaican and American, homosexual and heterosexual, Harlemite and Greenwich Villager, revolutionary and decadent, servant and celebrity" (88). This statement becomes even more plausible when one considers the close relationship McKay and the bisexual, radical and Leninist, Max Eastman, the editor of *The Liberator*, the nation's leading leftist magazine of the late teens to early 1920s, shared.

Perhaps an even more fitting and commonly used term to describe the fluid sexuality of McKay is "queer" because it rejects traditional labels of sexual identity in order to stimulate the creation of less confining sexual paradigms while spawning a debate on sexuality that transcends behavioral science discussions in the classroom, embraces and applies Modernist theory to everyday life, and, ultimately, counters the dominant discourse of normative hegemonies such as heterosexuality and patriarchy in the West.

Socialism

Radical political views among liberals were common during the early 20th century. A large number were neither "good Republicans" nor "staunch Democrats," but rather socialists. According to the *Merriam-Webster Heritage Dictionary*, Marxism

(Socialism) is the doctrine established by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on economics, politics and society based on the notion that economic determinism (all events, including human choices and decisions have sufficient causes) and political and social structures are determined by the economic condition of people. Marxism calls for a classless society where all means of production are collectively owned and a system is reached that thwarts the inevitable result of struggle between capitalists and workers.

When McKay arrived in New York in 1914, he took residence in Greenwich Village. His neighbors were predominantly white, liberals, bohemians and politically inclined towards Socialism like himself. He expressed little concern regarding the racially homogenized white community probably due to the fact that despite the defacto laws that segregated blacks and whites in the North, less attention was paid to them there. As a self-declared socialist, radical, liberal and intellectual, McKay wrote and participated in the dissemination of socialist propaganda, attended socialist party meetings at undisclosed locations and did everything in his power to see that more blacks embrace Socialism for greater racial, and economic equality with whites, especially at the workplace.

Living in the “Village” proved beneficial to the advancement of his literary career and budding socialist political views. His burgeoning literary career benefitted from meeting and befriending Max Eastman (and, subsequently, his sister Crystal), who was a respected, political activist, writer, poet and “Village” resident as well. Max and McKay shared similar interests, beliefs and passions. Max also became one of McKay’s closest friends, confidants and patrons throughout the course of his life. In 1911, Eastman started writing for the socialist magazine *The Masses*. During his tenure as editor, Eastman

supported McKay's literary aspirations. Friendship with the editor of one of the nation's leading left-wing liberal publications of critical thought put McKay in contact and in close proximity with numerous important white radicals and liberals, two groups of white individuals from which McKay received assistance in many ways on various occasions. Under the helm of Max Eastman, *The Masses* took a hostile stand against Conservatism and the social ills it exacerbated. An example of this sentiment is seen in the short descriptive message found on the inside cover of the magazine printed in the paragraph below:

This magazine is owned and published cooperatively by its editors. It has no dividends to pay and nobody is making money out of it. A revolutionary and not a reform magazine; a magazine with a sense of humor and no respect for the respectable; frank; arrogant; impertinent; searching for true causes; a magazine directed against rigidity and dogma wherever it is found; printing what is too naked or true for the money making press, a magazine whose final policy is to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody, not even its readers - there is a field for this type of publication - America, help us find it.

Convinced that a less puritanical day had dawned in the United States, the editors of top selling liberal magazines such as *The Masses*, *The New Republic*, *Seven Arts* and *Pearson's Magazine* took interest in writers such as McKay while living in the Village. His big break came when *Seven Arts* published two sonnets by McKay entitled "Invocation" and the "Harlem Dancer" for which he used the pseudonym Eli Edwards to

conceal his true identity to protect his current and future employment opportunities especially in New York.

“Invocation”

Ancestral Spirit, hidden from my sight
 By modern Time’s unnumbered works and ways
 On which in awe and wonderment I gaze,
 Where hid’st thou in the deepness of the night?
 What evil powers thy healing presence blight?
 Thou who from out of the dark and dust didst raise
 The ethiop standard in the curtained days,
 Before the white God said: Let there be light!
 Bring ancient music to my modern heart,
 Let fall the light upon my sable face
 That once gleamed on the Ethiopian’s art;
 Lift me to thee out of this alien place
 So I may be, thine exiled counterpart,
 The worthy singer of my world and race

This poem addresses the dilemma faced by the black intellectual: Being of and not of the West. It is also radical in its posture due to its unapologetic recognition of Africa and the author’s direct relationship to it.

“The Harlem Dancer”

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes

And watched her half clothed body sway; her voice was like the sound of
blended flutes,

Blown by black prayers upon a picnic day.

She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,

The light gauze hanging loose about her form;

To me she seemed a proudly swaying-palm.

Grown lovelier for passing through the storm.

Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls

Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,

The wine-flushed bold eyed boys, and even the girls,

Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;

But looking at her falsely-smiling face,

I knew her self was not in that strange place.

1917

This polarizing poem revealed the seedier side of black life to the dismay of the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and many members of the black literati and intelligentsia because it depicted the double consciousness which all blacks are forced to adapt to in order to live in white racist society.

Claude McKay: a Radical in Harlem

While living in the Village McKay began to frequent Harlem. His first impression of Harlem was extremely positive. In the biography *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner of the Harlem Renaissance* by Wayne Cooper, McKay stated “Harlem was my first positive reaction to American Life...After two years in the blue-sky-law desert of Kansas, it was like entering a paradise of my own people...I gave myself up to getting down into... [the] rhythm of Harlem life which still remains one of the most pleasurable sensations of my blood” (72).

In 1914, McKay moved to the Negro Metropolis. He was captivated by the electric magnetism of the people, streets, raucous nightlife and venues, underworld and polite society where close contact with fellow black radicals influenced his actions. After quickly settling into life in the burgeoning mecca of black America and the home to thousands of blacks who had migrated there from Southern states, the English, French and Spanish speaking Caribbean, and a smattering of Africans, he became particularly interested in the lives of the working class and the poor who in his opinion, were marginalized by both black and white society equally.

McKay never played it safe in Harlem by staying within the Black Belt and following the mores and precepts of that time. McKay violated Jim Crow laws, on the contrary. A fine example of this was when he helped Michael, a white petty thief, escape from the cops after having robbed someone and allowed him to stay in his room to his friend and housemate's Manda's surprise. Her shock is expressed in the following line: “Foh lords sake I wonder what will happen next!” (*ALWFH* 46). Her reaction is not only

based in surprise but also in fear of the wayward young man and, equally, in disgust of his scurrilous appeal because “like most colored southerners, she was hostile to poor white trash” (46).

Again, temerity and an intentional disregard for segregation policy and laws that kept blacks and whites apart in New York underscored his radical bent during his first sojourn in New York City. McKay was aware of the benefits of forging close intellectual, political, economic and social ties with whites who often satisfied his personal and professional needs. Proof of this is not only seen in McKay’s personal relationships with Walter Jekyll and Thomas Redcam but also in the relationships he forged throughout his life with most white males in general. In his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home*, the first chapter is centered around his admiration and desire to meet and hopefully receive criticism, help and ultimately the approval of Frank Harris, the famed twentieth-century British editor. Later, in chapter three, McKay befriends Max Eastman, the radical, white, leftist editor of the leftist magazine *The Liberator*. In chapter three, fittingly entitled “White Friends,” he explains the circumstances under which white friendship was beneficial to blacks: “a peasant would be proud of a white friend who was influential. But from a social asset point of view, he would place much more value upon friendship of a light colored person of wealthy and educated class or of a black who rose up out of the peasantry than he would upon that of an undistinguished poor white ” (36).

In chapter four, entitled “Another White Friend,” McKay befriends and helps Michael a white petty thief of the lowest class in society. All in all, white friendships symbolize the possibility of acquiring economic stability, literary support and, at times, a desire to connect with, others who shared his ways of thinking regardless of race

throughout the course of his life. McKay later goes on to write, “I have also had some white friends in my life, friends from the upper class, the middle class, the lower and the very lowest class. Maybe I have had more white friends than colored friends. Perhaps I have been impractical in putting the emotional above the social value of friendship, but neither the color of my friends, nor the color of their money, nor the color of their class has ever been of much significance to me. It was more the color of their minds, the warmth and depth of their sensibility and affection that influenced me” (38). In short, McKay was not awestruck or intimidated by the mere idea of whiteness but rather disposed to take advantage of it whenever possible.

Another factor that contributed to the radicalization of Caribbean immigrants such as McKay was the disillusionment, bewilderment and, ultimately, resignation, many Caribbeans felt upon experiencing the caustic sting of racism in the United States. In the following quote, the sentiment of a Caribbean immigrant is expressed: “having passed the immigration and custom examiners, I took a carriage for what the driver called ‘Nigger town.’ It was the first time I had heard that opprobrious epithet, and then, by a colored man himself. I was vividly irked no little. Arriving in Colored Town [Miami], I alighted from the carriage in front of an unpainted, poorly ventilated rooming house where I paid \$2.00 for a week’s lodging. Already, I was rapidly becoming disillusioned. How unlike the land from where I was born, I soliloquized. There colored men were addressed as gentlemen; here as “niggers” (*HATBOE* 97).

An account of similar sentiment in New York City read, “In the United States I was to gain new experiences. In New York City there were separate churches for colored and white people.... I found that discrimination existed in hotels, in the residential

sections of the city, and in office buildings, where in many instances colored people must use freight elevators. In general, I gathered the Negroes were not wanted except to do menial work" (*HATBOE 97*).

The famed Caribbean actor Sidney Poitier recalled the time he walked into the police station, and the desk sergeant - a big burly, rough-looking guy - says,

Take off that cap nigger." I turned around to see who was behind me and then suddenly realized that he was talking to me. So I said, "Are you talking to me?" He said "Yes, I'm talking to you." I said, "Are you crazy?" He said, "What did you say boy?" I say "My name is Sidney Poitier, you calling me names? Do you know who you are talking to? " The room is full of lots and lots of cops and at this point they're falling down on the floor with laughter. Never in their lives have they seen such a nutty little black boy - he's got to be insane, or somebody's paid him fifty cents to come in and play this little charade. The guy behind me is looking at me - his mouth wide open and he says, "What did you say your name is boy?" I say, "My name is Sidney Poitier - it's not 'boy.'" He says, "Okay, Mr. Poitier, would you mind telling us what it is you want?" I said, "I've come here because I want you to give me a pass to go across the Bureau of Vital Statistics to see about my birth certificate." He said, "All right, sir," having decided he would go along with the joke, whatever it was. And then he said to me, "Where are you from?" I said, "I'm from the Bahamas." And he said "Oh, I see." At which point they realized I just didn't know what was going on... (*HATBOE 85-86*)

British, non-American political status also contributed to the growth of Caribbean radicalism in the United States. Many Caribbeans gained entrance into the United States under the protection and privileges, so to speak, of their English passports. The cogent relationship that existed between these two nations facilitated Caribbean migration to the United States for work, education and temporary stays. Once there, many solicited U.S. citizenship. Others such as McKay opted not to, however. This decision often provided Caribbeans like McKay with unique, civil and even political protection. A paradoxical example of this was the peripatetic life of McKay who moved about, worked, lived and protested U.S. politics under the shield of his British Commonwealth status during his first sojourn. Laws, restrictions and other race related forms of repression and circumscription were often slightly relaxed for blacks from the British West Indies. In New York, the British Consulate occasionally provided aid to blacks of the British Caribbean who called upon them from time to time. Such benevolence was proffered in order to keep tabs on its subjects after World War I and to thwart the growing influence of Marcus Garvey in Black America at that time. In one alleged instance, the British Consul General in Philadelphia was even “successful in obtaining the reprieve of a condemned murderer” (*HATBOE* 73). As a result, a sense of security was often felt among Caribbeans who believed - either from hearsay or from personal experience - that the British Consul afforded them liberties American citizenship would never.

Another factor that bolstered radicalism in McKay in Harlem, New York was an overall weaker sense of commitment to the United States. Prior to and after abolition, Caribbeans moved throughout the region and beyond extensively in search of employment. Furthermore, a substantial number found work in Central America during

the construction of the Panama Canal at the turn of the twentieth century and on plantations in the region and the Caribbean as well. At the same time, the demand for skilled workers in the United States grew substantially. The idea of patriotism and nation had been lost on them since many had spent several years abroad and no longer felt the strong ties to the land of their birth. To these individuals, life in the United States was seen as a means to acquire economic, political and educational opportunities for themselves and their loved ones and nothing more. The Caribbean immigrant typically looked ahead to the future, not back to the past. Many believed that progress in the United States was attained through hard work, discipline and personal commitment, not nationalism. Therefore, when individuals such as McKay became involved in radicalism, they felt little to no cultural, racial or national obligation to the United States, its highly partisan political parties, organizations or associations.

The deliberate disavowal of religious faith among many Caribbean migrants also contributed to the propagation of radicalism. While African-American life centered on the black church since slavery and revered the Holy Bible and its teachings, little to no tolerance of agnosticism or atheism existed. As a result, little room was left for free thought and non-faith based approaches to solving the myriad of social ills that blacks were subject to at that time. Racism, the largest culprit of black demise and destruction was traditionally addressed through the council and representation of black clergymen who either acted as liaisons between black and white America or the spokesmen of the race. These individuals often stunted the growth or marred the reputation of the church by placing self-aggrandizement and self-preservation over the wellbeing of the congregation. In addition, the divisive complexities of ethnicity, class, skin color and politics did little

to attract Caribbeans in large numbers to African-American churches and much to push Caribbean radicals such as McKay further away from them.

In 1917, Hubert Harrison, the St Croix born migrant nicknamed the “Father of Harlem Radicalism” pointed out that African-American black agnostics were scarce in number, not because they were non-existent but because of the stigma it carried. According to Harrison, agnostics were “generally found to be West Indians from the French, Spanish and English islands” (*HTBOEA* 76), and not in the United States. He continued: “Here and there one finds an American-Negro who is reputed to have Agnostic Tendencies; but these are seldom, if ever, openly avowed. I can hardly find it in my heart to blame them, for I know the tremendous weight of the social proscription which it is possible to bring to bear upon those who dare to defy the idols of my tribe” (*HATBOE* 77). Thus, a prevailing sense of “invisibility” allowed many Caribbeans who openly or discreetly chose to pursue agnosticism or atheism because they lived beyond the realms of both white and black mainstream religion and therefore were exempt from the polarizing moral debates spurred by Christianity during the early 20th century in the United States.

Lastly, many fairly young Caribbean males were radicalized well before they reached the United States and especially New York. McKay was originally indoctrinated into radicalism as a young boy by his older brother Uriah and later by his mentors Thomas Redcam and Walter Jekyll. Marcus Garvey started the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914 to foster change for blacks in Jamaica two years prior to his migration and involvement in race politics in New York. In addition, Garvey was also a trade unionist and a printer in Kingston, Jamaica when he led a strike at his place

of employment. Hubert Harrison, born in the former Danish colony of St. Croix also migrated to New York during his early adolescence with the seeds of radicalism already planted in his precociously intellectual mind during his childhood.

The New Negro in Harlem

On a wintery February morning of 1919, just five years after McKay moved to New York, the New Negro made his public debut. Proud African-American soldiers marched uptown to Harlem as part of a welcome home parade that honored their unflagging courage and patriotism on the battlefields of Western Europe during WWI. The term “New Negro” was originally coined by the distinguished Howard University professor, scholar and writer Alain Locke in his groundbreaking compilation of progressive Negro fiction, poetry, history, art, music, drama, education and politics. In *The New Negro*, edited by Professor Locke in 1925, this figure was “inevitably moving forward under the control of his own objectives” (10). He represented the glorious manifestation of a metamorphosis that took centuries to create. Prior to 1919, tens of thousands of Negro men and women had already contributed to the formation of the New Negro in manifold acts of resistance, perseverance faith and prayer which ultimately rendered, on this cold, blustery morning, the new breed of young, educated, proud, black men committed to the task of fighting against racism, discrimination, repression, hate while forging racial, social and economic equality for themselves and those of their race in the United States.

Gone was the stereotypical, passive, ingratiating, illiterate Uncle Tom who genuflected whites upon the mere sight of them. Gone was the belief that life would

somehow improve if he continued to be patient, respectful, obedient and God-fearing. Gone were the days of self-doubt and insecurity in his ability to defeat the specter of racism. Gone were the days of paralyzing fear of repercussion and persecution, and gone were the days of white assimilation in exchange for black liberation.

Harlem would be his base, his refuge and his home. It would also be the largest Pan-African community the world had ever seen. Here, the black African, American, and Caribbean would meet, live, work, and build a rich community of similar and dissimilar working classes, professions, vocations and ambitions. Just north of Central Park, the skilled and unskilled, young and old, heterosexual and homosexual, male and female would lay out the ambitious blueprint for a new society of inclusion, equality and justice for blacks the world over.

In the July 7, 1927 issue of *Opportunity*, The New Negro was described by J.E. McCall as follows:

1. He scans the world with calm and fearless eyes
2. Conscious within of powers long-since forgot
3. At every step now man made barriers rise to bar his progress but he heeds them not
4. He stands erect, though tempests round him crash
5. Though thunder bursts and billows surge and roll he laughs and forges on, while lightning flash along the rocky pathway to his goal
6. Impassive as a sphinx, he stares ahead
7. Foresees new empires rise and old ones fall

8. While caste-made nations lust for blood to shed, he sees God's finger
writing on the wall
9. With his soul awakened; wise and strong he stands
10. Holding the destiny within his hands

McKay embraced the timely creation of the New Negro ardently. His initial sojourn in New York consisted of indelible experiences that fostered his emotional, intellectual, political and professional growth. Like The New Negro, McKay was a spirited fighter in both the literal and figurative sense. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay speaks in lengthy detail about his experiences as a Pullman train porter, and more importantly as a writer and poet.

In the poem "The Conqueror," McKay acknowledges the formidable strength with which the white race has conquered everything on earth except the black race's soul:

"The Conqueror"

He has battled with earth:

He has won;

Where once there were desert and dearth,

And jungles untouched by the sun,

Are altar and field and hearth:

He has fought the wild earth,

He has won.

He has conquered the Sea:

Proud he rides

Over the long white waves,
Over the frenzied tides,
Over the unmarked graves
Of the creatures that fought, as he,
The great Sea,
And he goes through the Air
On wings.
He has won everywhere.
He has under control
Earth, Sea and Air,
Yeah but his Soul.

1918

The New Negro as seen in the poem above channeled his strength from his ancestry, culture, and race. He was a fighter, a dreamer and, most importantly, a doer. These characteristics aptly described McKay's literary works until his death in 1948. Like McKay, The New Negro was also a traveler. During WWI, thousands of black men were shipped off to Europe, the majority relegated to non-combat duty and only a small minority were allowed to fight alongside white troops. When these men returned home, they had indeed undergone significant change. While overseas, they received more humane treatment from Western Europeans than they did from fellow Americans back home in the United States. For the first time for many black American troops, their race was secondary and did not invariably provoke fear, hostility or distrust in Europe. The

New Negro saw himself as the white man's equal. Gone was the docile, illiterate Uncle Tom and the all enduring "boy" of the antebellum and later Jim Crow South.

The New Negro also sought intellectual and academic growth. Long before McKay ever considered leaving Jamaica, education had already become paramount in his life. In his autobiography, *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, a clear sense of this is felt. While living with his parents, special fondness for his mother was largely due to her encouraging support of his pursuit for knowledge. Their relationship transcended the traditional parameters of mother and son. They were, more importantly, mutual friends who protected, uplifted and enjoyed one another. His mother also lived part of her life vicariously through him. Every time she allowed him to pick up a book to read in her presence, she was, in effect, freeing herself from the societal yoke of sexism in Jamaica. The more she allowed him to read, the more her efforts subverted the sexist foundations which her son would one day, openly challenge as a poet. This is evidenced in much of his Jamaican poetry and short stories which never fall short of strong female characters or, at the least, one strong female presence.

In the poem "A Country Girl," McKay empowers women in honor of the woman who empowered him: his mother.

"Lelia gal, why in this town do you stay?

Why, tell me why, did you wander away?

Why will you aimlessly foolishly roam,

W'ont you comeback to your old country home?"

"Country life, Fed has no pleasures for me,

I wanted de gay o' the city to see,
 To wear ebery Sunday a prettier gown,
 Da's why I came to de beautiful town."

...“Fed, it was horrid de lone country life!
 I suffered- for sometimes e'un hunger was rife;
 An' when I came, Fed, to try my chance here,
 I thought there would be no more troubles to bear.

...Don't t'ink I care 'bout exposure, my boy!
 Dat which you call sin is for me now joy;
 Country for Lelia will have no more charm,
 I'll live on the same way, twill do me no harm.

And after all, many girls richer than me,
 Pretty which girls of better degree,
 Live as I do, an'are happy an' gay
 Then why should I not be as happy as they? ”

1912

This poem was extremely avante garde for its times because it approaches the role of women in society from an egalitarian, not moral perspective. It challenges the belief that women were meant to be chaste and pure, passive and weak. In this poem, the main character is a female who leaves her rural agrarian village in search of employment and a better future in the city where she falls into prostitution. Throughout the poem, her male friend suggests that she return to their hometown for a life of agrarian drudgery which

she roundly refuses to consider, like McKay, who despite his hardships and tribulations in the United States or elsewhere never returns to Jamaica.

This poem also informs the reader that McKay disagreed with repression of any sort. This poem breaks the moral fetters placed on women. It also chooses not to demonize her decision to sell her body for money as a means of survival. Inequality was inherently wrong as far as McKay was concerned and the gender inequality had prevented her from aspiring to a life beyond the prostitution or, as in his mother's case, the domestic front.

As a poet of dialect forms, McKay had already proven that he could successfully write poetry in the tongue of his fellow countrymen. Now, in the United States, he would show both the black and the white worlds that he could also use the vaunted literary techniques of great English language poets that he had read, admired and, in some ways, attempted to emulate such as Whitman, Keats, and Byron. He would also continue to write radical, yet progressive poetry. A fine example of the anger and animosity that he felt towards the whites surfaces in the poem "To The White Friends" which was published in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1917. This poem captured McKay's anger in the following words:

Think ye I am not fiend and savage too?

Think ye I could not arm me with a gun

And shoot down ten of you for every one

Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?

Be not deceived, for every deed ye do

I could match-out match: am I not Afric's son

Black of that black land where black deeds are done?

1917.

In this poem he warns his white America, friends to beware of the black man who like him, has ample reason to be angry.

The New Negro also attempted to improve the economic reality of black people. McKay believed in self-sufficient black communities. In Jamaica, he had been reared in the agrarian entrepreneurship. Though they never became wealthy or amassed large amounts of material wealth, his family raised its own food and probably used it as barter to acquire the things they wanted or needed. They also formed part of the entrepreneurial working class. Therefore, the growing interest in Capitalism concerned and angered him.

As a man passionately driven by race, McKay, a true embodiment of the New Negro, felt a strong commitment to the advancement of the socioeconomics of his race. The following poem scoffs at the greed and abuses white capitalists had exacted on blacks in the United States in the poem "A Capitalist at Dinner":

An ugly figure, heavy, overfed.

Settles uneasily into a chair;

Nervously he mops his pimply pink bald head,

Frowns at the fawning waiter

The entire service tries its best to please

This over pampered piece of broken-health,

Who sits there thoughtless, querulous, obese,
 Wrapped in his sordid visions of vast wealth.
 Great God! If creatures like this money fool,
 Who hold the service of mankind so cheap,
 Over the people must forever rule,
 Driving them at their will like helpless sheep-
 Then let proud mothers cease from giving birth;
 Let human beings perish from the earth.

1919

In this poem, McKay expresses his contempt for the white capitalist who he describes as “an ugly figure, heavy, overfed,” who nervously “mops his pink bald head” and “frowns at the fawning waiter” who “tries its best to please” to no avail. This brief description is indeed a microcosm of the socio-economic and racial disparities that existed between blacks and whites at that time.

Another angry protest poem of a similar vein was “The White City.” This poem is directed at racial animosity.

I will not toy in it nor bend an inch
 Deep in secret chambers of my heart
 I muse my life-long hate, and without flinch
 I bear it nobly as I live my part.
 My being would be a skeleton, a shell,

If this dark Passion that fills my every mood,
 And makes my heaven in the white world's hell.
 Did not forever feed me vital blood.
 I see the mighty city through a mist-
 The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,
 The poles and spires and towers vapor -kissed,
 The fortified port through which the great ships pass,
 The tides, the wharves, the den I contemplate,
 Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate
 One reads this poem and is able to.

1921

Another sensitive yet significant area that the New Negro impacted was human sexuality, sexual behavior and its various manifestations. The New Negro was not always nor required to be exclusively heterosexual. As stated earlier A.B. Christa Schwartz, author of *Gay Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance*, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Richard Bruce Nugent were the four most prominent literary figures that concealed, explored, or embraced same-sex relationships, attractions or lifestyles.

Bisexuality and homoerotic overtones are present in his literary works and in his personal life. His close relationship with Walter Jekyll also seems to have been his induction to bisexuality. It is believed that their relationship was both literary and sexual. Jekyll was an upper-class eccentric who turned his back on the conservative civilization,

social mores and precepts of England and the Caribbean and embraced free thinking and perhaps homosexuality. Furthermore, Jekyll never married in Jamaica nor took a serious interest in women. Jekyll is also credited with having introduced McKay to the works of Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman, both noted homosexuals. In *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, McKay alludes to the magnetic attraction that he felt for Jekyll in the following sentence: “we liked each other immediately” (66), and “running away from home to be near him.” While training to become a constabulary, a position that Jekyll pulled strings for McKay to get, McKay spent days and nights at Jekyll’s mountain retreat preparing for the position; in fact, when McKay would visit Jekyll on weekends, he “kept a closed mouth about the relationship with Mr. Jekyll” (68), and when McKay went to visit Jekyll, his male friends always thought he “had gone to see friends or girls” (70). While on the constabulary, McKay also engaged in what seemed to be a very discrete, loving homosexual relationship with a fellow constabulary. Years later in New York, McKay was believed to have maintained friendships and perhaps an open relationship with his mentor/friend, Max Eastman, who rather openly embraced free-love with both men and women.

In Harlem, McKay was also believed to have had sexual trysts and erotic liaisons with men as well as women. In *A Long Way From Home*, McKay recounts how he befriended Michael, a white thug and pickpocket who “did tricks most of the time in the subways and parks or by getting friendly with them” (46), the text suggests that Michael was a hustler who preyed on men interested in him. It also suggests that the relationship between the two was not literary but, rather, homosexual. In subsequent chapters, this theme will resurface, as well. According to A.B. Schwartz, McKay “like many other

same-sex interested black writers, McKay connected with Alain Locke's gay network" (91).

England Bound

The New Negro also believed in fighting fire with fire when it came to protecting himself, his property and loved ones. Just before McKay departed for England, he published his most iconic protest poem "If We Must Die," during the Red Summer of 1919, one of the most violent summers blacks experienced in Chicago and throughout the United States at the hands of angry, racist whites. Shortly after the success of this poem, McKay left the United States for England, with the title of having been considered the most radical New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance, in hopes of pursuing his quest for racial and labor equality through the espousal of Socialism and Pan-Africanism.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
 Hunted and pinned in an inglorious spot,
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
 Making their mock at our accursed lot.
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,
 So that our precious blood may not be shed
 In vain; then even monsters we defy
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
 O, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
 Though far outnumbered let us show brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!

What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

1919

This sonnet became the most important protest poem of the Harlem Renaissance. Never before had a poem expressed such conviction and strength. Each line galvanizes black men to act in self-defense and in the interest of their loved ones and property. It also warned racist whites to beware of the New Negro and his fearless claim to life and if need be, death. Though this poem mentions no group in particular, it is written in response to the Red Summer of 1919 in Chicago which was marked by the cruel and senseless race riots that preyed on blacks during that summer. This call to arms stirred the black workers that McKay initially read it to on the Pullman Car Service and, shortly after it was published in 1919, it became a smash hit during the Harlem Renaissance. Two decades later, it was even said to have been recited by Winston Churchill to encourage British troops during WWII.

This sonnet was also revered for its exceptional use of form, style, tone, imagery and diction, written in traditional Standard English. McKay intentionally chose the sonnet to dispel extant beliefs that black art and especially poetry in this case, was intrinsically inferior to that penned by whites.

During the summer of 1919, McKay unapologetically penned the most fiery protest poem of its time before leaving for England where he would continue to set trails

ablaze within politics, labor rights and race as he looked to the Bolshevik Russian Revolution for strength and inspiration to continue his arduous battle against tyranny. Accolades and high praise rained down on McKay within the black community for having captured the anger, resolve and sentiment of thousands of blacks who were no longer willing to peacefully await a change of heart within white America. After this poem was published in *The Liberator* Magazine, it evoked the following response from Max Eastman, the editor about McKay's auspicious talent in the following words:

his attitude toward life is like Shelley's, free and yet strenuously idealistic....I wish he would write more poems as mettlesome and perfectly chiseled throughout as some of his stanzas are. And I think he will, for he is young and has arrived at the degree of power and skill revealed in these poems practically without encouragement or critical help. To me they show a fine clear flame of life...not forgotten (*CM: RSITHR* 103)

Chapter 3: England: Early 20th Century/ Caribbean Migration to England/Pan Africanism

McKay arrived in England imbued with a strong desire to combat racial inequality and determined to travel to Communist Russia after the success of his protest poem “If We Must Die” catapulted him into the literary stratosphere of Harlem Renaissance men of letters.

Like many British subjects, McKay harbored great zeal regarding the prospects of visiting the Mother Country while growing up in Jamaica and later as a young man in the United States. The desire to visit England and experience its formidable culture, fabled attractions and rich traditions first-hand were a direct result of his colonial education and upbringing in Jamaica, one of England’s most profitable sugar cane producing islands at one time. Once there, its romantic appeal quickly dwindled. The damp, cold weather, xenophobic denizens, sub-standard living conditions and blatant racism disheartened him to no end. According to McKay, “the feeling of London was so harshly unfriendly” (*ALWFH* 66), that had it not been for the social club for colored men to which he belonged, nor the political club for leftist intellectuals such as himself, he doubted that he “could have survived the ordeal of more than a year’s residence in London” (*ALWFH* 67).

World War I had taken its toll on England, most of Western Europe and the morale of its people, by the time McKay had arrived in London in 1919. His arrival coincided with large-scale national rebuilding efforts performed largely and in conjunction with the help of skilled and unskilled black and brown labor from the British Empire. As migrants from the British West Indies, Africa and Indo-Asia settled down in

the Union Jack, xenophobia, resentment and anger grew among whites who began to feel threatened by the change in the racial landscape of their country and the unfounded belief that these individuals would insidiously supplant white laborers and mar British society all together.

Ironically, the negative backlash against black migrants like McKay strengthened Pan- Africanism, the ideology that had already taken root among many progressive black thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century in the West. Pan-Africanism sought to unite members of the African Diaspora - regardless of location - in order to foment stronger social, economic, cultural and political ties not only to Africa but to the members themselves. It was also conceptualized in order to build a stronger front against racial oppression. Intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois had this to say in its favor, “The ideas of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent belongs to the twentieth century and stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States. Here, various groups of Africans, quite separate in origin, became so united in experience and so exposed to the impact of new cultures that they began to think of Africa as one land. Thus, in the late eighteenth century, when a separate Negro Church was formed in Philadelphia it called itself African”; and there were various “African” societies in many parts of the United States” (*Pan Africanism* 4).

In 1919, Marcus Garvey, another supporter of this ideology, launched the Black Star Line, a fleet of commercial shipping vessels intended to link people of African descent in commerce and industry. That following year, his Pan-African organization, the UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association) boasted a membership of two million members and thirty branches throughout the Diaspora (*PA* 133). London also became an

important city for Pan- Africanism due to the growing number of marginalized black migrants living there who embraced its principles.

The year 1919 was also one of the bloodiest years of the early twentieth century as far as racial violence was concerned on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In Chicago, The Red Summer of 1919 claimed the lives and property of hundreds of innocent blacks who were attacked by blood thirsty mobs of angry whites who resented their presence and their decision to migrate to major industrial cities in the North for work. In England, similar atrocities were exploding in the port cities of Liverpool, Cardiff, Newport, and Barry that same year. Crowds of angry white men and women commonly destroyed and pillaged homes in neighborhoods with largely black or almost exclusively black populations. Angry whites inflicted injuries, serious bodily harm and even death without indictment.

Despite violent attempts to bar and/or discourage black and brown British subjects from taking residence in England and seeking employment on the docks, black men like McKay defiantly continued to settle, form social groups, institutions and organizations there that enabled them to bear the brunt of racial hostility collectively.

In a letter written to the Home Office by the Cardiff Chief Constable on June 18, 1919, frustration, discontent and outrage leap off the page due to the growing number of black migrants persistent on staying in England and sustaining open and discrete intimate relationships with white women. This is what he wrote in part: "If there is further trouble these are the men who are likely to be the cause as they have made the U.K. their home, they have formed attachments with white women and are prepared to stubbornly defend

what they call their right” (*Black 1919: Riots, Racism and Resistance in Imperial Britain* 22). In attempts to quell such fear mongering, liberal whites and migrant blacks such as McKay consistently promulgated the peaceful integration of blacks into English society and the importance of standing behind English law which extended justice, equality and peace to its citizens and migrants. A prime example of the lengths migrant males went to in order to change the negative perception that many whites had of them is seen in the following quote, “The colored men have mostly served in the Forces, navy and transport. They are largely British subjects, and are proud to have been able to have done what they have done for the Empire....The majority of Negroes at present are discharged soldiers and soldiers without employment....Some of us have been wounded, and lost limbs and eyes fighting for the Empire to which we have the honour to belong “We ask for British justice, and to be as true and loyal sons of Great Britain” (*B 1919: RRARIIB* 43). Similar to blacks in the United States, the desire to form part of the national fabric of England was denied them in England because of their race.

That same year, the British working class, emblazoned with anger and hate launched more racial attacks on black and brown British subjects, especially in the port towns of England. McKay, a seafarer in his own right, had come to know the importance of the seas and ports. In 1912, he had set sail for the United States and seven years later, he embarked on another seafaring journey to England. In his seminal novel *Home to Harlem*, published in 1928 and discussed in depth in Chapter Five, it is important to note that the opening scene consists of Jake, the main character, returning from Cardiff to Harlem. The sea, ships, seaports and sailors are in effect, his first contact with racism in

England and his literary response to it. In the following poems, McKay expresses his persistent opposition to racism in England.

“England”

How like a fixed and fortified rock she stands,
Cliff-featured arrogance against the world
Of change the striving human spirit demands!
Lofty Reaction! When shall she be hurled
From her pedestal proud, whence she aways power
Over the millions raped of strength and will,
And trained before her armoured pride to cower,
Yet those whose low murmurings she cannot still
The angry tempest will not lash in vain,
Against thy granite, arch conspirator,
Scheming to shackle men with the ancient chain,
After the slaves revolt, the distant roar
Tocsins thy plundered native multitude,
That reach out hungry for thine ancient crown,
Thine ancient titles, with strong hands and rude,
From thy high eminence to dash thee down.

1924

Although this poem was written two years after McKay had left England, it clearly revealed his negative perception of this metropolitan nation after having lived there and having espoused socialism, Marxist ideology and racial and labor equality. In the next poem, McKay continues his merciless attacks on the ravaging effects capitalism has had on poor blacks:

“The Little Peoples”

The little people of the troubled earth,
 The little nations that are weak and white,-
 For them the glory of another birth,
 For them the lifting of the veil of night.
 The big men of the world in concert met,
 Have sent forth in their power a new decree:
 Upon the old harsh wrongs the sun must set,
 Henceforth the little peoples must be free!
 But we, the blacks, less than the trampled dust,
 Who walk the new ways with the old dim eyes,-
 We to the ancient gods of greed and lust
 Must still be offered up as sacrifice:
 Oh, we who deign not to live but will not dare,
 The white world’s burden must forever bear!

1919

This poem undoubtedly speaks to the disparate worlds of the haves and the have nots, blacks and whites, rich and poor.

In "The White City," McKay is rife with anger and minces no words about his feelings towards those that control all aspects of life from metropolises such as London.

"The White City"

I will not toy with it nor bend an inch.

Deep in the secret chambers of my heart

I muse my life long hate, and without flinch

I bear it nobly as I live my part.

My being would be a skeleton a shell,

If this dark passion that fills my every mood,

And makes my heaven in the white worlds hell,

Did not forever feed me vital blood.

I see the mighty city through a mist -

The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,

The poles and spires and tower vapor-kissed,

The fortified port through which the great ships pass,

The tides, the wharfs, the dens I contemplate,

Are sweet like wanton love because I hate.

1920

McKay maintains a strident tone of protest that emanates from the hatred of racial injustice in the following poem:

“Enslaved”

Oh when I think of my long suffering races,
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,
Enslaved and lynched and denied a human place
In the great life line of the Christian West;
And in the black Land disinherited,
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,
For this my race that has no home on earth.
Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry
To the avenging angel to consume
The white man’s world of wonders utterly:
Let it be swallowed up in the earth’s vast womb,
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke
To liberate my people from its yoke!

1921

Currents of anger towards the white race are clearly seen in McKay’s heart that “grows sick with hate” which hardens “as lead,” in its resolve to fight for racial equality in “the white man’s world of wonders”.

McKay: A Socialist in England

In London, McKay truly became a self-declared, well-versed socialist, loyal to the ideology of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel, its founders. This theory sought to put an end to capitalism by re-assigning individual wealth, power, and property to the government in order to create a controlled, evenly distributed, classless and colorless society. Labor, according to Marx, was the greatest obstacle put before the poor and the most detrimental to its progeny. It was also the most divisive tool capitalists used to manipulate them. Socialism attracted blacks in places such as the United States, especially, in Harlem, the center of progressive black culture, thought and radicalism during the first half of the twentieth century. London also became a major center of socialist ideology among the black and brown British subjects who had migrated there for work. In Harlem, McKay maintained friendly relations with many of its most important radical figures. A. Phillip Randolph, was one of them. He was an intellectual, activist, labor organizer, orator, thespian, co-founder and editor of the black radical New York based newspaper, *The Messenger*, also self-titled *A Journal of Scientific Radicalism*. Both McKay and Randolph believed that radicalism was the only way to effect real change for black people. As black radicals, they opposed lynching, demanded the right to vote and condemned Jim Crow laws and other forms of racial discrimination. They also insisted on social equality only attainable through socialism.

In London, McKay remained steadfast in his commitment to racial equality through Socialism. His seminal experience with this ideology, first in Kansas and then in Harlem, convinced him that economic relief, social equality and political stability was attainable for blacks worldwide. McKay worked hard to educate blacks on the virtues of

socialism in London as well. As a member of a peasant community growing up in Jamaica and a staunch advocate for the black working class in Harlem and now, in London, he witnessed the abuse that black laborers endured from white employers who routinely underpaid and exploited them mercilessly, and slave-wages kept blacks in a perennial state of dysfunction, mental, emotional and physical brokenness. Socialism, however, proposed the establishment of fair wages and even pay-scales, for all workers despite race or creed. It would also raise the quality of life for most blacks who lived at or beneath the poverty line. Blacks would no longer be charged twice as much as whites were for rent, utilities and food in disenfranchised neighborhoods. Public utilities such as gas, coal, electricity and transportation would no longer be privately owned. Instead, they would be controlled by the socialist government which would provide these services at a fair set rate for everyone. *The Messenger* echoed this sentiment:

The Negro tenant is between the devil and the deep sea. He has got to pay high rents to the landlords when he stays in their houses and high fares to the moving vans when he is disposed. Negroes suffer more from high rent than any other class of people, because they have been confined to a limited area. (26)

The Socialist Party would circumvent such unethical practices by taxing unused land to its fullest rental property, thus forcing it into use. The landlord would have to either develop the land for housing or sell it to a developer interested in doing so. This, in turn, would drive the cost of renting an apartment down.

Blacks would also benefit from a lower cost of living. In the following quote from *The Messenger*: “The social ownership of the tools which produce the necessities for living is the only solution to the problem of the high cost of living” (78). In addition, profit driven, private owned and run factories, coal mines, mills, meat packing plants, and other vital industries would be owned by the government and cost controlled, thus providing a major relief to the black working class.

Socialism also provided an immediate answer to the race problem, unlike Christianity, according to McKay and many of his cohorts in Harlem and London which only seemed to put a band aid on the problem. The following poem embodies the frustrations of the black radical and his askance view of the black church.

“Too Much Religion” by Walter Werret Hawkins

There is too much time for doctrine
 Too much time for talk and creeds,
 Far too little time for duty,
 And to heal some heart that bleeds,
 Too much Sunday Church religion,
 Too many stale and bookish prayers,
 There is too much talk in heaven,
 Too much talk of golden streets,
 When one can't be sympathetic,
 When a needy neighbor meets,
 Too much talk about the riches,

You expect to get “up there”,
 Where one will not do his duty,
 As a decent Christian here...,

In protest of organized religions such as Christianity, McKay praised Socialism in the poem “To Holy Russia”, published in 1919:

To “Holy” Russia
 Long struggling under the imperial heel,
 Some dared not see the white flame of your star,
 Dimmed by the loathsome shadow of your star.
 But men who clung to sacred dreams could feel
 Some day you would put forth your arm of steel
 And drag the manikins from near and far,
 Before the mighty people’s judgement bar...

1919

Sylvia Pankhurst

No one played a more instrumental role in the development of McKay’s socialist ideals in England than the suffragist, anti-imperialist, anti-fascist and anti-racist, Sylvia Pankhurst. Born in 1882 to Dr. Richard Pankhurst and Emmaline Pankhurst, both were radicals who were members of the Independent Labour Party. Pankhurst, like McKay, had a passion for justice and humanitarianism. As a young woman, she tirelessly worked to advance Women’s Suffrage in England despite the formidable opposition she faced

from men in society at that time. She devoted herself to the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1906. One of her greatest achievements came a decade later in 1914, when she founded her own newspaper, originally entitled *Women's Dreadnought* but subsequently changed the name to *The Worker's Dreadnought*, in 1914.

Pankhurst contributed much to the suffrage movement in England. She firmly believed that a women's right to vote was not only a civil right but a human right. She also believed that a woman deserved equal pay, work conditions, positions and benefits. Like McKay, Pankhurst envisaged the day when women and men would enjoy fair treatment in society regardless of gender. Like McKay, she also opposed defacto and dejure segregation of any sort. Often called a social feminist, she grew increasingly radical over time in order to further her agenda. Interestingly, the same can be said about McKay. Pankhurst once said:

I wanted to rouse these women of the submerged masses to be not only the argument for more fortunate people but to be fighters on their own account despising mere platitudes and catch cries, revolting against the hideous conditions about them,, and demanding for themselves and their families a full share in the benefits of civilization and progress (SP 95).

McKay and Pankhurst were also anti-imperialists at the height of the rule of the British Empire. After the first WW, the British Empire expanded greatly in Africa when much of the German Empire was divided between Britain and France. Pankhurst decried the expansion of the British Empire and its imperial agenda. The belief that the British were naturally endowed with intellectual, moral and cultural authority and superiority

over the rest of the world, and especially over people of color, was the driving force behind British colonialism and imperialism, which enjoyed popular appeal in England at that time due largely to the economic and political benefits the white population received directly or indirectly. Imperialism allowed the British economy to remain robust. Raw goods produced by relatively cheap labor in the colonies enabled British manufacturers, traders and merchants to refine, produce, supply and sell quality goods at premium rates and amass large profits. The overall rise in the quality of life in Great Britain during the 20th century was directly attributed to colonial ties it maintained around the world. In 1890 for example, the literacy rate rose sharply due to the creation of a national educational system which was compulsory and free for all citizens. The birth of the national and popular press also came about at this time. This form of media played an instrumental role in shaping public opinion and promoting imperialism, nationalism and conservatism. The national press also lionized the scholarly writings of men such as Darwin and the literary works of Kipling and Henty, individuals who proudly saluted imperialism.

Pankhurst was on the receiving end of the imperial system in England. Her family, firmly entrenched in the middle class, saw the evils of imperialism and geopolitical, social and economic disparity it caused within the colonized world. While studying art, Pankhurst had the opportunity to travel around England depicting the daily lives of working-class women on canvass. This experience profoundly changed her way of seeing the world and her place in it. It also gave new meaning to her life.

This was also one of the British Empire's most expansive periods. British hegemony and hubris ran high. Radical British subjects such as McKay and dissenters

such as Pankhurst were considered dangerous. The scars of imperialism ran deep in McKay's past. His daily existence was controlled by the Crown which had very little interest in the well-beings of Jamaica or its citizens. This sentiment was expressed in many of his early poetic works. In 1895, imperialist Cecil Rhodes roused the House of Parliament to imperial endeavors in the following speech:

I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches which were just a cry for "bread, bread, bread" and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism.....My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e.. In order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists (SP 99).

Racism and racial superiority was a social ill despised by both Pankhurst and McKay. The idea of an "Imperial Race" was a direct offshoot of 15th Century British history and the Enlightenment Period when the English Navy first took to the seas to conquer foreign lands. Encounters with Africa and the New World became part of this hegemonic narrative predicated on white superiority. Slavery also fueled the popular belief that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and especially to the British and Germans who belonged to the Anglo-Saxon race which, by virtues of an exaggerated

sense of racial supremacy, were more than equipped for “triumph in the struggle for existence on a world scale” (SP 96).

Pankhurst also opposed the specious claims propagandized by British conservatives that the concern in the fall of the British birth rate, the importance of eugenics and other hot button issues related to race and human reproduction were racially unbiased and benign. Fears that the recent decline in the white British birth rate would ultimately jeopardize its imperial hegemony and ability to maintain racial ascendance over its colonial possessions roused conservative lawmakers, government officials and the media influenced mainstream society to vehemently condemn feminist ideology and Pankhurst, one of its major proponents.

Consequently, Pankhurst and McKay seized many opportunities to subvert the imperial and racist agenda of the British Empire in their commitment to socialism and communism. In 1912, Pankhurst visited the U.S. on a speaking tour which included stops at The Indian University of Arkansas and the Negro University in Tennessee. This was an unusual undertaking because the Socialist Party of America had yet to come to terms with the ever growing polemic of race and racism in the labor movement, society and more importantly, within the party itself. *Social Evolution*, published in 1894, by famed white British sociologist and white supremacist Benjamin Kidd disapproved of the Marxist approach to the working class, labor and the poor. Kidd also opposed the elimination of the upper classes and the inclusion of black labor in England. He was not alone, however. Many influential Labor and Socialist party members also rejected the establishment of laws that would provide racial diversity and equality at the workplace. Instead, the general consensus was that blacks were unwanted within the labor movement because

they went against the nationalistic and religious notion of racial and cultural superiority. Pankhurst was also rankled by the racist tendencies of many suffrage movement supporters who were “barnacled with the prejudices of their circle, instinctively hostile to the other classes and races” (SP 97).

The revolutionary phase of the British Labor Movement, which took place from 1910 to 1926, did not condemn racism within the Labour Party stemmed from the fear that white women whose “sex appetites are... being starved” due to the absence of their men away fighting during WWI, would find it “impossible to repress natural desires” thus falling “into the arms of the vigorous Othello’s of Africa” (SP 103). The second reason black labor was rebuffed was the belief that race would undermine the racial integrity of the movement which was predominantly white. In the article “Black Labour” Tom Quelch, sarcastically asks, “What could be wrong with Fifty Thousand jolly coons, looking picturesque in ill-fitting European clothes with scarlet bandanas around their heads, boyishly larking as they toil, shufflin’ along in the approved fashion bringing with them the romance of the wild coming to Britain?” Quelch and the great majority of labor movement workers believed that “the physical and mental characteristics of blacks are different from Europeans. It would be better if they all stayed in their own countries - the races cannot mix”.

McKay also impressed Pankhurst when he criticized leading public figure George Lansbury, the editor of the paper *The Herald*, for not having “enlightened its readers about the real reason why the English considered colored troops undesirable in Europe, instead of appealing to illogical emotional prejudices” (SP 105). Never one to bite his tongue, McKay wrote:

The Communists had seized important plans. The Junkers were opposing the communists. The social democratic government was impotent. The French marched in an army....it was not easy to work up and arouse the notorious moral righteousness of the English in favor of the Germans and the French. Searching for a propaganda issue, the Christian radicals found the colored troops in the Rhineland. Poor black billy goat. (SP 105)

This letter led to his first meeting with Pankhurst who published the letter and offered him a position on the paper as an investigative journalist that wrote from a black perspective. In little time, a great deal of mutual respect, support and admiration flourished between them. McKay applauded the constant “jabbing her hat pin into the hides of smug and slack labor leaders. Her weekly might have called the Dread Wasp. And whenever imperialism got drunk and went wild among the native peoples, the Pankhurst paper would be on the job” (SP 105).

The Workers' Dreadnought

It is also important to mention the vital role *The Workers' Dreadnought* played on the radical politics and literary bent McKay adopted in England. This newspaper was founded in 1914 on radical precepts by suffragettes Mary Patterson, Zelig Emerson and Sylvia Pankhurst. It originally focused on women's suffrage. From 1917 to 1924, it was later renamed to its commonly known name and was adopted as a major pro Communist newspaper. During McKay's short tenure there, he delineated a clear anti-imperial and anti-capitalistic agenda that would take him east to Russia: the mecca of Communism. This periodical took particular interest in McKay's first-hand insight on the race question

and the participation of blacks in radicalism and, especially, those living in the United States, largely in part due to the cultural, political and racial influence of the Harlem Renaissance.

By 1919, McKay's reputation as a radical black proletarian/poet had piqued Pankhurst's interest. His unique blend of social radicalism and literary talent lent credence to her article "Stabbing of Negro in the Dock Area," by Pankhurst which indicted the angry white, penurious men who launched vicious attacks on black migrants for having sustained sexual relationships with white women who were in many instances, prostitutes in various British port towns such as Glasgow, Liverpool and Cardiff. These angry individuals resented the presence of McKay and British subjects of color like him who had migrated there with every intention of becoming part of the national cultural fabric. Pankhurst, like McKay, sought to bridge the chasm of race that existed between the white working-class men and migrant men of color in England with a labor- rights platform which required members of both races to join forces against capitalism, the system under which both groups were suppressed.

McKay also appreciated Pankhurst's support of his attack on the sexual politics of England in order to stoke the instilled hatred and fear whites had of blacks there. Despite the high levels of illegal prostitution, drunken debauchery and domestic violence committed against white women in England by white men, the conservative and mainstream media devoted unparalleled attention to the deviant, lewd, corrupted sexual behavior of a handful of lascivious black and brown immigrants. In the April 10, 1920 edition of *The Daily Herald*, a socialist paper run by George Lansbury, for example, ran relentless smear campaigns to destroy the image of black men in England and in Europe

after WWI in headlines such as: “Black Scourge, Black Peril on the Rhine” and “Sexual Horrors Let Loose by France.” McKay responded to these attacks in a series of articles; one was entitled “The Yellow Peril and the Dockers,” which dispels the deeply entrenched myth that Asians, Arabs and especially blacks are sexually deviant, and thus, a threat to the national safety of the civilized nations of Western Europe. His defense of men of color ends with the following words:

The dockers, instead of being unduly concerned about the presence of colored men, who like themselves are victims of capitalism and civilisation, should turn their attention to the huge stores of wealth along the water front. The country’s riches are not in the West End, in the palatial homes of the suburbs; they are stored in the East end, and the jobless should lead the attack on the bastilles, the bonded warehouses along the docks to solve the question of employment .(SP 23)

With experience under his belt as a field reporter in England, McKay went on to cover polarizing topics such as Socialism, Communism and Russia in his subsequent assignments for the paper. While on the beat, McKay educated himself on the philosophy of Karl Marx who believed that the cause of nearly all human suffering, marginalization and destruction was directly related to the inequalities of labor. Socialism, the ideology that relinquishes more control and power to the government and less to the individual so that a more egalitarian society is achieved resonated greatly with McKay. In Great Britain, Socialism had a special significance because of the transitional period it was going through. The industrialization of Great Britain, and the creation of trade unions and parliamentary parties such as the Labour Party founded in 1893 had an empowering

effect on worker militancy. The fact that socialists such as Pankhurst advocated on behalf of the disempowered in England regardless of race gave way to similar ideological offshoots such as Pan-Africanism, and the significance of Diaspora which will be explored later in this investigation. “The Negro Problem,” according to McKay, would only be solved through socialism. *The Messenger*, a black, radical, far-left, militant paper echoed this sentiment as well in the following words, “Can England make a motion in the Parliament world for order who has held her heel of oppression upon the necks of Ireland for over 800 years and whose hand is red and reeking with blood of India and other developed peoples. As for the Negro, neither property, life, liberty nor the pursuit of happiness, which by the way is only possible by possession of the former is secure in the Southern section of these United States” (Feb, 20 1919).

Like *The Messenger*, *The Workers’ Dreadnought* also railed against the high cost of living disproportionately imposed on the working class, immigrants and people of color who were routinely charged more for rent, food, amenities while being paid less and exploited more at the work place. McKay drew many parallels between these issues and other issues that affected the marginalized on both sides of the Atlantic: deprivation of human and civil rights, unfair tax laws and the importance of political allegiances with Socialism and Communism.

In an attempt to put an end to the string of incendiary articles printed about Negro soldiers in Europe, McKay wrote a letter to George Lansbury, the editor of the *Daily Herald*, informing him that his articles would foment additional racial animosity towards blacks. Unmoved by McKay’s concerns, Lansbury maintained that he was not a racist and the articles stood.

Lansbury's callous disregard to the growing anti-black sentiment within the British press contributed to McKay's growing disdain for mainstream British society and its overtly biased preference for whites in all spectrums of society. Upon a friend's encouragement, McKay sent the letter he had written to Lansbury to Sylvia Pankhurst with the hopes that she would take interest in the subject and she did. The following words written by McKay precipitated a swift response and an offer to work at *The Workers' Dreadnought*: "It is necessary to face the fact that prejudices, however unreasonable they may be, are real-individual, national and racial prejudices. My experience of the English convinced me that prejudice against Negroes had almost become congenial with them" (ALWFH 76).

Sylvia Pankhurst also put McKay to work on local and international stories related to the subjugation and marginalization of the working classes and black and brown people under British rule. In addition to his gratifying position as an investigative journalist, McKay also was able to make further inroads in extreme radicalism through close association with connections to European radical, leftist thinkers and supporters. The optics of this new phase of McKay's life convinced him that "The world was in the beginning of passing through a great social change," (*A Black Poets Struggle for Identity* 43).

The New Negro and Pan-Africanism in London

While McKay uncovered stories of shameful discrimination, hate and cruelty in hiring practices, work conditions and insufficient wages with a keen eye for the *Workers' Dreadnought*, he created even stronger ties to the small black, migrant community of

which he now belonged. The club for colored men, located on Drury Lane in London, represented a point of convergence and departure for these men who fraternized and strategized their advancement in England. For McKay, the fundamentals of Pan-Africanism had clearly permeated his literary, political and socioeconomic viewpoints. Five years of harsh bigotry in the United States followed by similar treatment in England convinced McKay that the axiom, "There is Strength in Numbers" was a truism of survival in the West. As a Pan-Africanist in England, he provoked change within labor laws, fought for equal rights for people of color and promoted socialism in his stint as a journalist for *The Workers Dreadnought*.

As a New Negro, McKay saw the importance and utility of embracing racial pride over nationalism and the racist milieu of London provided a rich opportunity for members of his race to do just that. As members of the Diaspora arrived in England, they were welcomed into the Pan-African community of African or African descendant people whose ethnic, nationalistic, cultural and linguistic differences took a back seat to their racial bond. McKay provided these men with leading black newspapers from the United States such as *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, *The Negro World*, *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Chicago Defender*, assisted them in miscellaneous matters related to their new lives in England, and kept them abreast on the struggle and progress being made in civil and human rights with regards to the black race in the Harlem Renaissance Movement in the United States and other black unity movements such as the Negritude Movement in the Francophone Caribbean, for example. Reading these publications fortified racial, social and emotional ties to blackness and created a strong sense of belonging and unity, similar to that of a close-knit family. These methodic, well calculated gambits increased the

number of Pan African loyalists and, hence, advanced the movement in England and much of Western Europe for that matter.

The November 1926 edition of *Opportunity*, a newspaper edited by W.E.B. DuBois, the tenuous issue of West Indian-American Relations was taken up in the symposium section of the paper where readers voiced their opinion on matters such as Pan-Africanism. Eugene Kenckle Jones, a reader wrote:

The Negro American and the West Indian Negro are of one blood. They are similarly disadvantaged being weaker minority groups, parts of empires controlled by Europeans who are out of sympathy with or indifferent to the progress of the darker races....Each group has much to contribute one to the other and there should be no points of difference or feeling other than sympathy between them.

Meanwhile, back in London, Pan-Africanism better equipped blacks to endure the onus of discrimination, marginalization, racism, economic hardship and even violence in England.

Although the presence of blacks in Britain predates McKay and his sojourn, a change in racial climate took place after WWI due to the beginning of the fall of the British Empire, the weak economy and the internal political and social strife at home. The British Empire, weakened after WWI, suddenly found itself under attack from growing anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-fascist movements. Social unrest in direct protest to the abusive system of colonialism started to take root in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa

which, in turn, created a greater demand for economic and political autonomy and slowly began to erode what had been a relatively uninterrupted colonial rule.

Protest Poetry in England

Despite an extremely busy schedule, McKay found the time to decry Mother England, the Crown and its citizens. His keen awareness of the injustice black and brown individuals such as himself faced there was directly related to the social, political and racial climate that persisted there.

“Song of the New Soldier and Worker”

We are tired, tired, tired - we are work-weary and war-weary;

What though the skies are soft blue and the birds still sing

And the balmy air of day is like wine? Life is dreary

And the whole wide world is sick of suffering.

We are weary, weary, sad and tired and no longer

Will we go on as before, glad to be the willing tools

Of the hard and heartless few, the favoured and the stronger,

Who have the strength to crush and kill...

920

In this poem, the sentiment of the New Negro comes into full view. McKay embodies the New Negro in this poem which is redolent of the effervescent songs sung in the fields by slaves in the American South and in the Caribbean. Like Anancy, the protagonist of hope and strength in Jamaican culture, the poem speaks on behalf of the

New Negro movement. The tone is urgent and mature, not callow and reactionary. It is intended to rouse fellow black men and to inform whites. McKay places much emphasis on the unequal work conditions that existed between blacks and whites, the hostility black workers experienced while working alongside white workers and the general milieu of labor exploitation that the English government and mainstream society sanctioned.

In the first stanza McKay describes the dismal state of black labor and laborers as “tired, tired, tired....work weary and war-weary.” This admission is followed by the characteristic juxtaposition of hope in the beauty of nature which is free for all to enjoy while the second line diverts the reader’s attention from the labor to the idyllic soft blue skies, singing birds and balmy air and wine, all found in or made up of natural elements.

The second builds in crescendo with “We are weary, weary, weary, sad and tired.” Clear resolve to fight injustice is evinced in the next line which declares a refusal to “go on as before, glad to be willing tools.”

The third and longest, most powerful stanza informs both conservative blacks who oppose the position of the New Negro and both liberal and conservative whites, whom McKay has misgivings that he and fellow New Negroes “will calmly fold our arms sore from labouring, and achingPull the thing to pieces!to wreck it all and smash with power” so that their “children yet unborn may live!”

“Re-Affirmation”

I am downhearted not, although it seems

The new birth is abortive in the West,

And men are turning from long-cherished dreams

Of world-wide freedom to ignoble rest
 I am discouraged not, although the foe-
 Shameless, like boars disporting in the mud...

1920

The title of this poem is very fitting. The reaffirmation of self-determination amidst the seemingly perennial hate, repression and strife is peppered with dogged resolve to forge ahead. Of the five stanzas, the opening sentences of the first three bear close similarity. McKay's first person avowal states "I am not downhearted not...I am discouraged not... I am despairing not....," set the bellicose tone of protest assumed by the poet who affirms a new day of equality and justice for the black man is "abortive in the West."

In the second stanza, McKay equates white racist males to "boars disporting in the mud." Such imagery reduces haughtiness to filth and repugnance.

The third stanza takes aim at the black elite and black intelligentsia who at every turn thwart the radical agenda of the New Negro. These individuals are "shameless...hard pressed and weak....fools and fops and knaves." They also make his heart "feel sick" but not "downcast" as he clearly affirms in the last line of the third stanza.

Then, the fifth and last stanza posits childbirth as a symbol of prescient change in: "The babe burst from the mother's womb in pain" and "The night is darkest just before the dawn." And finally, the poet closes with the consummate reaffirmation of "I will keep on."

“The Dominant White”

God gave you power to build and help lift;
 But you proved prone to persecute and slay
 And from the high and noble course to drift
 Into the darkness from the light of day.
 He gave you awe and order, strength of will
 The lesser peoples of the world to lead;
 You chose to break and crush them through life’s mill
 But for your earthly gains to make them bleed
 Because you’ve proved unworthy of your trust,
 God-he shall humble you down to the dust...

1919

McKay indicts the machinations of the white man in this lyric and descriptive poem divided into four stanzas of ten lines each. The use of prosody, or more simply stated, the rhythm, stress and intonation of this poem paired with incisive accusations akin to what one comes to associate with a court trial commences with “God gave you power....But you proved prone to persecute and slay.” He continues, “He gave you law and order, strength of will....you chose to break and crush them through life’s mill.” Such actions will not go unnoticed because “You’ve proved unworthy of your trust, God he shall humble you down to the dust.” This accusatory litany is directed at white patriarchy.

Rhyme patterns are also present throughout the poem. The last words of every other sentence, or almost every other sentence, also known as Ababa pattern create a sonorous flow of artful emotion, depth and cohesion. The sixth and the eighth line of the first stanza, for example, contain the end rhyme, “The lesser peoples of the world to lead” purls into “But for your earthly gains to make them bleed,” and so on.

To conclude, McKay employs repetition to strengthen the condemnation of the white man which is both a denotative representation of the oppressor and, more importantly, a connotative representation of the power structure of the West, in the last line of the poem which assures that “OH, he shall humble you!- down to the dust.”

“Battle”

If such should be my fate, I pray it will

Come to me sudden - swift, a keen sword dart,

Sent deeply through my burning breast to still

The rhythmic beat of my rebellious heart.

So, I should have the grand end come to me,

While following the only way of duty

And questing for the soul of truth and beauty!

I'd go convinced that there could never be

A fairer life for truth or beauty's flower,

While earth is ruled by man's imperial power.

1920

This protest poem recounts the dream that forebodes the death of Claude McKay. Written in narrative form, it resembles the iconic sonnet "If We Must Die," in its resolve and passion. In the opening line, "Last night I dreamed in deadly strife," McKay applauds the commendable act of laying down one's life for an honorable cause. He also deems it the ultimate form of resistance. In the line, "Where privileged power rules with ruthless might," McKay recalls, "I saw my body, a corpse still breathing life" and "Trampled and mangled, a bloody blackened sight.... such should be my fate, I pray it will," is similar in sentiment to "If we must die, Oh, let us nobly die.... So that our blood won't be shed in vain" from the poem, "If We Must Die," written a year prior to this poem which undoubtedly was written to redouble the steely resolve of the New Negro agenda.

Chapter 4: Harlem Shadows - McKay's Second Sojourn

McKay's brief return to Harlem reinvigorated his fighting spirit and decision to press onward to communist Russia. McKay left London and returned to Harlem in 1921 in order to find the financial backing to go to Russia, the mecca of the Bolshevik Movement, under the Russian leader, politician and theorist, Vladimir Lenin who led the Bolsheviks, a conservative faction of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. By the end of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Bolsheviks had gained total control of the Communist Party. McKay, Pankhurst and fellow socialists held the communist movement in Russia in high regard. They remained abreast on the latest news and events that took place there and, like most Marxists, hoped to visit. McKay supported the Communist Party in Russia because racial and labor equality for blacks seemed attainable.

McKay embraced the communist approach to black labor. Upon his return to Harlem, he saw little to no improvement in the state of black labor nor in the economic development of the black community overall in the United States. Conservative black leadership organizations such as the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and liberal white organizations such as the Socialist Party played complicit roles in maintaining the status quo as far as he was concerned. Both failed to take the necessary steps to make significant inroads in the advancement of labor rights for blacks. This harsh reality kept blacks in a perennial state of unemployment, under-employment and ultimately enabled both black and white groups to manipulate and exploit blacks regularly.

The Russian Communist Party, however, expressed an interest in the plight of the black worker and lent support to its cause. Leninism, the Russian interpretation of Marxism, was predicated on the defense of the proletariat or the working class. Vladimir Ilyrich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, the Russian communist revolutionary, political theorist, and primary leader of the Republic of Russia from 1917-1922 and the leader of the Soviet Union from 1922-1924, appropriated the famous Marxist rally cry “workers of the world unite!” for the communist movement. McKay, a radical and an increasingly growing supporter and admirer of communism, favored the Party’s willingness to include black workers in labor unions which protected the conditions, pay and rights of all workers regardless of race. The Russian Communist Party also recognized the potential support black workers could lend to the defeat of capitalism and the expansion of communism in the United States, its nemesis. Lastly, Communism sought to establish unbreakable labor, social and political bonds between members internationally despite color, creed, ethnicity or gender.

With labor and racial equality on his mind, McKay compiled *Harlem Shadows* in 1922, a collection of poems that reflected his musings on race, class, life, love, city life, Harlem, and, in great number, decried the exploitation of black workers. The following poem embodies such sentiment.

“America”

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness

And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,

Stealing my breath of life, I will confess

I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!

Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,

Giving me strength erect against her hate.

Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.

Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,

I stand within her walls with not a shred

Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.

Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,

And see her might and granite wonders there,

Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,

Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

1921

In "America," McKay's describes the love/hate dichotomy he feels for a nation that overtly polarizes race and class. Nevertheless, a scintilla of hope shines through his polarized emotions of love, hate, admiration and scorn he is forced to relive daily due to the stark racism, discrimination and disenfranchisement blacks experienced in the United States at that time there. McKay uses metaphors to liken America to a "tiger's tooth," and "bread of bitterness" that steals his "breath of life," on one hand, yet praises its enormity, development and allure which "sweeps his being like a flood," "flows like tides into my blood," and awakens his desire to "see her might and granite wonders" as a black man, poet and intellect.

In the following narrative poem, McKay rejects the inferior role of blacks in the world of labor and the menial positions of waiters, cooks, domestics they typically occupy.

“ALFONSO, DRESSING TO WAIT AT TABLE”

Alfonso is a handsome bronze-hued lad

Of subtly changing and unsurprising parts:

His moods are storms that frighten and make glad,

His eyes were made to capture women’s hearts.

Down in the glory-hole Alfonso sings

An olden song of wine and clinking glasses

And riotous takes; magnificently flings

Gay kisses to imaginary lasses.

Alfonso’s voice of mellow music thrills

Our swaying forms and steals our hearts with joy;

And when he soars, his falsetto trills

Are rarest notes of gold without alloy.

But, O Alfonso! Wherefore do you sing?

Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient places?

Soon we shall be beset by clamoring

Of hungry and importunate palefaces.

1920

In this poem, Alfonso, a young “handsome brown-hued lad” whose eyes “were made to capture women’s hearts” can never aspire to occupy a position in management in the back of the house where all of the major decisions are made, nor as a host in the front of the house due to the color of his skin. Instead, he is relegated to toil in the kitchen, storage rooms and wash rooms where his comely appearance and gifted voice of “magnificent flings...mellow music thrills...” and “fine falsetto trills” fall on deaf ears until, of course, it is time to serve the “clamoring of hungry and importunate guests arrive.”

Alfonso, the main character in this poem resembles McKay who, like the young lad, worked in the service industry as a Pullman car porter to make ends meet in the racially hostile city of New York.

“Harlem Shadows”

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
 In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
 Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who
 To bend and barter at desire’s call.
 Ah, little dark who in slippered feet
 Go prowling through the night from street to
 Street!
 Through the long night until the silver break
 Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
 Through the lone night until the last snow flake

Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
 The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
 Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.
 Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
 Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
 Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
 The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
 Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet to street.
 In Harlem wandering from street to street.

1918

This poem reminds the reader that disenfranchisement begets deferred dreams and often creates social ills such as prostitution in Harlem. McKay makes light of this sad reality with the hopes of finding a solution to this problem within the black community and, subsequently, creating an honest dialogue between blacks and whites on issues such as equality and morality. Unlike many of McKay's protest poems, "Harlem Shadows" harbors no anger. Nor is it accusatory. Whites are not necessarily the nemesis in this poem, the broken system is. The use of imagery referring to the color line is clearly visible in McKay's election of vocabulary terms and words such as "little dark girls," "the night," "dusky" and "brown feet" patronized by the white men who alight upon Harlem like "the last snowflake" that "has dropped from heaven... upon the earth's white breast."

Throughout the four stanzas, an aback rhyme scheme is present. McKay inserts himself into the poem as the helpless bystander who would like to help but cannot. These young girls whose “slipperd feet” “bend and barter at desires call” and “go prowling through the night from street to street!” are microcosm of black labor which must “bend” to the rigid parameters, work conditions and demands of white employers.

In the next poem, McKay releases his anger in a poem directed at the racist ways of whites.

“The White City”

I will not toy with it nor bed an inch.

Deep in the secret chambers of my heart

I muse my life long hate, and without flinch

I bear it nobly as I live my part.

My being would be a skeleton, a sell,

If this dark passion that fills my every mood,

And makes my heaven in the white world’s hell,

Did not forever feed me vital blood.

I see the mighty city through a mist -

The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,

The poles and spires and towers vapor-kissed,

The fortified port through which the great ships pass,

The tides, the wharfs, the dens I contemplate,

And sweet like wonton loves because I hate.

1921

This angry sonnet encompasses the brio of the New Negro in verse form. It also marks his maturity as a “fellow traveler” (a term used to describe those who sympathized and/or practiced communism), who has now experienced life in the Caribbean, the United States and, very importantly, England, the home and the heart of the British Empire. In “The White City,” he depicts an anonymous, large city thought to be New York or London. McKay deliberately leaves the name of the city out of the poem in order to show the commonality of black repression worldwide.

The first line, “I will not toy or bend an inch,” cuts like a knife. He unapologetically and nobly bears his “life-long hate” of injustice.

The Liberator

In addition to poetry, McKay used his return to *The Liberator* newspaper as a platform for the advancement of his views. During his second tenure, McKay served as executive editor of *The Liberator* along with Mike Gold, the pen name for Jewish writer, editor, novelist and communist Itzok Granich. Together they comprised the radical voice of the paper. Gold, a celebrated proletarian-literature writer, was a card-carrying communist who promoted this literary sub-genre in *The Liberator* and later in *The Masses*, both run by Max Eastman, McKay’s cohort. With McKay and Gold at the helm of the periodical, *The Liberator* spoke out against the growing backlash certain immigrant and ethnic groups faced after World War I in the United States. In 1916, President Wilson warned against the dangers of the “hyphenated Americans,” such as

Blacks, Jews, Irish and Germans who, due to their religious, political, socio economic and/or racial characteristics were considered suspicious.

McKay benefitted greatly from his partnership with *The Liberator*. During the six months that McKay and Gold worked together, he published ten poems, five essays and one short story. It also was the place where he wrote seventy-three of his *Harlem Shadow* collection of poems. Such contributions helped *The Liberator* become one of the premiere white liberal papers of the day. In fact, it was arguably the most intrepid of its kind. Few liberal organs placed as much emphasis on the plight of blacks and racial inequality as *The Liberator* did.

Over time however, fundamental differences between McKay and Gold undermined their partnership. Gold took a personal and an extremely passionate interest in the relationship between labor and the proletariat. The “average joe,” also commonly known as the white blue collar male worker, became Gold’s journalistic fixation and major contribution to the paper which had a readership that was roughly ninety- percent white. McKay, on the other hand, placed the greater share of his efforts on the race question and the indictment of racial inequality. (*Claude McKay: A Black Poet’s Struggle for Identity* 58)

McKay’s glaring penchant for the concerns of the black community widened the chasm of ideological difference between the two editors and ultimately compromised the integrity of the paper. McKay eventually resigned, leaving Gold to run the paper which Eastman recalled, “was not an easy choice and the result was fatal, but a choice made entirely upon the intrinsic fitness for the particular job” (*CM: ABPSFI* 59). McKay also

clashed with Eastman on the direction of the paper who felt that the majority of “whites full of peculiar ignorance and intolerance of the Negro” (*CM: ABPSFI 59*) would lose readership if the race question occupied more space in the paper. This decision cast aspersions on Eastman’s convictions and true commitment to racial equality and class consciousness as far as McKay was concerned.

Critically Acclaimed *Liberator* Articles

In 1921, McKay wrote “How Black Sees Green and Red” for *The Liberator*. This article drew similarities between the racial oppression experienced by blacks throughout the colonized world especially and the struggle for Irish independence from England. Both blacks and the Irish were victims of colonialism and imperialism. McKay backed efforts made by Irish radical groups such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret organization that fought for Irish independence from England from 1858 to 1924. He also attributed to the success of the inner workings and leadership of the African Blood Brotherhood, a radical civil rights group - of which he was an active member - founded by fellow socialist and West Indian native Cyril Briggs, in New York. Briggs, like McKay, believed that both ethnic groups remained on the margins due to their inextricably colonial ties to the British Empire. Unlike blacks however, the Irish did not suffer from the stigma of race but rather, nationality, which, ethnically speaking, put them on the lowest rung of British hierarchy and relegated them to similar social standings as blacks in the United States at that time.

In May of 1922, McKay’s article “He Who Gets Slapped” appeared in *The Liberator*. It recounted his dehumanizing and embarrassing night out on the Great White

Way with white colleague and *The Liberator* artist William Gropper. McKay recalled that he in fact was “The One Who Gets Slapped” after he was sat in the balcony despite the orchestra tickets he and a white friend had purchased because he was black (*ALWFH* 144-145).

McKay takes the White establishment and the firmly fixed unequal racial norms of the so-called “liberal” North to task. In the beginning of the article, McKay confidently - or boldly to some - makes his way to the orchestra seats where journalists and other members of the press customarily sit to review a show only to be reminded that his color does not allow him to sit there. As a New Negro, McKay is angered, offended and determined to push back through the use of literary, political and labor media. Throughout this article, McKay attempts to appeal to the humanity that lies within the civilized radical who believes in truth, justice and freedom for all. His hapless experience in the Fulton Theater further encapsulates the dismal state of race relations in America and the dire need for change within the white radical agenda which continually glossed over the race question for decades, although

...they assure themselves and their friends that they are irreconcilable enemies of the existing order, with all its frightful injustices. They are ready to faint when they hear that white children are compelled to work long hours in factories and on farms, and write lengthy articles, editorials, and letters of protest against repression in Ireland and against the introduction of African "savages" into "civilized" Germany. But their radicalism in many cases doesn't extend to colored peoples. This to a large extent to opportunistic elements inside various radical movements. Every

time they have to defend American Negroes, they usually do it with far from the same ardor as when they are up in arms against injustice with respect to members of their own race. (*The Negroes in America* 39)

In *The Negroes in America*, McKay included a wealthy white woman's account of the lynching of a black man accused of dubious rape and murder charges in Texas in 1922, who, as she wrote

... was hanged on January 6, 1922, in the county jail of Bexar County, at San Antonio, Texas, protesting his innocence with his dying breath. Denying firmly that he had not committed the crime of which he was accused -that blackest crime known to a southern people- the crime of raping a white woman. He was nineteen years old, and until the last, strong in his faith that right must prove triumphant; happy in his belief that God would protect the smallest of his children; sure that Justice was not blind. (*TNIA* 84)

McKay took special interest in this article due to the author's candor and eye witness account despite being a member of the "wealthy class Brought up in the spirit of southern traditions" (*TNIA* 83). From the beginning, the initial investigation of the whereabouts of black nineteen-year-old George McKinley Grace Jr, accused of rape, revealed that he had come home from Mr. and Mrs. Katy's yard where he was employed as a gardener and handyman before 11p.m. and went straight to bed, according to his sister who recalled that she and her mother went to bed at 1a.m. His sister also claimed that it would have been nearly impossible to leave the house at night without her or her

mother's knowledge of it. His extremely passive and timid demeanor around women also made the accusation harder to fathom for blacks and many whites such as the author herself, to believe. In addition, Grant Howard, the editor of the racially biased newspaper, *The San Antonio Express* stated that "the character of Negroes, Mexicans and poor white trash count for nothing" (TNIA 86) and, thus, cast aspersions on the objectivity of whites who had the power to decide the fates of blacks accused of crimes they may have not committed.

The forensic investigation failed to prove that Grace raped Mrs. Katy as well. First, Grace's finger prints did not match those lifted from the crime scene. Second, no traces of his nor Mrs. Katy's bodily fluids were found at the crime scene, save the three drops of blood found on Grace's underpants which most likely came from a cut finger he sustained earlier that day while working in the yard. Third, Mrs. Katy's initial declaration that Grace was the perpetrator was subsequently retracted upon further interrogation after she admitted that she could not identify the rapist because the room was completely dark. Fourth, Grace unknowingly signed a letter of confession of the crime written by the investigative team which assured him that the letter was written in his defense. Fifth, six jurors disbelieved the victim's account during the trial but "thought that the boy was there with her consent, and that it was better to hang him" (TNIA 87), and the sheriff's disbelief "that the Negro is guilty" all pointed to the unfair investigation, trial and hanging of Grace.

Such stories underscored the inequalities of race in the United States, the purported "Land of the Free."

Gay New Negroes

By 1922, the Harlem Renaissance, still a predominantly black heterosexual male display of culture, pride and performance started to show noteworthy signs of inclusion with regards to sexual orientation. Alain Locke, the famed gay black scholar, professor, historian, writer, philosopher and influential member of the black intelligentsia and friend of McKay published *The New Negro*, a compilation of short stories, poetry and other forms of prose written by black writers. Locke's sexuality comes as no surprise to the celebrated Harvard scholar and professor, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, who affirmed that the Harlem Renaissance "was as gay as it was black" (*Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* 2). Locke used his scholarship, clout in black academia and access to the black press to further the literary careers of New Negroes such as Claude McKay, Richard Bruce Nugent, and especially Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

Open declaration of one's homosexuality was rare and in most cases detrimental to the reputation of the individual during the Harlem Renaissance due to the formidable conservative currents of mainstream society. Knowing this, McKay never placed a label on his fluid sexuality replete with heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual relationships and encounters. Conversely, the closet became a unique space that allowed these individuals to grow intellectually, develop writing skills and purport their heterosexuality while discretely living alternative lifestyles behind closed doors. The closet also provided a respite for gay-or bi artists interested in meeting one another, networking with other gay or gay friendly members of the press, accessing the publishing world and wooing high society patrons without the fear of exposure.

According to Locke, Harlem was the black metropolis of the world that drew “the African, the West Indian, The Negro American...The Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast” (*GVOTHR* 8). And it is within this context that a newfangled interest in black life, black entertainment and black sexuality came about. Whites, intrigued by notions of black “primitivism” or highly charged sexual, emotional and tribal-like instincts often discretely travelled to Harlem in search of debauchery, jazz and sexual encounters with individuals of the opposite or the same sex. In short, Harlem acquired monikers such as “the City that never sleeps...A Strange, Exotic Island in the Heart of New York! Rent parties!...Sweetbacks!....Hincty Wenched! Numbers runners! Chippies! Jazz Love! Primitive Passion! (*GVOTHR*, 8). White pleasure seekers sought “Brown and Black Bodies - the color seemed lustier than white - full lips that quickened the flesh to move....” (*GVOTHR* 8).

They also sought the anonymity that speakeasies, buffet flats, cabarets and clubs of Harlem provided white visitors who were especially welcomed due to the large amounts of money they spent at these establishments. In addition, anti-vice operations carried out by the police were less stringent in Harlem which enabled it to become a hotbed for illicit activity and a place the white mainstream generally avoided. McKay, on the contrary, embraced the underbelly of Harlem and was unabashedly supportive of it. He believed that the culture of working-class blacks and the rollicking, often seedy, nightlife they patronized in Harlem was an important part of black identity, the Harlem Renaissance and The Gay Harlem Renaissance as well. Among the many explanations

proffered by scholars as to why gay tolerance levels seemed to be higher in Harlem, the most plausible one alludes to the dearth of neighborhoods which blacks - and especially working-class blacks - were able to live in due to defacto segregation in housing throughout the city. Harlemites, sensitive to the pain of discrimination and marginalization were also typically less disposed to reject members of their own race on the basis of their sexuality. Another reason points to the interdependence that was created within the community due to racism. Black businesses such as beauty parlors and restaurants depended almost solely on the patronage of blacks. Therefore, both homosexual and heterosexual clientele were customarily welcomed within most black establishments.

Schwartz, author of *Gay Voices of Harlem* wrote:

to some extent, male same sex interested Renaissance artists enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than other Harlemites who desired members of the same sex. They could partake in all the aspects of the Harlem's gay world - the lower class world with the speakeasies and buffet flats, the bohemian parties and studio meetings - and had their own networks offering protection, intimacy and support. (23)

McKay never embraced the label gay, Harlem Renaissance poet or even African American. These titles were for those who yearned to be part of a group. McKay did not. A clear example of this is when McKay pushes the firmly fixed limitations of sexuality, class and race when he unexpectedly meets and befriends Mike, a young, white, street hustler who hung around parks and robbed people - presumably men in public bathrooms,

spaces notorious for male prostitution and sexual encounters between men- brings him to the apartment he shares with his friend Manda without major reservations or concerns that such temerity would arouse suspicion regarding his sexuality. McKay and Mike share a friendly and, very possibly, a sexual relationship for the duration of his sojourn in Harlem.

Homo-Erotic Poetry

Well before McKay immigrated to the United States in 1912, his literary production had already showed signs that he was either gay or bisexual. The following poems “To Bennie,” and “Consolation,” also contain homo-erotic vestiges of a discrete homosexual relationship.

“To Bennie”

(In Answer to a Letter)

You say, dearest comrade, my love has grown cold,

But you are mistaken, it burns as of old;

And no power below, dearest lad, nor above,

Can ever lessen, frien’ Bennie, my love.

...Dearly I love you, shall love you forever;

Moment by moment my thoughts are of you,

Trust me, oh, trust me, for aye to be true.

1912

This poem also informs the reader of McKay's sexuality long before he immigrated to the United States.

“Consolation”

I took my marnin' bat' alone,

An wept for Bennie dat was gone;

An' after, -sittin', weepin' long,-

Someone came askin' what be'n' wrong...

...Restin a hand upon my knee;

De lantern old was burnin' dim,

But bright' nough for me to see him:-

One searchin' look into his face,

I gave him in my heart a place.

I never knew a nicer mind,

He was so pleasant and so kind;

An' uh the sweetness of his voice

That made my lonely heart rejoice.

It all comes back so vividly,-

The comfort that he brought to me;

The ray of hope the, the pure joy

He gave a poor forsaken boy; ...

1912

Caribbean Radicalism in New York Revisited

As stated in Chapter Two, Caribbean migrants played an important role in socialist and Black Nationalist organizations in New York. During McKay's brief return to Harlem, Caribbeans such as Hubert Harrison, Cyril Briggs, A. Phillip Randolph, W.A. Domingo and Marcus Garvey became key champions of black radicalism in white America. McKay described Harrison as a man who "lectured on free-thought, socialism and radicalism, and sold books. He spoke precisely and clearly, with fine intelligence and masses of facts. He was very black, compact of figure, and his head resembled an African replica of Socrates" (*ALWFH* 41).

Hubert Harrison, orator and lecturer played a pioneering role in New Negro radicalism and its influence on a new generation of black intellectuals and politicians in Harlem which provided the terrain on which McKay and Harrison would build a mutually supportive friendship over time. Born in St Croix in 1833 to a land-owning father but orphaned upon his death as a child, Harrison migrated to New York at the age of seventeen, in 1900, where he excelled in academics and graduated at the top of his high-school class and eventually became a charismatic street-corner orator in Harlem and downtown where he frequently lectured bystanders on his studies of African, African-American history, literature, natural sciences and social sciences and, later, socialism after the Socialist Party of America recruited and utilized his talents to diffuse information about the Party in order to increase black membership. During this time, both McKay and Harrison put full confidence in the Party and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and its egalitarian vision. Like McKay, Harrison believed that democracy driven by capitalism was inherently antithetical to the advancement of blacks in the United

States. Like McKay, Harrison believed that race trumped class and took a special interest in the black working class. In 1917, Harrison wrote the essay “The New Politics for the New Negro,” which delineated that

Any man who aspires to lead the Negro race must set squarely before his face the idea of race first. Just as the white men of these and other lands are white men before they are Christians, Anglo-Saxons or Republicans; so are the Negroes of this and other lands intent upon being Negroes before they are Christians, Englishmen, or Republicans. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Charity begins at home, and our duty is to ourselves. It is not what we wish, but what we must, that we are concerned with. The world as it ought to be, is still for us, as for others, the world that does not exist. The world as it is, is the real world, and it is to that real world that we address ourselves. Striving to be men, and finding no effective aid in politics, the Negro of the Western world must follow the path of the Swadesh[i] movement of India and the Sein Finn movement of Ireland. The meaning of both these terms is ...ourselves first. (*HATBOE* 12)

Upon his return from England in 1921, McKay joined the African Blood Brotherhood, a radical black organization primarily led by fellow West Indian immigrant Cyril Briggs, also known as “The Father of Radicalism.” Together, Briggs and McKay fervently espoused Marxism and, increasingly, black Bolshevism, under the aegis of the Communist Party of the United States of America. Briggs also founded the newspaper *The Crusader*, another radical organ that promoted Brigg’s agenda. That same year,

“black reds” such as Briggs, W.A. Domingo, Grace Campbell, Hubert Harrison and others met at *The Liberator* on at least two occasions to discuss pertinent issues. In addition, McKay wrote “*Every Negro*” for *The Crusader* in support of Bolshevism with firm conviction that whoever

lays claim to leadership should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the colored masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today that can easily be put into practice by the proletariat to better its material and spiritual life. Bolshevism (as Mr. Domingo ably points out in the current *Messenger*) has made Russia safe for the Jew. It has liberated the Slav peasant from priest to bureaucrat who can no longer egg him on to murder Jews to bolster up their rotten institutions. It might make these United States safe for the Negro. When the cracker slave frees his mind of the nightmare of race equality, when he finds out that his parasite politicians have been fooling him for years, when he takes back the soil from his Bourbon exploiters and is willing to till it alongside of the Negro and tries to forget that he is a “nigger,” while the latter ceases to think of him in terms of poor trash, when the Vardamans and Cole Bleases find themselves jobless, then the artificial hate that breeds lynching and riots might suddenly die. If the Russian idea should take hold of the white masses of the western world, and they should rise in united strength and overthrow their imperial capitalist government, then the black toilers would automatically be free! Will their leaders make good use of their advantages eventually?” (*HATBOE* 128),

McKay later defends the Bolshevik Revolution in the following letter to the editor of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. DuBois:

I am surprised and sorry that in your editorial.... You should leap out of your sphere to sneer at the Russian Revolution, the greatest event in the history of humanity; much greater than the French revolution, which is held up as the wonderful achievement to Negro children and students in white and black schools. For American Negroes the indisputable and outstanding fact of the Russian revolution is that a mere handful of Jews, much less in the ratio to the number of Negroes in the American population, have attained, through the Revolution, all the political and social rights that were denied to them under the regime of the Czar.

(*HATBOE* 166)

The Crusader also solicited financial support from its readers for a famine that was ravishing the Soviet Union because of its “friendly and fair-minded attitude towards the darker races and her concrete acts of friendship towards them” (*HATBOE* 166).

And lastly, “Of all the great powers Soviet Russia is the only power that deals fairly with weaker nations and peoples. She is the only power that has no skeleton of murderous subjugation and wrongdoing in her national closet- no specter of a brutally oppressed Ireland or Haiti” (*HATBOE*, 166).

Communism and Communist Friends

Though McKay never declared himself a communist, he embraced its pledge to grant blacks first-class citizenship, topple the institution of capitalism which bred racial hatred and jeopardized true democracy, equalize labor rights and fight for the rights of blacks in the United States.

When McKay migrated to the United States, he joined the millions of blacks that wanted equal opportunities and equal rights accorded to them by the terms of the Constitution which decreed that ALL MEN WERE CREATED EQUAL. Consequently, the perpetuation of de jure segregation in some parts of the nation and de facto segregation in others impeded the advancement of blacks nationwide. The separate but equal belief was glaringly false on various levels. Blacks received substandard services when it came to public health, education, housing and legal representation. They also were subject to lower salaries, inferior work conditions and fewer opportunities to ascend the socio-economic ladder.

Jim Crow in the South and segregation in the North also marred the quality of life within black communities like Harlem which had little political, social or economic exchange, interaction or political ties to white or non-black working-class communities; social ills and decay found an easier way into the fabric of life there. The constitutional denial of the right of blacks revealed the falsity of the American Dream which, though purported to be attainable by all, was simply intended for whites only.

McKay also supported the anti-capitalist principles of Communism. He believed that capitalism lay at the root of racial hatred and discrimination. Disempowered minority

groups such as blacks suffered under capitalism which stratified social classes and relegated blacks to the working class and, in far too many cases, poverty and disenfranchisement. Capitalists astutely manufactured hate among social classes, races, ethnicities and political parties in order to ensure that these dissimilar groups would only focus on their differences and not their commonalities. The threat or perceived threat that blacks would supplant whites in factories and other forms of unskilled work was often a canard that worked in favor of the insatiable desire to make money by any means necessary.

The African Blood Brotherhood, located in Harlem, aligned itself with the political and ideological precepts of the United Communist Party, a more radical offshoot of the Communist Party of America. This alliance drew Communist friendly blacks and card-carrying black Communists to its ranks. The UCP sought to “tear down the barriers of race prejudice that separated both black and white workers and to tie a union of common forces for the overthrow of their enemy” (*The Cry was Unity* 18). First, it took the unprecedented step of waging war against racism and poverty in America through the use of the Communist Press which consulted black communists on the state of black life in America and quickly published “The Negro Problem,” an investigative article that exposed the complexities of institutionalized racism, segregation and bigotry. Second, it attempted, at least nominally - despite opposition from many whites within the Party - to push for social reform for blacks in housing, education, health care and, of course, labor.

By the end of 1921, Briggs and McKay had firmly committed themselves to the Party. Briggs began to recruit, agitate and fortify the Party openly while McKay assumed a more discrete position within the Party as a poet and sympathizer within the African

Blood Brotherhood due to the peripatetic nature of his transnational sojourns, literary aspirations, penury and foreign status in the United States. McKay continued to use his literary talent in support of Russian Communism which can be clearly seen in the following:

“To Holy Russia”

Long Struggling under the Imperial heel;

Some dared not see the white flame of your star,

Dimmed by the loathsome shadow of your Tsar,

But men who clung to sacred dreams could feel

Some day you would put forth your arm of steel

And drag the manikins from near and far,

Before the mighty people’s judgment bar,

To answer for the ruined commonweal...

Down from their high, dishonoured place you hurled

The crowd, incompetent, corrupted few;

The blood-bathed flag of a new life unfurled,

Revealed your soul alike to Slav and Jew:

The eyes of the too-long submissive world,

Lifted in golden hope, are turned to you!

1920

Now more closely linked to black communists in New York, McKay also developed friendships with other white Communists such as Rose Pastor Stokes, a white American communist, feminist, social reformist and writer. Both Stokes and McKay relished the idea of galvanizing blacks to form a unified front against white chauvinism and capitalism and thereby become the driving force behind racism and the disenfranchisement of blacks in mainstream society. Her passion for justice meshed with the unorthodox social reform ideals of McKay. Stokes once called for a “Communist-black alliance to destroy capitalism root and branch” (*TCWU* 24); she also urged blacks to “Go East and you will find the red armies of Russia are marching shoulder to shoulder with black men” (24).

Richard B. Moore was another pivotal figure among black communists and the New Negro movement. He was also a socialist, communist, orator, social reformist, and bibliophile and intellectual that played a key role in the success of the African Blood Brotherhood. Born in Barbados in 1893 to middle-class parents, Moore’s future looked promising until he reached the age of nine when he became an orphan. In 1904, he migrated to N.Y.C. and was met with vehement racism. In 1919, he joined the African Blood Brotherhood, and, in 1920, he joined the Communist Party. Like McKay, Moore fought to improve the lives of blacks in the United States by denouncing segregation, race riots, and capitalism. Like Schomburg, Moore shared a love of literature and had a personal collection of over 15,000 books, booklets and pamphlets on the black experience worldwide. And like McKay, he understood the liberating power of the written word.

Harry Haywood was another black Communist that worked tirelessly to effect change within the Communist Party of America and the Communist Party of the Soviet

Union. As a member of both parties, Haywood, born in 1898, in Oklahoma and raised in the South was deeply affected by traumatic events such as the Red Summer of 1919 in Chicago and other similar racial attacks made on blacks by angry whites. In 1921, he joined the Communist Party upon the insistence of his brother who had already joined the Party. As a communist and member of the African Blood Brotherhood, Haywood, like McKay, promulgated the virtues of Russian Communism as the solution to the Negro problem.

Russia Bound

In September of 1922, McKay departed for Russia despite the difficulty and danger this unauthorized clandestine journey posed. His first stop was England where he decompressed briefly, met with Communist friends who helped him financially and logistically secure the second wing of his trip which took him to Berlin where he received aid from Communist friends who provided him with the necessary clearances for travel to Russia: *The Home of Communism*.

Chapter 5: Russia

McKay's long awaited sojourn in Russia made him rethink Communism. After much effort and determination, McKay arrived in Russia in November of 1922 on an old potato boat from Berlin that disembarked in Petrograd where he boarded a train to Moscow, the capital of the nation. His timely arrival predating the month-long Fourth Congress of the Third International Communist Conference, scheduled to commence on November 5, 1922, gave him sufficient time to secure clearance for the event. Thus far, McKay had experienced few setbacks or major difficulties in route to Russia. Once there, news of his presence quickly spread throughout Communist circles which, to a large degree, had never come in contact with a black person and, much less, one that sympathized with the Party. McKay expressed his position clearly from the beginning: He was not a Party member, but rather, a poet, and writer who espoused the fundamental tenets of the Party. Furthermore, he aimed to spark an interest in Russian Communism in the Negro press.

The Party welcomed his arrival and the symbiotic possibilities his support represented. The Russian proletariat embraced his presence, as well. His unmistakably Negroid features, complexion and hair texture attracted them to him during the Bolshevik Revolution's Fifth anniversary, which took place on the streets of Moscow days before the Congress opened. One comrade commented on the people's response to McKay in the following manner, "I don't quite understand. Some of the Indian delegates are darker than you - quite black - yet the people don't carry on about them that way. But there is something very different in your features

and that is what people see” (*ALWFH* 168). For the Russian proletarian, McKay’s physical appearance was the antithesis of Western Capitalism and white chauvinism.

But amidst the congenial welcome, nonetheless, members of the American Communist Party watched with antipathy. These individuals rejected McKay virulently. They resented his successful entry into Russia, the most difficult country to enter at that time, and the guest of state status he received once there, not to mention his race and the color of his skin which undoubtedly baffled and angered them, as well. In America, McKay occupied the lowest rung of racial hierarchy but in Russia his race was highly esteemed. The American communists also resented his outspoken criticism of their Party which paid little interest to helping blacks. As far as they were concerned, McKay was an unauthorized interloper who had no right to attend the Conference due to his race and his ill regard for them, which was - something they would never admit - a direct result of their hostile treatment of blacks in America and disinterest in solving or at the least ameliorating the race problem.

McKay decried their indifference towards blacks, ineffective social policies and tacit support of racial inequality in America. While in the United States, McKay witnessed fighting between liberal and conservative members of the American Communist Party and the schism created between them. Needless to say, McKay identified with the more liberal members of the Party. As the conference approached, McKay found himself under a barrage of attacks from the members of the conservative branch of the American Party who succeeded in representing the American Party in Russia but failed to mar McKay’s charismatic appeal to the Russians. In the poem

below, McKay pays homage to Russia, not the United States, the purported great symbol of equality and humanity, shortly after his arrival.

“Moscow”

Moscow for many loving her was dead...
And yet I saw a bright Byzantine fair,
Of jeweled buildings, pillars, domes and spires
Of hues prismatic dazzling to the sight;
A glory painted on the Eastern air,
Of amorous sounding tones like passionate lyres;
All colors laughing richly their delight
And reigning over all the color red.
My memory bears engraved the strange Kremlin,
Of halls symbolic of the tiger will,
Of Czarist instruments of mindless law...
And often now my nerves throb with the thrill
When, in that gilded place, I felt and saw
The simple voice and presence of Lenin.

1937

McKay extended his gratitude to Moscow, the capital of Russia, the first and only European nation that truly embraced him, with this poem, included in his autobiography.

Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black, and no mistake about it. Unforgettable that first occasion upon which I was physically uplifted. I had not yet seen it done to anybody, nor did I know that it was a Russian custom. The Moscow streets were filled with eager crowds before the Congress started. As I tried to get through along the Tverskaya I was suddenly surrounded by a crowd, tossed into the air, and caught a number of times and carried a block on their friendly shoulders. The civilians started it, the soldiers imitated them. And the sailors followed the soldiers, tossing me higher than ever. (*ALWFH* 168)

Timing also had much to do with the warm reception he received. The defeat of the autocratic Tsar culture ushered in a new, alleviating economic plan crafted by Lenin which allowed certain degrees of controlled capitalism for a while. This benefitted the working class and the poor who, prior to the Russian Revolution, lived in freedom. McKay also benefitted from being in a county that happened to be in the throes of one of its most euphoric and historic periods of triumph juxtaposed to the hostile reception he received upon arrival in America and England a few years prior.

His popularity opened political and literary doors. Once inside the Congress, McKay found favor among Russian Communist leaders. First, he was named delegate to the Congress and was given a larger platform on which to educate the Russians. This position required his participation in the Congress. While on the podium, the Russian delegates attentively listened to his speech on the importance of blacks in Communism and their potential within the International Communist movement. They also eagerly listened to his scathing criticism of the racist practices and policies upheld by American

and British Communists who ostensibly purported racial and social equality for all within the Party. As a black poet and writer, radical and, most importantly, as an unofficial delegate of the Conference, McKay was encouraged to express independent thought, non-conformity and personal observations at the Conference and throughout Communist Russia which sought to align herself with the plight of the marginalized world after landmark Civil Rights case “Plessy vs. Ferguson” in America in 1896 stripped blacks of the paltry civil advances they had achieved and perpetuated the racist narrative of Capitalism in the West.

“Plessy vs. Ferguson”

The landmark civil rights case “Plessy vs. Ferguson” had major implications for race in America. With the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865 and the end of the Civil War that same year, it was imperative that the nation reunite.

With President Andrew Johnson at the helm of the nation, The Reconstruction Period commenced and Lincoln’s dream of unifying the nation were put underway. From 1865 to 1877, the states that succeeded from the Union were re-incorporated, areas devastated by the Civil War were rebuilt, and seminal legislation was passed by the federal government to grant and protect the social and economic liberties of former slaves began to reshape and reunify the nation. Some Northerners wanted to further punish the South while others wanted to grant unprecedented freedoms to blacks in the South. The first significant step taken towards this goal, however, was the complete and total abolishment of slavery in the South followed by the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau to provide support for blacks and poor whites. While most Southern states passed Black

Codes which limited the rights of blacks, Congress implemented military rule in the region in 1867 to ensure the protection of the rights newly granted to blacks. These states were forced to allow all men equal rights regardless of their color. A year later, President Johnson was impeached by Congress. This left the gains achieved by blacks in a precarious state and made it easier for Southerners to overturn these laws.

In 1896, conversely, the Supreme Court upheld racial segregation in “Plessy vs. Ferguson.” This landmark case originated in the state of Louisiana between Homer Adolf Plessy, a creole male and the state of Louisiana which filed charges against him for sitting in the Whites Only car of the train. Plessy claimed that the ruling not only violated his rights and but also newly passed state legislation which supposedly aimed to eliminate racial discrimination there. His ability to pass for white did little to keep him from losing his seat in an all-white train car as well. He initially lost his case on the local court circuit but later appealed the ruling to the state Supreme Court, presided over by Judge Ferguson who also ruled against Plessy. His last attempt was made at the Supreme Court which ruled against him as well. This loss set a precedent for the perpetuation and further restriction of the rights of blacks throughout the south. The term “Separate but Equal” originated in this case which stated both blacks and whites were treated equally within the segregated society.

With a conservative Congress in power, the Democrats (then a conservative party unlike today) moved to block the Thirteenth Amendment which gave freedom to blacks, the Fifteenth Amendment which gave blacks the right to vote but supported the Fourteenth Amendment which gave more judicial autonomy to the states. These rights

however, were routinely violated by northern and southern states due to lax enforcement by Congress.

The Fourth Comintern Conference

The Fourth Comintern Conference held in Moscow in 1922 marked a racially inclusive agenda put forth by Communist Russia as an antithetical critique of Separate but Equal in the United States. Previous Comintern Conferences had excluded blacks and other people of color from its platform after the devastation of Western Europe during WWI which left the continent extremely vulnerable to the spread of Communism. It also shifted their attention to the indispensable contribution blacks made during the War and the growing influence of the New Negro movement in the urban cities of the United States. Communist Russia took interest in learning about the perils and obstacles set before blacks during the Great Migration both in the South and in the northern urban cities of the United States. In addition, it deemed the unwavering commitment and participation of black soldiers in WWI honorable and convinced Communist Russia even more that the inclusion and participation of blacks could provide a major opportunity for new recruitment within the Party in America and worldwide, thereafter.

The Negroes in America

With the disappointment of the Reconstruction Period and “Separate but Equal” in the United States on his mind, McKay proceeded to provide a first-hand account of the hardships of being black in the United States. Shortly after his arrival he wrote, *The Negroes in America*, an incisive case study of the shameful race politics practiced by the

United States. Written in 1922, McKay commenced the second paragraph of the introduction with the following:

I am filled with gratitude that here in Soviet Russia I have found the means and the leisure for my literary work. This book should have been written in America - for Americans. There exist hundreds of books and brochures about the American Negro but not one book or monograph which undertakes the task explaining to black and white workers their close affinity, and of indicating to dark-skinned people their true place in the class struggle and their role in the international workers' movement. That is precisely what I tried to do in Russia, although handicapped by lack of many materials. In America I was never able to tear myself away from daily work in order to devote myself to writing; I could take only enough time off my trifling poems; and I think that even other Negroes to whom it would occur to write about their race from a class point of view would meet with the same difficulties. Books written by Negro intellectuals, in spite of a note of race-conscious radicalism in them, are always full of bourgeois ideology, for the Negro intelligentsia has to resort to the support of the reformist bourgeoisie and be dependent on it.

My opinions are based on facts and experience. It was not my intention to please Russian comrades: I have written with the aim of letting them know the truth about the American Negro, his place in the worker's movement, and his relationship to that movement; about his place in American society, and about the relationship of organized labor and American

society to him. I have written in the spirit of a critic imbued with class consciousness, exactly as one would write in America in order to be heard by both whites and blacks. Some comrades may think that I am too harsh and too imbued with race consciousness. I would reply to them that for the Negro in America it is very useful to be imbued with race consciousness, but it is still more useful for him to look at the problem which disturbs him from a class point of view and to join the class struggle “internationalist.” The Negro in America is not permitted for one minute to forget his color, his skin, or his race. The American Negro who was not imbued with race consciousness would constitute a strange phenomenon. If my words are harsh and unpleasant to some extent, one must not forget that they are the legitimate offspring of the social structure of America and are completely appropriate (*TNIA* 3-4)

This manifesto is compiled into the following sections: Black Labor, Sports, Negroes in Art and Music, Negroes in Literature, Sex and Economics and Out of Texas based on a white woman’s personal account of a lynching.

Black Labor

McKay criticized the racist practices of American labor leaders without reserve. He took an excerpt of a letter written by Samuel Gompers, the founder of the formidable American Federation of Labor and president of the organization from 1886-1894 and from 1895-1924, when he died, to prove his case against these unjust individuals. Although Gompers promoted higher pay wages, collective bargaining for shorter work

hours and better work conditions for its members, he did not readily extend these concessions to black laborers. Gompers wrote, “The labor movement is a movement of the working people, by the working people, governed by ourselves, with its policies determined by ourselves” (*Report of Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor*, 37).

Nothing could have been further from the truth according to McKay. This egalitarian ideal did not include blacks. In fact, the exclusion of skilled and unskilled black workers from large swaths of industries and services was the norm. Proof of such exclusion is clear in the following quotation made by Gompers in 1915, “there are now two great groups of exploited workers in America: immigrants and women” (Gompers 56-57).

This comment not only overtly effaced the plight of the black worker in labor and falsely implied that blacks had already achieved equality at the workplace. McKay was vexed and highly offended by Gompers’ minimization of the plight of black laborers. Gompers also attempted to justify the dearth of black laborers in organized labor camps in the following quote, “It is difficult to organize black workers because being only a century removed from slavery, they did not have the same conception of their rights and duties as their white workers and were unprepared for fully exercising and enjoying the possibilities existing in trade unionism” (Gompers 56-57).

This comment essentially shifted the blame from the white labor organizer to the so called “incompetent” black laborer despite the glaring number of unemployed skilled

black workers who migrated North in search of work. Gompers then maligned the calls for racial equality made by black labor organizers:

In many instances the conduct of the colored workmen, and those who have spoken for them, has not been in asking or demanding that equal rights be accorded to them as to the white workmen, but somehow conveying the idea that they are to be petted or coddled and given special consideration and special privilege. Of course that can't be done”
(Gompers and Kaufman 44).

This comment absolved white labor leaders of any wrongful behavior and placed the blame on blacks who, according to Gompers, were inherently incapable of understanding the complexities of the nature of labor and therefore unprepared to fully enter the workplace, primarily due to their severe lack of mental adroitness to effectively carry out the job. McKay penned the following counter attack:

Negroes are denied all civil rights and all economic rights because the South cannot allow social equality. Even in mighty Manhattan, the pride of New York; in aristocratic Boston; in stinking Chicago; and in clean Denver, Negroes are not allowed in the theatres and restaurants. They have to be some kind of pariah on the dung heap of civilization. (*TNIA* 37)

McKay argued that social equality and labor equality were symbiotic and, thus, unattainable when separated. Ironically enough, Gompers also recognized the great potential of blacks in labor and the importance of exploiting it before another group such as the Communists did in the following comment: “These artificial barriers must be

eliminated by ourselves, otherwise they will be used by our enemies, who use all means in order to defeat us” (TNIA 26). And “There are about 8,000,000 Negroes in the United States and my friends, I not only have the power to put the Negro out of the labor movement but I would not.... Why would I do such a thing? I would have nothing to gain, but the movement would have much to lose. Under our power and policies we seek to build up the labor movement, instead of injuring it we want all the Negroes we can possibly get to join hands with organized labor (Gompers and Kaufman 45).

Nevertheless, Gompers also blocked black participation in the AFL-CIO union and supported the controversial use of hiring blacks as strikebreakers.

McKay railed against the white capitalists’ devious use of black strike breakers as a means to keep white labor in its place. McKay included a portion of *The Great Steel Strike* by William Z. Foster in *The Negroes in America*, to give the Russians a better idea of how blacks were used to stoke the burning flames of racial hatred and anger many whites harbored for blacks who began to cross picket lines in growing numbers due to underemployment and unemployment, “Most of them seemed to take a keen delight in stealing the white men’s jobs and crushing their strikes” (TNIA 26).

McKay asserts that this phenomenon was a direct result of the exclusion of black labor and the dire economic need and desire for employment within the black community. Foster continues:

For the tense situation existing the unions are themselves in no small part to blame. Many of them draw the color line, thus feeding the flames of racial hatred...It injures labor’s cause greatly. Company agents harp upon

it continually, to prevent Negroes from joining even the organizations willing to take them in...and the best Negro leaders must join heartily in destroying the pernicious anti-union policies so deeply rooted among their people. It is a lamentable fact, well known to all organizers who have worked in industries employing considerable numbers of Negroes, that there is a large and influential black leadership, including ministers, politicians, editors, doctors, lawyers, social workers, etc., who as a matter of face tactics are violently opposed to their people going to trade unions. They look upon strikebreaking as a legitimate and effective means of Negro advancement. Time and time again they have seen their people work their way into trades and industries previously firmly sealed against them by the white workers and the white workers' and the white employees' prejudices...For these elements, and they are numerous and powerful among Negroes, the color line clauses in the union constitutions are meat and drink; such leaders don't want them abolished - they make too strong an argument against the unions. (TNIA 27-28)

McKay scrutinized the hypocritical motives of the Workers Party of America. In the *New York Times* of December 1926, this party purported to "support Negroes in their struggle for freedom and aid them in their struggle for economic, political, and cultural equality, and will also try to put an end to the policy of inequality being pursued by unions" (TNIA 37). This pledge lost all of its thunder in practice, however. McKay provided numerous examples that supported his claim that most whites opposed true social equality. Take President Harding, the nation's 29th President, for example, and his

speech to Southerners in Alabama that affirmed that he lent support to the “complete equality for Negroes in the United States in the economic, political, industrial, and educational spheres; but there can never be social equality ” (*TNIA* 38), and “There can never be social equality,” (*TNIA* 38) was a widely used mantra of white workers within the Party that fractured and, ultimately, weakened the integrity and effectiveness of the Party on a whole in the United States.

McKay made a clear correlation between racial discrimination against blacks at the workplace and the blighted social ills of poverty in the United States due to the lack of gainful employment with one objective in mind: to indict American capitalism and present Russian Communism as the only viable option for blacks.

Despite the gains made within the Workers Party, McKay criticized its failure to see the need for blacks and whites to work together as a means of self-preservation against the rising tides of conservatism and Capitalism in the West. He described this sentiment in a nut shell, “In the age of the greatest industrial development, the American workers movement finds itself at a crossroads. It must choose one of the two paths: the organization of black and white workers separately or together with whites - or the defeat of both by the forces of the bourgeois” (*TNIA* 36). His warning however, fell on deaf ears.

Sports

“The white man refused to accept the idea that the black man can be equal to him physically or spiritually,” were the words of Blaise Diagne, a black deputy from Senegal in the French parliament, during an interview with the New York Times. This comment

struck McKay as particularly contradictory due to the Diagne's hierarchized views of French Negroes, who he argued, "must first look at themselves as Frenchmen and not as colored internationalists, for in comparison with American Negroes or with subjects of British Empire, the position of Negro citizens of France is truly worthy of envy" (*TNIA* 49).

When it came to professional organized sports, America refused to integrate. Segregation persisted and the racial divide widened. Sports was an important signifier of American culture of which blacks, despite two centuries of exploited toil, were not a part. Sports were also a measure used to define masculinity, virility and, hence, sexuality, something the black man was feared to have in savage, lascivious and virulent quantities. The exclusion of his participation ensured the untested perpetuation of white supremacy and dominance especially since the fortitude of white masculinity had already been challenged, questioned and, on occasions, defeated within the world of sports in the United States.

During his first trip to England in 1919, McKay noticed that whites had already begun to acquiesce the hallowed sporting venues where white masculinity was extolled to blacks and other men of color. In his autobiography, McKay never forgot nor forgave the tepid reception of his compilation of poetry *Spring in New Hampshire*, reviewed in *The Spectator*, a British newspaper, by a British aristocratic-like critic who was predisposed to believe that blacks were innately incapable of writing decent poetry. He wrote:

Spring in New Hampshire is extrinsically as well as intrinsically interesting. It is written by a pure blooded Negro... Perhaps the ordinary

reader's first impulse in realizing that the book is by an American Negro is to inquire into its good taste. Not until we are satisfied that his work does not overstep the barriers which are not quite explicable but deep instinct in us is ever alive to maintain we can judge it with genuine fairness. Mr. Claude McKay never offends our sensibilities. His love poetry is clear of the hint of which we would put our racial instinct against him, whether we would or not. (*ALWFH* 88)

McKay was also belittled by the acclaimed British literary critic Bernard Shaw, who once deadpanned the following words, "It must be tragic for a sensitive Negro to be a poet. Why didn't you choose pugilism instead of poetry for a profession? You might have developed into a successful boxer with training. Poets remain poor unless they have an Empire to glorify and popularize like Kipling" (*ALWFH* 61). McKay earnestly responded, "Poetry had picked me as a medium instead of my picking poetry as a profession" (*ALWFH* 61). Such profound honesty prompted a racially biased Shaw to quickly change the subject to cathedrals, a safer, less compromising topic, not surprisingly.

During the early decades of the 20th century, Negro boxing champion Jack Johnson was the most loved and loathed athlete in America and perhaps throughout the world due to his unmatched athletic prowess and the pompous defiance he flouted inside and outside of the ring. Throughout the course of his stellar career, he garnered much criticism and odium because he was the undefeatable champion of boxing and the symbol of black superiority, power and skill. McKay, however, a well-built, young black intellectual was objectified by Shaw whose racist views rendered him incapable of

embracing McKay's literary work artistically and honestly. Slowly but surely, the white man began begrudgingly to acquiesce to the participation of blacks in formerly all-white professional sports such as boxing, baseball, football and basketball.

Lastly, McKay exposed the illogical behavior patterns of racism in sports. In baseball, for example, the most popular sport of that time, McKay recalled the ironic patchwork of racial identity. A dark skinned Afro-Cuban player for example, was not called a "Nigger" or readily barred from the white world of sports while an Anglophone Afro-Caribbean, African or American Negro was referred to as such. McKay recalled that "Once, during a football match between two colleges, southern and northern, in which one mulatto student with a very dark face took part, one of the crowd screamed at the mulatto and at once a genuine roar arose, 'Kill the nigger, kill the nigger!' But one quick-witted northerner loudly shouted turning to a spectator and said, 'He's not a nigger, he's a Cuban!' and the cries of the protest at once were replaced by loud hand clapping" (*TNIA* 54).

In summary, McKay elucidated and ridiculed the divisive power of sports in the United States which was primarily established to make money and exacerbate race relations. A win for a white athlete was a win for the white race and likewise for the Negro race despite the shared nationality of both.

Negroes in Music and Art

With the Harlem Renaissance as the main reference point, McKay shed light on the disparities that existed between the black and white worlds of music and art. Though black music informed the culture of pervasive racial discrimination in the United States at

that time and the white ruling class was “reconciled to the fact that the distinctive syncopated music of the American people has a Negro origin and that Negroes excel in singing, dancing, and acting as naturally as whites ” (*TNIA* 56), black artists and musicians were excluded from “the stages, theaters and other mainstream venues which feature white artists often heavily influenced by black artists and their music” (*TNIA* 56). McKay continued:

It would be a sacrilege to the primacy of whites to encourage the artistic aspirations of blacks. And therefore, in spite of his clear talent, his exotic spirit that tries to quench its thirst in the huge American desert, they do not give the Negro the opportunity of showing his worth in those areas in which he has the most right to. The American theatres are in the hands of powerful Jewish syndicates which never make a contract with a Negro troupe. Individual Negro artists are invited to perform insignificant roles as domestic servants and idiots, but Negroes are never allowed to perform major roles. From time to time, for the sake of change, a Negro is allowed to act, but even then he performs traditional songs or eccentric dances. The Negro singer, whatever kind of voice he has, does not have the slightest chance of appearing in an opera, for a white company will not begin to act with him. As far as that is concerned, there cannot even be any question of a black woman in a white troupe, since racial prejudice against black women is much stronger than against men. Even splendid singers of Negro folksongs and the spirituals of slaves, first class choruses which come

from Negro colleges and universities, cannot find places on the American stage. (*TNIA* 59-60)

The Jazz Age also influenced this uniquely American blend of European and Negro rhythms, syncopation, and arrangements which became world renowned. Pioneered by and representative of the black struggle in the United States, black individuals from the United States were considered emissaries of resistance against the imperial greed and oppression of the West. McKay not only made acquaintances within the leading Russian writers such as Chukovsky, Boris Pilnak, Eugene Zamatian and Mayakovsky, whose wife confirmed the widespread European fascination for jazz. McKay recalled her words: “she desired to dance with me. She was a handsome woman of an Arctic whiteness and appeared as if she had stepped out of a Dostoyevsky novel” (*ALWFH* 188). McKay obliged but lamented the following, “I am afraid I did not measure up to the standard of Aframerican choreography” (*ALWFH* 186).

Black musical theater performances and the “primitive black music,” as it was often called by white critics because it relied heavily on African drums and call and response, gained international notoriety in the United States and later in Europe when black artists such as Josephine Baker showcased it in her enthralling banana dance performance of *La Revue Nègre*. Prior to the Jazz Age, the presence of black dance on stage was extremely rare.

The growing appeal of black music was also cause for concern in white America. White segregationists condemned jazz and the blues deeming it lowly and detrimental to white society. Unsuccessful measures were taken to demonize it and relegate it to black

radio stations. Despite the obstacles put before it, white youths found it alluring and enjoyable. Soon, the Jazz Age saw white jazz musicians heavily influenced by black jazz pioneers such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington taking center stage before white audiences who welcomed and almost invariably created optimal conditions for black musicians to crossover on the radio and in concert. Nevertheless, the black musician of the Jazz Age remained largely relegated to the black circuits and the venues that supported him. Closer approximation to white mainstream audiences did not necessarily mean better treatment nor the amelioration of racial discrimination for black musicians in the United States. The racial lines remained firmly fixed. Black performers continued to play to segregated audiences at segregated venues. Similarly, classical music, originally from Europe, denied the participation of black musicians and performers who were classically trained. In fact, many of these individuals turned to jazz music after the doors of mainstream genres such as Classical were slammed shut in their faces.

The glaring polemic of racial discrimination also pigeonholed black artists. Those that set their ambitions on genres such as classical and opera, for example, were commonly dismissed and, in the majority of cases, roundly shut out. McKay expounded further on this topic:

Anglo-Saxons have established limits for the creative capabilities of the Negro. They approach the Negro with the criterion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. There is a radical cause for such a mistaken concept. It is not difficult to find since it comes from the bourgeois psychology of the ruling race - the desire to keep the Negro in his place. (TNIA 63)

Black Art was also marginalized according to McKay who contended:

Our Age is the Age of the Negro in art. The slogan of the aesthetic art world is Return to the Primitive. The Futurists and Impressionists are agreed at turning upside down in an attempt to achieve the wisdom of the primitive Negro. The respectable bourgeoisie, somewhat anxious in its paradise, is filled with interest. The Congo, it turns out, has an interest independent of rubber and savages. In the hunt for culture, the explorers are again attempting to glue together the pagan idols, smashed by the missionaries. The artists have discovered art. It is often strange to see how an ultra-civilized pupil sits at the feet of a simple savage teacher and gleans so little from him because he is too civilized to learn. The imperial state of Benin, with the strains of human sacrifices on its shield, returns to life in the British Museum....and the British Hall of the Museum of Natural History in New York Homage is rendered to the dead Negro artists, while the living must struggle for the recognition of a just place for Negroes in the industrial society of the modern world. (*TNIA* 64-65)

Europe's penchant for black art predated the Jazz Age according to McKay. In 1885, for example, the British invaded Benin in Nigeria and pillaged its native art. Magnificent ivory carvings and bronze sculptures were sent to the African Hall of the British Museum. British piracy enriched its national coffers and provided the wherewithal for economic, social and artistic development. This practice came to define the operus memorandi of the British Empire during the colonial period. McKay indicted the Portuguese as well. Records show that they were the first to step foot on the African

continent, enslave and traffic African bodies to the New World during the Fifteenth Century. They were also one of the first to ship African relics back to Portugal where many remained. France, Germany and Belgium also plundered myriad objects of value from the continent that have yet to be repatriated McKay noted. Famed European artists of the early twentieth century such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Marcel Duchamp founded the Plastic Arts Movement inspired by African carvings and sculpting. In fact, Picasso was so taken by African art that it became the muse of his Black Period paintings from 1907-1909 and one of his most renowned paintings, “Les Demoiselles de Avignon” painted in 1907, was a testament to the formidable influence African art had on Picasso’s life and career. This masterpiece bears stark semblance to tribal women and the traditional masks of West African and Central African peoples. Incidentally, the Black Period provided Picasso with the artistic mettle needed to pioneer Cubism (1908-1912), his most emblematic and highly regarded artistic style admired by millions worldwide today. French artists studied and mimicked Primitive Negro art in 1920 and the first Negro Art exhibition featured wood sculptures, idols, masks and vessels. The exhibition impressed throngs of attendees and received rave reviews. This exhibition coincided with McKay’s sojourn in London and most likely came to his attention at that time. McKay derided the ignorance of the supposedly cultured bourgeoisie curator in the following quote:

The wise reviewers were struck and amazed by the great art of Primitive Negroes. Of course, these literary fools would have found nothing special in the collection presented at the exhibition if they had known the more beautiful, vaster, and more varied collection of Negro art which they did

not notice through their monocles in the African Hall of the British museum. The multi-colored, fantastic objects and masks from the Congo and West Africa, and the treasure house of Benin are more complex in conception and more amazing than the strangest works of Picasso. (*TNIA* 58)

Negroes in Literature

Negroes in Literature, a topic near and dear to McKay's heart, were also the victims of racial discrimination. Though the belief that blacks were inherently incapable of learning how to read and write was debunked more than a century before McKay was born by the likes of Phyllis Wheatley, a talented black woman who was brought to the United States from Africa in bondage as a young girl and sold to an aristocratic white family in New York who educated and nurtured her natural ability to write poetry, a heady genre, generally associated with the privileged class at that time. McKay also excelled as a poet during childhood and became somewhat of a child prodigy nurtured by both local and foreign erudites who exposed him to literature at an early age and fed his hunger for reading, writing, literary expression and wanderlust.

Negro literature such as *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois and *Literature about Black History* such as the following poem was powerfully inspiring according to McKay. Literary greats such as William Wadsworth, one of Great Britain's most emblematic bards and literary emissaries of the early mid-nineteenth century, penned "To Toussaint Louverture" below, in expression of both empathy and admiration for the Haitian leader.

Toussaint, the most unhappy of men!
 Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
 Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
 Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den;-
 O miserable Chieftain! where and when
 Wilt thou find patience! Let die not; do thou
 Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
 Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
 Live, and take comfort. Though hast left behind
 Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
 There's not a breathing of the common wind
 That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
 Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
 And love, and man's unconquerable mind. (1802)

It is important to note that although this poem praises the triumphs of the Haitian victor, it also laments his defeat against tyranny. Wordsworth stopped short of condemning the institution of slavery, however, an institution he was in no position to criticize vehemently because his upper-class family benefitted directly from it. Nonetheless, Wordsworth could not contain his admiration or respect for Toussaint, the Haitian leader and warrior of epic proportions, whose fearless spirit inspired McKay to expose injustice in *The Negroes in America*, an indictment of white America.

In this case study, McKay channeled the strength, conviction and resolve of Toussaint and his ancestors coupled with the passion and pride of black radicals who embraced, affirmed, conserved, praised and dared to tell the truth about life in America from the black perspective. He railed against the vile perpetrators of racism against blacks in America who were commonly objectified, eroticized and minimized to second-class status on a daily basis. Furthermore, the blatant exclusion of contemporary black writers such as McKay from the world of mainstream literature, publishers and white literary circles, for example, relegated black writers to black readership primarily in America and abroad, thus reducing the black writer's ability to acquire mainstream notoriety.

One would have thought that highly acclaimed works in "negro literature" as it was called at that time, would have been sufficient reason to ease exclusionary practices and foster the integration of the black writer into the predominantly white literary world of the West but the dominant racial discourse of the early Twentieth century proved otherwise. Neither the fame of the iconic black poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar who gained notoriety within white literary circles due to his intrepid use of black dialect in his poetry nor the Harvard educated writer, philosopher, and activist W.E.B. DuBois, whose timeless ethnologic study on the American Negro remains unparalleled in precision and in truth today, enjoyed praise beyond the Negro Literary Cannon. One can only imagine the great number of white writers - both famous and non-famous - that may have been as equally moved and influenced by *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois as black writers were at that time or how the inspirational call-to-arms sonnet, "If We Must Die," may have inspired white writers and mainstream society alike during WWII, the way it

was said to have inspired Winston Churchill, the famed prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1940-1945, had the literary mettle of black writers and poets been given equal recognition.

On the one hand, *The Negroes in America* gave McKay the opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to telling the truth about race and race relations in America. On the other hand, black writers such as McKay also suffered hefty financial and professional losses for their honest accounts of black life devoid of nuanced language and literary expression that invariably softened or made their works more palatable to a wider black and/or white readership. McKay, from early on, conversely, chose to write raw truths despite the allure of mass appeal, financial success or the advice of numerous black and white friends and literary contemporaries who suggested that he sanitize the language and thematic content of his works in order to produce a congenial, not discomforting experience for the white reader particularly, who did not want to ponder the racial and social disparities that existed between blacks and whites in America.

Sex and Economics

“Sex and Economics” is the penultimate chapter of this study and perhaps the most insidious (The last chapter entitled, “Out of Texas” was previously discussed in Ch.3). In this chapter, McKay explained how race had been astutely used to propagate fear and hatred of blacks in America. McKay wrote:

Thinking minds enter a blind alley when confronted with the usually sharply developed attitude Americans have towards sex. It is a puzzle even for thinking Americans. When a white man is defeated on every point

where he comes out against giving Negroes equal rights, he rushes wildly at his opponent and shouts, 'Would you agree to let your daughter or sister marry a Negro?' (*TNIA* 76)

This question went to the heart of America's learned hatred and manufactured fear of blacks. Clearly illogical in its essence, White America - since slavery - dehumanized black sexuality in order to keep the races separate and to ameliorate the sins of, or, at the very least, diminish the reprehensible transgressions both white men and women had committed against blacks in bondage and thereafter.

To reinforce the perils of black sexuality, the cunning slave master insidiously played on the primal fear poor whites had of losing their privilege of whiteness by constantly reminding them that the only way to ascend socially and economically was through access of better paying jobs which were held by members of the white ruling class. With labor as the crux to success, blacks and whites were then pitted against one another in the following manner: Members of both races were taught the same skills but hired and paid on racially biased sliding scales which invariably paid whites a little more than blacks. This kept poor whites in a constant state of economic flux and uncertainty due to the direct competition they faced from blacks who provided free labor during slavery or cheaper labor after the Civil War than whites. In addition, the limited number of available positions in a given trade or vocation engendered contentious race relations, and the perpetuation of abject poverty reduced the possibility that relationships of a romantic nature would likely flourish between members of both races.

The slaves were equally duped. During slavery, they were taught that the slave had a better life than poor whites who were often referred to as the filthy scum of the earth by the ruling white upper class. This created stronger ties of allegiance between credulous slaves and their masters who often speciously promised them freedom, property and, if nothing else, a place in heaven upon death in exchange for their unwavering loyalty. After slavery, the situation continued. The white ruling class continued to foster ill feelings towards poor whites while owning and controlling the majority of the resources, employment, housing and public services.

Despite the great deal of hardship and exploitation poor whites suffered from the overt and covert machinations of the controlling class, the thought of surrendering a white woman to the lecherous savagery of a black man was enough for poor whites to throw total support behind the white ruling class. During the Civil War, poor white males enlisted in the Confederate Army at larger numbers than males from the ruling class did. The defense of the ruling class' interests during the Civil War, fought against the North from 1861 to 1865, was internalized by poor whites as a collective matter of racial, cultural and geographical survival, not a war over ideological differences that, in effect, exploited not only blacks but poor whites, as well. These individuals also played a major role in the creation of white supremacist hate groups such as the Klu Klux Klan and countless others, lynchings, race riots and, of course, Jim Crow.

The North was equally complicit. Though not as open about its hatred and fear of blacks, it employed various modes of pro-white propaganda, racial separation, racial disempowerment and racial discrimination within social, institutional and political settings. The creation of Black Belts in northern cities such as Harlem was one of the

ways white northerners circumvented Great Migration newcomers. These areas were typically the least desirable parts of the city to live in due to their high levels of poverty and disenfranchisement from mainstream society. Race riots were also part of the urban landscape of northern cities which had large working class white populations that felt threatened by the migration of thousands of poor southern blacks who settled there in search of employment.

Unlike the South, where interracial sex was considered taboo, many northern Black Belts, such as Harlem, became places where prostitutes and other kinds of sex workers catered to both black and white clientele. In Harlem, the black body was commodified, objectified, and, ultimately, feminized (even the black male body) by the formidable strength of the dollar, much like men dominated women, regardless of their position in society, at that time. White men and women often paid to watch, socialize or share intimate contact with blacks in Harlem nightclubs, bars and cabarets that pandered to whites despite the anti-miscegenation laws that existed on the books but were loosely enforced in Harlem.

Frustrations and Disillusions

Although McKay had no intention of speaking at the Fourth Congress, he was urged to do so. Fraught with frustration and disillusion, he proceeded to elucidate the Negro problem in America.

Frustrations

His frustration came from many sources. First, he criticized the exclusionary racial politics of the American Communist Party that took little interest in increasing

black membership in America and the resentment its members felt regarding the warm welcome and important platform he received in Russia. Second, McKay denounced their disingenuous promulgation of racial equality on Russian soil; and third, their attempt to proffer Otto Huiswood, a very light-skinned mulatto, as the embodiment of racial inclusivity and expertise on Negro issues, annoyed McKay considerably. Huiswood, like McKay, was originally from the West Indies, a region fraught with colorism and racial hierarchy during the early twentieth century. In America, Huiswood, unlike McKay, also found greater acceptance from white members of the American Communist Party due to his lighter skin tone and less critical opinion of them, not to mention his seemingly more pliable position on race in America.

Despite the American Communists' deliberate attempts to sway Russian perception, McKay was clearly their choice. His black skin, unmistakably Negroid features, and revolutionary vision embodied in his protest sonnet, "If We Must Die," made him a prominent spokesman on Negro radicalism in America with a voice representative of the black underclass in America, a voice the Russians were keenly interested in hearing and learning from. Even white American Communist Rose Pastor Stokes, an erstwhile acquaintance and supporter of McKay, chided his presence in Russia on the grounds that his critical accusation that the Party "neglected to work with blacks had allowed some to drift away" (Solomon 40).

McKay took full advantage of this golden moment. He commenced his speech by admonishing the American Communists in the following statement:

The Socialists and Communists have fought very shy of [the race problem] because there is a great element of prejudice among the Socialists and the Communists of America. They are not willing to face the Negro Question. In associating with the Comrades of America I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the White and Black comrades had to get together: and this is the great difficulty that the Communists have to overcome -the fact that they first must emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertain toward Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negro with any kind of radical propaganda. (Cooper 78)

This statement exposed the deeply entrenched racist practices these individuals perpetuated and the great deal of misdirected energy they placed behind “petty squabbles while the capitalists were trying to turn blacks into strike breakers” (*TCWU* 41). Ironically, members of the white reformist bourgeoisie contributed more to the empowerment of blacks and the survival of black institutions in America than the Socialists or the Communists ever did in America, according to McKay.

Hoping to assuage his frustration, the Russians gave McKay the opportunity to exert influence over the Resolutions of the Negro Commission of the Fourth Congress. This novel committee consisted of Huiswood, some Asian Party members and a few White American members. They constituted the first major effort to solve the Negro problem and grow black Party membership in the United States at the Congress. They concluded that “the history of the Negro in America fits him for an important role in the liberation struggle of the entire African race” (Cooper 178), and a Marxist survey on the

black struggle against American oppression stated that “the post-war industrialization of the Negro in the North and the spirit of revolt engendered by post-war persecutions and brutalities places the American Negro... in the vanguard of African struggle against oppression” (Cooper 178). McKay kept these words in mind when he was granted the opportunity of meeting Lenin and, later, Trotsky, to further discuss the Negro Problem. His brief meeting with an ailing Lenin became the prelude to deeper talks with Trotsky, the new Russian leader, on the race issue. McKay applauded Lenin’s desire to include black concerns in Party affairs. In the essay “Lenin and the Soviet Union,” McKay wrote, “Though Western Europe can be reported as quite ignorant and apathetic of world affairs, there is one great nation with an arm that is thinking intelligently on the Negro as it does about all international problems....One of the first acts of the new Premier, Lenin, was a proclamation greeting all the oppressed people throughout the world, exhorting them to organize and unite against the common international oppressor—Private Capitalism” (Cooper 188). Upon Lenin’s death, Trotsky diligently worked to advance black membership within the Party. As a result, a meeting between Trotsky and McKay came about. McKay posed five pivotal questions to him.

Due to the absence of the actual questions and the nature of the answers, the first question probably sought ways to keep France from using blacks in European conflicts. Trotsky responded, “It is necessary to set the blacks themselves against this. It is necessary to open their eyes to the fact that, by aiding French imperialism to enslave Europe, the blacks are enslaving themselves by supporting the dominion of the French capital in Africa and other countries” (*TNIA* 7). Trotsky expounded on the necessity to

educate dark skinned people of the colonial world by stressing the urgency of taking action against colonialism without delay because

Every group of ten Negroes attracted to the revolutionary, united into a practical group for practical action among dark-skinned people, is one hundred times more important than a group of ten principled resolutions in which the Second International was so rich. A communist party which would limit itself in this area to Platonic resolutions, without applying all its energy to practically conquering the largest number of Progressive Negroes in the shortest span of time, would not merit the name of a communist party. (*TNIA 7*)

McKay's second question (not included) must have closely resembled the first question, judging from Trotsky's response:

There cannot be any doubt that the involvement of colored troops in the imperialist war - and now in the business of occupying German territory - represents well thought-out and carefully implemented attempt by European (and especially French and English) capital to find for itself armed forces outside of an aroused Europe Thus within the question about the use of colonial reserves in imperial armies lies hidden the question of revolution in Europe; the question of fate of its working class. (*TNIA 7*)

It is obvious that McKay continued to denounce the exploitation of black imperial troops in Europe, a continent largely devoted to colonial expansion, the control and the

exploitation of black and brown people worldwide. McKay also pointed out that the French, like the English, were dogged imperialists and inherently opposed to the creation of a liberated world. McKay also informed Trotsky that he had been “disillusioned with the European War, because they kept on having frightful clashes with British and English soldiers, besides the fact that authorities treated them completely different from white soldiers” (*TNIA 9*).

Question number three (question not included) likely centered around Trotsky’s opinion on the use of black troops and their position within imperial forces. Trotsky responded:

There can be no doubt that the involvement of colonial masses who are more backward in economic and cultural respects in world imperialist conflicts, and more especially in European class conflicts, represents an extremely risky experiment from the point of view of the governing bourgeoisie themselves.When the hand of capital and all the more so, the hand of militarism mechanically uproots them from their customary conditions of existence and compels them to risk their lives for complex and new problems and conflictsthen their stubborn, conservative states of mind break down at once, and revolutionary ideas find quick access to a consciousness thrown off its equilibrium. (*TNIA 8*)

The fourth question (question not included) seemed to have sought to ascertain Trotsky’s approval of progressive Negroes or the New Negro, at that time. Trotsky affirmed:

It is so important to have immediately some progressive Negroes -even if only a small number-who are young, self-sacrificing, deeply interested in raising the material and moral level of the Negro masses, and capable, at the same time, of linking their fate with the fate of the mother countries of the whole world and first of all, with the fate of the international working class. (*TNIA* 8)

Lastly, McKay asked, "What are the most expedient organizing forms for a North American Negro movement?" Trotsky replied, "I find it difficult to say, since I am insufficiently closely acquainted with concrete conditions and possibilities. But organizational forms will be found just as soon as sufficient will for action itself is at hand" (*TNIA* 8).

Disillusions

After the excitement of the Conference wore off, disillusion quickly set in. McKay quickly began to realize that his hunger for justice, equality and redress would not be satisfied exclusively through the ranking file members of the Communist Party of Russia and much less through its American counterparts. This realization came after the Russians failed to implement the advice, suggestions and directives he furnished to address the Negro problem in the United States and the Party's growing interest in the recruitment of blacks.

And as time progressed, his celebrity status became increasingly onerous and problematic for him as well. For instance, he "soon apprehended that the Russian demonstration was a different thing. Just a spontaneous up surging of folk feeling"

(*ALWFH* 167), which was plausibly due to the air of felicity that pervaded the streets of Russia after the Russian Revolution ousted the Tsarist autocracy in February of 1917 and subsequently installed Communism as the official political system later that year in October. Under Bolshevism (Russian Communism), the proletariat and peasant majority population saw an increase in social reform, the confiscation and appropriation of bourgeois wealth, property, and personal resources.

Furthermore, empathy for the black man, oppressed to the core by Imperial Europe and America, the nemeses of Communist Russia, also created a feeling of superiority among the Bolsheviks who looked down on the flawed sense of humanitarianism among American and European Capitalists. The abuses of the West became a major source of propaganda used by the Bolsheviks to vilify the West while the congenial assent of McKay, a black casualty of colonialism, slavery, imperialism and capitalism, embodied Communist Russia's desire for "a typical Negro at the Congress" (*ALWFH* 173) and not the mulatto delegate (Huiswood) who was, according to McKay, "too yellow" (*ALWFH* 173) and, therefore, a poor representation of the black struggle in America.

McKay began to resent the Bolshevik agenda, which espoused partisan growth and strength over racial equality. The euphoric brio that his presence stirred among the Russian proletariats after the success of the Russian Revolution only served to strengthen the Party, and moreover, Communist Russia. This diminished his lofty view of Russian Communist leaders who propagandized his stardom to reach the outer margins of newly reformed Russian society (i.e., the bourgeois, socialists etc.). Consequently, it became very clear that the Bolshevik agenda had one solid objective: to acquire social and

political capital for the Party which meant that McKay was nothing more than a means to an end for the Russians, unfortunately.

The hypocrisy of the American delegates also disillusioned McKay in Russia. As stated earlier, they proudly promulgated altruism and egalitarianism in Russia while insidiously effacing the plight of blacks in America. In addition, they astutely adorned their speeches with platitudes and rhetoric such as:

Greetings from America. The workers of America are groaning under the capitalist terror. The revolutionary organizations have been driven underground. But the American Communist Party is secretly organizing *The Masses*. In a few years we will overthrow American capitalism and join our forces with the Russian Communists, Long live the Revolution....In five years we will have the American Revolution.

(ALWFH 174)

Speeches of this nature revealed the Party's blatant disregard for blacks. In fact, black issues never took center stage in their discourse because the Party upheld the dominant discourse of white superiority in America. Their speeches also misrepresented life in America. In the greeting above, the speaker falsely placed the white communist male on the lowest rung of American society, failing to mention that the act of social and political dissidence was commonly tolerated in America, so long as the perpetrator was white and acted within the confines of his rights protected under the Constitution of the United States of America. Blacks, on the other hand, were roundly precluded and denied the same luxuries. McKay buttressed the previous statement with the following words:

I am a Communist, and my request to transfer me from the illegal party in the United States to the legal one was dictated by purely practical considerations... I obtained this transfer not because I am afraid of danger. In America it is much less dangerous to be a Communist than to be a Negro. A Communist lives in fear of government persecution; the Negro lives in fear of bourgeois persecution and the devilish caprice of the white population which is numerically overwhelming. (*TNIA* 89)

Furthermore, McKay found the myopic view of the American Communist Party deceitfully misleading. The proximity to what they called the “American Revolution” created false hopes in the minds of the Russians, who expressed great interest in learning more about this prospect from McKay who forthrightly declared the “American Revolution” a specious attempt to gain favor in Russia. McKay issued the following statement on this issue:

Truly I could not speak such lies. I knew that the American workers were generally better off than at the beginning of the World War in 1914. I was aware that labor organization in this country was far below the standard of labor organization in England, Germany, and France, that American labor was not organized as a political weapon, that in some sections of the country and in certain industries labor was even denied the right to organize, and that radicals were always baited. But that Leavenworth was not Siberia. And by no means of the imagination could the United States be compared to Czarist Russia.... How, then, could I stand in front before the gigantic achievement of the Russian Revolution and lie? What right

had I to tell these people, who had gone through a long death struggle to conquer their country for themselves that the American Revolution was also in travail? (*ALWFH* 175).

Despite the disappointment and, at times, the disbelief in the candor evinced among the Russians, McKay voiced his sobering views. As a special delegate, he was granted entry into the private circles of the high-ranking members who also preferred to hear that the “American Revolution” was on the horizon when it clearly was not. On one occasion he was called a “defeatist,” and told by a close comrade that he “should have told them the American Revolution is right around the corner. That’s what they want to hear” and “You’re all right for propaganda. It’s a pity you’ll never make a disciplined party member” (*ALWFH* 177). McKay maintained his position and did not bend under pressure. He also recast his image in Russia as a poet first and foremost and not a card-carrying member of the Party.

Another source of frustration came from the Russian Communists’ weak commitment to increase labor and class awareness among American blacks. Having worked and/or lived among the black working class almost exclusively in the United States, McKay firmly believed that solving the Negro Problem lay in the creation of black labor coalitions, associations and organizations that sought to protect the labor interests of black workers exclusively, since white organized labor unions routinely prohibited, shunned or thwarted black membership.

Trotsky and his commissars disagreed. They believed that this task was better suited for the American Negro, not because he was black but because he was part of the

marginalized world. McKay found this position problematic on many levels. First, it contradicted Trotsky's purported desire to solve the Negro problem. Second, it showed Trotsky's stark incapability of understanding the challenges of marginalized groups within the imperial and colonial world context. Third, it intimated that blacks were inherently chauvinistic, and fourth, it failed to vehemently denounce white supremacy. This frustrated McKay who devoted countless hours in conversations, speeches, meetings and gatherings - not to mention his work, *The Negroes in America* - for the enlightenment of Russian Communists on the ill effects racism had on blacks in America. Ultimately, it also impressed on McKay the glaring incompatibility of Communism and blacks.

The differential treatment that existed between the lower and higher ranking members of the Party disheartened McKay, as well. Communism was supposed to promote economic, social and racial equality among all members, not merely create the illusion of it. To his dismay, McKay noted stark disparity among party members while visiting different parts of the country as an honorary guest of the Party. On one occasion, he witnessed the disregard upper ranks had for the lower ranks when he landed at an airport one night in the midst of a snowstorm, only

to find a crack of squad sailors, fine handsome fellows, had been waiting for us for hours in the blizzard. They were not rigged out, like myself and the pilot, against the bad weather, and were cold. For the life of me I couldn't understand why a squad of men should have been detailed to await my arrival at the air base, when I was no kind of official. And I had been told that my visit was an informal thing. Right there I remembered my experience in the Pennsylvania railroad service - how often in the cold

steel car out on the track, our crew waited for hours in the biting zero weather until the late train arrived and steamed us out. And sometimes we were frostbitten. (*ALWFH* 214)

The resemblance between the low-ranking Russian communists and American Blacks was hauntingly similar and all too familiar to McKay.

His time in Russia also marked the steady decline of his health. McKay addressed this downturn in his autobiography in the following words, “In 1922 I left America in perfect health and more completely whole than the day on which I was born. My first accident of illness occurred in Russia. Sanitary conditions were not ideal in Petrograd and Moscow in 1922” (*ALWFH* 230). He explained that this was to be expected since the country was still recuperating from eight years of revolution and civil war; with the scarcity and high cost of basic necessities, food and even medicine, the likelihood of infection, sickness and chronic disease rose among the population. As a guest writer and poet, he witnessed the erosion of wealth and the migration of the wealthy to the West, as well. An infection of a serious nature or a stroke of some degree also seemed to have weakened his health. He wrote, “It was near the very end of my visit that I experienced a sort of deadness in my left side and once my face gradually became puffed up like an enormous chocolate soufflé, I have photographs on my possession, taken in Moscow, which authenticate my condition at that time” (*ALWFH* 231). That said, his poor health, especially towards the end of his stay did little to raise his spirits about Russia, the cradle of Communism, nor her ability to truly foster a new socio-economic paradigm that would redefine life for millions worldwide.

Lastly, he faced literary obstacles, as well. His poetry was often criticized for not being proletarian enough by the Bolsheviks who thrived on proletarian literary panache. Unlike the dubious proletarian poetry of Mayakovsky, a former Russian futurist and poet he met while there, who entertained the likes of the Czars before the revolution and conveniently joined the proletariats after the Bolsheviks took control, McKay wrote in defense of justice and, primarily, in defense of the black race. Bolshevik critics claimed that his literary work was no longer proletarian enough. Their insensitive criticism paralleled White America's attack on the well-intentioned, justice seeking black because both groups were disempowered segments of their populations and neither enjoyed sufficient agency within the dominant cultures of which they belonged, to sway or influence public opinion. Such disparity gave way to prized "proletarian" or working class emissaries such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright in Black American literature and Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Anton Chekov in Russian literature. A perfect example of proletarian praise is found in McKay's ode, eponymously titled, in honor of the Russian city of Petrograd.

"Petrograd: May Day, 1923"

The Neva moves majestically on,
 The sun-rays playing on her breasts at seven,
 From her blue bosom all winter
 Shrouded the city's snow-slabs gone.
 Now ripples curl where yesterday lay riven
 Great silver oblongs chiseled by the hand

Of Spring that bellies through Earth's happy womb,
 To glad and flower the long, long pregnant land!
 Where yesterday a veil of winter gloom
 Shrouded the city's splendid face,-today
 All life rejoices for the First of May

McKay pays homage to the triumph of the Bolsheviks who dared to challenge the status quo. The autocratic oligarchy is compared to a veil of winter taken away by the arrival of the Bolsheviks who replace it with the bounty of Spring, flowers, happiness and joy.

The Nevsky glows ablaze with regal Red,
 Symbolic of the triumph and the rule
 Of the new Power now lifting high its head
 Above the place where once a sceptered fool
 Was mounted by the plunderers of men
 To awe the victims while they schemed and robbed.
 The marchers shout again! again! again!!!
 The stones, where once the hearts of martyrs sobbed
 Their blood, are sweet unto their feet today,
 In celebration of the First of May.

Again, the joy of conquest imbues McKay, a man confined by race and replete with hopes and dreams that one day the black man will, like the Bolshevik, achieve similar defeat over his nemesis. With this in mind, the fighting resolve of "If We Must Die" is

brought to the fore of McKay's imaginary once again, which, like the Nevsky, the main thoroughfare of St Petersburg, Russia, or Lenox Avenue, one of the most important boulevards of Harlem, become symbolic spaces where resistance thrived. The poem continues,

Cities are symbols of man's upward reach,
 Man drawing near to man in close commune,
 And mighty cities mighty lessons teach
 Of man's decay or progress, late or soon,
 And many an iron towered Babylon,
 Beneath the quiet golden breath of Time
 Has vanished like the snow under the sun,
 Leaving no single mark in stone or rhyme
 To flame the lifted heart of man today,
 As Petrograd upon the First of May.

1923

This stanza continues to praise the diachronic truism that good ultimately conquers evil, which eventually vanishes like snow under the sun.

Where of Egypt and the Athens of Rome,
 slaves long toiled for knights and kings to reap.
 But in the years, the wondrous years to come,
 The heart of youth in every land will leap

For Russia that first made national the day-

The embattled workers' day- The First of May.

Similar to the Greek Epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, McKay reifies the trope of victory throughout this stanza in his recreation of the arduous journey “where slaves long toiled for knights and kings to reap” in distant lands of Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece as the oppressed forge into the light of the “First of May.”

Jerusalem is fading from men's mind,
 And sacred cities holding men in thrall,
 Are crumbling in the new thought of mankind –
 The pagan day the holy day for all!
 Oh, Petrograd, oh proud triumphant city,
 The gateway to the strange, awakening East,
 Where warrior-workers wrestled without pity
 Against the power of magnate, monarch, priest-
 World Fort of Struggle, hold from day to day
 The flaming standards of the first of May!

1923

The last stanza extols the success of the Bolshevik Revolution with grandiose performative style and grace. Despite the poem above, both McKay and the Bolsheviks that doted on him, accepted his true calling: to be a poet, not a politician. His loss of enthusiasm for the Party was as evident as his disaffection for Communism had become. Much had changed.

Chapter Six: France

Once again, McKay is placed on the margins in France alongside men from the African Diaspora whose friendship inspired two of most iconic literary works that promoted black solidarity.

McKay arrived in Paris in October of 1923, after a short sojourn in Berlin where he lived penuriously as a struggling poet, weathered minor illnesses and reflected on his momentous sojourn in Russia. The variables of time and distance allowed McKay to evaluate the current state of Russian Communism and the growing dilemma it faced there with particular respects to Party leadership and its commitment to labor and black recruitment in America. Internal strife had essentially weakened the Party starting with the death of Revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, the highly criticized leadership of Leon Trotsky who was ultimately defeated by his adversary Joseph Stalin who seized power through a series of gambits and decisions that isolated him ideologically from key officials and lower- ranking members of the Party. Ensnared in a downward spiral caused by an ideological divide centered on disparate views of leadership that favored aggressive expansionism on one hand and conservative pragmatism on the other, McKay epistolized his support of the latter, part of which read as follows,

Personally I think the headquarters of the International should be moved from Russia if it could be set up legally in another country. I feel about it that Russia has already had her Revolution - and that because so many of the Russian leaders of the International are connected with the Russian government, the International will

always consciously or unconsciously be over influenced by Russian governmental politics internal and external - to the detriment of the proletarian movement. Wherever I look in the Communist International I see nothing but dry rot - the little leaders of Western Europe and America are ventriloquists vying each with the other to repeat the words of Moscow. To me it seems bad for everybody all around and even worse for Russia. Fancy a great wonderful country like that using a ventriloquist show to scare the great lords of International capitalism. (*CM: RSITHR 87*)

The more McKay came to terms with the deficiencies of the Communist agenda for blacks, the more he espoused racial unity as the only viable means for social, economic and political equality. McKay kept an open mind about France, the nation touted as the world's most racially tolerant, ostensibly liberal and conducive to artistic expression. During the early 1920s, France became the bastion of pleasure, progressive thought and tolerance. It also became a mecca for self-exiled ex-patriate American artists and tourists seduced by the magnetic allure of its culture, sophistication and an escape from the confining limitations of race, class and socio-economics in America.

McKay arrived in France with similar illusions. What he encountered however, was something else. First, the tolerance of the French only surpassed that of the Americans superficially and, second, racial hierarchy in France shared fundamental semblances to American race politics: blacks were objectivized, eroticized but rarely humanized in the way that whites were. Not even the patriotic zeal of African and Caribbean francophone troops who risked life and limb to protect French interests and

citizens during W.W.I mitigated the pervasive wave of white chauvinism in France. And the end of W.W.I brought few improvements as far as race relations were concerned. Although racism continued to bedevil blacks in France and throughout the French Empire, New Negro ideology continued to gain traction throughout Europe. Furthermore, Negritude, a Franco-centric offshoot of Pan-African and New Negro ideology was embraced by African and Caribbean- francophone migrants who took unprecedented steps towards embracing race over French loyalty in protest of and in solidarity with the growing tide of racial awareness, pride and struggle worldwide.

Take the first black francophone writer to win the renowned Prix Goncourt in 1921, René Maran, for example. Born in Martinique in 1887, Maran spent his earliest years steeped in French colonial rule, indoctrination and genuflection to the French Crown. From the ages of three to seven, Maran lived in Gabon (then a French colony) with his father who was stationed there as a colonial military officer. Upon return to Martinique, Maran completed grade school and followed his father's footsteps in the military in what was formerly a French colony known as Equatorial Africa from 1910-1925. His experiences in colonial service in Africa made him question the role of the French in the Caribbean, Africa and perhaps, most importantly, his role as a French soldier. As the first black officer to hold the post of petty officer in charge of indigenous affairs there, Maran used his privileged post to educate himself on the native culture, language and history of the African peoples of that region colonized by France. His observations enabled him to write *Batouala*, his first novel based on the wealth of rich information, personal accounts and artifacts he gleaned from the country's national archives, local men and women and colonial ledgers. It also became one of the first

novels written by a black francophone to esteem Africa, Africans and their cultures instead of France, the French and French culture. The novel was also lauded by Gustav Geoffroy, a member of the Prix Goncourt academy who proudly stated, that awarding the Prix Goncourt to a black person was nothing short of an honor for blacks who are loyal to the French flag. This award also acknowledged the notion of *Négritude* among francophone blacks within the francophone Diaspora and New Negro ideology. Sadly, the novel ends with the triumph of the French over the Africans and provides yet another clear example of European hegemony and France's disingenuous interest in true racial equality.

While America remained obstinately color struck, France slowly took a more centrist approach towards blacks of an artistic or intellectual ilk. Although Maran and McKay would have likely agreed that France was far more attractive to black writers than England or America was at that time, neither would have called France a racial utopia. The black writer in France experienced professional and social displacement similar to the displacement many educated American southern blacks experienced in the north when seeking white collar employment after the Reconstruction period or during The Great Migration period in America where black doctors, lawyers and engineers, three of the nation's most prestigious and most vital professions due to the burgeoning industrial and commerce sectors in the north and the west for instance, were routinely denied employment in white institutions, organizations or associations due to the color of their skin. Unskilled or moderately skilled black workers fared equally. They also failed to secure employment as civil servants, blue collar workers or in basic-entry unskilled

positions or vocations; the scant few that did were often alienated by their white colleagues and white clients who resented their presence.

Beneath the surface, the French practice of hierarchizing certain groups of blacks over others was just as repressive and dehumanizing as the One Drop of Negro Blood Rule was in America. Blacks that belonged to the American intelligentsia or the arts and letters set enjoyed the privileges of white Americans only marginally. These individuals were tolerated more readily by the French ruling class due to their Francophilia, liberal views and American citizenship, the most economically solvent country of the Twentieth Century. Furthermore, the unparalleled narrative of the erstwhile British colony turned formidable superpower undoubtedly captivated the Old World-colonial mindset of the French. Prior to McKay's arrival in France, he was quite familiar with the dark past of the colonial French in Africa and the Caribbean. He was also well aware that the French bourgeois had exploited black African and Caribbean troops during WWI by pitting French Caribbean troops above French African troops which occupied the lowest echelon of the French colonial hierarchy. This caused constant strife and competition between both groups and essentially kept them divided. It also enabled France to manipulate African and Caribbean troops more easily. Afro-Caribbeans, also called *Noirs* in French, were considered closer to white within the French colonial hierarchy. This "privilege" allowed them to hold positions in government that Africans were denied even in their homelands. The African French, on the other hand, were called *Négres* in French. This term closely resembled the American racial epithet "Nigger." This group occupied the lowest rung of the French colonial ladder due to French perceptions that categorized them as savages and uncivilized.

McKay attempted to dispel the myth that France was the ultra-liberal escape many black Americans perceived it to be in the following analysis,

“The good treatment of individuals by those whom they meet in France is valued so highly by Negroes that they are beginning to forget about the exploitation of Africans by the French.... Thus the sympathy of the Negro intelligentsia is completely on the side of France. It is well informed about the barbarous acts of the French in Senegal, about the organized robbery of native workers, about the forced enlistment of recruits, about the fact that the population is reduced to extreme poverty and hunger, or about the total annihilation of tribes. It is possible that the Negro intelligentsia does not want to know about all this, inasmuch as it can loosely generalize about the differences in the treatment of Negroes in bourgeois France and plutocratic America. René Maran wrote a novel which, by the way, is an indignant denunciation of the activities of the French government in Africa; but the author, in spite of this, received the Goncourt prize and indisputably became a desired member of writer's and artists' circles in France. Dr. DuBois writes a surprisingly moving work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in splendid English; nevertheless, he remains up to the present an outcast in American society. (Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 94).

It didn't take long for McKay to realize that his sojourn in France would present a unique set of challenges due to his race and traveler status which reduced employment opportunities and worsened his near indigent financial state. McKay's onerous life in

Paris made his celebrated life in Moscow seem enviable. Nonetheless, McKay managed to remain hopeful perhaps because he never allowed himself to be swept away by the allures of France. In fact, this was what he wrote on the matter:

Paris, away from Montmartre and Montparnasse, seemed to be the perfect city of modern civilization. It was the only city I knew which provided quiet and comfortable clubs in the form of cafés for all its citizens in every class. I appreciated but was not especially enamored of Paris, perhaps because I have never had the leisure necessary to make an excellent clubman. If I had to live in France I would prefer to live among the fishermen of the Douarnenez, or in the city of Strasbourg, or in sinister Marseilles, or in any of the coastal towns of the department of the Var.

(ALWFH 230)

McKay never romanticized France simply because he inherently knew that France was proudly Eurocentric. The city of lights, love and culture of France was built for those with power, fame, lineage or wealth, not poor struggling black poets such as himself.

Despite this fact, many blacks clung to the belief that France was also more liberal than other Western nations because it supported Pan-Africanism. In January 1900, the Congress of the United States passed a bill signed by the president awarding Thomas Calloway, a War Department official and Booker T. Washington protégé, \$15,000 for the creation, installation and stewardship of the American Negro Exhibit, designed to highlight the social and economic progress of American Negroes since Emancipation. With W.E.B. DuBois at the helm of this effort, the industrious, intrepid and intellectual

élan of the New Negro was represented in a multifarious display of over three hundred and fifty official patents by black inventors, two hundred novels written by black authors, hundreds of black College and University photographs, dozens of black newspapers, a Library of Congress bibliography of over 1,400 entries and a host of photos and paraphernalia related to the integrity of black life in America. The success of the World's Fair attended by over fifty million was widely covered by the American mainstream press which purposefully ignored the Negro exhibits which won a total of fifteen awards, medals and high praise for Thomas Calloway, Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee Institute and W.E.B. DuBois who affirmed the problem of the twentieth century could be distilled into three words: the color line. Nevertheless, the strong debut of the New Negro marked the first step to the creation and affirmation of a self-defining culture bountiful and rich in talent, drive, determination and passion. McKay believed that the interest the French government and press took in black life was, at best, superficial and fleeting. He equated it to the ephemeral awe and amazement one felt upon encountering an exotic or rare bird at the zoo followed by the eventual feeling of satiation, satisfaction and the desire to repeat the process all over again.

In all fairness, the French took exceptional delight in the creative expression of ragtime, jazz music and the African Americans that performed them such as Adelaide Hall and Josephine Baker. Unlike in America, many black performers and artists received better treatment in France than they did at home where the color of their skin often eclipsed and compromised the quality of their craft. Black Jazz pioneer Adelaide Hall was born in 1901 in Brooklyn, New York. As a child she was taught to sing by her father and, at the age of twenty-one, she embarked on a Broadway musical, cabaret, and acting

career that took her throughout Europe and the United States. Throughout her long and prolific career, she carved out a special place in the hearts of the French where she rivaled Josephine Baker, another largely successful black female dancer, singer and performer who rose to fame abroad in France after being discovered dancing on a St. Louis, Missouri street corner. Both women, like McKay, were admired figures within the Harlem Renaissance. Baker became a French citizen in 1937 and spent the majority of her career in France, a country that embraced her artistry, race and *joie de vivre*. Hall also enjoyed great success abroad in England, the mother country of the British Empire and the nation that was generally hostile to black immigrants from its colonies such as McKay.

The belief that racial tolerance was endemic among the French also came from the many talented black soldiers who dazzled the French with song and instrumentation during WWI. The Fifteenth Regiment of the New York National Guard was an infantry regiment of the United States of America during WWI and WWII. This regiment also consisted of soldiers from Puerto Rico, many of whom were considered black as well, and was the first to be allowed to fight in any major war overseas. Prior to WWI, blacks had to join the French or Canadian army in order to participate in the theatre of war. Their brave gallantry and fearless spirit earned them the nickname of the “Harlem Hellfighters.” This regiment also introduced black music to much of Europe during that time. Under the leadership of the legendary band leader James Reese Europe, the regimental band played for audiences in England, France, and American military audiences. After WWI, the band was credited with introducing Jazz to Europeans and especially to the French who became enamored by this newfangled musical rhythm.

Europe and McKay shared similar racial pride. Europe had a distinct playing style that he attributed to his sincere embracement of black life, struggle and music and McKay was also heavily inspired by black life. Europe once said that his band “had developed a kind of symphony music that, no matter what else you think, is different and distinctive, and lends itself to the playing of the peculiar compositions of our race...My success had come...from a realization of the advantages to sticking to the music of my own people” (Wikipedia). He also affirmed upon arrival from France:

I have come from France more firmly convinced that every Negro should write Negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies... We won France by playing music that was ours and not a pale imitation of others, and if we are to develop in America we must develop along our own lines. (Wikipedia)

The Pan-African Congress of 1919, held in Paris, also pointed towards growing racial tolerance in France. This event was strategically planned to coincide with the Paris Peace Conference at the end of WWI in order to focus the developed world’s attention to the arduous plight of blacks throughout the African Diaspora. Pan-African leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and Blaise Diagne, the highest ranking Senegalese deputy of the French Parliament, were extremely instrumental in organizing the conference and overcoming the social, political and economic hurdles set before it. At least fifty-seven delegates from fifteen countries and colonies including Haiti, the British West Indies, West African colonies and America attended. At least nineteen were from Africa. This event, patterned after the Pan-African Conference of 1900, sought to mollify the harsh political and economic conditions blacks within the Diaspora were forced to endure.

Changes within colonial policy were also requested in the following areas: Land ownership and equitable economic development that would allow them to profit from the sale of their natural resources, higher quality education and health care accessible to ALL MEMBERS of society, Negro participation in colonial governments and on decolonization boards. Lastly, the Pan-African Congress of 1919 in Paris paved the way for the next Pan-African Conference to be held in London in 1921.

Home to Harlem

In 1926, McKay embarked on his seminal full-length novel based on black life set in Harlem during the 1920s, a decade of prolific black artistic expression and personal, literary and political growth spent mostly overseas in Europe. Shortly after arriving in France, American journalist, Bolshevik sympathizer and friend, Louise Bryant introduced McKay to William Aspenwall Bradley, the most successful American literary agent in Paris of the day, who encouraged him to expand one of his short stories into a novel, hence, the story of Jake, a young black drifter from the South who migrates north to Harlem where he finds a home on the margins of both mainstream and black society, was born. Slightly dejected by the failure and scrapping of the novel *Color Scheme*, his first unsuccessful literary attempt, McKay had not only finished *Home to Harlem*, a controversial novel that unabashedly extolled Negro primitivism, debauchery and human survival but he had also succeeded in writing a polarizing bestseller steeped in left of center radicalism.

McKay embraced Negro primitivism and challenged mainstream mores and precepts in *Home to Harlem* by doing so. The Harlem Renaissance was America's most

formidable black arts movement of self-affirmation, self-determination and resistance. Many New Negroes such as McKay believed that the beauty and singularity of black artistic expression lay in its sincerity unlike white artistic expression which was fettered in American conservatism and the glaring banality of old and new European styles which suppressed artistic creativity, honesty and created neurosis in society according to Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. The popularization of primitivism in African art greatly inspired the works of sculptors and painters such as Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin who translated “tribal” or primitive life into iconic works of art which began to gradually move away from the adherence to Puritanical sexual ethics and restrictive behavior in American society after WWI. Primitivism also heightened the allure of the popularity of the Jazz Age in music and popularized literary works of white writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway and Walt Whitman, who championed existentialism and wanderlust in their personal lives and literary works. In *Home to Harlem*, life is espied through a clear, unromantic lens with regard to the setting, characters and plot.

Setting

The setting pays homage to the liberating, progressive and cultural space that the disenfranchised occupy on the margins in Harlem. The truest, most authentic slices of black life take place in the buffet flats, rent parties and cabarets of Lenox Avenue, not on Sugar Hill, the most affluent section of Harlem where well-to-do Negroes “became mimics of whites, wearing clothes and using manners of sophisticated whites, earning the epithet ‘dicty niggers’ from the very people they were supposed to be championing” (Bascom, *A Renaissance in Harlem* 12). Thus, two Harlems existed independent of the

other. Langston Hughes had this to say about the bitter and the sweet side of life on the margins in his autobiography *The Big Sea*:

White people began to come to Harlem in droves. For several years they packed the expensive Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue. But I was never there because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow club for gangsters and monied whites. They were not cordial to Negro patronage, unless you were a celebrity like (dancer) Bojangles. So Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community, nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx of whites towards Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside table to sit and stare at the Negro customers -like amusing animals in a zoo (65).

The Negroes said we can't go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won't even let us in your clubs. But they didn't say it out loud for Negroes are practically never rude to white people. So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses.

I was there, I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. (I remember the vogue for things Russian, the season the Chauvre-

Souris first came to town.) For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus (entertainer) Gladys Bentley. They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke:

Don't know what made any Negroes think that- except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any (Quoted in *ARIH* 23).

In *Home to Harlem*, McKay utilizes Jake, the main character and “ordinary Negro” to laugh in the face of the conservative black critics who vociferously despised anyone and anything related to the margins. Black journalist Dewey Jones of *The Defender* cynically stated that “white people think we are buffoons, thugs, and robbers anyway. Why should we waste so much time trying to prove it? That's what Claude McKay had done” (*IBID*, 245). But McKay had actually done the opposite by validating the lived experiences of Jake, his best friend Ray and the rest of the secondary characters that live on the margins of a community not unlike any other where both negative and positive elements exist for better or for worse. In addition, McKay honored the seemingly insignificant and undesirable position of working-class blacks in his depictions of black entrepreneurship that took the shape of black owned eateries such as Bank's, Jake's first stop in Harlem after returning from overseas, where “he ate a Maryland fried chicken

feed -a big one with candied sweet potatoes.”(*HTH* 10). Jake also enjoyed frequenting the popular stretch of Seventh Avenue between One-Hundred and Thirty-Fifth and One-Hundred and Fortieth Streets or the ice cream parlor on Lenox Ave, where he admired “girls sipping ice-cream soda through straws” (11). Even the cabaret was a place that “perfectly fitted his presence” (11). The cabaret also provided the meeting ground where Jake met a sweet-looking brown skinned girl who wore “an orange scarf over a green frock, which was way above her knees, giving an adequate view of legs lovely in fine champagne-colored stockings” (11), accepted his invitation to stroll along Lenox Avenue where he very respectfully “held her arm. His flesh tingled. He felt as if his whole body was a flaming wave” not realizing that she had decided to waive her “working girl ” as a token of her mutual interest in him in the following note she left for him the next morning that read “Just a little gift from a baby girl to a honey boy!”(16). Jake and the unexpected meeting of the girl proved that love - or the natural possibility of it - not only blossomed downtown in Central Park between whites but uptown in Harlem between blacks as well.

The friendship between Ray and Jake crystallizes in Harlem, the place that enabled blacks of glaringly disparate cultural, academic and linguistic bonds to form. Though class separation existed in Harlem, its limited space and considerably dense blocks, tenements and public areas put blacks in closer proximity with one another than it put blacks in many other black belts in America. Outside of Harlem, interaction beyond the work place would have been less likely to occur between Jake and Ray due to the stratified socio-economic reality of modern life. Their nationalities would have also played a major role in where they lived as most ethnic groups or southern blacks for that matter, tended to form enclaves in Harlem. Nevertheless, main thoroughfares such as

Lenox Ave and One-Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street essentially became the Ellis Island and the Pan-African mecca of the black world. After work on the railroad, Jake, a Pullman third-line cook and Ray, a waiter, both circumscribed to black society outside work, would have also remained relatively distant from one another at work as well had it not been for their Harlem residency. Black cooks were inferior to black waiters on the railroad. Waiters were paid more and had better work conditions because they served whites. Most waiters had lighter complexions, more years of formal education, were generally more refined than the black cooks who were typically darker, had less years of formal education and were less refined. This contributed to the pre-existent, intra-racial socioeconomic class strife that prevailed among Negro railroad employees and mirrored the polarizing practices of colorism and classism in Harlem overall. Jake fit the description of a cook in most ways. He was uneducated, unrefined and had brown skin. Ray also fit the profile of a waiter, save his dark skin which McKay purposefully reimagined to mimic his own complexion, racial pride and high level of intelligence.

Greater degrees of humanity existed on the streets of Harlem, as well. Black men such as Jake and Ray were not precipitously labelled dangerous, indecent, inferior or feckless due to their race in Harlem. Instead, they were judged by the content of their character. Even excessive womanizing, carousing and partying in bars did not completely alienate them from the larger, devout Christian black working class which believed that total alienation and condemnation of such individuals was ungodly. In addition, the effacement of Jim Crow on the streets of Harlem allowed these men to move freely throughout the community without concern or fear of draconian repercussions exacted upon them. This empowering fact enabled them to walk the streets of Harlem with pride,

interact with members of the community and positively contribute to it. A perfect example of this is when Ray helps an ailing Bugsy, a mutual friend of Ray and Jake, by calling a black doctor, who happens to be a friend of his. In mainstream society, Ray would not have had a white friend and, much less, one that was a doctor he could have called for a sick friend. By the same token, McKay would not have met black entrepreneurs such as Mr. Morris, McKay's landlord and owner of the saloon McKay and friends patronized in order to "to help Negro business" (*ALWFH* 50), nor would he have fraternized with the likes of Manda, a southern black housekeeper he met one night at a bar, befriended and subsequently became a roomer in the flat she lived in owned by Mr. Morris, had he not lived in Harlem, as well. Both Manda and Mr. Morris accepted McKay's Caribbean roots, penury, penchant for the underbelly of Harlem and his bohemian literary lifestyle, four characteristics that would easily have alienated him from hardworking individuals such as Mr. Morris and Manda outside of Harlem.

Lastly, the setting also allowed the men to shed their "duality" or "double consciousness." According to DuBois, ambitious blacks had to efface their blackness in order to progress in white society. DuBois couched this theory within the historical context of Orientalism in the following paragraph:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Tatuán and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see through the revelation of the other world is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes

of others, of measuring one's soul through the tape of a tape that looks on in amused contempt or pity. One ever feels his twoness, -an American, and Negro,- two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois 215)

Then, he expressed the Negroes's desire to play an integral role in mainstream society in the following paragraph:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife -this longing to attain self-consciousness, manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for he knows America has too much to teach Africa and the world. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wished to make it possible for a man to be both Negro and American, without being cursed or spit upon by his fellows, without the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

(DuBois 215)

McKay subscribed to this way of thinking. Prior to his arrival in America, he accepted the fact that living abroad meant effacing much of his Jamaican culture. This did not mean that he was prepared to attempt the daunting fete of extricating all Caribbean, peasant or agrarian elements from his core during his sojourns. He constantly examined and negotiated assimilation to the societal norms of the country he visited for

acceptance, understanding and success. A perfect example of this is seen in the rural and urban settings of his dialect poetry in *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* which enables the reader to envision and, more importantly, experience unadulterated Jamaican culture and identity devoid of duality. In comparison, McKay's "Jamaicanness" and, in effect, blackness is effaced in America in compilations such as *Spring in New Hampshire* or *Harlem Shadows*, penned for educated white and/or black circles largely intolerant of non-traditional linguistic forms such as creolized Jamaican English.

Likewise, the Southern black dialect widely spoken throughout the novel unifies those on the margins. Like Jamaican Creole, the Southern black dialect, free of duality, became the *lingua franca* of Harlem, to the chagrin of the black intelligentsia and black middle and upper class. McKay, however, defended its linguistic legitimacy and autonomy. Historically, language has always been used to divide or conquer people. During American slavery, enslaved Africans recently brought to America were forbidden from speaking their mother tongues in order to control them more easily. In *Home to Harlem*, the fact that the large numbers of Great Migration migrants spoke relatively similar variations of the same dialect proved advantageous to them in many ways. First, a sense of community was established more rapidly among these individuals. Second, this dialect often prevented Northern whites, most of whom had limited contact with those that spoke the dialect, from understanding it. Third, linguistic cohesion strengthened black resistance and, fourth, it quickly evolved into becoming the "official language" of Harlem due to the sheer numbers of residents who spoke it. A prime example of the power of the southern black dialect is when Jake laments having enlisted in the military full of hopes and patriotism only to be sidelined because of his race, in the following

musings, “Why did I ever enlist and come over here?...Why did I want to mix mahself up in a white folks’ war? It ain’t ever was any of black folks’ affair. Niggers am evah always such fools, anyhow. Always thinking they’ve got something to do with white folks’ business” (*HTH* 8). McKay cleverly questioned the futility of black enlistment in a war blacks did not start and the ill-treatment they received from white military officials and soldiers who resented their presence while enlisted. Later, in route to America, Jake loudly clamors:

Harlem for mine! ...I was crazy thinkin’ I was happy over heah. I wasn’t myself. I was like a man charged up with dope every day. That’s what it was. Oh, boy! Harlem for mine! Take me home to Harlem, mister Ship! Take me home to the brown gals waiting for the brown boys that done show their mettle over there. Take me home Mister Ship. Put your break right into that water and jest move along. (9)

Main Characters

In the novel, Jake and Ray, the main characters, reflect the author’s warring desire to assimilate and resist. If a close literary analysis of McKay’s choices of themes and characters tends to speak volumes about the *zeitgeist* and events that shaped his life, then *Home to Harlem* is truly McKay’s first autobiographical account of his initial foray into black life in Harlem. Though lightly tinged with fiction, Jake the traveler, bent on finding happiness, is McKay at heart. Jake’s refusal to conform to life in the Jim Crow South constituted his first true act of resistance. Similarly, McKay fled the imperious rule of the Union Jack in Jamaica for America, the highly touted “land of the free.” Upon arrival,

McKay attempted to stay on the conventional path of studying agronomy in order to return to Jamaica with a solid preparation for a career in agriculture but his true passion for travel and writing poetry won him over. Incidentally, Jake faced a similar identical crux when he enlisted in the military during WWI along with thousands of patriotic American blacks who, like himself, were not allowed to prove their love of nation because of their race. In *Home to Harlem*, Jake recounts a similar disillusion:

when America declared war upon Germany in 1917...he thought he would like to have a crack at the Germans....And he enlisted....In the winter he sailed for Brest with a happy chocolate company....Jake toted lumber-boards, planks, posts, rafters-for the hundreds of huts that were built around the walls of Brest and along the coast between Brest and Saint-Pierre, to house the United States soldiers...Jake was disappointed. He had enlisted to fight. (4)

Going A.W.O.L. (Away Without Official Leave) was Jake's second act of resistance. He "obtained leave...put on clothes and lit out for Havre...liquored himself up and hung around a low-down café in Havre for a week" (5), before he decided to strike out on his own. Once off ship and on solid ground in England, Jake regrouped in London and stowed away back to America on a ship now convinced more than ever that race trumped nationality in America.

Ray, the Haitian intellectual also assimilates and resists in the novel. Like McKay, Ray rejects the socio-economic limitations of life in the Caribbean. In America, he aspires to assimilate by earning a living using his intellect and not his hands like any

other white intellectual would have naturally been inclined to do. Like Jake, Ray is prevented from making his dream a reality due to the color of his skin in America, a country that prizes white intellectuals but loathes black ones. Out of desperation, he takes a menial and degrading job as a waiter serving whites who either pity him, detest him or fall somewhere between the two extremes. On the job, he violates the tacit work rule that waiters and cooks were not to fraternize when he and Jake make friends while working and develop their friendship in Harlem where he commits a second act of resistance against the black intelligentsia by “crossing over,” or “going native” with Jake on the margins.

In conclusion, *Home to Harlem*, though harshly criticized for its comparisons of some character’s physical descriptions to animals, promoted racial unity and resistance in America and internationally in the final analysis. In response to the largely negative reviews black critics gave *Home to Harlem*, McKay wrote the following response:

I consider *Home to Harlem* a 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 fake, 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 appreciation of what we are doing to the emancipated Negro intelligentsia of the future, while we are sardonically

aware now that only the intelligentsia of the superior race is developed enough to afford artistic truth. (Quoted in Cooper 247)

Here, McKay redoubles his commitment to uplift and validate blacks of the lower class and summarily rejects the biased critiques of narrow-minded blacks who failed to see the true value of a novel written to empower, not weaken blacks, who in McKay's view needed to redefine, reimagine and support themselves.

Marseille: The French Harlem

When McKay left Paris, he headed for the climatic and emotional warmth of this Mediterranean port city largely due to its reminiscence of the places, faces and fast living of poor blacks in Harlem. McKay felt comfortable on the docks of Marseilles next to his Diasporic brothers. In testament to this sentiment, He wrote:

It was a relief to get to Marseilles, to live in among a great gang of black and brown humanity. Negroids from the United States, the West Indies, North Africa and West Africa, all herded together in a warm group. Negroid features and complexions, not exotic, creating curiosity and hostility, but unique and natural to a group. The odors of dark bodies sweating through a day's hard work, like the odor of stabled horses, were not unpleasant even in a crowded café. It was good to feel the strength and the distinction of a group and the assurance of belonging to it. (*ALWFH* 277)

Banjo, McKay's second novel, was set in Marseille, the second largest and most immigrant filled port city of France due to the following factors: the large number of

Diaspora migrants, the less oppressive weather and nature of life on the docks and the vibrant underworld economy that provided varying degrees of economic relief for these individuals. This port city has a long history of war, migration and trade. Circa 600 BC, it became a permanent settlement and trading post of the Greek Empire until it was annexed by the Roman Empire in 500 BC. As part of the Roman Empire, it became a major exporter of wine and other Mediterranean grown goods to Rome. After the fall of the Roman Empire, during the 8th Century, it fell under the control of various warring groups until the Middle Ages when the unification of multitudinous city states marked the seminal formation of France. In 1481, Marseille became part of the city state of Provence which gave France access to the Mediterranean Sea, facilitating import/export commerce to and from the French colonies throughout the world. At the end of the 18th century, Marseille solidified its place in French history when the “La Marseillaise,” the national anthem of France was created and sung by 500 citizens who marched from this port city to Paris to lend their support to the French Revolutionary government in 1792.

From the mid-nineteenth century to the arrival of McKay during the 1920s and thereafter, the city served as a major gateway into France and a major hub for transient migrants in search of economic opportunities, European citizenship and/or political and religious freedom. McKay, like “Lincoln Agrippa Daily,” known to his drifter cohorts on the 1920’s Marseille waterfront as “Banjo” (*Banjo*, back cover excerpt), the main character of the novel was undoubtedly drawn to the resilience of the migrant community which resembled Harlem in many ways then and now. In the March 2012 edition of the *National Geographic*, journalist Christopher Dickey described the city in the introduction of his article “Marseille’s Melting Pot” in the following manner:

It's tempting to say but probably true that no rule made by Paris goes unbent in the city of Marseille. The capital of Provence has a well-deserved reputation as a rough and unruly place, a port that attracts all kinds of contraband and all kinds of people, some of them contraband too. Over the centuries they've mostly come by sea-mingling, scheming, brawling, coupling, feasting and drinking with unashamed and unapologetic flamboyance. The city has served as a refuge for people fleeing persecution, pestilence and poverty. Recently, its sizable immigrant flux has largely been of Muslim origin, and today when you gaze from one of Marseille's many beaches across the Mediterranean, toward the unseen North African coast, you can almost imagine a deluge on its way as the spreading unrest in the Arab world pushes more refugees and job seekers towards the shores of Europe (45).

McKay would have concurred.

Like most port cities, Marseille had a long history of immigration and transient communities. *Banjo, a Story Without a Plot*, contained remnants of life in Harlem harshly condemned by DuBois who railed against blacks "whose chief business in life seems to be sexual experience, getting drunk, and fighting" (Quoted in Cooper 107), and dismissed the novel for its lack of character development, cohesion and logic as far as he was concerned. On a positive note, DuBois didn't feel *Banjo* was nearly as bad as *Home to Harlem* by any stretch of the imagination. Nonetheless, *Banjo* lacked literary value according to DuBois (Cooper 108). Paradoxically, McKay set out to replicate the fruitlessness of life on the margins where:

many others besides them - white men, brown men, black men, Finns, Poles, Italians, Slavs, Maltese, Indians, African Negroes, West Indian Negroes - deportees from America for violation of the United States immigration laws - afraid and ashamed to go back to their own lands, all dumped down in the great Provencal port, bumming a day's work, a meal, a drink, existing from hand to mouth, anyhow and anyway, between box car, tramp ship, bistro, and bordel. (*Banjo* 6)

While DuBois exclusively culled individuals from the black intelligentsia with the hopes of creating a monolithic group of black leaders whom he called the "Talented Tenth," would advocate for racial equality. McKay embraced the disenfranchised migrant class living on the docks in Marseille, a place where bedraggled men of foreign lands forged symbiotic bonds of brotherhood and unity in order to allay the specter of racism, xenophobia, poverty and deportation.

In *Banjo*, the plight of the black American drifter and main character who plays the eponymously named instrument on the docks for meager earnings and Ray, his fellow drifter from the West Indies, essentially represent McKay's alter egos. *Banjo* speaks to the earthy, sensitive and proletarian ethos of McKay who hailed from humble hinterland peasants while Ray represented the intellectual, educated thinker committed to the beneficence and the survival of blacks. This dichotomy is evinced when Banjo says:

Let the crackers go fiddle themselves, and you too. I think about my race as much as you. I hate to see it kicked around and spat on by whites, because it is a good earth-loving race. I'll fight with it if there's a fight on,

but if I am writing a story- well, it's like all of us in this place here, black or brown and white, and I am telling a story for the love of it. Some of you will listen, and some won't. If I am really a story teller, I won't worry about the differences in complexion of those who listen and those who don't, I'll just identify myself with those who listen and those who don't. I'll just identify myself with those who are really listening, and tell my story. (*B* 115-116)

In *Banjo*, Ray also embodied McKay's restless, radical, iconoclastic and intellectual inner being forced to live on the margins but, nonetheless, happy to be there with his lesser educated brothers who, similar to those in Harlem, forged a world exclusive unto themselves. McKay supports the creation of this space and rails against blacks and whites who oppose it. Furthermore, the docks shared stark resemblance to life in Harlem where less vigorous policing also facilitated illicit activity within a public domain which enabled blacks to construct and enjoy greater degrees of social freedoms. In other words, the negative effects of neglect fueled by racism resulted in less police protection on the down side but less law enforcement and vigilance of black and brown bodies on the up side. Historically, poor migrant populations received less attention from the host country due to their penurious state and purported economic and socially onerous presence as many of these men were homeless. To some individuals, life in such a state may have seemed unbearable but to McKay and likeminded individuals it was a largesse. Reduced policing allowed his cadre to create its own way of living and rules for life. Employment opportunity barriers no longer existed in this deregulated zone where immigrants sold fruit and vegetables, peddled miscellaneous goods, hired themselves out

to local carpenters, fishermen and shop owners by the day and engaged in illicit activities such as drug trafficking, loansharking, prostitution or petty thievery by night. Gradually, many black migrants took their first steps towards financial independence, entrepreneurship and self-determination in Marseilles where nightlife brimmed with rollicking music of the Jazz Age and the hot syncopated rhythms of black musicians such as Banjo, filled the bars, night clubs and sleazy dives on the docks with a steady influx of local and foreign patrons hungry for black entertainment. McKay applauded this enterprising spirit which once inspired him to open an eatery in the black belt of Brooklyn for a short while, which, despite its eventual failure, solidified McKay's support of black entrepreneurship. This was nothing new to McKay who had grown up patronizing small-scale black entrepreneurship in Jamaica, his native land. He also believed that the most vibrant and most significant part of black societies, regardless of where they were, was the working class, not the Talented Tenth upper class where:

They say you find the best Negro society in Washington. When I was there the government clerks and school teachers and the wives of the few professional men formed a group and called themselves "upper class." I don't know whether it was that or their complexion or teaching or clerking ability that put them in the upper class. In my home we had an upper class of Negroes, but it had big money and property and power. It wasn't just a moving picture imitation. School teachers and clerks didn't make any ridiculous pretenses of belonging to it... I could write about the society of Negroes you mean if I wrote a farce. (*TNIA* 55)

McKay also rejected the predication of privilege and class as a point of entry into the upper echelons of black societies. He once wrote:

Gee! I remember when I was in college in America how those Negroes getting an education could make me tired talking class all the time. It was funny and it was sad. There was hardly one of them with the upper-class bug on the brain who didn't have a near relative - a brother or a sister who was an ignorant chauffeur, butler, or maid, or a mother paying their way through college with her washtub. If you think it's fine for the society of Negroes to fool themselves on the cheapest of imitations. I don't. I am fed up with that class. (*TNIA* 56)

Banjo

When McKay wrote *Banjo*, he depicted life as he had come to ascertain it on the margins in France, a country rife with racial, national, social, economic and sexual duplicity.

Race and Nationality in *Banjo*

McKay examined race from the beginning to the end of the novel in order to strengthen his initial call for black unity in his seminal novel, *Home to Harlem*. In *Banjo*, black life is revisited in its depictions of both minutiae and monumental events on the docks. Again, black and brown men comprise the main characters of the novel and the controlling theme that juxtaposed black and white life in France. Having black or brown skin is the major signifier of marginalization, empowerment and, favorably, the glue that kept these individuals together while facing the obstacles set before them due to their race

in an otherwise foreign and arguably hostile land. Banjo, the uneducated, banjo playing, street smart, black drifter of the American South seeks to escape the physical, emotional and social confines established for blacks during the economic largesse of the Roaring Twenties in America, during which time Jim Crow laws permeated every facet of society. In South Carolina, for example, the refusal to hire blacks tripled the unemployment rate among blacks who could not work in the same room, look out the same window, nor enter or exit the work place through the same door as whites. Blacks entered through the back door while whites entered and exited through the front door because direct contact between the races was prohibited. In Richmond, Virginia, white neighborhoods were kept racially homogeneous by barring blacks from living there. In parts of Texas, Negroes could not be on the streets after 10:30 at night and the list of rules and restrictions went on and on not only in the South but also in the north which played a tacit and often insidious role in the perpetuation of racial discrimination, marginalization and disempowerment.

In cities above the Mason Dixon line, race riots spawned by angry working-class whites became a regular occurrence. Public and private organizations routinely denied employment, housing and equal opportunities to blacks while an uptick in racial oppression, hate and polarization crystallized. In cities such as Washington D.C., Chicago, Detroit and New York, the idea that blacks lived better lives than their brothers and sisters in the South was debatable. Rudimentary freedoms such as attending white schools and eating at the same lunch counters as whites were commonly denied to blacks in the North where blatant signs in shops read WHITES ONLY. Famous black celebrities such as Marianne Anderson, Paul Robeson, Dorothy Dandridge and Josephine Baker

were refused service at white establishments, eateries and performance spaces and the denial of credit from financial institutions and voting rights from the local and state governments stymied the development of entrepreneurialism and political power within black communities. As a result, poverty spread in large swaths of the urban North and precipitated White Flight patterns which started during the 1920s. Like the South, the North also vehemently discouraged and on various occasions prohibited miscegenation with the threat of harsh jail sentences, fines and, often times, both.

Ray, another main character in the novel fled from the pervasive social ill of colorism of his native Caribbean homeland only to re-encounter it again in France. The polemical trope of colorism in the Caribbean colonial narrative is exposed in Ray's collective memory of his homeland (country is never mentioned but very possibly Haiti), built on a three-tiered social construct of which the white elites or *grand blancs*, as they were called in France, occupied the highest tier. These individuals comprised the ruling class and the political power structure. Next came the mulatto class or the *affranchise* who were the descendants of blacks and whites, many of whom became part of the bourgeois class. These individuals played major roles in the daily operations of local and national government, small and medium-scale commerce and entrepreneurship and generally served as lackeys to the white elites who controlled their movement in society as well. Historically, the *affranchise* played a very complicit and contentious role in the perpetuation of France's colonial agenda in Haiti. Lastly, the blacks or *noirs* occupied the lowest tier of this trio. Ray and Banjo proudly belonged to this class, which, without a doubt, displayed the most tenacity, resilience and acumen throughout the novel.

In *Banjo*, Ray, like McKay, found no relief from the hyper sensitive color consciousness of the Caribbean or the docks of Marseilles. His black skin, once again, placed him at the bottom of the racial hierarchy although the locality of his origins provided a slightly greater probability for social ascendancy in France than it did for his West African French cohorts who were seen as the nadir of Black Francophones. McKay drew parallels between the confining circumstances of the picaresque denizens who subsisted on the docks of Marseilles to similar ruffians and rogues he encountered on the northwestern coast of Jamaica where he spent part of his childhood with his older brother Uriah and sister-in-law and on the southeastern coastal capital city of Kingston a few years later, while on the beat as a constabulary. Ray, like McKay, despised the colonial agenda in France and unabashedly inveighed against it in verbal, written and, when necessary, physical form. A prime example of this was when Ray expressed indifference towards the hubris of the French Empire in the following description:

Ray had undergone a decided change since he left America. He enjoyed his role of a wandering black without patriotic family or ties. He loved to pose as this or that without really being any definite thing at all. It was amusing. Sometimes the experience of being patronized provided food for thoughtful digestion. Sometimes it was very embarrassing and deprived an emotion of its significance. (136)

The dark skinned Sub Saharan African characters fared even worse in *Banjo*. Their roles as secondary and tertiary characters signified utter inferiority in the novel. In the novel, Taloufa, a boy from the African bush was treated just as harshly in Marseille as he was in Africa by the French who placed severe limits on the cultural, linguistic and

economic autonomy of his people and the numerous West African peoples subjugated by the French in that region. In Taloufa's native land of Senegal, the racial breakdown consisted of blacks, who were Africans of pure descent, the *affranchise*, who were a mixture of French and African blood and, naturally, the whites or *blancs* of France and of French descent. Unlike most of the French West African colonies, special freedoms allowed the *affranchise* to play a greater role in Senegalese and French governance. This group also enjoyed an unprecedented, albeit marginal, approximation to Caribbean *Noir* status which, as stated earlier, elevated their social status in France. McKay's dark skin, expressly Negroid features and hinterland origins naturally linked him to Taloufa in France where McKay dismantled ethnic hierarchy established by the French in order to keep peace among the African and French Caribbean men. Like McKay, Taloufa was also fond of European instrumentation such as the piano more than the Banjo, a string instrument considered inferior to the guitar, common among blacks in the southern states of America at that time. And like Taloufa, McKay had also left "the bush" full of excitement and hope in the Northern hemisphere never once forgetting his humble roots based in West African culture. In France, for example:

Ray...always felt humble when he heard the Senegalese and other West African tribes speaking their own languages with native warmth and feeling. The Africans gave him a positive feeling of wholesome contacts with racial roots. They made him feel he was not merely an unfortunate accident of birth, that he belonged definitely to a race weighed, tested and poised in the universal scheme. Short of extermination by the Europeans, they were a safe people, protected by their indigenous culture. Even

though they stood bewildered before imposing bigness of white things, apparently unaware of the invaluable worth of their own, they were naturally defended by the richness of their fundamental racial values.

(320)

The tertiary role of Latna, the North African Arab female, also evokes blackness while providing an arresting look at the feminization of black cultures and black men in white societies. Despite her lighter skin tone, curly hair and North African features, Latna is unable to advance in French society due to her otherness” or, simply put, “blackness.” As a result, she is forced to remain firmly fixed on the margins and circumscribed to life in the underworld of Marseille. Her character replicates the historically tense relationship that existed between North Africa and France since the official colonization of Algeria, France’s most important North African colony in the 1830s, some sixty years prior to colonization in Sub-Saharan Africa. By the late 1840s, Algeria had fallen under full control of the French Empire. As a colony, it became a department of France and a settler colony for hundreds of thousands of French citizens who took advantage of the new opportunities for farming, commerce, trade and entrepreneurship there. Latna, a native of an undisclosed North African nationality - likely Algeria - a country the French eroticized and orientalized due to its arcane non-Western culture, traditions, religion, language and people who did not subscribe to Western social constructs of black and white but rather the intertwined complexities of tribalism, Islam and gender. In North Africa, the importance of race or skin tone came into play far less than it ever did in France to say the least. That does not mean that skin color and race played insignificant roles in this society, because it did. The correlation between darker skin tones in North Africa and

servitude, savagery and inferiority are important linchpins of society that will be explored further in the next chapter.

Lastly, whites are racially juxtaposed to blacks in the novel. Throughout the novel, McKay takes the opportunity to showcase the resilience, intellect, strength, and humanity of blacks buffeted by both migrant and native whites. Regardless of nationality or socioeconomic difference, white skin antagonizes black skin. On the docks of Marseilles, whites live unscrupulously while blacks eke out a humble existence within the crooked backdrop of money, lust and greed. Like Harlem, much of the underworld is controlled by the Italian Mafia and its Mediterranean appendages such as the Portuguese, Greeks, Spaniards and a smattering of Irish hoodlums who, like McKay, are marginalized British subjects. Though these white men are essentially reduced to “men of color” status due to their indigence, nationalities and illegal migratory status in France, they exercise and enjoy racial hegemony over blacks. This is seen in the band of brotherhood among white hooligans who see themselves as the norm and blacks as the “Other.” Banjo, the main character articulated the creolization of black skin which has been customarily classified as “Black,” and not Black Caribbean or Black African, but simply black united as one against white oppression. French Whites and American whites seemed to be the worst, however. McKay exemplifies the moral bankruptcy of crooked French police who played complicit and illicit roles in the deportation, harassment and exploitation of blacks while white migrants are often left unbothered. American racism reared its ugly head too. These individuals unbridle their hate for black men at white owned bars in the area and contaminated European whites with a more virulent form of American racism towards blacks.

Socio Economics in *Banjo*

With inescapable poverty as a formidable theme and major backdrop of the novel, McKay proffered the collective pursuit of financial freedom as an escape from poverty within the Diaspora. Hoping that the white world would respect and encourage such a noble endeavor was partly at the heart of McKay's decision to write such a story just as much as rousing patronage for aspiring black entrepreneurs and artists such as himself. From early on, McKay learned how important it was for blacks to foment strong alliances with whites who shared their vision. He also validated the legitimacy of DuBois' social theory of duality as a major key for success for blacks interested in getting ahead in white society. Many of his most supportive friends were white and, most often, financially solvent. As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, McKay's childhood and adolescence was heavily influenced by white mentors who generously contributed to his wellbeing, education and departure to America. Likewise, his relationship with white radical and intimate friend Max Eastman provided similar social, monetary and literary benefits. Affiliation with Eastman also opened doors that would have remained closed to him overseas. Eastman provided numerous contacts - both American and European - for McKay. Eastman also continued to contribute to McKay's financial survival at that time.

In a similar vein, McKay built a story around an instrument to evince the possibility of building a community and a solid economy around the assets and talents found within black communities. From the successful black numbers runners, to the mobile street vendors who sold the freshest vittles of the day with a hefty dose of well-rehearsed comedy sketches, jingles, songs and anecdotes to the likes of hair products icon Madame CJ Walker, McKay was convinced that blacks need not look beyond themselves

or their communities for entrepreneurial ventures or employment. The history of the banjo and its popularity among southern Negroes from America and later among whites in Marseille was another testament to the endless economic possibilities that awaited confident, competent and intrepid blacks in society and in economics. In the novel, the main character strategizes ways to promulgate his talent and increase monetary gain by packing the night clubs and bars frequented by cash clad whites. As an entrepreneur, Banjo included singing, dancing and even comical storytelling in order to add depth to his nightly performances. Throughout the novel, the banjo also creates indirect employment for members of his cadre who find temporary, intermittent and permanent employment alongside *Banjo* and his instrument which set the underbelly of Marseille ablaze. And when Banjo filled the nocturnal bars, dives and restaurants with the lively tunes that engender laughter, introspection, camaraderie and, more importantly, money for him and his cohorts to subsist, racial and bridges of camaraderie, brotherhood and bonhomie replace the impenetrable walls of ignorance, racial pride and xenophobia that many whites and non-blacks harbored regarding blacks.

In *Banjo*, another less savory source of subsistence for the men was illicit activity. McKay chose to expose rather than hide this reality. Underworld dealings, transactions and schemes - similar to Harlem, - enabled many blacks in Marseilles to survive. McKay's decision to include less flattering sides of black society were meant to dispel the myth that Blacks were inherently lazy, shiftless and attracted to crime. He wants the reader to understand that anyone would be prone to such an empty life if, time and time again, he or she were precluded from mainstream society and left to fend for him or herself on the margins. Blacks are not the only perpetrators of crime and illegal acts,

white men also partake in this lifestyle. McKay deemed it extremely important to inform the world that the human condition is not predicated on race but, rather, needs and desires.

Sexuality in *Banjo*

The most clearly expressed theme of the novel proves to be, without a doubt, sexuality. McKay, the *enfant terrible* of the Harlem Renaissance, explored multiple sexual identities in France. He was, according to Steve Watson, “perhaps the purest example of the dual identity so common among the New Negroes: Jamaican and American, homosexual and heterosexual, Harlemiter and Greenwich Villager, revolutionary and decadent, servant and celebrity” (Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, 124). His sexuality was a fluid expression of unfettered desire of which he exercised total control unlike race, nationality, socioeconomics or color, which seemed to define him throughout his life.

In *Banjo*, McKay creates a gay friendly space for black men where homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality and sexual ambiguity peacefully coexist and interact through male bonding and myriad displays of black virility on a regular basis. While these men disport and frolic in the waters surrounding the docks to beat the heat, they unwittingly remove the barriers of male heteronormativity in the public domain. This assessment does not pretend to cast aspersion on the largely heterosexual identity of the men but rather to suggest the importance of reading *Banjo* through a gay-friendly lens, as well, because “the beach boys often bathed down at the docks making bathing suits of their drawers. And sometimes, when they had the extreme end of the breakwater

to themselves, they went in naked” (*B* 34). Thus, the traditional lines of masculinity are redrawn and reconsidered in the absence of major female antagonists or protagonists with the exception of Latna, Banjo’s North African female lover, whom he treats like one of the guys. McKay’s self-proclaimed sexual liberation arguably celebrates black sexuality often referred to by himself as “natural” or “primitive” in comparison to the “unnatural” or contrived sexuality of whites. One might conclude, however, that McKay, heavily influenced by his sexually ambiguous mentor Walter Jekyll, the English folklorist who turned away from “civilization” and the confining social mores of London for the “freedom” of Jamaica, introduced McKay to gay writers such as Whitman, Wilde and Carpenter whose themes partly influenced the non-hetero normative bent in *Banjo* where Ray, the intellectual, enjoyed the squalor of the men’s living quarters, though “dirty and stinking, he had preferred it to a better proletarian quarter because of the surprising and warm contacts with the men of his own race and the pecuniary help he could get from them at critical times” (*B* 235).

A close reading of *Banjo* poses even more questions about the complex relationship McKay had with his own sexual ambiguity, sexual fluidity and the main characters of this novel. As the narrative progresses, McKay seems to vacillate between the defense of patriarchy on one hand and the defense of nonconformity on the other. For instance, the possibility that non-heteronormative activity amongst the men existed is very likely due to the close proximity and symbiotic relationships they shared and the noteworthy absence of female characters in the novel. It is hard to believe that McKay defends patriarchy in the novel when he ascribes true masculinity to those unlike himself: the uneducated and unrefined, and casts aspersions on white collar men when Ray, a

potential white collar worker himself, disparages “Negroes doing clerical work wearing glasses that made them sissy-eyed” (*B* 323), because they have been tainted by white civilization and, thus, have lost part of their raw masculinity.

McKay also critiqued the repressive nature of white sexuality. According to Ray, sexual repression in white society was the “fundamental, unconscious cause of the antagonism between white and black ...the white man considered sex a nasty, irritating thing, while a black accepted it with primitive joy ” (*B* 325). The bustling nightlife on the docks was generally centered around the black men’s sexual conquest, promiscuity and prowess with white women who are depicted as embodiments of Westernism, materialism, debauchery, whiteness and hypocrisy. Black sexuality, an offshoot of black culture, was a pure expression of vitality, purity, innocence and sincerity according to McKay who placed little importance on the views of black critics such as conservative black literary critic George Schuyler who deemed McKay’s works as mere pandering to white preconceived notions and fears of blacks, especially in terms of sexuality. In *Banjo*, the metropolitan ubiquity of these men and the absence of violence of any sort against women expressly dispel the myth that they are savages. White sexuality, conversely, is warped due to the corruption of white society rife with rigid stratifications of social class and economics, especially in Western Europe where the working class and poor whites are essentially treated like blacks in America. When Ray frowns upon the lifestyle of a dissolute white female prostitute, he moralizes Negro culture and indicts white society, which promotes class division and poverty within its members. This act places him on higher moral ground than the whites who surround him on the docks and in Parisian government which perpetuate the status quo.

McKay uses Ray to refute the belief that the black males are sexually deprived by nature. In the novel, Ray exerts complete control over his sexual desires, thoughts and encounters. These actions are in part due to McKay's advocacy of black unity, self-determination and the refusal to fall victim to the fleeting desires of the flesh. Ray becomes the incorruptible, decent black man who prefers an honorable life of struggle in order to become a writer over compromising moral integrity for capital gain. In doing so, he successfully avoids the corruption of white civilization and "a group of white occultist whose leader has a penchant for exotic sins... celebrations of occult rites and barbaric saturnalia with the tempo of nocturnal festivities regulated by the cracks of the whips" eager to incorporate an African man part of their sex show. McKay drives home the point that white society is clearly depraved and derives special pleasure from the domination and dehumanization of blacks within the sexual realm. Ray supports this claim when he refers to blacks, Arabs, and Chinese who are hired to "perform like monkeys" in Marseille sex shows. While in Paris, McKay most likely developed a distaste for white sexual deviancy or sexual corruption exacted upon black males after having worked in a *bain de vapeur*, a common hangout for gay males, who likely crossed the line with McKay, making him feel like he had "sacrificed to make a little extra money," while "denying white men the satisfaction of 'perverse' desire" (Schwartz 102).

At the end of the novel, Banjo and Ray embark on a homosocial and an implied homoerotic journey. As the fragmented stories of the men are told, the cast of characters atrophies due to death, deportation, and the pursuit of opportunities elsewhere, leaving Ray and Banjo, the main characters, two options: to vagabond beyond Marseille together or to part ways on ships bound for foreign lands. Ray expresses his desire for the former

in the following line, “He had been dreaming of what joy it would be to go vagabonding with Banjo. Stopping here and there, staying as long as the feeling held in the ports where black men assembled for the great transport lines, loafing after their labors long enough to love and jazz and fight” (*B* 319), and to his surprise, Banjo expresses similar desire without Latnah, his lover. In the closing paragraph of the novel, Banjo delights in Ray’s decision to journey through life with him and admonishes Ray who laments ostensibly Latnah’s absence to possibly assess Ray’s feelings for Latnah and the importance of female companionship in general by saying, “It would have been a fine thing if we could have taken Latnah along, eh”? (*B* 326) and Ray’s deft response “Don’t get soft ovahh any one wimmens, pardner. Tha’s you’ big weakness. A woman is a conjunction. Gawd fixed her different from us in moh ways than one. And theah’s things we can git away with all the time and she just kain’t. Come on, pardner. Wese got enough between us to beat it a long ways from here” (*B* 326).

McKay ends the story steeped in sexual, racial, cultural and economic unorthodoxy. While the colonized world struggles to attain metropolitan standards of living, respect and alliances, McKay proposes acceptance of multiple sexualities, primitivism and the rejection of the dominant discourse in the West, the lionization of patriarchy, capitalism and white hegemony as ways to empower all members of the African Diaspora. Lastly, McKay drives home the importance of black resilience and evolution as major keys to combating racism in this work.

Négritude

During McKay's five trying years of literary output, financial instability, physical and emotional obstacles, he inadvertently inspired Négritude, the Francophone blacks' acceptance of self and affirmation of black pride according to iconic figures of the movement such as Senegalese poet, cultural theorist and the first president of that nation Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor who concluded "Claude McKay can rightfully be considered the true inventor of négritude" after reading *Banjo (Claude McKay: The True Inventor of Négritude* 116).

Despite underwhelming success in America or Europe, *Banjo* inspired salient race consciousness and cultural production among French-speaking blacks during the 1930's. *Banjo* not only diagnosed the prevailing social ills of colonialism, racism, self-hate and disempowerment, it also proffered prescriptive solutions to these problems. McKay described Senghor as "a tall, lean, intelligent Senegalese and his ideas were a mixture of African nationalism and international Communism. Senghor was interested in my writing and said he wished I would write the truth about the Negroes in Marseille. I promised him that I would someday" (*ALWFH* 278). The time spent among French-speaking blacks had given McKay credibility and provided a platform for his personal ideology on race. His colonial West Indian roots, literary bent, and New Negro/Harlem Renaissance affiliation also inspired francophone Caribbean leaders such as the Martinican poet, writer, cultural theorist and politician Aimé Césaire, who coined the term Négritude in 1939 in the following poem entitled "Notebook of a Return to a Foreign Land"

My négritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled

Against the clamor of day
 My négritude is not a laukoma of dead liquid over
 The earth's dead eye
 My négritude is neither tower nor cathedral
 It takes root in the red flesh of the sky
 It breaks through the opaque prostration
 With its upright patience.

In his *Prose and Poetry*, Senghor writes, Negritude is “quite simply, the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world. It is not racialism, it is culture” (94).

McKay, Césaire and Senghor also shared similar cultural and intellectual similarities. All three credited the strong influence white intellectuals and the metropolises played in their academic formation and radical subsequent racial politics. In *Banjo*, Ray references Rimbaud and Tolstoy as literary mentors who advocate for the peasantry; Césaire's poetry was heavily influenced by the surrealist movement in France and, particularly, the ethnographic studies of Africa by Leo Frobenius and Maurice Delafosse educated the growing awareness that existed among Francophone black intellectuals in Paris on the Great African civilizations. Césaire's denunciation of white chauvinism also informs some of McKay's most virulent musings on race in the following line,

Because we hate you, we claim kinship cannibalism
 With dementia praecox and the flaming madness
 of persistent and your reason (Senghor 49)

Both Césaire and McKay looked to the triumph of the Haitian Revolution for inspiration and the uplifting of blacks internationally. Senghor actively cited the significance of ancestral traditions, African culture and African cultural themes as the corner and capstone of this movement, which was greatly inspired by the works and sojourn of McKay in France from 1924 to 1929.

Chapter Seven: Morocco

McKay found temporary solace in the culture and people of Morocco. While writing *Banjo* in 1927, McKay's desire to visit Africa grew after a Senegalese friend who lived between France and Morocco spoke very highly of the country and invited him to visit. Upon completion of *Banjo* in 1929, McKay decided to seek greener pastures outside of France. He felt that there was nothing more left for him to see, do, or aspire to there. Still searching for "home," and with Africa on his mind, he went south to Spain, where the provincial warmth of the people enchanted him and the devoutly Catholic spirit in the air calmed much of his anxiety about race, class, life and, ironically, God. For the first time in his adult life, McKay re-evaluated the idea of a higher being, spirituality, and the true meaning of life. Catholicism in Spain felt sincere, unlike American, English or even French Christianity which felt disingenuous and self-serving. His first stop was the north eastern Mediterranean city of Barcelona, where he wrote

Barcelona took my sight and feeling so entirely that it was impossible for me to leave... The magnificent spectacle of the sporting spirit of the Spaniards captured my sense and made me an aficionado of Spain. I had never been among any other white people who gave such a splendid impression of sporting impartiality, and with such grand gestures. Whether it was boxing between a white and a black or a duel between a man and a beast in the arena, or a football match between a Spanish and a foreign team, the Spaniard's main interests lay in the technical excellencies....
(ALWFH 296)

And not race. Despite the very small numbers of blacks in Spain, his race did not seem to pose a problem. As an artist, he was drawn by “Spanish sporting spirit into the popular theatres where flamenco is seen and the Andalusian melodies are heard. In no other country have I seen a people’s audience so exigent in demanding the best an artist can give, so ruthless in turning thumbs down on a bad artist, and so generous in applauding an excellent performance” (*ALWFH* 296).

Three intended days turned into three months in Spain, a country where the people were warmer, lived closer to the land, and were more willing to share their culture with outsiders like himself. He considered these positive traits “the African streak in its character” (*ALWFH* 296). Then McKay continued further south to Casablanca, Morocco, his first African sojourn. His immediate impressions of Africa were that it was strikingly similar to Jamaica. Even the racial lines between the Arabs of North Africa and the blacks of Sub-Saharan Africa seemed to blur in Casablanca, where one afternoon his Martinican friend took him to see...

some Guinea sorcerers (or Gueanoua, as they are called in Morocco) [who] were performing a magic rite. The first shock I registered was the realization that they looked and acted exactly like certain peasants of Jamaica who give themselves up to celebrating of a religious sing-dance orgy which is known as Myalism. The only difference was in their clothing. (*ALWFH* 297)

In Spain and even more so in Morocco, McKay had found the racial, cultural, socioeconomic, personal and physical “home” he had not found on previous sojourns.

Race in Morocco

Race in Morocco was not solely based on the Western binaries of black and white but on centuries of African-Arab relations from invasions, wars, migration and interracial marriage. During McKay's sojourn, the 20th Century Western definition of race, largely dictated by Western European nations such as the English and the French who controlled Morocco during that time, grappled with the complex concept of race among North African peoples such as the Berbers (considered Caucasian) and Bedouins who extended throughout North Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, the Arabs of the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africans and Europeans, especially from the Mediterranean countries of Spain and France. Sub-Saharan African and North African relations dated back to 615 AD, when Muhammed the Prophet and his followers fled (hijra) the holy Islamic city of Mecca for Medina some 200 miles to the south after receiving word that his assassination was being planned. They found protection under the King of Abyssinia in present-day Ethiopia where the first Islamic community was formed outside of Arabia. In 640 AD, Arabic General Amru captured Egypt and spread Islamic influences, which spread East to the Atlantic and across the western desert and South along the coast of the Red Sea. By 708 AD, North Africa had been conquered completely when Musa Ibn Nusair invaded Morocco. Three years later, Muslim Berbers crossed the Mediterranean into Spain and conquered it. These people were known as the Moors. By 725 AD, Islam had reached the neighboring Moroccan countries of Mali and the Senegal Regions. Under Moorish rule, the Dark Age of Europe had come to an end. Spain became a "mecca" for the arts, education, the sciences, navigation, agriculture, and Christian barbarians of Europe were civilized. Southern Europeans learned how to cultivate crops, such as oranges, lemons,

rice, silk, cotton and sugar. The Moors also brought musical instrumentation and cultured dress, manners and etiquette. General Tarik Ibn Ziyad, a Berber who converted to Islam, was Sub-Saharan African and one of the three most well-known travelers, explorers, and warriors of Moorish descent. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the onus of race was lifted from McKay in Morocco, a land that evoked Jamaica and Africa in McKay's mind's eye.

Sub-Saharan Africa engaged in trade, commerce, war and migration with Morocco for centuries. The Gueanoua people for example:

Were all pure black. They were the only group of pure Negroes in Morocco. Men and women marry black, and it is the only religious order that has female members. If one is not pure black he cannot belong to the Gueanoua. They say the strict keeping of the rule makes the Gueanoua magic powerful. The fetish rites are West African and are transmitted from generation to generation. They have a special place in the social life of Morocco. The wealthiest as well as the poorest families have them to exorcise devils. Often they were protected by powerful sherifian families, and sultans have consulted them. (*ALWFH* 297)

Such a group would never have been allowed to maintain its religious practices and high position in American or Western European society for many reasons. First, Christianity demonized and denigrated all forms of African polytheistic religions. Second, these religions threatened the spread of Christianity, and, third, they challenged the racial, linguistic, political, social standards of white society.

Paradoxically, McKay became both “white” and “native” or black Moroccan. His foreign status, American affiliation, Western style of dress, body language, mother tongue and academic preparation “whitened” him there. Like Walter Jekyll, his childhood mentor from England who in similar fashion renounced life in the metropole for life in Jamaica, a colony of England, McKay also renounced life in Europe and namely in France, the country that colonized Morocco, for Africa. McKay stood out among the natives who instinctively knew he was foreign through years of contact with the French, Spanish, Italians and British. His lifestyle was also very expat, in that he was finally able to lease “a little house in the country by the sea, about three miles out of Tangier...found a little brown native girl to take care of the house. She brought her mother along, so she could look her own people in the face without flinching. There was also a boy on a bicycle who ran errands. And we all cultivated the garden and lived comfortably on twenty-five dollars each month” (*ALWFH* 330). But living “the good life” or the typical life of a white colonial simply because he had the wherewithal to do so did not interest McKay in the least. Making connections with the black African influenced natives and culture did, however.

McKay adopted a native lifestyle in Morocco. In Rabat, he delighted in the richness of native life. In Shellah, he visited the tomb of the Black Sultan “who, according to the native legend, was the greatest ruler of Morocco, having united all North Africa under his rule, conquered Spain, built the greatest monuments of the Giralda at Seville, the Koutabia at Marakesh, and the Hassan Tower at Rabat” (*ALWFH* 298). He reveled in feelings, as if he “was walking all the time on a magic carpet” (*ALWFH* 298). In Fez, he was enchanted by the bazaars and souks full of the exotic wonder expressed in

Orientalism by Edward Said. He also realized that prior to Fez, he had “been merely a spectator” (*ALWFH* 298), and decided to take a more active role in connecting with the natives who invited him to “his first native meal of cous-cous in a native house....princely marriage feasts ...to drink the a la menthe in cool gardens, to the intimate dancing of the fatmahs” (*ALWFH* 299). Eventually, McKay...

went completely native ...living native and cheaply...occupied in sampling the treasures of the city and its environments; in picking up the trails of the peasants bringing their gifts to town; following the Afro-Oriental bargaining; feeling the color of the accent of the story-tellers in the marketplaces. And in the evening there was always divertissement: a marriage ceremony and feast, an invitation to a fondouk.... never tired of listening to the native musicians playing African variations of the oriental melodies in the Moroccan cafes. (*ALWFH* 300)

For the first time in McKay’s life, he felt “singularly free of color-consciousness...a feeling akin to the physical well-being of a dumb animal among kindred animals, who lives instinctively and by serious sensations only, without thinking”(ALWFH 300).

Similar to the peasantry in Jamaica or the working class in Harlem, McKay felt a sense of calm, solidarity and pride.

Sexuality in Morocco

According to *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Moslem Societies* by John Dececco, sexuality in Morocco is a social construct that men are allowed to quietly redefine. Sexuality was also defined in different terms in Morocco. The dominant

discourse that established the opposing polarities of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the West did not have the same meanings nor connotations in Morocco, where the notion of patriarchy was defined differently. Being the well-read, educated man that McKay was, it is highly unlikely that he was oblivious to the homo-friendly air that pervaded the tourist areas and the major cities of Morocco. There is a reason American writer William Burroughs chose Morocco to write his loosely autobiographical novel *Naked Lunch*, which was banned in the U.S. in the 1960s due to its vivid descriptions of gay sex in Morocco. American novelist Paul Bowles also chose to set his novel *The Sheltering Sky* against the backdrop of the Sahara in Tangier for the same reason. And fellow Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg spent time in Morocco due to similar motives. Ernest Hemingway, Jean Genet, André Gidet, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Joe Orton were also rumored or confirmed to have been either gay or bisexual writers who were also drawn to Morocco, in part due to the same sex tolerance of Moroccan culture and the liberal tourist scene that catered to the satisfaction of carnal desire. Major cultural differences between Morocco and the West date back to the 15th century when the term Orientalism was created by Europeans who eroticized North African culture and its people, questioned the social mores that permitted two men to walk hand and hand down a street or to greet one another with a kiss on the cheek: two social practices reserved for females in America. (Dececco 73)

And although McKay writes about the soft, pretty, brown middle-class African-American girl named Carmina, who fruitlessly tries to force his hand to marry her, McKay seemed to enjoy the sexual freedom to explore his sexuality with Moroccan men

who commonly lived traditional heteronormative lifestyles but occasionally or frequently availed themselves to gay tourists seeking sex and companionship for a fee.

Homosexuality in *Romance in Marseille* and *Gingertown*

The secret subculture of non-normative behavior in Morocco helped influence the creation of same gender love and lust themes/sub-themes, characters, places and events in many of the works written in Morocco. McKay clearly subscribes to ideals of natural and unnatural sexuality. Natural sexuality was tantamount to black primitivism while unnatural sexuality equated the adulteration of primitivism in white civilization. In *Romance in Marseille*, Petit Frère is an effeminate gay white character who is romantically linked to Big Blond, his masculine companion. The interaction between the couple adheres to traditional behavior of most heterosexual couples of that time which consisted of a dominant male and a submissive female. The effeminacy of Petit Frère reduce his agency and places him at a disadvantage throughout the novel, which seems to favor and sanction the performance of masculinity among homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. McKay also witnessed this dynamic in Jamaica, Harlem and Morocco where McKay never openly nor freely expressed his fluid sexuality. Instead, he played it safe, primarily in Jamaica but also in the countries he visited, by adhering to the strict heteronormative rules of male behavior in public while secretly bending, subverting, or disregarding them in private. Therefore, the presence of white pansies or effeminate men in *Romance in Marseille* are portrayed as products of the failures of white society and its deviation from normative heterosexuality, heavily preoccupied with the natural carnal inclinations of men to conquer another via penetration, sexually speaking. In *Romance in Marseille*, McKay metaphorically describes the “wide-open holes in the wall” as the

pansies' and the female prostitutes' place of work, while male prostitution is generally seen as men's work where most of these individuals occupy the dominant role in the sexual act. A prime example of such bias is in McKay's description of a bar in Marseille in the novel where "the little brothers steal business away from the female prostitutes" (88). Hence, sexual encounters between effeminate gay males and masculine heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual males is less egregious in society because it mimics dominant heteronormative behavior.

McKay continued to indict white civilization in his critique of the white pansy, which he depicted as "freakish... with his pale prettiness and challenging deep dark ringed eyes and insolent mouth" (68), while Big Blond is more favorably described as a "big firm-footed broad shouldered man, splendidly built" (68). Big Blond also performs random acts of masculinity such as braggadocio, brawling, and imbibing large amounts of liquor at their local hangout. Once Big Blond "broke up the furniture in a saloon ...because a boy companion of his was insulted there" (112). In addition, Big Blond "didn't want to impose Petit Frère upon" (70) his cohorts who frequented the Café Petit Frère, a predominantly male bar where Petit Frère is considered to be a strange societal anomaly.

Black pansies in *Home to Harlem*, on the other hand, inspire women "painted like dark pansies" (54), or effeminate men portrayed as fashion and beauty mentors, trend setters, and stylists for heterosexual women. A perfect example of this is the black pansy who was "made up with high-brown powder, his eyebrows were elongated, and blackened up, his lips streaked with dark rouge so popular in Harlem, and his carefully straightened hair lay plastered and glossy under Madame Walker's absinthe colored salve

‘for milady of fashion and color’ (76). Unlike the undesirable “queer gestures and queerer screams” (46) of white pansies in *Romance in Marseille*, “dark dandies were loving up their pansies” (76) in *Home to Harlem* as an acceptable alternative for men such as Jake who “luxuriates with charmingly painted pansies” (77), after his relationship with Rose, an older black financially sound woman turns sour.

Homosexuality is also alluded to in *Gingertown*, a compilation of short stories written by McKay. White lesbianism is vilified in “Highball,” a short story about Nation, a black cabaret singer who dutifully entertains whites by night downtown while Myra, his unhappy stay-at-home white wife, who secretly despises him and his race, is surprised by Nation, who comes home early one night unannounced, only to find Myra and her best friend Dinah “kissing and embracing each other” (107). Myra is “a rather coarse-fleshed woman, with freckled hands, beet colored elbows, dull blue eyes, and lumpy hair of the color varnish” (106). Dinah, Myra’s friend and secret lover, resembled a vampire with “tall and black haired sharp featured and stubbed nosed. Her arms were uncommonly long. Her nails were manicured to sharp and exceedingly long points. Her lips were carmine-excessively rouged. And she affected black dresses with a touch of red, black velvet, slippers and purple stockings” (116). McKay compares Dinah and Myra to vampires who prey on black man’s vulnerable yearning for acceptance into white society.

Distaste for white lesbians is also seen in McKay’s criticism of his friend Louise Bryant’s choice of female lover, whom he labeled an “ugly mugged woman” (285) that resembled “the apparition of a male impersonator who was never off stage” (285). McKay’s disapproval of Bryant’s choice of woman “despite the many attractive women in the world” (285) reinforces his belief that masculine white lesbians are simply

distasteful and unnatural. Nation's naiveté and desire to be accepted by whites prevents him from seeing Myra's egocentric motives, which become more than evident to him when he realizes that "Myra was more affectionate to Dinah than she was to him" (120), largely because he was not white, a point McKay continues to drive home in his works.

Bisexuality among men of color resurfaces in the short story "The Prince of Porto Rico," based on the life of Manuel, "whose gestures were fine and he was most handsomest and most elegant of the lot" (32). He is also a philanderer and playboy who delights in non-committal sex and relationships with women, another indication of his non-normative sexual proclivity. Set in a barbershop, a place where black males have historically gathered and bonded in the absence of women for decades yet reminiscent of the beauty parlor, an exclusively feminine space, homoeroticism abounds in the "pink cream smeared all over chocolate skin. Sugar brown experts bending over chocolate lads, luxuriating under the process and dreaming sweet scented rendezvous with the chippies" (32). Manuel, also known as Prince, is aware of his popularity among the women who lust after him and men who try to emulate him. He expresses his mutual platonic and aloof erotic interests in both sexes in the following lines, "Oh I love a lot. I love the girls. I love the boys. I love to love" (40). He also takes a laid-back approach to dating women much like McKay who was not as adverse to the possibility of dating one as he was to the idea of committing to one exclusively. In the short story, Prince didn't "fool around with women too much" (38). He earns his smooth reputation that way, as well. Besides, life taught him that it was always better to "treat them straight but sharp and they will like you better" (38).

Male and female sex workers also played visible roles in much of McKay's writing in Morocco. Male prostitution, though clandestine in its nature, did not challenge male patriarchy in Morocco - which denigrated the homosexual male who played the passive role in gay sex but not the aggressive one who in many instances - and especially when sex work was concerned - was considered homosexual. Female prostitution, on the other hand, violated the social codes of morality, decency and, most importantly, the laws of Islam. In *Home to Harlem* and in *Banjo*, prostitution and sex acts serve as a constant backdrop to the plots that unfold in the buffet flats of Harlem and the second rate hotels in the winding alleyways of Marseille. When McKay is accused of sleeping in natives' homes in *A Long Way From Home*, it is also implied that the charges brought against him hinge on suspicions that he engaged in illicit sexual activity with the natives. Whether true or false, many of the hotels where McKay lodged were havens for drug trafficking, human trafficking and prostitution.

Primitivism in *Romance in Marseilles* and *Gingertown*

Primitivism is a philosophy and Western art movement that dates back to the Golden Age. It prizes the simpler way of life over the complexities of modernity. McKay extolls this ideology in myriad ways in *Romance in Marseille* and *Gingertown*.

Africa

Sojourning in Morocco enabled McKay to discover the land of his forefathers. Although his grandparents came from Sub-Saharan Africa, the tribal experience of the "village" brought McKay back to the hills of Jamaica, the streets of Harlem and docks of Marseille. In *Romance in Marseille*, the African "village," or Quayside, is the place

where Lafala, a West African young man's fate changes after he stows away in the bows of a ship from France to NYC, loses his feet and legs to his knees to frostbite, is awarded \$ 7,000, and returns to Marseilles instead of W. Africa. Lafala essentially becomes the quintessential representation of the African snatched from his land, deracinated from his culture and forced to survive far from "the bush with naked black youth" (1) in France. Upon returning to Marseille, the Quayside becomes, once again, the place where Lafala and his fellow black and brown migrant brothers or "tribesmen" drink from the calabash on the sacred grounds of the docks of Marseille where existential rites of African culture are preserved and performed, and Lafala "heard the other Negroes discussing the Back-to-Africa news and wandering what would become of ...was stirred too. Return.... Return.... Turn away from strange scenes and false gods find salvation in native things..." (3).

The Quayside also represents a point of re-entry into primitive society. Lafala's return is a symbolic representation of "the native soil....lovely heaps of leaves, and affectionate tufts of grass" (2) he once knew as a young child in Africa before "the missionaries brought him from the bush to the town where they lived and taught," (2) and, subsequently, his point of departure from Africa to France to America and, ultimately, back to France again. McKay makes an interesting parallel between Lafala's Trans-Atlantic voyage and the Middle Passage which brought millions of Africans to the New World, often times, after having stopped at a major European port city such as Liverpool or Marseilles where life on the docks was never static. McKay makes reference to this constant state of flux he witnessed in the Moroccan port cities of Casablanca, known for its "overwhelmingly European atmosphere" (*ALWFH* 298) and Rabat, a city

where “native life was the big tree with solid roots and spreading branches, and the European city was like a garden, lovely and carefully tended” (*ALWFH* 298). In *Romance in Marseille*, Lafala pleasantly reminisces about “home” when he meets Aslima, a black North African female he describes as a “near native thing, a way to go back too” (3). Her inner strength and keen tribal instincts draw him closer to her and enable her to discern good from evil like a “tigress and her domination had long been undisputed at Quayside” (37). Likewise, her formidable presence in a male-dominated society challenged gender norms of modern civilization. Like the West African women who control the local street markets, Aslima a “lady of the night,” controls her destiny, as well, when she exercises emotional agency in her ability to separate business from pleasure. On the other hand, the mere nature of her profession compromises complete autonomy. Therefore, her description as a “strong willed, near native thing....a way to go back too” (4) suggests conflict between McKay’s desire to return to primitivism and his deep connection to the West.

The following poem, nevertheless, distills his occasionally mixed emotions about primitivism and Western civilization,

“Tetuan”

The conquering Moor an homage to Spain

And the Alhambra lifted up its towers!

Africa’s fingers tipped with miracles,

And quivering with Arabian designs,

Traced words and figures like exotic flowers,

Sultanas' chambers of rare tapestries,
 Filigree marvels from Koranic lines,
 Mosaics chanting notes like tropic rain.
 Even the Moslem pride,
 And Spain repaid the tribute ages after:
 To Tetuan, that fort of struggle and strife,
 Where chagrined Andalusian Moors retired,
 She bought a fountain bubbling with new life,
 Whose crystal charm won the Moslem pride,
 and filled it sparkling with flamenco laughter.

1937

This poem exemplifies the coalescence of Sub-Saharan and Moorish blood in Northern Africa by way of the local tribes and clans that occupied the land for centuries to form a new culture built on both indigenous and Western elements.

McKay also recreates the African "village" in Morocco. After settling into life there, McKay began to submerge himself in greater degrees of local culture. One of his first acts of such approximation was the shedding of his Western garb for traditional attire which allowed him to jettison the Western stigmas that came with them. This is evident when he was arrested by French officials who claimed that he fraternized with locals in their homes, a punishable act. Another approximation of a return to the primitive way of living was his daily routine which included the daily consumption of mint tea with wise elders on the streets or at the bazaars, his acclimation to North African foods such as

cous-cous with lamb and chicken and the *Dar Hassani* (native house) he rented in Tangier where he “found a little brown native girl to take care of the house” (*ALWFH* 331). McKay also welcomed the mother of the young girl who also came along and “a boy on a bicycle to run errands....cultivated the garden” and (*ALWFH* 331). These individuals became the surrogate family that McKay grew to love, largely because it reminded him of the Jamaican families he had come to know and love growing up in rural Clarendon. But despite his Moroccan experience, McKay “did not plunge deep enough down into the native ways to touch the depths of that tribal opposition to opposing groups which gave strength and meaning to their common existence” (*ALWFH* 332). Instead, he “lived on the edge of the native life, among them, but not of them” (*ALWFH* 333) a strikingly similar approach he took to life everywhere he went, especially Harlem.

Like McKay, Lafala returned to the Quayside in Marseille, this time as a person with an enviable amount of money and a different outlook on life. McKay faced a similar dilemma in Marseille among his pan-African brethren because his Western formation also prevented him from totally reinserting himself back into African life in Morocco despite having had the chance “to marry into a Moroccan family...religion was an obstacleand Islam, as it was practiced was intolerant and fanatic” (*ALWFH* 332,333). Lafala, like McKay, also became the outsider on the docks due to the loss of his lower limbs and his instinctive ability to dance on the Quayside, in the bars, clubs and cabarets like before.

The large financial settlement also set him apart from the boys on the docks, as well, because having the financial wherewithal to live as he pleased meant he no longer

depended on the benevolence of local nightlife promoters or entrepreneurs. This made him more desirable in Aslima's and her contender, La Noir Fleur's eyes, since both women were interested in his money. McKay felt similar sentiments under the constant watch of Moroccan officials who answered to the French and/or the British Consulates.

Harlem and Jamaica

Gingertown is replete with primitivism. In June 1930, McKay finished *Gingertown*, a compilation of short stories based on life in Harlem and Jamaica. Originally titled *The Jungle and the Bottoms*, this work marked the end of the picaresque literary genre that he had decidedly embraced. Once again, the capacious themes of marginalization, race and the black struggle inform the lives of the main characters of six Harlem stories that "go deeper into the life of Harlem Negroes than *Home to Harlem* ever did" (Cooper 269). Having recently turned forty, McKay felt the need to put roots down somewhere; Tangier seemed to be the ideal locale due to its large international community, proximity to Spain, - McKay's favorite European country - and cosmopolitan feel.

Folk tradition inspired him throughout Morocco. In a letter to his friend Max Eastman - included in Wayne Cooper's biography on McKay - he wrote:

no place has satisfied me since I left home as much as Morocco. There are many things in the lives of the natives, their customs and social life of the peasants. I am ripe for it as I am also feeling very religious now among the Moslems.... After my experience here the "Jungle" seems rather thin and

cheap. I am right in coming back to feel that basic community existence.

(271)

The first six short stories of *Gingertown* take place in Harlem and are based on black performance in one way or another. The short story “Brownskin Blues,” one of the six, and the poem “Harlem Dancer,” will be compared and “When I Pounded the Pavement,” also from “Gingertown,” will also be analyzed for the purposes of this investigation.

In the short story “Brownskin Blues,” McKay explores the popularity and pitfalls of colorism among black performers both on and off stage. The plot is centered around Bess - speculatively, blues singer Bessie Smith - a cabaret singer rankled by the color of her “gleaming coffee” complexion despite her successful career and loyal followers. Every night Bess enralls captive audiences with song, soul and racy innuendo. Nothing empowers her more than “the general handclapping and tinkling of glasses” moments before she struts on stage with her head back and hands on hips singing, ‘I got a feeling for you’ ” (4). Bess made love to the audience with her “deep contralto voice just right for easy-singing cabaret tunes” (4), inviting dance steps from tap to burlesque to the wildly sensuous Wickle Wiggle before proceeding to pick up her tips from debauched men and women sitting at tables dispersed throughout the room. Bess embodied the New Negro on the outside: dark, lovely, talented and confident. But unlike the New Negro, her ebony blackness tormented her existence to no end on the inside.

Like the poem “Harlem Dancer”, penned by McKay and included in *Harlem Shadows*, Bess exemplifies the “Harlem Dancer” whose outward smile masks inner tears amidst the

Bess and the Harlem Dancer perform whiteness on stage in similar yet different ways. Bess' rapturous performance and successful career effaces her dark skin on stage and in effect puts her celebrity on the par with that of the early Twentieth-Century white cabaret performer and silver screen vixen, Mae West. But Bess is unlucky in love having been jilted twice. Her first lover was a high-yellow or very light-skinned "sweetman" or playboy who left her for a black woman with long flowing hair and a complexion lighter than his own. Her second lover was a dark-skinned black man whom she met after exchanging furtive glances with him while performing one night, alongside his "light yellow, highly-powdered" black (6) woman who, unaware of the visual communication transpiring between them, uses her body language to flaunt her elevated social standing over Bess in both black and white societies due to her complexion. She "smiled maliciously, and tossed her head and put up her hand on the shoulder of the darker man in a possessive kind of way, while the waiter was fixing a table for them" (6). Bess' clear interpretation of the woman's non-verbal assertion of power, superiority and disdain for her causes Bess to abruptly abandon the stage in mid-song in utter consternation and defeat, lose her job and, ultimately, the illusion of "whiteness," while performing on the black cabaret circuit. What is most tragic, however, is Bess' ill-fated decision to bleach her skin to approximate whiteness and the ill effects of disfiguration, marginalization and regret she experiences thereafter upon realizing that Jake, her faithful, light-skinned friend, confidant and suitor was truly the only man who ever really loved her.

In the sonnet "The Harlem Dancer," performance masks the pain of a young black dancer unhappily immersed in Harlem night life probably out of necessity. Though never openly stated, "The applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes, watched her

perfect, half clothed body sway,” leads one to believe that the Harlem Dancer also sells her body simply due to the nature of the cabarets, night clubs and buffet flats widely known to offer food, liquor, music, dance and sexual trysts with the female entertainers so long as the price was right. Like Bess, the Harlem Dancer performs “gracefully and calm” and, perhaps, McKay is the only compassionate observer who intuitively “knew herself was not in that strange place” despite “her falsely smiling face.”

McKay metaphorically applauds her ability to overcome adversity like a “proudly swaying palm grown lovelier for passing through the storm” and endearingly equates her to the resilient peasant women of his youth who proudly stepped “over stones which had been placed in the stream for the people to cross....lift their silk frocks almost waist high, displaying their beautiful white petticoats... some filled with beautiful lace, much of it hand crocheted...beautiful embroidery stiffly starched” (*MGHOJ 2*), on their way to Sunday morning worship, thus adhering to the rigid norms of peasant society which dictated that women outwardly perform their Christianity in their speech, mannerisms, behavior and clothing.

In the short story “When I Pounded the Pavement,” social acceptance, respect and, ultimately, manhood are determined by the often unforgiving rules of performance. In the story, a young constabulary breaks the codes of conduct when he visits a girl at her home during his shift, gets caught and is humiliated, emasculated and demoralized by the switch of “two policemen holding him down on a block and taking down his pants and whipping him for sleeping with a girl.” From the start, McKay never liked constabulary work because it protected colonial interests primarily and required the constabularies to “make cases” or arrest citizens for the slightest offense. McKay, in anti-British contempt,

boasted that he “had never made a case since [my] enlistment and didn’t intend to make any” (*Gingertown* 206). McKay saw the atrocities committed against the marginalized and the inhumane abuses they suffered from government and law enforcement officials who considered them burdens to society and not potentially active members of it. McKay wanted to help them better their lives. This short story is based on the unhappy time he spent on the force and the conflicts he faced on the beat. Written in the first person, one better understands where McKay’s “fierce hatred of injustice” originates and the factors that impel him to protect the weak wherever he goes. It also underscores the negative aspects of performance which commonly require individuals to act unscrupulously and callously for financial and job security, and upward mobility. A fine example of this is when the constabulary (possibly McKay) is forced to set up a young couple making love on the behest of the girl’s white father and a fellow member of the constabulary. Race also comes into play in this story which pits the constabularies headed by an Irishman against the locals who are predominantly black. According to McKay, this dynamic further exacerbates existing tension between the colonizer and the colonized. In Morocco, McKay re-encountered this dichotomy and remains true to his commitment to protect and promote local culture and the people that have practiced it for centuries. This decision poses existential unrest for McKay, however. In *A Long Way From Home*, he is haunted by French and British constabularies suspicious of his intentions in Morocco and eager to deport him. He describes the rigorous degree of scrutiny they exercised when interrogating him and the rancor they exhibited towards him due to his race, Russian sojourn, and what they considered “subversive acts” such as fraternizing with the locals at their homes.

In the following poem, McKay extols the celebration of the performance of culture and history in a non-Western or primitive panache.

“Marakesh”

High Ramparts, tombs and mosques and mansions vaunting

Above the myriad huts of straw and clay,

Against the palms and olive branches singing,

Beneath the circling Atlas grand and hoary,

Barbaric strength of swarthy sultans’ sway-

While walls re-echo with the bell-like ringing

Of Muezzins ‘voices chanting Allah’s glory,

And ghosts of warrior’s ancient flags are flaunting:

The Berber youngsters pitch their little tents,

And skip gazelle-like for the approving throng

Of nomads purchasing the city’s joys -

African drum beat, oriental song,

Salome - sensual dance of jeweled boys,

Amidst the ruins of austere monuments.

Circa 1934

The first stanza of this sonnet lionizes the “primitive” aspects of Moroccan culture that have endured the test of time for centuries. A close reading of this stanza also reveals the importance of traditional music and its significance in Morocco and further still,

throughout the Diaspora. The significance of “primitivism” is clear in this stanza which pays homage to Moorish history, Ancient Egyptian semblance, North African architecture and Islam.

The second stanza, similar in tone, centers around the wonders of Moroccan or “primitive culture,” as seen through McKay’s watchful gaze. Unlike the first stanza, rich in its expressions of the cultural production of music in Africa, African tribal life, masculinity and history dovetail harmoniously in this stanza. The use of transitive verbs such as “vaunting” and “swaying” empower the natural elements of the culture and, hence, subverts colonial and imperial control and manipulation little by little. It is also interesting to note that Harlem remained a constant source of inspiration while living and writing in and about Morocco.

Banana Bottom

Banana Bottom, published in 1933, is arguably McKay’s finest novel. It purports primitivism and, more importantly, Black Nationalism. This work marked a definitive turn from the picaresque to the wider genre of the Black Experience set in Jamaica, the country where Tabitha “Bita” Plant, the main character, returns from England after having spent seven years of schooling and grooming there, slowly reintegrates herself back into local culture and peasant life or “primitivism” to the chagrin of the Craigs, the white missionary couple from England that sent her to England with hopes that she would return fully indoctrinated and committed to the colonial agenda. However, she does the opposite by going back to her peasant roots, agrarian values, and “country religion.”

McKay's unflinching support of Jamaican culture and Jamaican nationalism and anticolonial posture will be exemplified in Bitá, the anticolonial main character, the colonial gaze of the Craigs and Jubban, the Black Nationalist and humble peasant farming husband she ultimately falls in love with and marries.

Bitá

The creation of Bitá initiates McKay's acknowledgement of the important role of the black woman in the Diaspora. This seemingly insignificant act challenges patriarchy and Eurocentrism, two formidable pillars of hegemony in the national identity of Jamaica, a Caribbean island colonized by England for more than two centuries and granted independence in 1962. The publication of *Banana Bottom* predated Jamaican independence by nearly three decades. Nevertheless, the racial, social, cultural and economic issues facing Jamaica before McKay left remained fairly consistent with the major themes of this novel. Throughout this investigation, it has been established on numerous occasions that McKay's support of the working class and the underclass in Jamaica, Harlem and Marseilles has strengthened his desire to defend and preserve the historical legacies of black cultures in both adulterated and unadulterated states. It has also posited similarities between black cultures in the "New World" and West African cultures from the late 1800 to early 1900s when life revolved around agriculture, farming and the hierarchized and highly vaunted village. McKay was also interested in 19th century agrarian novels of Russia, which praised peasant life. Men and women played distinct yet equally vital roles in rural Jamaican society. Bitá, a peasant girl who wore her hair in pigtails, was a descendant of the slaves who constituted about three-fourths of the population classified as black or brown. This fact underscored the progressive move to

include black women in the New Negro movement in a substantial manner in the following passage from *Banana Bottom*, regarding the unorthodox opportunity she had to study in England, “it was a unique thing for a Negro girl to have that privilege . . . and there was not a black family in *Banana Bottom* . . . that did not wish their children had been in Bitá’s shoes” (29).

Interestingly, Bitá shared much in common with Carmina, McKay’s African-American paramour who wanted to marry him in Morocco. The similarities between both women are striking: Carmina was “a pretty colored lady who had recently deserted the best circles of Harlem for Paris” (*ALWFH* 324), that belonged to the middle class raised in Harlem, educated, refined, well-traveled and independent both financially and emotionally; Bitá, “had seven years sound education” (*Banana Bottom* 31) when she returned to Jamaica from England, where she had acquired degrees of sophistication, allure, education and self-confidence that matched Carmina’s. Both were attractive women with access to the black middle class in their respective countries but neither was drawn to that group nor its supercilious gaze on the black working class and the poor. Both women were instinctively drawn to the working class like McKay. Despite Carmina’s wide variety of male suitors. McKay wrote in *A Long Way From Home* that

she chided me for deserting her and said that she, too, wanted to go to Africa; that she was sick of Europe and growing worse. She had met all the leading bohemians, writers and artists more than I ever met. She was a frequent visitor to the Rue Fleurus and was hooked up with one of Gertrude Stein’s young men. But she was disgusted with him; he was just

a poor white mouse, she said. She was sick of it all and wanted to come to me. (328)

Bitá also returned to Jamaica with similar indifference for white Western civilization as evidenced when she defended the motives hundreds of Jamaicans had for migrating to Panama where, according to a disapproving Mrs. Craig, they “are not the same after contact with the Americans. They come back ruder...hard drinking and strutting with bad manners, loud clothes and louder jewelry” (35). Mrs. Craig’s continued, “Times may be hard here and our black folk terribly poor. But I like them better so than when they come back peacocks from Panama” (35). This quote neatly encapsulated the race relations in the Diaspora between blacks and whites as far as the New Negro was concerned. Whites resented black economic, social, political and cultural advancement, especially when these achievements were made by their own efforts. Such behavior and attitudes threatened white superiority built on the tenuous lie that because blacks were inherently inferior to whites, any attempt to prove the contrary would fail miserably.

Like McKay, Bitá held the local culture of the peasantry in high regard. Though numerous examples of cultural affirmation are replete in the novel, none were stronger than the syncretic elements of Christianity practiced by the peasants, the West African influenced social structures that reigned in peasant villages and the linguistic prominence of Jamaican English or Patwa.

Bitá was conflicted by Christianity, a religion imposed on her people. Historical records show a direct link between the spread of Christianity within the New World and

Colonial Period which took place from the late Fifteenth Century to the mid-Twentieth Century. During that time, Christianity was purportedly used to improve the lives of subalterns who commonly practiced non-Western religions such as from West Africa or from the Americas, for example. The idea that Christianity in the New World had to meet European standards troubled Bitá and affected the relationship she had with the Craigs much like it affected McKay's relationship with Christianity throughout most of his life. Throughout *Banana Bottom*, the chaste posture of the Craigs battles against the wayward will of the peasantry which infuse syncretic elements in Christianity despite the aggressive attempts made by the Craigs to convert, evangelize and, in effect, control the peasantry with it. One of the first major instances of anticolonial resistance with regards to religion was when Mrs. Craig admonished Bitá for fraternizing with the peasantry because "there are certain things we just can't do, simply because they reflect on the mission" (45). Nevertheless

That night Bitá went to bed with a new book that had arrived for Mrs. Craig. It was a novel by a Mrs. Humphry Ward and the motif was the conflict between Faith and Reason. She tried to read it but she could not get into the spirit of the book and be carried away. So she lay thinking about herself and her future. Everybody among the natives, from her father down, thought it was a magnificent and unique chance for her to have been adopted and given a high-class education to come back to the Jubilee Mission practically the heiress of the Craigs. (46)

Bitá was unsure, however. In fact she seriously pondered her affiliation with the Craigs and her happiness living under their rule in the same way that Twentieth-century

Jamaica began to define itself within the Diasporic and Caribbean context with regards to syncretized religions such as Rastafarianism and Revivalism, Myalism, and Kumina, for example.

Bitá's interest and support of Tea Dances was an active expression of Jamaican cultural production and colonial resistance. Tea Dances, or *Dansante* in French, originated during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries in England. Initially set in the English countryside, these events took place from the late afternoon to the early evening and consisted of light fare such as sandwiches, pastries, fruit, coffee, tea, and champagne; a live orchestra and ballroom dances such as the Waltz, Tango, and Foxtrot quickly spread throughout the upper classes in England and her colonies. In Jamaica, members of the lower classes held Tea Meetings. These events were very similar to Tea Dances in structure and to Cakewalks celebrated in Harlem in content. Despite Mrs. Craig's determination to mold "young Bitá Plant until she would be English trained and appearing in everything but the color of her skin," (31), Bitá was encouraged by Squire Gensir, the eccentric English expat and intellectual (Walter Jekyll in a fictional version arguably) to embrace her culture more than English culture because "Obeah is a part of your folklore, like your Anancy tales and your digging jammers. And your folklore is the spiritual link between you and your ancestral origin. You ought to learn to appreciate it as I do mine" (125), admonished Gensir. Once again, McKay replicates his anticolonial relationship with white unorthodox figures to usher Bitá out of the darkness of existential repression imposed by the colonists (the Craigs) into unfettered Jamaican paganism or "primitivism" by way of the intense beat of the African drums and dancing in the streets with the peasantry which "came more natural to her than the waltzes and minuets,

although she liked these too in a more artificial atmosphere” (84). It is important to note here, however, that, despite Bitá’s marriage to Jubban, she still likes to play the piano and read.

Bitá’s gradual emotional and physical return to peasant life undermined the rigid strictures of class in Jamaica. But like McKay, Bitá...

mingled in the crowd, responsive to the feeling, the colour, the smell, the swell and the press of it. It gave her the sensation of a reservoir of familiar kindred humanity into which she had descended for baptism....Many young natives had gone to the city or abroad for higher culture and returned aloof from, if not actually despising, the tribal life in which they were nurtured. But the joy that Bitá felt in the simple life of her girlhood was childlike and almost unconscious. She could not reason and theorize why she felt that way. It was just the surging free big feeling....The noises of the market were sweeter in her ear than a symphony. Accents and rhythms, movements and colours, nuances that might have well passed unnoticed if she had never gone away, were now revealed to her in striking detail. (40, 41)

And like McKay, she obviated the very social precepts that dictated appropriate behavior within her class. Both McKay and Bitá could have easily relegated themselves to the privileged class of blacks whose standards, values and mores mimicked those of the white privileged class but neither experienced the same degree of happiness that they felt among the lower class.

The Craigs

If Bitá's character thinly veils McKay's anticolonial thrust against England, then the Craigs represent the perpetuation of the colonial agenda. The Reverend Malcom Craig and his wife Priscilla Craig are English missionaries responsible for the academic, social, and religious formation of Bitá. Both individuals impose colonial rule in myriad ways. The Craigs come from long lines of missionaries who followed colonizers into the hinterlands of island colonies at "the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century" (12). McKay recalled their visible presence on the island as a "a simple band of zealous non-conformists [who] went forth to the famous and fertile slave belt of the New World to preach the Word to the Quashees. To bring to the jungle creatures Light" (12). English hegemony mandated that the natives be saved from their hopeless condition of savagery imposed upon them by the defects of their race, culture, and mental capacity.

The Craigs' Colonial Agenda

The Craigs play vital roles in the advancement of the colonial agenda in Jamaica. Their purported Christian presence, intended to uplift, guide and fortify the souls of the downtrodden, was fraught with ignorance, bigotry and condescension. Mr. Craig's wholesome austerity, good build, straight face and devout spirit made him the exemplary missionary, spiritual inspiration for male native converts to follow while Mrs. Craig, his altruistic, pious wife devoted herself to preserving the purity and cultivating the chastity of young women such as Bitá, especially.

The disingenuous relationship they shared with Bitá was more oppressive than liberating on various levels. For starters, Mrs. Craig isolated herself from Jamaicans who, according to her actions and comments throughout the novel, were utterly disagreeable to her due to their race, first and foremost, and their backwards customs secondly. Anything related to native culture within the novel was frowned upon and immediately discouraged by Mrs. Craig who believed that Bitá's only chance for a better life was through her. This attitude was also held by European officials in Morocco who looked down on North Africans, precluded foreigners such as McKay from interacting with them, and punished those that broke the law with fines, jail and deportation.

The Craigs clearly extolled whiteness. This is evident when "Priscilla Craig, a proud descendant of militant Protestants... took her brown ward of Protestantism voyaging through the Fatherland of that cult. And Bitá had been introduced to the charms of Munich and Dresden and Leipzig, the Rhine towns and the birthplaces of Goethe and Beethoven" (*BB* 32). The tour through Germany was not problematic in and of itself. Bitá undoubtedly expanded world knowledge and deepened her understanding of many of the texts, movements and theories she was learning about in England. However, the Craigs' total disregard for Jamaican culture heavily influenced by the rich traditions, cultures and practices of West Africa, constituted a redoubled form of colonization that alienated Bitá's people from their past but also attempted to isolate her from the present. Mrs. Craig frowns upon secular interaction between Bitá and members of her own race, who she fears would negatively influence her. This is an early sign of her colonial agenda and attempt to compromise the integrity of the black peasant underclass. Also, when Bitá goes to the tea meeting, an event Mrs. Craig detested due to its exuberant display of

Jamaican black culture, Bitá knew that “it would make all the difference if she went with a spectator . . . like Squire Gensir who could do as he liked and yet command the respect of the highest and the lowest people” (74). Here, whiteness or the presence of almost any white person, regardless of his/her moral standing and religious beliefs or lack thereof, is enough to allay Mrs. Craig’s primal fear that Bitá will be irreparably damaged by the natives. This is rooted in Mrs. Craig’s preoccupation with white supremacy, not true Christianity, which promulgates the love of neighbor as thyself. Furthermore, her distaste for Africa adulterates her best intentions to do God’s will because the “Negro world was disturbingly different from that to which she had been accustomed” (198).

Jubban

Jubban, Bitá’s husband, represents the embodiment of post-colonialism in Jamaica and the antithesis of the Craigs, who represent colonialism. Jubban embodies the heart, soul and peasantry of Jamaica. His skillful hands mastered all aspects of husbandry and his “deep, rich tuneful voice, splendid for the easy-singing native jammás and shay-shays” (252),” reaffirmed unflinching cultural and racial pride. Self-sufficient, confident and upstanding, Jubban is not intimidated by whites nor Empire. In fact, he challenges it when he reveals that “mi feets em cleaner than you . . . You t’ink ah ‘fraid a you causen youse a son of a backra? Ise a drayman but a man all de same an’ it wi’ték a bigger one than you to lick mi black bottom wid a supple jack” (264).

The happy marital union of Jubban and Bitá underscores the symbiotic roles the skilled and the unskilled classes play in the founding and survival of an independent nation such as Jamaica or Morocco. This is evident because . . .

She had no craving for Jubban to be other than what he was, he was in no way a hindrance to the intellectual side of her life. He accepted with natural grace the fact that she should excel in the things to which she had been educated as he should excel in the work to which he had been trained... Her music, her reading, her thinking were the flowers of her intelligence and he the root in the earth upon which she was grafted, both nourished by the same soil. (313)

Lastly, McKay ends the novel in strong support of Black Nationalism which is seen when...

Bitá was awakened by little Jordan's bleating in the yard, and looking out of the window she saw him, his shirt wet and yellow with mango juice, writhing indignantly in Anty Nommy's arms angered that Anty Nommy had taken him away from under the kidney-mango tree, thus preventing him from overstuffing his belly during the night. (*BB*, 315)

And hence, McKay esteems the culture, traditions, land and freedom of peasant life and post- colonialism in Jamaica.

In the following poem, McKay says goodbye to Africa with a heavy heart and profound memories.

"A Farewell to Morocco"

Oh wistful and heartrending heart earth, oh land

Of colors singing symphonies life!

Myself is like a stone upon my spirit,
Reluctant, passing from your sunny shore.
Oh native colors,
Pure colors aglow
With magic light.
Mysterious atmosphere whose elements,
Like hands inspired by a magnetic force,
Touched so caressingly my inmost chords,
How strangely I was brought beneath your spell!

Leaving “Home”

By 1933, McKay found it impossible to sojourn in Morocco due to his severe state of indigence, failing health, and the increased colonial surveillance placed on him. His unsuccessful attempts to recreate a best-selling novel in the writing of *Banana Bottom* had also taken a toll on his finances and his literary confidence. His patrons had all but fallen by the wayside, and money became more and more scarce. Desperate pleas for financial help from friends in New York such as James Weldon Johnson or Max Eastman availed little. American publishing houses considered McKay's works a great liability due their previous failures. His failing health also exacerbated his existence in Morocco, a country that lacked adequate health care and service for locals or foreigners. McKay set sail for the United States in January of 1934 as a last ditch effort to resuscitate his career, improve his health and to find new inspiration in his life.

Chapter Eight: Final Sojourn

During McKay's final sojourn to the United States, he penned the unfinished manuscript *Amiable with Big Teeth*, converted to Catholicism, and redoubled his efforts to foster black solidarity.

On February 1, 1934, McKay returned to New York City after having spent more than a decade in Europe and North Africa with a heavy heart afflicted by racism, poverty, and disenfranchisement that he experienced and witnessed firsthand while overseas. This trip would also constitute the final sojourn of his life due to his floundering literary career and failing health. Upon arrival, he quickly recalibrated his lifestyle and mindset to the draconian brand of American racism characterized by segregation, Jim Crow, and lynching, largely supported by the conservative white ruling class. Never one to waste time, McKay granted an interview to Henry Lee Moon of *The Amsterdam News*, the leading black newspaper of N.Y.C. of that time, in attempts to reinvigorate the momentum that propelled him into the Harlem Renaissance literary canon a decade prior. During the interview, contempt and cynicism dominated the air. When Moon asked McKay why he had returned to Harlem, McKay snidely remarked, "Well, the Negro intellectuals have been boasting for years that I could not come back. So maybe I... came back to prove them wrong- as usual" (Quoted in Cooper 291). Despite McKay's strained relationship with American Negro leaders, he was fully aware that his literary livelihood depended largely on the alliances and bonds formed with them and their political, social, and cultural affiliations. Many influential Negro leaders and intellectuals, however, had already written McKay off due to his unorthodox themes which tarnished or perpetuated biting negative stereotypes about Negroes in America in their eyes.

Hapless timing also played a role in the final chapter of McKay's life. The Great Depression of the 1930s put an end to the golden era of the Negro Vogue. Whites showed less interest in Negro art and white patronage, white literary publishing houses and agents followed the trend. Poverty and disenfranchisement rose significantly, and progressive liberals, such as McKay found themselves alienated by Harlem leadership, which continued to push for inclusion and equal rights. McKay and those who shared his sentiments embraced the virtues of Black Nationalism over racial equality in a country that showed little interest in changing its *status quo* on race. Luckily, federal relief programs such as the Worker's Progress Administration (WPA) temporarily assuaged his economic woes. Aid also came from an unexpected source: The Catholic Church.

Unbeknownst to many, the Catholic Church and blacks have had a relationship that has existed for numerous centuries. According to Father Cyprian Davis, the author of *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, the Catholic Church originated in the Mediterranean, not northern Europe, "Remember, Ethiopia was a Christian nation earlier than many nations in Europe. It was a Christian nation before Ireland was evangelized, before most of Northern Germany was evangelized and before Poland was a Catholic country" (12). Research shows that the first blacks to reach American shores were African slaves that previously converted to the faith during the Middle Passage or in southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy, where some were sent before traversing the Middle Passage. In 1565, Spain established a military outpost in what is now the state of Florida, then a colony of Spain, populated by Spaniards and free black men, women, and children who practiced Catholicism in the settlement for the next 200 years, according to baptism records. In 1693, Spain offered freedom to runaway

slaves provided that they convert to Catholicism. As a result, Fort Mose, located north east of St. Augustine became the first free black town established in the United States until 1763 when it was traded to the British in exchange for control of Havana, Cuba. In 1781, Governor Don Felipe de Neve, the fourth governor of California, recruited a total of eleven Catholic families all of which were mixtures of Spanish, American Indian and African descent, to settle the Porciuncula River, currently known as the Los Angeles River. Back east however, the black Catholic population grew substantially in states such as Maryland, where membership rose to 3,000 due to Jesuit evangelization in the area. In 1824, The Oblate Sisters of Providence, one of the first order of black nuns that devoted their energy to serving within black communities in Baltimore in 1829 and subsequently spread to Philadelphia and New Orleans, was founded. In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI condemned the slave trade in an apostolic letter which placed the Vatican ahead of the United States in human relations. As a result, many slave owning Catholics began to advocate for the humane treatment of slaves and, in 1842, Sisters of the Holy Family, the second religious order of free black women was founded in New Orleans. It ministered to poor free blacks, tended to the sick and educated members of the free black community. In 1853, the death of Pierre Toussaint, a Haitian slave brought to New York by his slave owner where he became the hairdresser to the rich in New York City and was subsequently granted freedom, devoted his life to helping the poor to such an extent that calls for Beatification have been made in Rome on his behalf. In 1875, Father James Healy became the first black Bishop in America. Born to a white plantation owner and slave mother, Healy was considered black, something he hid throughout his life in order to “pass” for white in Portland, Maine. His brother, Patrick Healy also “passed” for white

and made history when he became the first black president of Georgetown University during a time when the university did not admit blacks whatsoever. In 1889, founder of the *American Tribune* and leader of the black laity of Ohio, Daniel Rudd, a black journalist and founder of the *American Catholic Tribune* and the first black Catholic laity in Congress received applause from Pres. Grover Cleveland (35).

From 1889 to 1894, individuals such as Daniel Rudd, the publisher and editor of *The American Catholic Tribune*, the only Catholic newspaper written and published by Catholics of African descent during the nineteenth century, found inspiration in black Catholic Laity efforts to “take an active interest in what concerns, not only the spiritual but also the temporal welfare of people entrusted to its care” (Davis 44). Henceforth, concerted efforts to address the social, economic, emotional and physical needs of black Catholics in the United States became a major priority among black Catholics. On Tuesday, January 1, 1889, a congress of high- ranking black Catholic officials sat down with sympathetic white Catholics in order to address this problem. By the end of the nineteenth century, a total of four congresses of this sort had been held, each more confident and militant than the one before it. Concerns centered around the political, economic, social and spiritual well-being of blacks.

In 1909, the Knights of Peter Claver was founded. This organization marked a major milestone for black Catholics because it was the largest predominantly all-black Catholic organization of its kind in the nation. In 1916, the Committee for the advancement of Colored Catholics was founded by black Catholics concerned about the great number of colored troops that were overlooked or neglected by the public health system after WWI. This organization, along with the Committee for the Advancement of

Colored Catholics joined forces to denounce racial injustice and social marginalization within mainstream society and, particularly, within the larger, predominantly white, Catholic Church. Four years later, in 1920, black Catholics formed the Society of the Divine Word, the first black Catholic seminary in Greenville Mississippi despite tepid support from many white Catholic organizations in the United States. During the span of fourteen years that passed until McKay returned to the United States in 1934, black Catholicism had increased its national ranks of clergymen and women, organizations and parishioners eager to practice their faith while fighting for justice. (*The Heritage of American Catholicism: Black Catholic Protest and the Federated Colored Catholics* 1917-1935 14).

By 1943, McKay had spent nine arduous years of disappointing literary production, self-introspection, and a serious illness in New York. Had it not been for the goodness of a white Catholic couple who loaned him their summer cottage in Connecticut, his demise may have been precipitated. McKay recalled his convalescence there coupled with ample time to read literature about Catholicism at his disposal. Upon his return to New York, McKay's newfound interest in Catholicism set him on a path to learn more about the theoretical tenets of the faith and its tangible manifestations in Spain and Harlem, convinced him - for the first time of his life - that Catholicism was "the authentic mother of Christendom," (*Right Turn to Catholicism* 1) and hence, meritorious of his support and conversion to the faith.

Right Turn to Catholicism

Shortly after converting, McKay came under fire by both liberals and radicals, who disparaged his decision to convert in the article “Right Turn to Catholicism.” To the liberal white male/female, McKay had violated the popular ideology of free thought which informed the world of one’s self-proclaimed inner strength, self-determination, and rejection of a higher more powerful being. To the radicals, his conversion represented a white flag of defeat of the once untamable, nihilistic, and warring spirit. To McKay however, Catholicism represented freedom, hope and belief in humanity.

McKay felt freest as a Catholic. Gone were the fetters of race, class, political affiliation, or nationality. In true Catholicism, these factors were of little importance. To buttress his position, he linked the flawed systems of Capitalism, Modernism, State Socialism, Agnosticism, and Atheism to Protestantism which, at its core, spawned egocentrism and greed. Catholicism, on the other hand, embraced service, altruism, and sacrifice for the good of humanity according to McKay. In Spain, not France, McKay became aware of “the full significance of Catholicism as a way of life and bedrock for an entire civilization” (Cooper 352).

“In Right Turn to Catholicism,” McKay notes that gender equality existed in the faith in Spain where he recalled seeing both men and women worshipping at the cathedrals unlike in France where he only saw women practicing their faith openly. Race was another deciding factor for McKay, who felt no hostility or rejection because of his race in Spain, just south of France, the Western European country McKay seemed to like the least, due to the level or racial duplicity that existed there. Even the end of the

Spanish-Moroccan war did little to increase acrimony towards black and brown people in Spain. To this fact, McKay attested “a Spaniard will accept any man as a human being until he shows himself unworthy. It is a country where the dignity of the individual is more highly regarded than in any I know” (5). Furthermore, Spaniards despised men who “existed on the immoral earnings of a female” (5), thus the gender gap of equality was notably reduced. One night, McKay witnessed the devalued social currency of lawyers in Spain while at a party invited by the host who was a black musician. The group of lawyers in attendance asked McKay not to reveal their profession to the girls so as not to lose their respect. Lawyers in Spain “had no social or political importance. Just as there were no procurers, or more precisely, gigolos and pimps, as they call them in France, Britain and the United States” (5).

Catholicism also discouraged violence according to McKay. Life in the United States and England had provided McKay with sufficient insight into the psyche of the Anglo-Saxon which was rife with violent thought. To McKay’s surprise and delight, the Spanish penchant for bull fighting and the gore it produced did not translate into violent behavior beyond the bull-fighting arenas. Conversely, the false image of civility projected by Americans and especially the British was nothing more than a façade that hid the lynching of blacks in the American South and the covert and overt acts of hate and repression of equal severity in the North. The raucous belligerence of the drunken and/angry working-class Englishmen was no different, save perhaps the aspect of lynching. In McKay’s opinion, boxing, the American and English favorite pastime, attracted white blood-thirsty fans who roved streets, alleys, and all public spaces in search of blacks to do bodily harm or kill in the most horrific ways, especially after

highly charged interracial matches polarized spectators. Spanish bull-fighting fans, on the other hand, left their aggressions at the arena. Fans rarely committed violent acts against foreigners, blacks, or even themselves out of frustration.

Generally, Catholics were also friendlier people, overall. This belief undoubtedly came from his direct contact with the Catholics who came to his physical, emotional and financial rescue after his return from the United States. According to McKay, “there had always been much more friendliness between the Spanish Moroccans and the Spanish than between the French Moroccans and the French people” (7). Likewise,

the Spanish government under the monarchy declared that their native leaders should be encouraged to enlighten their people. And the government actually made a grant to help build more mosques! While the French maintained a strict censorship, most of the revolutionary Islamic propaganda from Egypt and elsewhere reached all of Morocco through Tetuán and Tangier by way of the Spanish post office. (8)

Needless to say, McKay attributed the palpable humanity of the Spaniards to the Catholicism they practiced in its purest form. Protestants, by contrast, were inherently impassive to the travails of blacks despite their concerted efforts to appear otherwise. In the United States, for example, McKay criticized the hypocrisy of white evangelicals who touted the word and blessings of God on one hand but supported Jim Crow and other visible and clandestine racial machinations of hatred and superiority over blacks.

Catholics also made better leaders in McKay’s opinion. The flaws of protestant national and world leaders convinced McKay that Catholics based their decisions on the

word of God. Therefore, such individuals were better suited for leadership. McKay wrote, “The United States may be fit, perhaps, to lead the world of Europe, but if it continues to maintain its morbid prejudice against human color, the people of Asia and Africa will consider the United States unfit to rule them” (17). This belief also extended to adherents to Communism, radicalism and their relations with blacks. Both groups touted equality and social justice, but neither upheld that belief. McKay wrote, “Our white liberal and radical ‘friends’ will not tell Negroes the truth as they see it, for they are white and diplomatic” (17). Liberals were deceptive, disingenuous, and opaque. One never knew the true feelings of the liberal who constantly sought to make blacks believe that they were helpless victims in need of white leadership. McKay vehemently opposed the white liberal, who almost invariably aimed to keep blacks in sheer ignorance of the power they possessed collectively in order to control and manipulate them. White liberals divided black communities, too. The mere presence of white skin was often times all that was needed to convince naïve, self-doubting blacks to follow them. Radicals also took advantage of blacks by using them to further radical agendas that did not necessarily benefit nor concern blacks in the long run. This occurrence was common among Communists who frequently tapped the support of blacks for white causes. Many joined the Communist Party with the hopes that it would solve the Negro problem in the United States. Instead, it only exacerbated them even more over time. Blacks remained equally isolated and overlooked within the Communist party as they were within mainstream political parties. McKay learned this lesson early on while in Russia.

Essentially, both Communism and radicalism were for whites only, unlike Catholicism in McKay’s assessment of early 20th century politics. Both ideologies were

products of the white world and intended to protect white interests, not black. The class warfare of Marxism was originally prescribed for the working classes of Europe, not the working classes of Africa, the Caribbean or the black and brown people of the Americas. That said, McKay rejected both ideologies and embraced Catholicism with the ease of knowing that it was a religion that was heavily based on deeds performed on a daily basis, not theory studied and analyzed *ad nauseam*.

Catholicism transcended nationality, as well. As a proud West Indian, McKay found comfort in the Catholic tenet of acceptance. Throughout his years of travel, McKay found little acceptance as a foreigner, save in Morocco and Spain and perhaps Communist Russia due to his political bent at that time. McKay learned how to channel his feelings of displacement very well. Wherever he sojourned, he never lost sight of the fact that he was a stranger. McKay was often ostracized by whites and blacks alike due to his nationality. In response, he penned, "I am a West Indian. And of that I am not one whit ashamed. A West Indian, [sic] I brought my gifts to the United States. And as a colored American, I enrolled myself on the side of the American Negro. Although the West Indies may be the best governed of Britain's colored colonies, I became a citizen of the United States, because I had no faith in the British Empire" (24). He later goes on to speak about the differences that existed between American blacks and West Indian blacks in the following words:

I have always been aware that there are many differences between the American Negro and the West Indian. The aristocrat of Negro Americans, James Weldon Johnson, once explained to me that the Negro had one way of talking to whites and another to colored. Well, the West Indian is not a

consummate politician and I have no training as a diplomat. I was brought up to use the same language to a white person as a colored person, without carrying any chip on my shoulder. When I was a boy, I sat down and listened to my brother talking about world affairs to white as well as colored persons. (24)

Catholicism bridged the gaps of nationality that commonly keep individuals apart. McKay reminded his readers and detractors that “Jesus Christ rejected the ideal of any special, peculiar or chosen race, when he charged his apostles to: Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel” (25). These holy words gave McKay the strength and the moral resolve to remain a Catholic, a faith that unlike Protestantism, did not create division by fostering various national denominations.

In conclusion, McKay’s decision to become Catholic was partly circumstantial due to the timely help he received from members of the faith and partly visceral due to the spiritual and emotional cord it struck within him after he took an intellectual interest in the faith.

Amiable with Big Teeth

In late March of 2017, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, McKay’s unfinished manuscript was published. In 2012, sixty-four years after the death of Claude McKay, a startling discovery was made in a long forgotten box of Claude McKay manuscripts housed at Columbia University. The fortuitous discovery was made by Jean Cristophe-Cloutier, a doctoral student in English and Comparative Literature, while interning at the Columbia Rare Books and Manuscript Library in 2009. While rummaging through the papers of

Samuel Roth, a polemical literary figure who gained notoriety in an obscenity scandal in the 1950s and for having published the works of established 20th Century writers without their permission, Clotier found *Amiable with Big Teeth*, a three-hundred page manuscript bound in cardboard on the back as well as the front cover which included the title of the work and the name of the author. Rigorous authentication tests immediately yielded positive results and the confirmation of McKay's last unfinished novel, likely slated to be released shortly after his death in 1948 had he lived, went public.

The story revealed much about the author's last decade and a half of life and his disaffection for once beloved political parties such as the Communists, the socio-economic reality of the Thirties in Harlem, and his support of Black Nationalism in America.

Set in Harlem in 1936 amidst the Great Depression, *Amiable* proffers Black Nationalism as the only viable solution to the Negro problem and critiques the structural and political failures of Communism within the black community. Upon his return to the United States, McKay was buffeted by the ostensible promises of Communism made to thousands of black males so that they would join its ranks. Blindly, many of these individuals joined the Party, unaware of its desire to increase membership more than its promises to improve life for them in America. They were also oblivious to the Party's mission of expansion in order to compete against the growing allure of unfettered Capitalism particularly centered in the United States, which was exemplified by the wildly anticipated arrival of the envoy of cars full of Harlem dignitaries and the vaunted, presumed to be, The Prince of Ethiopia and his cadre "From 110th to 140th Street, Seventh Avenue...was a grandly tumultuous parade ground. The animated crowds

pushed over the jammed sidewalks into the streets to hold their places and ward of newcomers. Above, the tri color green-yellow-red of Ethiopia blazoned from many windows” (3). After the parade, Professor Koazhy, who resembled Haile Selassie and was also from Ethiopia, revealed his true identity to the gullible Afro-Americans who took him for Selassie. McKay used this event to underscore how a large portion of the Afro-American community in the U.S. was frequently exploited and manipulated by outside groups such as the Communists and, in this case, the Ethiopians. He also used this debacle to raise serious questions about the integrity and legitimacy of overwhelmingly credulous black leaders who threw their support behind individuals and political parties before thoroughly vetting them.

McKay equated Professor Koazhy’s riveting arrival to the disingenuous promises made by the Communist Party to solve the Negro problem in America. In 1934, Stalin made the unilateral decision to join the League of Nations. This organization consisted of a Western alliance comprised to defeat Nazi Germany led by the United States, Russia’s political, labor, social and military nemesis. Worried that the rise of Hitler in Germany would ultimately threaten Russia, Stalin sought to form alliances with western nations such as the United States, despite the diametrically opposed differences both countries shared when it came to politics. This profound sea change created a major rift between black communists and Stalin’s directives which blacks considered insensitive and duplicitous. In addition, the directives to solidify the newly formed alliance with the United States made relations worse within the black community when Russian communists openly attacked the N.A.A.C.P. and other black organizations to ingratiate American leaders such as Pres. Roosevelt, who urged the Communists to promote the

New Deal. This series of government instituted experimental projects and programs provided relief to blacks as part of a larger plan to discourage the increase of Communism and radicalism within marginalized communities such as Harlem.

Likewise, McKay expressed the same bewilderment in response to Professor Koahzy, who contradicted many of the African-American precepts and mores thought to be shared by the Ethiopians. The first contradiction was his clothing, which was more fitting of a prince and less of the military man that he was. In fact, Pablo Peixota, the African-American chairman of the event was perplexed by Koahzy's style of dress and wondered why he chose to wear such a "barbaric fantastic costume which was not symbolic of the new spirit of Ethiopia" (4). McKay drew parallels between the gaudy outfits of the popular street orator Sufi Abdul Hamid and Professor Koahzy's use of extravagant clothing as mere props used to deceive blacks who were more easily taken with outward appearances and pageantry than with intellectual stimulation and true authenticity.

Professor Koahzy was equally perplexed by the African-American crowd which appeared and comported more along the lines of Europeans than Africans. Like the white Communists that captivated the black imagination whenever they spoke before black crowds, Koahzy held a similar spell over the naive black attendees, who hungrily digested his call for economic support, which they quickly proffered in large and small quantities without hesitation. A close reading of *Amiable* makes McKay's despise for the duplicitous black religious and political figures who routinely bilked and manipulated naïve blacks in Harlem from the 20s to the 40s crystal clear to the reader. McKay also evinces this sentiment in his collection of essays, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, published

in 1940, which expose the deceitful ploys of Father Divine and numerous occultists unapologetically. The crusade continues in the novella, *Harlem Glory* as well. According to Carl Cowl, one of McKay's former literary agents and the author of the preface to *Harlem Glory*, published in 1990, this work "dealt with the cultural and political life of the depressed black community of the Thirties; the phenomenon Father Divine, whom tens of thousands worshipped as God;...." (6). Father Divine reappears in *Harlem Glory* in the character "Glory Savoir" and shares stark resemblance to the self-serving Communists and Professor Koahzy in *Amiable*, who according to McKay, exploited the ignorance and naiveté of working-class blacks who were largely uneducated and scarcely versed in the complexities of politics. A perfect example of such exploitation is Koahzy's ignorance of the fact that Pablo Peixota was indeed fraudulent. As chairmen of the Hands of Ethiopia, an independent black organization that supported Ethiopia and black nationalism in Harlem, Peixota urged the crowd to show the professor "the things that we can and will do....in a big way this afternoon" (6). Despite the economic hardships many of the attendees faced, black politicians, Communists, and Professor Koahzy were dexterous in rousing emotions and raising funds to support the cause. I argue this point because although the Great Depression hit the black community twice as hard as it hit the white community, blacks were commonly fleeced of what little monies they possessed in order to support causes purported to be worthy such as Communism and Ethiopia, the country that came to represent a real-life romantic version of The Promised land for blacks in America.

In *Amiable*, Ethiopia was to working-class African-Americans what Russia was to black Communists. Of all the numerous references about the formidable Biblical past and

prophecy of Ethiopia found in the Bible, none was more prescient than “Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch out Her Hands to God” (*Psalms* 68:31). African-Americans identified with this verse not only because God favored Ethiopia since the days his son, Jesus Christ, walked the earth, but it was also the only country in Africa to resist conquest by a European nation and the only country in Africa to maintain its sovereignty during the Scramble for Africa, which constituted the invasion, occupation, exploitation and colonization of Africa. In 1896, Italy attempted to expand its colonial rule in Ethiopia in the Battle of Adwa but failed miserably due to a strong anti-colonial sentiment in Italy and poor strategic planning on the part of the Italian hubris-filled military. As a result, the Italian troops were outclassed by the Ethiopian military in weaponry and fighting spirit. This triumph stoked African, Caribbean and African-American flames of anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance at a time when colonialism and imperialism were on the rise. A perfect example of anti-imperial sentiment was expressed by Haitian Pan-Africanist Benito Sylvain who travelled to Ethiopia in 1904, as part of a transatlantic celebration of Haitian Independence there. Other forms of Ethiopian resistance included the emulation of the colors and style of the Ethiopian flag in homage to the formidable task of battling against and defeating European imperialism. Ironically, the leader of the Ethiopian forces Emperor Menelik II did not consider himself to be black but Caucasian due to the European cultural influences and racial plurality that had existed in Ethiopia for centuries.

Another similarity that existed between Ethiopia and Russia as imagined anti-colonial and post-racial states was the strategic planning of pro-Ethiopian events, propaganda and active door-to-door promulgation of both nations as viable alternatives

for the black race. Unlike Liberia and Sierra Leone, Russia and Ethiopia were two nations that withstood external political and militaristic pressures despite the economic growth both could have enjoyed had they placed economic gain above nationalism. During the 1920s, Russia became the “promised land” of not only black communists but of those of other ethnic groups, such as Asians, as well. In *A Long Way from Home*, McKay fondly refers to Sen Katamaya, the Asian comrade and friend he made in England, as “the Japanese revolutionist” (164). Kataymara was a member of the Second International Congress, who knew “all of the big men of the conservative and British and continental labor movement. He was an old friend of Lenin, Zinoviev, Bukhrain and Radek, and had gone over to the third International at its inception” (164). Sen Katayama and McKay understood and supported one another’s plight as both were radicals at that time and both found favor within the Party in Russia. In fact, Katamaya “had more real inside and sympathetic knowledge and understanding of American Negroes than the white American communists who were camping in Moscow” (165), according to McKay. Like McKay, Sen Katayama was also a celebrity of sorts in Moscow, who was “in his glory in Red Russia. He was an honorary coronel of the Red army and always appeared at mass meetings in his uniform. The crowds adored him and applauded frantically. He appeared to be somewhat like a harbinger, a symbol of the far eastern element in the new heart of Russia” (165). Similarly, Ethiopia, a nation of numerous ethnicities, dialects and tribes, was another space where racial inclusion and multicultural differences were generally looked upon favorably. During the 1930s, over eighty ethnicities were classified within the country, the largest being the Oromos, Amharas and the Somalis respectively. The most widely spoken languages were also Oromos, Amharas and Somali, as well; Halie

Selassie, the Ethiopian Emperor, was a perfect example of the ethnic mixing and racial tolerance that existed there. His mother was of the Oromo tribe while his father was a descendant of the Gurage and royal Ahmara tribes.

Haile Selassie and Lenin were especially romanticized among black nationalists and communists respectively. During the Italian invasion of 1934, Selassie, believed by many to be a direct descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, roused the Ethiopian troops with the following mobilization order that solidified his legacy as a stalwart against imperialism:

If you withhold from your country Ethiopia the death from cough or head cold which you would otherwise die, refusing to resist (in your district, in your patrimony, in your home) our enemy who is coming to attack us, and if you persist in not shedding your blood, you will be rebuked for it by your Creator and will be cursed by your offspring. Hence, without cooling off your heart of accustomed valour, there emerges your decision to fight fiercely, mindful of your history that will last far into the future.... (*My Life and Ethiopia's Progress: The Autobiography of Ras Tafari, Haile Selassie Vol I*, page forthcoming, ordered book on Amazon).

The success of the temeritous stand that Selassie took against the Italians produced a positive and negative ripple effect within the African Diaspora. On one hand, it earned him an elevated degree of respect, awe, loyalty and a large following in the African Diaspora. On the other, it paved the way for the individuals such as Father Divine and those of similar ilk in places such as Harlem.

Another enthralling characteristic that many blacks revered in Selassie was his militaristic acumen. In the following quotation, Selassie's mental acuity, adeptness, and adeptness is evidenced,

When an airplane comes to drop bombs, it will not suit it to do so unless it comes down to about 100 metres; hence when it flies low for such action, one should fire a volley with a good and very long gun and then quickly disperse. When three or four bullets have hit it, the airplane is bound to fall down. But let only those fire who have been ordered to shoot with a weapon that has been selected for such firing, for if everyone shoots who possesses a gun, there is no advantage of this except to waste bullets and to disclose the men's whereabouts.... (*MLAEP* p. forthcoming).

Amiable also examines the roots of the cherished institution of Russian Communism among black communists in Harlem. With Russian communist champion and leader, Vladimir Lenin at the helm of the Russian Revolution of 1917, structural and fundamental changes were made in Russian society and government immediately after the Revolution. Newfangled illusions of Communism planted seeds of hope in the minds of some whites and blacks in the United States. For whites, the purported virtues of this new form of government convinced them that the elimination of Capitalism would create favorable labor and quality of life conditions and dismantle the polarizing undercurrents of classism that greatly affected working and middle-class whites, who were exploited by the upper class in the United States. For blacks, however, Communism seemed to provide a propitious solution to racism, discrimination and, ultimately, "The Negro Problem," which exclusively precluded blacks from participating in white society with equal access

to opportunities and growth afforded to whites. This topic gained noteworthy traction within black communities such as Harlem when white American journalist, activist, and poet John Reed presented two papers on blacks at the Second Congress in Russia in 1920. According to Cooper, the author of both investigations centered on “national and colonial questions” (175) and the other was presented before the entire Congress. In both papers, Reed declared that “American blacks were primarily interested in winning equal rights as citizens in the United States” (176). He stated that blacks in the United States considered themselves “first of all Americans” (176). He also urged Russian communists to partake in “Negro movements for social and political equality and at the same time endeavor to make blacks aware of how futile were their strivings for advancement in a bourgeois society” (176). Reed’s petition availed much. Shortly after the Second Congress, Lenin stressed recruitment of blacks in the United States as a “strategically important element in Communist activity” (176). And by 1922, the African Blood Brotherhood, the Harlem based offshoot of the white Communist Party run by black Caribbean Cyril Briggs, became one of the most important propaganda organs of the American Communist movement which solely addressed the concerns, issues and plight of blacks in the United States.

In *Amiable*, black unity is fractured and ultimately undermined, largely in part due to the divisive machinations of deceitful individuals such as Professor Koazhy. From the beginning of the novel, McKay urges the reader to question the validity of all public figures in positions of leadership, and especially those with larger-than-life personalities, reputations and promises. From early on, we learn that Prof. Koazhy

had an encyclopedic knowledge of African fetishism and prided himself on being a pagan. And he was the historical mentor of a group calling itself, the Senegambians. His Christian name was Matthew—Matthew Preston, but he changed it after his absorption in African fetichism—to Koazhy. Koazhy was his version of Quashie which he pronounced Kwazee. He insisted that African names often sounded ridiculous to Aframerican ears because they were pronounced badly and written wrongly. And so he turned Quashie into Koazhy and prefaced it with Professor. (12-13)

McKay exposed Koazhy's fraudulence in many ways. First, he revealed the professor's "hidden" African-American, northern identity and Southern academic, religious, and social formation he used to fleece blacks in Harlem. His years in the South spent as a teacher and preacher - two very highly respected professions within black society in the South at that time - who abandoned the pulpit to lead a sinful life as a public figure evinced his lack of moral integrity and hubris. Next, we learn that Koazhy's title of Professor was not the end product of years of studies on African fetishism at a university but was rather self-proclaimed. Furthermore, the motivation behind his name change revealed his desire to appear more authentically African to African Americans, most of whom were oblivious to his African American identity, roots and true Christian name. Equally disingenuous is the purported concern that he has for the black community of Harlem, which he financially exploited by playing on their naiveté. A perfect example of this was when he said, "If you like what I have said I want you to prove it. If I have enlightened you any about Ethiopia, then I want you to give more to the Cause of

Ethiopia. At least I want one person in this audience to bring twenty-five dollars and come and shake hands with me” (11). Positive response to his request compelled him to increase the amount to fifty dollars which he successfully fleeced from, arguably, some of the poorest and most economically marginalized individuals in the United States. Such exploitative actions shrouded in “good will” rhetoric and organizations such as the Cause of Ethiopia or the Hands of Ethiopia, the anticolonial Ethiopian support group headed by Peixota, who was also the chairman of this organization, which was housed on the first floor of his Harlem brownstone. Lij Tekla Alamaya, however, the true descendent of the King of Ethiopia, was nothing like Koazhy. Instead of extravagantly exhibiting himself as a serious and extraordinarily well-informed man like Koazhy, Alamaya was “not much of a student of history, not even Ethiopian history” (14). He also arrived “prepared for simplicity and the democratic way of doing things” (15) and was unimpressed by the “pomp and splendor of titles and uniforms that glittered in Harlem in the heyday of the pan African movement” (15). That said, Alamaya’s demeanor was an ill-shaped cog that did not fit into the inner nor outer workings of the political machinery of Harlem that exploited, manipulated and controlled The Masses. Sadly, he too played a complicit role in the fragmentation of the collective economic and political power of Harlem by sanctioning and defending Koazhy’s “fund raising performance” at the church which he quietly considered “amazingly convincing” (16), despite the fact that Koazhy’s dated uniform was a visible example of how little African Americans knew about the current reality of life in Ethiopia, a country that had long since begun to “modernize the army, and the country” (17).

The desire to include whites in black organizations is another false step that McKay criticizes in *Amiable*. As the novel proceeds, Peixota defends the major tenets of Garveyism, founded on the philosophy of Black Nationalism, which according to W.E.B. DuBois was a futile solution to the race problem in America, where the black man

ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the elder selves to be lost, he does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He does not wish to bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes...that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon (W.E.B. DuBois "Strivings of the Negro People", *Atlantic Monthly*, 9 August 1897, 194-195).

A more generic definition would define this ideology as a body of "social thought, attitudes, and actions ranging from the simplest expressions of ethnocentrism and racial solidarity to the comprehensive and sophisticated ideologies of Pan-Negroism or Pan-Africanism" (*Black Nationalism in America* Intro, xxvi).

McKay criticizes the dearth of black solidarity and the simplest manifestation of Black Nationalism in *Amiable*. Like his fellow countryman Garvey, McKay linked the survival of the black race to black governance, black diplomacy, black business, black institutions and black pride. Unlike Garvey, McKay did not support the repatriation of blacks to Africa, nor did he approve of Garvey's tempestuousness and flamboyance, two characteristics that ultimately destroyed Garvey in McKay's opinion. Nonetheless, both men made concerted attempts to unite blacks in Harlem. While Garvey roused a sense of black pride, unity and hope in Harlem, Prof. Koazhy -and McKay, the author - , attempted to do the same. Unfortunately, neither was successful. Throughout *Amiable*, Peixota's desire to resist integration and Koazhy's desire to integrate black organizations share striking parallels with Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement," which espoused racial purity and racial segregation. Contrariwise, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People supported racial inclusion, racial integration, and was also heavily supported by W.E.B. DuBois, McKay's ideological nemesis. In *Amiable*, a sense of malaise looms over the narrative which details the insidious demise of The Friends of Ethiopia who believed that their "all-coloured organization be respected" (30) by the paltry yet vocal opposition headed by the integrationist school teacher and member, Newton Castle. Castle made the case for the inclusion of white members out of concern that, otherwise, whites would retaliate by prohibiting black participation and black membership in white organizations.

Colorism hurts and ultimately hinders the creation of a black nation in *Amiable*. It is interesting to note that the complexions of the main characters of this work are decidedly brown and not black. Professor Koazhy bears a resemblance in color to Haile

Selassie who was “a slight olive-colored youth” (4). Pablo Peixota, in addition to being one of the wealthiest men in Harlem, a brown man “was thought to be a Brazilian” (22), probably due to his North European-like features, and his wife, Kezia Hooker, “a Durham girl vastly admired for her beauty which was more sensuously South-European than Aframerican in its appeal” (22), perpetuate the color caste system that hierarchized light skin and European features over dark skin and Sub-Saharan African features in the story and mirrored reality in Harlem during the 30s. Seraphine, Kezia’s self-centered daughter from her first marriage, also had an extremely light complexion. Though not as beautiful as her mother, “she was an arresting type with an extraordinary personality” (24) and her “skin was so fair that her appearance was suggestive of an Albino. She had inherited her father’s hair, which was coarse dark-dull red. Her eyes were strange, the right one slightly bluish and the other of a chameleon-like yellowish tint” (25). Kezia adhered to the restrictive rules of colorism and instilled similar values in her daughter. This is made evident when it is revealed that Seraphine’s biological father was also light, in fact “her father was a reddish person and so covered with freckles, he looked like a cinnamon sandwich. He had been nicknamed “Red” at college” (24). Another glaring espousal of colorism is seen when Peixota, a man who built a small fortune in illegal gambling in Harlem, suggested to Kezia that Seraphine “should be sent to a colored college after her graduation from High School. But Mrs. Peixota persuaded him that an academic education in New York might be of greater value to Seraphine. And so the girl was sent to Hunter College” (24). Kezia’s latent contempt for poor blacks and the institutions that provided assistance to them surfaces when it is time to send Seraphine to college due to the lack of prestige and access to opportunities in mainstream society. Colorism

engendered duplicity in more profound ways, as well. Throughout the novel, Kezia avoids “fashionable activities” (24) such as balls, galas and social events that involve Harlem’s privileged set. Instead she “gave gifts to the Colored Orphanage and the Co-operative residence for the Young Unmarried Colored Mothers and her name appeared as a sponsor of the benefit affairs for like institutions. She was a member of the Aldermanic Committee of Christmas Cheer for Needy Colored Families” (24). Her munificence, however, did not negate the fact that deep within she felt poor blacks were beneath her in social status and in complexion if they were dark, unlike her husband Peixota, who did not harbor such sentiments. Kezia also directed Seraphine towards eligible older black men of power, prominence or money, well aware that these kinds of men sought young black woman with light complexions like Seraphine, who was often called “black Peixota’s white daughter” (25).

Colorism also existed within black organizations in Harlem, as well. Newton Castle, a brown- skinned school teacher and fellow member of The Executive Committee of The Hands to Ethiopia, argued that “if Aframericans set a precedent by excluding whites who desire to join their organizations, it will give the whites the justification for maintaining barriers against Aframericans and keeping them out of their private clubs and places” (30). This belief placed him in direct opposition with Peixota, who shared the overwhelming “sentiment of the people for an all-colored organization” (30). Castle’s disapproval of racial exclusivity revealed the inner-workings of his color-struck psyche, which equated leadership to whiteness or the approximation of it. Many black organizations were plagued with this phenomenon. The N.A.A.C.P., for example, was founded and financially supported in part by a large contingent of white liberals who held

key positions of power on the Board of Directors, as well as a host of other vital operational and administrative titles. Opposition to the participation of whites was a polarizing issue that resonated on the streets of Harlem where it divided a largely working class (that consisted of Southern and immigrant blacks who favored slow but steady integration into the white mainstream) from a considerably smaller but highly educated set of blacks often the scions of Great Migraters or Caribbean immigrants (who favored radical approaches to solve the Negro Problem). Nonetheless, color tended to play decisive roles in political and community affiliations. In *Amiable*, Ethiopia receives a great deal of support from members of the black Christian churches attended by the black masses. An interesting correlation can be drawn between the outpouring of support for Ethiopia and the Proem of the unfinished manuscript which includes a poem (title not found) by British 19th Century British journalist, essayist, poet and businessman, Walter Bagehot which reads:

The Ethiop Gods have Ethiop lips,
 Bronze cheeks and wooly hair;
 The Grecian Gods are like the Greeks,
 As keen-eyed, cold, and fair.

In this short poem of one stanza, the poet extols the Negroid features of the black man shaped in the image of the Ethiopian God and devalues the daunting impassiveness of the Eurocentric deity. Likewise, the book of Psalms speaks favorably of Ethiopia, a northern African land with a Sub Saharan racial identity unlike the color-struck Seraphine who attempts to “whiten” Ethiopia and Lij Alamaya in the following quote: “We were talking about you Tekla and Ethiopia and everything. Professor Fischer is an

anthropologist and he says the Ethiopians are not really an African people in the sense that the Aframericans are, that they are a Semitic people like the Arabs” (41). Thinking Alamaya would take delight in her comment is short lived when he quickly responds, “Ethiopians don’t think so. We call ourselves a black African nation” (41). This assertion confirms her hope and belief that Ethiopians are substantially lighter than African Americans on a whole. And when Seraphine’s friend Bunchetta states, “And I insisted I could pass for a typical Ethiopian girl, couldn’t I, Lij Alamaya ” (41), he rejects that notion when he replies “ Oh there are various types, just like in Harlem...but Miss Kendall could be a typical Ethiopian girl” (41), to the chagrin of both young women, who are utterly perplexed “Gloria Kendall who had had so little to say and remained almost unnoticed was now the center of attention...Her face was attractive, round and sweet like, and in the same color of a nice cup of rich warm cocoa” (41), She was not *café au lait* like Seraphine or Bunchetta who “had been painted by a painter in Greenwich Village, where she was told that her complexion was Balinese ” (36). Lastly, David Levering Lewis, the author of *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, includes the following McKay quote that rejects white chauvinism, “A white person is just like another human being to me. I thank God that although I was brought up and educated among white people, I have never wanted to be anything but myself. I take pride in being colored and different, just as any intelligent white person does in being white. I can’t imagine anything more tragic than people torturing themselves to be different from their natural, unchangeable selves” (295).

Another pervasive theme throughout *Amiable* is the lack of racial unity and the perpetuation of ignorance in Harlem due to Communism in particular. By the time

McKay returned to Harlem, more than a decade had passed since he had linked Communism to opportunism within the black community. This explains the full title, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem* and his firm belief that Communism would never truly rout white chauvinism. Mark Solomon, the author of *The Cry Was Unity*, points out that Moscow had done little to quell racism in the United States where both black and white members of the Popular Front “sat on different sides of the room” (259) in Harlem during the 1930s. Traditionally, the popular idea of the “black sheep” implies imperfection and inferiority; in this case, blacks embodied the black sheep juxtaposed to whites in both the mainstream and in the Communist party which boldly and insidiously manipulated and fleeced them.

During the 30s, structural cracks within the Party were revealed when it alienated many black members. Placing lethargic emphasis on racial equality in society and more on racial unity at the workplace divided black Communists. Despite the fact that during the spring of 1933 black doctors and nurses at Harlem Hospital complained of discrimination, tenement evictions were rife, unemployment reached record numbers and the living conditions for many of its residents were deplorable, the needs and demands of black communists went unattended. As a result, a schism formed and widened between black communists who sided with the national black organizations such as the Urban League, which expressed little faith in the Party’s ability to sustain or expand black membership when “white chauvinism in the Party turned out to be more egregious than reported” (*TCWU* 228). In addition, “sectarianism, ran counter to the religious and

cultural values of many blacks” (TCWU 228), and “the Party’s paltry size and limited resources made it difficult to reach many sectors of the black community” (TCWU 228).

In contrast, black support of Communism burned within a small but ardently passionate group of black Communists. Take, for example, Newton Castle’s staunch support of Communism in *Amiable* and his vow to “challenge any sodden-mouthed Trotskyite who tries to slander Soviet Russia” (20). Likewise, Communism drew the attention of *The Crisis*, the black liberal newspaper founded by W.E.B. DuBois, which organized a symposium of unprecedented magnitude on the Negro and Communism. In addition, other black-owned newspapers around the nation during the first half of the twentieth century such as the *Afro-American* provided the platform on which Islam was often extolled. Other black owned newspapers such as *The Norfolk Journal* and *Guide’s P.B. Young* also applauded the Party’s efforts to help black men. Many hailed the Party for welcoming black male membership that “came to blacks with brotherhood not charity, with deeds, not words,” according to W.P. Dabney, editor of *The Union*, a black newspaper in Ohio.

Conversely, doubt had also begun to take root among some black Communists. Tenable motives for disaffection such as Communism’s inability to change the racial *status quo* in the United States made black communists question the true relevance it had in American life and especially within places such as Harlem. McKay’s feelings about Communism were congruent to these individuals. In “The Publisher’s Note” of the unpublished manuscript of *Amiable*, allusions to the deficiencies of Communism are clearly expressed in the following words,

As a result of the Italian-Ethiopian War envoys and refugees from these countries descended upon the Harlem of the Twenties with many different and diverse objectives in mind. One of the earliest of the campaigns was to render such aid to Ethiopia as would free it from Mussolini. Of these envoys, refugees and organizations, some were genuine and sincere, some fake and fantastic, and still others communists disguised as sympathizers. It was a formidable problem to establish the real from the unreal, the false from the true, the citizens from the communists.

In similar fashion, the majority of blacks who did not support Communism had varying degrees of skepticism or cynicism towards it. When little economic and social fruit was reaped from the New Deal shortly after it was championed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, many blacks began to espouse self-sufficiency and self-determination as they moved further and further away from Communist ideals and looked to one another for support. The black press and other major organizations turned against the National Recovery Administration (NIRA), which failed to protect blacks who “were doubly victimized-by joblessness where wage equality was applied and by low paying jobs where wage equality was not applied” (Solomon 234). McKay captures the reinvigoration of New Negro politics this time set over a decade later during the most economically desperate times of the Great Depression in Harlem in Peixota, one of the richest men in Harlem who espouses Black Nationalism economically, politically and socially.

Peixota is a prime example of black determination, resolve and successful entrepreneurship. Modeled after the success of the wealthiest and most powerful

immigrant families who made billions both legally and illegally in the steel industry, the railroads, construction and banking during the Industrial Revolution, Peixota ran successful illegal gambling operations and invested the profits in Harlem where “he owned other private houses besides the one he lived in and three large tenement buildings. Also he was the owner of the best bar in Harlem. And he had interests in other enterprises that were not generally known to the public” (*AWBT* 21). This enabled him to influence black and white politicians in Harlem and sway public opinion on subjects of his personal interest. His home became the headquarters of the Hand of Ethiopian Mission, and his voice became one of the most formidable within the organization. Throughout the novel, he promotes - at times more successfully than others - Black Nationalism, like Marcus Garvey who asked “Where is the black man’s Government... Where is his King and his Kingdom?... Where is his president, his country and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?... I could not find them, then I declared I will help to make them” (*Philosophies and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* 3). As an entrepreneur, Peixota and his family enjoyed the privileges of wealth in Harlem, where they had political power. This is evident in his direct dealings with everyone from Lij Alamaya Tekla to the average unskilled laborer if he so desired. Peixota lived happily in Harlem. His life was complete, and he lacked for nothing contrary to popular belief downtown held by some that blacks harbored “a popular resentment against such prejudice. Cut off from the fuller life of the city” (*AWBT* 43). Further from the truth they couldn’t have been. Peixota, McKay and many Harlemites did not live their lives yearning to be downtown.

Like Peixota, McKay legitimizes black life in Harlem and concurs with James Weldon Johnson, his supportive friend, whose words are quoted in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, by Lewis, “First, the language of Harlem is not alien; it is not Italian or Yiddish; it is English. Harlem talks American, reads American, thinks American. Second, Harlem is not physically a “quarter,” It is not a section cut off...third, the fact that there is little or no gang labor gives Harlem Negroes the opportunity for individual contacts with the life and spirit of New York ” (113). Anthropologist Melville Jean Herskovits also echoed McKay’s sentiment when he wrote the following about the integrity of black life in Harlem: “It occurred to me that I was seeing a community just like any other American community. The same pattern, only a different shade!” (Lewis 113).

McKay also portended the inevitable corruption of black organizations when members are enticed by white privilege or suffer from low self-esteem due to the fact that a great majority of blacks are haunted by the specter of slavery, racism, and insecurity. McKay opposed the privileged participation of whites in black organizations for this very reason. In *Amiable*, the Hands of Ethiopia of Harlem and the White Friends of Ethiopia are adversaries that essentially represent a microcosm of the strained relations that exist between blacks and whites fraught with contention and hegemony in real life. McKay employs allegory to critique the disparate approaches both races take when integrating members of other races into their organizations. Blacks often welcome the participation of whites due to the belief that whites are inherently more capable and competent than blacks, especially when placed in positions of leadership. They also tend to prefer white participation because it validates the legitimacy of the organization. Whites, on the other hand, admit blacks only when it is in their best interest to do so. They do not celebrate

such acquisitions, however. Instead, they quietly but watchfully assign the duties of the position to the black employee who must prove his worth and win the confidence of his/her colleagues before gaining acceptance. Lofty positions of power that could potentially sway the balance of power are also less frequently assigned to blacks, and, when they are, their work is checked and balanced by others who share equal or more power. This allows avoidance of awarding positions to black colleagues that will sway the racial and power balance. Peixota defends this claim when he meets with the White Friends of Ethiopia who criticize the futility of racial purity to which he responds:

I want to say I imagine your campaign might be of greater national significance and symbolic effect, if you made it a campaign to put a colored person in every white institution. You might take the government first. Begin with the cabinet and then switch to the Supreme Court, the Federal Judiciary, and the other government departments, right down the line; then the different State Governments and finally the public institutions: colleges and Schools, Libraries, Newspapers, Radio, Banking, Shipping, railroads, Airplanes, Busses, Hotels, Cinema, Theater, orchestra, Trade Unions. (*AWBT* 56)

McKay makes the case that black inclusion in white mainstream settings is heavily based on tokenism whereas blacks tend to base white participation on the desire to be accepted by whites in the mainstream.

Bluntly put, McKay informs the reader of the surreptitious motives of many white officers, directors and executives to infiltrate black organizations in order to subvert

them. In the essay, “Message of Marcus Garvey to Membership of U.N.I.A. from Atlanta Prison” Garvey expresses his suspicion of the hidden agenda of whites who self-identify as liberals to promote “race amalgamation and inter-marriage as the means of destroying the moral purity of the Negro race and our absorption within the white race which is nothing less than race suicide” (*Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey* 187). And such was the case in The White Friends of Ethiopia in *Amiable*. This organization loathes the all-black Friends of Ethiopia to such an extent that it sets out to destroy it for reasons purely racial and racist. Miffed by the strong sense of black self-determination and confidence, The White Friends resent and fear the overt displays of blackness by circumventing and circumscribing the success of The Hands by convincing Lij Alamaya to work for the good of Ethiopia under the direction of the White Friends of Ethiopia. They also use Maxim Tasan, a mysterious person identified with the friends of Ethiopia and a liaison to Newton Castle, the secretary of the Hands to Ethiopia who eventually joins The White Friends, as well. The reasons these men secretly switch from the black organization are due to the perception that whites were better equipped to secure funds and more successful at achieving their goals than blacks were. What they did not see was Peixotas’ hopeful vision of building a better Harlem as:

an instrument for helping the Aframericans here, to give the dignity of human being that bridged the enormous pit of slavery, something that could shake them in their skins to feel that they were no less men because they were different from other men, something that could make them feel the physical aspect of man was not less noble because it was diversified.

(155)

To sum up, the pitfalls of white inclusion in vital positions of black organizations posed serious questions with special regards to just how far the black man could trust the morality, values and help of the white man, who is by nature violent, greedy and egocentric.

Lastly, *Amiable*, like all of McKay's prior narratives, attempts to lead blacks out of the darkness and into the light. In this work, McKay takes great pains to educate blacks and provide a clear direction that they should follow for success. The path McKay chooses is one of unity, strength and self-reliance. This message is pounded into the narrative repeatedly. At the end of the unfinished parable, the black organization and black Harlem are left fragmented and weakened due to the protracted contention that essentially tears Harlem and its residents apart over and over again.

New Negro Legacy

On May 22, 1948, Claude McKay died of heart failure in a Chicago hospital after months of illness. A Roman Catholic service was performed, and his body was sent to a Queens, N.Y. cemetery, where he was buried. Harlem mourned his passing and celebrated his legacy which invigorated thousands of black men and women, boys and girls throughout the Diaspora. His legacy would inform the world of the racial disparity that still existed and the arrival of a collective push to challenge and change the status quo in various movements.

The immediate years following McKay's death brought new challenges, hopes, dreams and, most importantly, change by way of the Civil Rights movement, The Black Power Movement and The Black Arts Movement.

McKay's social justice efforts helped lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement, a social movement for equal rights led by blacks in the South that eventually spread nationwide. Throughout his life he fought injustice and worked to improve the lives of black and brown people worldwide. This commitment remains evident in Harlem, the community he identified with most. Elements of his social message are also seen in the radicalized/ridiculed, Black Nationalist Ras the Destroyer/Exhorter (aka Ras) in Ralph Ellison's Classic *Invisible Man* published in 1952, four years after McKay's death, evoking similar advocacy for the creation of Black Nationalism in the following quote, "This is Harlem. This is my territory, the black man's territory. You think we let white folks come in and spread their poison? Let 'em come in like they come and take over the numbers racket? Like they have all the stores? Talk sense mahn, if you talking to Ras, talk sense!" (367).

In many ways, McKay probably inspired Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent approach to protest as McKay was not a violent man by nature. Instead, McKay preferred acts of civil disobedience and resistance, community education and organization, boycotting, civil resistance and voter registration.

From the mid-fifties to the late- sixties, the Civil Rights movement depended heavily on the support of the working class. McKay also depended on this group in Harlem, London and Marseille where the harsh realities of displacement, penury and racism were softened due to the relationships he formed with individuals of this ilk. Like McKay, Dr. King involved himself in politics and public policy that protected or expanded the rights of blacks. Once a sympathizer of communism and the labor-inspired foundation of Marxism, McKay fought for labor rights which were championed in the

1964 Civil Rights Act along with the legal prohibition of discrimination due to race, gender, color, religion, or national origin in schools, work and in public places. The following year the Voting Registration Rights Act was passed in order to protect voter's rights in cases where they had been violated or restored in cases where they had been taken away. That same year the Immigration and Nationality Service Act of 1965 made it easier for non-European immigrants such as McKay to acquire citizenship, and, lastly, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed, thus banning the use of racial discrimination to rent or sell property.

McKay's intrepid spirit and behavior wherever he went also laid the groundwork for the Black Power Movement, an ideology that promotes self-sufficiency, self-determination, for people of African/Black descent. From the early sixties to the early seventies this decidedly radical slogan was used by its followers who took a harder approach to achieving equal rights. Unlike the passive slogan Freedom Now used by Dr. King and his followers, the slogan Black Power created by Huey Newton and Stokely Carmichael touched the visceral emotions of anger and retaliation much like McKay's rousing protest poem, "If We Must Die." This movement often ran parallel and intersected Civil Rights Movement agency with some noteworthy exceptions such as its aim to prove the standing of living of blacks around the world and its willingness to use force to protect oneself when absolutely necessary. Another offshoot of this movement was the Black Panthers who were primarily created to provide protection of black power members and leaders from bodily harm. The influence of this movement is also largely responsible for the creation of black studies programs on college campuses across the nation as well. It is important to note that contrary to ill-conceived notions that

stigmatized this group, it did not preach hate against whites. Instead, it promoted the collective opposition to white supremacy in all of its manifestations.

Lastly, McKay also inspired the Black Arts Movement founded in Harlem by Amiri Baraka. This movement linked black artists and performing arts to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. It also urged them to claim legal ownership, publish and manage their art. McKay shared similar feelings on this topic and undoubtedly helped pave the way for the *Third World Press*, the nation's oldest Black owned publishing firm dedicated to printing positive enlightening literature for primarily African Americans. Founded by Haki R. Madhubuti in 1967 with just four hundred dollars, the press has steadily grown and today boasts an extensive list of works of both fiction and non-fiction by African Americans and all members of the African Diaspora in order to honor Black writers and artists and to celebrate and protect their respective cultures. *Third World Press* has also published the most extensive cannon of Black Art's Movement literature. Like McKay, Dr. Madhubuti also supports independently owned black institutions. From 1970 to 1994 he was founder and editor of the *Black Books Bulletin*, a key literary journal that published the studies, works and findings of black scholars, authors etc. He is also the founder of the Positive Concept/New Concept School (1969), and co-founder of the Betty Shabazz international Charter School (1998) and the Barbara A. Sizemore Middle School (2005) and the DuSable Leadership Academy (2005).

Conclusion

During this investigation of the life and literary works of Jamaican native Claude McKay, extremely important findings related to his role as a spokesman, social agitator and great thinker confirm his contributions to twentieth-century Caribbean poetry, Harlem Renaissance literature, the creation of the New Negro and the progressive black intellectual of today. From his earliest years as a pioneer of dialect poetry in the Jamaican hinterlands to his last sojourn in the United States under the care of the Catholic Church, McKay became a spokesman for blacks who questioned the system that circumscribed their human and civil rights at every turn throughout the course of his life. His most thought-provoking query was centered on racial hierarchy. From a very young age, McKay began to ponder the origins and fairness of race politics in Jamaica where blacks occupied the lowest rung of the society and white colonials occupied the highest. Such inequality compelled him to pen his seminal poetry compilations entitled *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. Both works examine, question and challenge the racial *status quo* on the island and abroad. Later, in the United States, he continued to broaden the Caribbean diasporic literary canon when he took to the pen, this time in the most forceful tone of protest yet to be seen among Harlem Renaissance poets in “If We Must Die,” the sonnet that called black men to arm and protect themselves and their families and property against blood-thirsty gangs of white racists during the Red Scare of 1919 in Chicago. In Europe, McKay continued this crusade when he challenged the issue of racial inequality particularly in England, Russia and France with his daily comings and goings, and most importantly, his pen. Noteworthy works of this era were *Negroes in*

America, Home to Harlem, Banjo and a host of short stories and poems during his most prolific period of literary production driven by zealous ambition. After leaving Europe, he settled in Morocco where he found peace and a true sense of belonging, largely due to its semblance to Jamaica. Lastly, McKay returned to the United States, the country that he arguably loved and hated the most, with a renewed passion to help direct his race in the way he believed it should go, evidenced in works such as *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, a work that examines the normalcy of black life, humanizes its denizens and promulgates racial solidarity and Black Nationalism over assimilation into white society.

McKay also used his agency to agitate the political, social and economic powers of that time. In Jamaica, his poetry revealed thinly veiled anti-colonial sentiments, disloyalty and disdain for the oppressive governance of the Union Jack. In the United States, his ultra-liberal political inclinations remained consistent with his efforts in Jamaica. Despite the risks of bodily harm, deportation and the loss of his literary career, he participated in activities sponsored by left-wing communists, socialist and radicals who, like him, objected to the fundamental ills of capitalism and imperialism in the United States and Europe. Though never openly flaunting his membership to any of these organizations, countless articles published in the white, liberal, New York City newspapers such as *The Liberator*, a white, New York City leftist newspaper provided McKay with employment, mentorship and support in his plight against white supremacy in America. In Europe, McKay aided social agitators such as Sylvia Pankhurst in London, a white woman who railed against colonialism, sexism, racism and classism and during his sojourn in Russia, he did the same with high ranking officials of the Communist Party

who propagandized his presence and participation in Communist activities in Russia in order to increase black membership more in theory than in practice. Needless to say, the honeymoon between the two was relatively short-lived because McKay quickly came to the realization that the objectives of the Communists did not dovetail with the collective needs of blacks. Nevertheless, McKay attempted to undermine partisan politics wherever he sojourned with the goal of improving the lives of blacks worldwide and especially in Harlem.

Lastly, McKay was a great Harlem Renaissance thinker that proposed transnationalism, cross-culturalism and Black Nationalism as the solution to the Negro Problem and the state of blacks living under imperial and /or colonial yoke of Western Europe or the United States. Though previously mentioned, it is important to underscore the important role that egalitarianism played in his personal ideological manifesto, undoubtedly shaped by his lived experiences, history and his hopes for the future.

This research is particularly relevant today due to the prevailing polemics of racism, discrimination, demagoguery and the election of the ultra-right wing conservative billionaire Donald John Trump as the 45th president of the United States in November of 2016, who ran his election campaign on the slogan “Make America Great Again” by, in effect, vowing to pass legislation to socially, economically and politically disempower marginalized groups and nullify utterly all progressive legislation- especially that passed by his Democratic, liberal, African-American predecessor, Barack Obama - in the United States so that the greatness of Mid Twentieth-Century America. McKay envisaged the daunting tasks that lay ahead of the black race and the imminent battles they would face to overcome them. This investigation is a blueprint for the construction

of a stronger, more self-sufficient African Diaspora currently besieged with the overhanging specters of race, race politics, and racism, three distinct areas that continue to bedevil members of the Diaspora. His last work, better known as his unfinished manuscript entitled *Amiable with Big Teeth*, takes an honest look at the state of black leadership and the often egocentric and destructive inner workings of black leadership.

Future research should build on the sound foundation established by McKay who envisioned new ideas for old problems. And his words and preoccupations are just as timely today as they were a century ago. More investigative work must apply its findings directly to the black community if true change is to occur. Cross-culturalism and transnationalism within the Diaspora and beyond must also occur if the race is to better its united stand to forge a better future for its progeny. McKay eschewed the idea of racial effacement in order to move ahead in white society. Instead, he supported the promulgation of the Diaspora as a space and people who think, create and fend for themselves. This too is my humble wish.

In conclusion, McKay was an inspiring transnational progressive who stirred debates and challenged many schools of thought. His fierce aversion to malevolence and injustice inspired the forefathers and mothers of the Civil Rights Movement and numerous other human rights movements. It was his hope that his efforts would render fruit, and they have. It was also his hope that blacks worldwide control their destinies despite the numerous attempts to keep them down. That too is the message I wish to send to all who have read this work regardless of race. It is also my humble wish that those who share this sentiment, and especially those who are black or identify with the Black

Diaspora, do more to honor the life, times, works and travails of progressive black thinkers such as Claude McKay.

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