

THE FRAGMENTED VISION OF CLAUDE MCKAY:
A STUDY OF HIS WORKS

BY

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Abstract

The Fragmented Vision of Claude McKay: A Study of His Works

Barbara Jackson Griffin, Doctor of Philosophy, 1989

Dissertation directed by: Professor Jackson Bryer,
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Claude McKay, born in Jamaica in 1890, played a significant role in the development of Black American literature. His search for a Black aesthetic and his poems of defiance gave inspiration to young Black artists hungry to explore new ideas. Their creative spirit flowered into the Harlem Renaissance. But, McKay, whose themes helped to stimulate this movement, was plagued by the very concepts that helped to define it. Throughout his life, he was ambivalent about three things: his Afrocentric universe, his role as rebel spokesman, and his relationship to Jamaica.

Already a poet of some consequence in Jamaica, McKay thought of America as a grander arena for his voice, but when he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina in 1912, he was shaken by the intense racism of America. His upbringing in rural Clarendon Hills had not prepared him for what he witnessed. By nature, a proud man, McKay turned his lyrical expression into an instrument that would change the arrogance of the Whites.

"Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation" (1917) implied the nobility of African roots and affirmed the superiority of primitivistic value system over Western cultural standards. But in McKay's psyche lay the germ of ambivalence that rejected the code of any "world" not sanctioned by the West.

During the years following World War I, when relations between Whites and Blacks were strained, McKay became a rebel spokesman for the masses with his defiant poem "If We Must Die" (1919). It urged oppressed people to stand valiant in the face of defeat. But McKay later denied that the poem spoke for Blacks and further questioned the artistic worth of his other "militant" poems.

McKay was also ambivalent about his homeland. Throughout most of his life, he ignored in his writing the political, social, and economic realities of Jamaica and evoked instead the image of an Edenic island that offered him refuge from the complexities of the twentieth century.

To my husband, Ronnie Griffin,
and my sons. Thank you for
your love and encouragement.

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Introduction

Claude McKay, born in Jamaica in 1890, was important to the development of twentieth-century Black literature. According to John Hope Franklin, he was "the first significant writer of the Harlem Renaissance."¹ He, along with other pioneers, "prepared the ground and planted the seeds" for this literary movement.² His two sonnets, "The Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation," published 1917 in Waldo Frank and James Oppenheim's Seven Arts Magazine made him one of the first Black artists to ponder the theme of the Black man's cultural relationship to Africa. However, it was in 1922 that he published his most important collection of poems, Harlem Shadows. This volume set the spirit for the flowering of Negro creativity realized during the Harlem Renaissance because it brought together concepts that would stimulate the minds and hearts of artists, critics, and readers eager to explore an Afrocentric world. From Harlem Shadows emerged three thematic concerns that would figure prominently in McKay's later works: that of anger and rebellion, the search for a valid Black identity, and the place of Jamaica in his life.

¹John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans 3rd edition (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 503.

²Arthur P. Davis, From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900 to 1969 (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), p. 15.

McKay's impatience with social injustice is clear in Harlem Shadows as he signals a new stance for twentieth-century Black artists: an intolerance of racial oppression. His angry, defiant poems urging Blacks not to accept passivity in the wake of racial discrimination were responsible for the thrust toward protest writing that has since remained a significant concept in Black literature.³

James Weldon Johnson, calling McKay "preeminently the poet of rebellion," credits him with voicing more effectively than any other artist during his time the emotions that Blacks in America were experiencing following the unsettling years after World War I.⁴ And Robert A. Smith says that McKay, in Harlem Shadows, expresses "the passionate language of a persecuted race."⁵ Arthur D. Drayton observes that McKay's protest poetry articulates the outrage not only of Afro-Americans but of all humanity.⁶

³Ibid.

⁴"Claude McKay," in Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism 7, eds. Sharon K. Hall and Others (Gale Research Company, 1982), p. 456.

⁵"Claude McKay: An Essay in Criticism," in Phylon: The Atlanta Review of Race and Color 9 (September 1948): 270.

⁶"McKay's Human Pity: A Note on His Protest Poetry," Black Orpheus 17 (June 1965): 48.

Through his protest poems appearing in "little magazines," as well as those in his Harlem Shadows, McKay has earned the right to be called "America's Chief Poetic Spokesman for Negro Rights."⁷

Certainly, little can be said to refute the traditional evaluation of McKay as a forerunner of the defiant posture in Black literature. But it is significant that popular assessments of his artistic contributions fail to explore below the surface of his so-called protest poems. Satisfied with his one-dimensional bravado and angry facade, most critics overlook the conflict at the heart of his rebellious poetry. Accepting McKay's poems as the articulation of mass sentiment, they do not see that, in his poems, McKay is concerned with expressing his own private range and not that of others. In his militant poems, he is a man alienated not only from America but his own "group" as well.

When McKay included in Harlem Shadows poems about his Jamaican home, he brought a new dimension to the alien / exile theme popular in Afro-American literature. Through remembrances of Jamaica and the persona of the homesick exile longing for his island home, he challenged the prevailing myth of the deracinated Black man, powerless to call any

⁷Charles Terrance, "The Making of a Black Poet: A Critical Biography of Claude McKay For the Years 1889-1922" (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, Temple University, 1972).

country his own. Through his "real" memories of Jamaica, he seemed to declare to his American readers, both Black and White, "Here is a Black man who has roots in a soil untouched by your racial bigotry." Through these poems that painted Jamaica as a haven, he implied pride in his Black heritage. In subsequent works, especially in his last novel, Banana Bottom (1933), McKay would continue to evoke positive images of his boyhood home.

Because McKay was boastful of his home, critics have cited his kinship with Jamaica as an important factor that not only helped to mold his philosophy of negritude but also separated him from Black American artists, who wasted "much psychic energy" agonizing over whether a Black man ought to be a Black poet or just "a poet."⁸ They argue that his philosophy of negritude was a natural culmination of his positive experiences in Jamaica. Because he grew up in a predominantly Black rural village, he saw race as a natural part of his identity as an artist and a human being; for him, to refuse one's racial identity was tantamount to rejecting one's humanity.⁹ And through his portrait of Jamaican peasants, he seemed not only "to reaffirm the virtues of simple [peasant] life" but to imply the superiority of a

⁸George E. Kent, "The Soulful Way of Claude McKay," Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), pp. 36-52.

⁹Ibid.

primitive / African ethos over a European value system.¹⁰ One critic suggests that McKay drew on the image of his Jamaican home throughout his life as a source of "solace and inspiration."¹¹

McKay's West Indian background certainly must assume a significant place in any discussion of his themes, for Jamaica was a wellspring for many of his ideas. But too often critics have discussed Jamaica as the pastoral oasis from which McKay gained his rebellious pride and positive Black perspective, but they have not examined it as a significant source of conflict in his work. For along with inheriting a supposed rebellious spirit, a secure identity, and an appreciation of a Black ethos, McKay inherited from Jamaica a colonial mind-set that would, throughout his life, challenge the validity of the very themes that distinguish him as a pioneer artist.

Although some critics have noted the conflict in McKay's themes, no study has been undertaken to examine in-depth the fragmentation in his works. In his Ph.D. thesis, Thomas

¹⁰Thomas Sutton, "Threefold Vision in the Works of Claude McKay," (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, University of Miami, 1975).

¹¹William Harold Hansell, "Positive Themes in the Poetry of Four Negroes: Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, University of Wisconsin, 1972).

Sutton observes that McKay was divided by three conflicting forces in his life: his Jamaican-African soul; his fertile mind, which was filled with the literature of Western civilization, and his private vision.¹² But his study does not emphasize the interplay within or between these forces. Jean-Claude Bajoux sees as paradoxical McKay's use of traditional Western values to denounce Western culture, for example McKay's adoption of the sonnet to express hatred and defiance for America.¹³ Bajoux's study emphasizes the irony in McKay's militant poems but does not explore the ambivalence in other aspects of McKay's works.

Finally, Wayne Cooper's "Stranger and Pilgrim: The Life of Claude McKay,"¹⁴ offers a thorough account of the poet's life, from his beginning years in Jamaica to his final years as a bitter, disappointed man. Although his study is a richly researched project that reveals many of the paradoxes underlying McKay's life, it is a biography that does not purport to evaluate thoroughly McKay's writings.

¹²Sutton, Ph.D. dissertation abstract.

¹³Jean-Claude Bajoux, "Antilla Retrouvee: La Poesie Noire Antillaise 'A Travers L'Oeuvre De Claude McKay, Luis Pales Matos, Aime Cesaire" (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, Princeton University, 1977).

¹⁴Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1982.

From his first collection of poems, Songs of Jamaica (1912), to his final writings declaring his religious conviction, McKay wrote significantly on many issues of his times. In his social criticisms, his novels, his short stories, and his poems, he sought to articulate his philosophies of negritude and rebellion. For the most part he was successful in articulating his revolutionary themes. But a close examination of his works reveals contradiction and conflict at the heart of his ideas. It is the purpose of this study to show that McKay was a man plagued by ambivalence throughout his life, and that ambivalence is reflected in his perception of an Afrocentric world, his relationship to that world, his relationship to Jamaica, and his role as twentieth-century rebel.

Chapter I

The Jamaican Homeland

In his 1922 collection of poems, Harlem Shadows, McKay introduced American readers to his Jamaica. The introduction was significant for two reasons. It made his audience more aware of the universality of the Black experience, and it established a background for McKay that set him apart from the other Harlem Renaissance writers. Jean Wagner, in his Black Poets of the United States, suggests that McKay had advantages over most American Blacks because, unlike them, he had the security and stability of the Jamaican countryside. Wagner says that because McKay felt protected by the bonds of his community, he was spared the schizophrenia that most Black Americans experience. "The Jamaican countryside, peopled almost entirely by Blacks, offered an admirably supportive, kindly milieu for the unfolding and stabilization of McKay's personality. Since no racial prejudice affected persons who were all of one color, he was able to grow up without having a sense of inferiority forced on him."¹ Wagner concludes that most Jamaicans feel truly at home in Jamaica. "His gratitude to this land is total, his

¹Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, trans. Kenneth Douglas (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 211. Although color discrimination existed in Jamaica, the rural mountain village where McKay grew up was spared the intense racial conflict that plagued the cities.

loyalty without reserve, and there is not one negro who, to defend it, would not shed his last drop of blood. One could not find in any American black poet so entire a sense of belonging and such unalloyed patriotism."² And Sister M. James Conroy suggests that McKay's Jamaican heritage and the Jamaican soil acted as a "revitalizing power" which gave him "the strength to offset the machine age's impersonality."³ But in their assessment of McKay's relationship to his homeland, both critics failed to see the complexity in McKay's image of Jamaica. Both saw only the side of Jamaica that McKay had intended that they see. Throughout much of his life, McKay was careful to place before the public only an idyllic Jamaica, an Eden. Very rarely did McKay reveal a three-dimensional perspective on Jamaica.

One has to believe that McKay himself had a need to believe in the Utopian Jamaica he manufactured because of the shock he experienced after witnessing racial discrimination as practiced in the United States in 1912. Although racial discrimination was also a fact of life in Jamaica, its raw edges were softened by the overlay of class distinctions. McKay was not prepared for the blatant color prejudice he felt when his ship sailed into the port at Charleston, South

²Ibid., p. 212.

³Sister M. James Conroy, "Claude McKay: Negro Poet and Novelist," (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, University of Notre Dame, 1968), p. 1.

Carolina. He writes, "Where in all America could one land and find more beauty and moral ugliness at the same time?"⁴ Jamaica represented a refuge, a place to escape whenever the stings of racial discrimination became unbearable to his sensitive mind and spirit. Unlike the other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay could escape to his romantic past, an age of boyhood innocence. Through the haze of recollection, McKay saw Clarendon Hills (his own village in Jamaica) as a Garden of Eden, and he imagined himself a blushing youth being gently and securely cradled in her unchanging beauty and purity. But in order for this vision of Jamaica to work as a "revitalizing power,"⁵ it was necessary that McKay endow it with perfection and immortality. His Jamaica would never change, nor would it be subject to the forces of cynicism and deception that plagued the real world around him and made life difficult and uncertain.

But other difficulties would beset McKay and drive him to create an imaginary, perfect Jamaica. In 1912, before McKay set sail for America, he had a vision of success in

⁴Claude McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," Phylon 13 (2nd quarter 1953): 145. "Boyhood in Jamaica" is an edited excerpt from McKay's "My Green Hills of Jamaica." Cedric Dover, the author of American Negro Art (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1960) edited McKay's article after the poet's death. He and McKay were planning to publish their memoirs together in a volume entitled, "East Indian-- West Indian."

⁵Conroy, p. 1.

front of him. He had already gained recognition as a poet in Jamaica through his two books, Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads, and he had been accepted into Tuskegee Institute's famed agricultural program with his school expenses having been underwritten by his mentor in Jamaica, Walter Jekyll.⁶ His plans were to complete Tuskegee and then return to Jamaica a poet-farmer, with the experience of America under his belt. "Going to America," says McKay, "was the greatest event in the history of our hills, for America was the supposedly golden land of education and opportunity....It was the new 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."⁷

But McKay's plans were quickly changed. He found Tuskegee too regimented and intellectually stagnant. He withdrew in his first semester there and immediately transferred to the agricultural program at Kansas State. But this too would not be a satisfactory solution. Spending almost two years there, he withdrew in the spring of 1914, realizing that his heart was not in farming. With an endowment given to him by a benefactor, quite probably Walter Jekyll, McKay set out for New York City with an idea of

⁶Wayne Cooper, F., "Stranger and Pilgrim: The Life of Claude McKay, 1890-1948," (Ph.D dissertation, Rutgers University, 1982), p. 129.

⁷Claude McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," Phylon 13: 135-36.

investing his money in some business enterprise. In the summer of 1914, McKay married his Jamaican sweetheart, Eulalie Imelda Lewars (whom McKay sent for from Jamaica), and he became a restaurateur somewhere in New York City's old Negro district in the West Fifties.⁸ But within six months, he was to lose both his restaurant and his wife. Having become "wearied" of the life in New York City, she returned to her native Jamaica.⁹ By 1915, McKay must have begun to feel the pull of adversity and ill-luck that would in the future throw many of his plans and dreams awry. Although one cannot say with certainty that McKay had planned to return to Jamaica once he had left his West Indian island home in 1912, it is certain that after his initial plans in America ended in failure, he resolved in his heart never to return to Jamaica again. In his autobiography McKay writes about that period, 1915: "I had no desire to return home. What I had previously done was done."¹⁰

Between the years 1915 and 1919, McKay would replace his real homeland with a romantic paradise, a place for which he could long nostalgically. For the rest of his life, McKay would fight fiercely to protect his hazy image of Jamaica.

⁸Stephen Bronz, Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness: The 1920's, Three Harlem Renaissance Authors (New York: Libra, 1964), p. 71.

⁹Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 158-168.

¹⁰McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 4.

He first presents Jamaica as Eden in his 1919 poem, "After the Winter." The poem is elegiac in that McKay, who longs for a dream that will never be fulfilled, actually mourns a past that is lost to him forever. The rhetorical circumstance of the poem is that of a man talking to his lover about one day going home to his beloved isle. However, the first stanza begins with the poignant word "someday," making it clear that the poet is meditating upon a nostalgic vision that has no ground in reality. The lines in the first stanza move rather wistfully and lazily because of McKay's use of soft sibilant alliteration, adding to the effect of a man painting a scene that he knows will never be within his grasp.

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves
 And against the morning's white
 The shivering birds beneath the eaves
 Have sheltered for the night,
 We'll turn our faces southward love,
 Toward the summer isle
 Where bamboos spire the shafted grove
 And wide-mouthed orchids smile.¹¹

In the second stanza, McKay adds finality to the idea of the impossibility of ever going home by actually coming home, but surrounding that homecoming with shades of the pastoral elegy. Through the use of liquid l's and open, extended

¹¹Claude McKay, "After the Winter," Selected Poems of Claude McKay (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953), p. 30, earlier published in The Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920), p. 57.

vowels, which lends to the poem an air of heaviness and lethargy (appropriate for images of fading and dreaming), McKay proposes to his lover that they build the obligatory cottage in the woods, located on a "quiet hill."

And we will seek the quiet hill
 Where towers the cotton tree,
 And leaps the laughing crystal rill,
 And works the droning bee.
 And we will build a cottage there
 Beside an open glade,
 With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near,
 And ferns that never fade.¹²

The final line confirms the poet's unspoken judgement that a homecoming will never take place. For it is only in dreams or in unearthly realms that one can see "ferns that never fade."

During a trip to England in 1920, which will be discussed more extensively in later chapters, McKay was fortunate enough to have several of his poems published in the summer issue of The Cambridge Magazine. The magazine's renowned critic and editor C. K. Ogden included twenty-three of McKay's sonnets in the June issue and a few of his shorter lyrics. In A Long Way From Home, McKay makes brief mention of Ogden's kindness to him, remarking that he steered him around "the picture galleries" of London.¹³ Although McKay

¹²"After the Winter," p. 30.

¹³McKay, A Long Way From Home, 86.

included some love poems, poems on the plight of the poor worker, and poems about racial injustice (not yet the militant poems of racial hatred that we have come to associate with McKay), it is the poems that express nostalgia for his homeland that dominate.

Wayne Cooper has suggested that perhaps McKay had a resurgence of homesickness for Jamaica because during this trip he was forced to see a different England from the one that he had envisioned as a child in Jamaica.¹⁴ As a child, McKay romanticized England. Because of his colonial orientation, he had come to regard England as a cultural and spiritual fountainhead. But he came to discover what other West Indian colonials soon discover, that "the average Englishman had not the remotest idea that they shared a common culture."¹⁵ Instead of seeing the England of Wordsworth and Shelley, he saw the England of World War I.¹⁶

Such a shocking invalidation of childhood notions probably sent the poet in search of childhood memories. While agreeing that McKay's first visit to England must have been a significant contributor to his nostalgic expressions,

¹⁴Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 300.

¹⁵David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 52.

¹⁶Cooper, p. 300.

one must argue that he began formulating his ambivalent relationship toward Jamaica long before his trip to England. McKay's trip to London, shortly after his failed experience in school and his failed brief marriage, simply compounded his decision never to return to Jamaica. In London, he was subjected to failure again: He was forced to reject the myth of his colonial childhood--that London was his true "motherland,--" and once again he was compelled to seek compensation by reflecting on his past in unrealistic terms.

It is not surprising that McKay in many of the Jamaican poems appearing in the 1920 Cambridge issue combines the themes of nostalgia for a "perfect" homeland and longing for boyhood innocence; he needed, in some part of his mind, to believe that the promises of life as he had conceived of them in Jamaica would be fulfilled, and that the world, despite his harsh confrontation with twentieth-century England, was a warm, wonderful place waiting to embrace one of its best. For example, in "Sukee River," McKay expresses his longing for home by lyrically addressing an aspect of nature closely attached to his boyhood--the river. This poem is a nostalgic longing for youth and home. McKay begins his celebration of the river by establishing its nurturing effect upon his

childhood. His gift of lyricism is in evidence here as he uses soft sibilant alliteration and open-vowel assonance to express the gentle, mother-like quality of the river.

Thou sweet-voiced stream that first gavest me drink,
 Watched o'er me when I floated on thy breast;
 What black-faced boy now gambols on thy brink,
 Or finds beneath thy rocks a place of rest?¹⁷

In the next few lines, McKay indirectly alludes to his estrangement from Jamaica and his childhood innocence by voicing his concerns about the new youth that has supplanted him.

What naked lad doth linger long by thee,
 And run and tumble in the sun-scorched sand,
 Or heed the pea-dove in the wild fig tree,
 While I am roaming in an alien land?¹⁸

Certainly, McKay's reference here to "roaming in an alien land" offers some insight into his thinking at that time. By 1920, McKay had not only abandoned the idea of returning to Jamaica, but he had begun to see himself as the homeless wanderer who could not go home.¹⁹ Then, in the final lines of the poem, McKay makes plain his permanent

¹⁷"Sukee River," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 17, originally published in The Cambridge Magazine, 10 (Summer, 1920), p. 59.

¹⁸"Sukee River," p. 17.

¹⁹A Long Way From Home, p. 4.

estrangement from Sukee River by telling her that he will be ever faithful. As in "After the Winter," McKay, in elegiac fashion, sets up a circumstance that cannot possibly exist in reality.

I shall love you ever,
Dearest Sukee River:
Dash against my broken heart,
Nevermore from you I'll part;
But will stay for ever,
Crystal Sukee River²⁰

In "The Spanish Needle," McKay once again addresses a specimen of nature peculiar to his home in Jamaica, and, in so doing, sounds the familiar theme of the poet homesick for his homeland and his youth. Throughout this poem, McKay asks the Spanish Needle whether or not it remembers him. But what distinguishes this poem from "After the Winter" and "Sukee River" is McKay's attempt here to recount "realistic" vignettes from his rustic childhood. Every detail expressed in this poem was quite possibly a boyish activity that McKay engaged in. He asks,

²⁰"Sukee River," p. 17.

"Do you see me by the brookside,
 Catching crabs beneath the stone?
 As you did the day you whispered:
 Leave the harmless dears alone?

"Do you see me in the meadow,
 Coming from the woodland spring,
 With a bamboo on my shoulder
 And a pail slung from a string?²¹

In "Homing Swallows" McKay turns once again to the painless days of childhood in Jamaica. Here again, befitting the romantic quality of his lyrics, he addresses some element in nature. And through the same questioning pattern that he uses in "The Spanish Needle," McKay paints a carefree pastoral vision of childhood on his island:

When at the noon hour from the chapel school
 The children dash and scamper down the dale,
 Scornful of teacher's rod and binding rule
 Forever broken and without avail,

Do they still stop beneath the giant tree
 To gather locusts in their childish greed,
 And chuckle when they break the pods to see
 The golden power clustered round the seed?²²

²¹"The Spanish Needle," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 24, originally published in The Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920): 55.

²²"Homing Swallows," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 18.

In "North and South," McKay uses soft gliding alliteration, recurring sibilant sounds, liquid l's and soft bilabial sounds to unite hearing and vision to paint a lazy, dreamy world heavy with the fragrance, color, and warmth of the tropics.

.....
 O Sweet are tropic lands for waking dreams!
 There time and life move lazily along.
 There by the banks of blue and silver streams
 Grass-sheltered crickets chirp incessant song;
 Gay-colored lizards loll all through the day,
 Their tongues outstretched for careless little
 flies. ...²³

In the following poems McKay expresses quite clearly the romantic opposition of the city versus the country, with Jamaica, of course, symbolizing pastoral innocence. In "Home Thoughts," McKay's imagination is so powerfully seized by the rustic images of his past in Jamaica that he believes he can sense, even amid the noise and overwhelming presence of the city, what is happening on his island at that moment:

²³"North and South," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 20, originally published in The Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920): 57.

Oh something just now must be happening there!
 That suddenly and quiveringly here,
 Amid the city's noises, I must think
 Of mangoes leaning to the river's brink,
 And dexterous Davie climbing high above,
 The gold fruits ebon-speckled to remove
 And toss them quickly in the tangled mass
 Of wis-wis twisted round the guinea grass.²⁴

In this poem, McKay successfully combines the fruits and flowers natural to his tropic home with the natural spontaneous activities of youth.

Through softly accented iambic pentameter lines, McKay continues expressing the vision he sees before him. It is significant that he ends his dream vision with reference to schoolboys, a synonym for early youth:

And Cyril coming through the bramble-track
 A prize bunch of bananas on his back;
 And Georgie--none could ever dive like him--
 Throwing his scanty clothes off for a swim;
 And schoolboys, from Bridge tunnel going home,
 Watching the waters downward dash and foam.²⁵

²⁴"Home Thoughts," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 21, originally published in The Liberator 2 (February 1920): 12.

²⁵"Home Thoughts," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 21.

Finally McKay concludes that the images are too real and too vibrant to be merely a dream:

This is no daytime dream, there's something in it,
Oh something's happening there this very minute!²⁶

McKay continues the city versus the country opposition in his poem "When Dawn Comes to the City." Here the poet contrasts dawn in the city with dawn in his homeland. In the city, dawn is a gloomy bleak time, full of greyness and monotony:

The tired cars go grumbling by,
The moaning, groaning cars,
And the old milk carts go rumbling by
Under the same dull stars.
Out of the tenements, cold as stone,
Dark figures start for work;
I watch them sadly shuffle on,
'Tis dawn, dawn in New York.²⁷

In this stanza, McKay, expressing his view of dawn in the city, purposefully uses a stagnant and lifeless rhythm. In addition, he uses imagery that is colorless and dull. However, when McKay turns his thoughts to Jamaica, the rhythm becomes noticeably more complex and interesting; the imagery becomes richer and more natural. McKay evokes nature and

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷"When Dawn Comes to the City," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 62, originally published in Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920): 58.

color to give life to this stanza. And although he uses repetition here as in the previous stanza, the words repeated are words associated with the poetic, natural response of simple animals:

But I would be on the island of the sea
 In the heart of the island of the sea,
 Where the cocks are crowing, crowing, crowing,
 And the hens are cackling in the rose-apple tree,
 Where the old draft-horse is neighing, neighing, neighing,
 Out on the brown dew-silvered lawn,
 And the tethered cow is lowing, lowing, lowing.
 And dear old Ned is braying, braying, braying,
 And the shaggy Nannie goat is calling, calling, calling
 From her little trampled corner of the long wide lea
 That stretches to the waters of the hill-stream falling
 Sheer upon the flat rocks joyously!
 There, oh there! on the island of the sea,
 There would I be at dawn.²⁸

As the poem draws to a close, McKay modifies the already stagnant rhythm so that dawn in the city becomes progressively colorless and dull.

McKay discusses "The Tropics in New York" in his autobiography, A Long Way Home. He mentions a particularly special event at the offices of The Liberator one day. Charlie Chaplin walked in on the arm of The Liberator editor, Max Eastman. Eastman told McKay that Chaplin had read his poems in The Liberator and liked them. McKay says that he gave Chaplin a copy of his 1920 collection, Spring in New

²⁸"When Dawn Comes to the City," p. 62.

Hampshire, which included "The Tropics in New York." He says that Chaplin must have especially liked the poem because he included it in his book My Trip Abroad.²⁹

In "The Tropics in New York," McKay is seized by a wave of homesickness when his eyes fall upon a display of exotic tropical fruit in a city store's front window. It is obvious that McKay, in this first stanza, has taken great pains to appeal to the senses. To that end, he resorts to cataloging in order to impart a flavor of thickness and fertile richness.

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
 Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
 And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
 Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
 Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
 And dewy dawns, and mystical blues skies
 In benediction over nun-like hills.³⁰

Finally, the poet is so overcome with impassioned memories of home that he must cease his gazing:

²⁹My Trip Abroad (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922).

³⁰"The Tropics in New York," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 31, originally published in The Liberator 3 (May 1920): 48.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze,
 A wave of longing through my body swept,
 And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
 I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.³¹

McKay was especially pleased with "Flame-Heart," which Sterling Brown himself called "one of the best lyrics in negro poetry."³² As a matter of fact, in his autobiography, McKay points to the poem as proof that his disappointing stay in London was not "wholly Hell," for it was there that he wrote "Flame-Heart."³³ In addition, McKay's Selected Poems begins with this lyric, and there is evidence that although the collection was published posthumously, McKay had a hand in its final arrangement.³⁴ "Flame-Heart" is nearly perfect in its combination of quiet meditative music, powerful impression of natural scenery, and poignant longing for fleeting childhood memories.

³¹"The Tropics in New York," p. 31.

³²Negro Poetry and Drama (Washington, D.C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937), p. 65.

³³Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 73.

³⁴Claude McKay to Carl Cowl, 13 February 1948, McKay Papers, Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. In his letter to Cowl, McKay mentions that he arranged the layout of the poems himself, although he expressed bitterness that neither he nor Cowl had been successful in finding a publisher. The collection was published in 1953, five years after McKay's death.

Each stanza of "Flame-Heart" represents a stage in the poet's attempt to recall days gone by, days blessed with a kinship with nature and the natural activities of innocent children. McKay heightens the tragedy of dimming childhood images by painting vivid pictures of those things forgotten and lost in time. In the first stanza, McKay's memory is dim. He can recall little, but what he cannot recall is made vivid through his ability here to appeal to both sight and sound:

So much I have forgotten in ten years,
 So much in ten brief years! I have forgot
 What time the purple apples come to juice,
 And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.
 I have forgot the special, startling season
 Of the pimento's flowering and fruiting;
 What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
 And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.
 I have forgotten much, but still remember
 The poinsettia's red, blood-red, in warm December.³⁵

McKay establishes a sense of unity here through his repetition of soft *f* sounds and his emphasis of extended open vowel sounds which offers a sense of fullness and fruitfulness. Also a sense of unity is achieved through his repetition of the phrase "I have forgot." And finally McKay's repetition (with some variation) of the rhymed couplet at the end of each stanza brings a unity to the whole

³⁵Claude McKay, "Flame-Heart," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 13, originally published in Claude McKay, Spring in New Hampshire (London: Grant Richards, Ltd., 1920), p. 30.

poem. "I have forgotten much, but still remember/The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December." It is the one constant from his fleeting Jamaican past; it is the "flame-heart."

The next embodies a natural progress in the poet's feverish struggle to remember his past: fragments of long-ago images begin to take shape:

I still recall the honey-fever grass,
 But cannot recollect the high days when
 We rooted them out of the ping-wing path
 To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.
 I often try to think in what sweet month
 The languid painted ladies used to dapple
 The yellow by-road mazing from the main,
 Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple.
 I have forgotten--strange--but quite remember
 The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.³⁶

The last stanza is a climatic ending of the poet's desperate effort to visualize his past. His voice rises to a wild ecstatic pitch as he realizes the images that he struggled so passionately to recall are now vivid and complete.

³⁶"Flame-Heart," p. 13.

What weeks, what months, what time of the mild year
 We cheated school to have our fling at tops?
 What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with joy
 Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?
 Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days,
 Even the sacred moments when we played,
 All innocent of passion, uncorrupt,
 At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade.
 We were so happy, happy, I remember
 Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December.³⁷

The high emotional intensity at the end of "Flame-Heart" suggests that the poet wishes escaping into the innocence of his past were an alternative.

If "Flame-Heart" raises the possibility of escaping into the past, "I Shall Return" closes the door to that possibility forever. The poem is painfully elegiac, and appropriately enough appears as the final piece in McKay's section of poems on Jamaica in his Selected Poems.

In "I Shall Return," McKay mourns the present and longs for the innocent wonder of his childhood in Jamaica when he dared laugh, love, and dream. This poem is very similar to "After the Winter," in that McKay expresses a nostalgic longing for scenes and events that will never take place, ironically suggesting the probability that he will never see Jamaica again:

³⁷"Flame-Heart," p. 13.

I shall return again. I shall return to laugh
 and love and watch with wonder-eyes
 At golden noon the forest fires burn,
 Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.³⁸

More than a longing for place, the poem expresses the desire for a time when his dreams seemed possible. When he published this poem in 1920, he had already seen the destruction of many of his youthful dreams; returning to Jamaica and to the past would restore magic and hope to his life once again.

Ironically, when McKay began publishing his nostalgic lyrics about Jamaica in 1919, his reputation as a socially conscious poet on American themes had already been established. In 1917 he published "The Harlem Dancer," whose revolutionary theme was the degradation of Black art by an immoral White culture. And 1918 would see the beginning of the rebellious sonnets that assert his stoic defiance to a hostile White enemy, such as "To The White Fiends," published in Pearson's Magazine.³⁹ Throughout 1919, 1920, and 1921 McKay continued to cultivate his gift of combining socially conscious poems with traditional literary forms, and he

³⁸"I Shall Return," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 32, originally published in The Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920): 58.

³⁹"To The White Fiends," Pearson's Magazine 39 (September 1918): 256; reprinted in The Liberator 2 (September 1919): 25.

would continue to write the purely poetic lyric. But what is interesting is that never once does he turn a socially conscious eye to his homeland. It is significant that none of his poems about Jamaica, after his disembarkation onto American soil in 1912, examine its social reality and its poverty--born of deep-seated class structures--its racial prejudice, and its barren lack of opportunities.

McKay was indeed aware that Jamaica was a troubled West Indian island. In 1979, at a special ceremony in Jamaica honoring McKay's contribution to West Indian literature, the Minister of Information and Culture praised McKay, stating that his achievements took "more than ordinary ability and application" because he had been born at a time when only property-owning persons could vote and when "racial discrimination against black people was at its highest."⁴⁰ Jamaica was troubled by its impoverished economy, racial hostilities, and a general cultural and economic disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

The legacy of poverty and cultural deprivation can be traced to the cruel history of slavery in the West Indies.⁴¹

⁴⁰The Daily Gleaner, 22 December 22, 1979, newspaper clipping in McKay Folder at the Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

⁴¹Wayne Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim: The Life of Claude McKay," p. 3.

Many vestiges of the slave regime in the Caribbean lasted throughout the nineteenth century and carried over into the twentieth century: for example, large plantations and a multitude of landless workers. For a brief period, Negroes were under an apprenticeship system which was established by the British government to aid in the transition of Blacks from slaves to freemen: the ex-slaves were to have their freedom, but the products of their labor would be under heavy supervision of Whites; needless to say, the system proved ineffective. Blacks were still not totally free.⁴² After the apprenticeship system failed, Blacks found themselves back on the plantations where they had once been enslaved, working long and hard for "pitifully low wages." Only a few were able to rise above a low agricultural status.⁴³ The poverty and bare resources of the freed Negroes caused them to be victimized by a system (similar to that set up in the United States after Emancipation) which allowed the planters to hire workers and provide them with substandard housing, then deduct the costs of sheltering them from their wages, and, if they were sharecroppers, deduct these expenses from crop sales. In order to exploit further resourceless laborers, planters began importing more workers from the

⁴²Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, pp. 347-351.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 351-352.

Orient and India after 1855.⁴⁴ Amy Jacques Garvey, wife of Black activist Marcus Garvey, commented on the phenomenon of foreign traders in the West Indies: "The grocery trade-- wholesale and retail--were in the hands of Chinese, whose ancestors came to the Island as indentured labourers. Now their offspring were the traders. The Syrians and Lebanese practically monopolized the clothing and shoe trades. Thus money that had to be spent to buy the barest necessities of life went into the pockets of alien traders."⁴⁵

Before leaving Jamaica in 1912 for the United States, McKay had established himself as an astute observer of the political and social realities of his society. His publication of Constab Ballads, a collection of dialect poems, gave evidence that he was not only cognizant of the social, economic, and political issues threatening the well-being of his homeland, but that he also felt compelled to express his reactions to the injustices he saw around him. Unlike Songs of Jamaica, a collection which celebrated the ideality and nobility of the Black peasant in rural Jamaica, Constab Ballads explored the more complex aspects of Jamaican life.

⁴⁴Franklin, p. 352.

⁴⁵Amy Jacques Garvey, Garvey and Garveyism, p. 195, quoted in Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, p. 131.

For example, McKay was very much aware of the economic and social implication of the predominance of foreign tradesmen in Jamaica. He made the issue a subject of one of his poems in Constab Ballads. "Me Whoppin'-Big-Tree Boy," written in dialect, tells the humorous story of a "whoppin' Syrian-boy"--a Negro peddler who works for a Syrian businessman--who refuses to carry the man's load any farther, thus declaring his freedom from the Syrian's service.

Wid his han's dem set akimbo in a mannish sort o'
 way,
 Said he "Do wha'it you like, but A wi wuk no mo'
 te-day."
 An' de Syrian grew astonished as he looked upon his
 load,
 Which de whoppin' big-tree boy had tumbled in de
 middle road:⁴⁶

Having declared his freedom, to the amazement of the Syrian businessman, The Big-Tree boy begins upbraiding him about his exploitative business practices against Negroes and threatens the Syrian's safety.

"Now I'm free fe talk abouten all de people whe'[who] you
 rob,
 How you sell wha' no wut gill self to black naygur for
 a bob;
 But me eboe-light [stick] wi' sure talk, of dat you can have
 no doubt,
 Fe revenge de quantity o' poor poor people you play out."⁴⁷

⁴⁶"Me Whoppin'-Big-Tree Boy," Constab Ballads (London: Watts & Co., 1912), p. 48.

⁴⁷"Me Whoppin'-Bit-Tree Boy", p. 43.

The poet's spirit is clearly uplifted by the Big-Tree Boy's bold handling of the Syrian.

Then I roared, I roared with laughter, although
 posted on my beat,
 Till I half forgot de sore pain in me bosom an' my feet.
 ...⁴⁸

In "Pay-Day," McKay again presents the Syrian businessman as greedy and immoral. It is the policeman's pay-day, and a motley crew of undesirables await his money just as anxiously as he. Among the waiting crowd is the midnight girl who has lost her purity and innocence after leaving the country, the old tattered "mess woman" whom the police neglect to pay after eating her food, and the Syrian.

Clearly seen among dem all
 Is a colourless white face
 Anxious more dan every one,
 Fine type of an alien race:
 He is waitin' for some cash
 On de goods trust' tarra day, [the other day]
 Our good frien' de Syrian,--
 For it's policeman pay-day.⁴⁹

McKay wrote Constab Ballads as a cathartic exercise to relieve the distasteful memories he had of serving on the Constabulary in Kingston for a brief period. McKay wrote

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹"Pay-Day," Constab Ballads, p. 52.

that he found this brief semi-military period agonizing: "Let me confess it at once. I had not in me the stuff that goes to the making of a good constable I am by temperament, unadaptive; by which I mean that it is not in me to conform cheerfully to uncongenial usages."⁵⁰ McKay was fortunate in not having to serve the complete five years that the Constabulary required. His mentor and friend Walter Jekyll was able to use his considerable influence to have him released after a period of one year of service.⁵¹ After receiving his unexpected discharge from Constabulary service, McKay wrote the poem "Free."

Scarce can I believe my eyes,
 Yet before me there it lies,
 Precious paper granting me Quick release from
 misery....⁵²

McKay found his year on the Constabulary intolerable for several reasons: his wild free nature that precluded him from painlessly following the rigid strictures of duty, his feelings that as a police officer he was a party to the persecution of his own kin, those with his own Black skin, and, last, his sense of despair at being so close to the social injustices that he had heard of and felt only

⁵⁰Preface, Constab Ballads, p. 7.

⁵¹Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim: The Life of Claude McKay," p. 70.

⁵²Constab Ballads, p. 78.

indirectly in his rural mountain isolation. Now it was all real and palpable. Jean Wagner writes, "Constab Ballads reveal the disillusionment and pessimism the poet felt when plunged into the life of the capital."⁵³

"The Heart of a Constab" expresses McKay's feeling that donning the uniform of a police officer meant a betrayal of race. In the first stanza, McKay bemoans the hatred that pervades the life of a police officer. Then he goes on to lament the alienation that he must suffer from his own kind:

Oh! where are de faces I loved in de past,
 De frien's dat I used to hold dear?
 Oh say, have dey all turned away from me now
 Because de red seam I wear?

I foolishly wandered away from dem all
 To dis life of anguish an' woe,
 Where I mus' be hard on me own kith an' kin,
 And even to frien' mus' prove foe....

'Tis grievous to think dat, while toilin' on here,
 My people won't love me again,
 My people, my people, my owna black skin,--
 De wretched t'ought gives me such pain....⁵⁴

In "The Bobby to the Sneering Lady," McKay again expresses the discomfort the Black Constab has in having to arrest his own kind. In this dramatic monologue, the officer is talking to a European woman who has obviously summoned the

⁵³Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 204.

⁵⁴"The Heart of a Constab," Constab Ballads, pp. 62-63.

Constab to arrest her Black female servant. He informs the woman (who never speaks) that he will not arrest the servant because he feels that the poor woman has been beaten enough. Of course the woman becomes angry and condescending in her attitude toward the policeman. He then tells her,

You may sneer at us, madam,
 But our work is beastly hard;
 An' while toilin thus we scarce
 Ever get a lee reward.

Our soul's jes' like fe you,
 If our work does make us rough;
 Me won't 'res' you servant-gal
 When you've beaten her enough....⁵⁵

Then he goes on the express solidarity with the black skin of the servant.

Ef our lot, then, so hard,
 I mus' ever bear in mind
 Dat to fe me own black 'kin
 I mus' not be too unkind....⁵⁶

McKay was obviously extremely incensed by the issue of man's inhumanity to man, or specifically authority's inhumanity toward helpless people, for he makes this problem the subject of a rather emotional poem, "Strokes of the Tamarind Switch." The poem is significant in that it is the

⁵⁵"The Bobby to the Sneering Lade," Constab Ballads, pp. 66.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 67.

only poem in Songs of Jamaica that makes an overt social comment. In this poem, McKay discusses an incident in which a young Black man of fifteen, who has gotten in with a gang of bad boys, is beaten with a tamarind switch by the authorities. McKay was outraged that this little boy should be treated so harshly.

I dared not look at him,
 My eyes with tears were dim,
 My spirit filled with hate
 Of 's man's depravity,
 I hurried through the gate....

Poor little erring wretch!
 The cutting tamarind switch
 Had left its bloody mark,
 And on his legs were streaks
 That looked like boiling bark.⁵⁷

McKay in the fourth stanza highlights the cruelty of a public beating by emphasizing the emotional consequences of such an act.

I spoke to him the while:
 At first he tried to smile,
 But the long pent-up tears
 Came gushing in a flood;
 He was but of tender years....⁵⁸

⁵⁷"Strokes of the Tamarind Switch," Songs of Jamaica, p. 111.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 112.

The final stanza shows McKay's total rejection of physical punishment as a solution to the problem of "rude" boys.

I 'member when a smaller boy,
 A mother's pride, a mother's joy,
 I too was very rude:
 They beat me too, though not the same,
 And has it done me good?⁵⁹

And the end of this poem McKay included a note which explained the circumstances surrounding his witnessing of the boy's beating. He writes,

This was a lad of fifteen. No doubt he deserved the flogging administered by order of the Court: still, I could not bear to see him--my own flesh--stretched out over the bench, so I went away to the Post Office near by....⁶⁰

Police oppression of Blacks was the subject of another McKay dramatic monologue "The Apple-Woman's Complaint." However this theme is expressed through the comical antics of the Apple-Woman. When the poem opens, the speaker--the Apple-woman--has just been told by a police officer on patrol that she cannot carry her apple tray through the streets.

⁵⁹"Strokes of the Tamarind Switch," Songs of Jamaica, pp. 112.

⁶⁰Note by Author, "Strokes of the Tamarind Switch," p. 113.

Outraged, she goes on to complain about how the stifling laws of the policemen keep Blacks from feeding themselves, while the policemen find ways to eat.

Black nigger wukin' laka cow
 An' wipin' sweat-drops from him brow,
 Dough him is dyin' sake o' need,
 p'lice an' dem headman boun' fe feed."⁶¹

Then the Apple-Woman scoffs at the hypocrisy of the laws enforced by the Constabulary that prevent Blacks from doing the very things the police officer do, such as gamble.

P'lice an' dem headman gamble too,
 Dey shuffle card an' bet fe true;
 Yet ef me Charlie gamble,--well,
 Dem try fe 'queeze him laka hell....⁶²

McKay has a bit of fun with the Apple-Woman when he allows her to beg her son to be anything but a police officer. Of course the son is not present, but she throws a general plea into the air for the benefit of the officer who is plaguing her.

Ah son-son! dough you're bastard, yah
 An' dere's no one you can call pa,
 Jes' try to ha' you' mudder's min'
 An' Police Force you'll neber jine....⁶³

⁶¹"The Apple-Woman's Complaint," Constab Ballads, p. 57.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³"Papine Corner," Constab Ballads, p. 58.

In this early volume, McKay also begins to explore his theme of the city as a corruptor of the human soul. It is here in the city that the ugliness that lay at the foundation of a troubled Jamaican society is revealed. It is in the city where the police, who are themselves corrupt, brutalize the helpless, and it is in the city where young girls from the country fall into prostitution.

"Papine Corner" captures the essence of the city. Any sort of vice or depravity the visitor requests can be supplied quite easily. In the city, the services of a prostitute are easily procured:

...When you want see gals look fine,
 You mus' go up dere,
 An' you'll see them drinkin' wine
 An' all sorts o' beer:
 There you'll see them walkin' out,
 Each wid a young man,
 Watch them strollin' all about,
 Flirtin' all dem can.⁶⁴

The city is the place for those who have tired of the innocence, quiet, and sanctity of the country.

⁶⁴"Papine Corner," p. 40.

When you want hear coarsest jokes
 Passin' rude an' vile,
 Want to see de Kingston blokes,--
 Go up dere awhile:
 When you want hear murderin'
 On de piano,
 An' all sorts o' drunken din,
 Papine you mus' go.⁶⁵

Of course the police share in the corruption at Papine
 Corner. McKay tells the prospective visitor,

Ef you want lost policeman,
 Go dere Sunday night,
 Where you'll see them, every one
 Lookin' smart an' bright:
 Policeman of every rank,
 Rural ones an' all
 In de bar or on de bank,
 Each one in them sall....⁶⁶

Finally, McKay discusses the city's ability to
 demoralize everyone in general through a pervasive
 degradation of humanity:

When you want meet a surprise,
 Tek de Papine track;
 Dere some things will meet you' eyes
 Mek you tu'n you' back:
 When you want to see mankind
 Of "class" family
 In a way degra' [degrade] them mind,
 Go 'p deh, [up there], you will see....⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷"Papine Corner," p. 42.

McKay's exploration of the decadence of the city was merely the first step toward a lifelong preoccupation with social issues. It was in the city of Kingston that he first discovered a system that routinely practiced acts of injustice against persons on the lower end of the economic, cultural, and social scale, and his poems show clear evidence that he was sensitive to and conscious of the consequences of social and political inequality, although, at this time, his maturing mind was not prepared to isolate separate issues and hurl strong invectives from his pen at an indifferent government.

Although Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads clearly show McKay's awareness of the social and economic injustices that plagued his island, he rarely wrote direct social commentaries that placed blame on a particular facet of society. Instead, in these two collections, he showed the devastating results of an indifferent government and ineffective economic system through his highly colorful portraits of poor black peasants. But there is evidence that McKay, between 1911 and 1912, wrote overt social commentaries on controversial contemporary issues in other publications in Jamaica.

For example, on December 6, 1911, McKay published a poem in the Jamaica Times called "Christmas in De Air."⁶⁸ The poem reflected the concerns that many had at that time about the economic hardships experienced by rural peasants throughout Jamaica in 1911 and 1912. During those years, the Jamaica Times, a socially responsive journal, periodically ran a letters-to-the-editor section to give readers a forum to debate proposed solutions to Jamaica's economic problems.⁶⁹ It was in this climate that the Jamaica Times published McKay's poem. It is written in the form of a dramatic monologue in which the speaker, an impoverished farmer, complains about the plight of the poor peasants in Jamaica and the government's indifference about finding a solution. The farmer and his family--a wife and several children--are facing insurmountable problems, drought, poverty, and hunger.⁷⁰ The farmer considers the possibility of sharecropping, but rejects wage farming as a viable solution to his problems.

⁶⁸Wayne Cooper, Stranger and Pilgrim, p. 110.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 111.

⁷⁰Cooper, p. 110.

Wuk [work] is shet do'n 'pon de road,
 An' plantation pay no good.
 Whole day ninepance for a man! wha' dah come to dis
 ya lan'?⁷¹

The farmer goes on to observe that, despite the crisis he and the other peasants must face, profits are being realized by merchants and large planters.⁷²

While we batter t'rough de tret
 'Tis a reg'lar pay dem get;
 While we're sufferin' in pain
 Dem can talk 'bout surplus gain;
 O me God! de sad do' n-care, An' dere's Hard Times
 in de air.⁷³

On January 27, 1912, the Daily Gleaner published a lengthy one-hundred-and-twenty-four-line poem by McKay entitled "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin'." The narrator is again a poor concerned peasant who speaks up on the issue of the need to lower tariffs on imports so that poor peasants can afford to purchase decent food and clothing:⁷⁴

⁷¹Claude McKay, "Christmas in De Air," in the Jamaica Times, December 16, 1911, p. 27, quoted in Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 110.

⁷²Cooper, pp. 110-111.

⁷³Claude McKay, "Christmas in De Air," p. 27, as quoted in Cooper, p. 111. The phrase Hard Times (McKay's italics) refers to Charles Dickens' novel about vicious laissez faire capitalism practiced in nineteenth century industrial Manchester.

⁷⁴Cooper, p. 114.

A little cornmeal, little rice,
 A little flour at lesser price,
 Though it be but a fardin' less,
 Wi' help we conquer grim distress.

.....
 We woldn' mind ef dem could try
 Mek calico cheaper fe buy;
 Tek duty off o' we blue shirt,
 An also off o' we t'atch hut.⁷⁵

Then the peasant questions whether or not lowering tariffs on imports would prove at all a benefit to poor peasants since wages are extraordinarily low and what little they have is quickly consumed by the trickery of the East Indian, Chinese and Syrian petty merchant who "squeezes the peasants for every possible penny and keep them in debt by selling them 'fripp'ries an' de fin'ries' on trust."⁷⁶ The narrator then proceeds to weigh various factors in the debate over migration. He wonders whether or not it is worthwhile for poor laborers to leave their home in Jamaica to migrate to other areas that offer decent wages, such as Panama. But, first, he must caution foreigners about giving their opinion on the subject:

For hardly can de buccra [white man] find
 What passin' in de black man's mind;
 He tellin' us we ought to stay,
 But dis is wha' we got to say:

⁷⁵Claude McKay, "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin'," in the Daily Gleaner, January 27, 1912, p. 8, as quoted in Cooper, pp. 114-115.

⁷⁶Cooper, p. 115.

"We hea' a callin' from Colon,
 We hea' a callin from Limon.
 Let's quit de t'ankless toil an' fret
 Fe where a better pay we'll get.⁷⁷

McKay's "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin'" let it be known to those in power that the poor Blacks in Jamaica were not contented with their miserable lot.⁷⁸

On April 6, 1912, McKay wrote a strongly defiant poem on behalf of an organized group of demonstrators called the "Passive Resisters." This group was formed to fight a rate increase planned by the poorly run Canadian-owned streetcar company in Kingston. At first, the demonstrations proceeded peacefully and smoothly, but after a few days, erratic, less disciplined members precipitated violent confrontations between the company and the demonstrators, causing government intervention. Needless to say, after the government became involved, the life of the movement was crushed. However, the "Passive Resisters" made one last show of strength in a defiantly militant poem by McKay, appearing in the Daily Gleaner on April 6, 1912. There is no actual evidence that McKay ever actively demonstrated with the "Passive Resisters," but he definitely sympathized with their grievances. This poem clearly foreshadows the defiant stance

⁷⁷Claude McKay, "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin'," p. 8, as quoted in Cooper, p. 115.

⁷⁸Cooper, p. 116.

would recall would not be the class-ridden Jamaica of hard poverty and limited opportunities he had written about in his socially conscious dialect poems. It would be the proud, lovely, independent Jamaica he had enshrined forever as part of that lost, idyllic childhood of his imagination,"⁸¹ the Jamaica captured in his nostalgic poems.

McKay's efforts to idealize Jamaica reached beyond his homesick poems, consuming his mental energies in other ways. A case in point was his scathing response to an article, "Notes on Jamaica," published in The Nation by Margaret Marshall, its editor. Mrs. Marshall's article was an uncomplimentary analysis of Jamaica's racial problems gleaned from observations she had made during a trip. McKay's letter in response noted, "There is no 'race problem' in Jamaica. If there is a 'color problem' it is not between whites and non-whites, but between the blacks and the near-whites and it exists only in the city of Kingston. It is a very minor thing"⁸² McKay's letter never appeared in The Nation. McKay held tenaciously to the image he had created of Jamaica throughout the remainder of his life.

⁸¹Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 134.

⁸²Claude McKay, "An Unpublished Letter From Claude McKay, Poet and Literateur," Negro History Bulletin 31 (April 1, 1968):10.

Near the end of his life, McKay set down memoirs of his childhood in a work entitled, "My Green Hills of Jamaica."⁸³ Despite his illness, he felt constrained to write it, explaining that "the creeping pressure of disease tells me that this is my last book, and I will never again see my green hills and the people I loved so much."⁸⁴ "My Green Hills" is the culmination of McKay's idealization of Jamaica. The book, presented through the haze of memory and illness, is discursive and uneven. But the impression of Jamaica that McKay wanted to establish is clear. First of all, he begins with a description of his own village, ranking it second only to the Garden of Eden in lush beauty: "The Clarendon Hills are renowned in Jamaica as one of the most fertile regions. There grow in abundance as if spilled straight out of the Hand of God--bananas, oranges, cocoa, coffee, pimento, breadfruit, akee, mangoes, sugar cane and all the lesser varieties of edibles."⁸⁵

⁸³"My Green Hills of Jamaica," is an autobiographical typewritten manuscript of McKay's young life in Jamaica. The manuscript is on file in the McKay folder at the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History in the New York Public Library. And there is a typewritten manuscript available in the McKay folder in the Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

⁸⁴Claude McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," p. 145.

⁸⁵Claude McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

"My Green Hills of Jamaica," gives McKay his last opportunity to depict Jamaica as a land of peace and harmony. He says that "compared to Puerto Rico, Jamaica is an island for the gods. There are no acute racial antagonisms--no white suppression of blacks and browns, East Indians and Chinese, sanctioned by traditions or laws." Insisting that no person in Jamaica feels that the color of his skin can keep him from rising because "anyone with talent can rise out of the masses and not be held back because his skin is darker, he boasts that "no Jamaican peasant imagines he is inferior to anybody but God."⁸⁶ Halfheartedly acknowledging the existence of poverty in Jamaica, he states that in spite of it, the island is "like a beautiful garden in its human relationships." McKay brags that Jamaicans have no need for organizations such as societies for the improvement of race relationships.⁸⁷ Consequently McKay feels that Americans should be sent in large numbers to Jamaica so that they can "learn how all types of humanity can live together in peace and with good will towards one another."⁸⁸ Margaret Marshall of The Nation did not learn this lesson on her visit to Jamaica.

⁸⁶"My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

⁸⁷Claude McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," p. 139.

⁸⁸"My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

McKay adhered to his fantasy of Jamaica until his death, straying from his partial recollection only once. In 1922, after leaving his position as co-editor of The Liberator, McKay traveled to Moscow where he attended the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International. While he was in Russia, he wrote a book called The Negroes in America. In this small one-hundred page volume, McKay gives a brief survey of the Negro's place within the fabric of American society from 1865 to World War I and attempts an analysis of race problems in America. It is obvious that The Negroes in America was simply McKay's effort to brief a foreign audience on the history of Negroes in America. He concentrates on the most popular key stages in the Negroes' social history: emancipation, reconstruction, the founding of the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League, and the debate between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington on compromise versus political and social aggression. Also McKay does not hesitate to be subjective in his presentation of facts; for example, he calls Lincoln a "cautious opportunist"⁸⁹ and labels DuBois "the outstanding reformist leader of the American Negroes."⁹⁰

⁸⁹Claude McKay, The Negroes in America, ed, Alan L. McLeod, trans. Robert J. Winter (Port Washington, New York:) Kennikat Press 1979). p. 13; originally published as Negry v Amerike, trans. by P. Okhrimenko (Moscow and Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1923).

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 49.

But what is significant about The Negroes in America is what McKay says about the Negroes in Jamaica. For the first and only time since his emigration from Jamaica, McKay comments directly on the harsh realities of his homeland. He writes,

The West Indies Negroes languish under the strain of unbearable exploitation by British landlords, and every year thousands are more ready to emigrate to South America, Central America, Cuba, and the United States than to bear the difficult economic conditions and unbearable poverty to which they are doomed by the British form of government. The fact that their individual freedom will be more restricted under the American flag than under the British is not taken in account.⁹¹

Seeking to impress the Communists with the West Indian's thirst for a political and classless equality, McKay tells his Russian readers that Black Jamaicans arrive in the United States not only seeking a more decent life, but seeking kinship with American Negroes as well:

The Negro of the West Indies has much better food, dress, and shelter in the United States than he could have in his native land. He has contact with a much more developed civilization, and his mind, much more imbued with class consciousness, is aroused and fortified by the greatly developed race consciousness of the American Negro.⁹²

⁹¹Ibid., p. 51.

⁹²The Negroes in America, p. 51.

Then McKay tells his Communist readers a lie that must have caused the poet himself to wince. He tells them that West Indians gain the sympathy of their oppressed American brothers and sisters by telling them of the horrors to which the British government has subjected the Black islanders. He writes, "The Negro of the West Indies nourishes his natural anger at British class divisions and the British diplomatic method of exploitation, and upon emigrating to other countries tells about the oppression and gains sympathy from his American brother."⁹³ One must question McKay's sincerity, for certainly he knew that West Indians were not likely to criticize British government in front of American Blacks since they often used their association with England to declare their distinction from them.⁹⁴

It is obvious that McKay knew well the reality of his trouble-ridden homeland. Yet, because of emotional and psychological needs discussed earlier, he suppressed the truth. But quite possibly he had an additional reason for perpetuating the myth of Jamaica: the need to assuage the guilt he must have felt in never going back home to see his family.

⁹³The Negroes in America, p. 51.

⁹⁴Harold Cruse, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc. New York, 1967), p. 435.

Although his mother died when he was a youngster, his father lived until 1933.⁹⁵ Indeed, he was the youngest child of a family of eight children, seven boys and one girl.⁹⁶ There was no evidence of serious personal conflicts within the family. Although McKay in "My Green Hills of Jamaica" describes his father as "strict and stern," correspondence between the poet and others reveals no insurmountable difficulties between McKay and his father. As a matter of fact, Uriah Theodore McKay, the poet's older brother, writes McKay on March 1, 1929, to tell him that their father is well and wishes McKay to write a book about Jamaica. McKay does write that book in 1933, Banana Bottom. Uriah goes on to tell McKay how they all miss him. He tells him that, when others ask about his brother, he must sadly report that he never hears from him.⁹⁷

Besides McKay's immediate family, his wife, from whom he was separated but from whom he never obtained a divorce,⁹⁸ gave birth to their daughter, Rhue Hope McKay, in Jamaica. Although McKay never saw his daughter, he was concerned about

⁹⁵Thomas Edison McKay to Claude McKay, August 5, 1929, on file in McKay folder at the Bienecke Library at Yale University.

⁹⁶Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 16.

⁹⁷Uriah Theodore McKay to Claude McKay, March 1, 1929, on file in McKay folder at the Bienecke Library at Yale University.

⁹⁸Hope McKay Virtue, interview in The Daily Gleaner, December 23, 1979, cols. 2-3, p. 23.

her well being. His brother Thomas Edison McKay wrote to him on March 8, 1929, that money McKay had sent for his daughter's education had been received. The brother went on to discuss private high schools for her but indicated that there would be some problem "getting the child away from the maternal grandparents."⁹⁹ In the McKay folder at the Bienecke Library at Yale, there is a Last Will and Testament, signed by McKay, which bequeaths ten percent of the royalties derived from the sale of his works to his daughter. He names his brothers and sister executors of the estate. Hope McKay, who now owns the copyright to her father's work and resides in California, avers that her father did neglect her as a child, but states, "People like my father don't belong to any families, they belong to the world--they can't be domesticated."¹⁰⁰

Critics, like Harold Cruse, offer unsentimentalized reasons that people like McKay do not return to Jamaica. According to Cruse, they simply do not really like their homeland. He observes, "For all their claims to the contrary, there is considerable doubt as to how much West Indians really love their island homeland." He contends that West Indians are "never so much in love with Caribbean

⁹⁹Thomas Edison McKay to Claude McKay, August 5, 1929, on file at the Bienecke Library at Yale University.

¹⁰⁰Hope McKay Virtue, The Daily Gleaner, December 23, 1979, col. 2, p. 23.

heritage, or never so vehement in defending the West Indian image, as when they are indulging these sentiments from afar in England or in North America."¹⁰¹ Cruse calls West Indians like McKay hypocrites because they really come to America "to make good." He claims, that although they are loath to admit it, America, to them, is really the land of opportunity. And they know that if they remain in the West Indies they will have little opportunity for advancement because of the stifling British colonial government. But they will not admit that; they pretend all is well.¹⁰² Cruse's conclusion about why West Indians do not wish to return home does not answer the critical question of why McKay never once visited his family and friends. He had money on occasion, he had leisure, and he did travel throughout Europe.

Less critical, George Lamming says that West Indian artists do not return home because they cannot survive as writers in the West Indies. He notes that because of the heavy British orientation in West Indian culture, there was a general consensus that books were not supposed to be written by natives; therefore, any writer who wished to function as a working artist had to leave the islands. To all West Indians, the writer as well as the reader, "culture, all of it, came from outside: Dickens, Jane Austen, Kipling and

¹⁰¹Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, p. 438.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 135.

that sacred gang."¹⁰³ And McKay was not immune to such prejudices. In his essay "A Negro Poet," he discusses his awakening love of literature. Of course, his early reading was predominantly British. He writes, "My brother possessed a nice library--all the great English masters." In the same essay he boasts that his friend and mentor, Walter Jekyll, opened a new world to him, introducing him to Carlyle, Browning, Wilde, and Shaw.¹⁰⁴ Although McKay wrote in dialect before he left Jamaica in 1912, he remained very much concerned about the regard his cultured countrymen had of him as an artist. And both he and they used British standards to measure excellence. In "My Green Hills of Jamaica" he writes of an occasion he had to recite his poems to a literary society. "I had read my poems before many of these societies and the members used to say: 'Well, he's very nice and pretty you know, but he's not a real poet as Browning and Byron and Tennyson. ... McKay vowed that he would amaze them someday by showing them he could write profound poems in "straight English."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile, p. 75.

¹⁰⁴Claude McKay, "A Negro Poet," Pearson's Magazine, (September 1918): 275-276.

¹⁰⁵Claude McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

Lanning's explanation of why West Indian artists do not wish to remain in the Caribbean is viable, but it does not address McKay's decision never to set foot on Jamaican soil again.

No one can answer positively why McKay chose never to return to Jamaica. Perhaps even McKay could not say. But what can be said with some degree of certainty is that his decision was based on personal and emotional circumstances. First of all, McKay made his decision not to go back to Jamaica as soon as he realized the failure of his initial dreams--his marriage and his educational goals: "I hated to go back after having failed at nearly everything, so I just stayed here and worked desultorily--porter, houseman, janitor, butler, waiter--anything that came in handy."¹⁰⁶ But he probably discovered very quickly that the attainment of those initial dreams were no longer valuable to him. In his autobiography A Long Way From Home, after his wife leaves him to return to Jamaica, he says of that situation, "All my planning was upset. I had married when I thought that a domestic partnership was possible to my existence. But I had wandered far and away until I had grown into a truant by nature and undomesticated in the blood. ...I desired to be footloose, and felt impelled to start going again."¹⁰⁷ So if

¹⁰⁶Claude McKay, "Claude MacKay [sic] Describes His Own Life: A Negro Poet," Pearson's Magazine 39 (September 1918), p. 276.

¹⁰⁷Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 150.

his dreams were no longer valid for him, what reason had he for returning to Jamaica? Returning to the real Jamaica would mean offering explanations, making excuses, dealing with an unhappy wife, and attempting to formulate plans for a future of responsibility.

At this point in his life, McKay was a man without a country, a man without a plan, except to write. It was at this time that he felt a need to create an ideal Jamaica, one that existed in his childhood memory. It was a place of innocence and peace, a refuge from reality. McKay could not face a real Jamaica.

Then there may have been an ever deeper personal reason that McKay avoided Jamaica: the painful memory of his mother. McKay's mother died in 1909, after suffering many years of a chronic heart ailment. When she died, the poet was nineteen years of age. It is clear that McKay adored his mother. They were extremely close. One critic contends that McKay's devotion to her was "excessive." He says, "Upon her he had concentrated all his familial affections, and within her he had projected all those sensitive, romantic qualities he himself possessed."¹⁰⁸ McKay describes his mother as being very beautiful, "quite brown with two strands of wonderful hair which, plaited reached down to her shoulders,

¹⁰⁸Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 56.

and he warmly remembered that she could always be counted on to override his father's stern disciplining tactics. McKay says that everyone in the village respected and loved his mother: "My mother although a young woman in her forties was called 'Mother Mack' by all the villagers. That was a great mark of love because only certain native women were honored with this distinction."¹⁰⁹

Because of her debilitating heart condition, McKay's mother tired easily and became bloated because of water retention. When she had these bouts, McKay would nurse her. Once he gave up an apprenticeship to be by her side. Years later, when writing about her illness in "My Green Hills of Jamaica," McKay described the last days of her life and her funeral in great detail and with great emotion. But the irony is that he, himself, was dying at the age of fifty-eight from the same heart defect: "I never thought that in three decades, I'd be laid low by the same disease that killed by mother."¹¹⁰

Ten years after his mother's death, 1919, McKay wrote the poem entitled "My Mother." The poem commemorates the moment of his mother's death. McKay says that minutes before

¹⁰⁹Claude McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

¹¹⁰Ibid., n.p.

she died, he had reluctantly left his mother to go walking with a friend. She had urged him to go saying, "I shall last another day."

But scarcely had we reached the distant place,
When over the hills we heard a faint bell ringing.
A boy came running up with frightened face--
We knew the fatal news that he was bringing.¹¹¹

It is significant that after hearing the news of his mother's death, McKay says, "The only one I loved was gone."¹¹² McKay's mother was an important part of his childhood innocence. After her death, no one else mattered.

Last night I heard your voice, mother,
The words you sang to me
When I, a little barefoot boy,
Knelt down against your knee.

And tears gushed from my heart, mother,
And passed beyond its wall,
But though the fountain reached my throat
The drops refused to Fall

'Tis ten years since you died, mother,
Just ten dark years of pain,
And oh, I only wish that I
Could weep just once again.¹¹³

¹¹¹Claude McKay, "My Mother," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, pp. 22-23.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³"My Mother," p. 23.

McKay memorialized his mother just as he had memorialized the Jamaica of his childhood. For the remainder of his life those two symbols of innocence and purity would be intertwined and enshrined in his mind forever, untouched and unspoiled by the bitter disappointments of life. They would be his refuge, his safe harbor. They represented a painless Jamaica, the only homeland he wanted and needed.

Chapter II

Spokesman For the People

In July, 1919, The Liberator published seven of McKay's poems in a two-page spread. All of the poems, except one, touched upon racial themes. And among the racially conscious poems two heralded a new kind of poetry, poetry decidedly angry and militant. Although many of McKay's earlier poems had emphasized the integrity and authenticity of the Black experience, these poems added a new dimension of raw, bitter defiance, earning for McKay the dubious title of "the Poet of Hatred,"¹ and gaining for him the role of spokesman for an oppressed people. McKay's angry sonnets eloquently articulated the outrage and frustration of a people who, after World War I, felt that their hope for democracy had been betrayed by an America who sent Black troops to fight and die for democracy in Europe, but whose practices at home demonstrated to all Blacks that liberty and freedom did not extend to them.

In these poems McKay seemed to be a conduit for an otherwise inarticulate rage. His bitterness was undiluted as he observed the startling spectacle of barbarous deeds

¹Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 225.

example in "A Roman Holiday," McKay charges that each state in America competes for the record of having the most heinous method available for "torturing Negroes." In languages more graphic and provocative than any he had used before, McKay cries out to southern Black men to warn them of the great devastation and horror about to beset them and their families. He begs them not to "like hogs await [their] doom" as,

White wretches hunt and haul you from your huts,
 They squeeze the babies out of your women's womb,
 They cut your members off, rip out your guts!
 It is a Roman holiday and worse. ...²

His outrage at the spectacle of racial oppression he had witnessed across the country makes him quite willing to substitute invective for lyricism as he offers the portrait of Whites as barbarous savages who dismember fellow human beings.

In his final couplet McKay makes reference to the irony and hypocrisy of a nation that gives lip service to the ideals of democracy abroad but commits crimes against humanity at home. He offers a satirical salute to America:

²Claude McKay, "A Roman Holiday," The Liberator 2 (July 1919): 21.

Bravo Democracy! Hail greatest Power
That saves sick Europe in her darkest hour!³

McKay never softened his harsh judgement of American democracy as a system riddled with hypocrisy and injustice. In an essay written a quarter century later, "Right Turn to Catholicism," he complains that Americans "shout" about democracy as if it were a "God-ordained" system of government. But he argues that Americans forget that, when they run about spreading democracy everywhere, they also spread less positive aspects of their culture such as divorces, slang, gangsterisms, comic strips, and swing music; and along with this "junk" comes the American penchant for mistreatment of minorities and lynchings.⁴

After "A Roman Holiday," he wrote another poem intended to express the collective anguish of Black folk. In "The Lynching," McKay describes the grotesque spectacle of Whites hanging a Black man. Although McKay's language and imagery are powerful and graphic, the tone is more "subdued" and less dramatic than that of "A Roman Holiday," causing one critic to suggest that in "The Lynching," McKay is a much more

³"Roman Holiday," p. 21.

⁴McKay, "Right Turn to Catholicism," 1945, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library (typewritten manuscript), p. 16.

disciplined artist than he is in his other protest poems.⁵ McKay portrays the lynched victim as a Christ-like figure, but one whose ordeal of redemption is nothing but a cruel exercise because his father has abandoned him and since his lynchers seem beyond regeneration:

His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
 His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
 Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
 The awful sin remained still unforgiven
 All night a bright and solitary star
 (Perchance the one that ever guided him,
 Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
 Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.⁶

Although the poet expresses horror at the lynching itself, he is even more horrified at the Whites--men and women--who not only commit their own minds and souls to the acting out of unspeakable deeds, but who by their apathy and indifference compel succeeding generations to continue the abhorrent ritual:

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to
 view
 The ghastly body swaying in the sun.
 The women thronged to look but never a one
 showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.
 And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
 Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.⁷

⁵Arthur Drayton, "McKay's Human Pity: A Note On His Protest Poetry," Black Orpheus 17 (June 1965): 39-48.

⁶Claude McKay, "The Lynching," Selected Poems, p. 37; first published in the Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920): 56.

⁷"The Lynching," p. 37.

McKay showed "The Lynching" to Frank Harris, editor of Pearson's Magazine, who objected to the poem because it did not speak for "race, for mankind, for literature." He urged McKay to write a poem that would "[rise] to the heights and [storm] heaven."⁸ McKay's answer was "If We Must Die." Harris agreed that it was truly a great poem--"authentic, fire and blood; blood pouring from a bleeding heart."⁹ McKay was pleased.

"If We Must Die" symbolized a militant "call to arms" for all Black people in America against racial oppression. It seemed such a rallying cry that Senator Henry Cabot Lodge had it entered into the Congressional Record as proof of a new disturbing radical spirit among Blacks.¹⁰ In a "rousing cadence calculated to stir the blood" and spirit of the timid masses,¹¹ McKay pleads with his Black brothers and sisters not to yield victory to a superior force, but to fight on valiantly even in the face of death:

⁸McKay A Long Way From Home, p. 21.

⁹Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁰Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 72.

¹¹Nick Aaron Ford, Black Insights (Waltham, Massachusetts: Ginn and Company, 1971), p. 155.

If We must die--let it not be like hogs
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
 Making their mock at our accursed lot.
 If we must die--oh, let us nobly die,
 So that our precious blood may not be shed
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
 Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
 Though far outnumbered, let us still be 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!¹²

The poem gave McKay instant national recognition and made him a poet of the people, as he so effectively expressed the feelings of all Blacks when the outbreak of racial violence across the country during the "Red Summer" of 1919 reached a fever pitch. It seemed McKay spoke for them. One critic, in praising McKay's militant stance in the poem, pointed out that since "negroes had no swords..." poets like McKay took up the pen for them.¹³ And Sterling Brown marvelled at McKay's status as "Poet of the People" after publication of "If We Must Die." He reported seeing copies of McKay's poem in hotel kitchens, barber shops, and in all sorts of unexpected places.¹⁴ The poem's extensive mass appeal quite possibly stemmed from the fact that McKay

¹²McKay, "If We Must Die," The Liberator 2 (July 1919): 21.

¹³Robert A. Smith, "Claude McKay," Phylon 9 (September 1948): 270-273.

¹⁴Sterling Brown, "A Poet and His Prose," Opportunity (August 1932): 256.

composed it from an inside perspective. When he wrote the words, he was simply another Black person caught in the throes of racial violence.

In his autobiography, McKay writes of his fears as a railroad man (he spent three years as a pantryman on the railroad--from 1917 to 1919) traveling throughout the country during the "Red Summer of 1919." He said that during that time the newspapers had been literally full of stories of shootings and hangings of Black people. According to McKay, the Black railroad men were terrified because they found gauging the attitude and temper of various towns difficult. So consequently, they resolved either to carry a gun or confine themselves to quarters when it was necessary for the train to lay over. McKay reported it was during these times that "If We Must Die" erupted out of him. McKay was proud of its appeal to the masses and stated that it was the only poem he had ever shared with the members of his crew. He remembered how "agitated" they became after hearing the poem. Even the fourth waiter, whom McKay called the flightiest and most irresponsible of them all, actually cried.¹⁵

McKay clearly saw "If We Must Die" as his contribution to the racial struggle and the struggle of the masses in America and took pride in his identification as its author

¹⁵McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 32.

throughout his lifetime. In Russia, he was privileged to attend a celebration of the anniversary of the Red Army. Although there were many persons of political acclaim present at the ceremony, McKay was asked to give a speech. When he was called onto the stage, the crowd demanded a poem. He said that he searched his mind for a poem that would epitomize his sympathy with the struggle of the proletariat. After giving them "If We Must Die," he reflected,

I gave it in the same spirit in which I wrote it, I think. I was not acting, trying to repeat the sublime thrill of a supreme experience. I was transformed into a rare instrument and electrified by the great current running through the world, and the poem popped out of me like a ball of light and blazed.¹⁶

When McKay returned to the United States, he was attacked by The New Masses, the literary organ of the Communist Party, as a washed-up radical who had grown "fat and ill and indifferent."¹⁷ Against their charges he offered "If We Must Die." He felt it stood as sufficient proof of his integrity and his commitment to the concerns of the people, the common people.

¹⁶Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 210.

¹⁷After leaving Russia in 1923, McKay became ill. He blamed the poor sanitary conditions in Petrograd and Moscow. As a consequence of his illness, he spent three months convalescing in Germany in the summer of 1923. But when he arrived in Paris shortly thereafter, he was hospitalized for syphilis. See A Long Way From Home, pp. 230-231; and see Wayne Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 478.

There is little doubt that McKay wholeheartedly identified with the "Black / proletarian" heart of the poem, so much so that he experienced shame when he left "If We Must Die" out of his 1920 collection published in England, Spring in New Hampshire, because his editors advised him to do so. He relates an occasion in which he showed Frank Harris, the editor of Pearson's Magazine, his 1920 collection. When Harris discovered the absence of "If We Must Die," he called McKay a traitor to his race. McKay later admitted the pain of conscience he suffered as a result of excluding the poem:

Frank Harris's words cut like a whip into my hide, and I was glad to get out of his uncomfortable presence. Yet I felt relieved after his castigation. The excision of the poem had been like a nerve cut out of me, leaving a wound which would not heal. ...¹⁸

Because McKay saw his poem as an expression of mass sentiment, he struggled desperately to see it included in an American collection, and, of course, it appeared in his 1922 Harlem Shadows.¹⁹

¹⁸A Long Way From Home, pp. 98-99.

¹⁹Ibid.

It was only natural that McKay would be the first Black poet to capture the imagination of the common people; after all, his orientation had always been among the masses. It was within the masses that he saw the spirit of the Negro people.

As far as McKay was concerned, the truly effective leaders were those who arose from the Negro masses, not those who sought identification with the Negro elite. In Harlem: Negro Metropolis, McKay praised a flamboyant Harlem street orator, Sufi Abdul Hamid, as a successful leader in his attempts to organize young Harlem workers to apply street-corner tactics of picketing and haranguing in order to get jobs within white establishments in the Harlem community. McKay added, "It [the movement for jobs] was ignored by the church, ridiculed by the press and cold-shouldered by the ... Harlem intelligentsia."²⁰ And because of Marcus Garvey's mass appeal, McKay found him worthy of praise. While conceding that Marcus Garvey had grave deficiencies as a leader, McKay admired his ability to stir the imagination of the masses as "no negro had."²¹ He credited Garvey with giving the Negro Renaissance its heart through the exhibition of the cultural achievements of the Negro masses universally, pointing out that it was Garvey who revealed to Harlem what

²⁰McKay, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, p. 190.

²¹Ibid., p. 177.

the common skilled craftsman from America and from Africa was capable of achieving. McKay charged that these Negro accomplishments were a revelation even to the so-called Negro elite who were supposedly informed about cultural matters.²² For McKay, both Garvey and the Sufi established a kinship with the masses, and that kinship with the common people was the heart's blood of any struggle. McKay warned the Negro elite that progress was very unlikely "if the negro masses are despised and neglected."²³

Even as a young artist in Jamaica, McKay felt a strong bond with the masses. This sense of kinship probably stemmed from the fact that Jamaicans, in the tradition of the British, quite seriously adhered to strict class strata. And McKay, for all intents and purposes, was born a peasant (even though his family was considered successful by village standards).²⁴ Consequently, it was quite natural for him to draw a hard line of distinction between him and the island elite, especially the White elite. In his early career as a poet, he wrote exclusively of his West Indian simple country

²²Harlem: Negro Metropolis, p. 190.

²³A Long Way From Home, p. 351.

²⁴McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

folk, those people he knew well. He told their stories with humor, tenderness, and sometimes sadness in the lilting, Jamaican dialect that aptly expressed the richness of their lives.

In "Quashie to Buccra" (quite loosely translated "the peasant to the White man"), the peasant speaker voices pride in his simple yet noble ability to wrest fruits from the earth because of his honest labor. This poem, which aptly displays McKay's talent for humor, has the Black peasant looking at a White man who is peering over the hedges at the field of sweet potatoes the peasant has grown. The peasant teases the White man who wants to pay only a small sum for the potatoes. He asks,

You tas'e petater [potato] an' you say it sweet
 But you no know [don't know] how hard we wuk fe it;
 You want a basketful fe quattiewut [a quarter of sixpence]
 Cause you no [don't] know how 'tiff de bush fe cut.²⁵

McKay gives dignity to the hard work of the peasant by having the speaker challenge the implied easy life of the Buccra:

²⁵McKay, "Quashie to Buccra," Songs of Jamaica, p. 13.

It is appropriate that McKay chose to write the poems included in Songs of Jamaica in dialect, in the soft languorous tones of native West Indians.³³ In the preface, his friend and mentor Walter Jekyll suggests that the poems' true melodic flavor could best be appreciated through hearing them read aloud.³⁴ These dialect poems, among the earliest published representations of the West Indian idiom,³⁵ were truly McKay's affirmation of his commitment to the people, those common folk who inhabited the country village towns in Jamaica. And because only one other well known Black poet wrote so convincingly in dialect, it is only natural to make comparisons between him and McKay.³⁶

James Weldon Johnson, in assessing Dunbar's achievement in his dialect poems, finds little to praise. He concludes that Dunbar was merely good at executing a fad that not only had little literary merit, but that had the power of destroying the positive image of the artist as well as that of a race of people for many years to come. Granted, he says, Dunbar could wring music from "the humble speech of his

³³Included among the poems in dialect are three written in standard English, "A Dream," "Strokes of the Tamarind Switch," and "To Bennie."

³⁴Walter Jekyll, Preface to Songs of Jamaica, p. 5.

³⁵Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 85.

³⁶See Ralph G. Johnson, "The Poetry of Dunbar and McKay: A Study," M.A. Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1950.

People," like a Robert Burns, but at what price, the "stigmatizing of himself and of the people he wishes to celebrate?" Johnson expressed the conviction that dialect poetry, created as an instrument for depicting Negroes "shuffling, banjo-picking, and singing," has no place in American literature, since it is too narrow an idiom to express the "diversification" of Negro life in America, and since it has "but two full stops, humor and pathos."³⁷ But McKay's dialect poetry is another matter indeed.

According to critics, unlike Dunbar's, McKay's dialect poetry is capable of expressing a wide spectrum of emotions, from humor to militancy. And the reason for such a quality is quite simple: McKay's dialect is the true idiom of the West Indian native, coming "directly from the people and is rooted in the soil." Critic Jean Wagner observes,

everything is entirely and authentically Negro ... the phonology, often flavored with a delightful exoticism, and the rather summary morphology; the typically fantastic placing of the tonic accent and the somewhat rudimentary syntax, seldom in accord with the Queen's English; and finally, the often unexpectedly roughhewn words and images, which originate in the hardworking folk's immediate contact with a soil reluctant to part with its riches.³⁸

³⁷James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 51.

³⁸Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 205.

The dialect poetry used by Dunbar, patterned after that of the White poet Irwin Russell, was exaggerated and contrived, and most assuredly was not representative of the idiom of Negro people before or after the Civil War. This kind of poetry had one purpose--to reinforce the false idyllic image of plantation life given credence by the antebellum apologists and continued after the Civil War by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. The accounts of slavery and plantation life in these dialect poems failed to take into account "the hardships and evils of slavery from the physical, economic, moral, or democratic point of view."³⁹ But because McKay's dialect poems are authentic expressions of the people, they are not plagued by the minstrel and plantation tradition that hampered those of Dunbar. In his dialect poems, McKay's peasants are painted with a realism that suggested a "bond of sympathy" between them and the artist.⁴⁰

There is little doubt but that McKay's early sense of kinship with the folk helped to establish the direction of his ideas for many years.

³⁹Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture, based on materials left by Alain Locke, Revised and Updated (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971), p. 99.

⁴⁰Jean Wagner, p. 206.

In the United States, although abandoning dialect for standard English, McKay continued to draw a hard line of distinction between the masses and the elite by clearly sympathizing with the people of the street rather than those functioning within the mainstream of society. In "The Tired Worker," a sonnet published in 1919, McKay expresses in grieving tones the spiritual plaint of a laborer whose work-weary body patiently awaits the hushed peacefulness of the evening. The poem begins,

O whisper, O my soul! The afternoon
 Is waning into evening, whisper soft!

 Be patient, weary body, soon the night
 Will wrap thee gently in her sable sheet,
 And with a leaden sigh thou wilt invite
 To rest thy tired hands and aching feet.⁴¹

McKay concludes his poem by drawing on the familiar "us" versus "them" theme. The laborer whispers in quiet triumph, "The wretched day was theirs, the night is mine."⁴²

In "The Castaways," McKay begins with what seems to be a lyrical celebration of Spring--the dawning of new life suggesting rebirth and hope:

⁴¹McKay, "The Tired Worker," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 79.

⁴²Ibid.

The vivid grass with visible delight
 Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth,
 The butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
 Dancing and chirping for the season's birth. ...⁴³

But soon he subverts the familiar implications of hope and happiness that spring's symbols usually suggest by confessing that it is not these heralds that his eye first espies but rather the faceless "castaways," who have no hope amidst the joy that surrounds them:

But seated on the benches daubed with green,
 The castaways of life, a few asleep
 Some withered women desolate and mean,
 And over all, life's shadows dark and deep.⁴⁴

Unable to bear his grief at such despair, the poet, instead of making an overt social statement, affirms his empathy and kinship with these people by turning his head to cry. Full of emotion, he confesses, "I have the strength to bear but not to see."⁴⁵

McKay seemed proud to be one of the masses and embraced the life of a laborer as proudly as he embraced his role as an artist. Throughout his residence in America, he performed

⁴³McKay, "The Castaways," Selected Poems, p. 73; first published in Cambridge Magazine (1920): 58.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

a series of menial jobs in order to survive. He seemed to find no serious discomfort in such tasks. "I looked for the work that was easy to my hand," he explained, "while my head was thinking hard: porter, fireman, waiter, bar-boy, houseman." McKay said that he took these jobs much like a student who is "working his way through a university."⁴⁶ Fortunately, McKay's experiences with the masses of the United States would act as a wellspring for his work in the years to come. Being among the real folk was an elixir that gave him, he says, a sense of well being and a fountain of rich material for his fiction.

In "A Negro to His Critics," McKay writes that it was not until he was "forced down among the rough body of the great serving class of Negroes" that he came to know his "Aframerica."⁴⁷ In this article written to explore the role of the Black artist in the face of the demands of social responsibility (propaganda), McKay, in an implicit rejection of the social progressive attitude of the Negro elite, embraces the "warm" human quality of the young "labor classes." He praises their spontaneity and delight of physical sensuousness. He felt at home with them.⁴⁸ And when he, in 1928, published his first novel, Home to Harlem,

⁴⁶McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 4.

⁴⁷"A Negro to His Critics," p. 135.

⁴⁸Ibid.

and saw it achieve best seller status, topping the performance of these genre primitivistic novels so popular during the middle 1920's, he bragged that his success was due to his more accurate rendering since his book, unlike the others, had been written from the inside. He explained that he had come to know his Negroes, not by merely talking to them as the others had done, in cafes and in academic settings, but he knew his unskilled Negroes from working side by side with them. He reasoned that since they had attended the same rent parties, drank and caroused together in bars, when it came to writing about them, he had no need for manufacturing a pseudo-romantic Negro as did most bourgeois people (McKay clearly has in mind Carl Van Vechten), who had to rely upon information obtained from merely "rubbing elbows" with Negroes occasionally. Instead, McKay boasted that his Negroes were created "without sandpaper and varnish."⁴⁹

Although McKay threw his lot in with the masses on both philosophical and political grounds, he had another quite simple reason for embracing a common folk orientation: he considered being singled out as special or different annoying and embarrassing. Being pointed out as a member of the elite among the ordinary people caused him extreme discomfort. A case in point was his attitude about being discovered as a

⁴⁹McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 228.

poet by his fellow workers. While McKay worked as a waiter on the railroad, he never read any of his poems to the other men, despite the fact that he had published a few poems during that period. (An exception was "If We Must Die," discussed in Chapter Four.) As far as he knew, none of his co-workers were aware of his artistic side. McKay feared that had they discovered his reputation, he would have lost his status as being just one of them, a "pal and buddy." Instead they would have shied away from him and "dubbed" him "Professor."⁵⁰

After McKay's modest success as a poet, and after he had achieved some name recognition in Harlem, he was, to his consternation, sought out as a special person, a "personnae de celeb," making him a candidate for elitism. And, to say, the least, McKay did not like his new status. He lamented, "and now that I was legging limpingly along with the intellectual gang, Harlem for me did not hold quite the same thrill and glamor as before." For him, the heady music and melody that he was able to distill from his spontaneous and anonymous visits to cabarets and bars was gone now. Now he was pointed out as an author everywhere that he went.⁵¹

⁵⁰McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 5.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 114.

Not only did McKay feel that being singled out as a poet destroyed his free and easy style of living in Harlem, but he also felt that his newfound fame placed irritating restraints upon his time. He resented the obligatory meetings and platform recitations in which he had to pretend he enjoyed reading his poems to audiences. Quite often, he was forced to feign pleasantness.⁵²

Even back in Jamaica, McKay found being regarded as famous an uncongenial state. Even there, he wanted no part in being singled out as special. When he was himself freed from his duties on the Jamaican Constabulary, he found returning to his village home difficult because of his budding reputation as a poet. Calling his fame an "old embarrassment" that refused to go away, McKay claimed that all he ever wanted to be was one of the people--one of the peasant villagers, but, he lamented, "People knew that I was a poet, and that made me different, although I wanted so much to be like them."⁵³ Years later, McKay implied that his dislike for being singled out was so intense that fear of being treated as special kept him from going back to Jamaica for a visit. During the 1930's when he had made a respectable sum from his novels, relatives and friends in

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p., McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

Jamaica begged him to come home for a visit, but he refused. He said that he had little desire for the "noise" that would be made about his success.⁵⁴

McKay's sympathetic identification with the masses quite naturally reinforced the perception that he considered himself an enemy of polite Negro society. In defense of himself, McKay says that he has never harbored any desire to insult the elite; he simply wanted the fact made plain that he was not of this special Negro class. As a matter of fact, says McKay, when his White Liberator friends invited him to the tearooms and ginmills of Greenwich Village, he would reciprocate be inviting them to Harlem cabarets and the "cozy flats" of subterranean Harlem because he had no "entree into the nice homes of the Negro elites."⁵⁵ McKay's rejection of the Negro elite, except for his deep and lasting admiration for James Weldon Johnson, is well documented in his correspondence as well as in his fiction and essays. His absolute contempt for this upper echelon of the Black community is hardly disguised in his Harlem Negro: Metropolis, making this social history of Harlem an almost embarrassing display of subjectivism where the Negro elite is concerned: nearly every chapter bristles with McKay's censure of this group.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 115.

In his role as spokesman for the masses, whether he spoke for the Jamaican trolley car riders in "Passive Resistance" or for American Negroes in "If We Must Die," McKay saw no impossible conflict in the synthesis of polemicism and art. In "Soviet Russia and the Negro," McKay declared his pride in being a propagandist for the people. For him, such a title placed in the company of writers like Milton, whom McKay credits with writing a great sonnet that was nothing short of "pure propaganda," and writers like Voltaire, Hugo, Heine, Swift, Shelley, Byron, Tolstoy, and Ibsen. All, says McKay, "carried the taint of propaganda."⁵⁶ As a writer and critic, McKay would, throughout much of his life, promulgate the idea that social content and propaganda made for effective literature. Despite his personal disdain for DuBois, because of the scholar's learnings toward bourgeois reformism, McKay considered him an artist of the highest caliber since he was a "great passionate polemic."⁵⁷ DuBois once himself professed that "All art is propaganda and ever must be."⁵⁸ And in estimating the poetical worth of Wordsworth, McKay says that, when he penned the sonnet "To Toussaint

⁵⁶"Soviet Russia and the Negro," Crisis 27 (December 1923-January 1924), pp. 61-65, 114-118, in Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 95-96.

⁵⁷McKay, The Negroes in America, pp. 70-71; A Long Way From Home, p. 110.

⁵⁸DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," Crisis 31 (October 1926), p. 296.

L'Ouverture," he was at his height of literary effectiveness because his polemic soul had been fired by the French Revolution. But McKay laments that after the Revolution and its weighty aftermath of reality, Wordsworth left off his propaganda and began writing useless "decorous pastorals."⁵⁹

Following the lead of his mentors, McKay exhorted other Black poets to reject art that did not serve social and economic ends. In a poem entitled "Labor Day," McKay judges traditional "art-for-art-sake" poetry as

Hollow...and cold,
Like imitated music, false and strange.
Or half truths of a day that could not hold
Its own against the eternal tide of change.⁶⁰

And in a light-hearted lyrical verse, McKay praises the artistry of Alphonso, a young handsome waiter, who sings "olden songs of wine and clinking glasses." While marveling at the young man's ability to thrill his listeners' hearts with his mellow voice that "trills notes of the purest gold," McKay implies that such purely artistic activity is useless for today's social and political developments. He asks,

⁵⁹McKay, The Negroes in America, p. 65.

⁶⁰"Labor Day," as quoted in Johnson and Johnson, Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), p. 59.

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.⁶¹

According to McKay, too many Negro writers become obsessed with writing unreal, idealistic portraits of Negro life when they should be writing national propaganda, the only type of Negro literature that merits any serious attention.⁶² In a letter to a friend, written in Berlin, requesting supportive materials and funds, McKay indicated that his writing had as its end the furthering of the Negro's social and political position. "I am working in my small way," says McKay, "for the common cause."⁶³

But was McKay really working for the "common cause"? Was he really a spokesman for the masses, or was he an artist who, while expressing his own personal indignation at racial injustice, seemed to be articulating a mass sentiment? There is much to support the contention that McKay's socially conscious poems come more from his need to work through his

⁶¹"Alfonso, Dressing To Wait Table," Selected Poems, p. 76.

⁶²McKay, The Negroes in America, p. 73.

⁶³McKay to Schomburg, 1924 [ca.], McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

own personal difficulties with racial prejudice than from his desire to express candidly the spirit and feelings of the Black masses.

As a Jamaican, McKay was understandably outraged by the ugly graphic racism he saw practiced in America, Jim Crow laws, name-calling, and lynching. His growing up in a sheltered West Indian village did little to prepare him for the spectacle he witnessed when his boat docked in Charleston, South Carolina in 1912. For the first time in his life he "felt the barbs of American racism as fresh wounds."⁶⁴ McKay recalled,

It was the first time I have ever come face to face with such manifest implacable hatred of my race, and my feelings were indescribable. At first I was horrified; my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it all. ...Then I found myself hating in return. ...⁶⁵

McKay's own volatile personality, coupled with this new assault against his dignity, worked to bring out the flagrantly defiant McKay, a McKay Jamaica had never seen.

⁶⁴Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia Lippincott Company, 1968), p. 42.

⁶⁵McKay, "Claude MacKay [sic] Describes His Own Life," Pearson's Magazine 39 (September 1918), p. 25; see also Wayne Cooper, "Claude McKay and the New Negro of the 1920's," Phylon 25 (Fall 1964), pp. 297-306.

His friends back home were right when they warned him not to go to America where he would be changed. They cried, "Claude, we hate to see you go [to America] because you will be changed; terribly changed by America."⁶⁶ And one critic reasoned that McKay must have suffered a drastic change inside for him to make the conversion from a poet of light-hearted dialect poems to a poet of social defiance.⁶⁷ McKay's conversion was nothing more than a strategy against the assault to his dignity. He needed to respond, and his response was to "sharpen his claws and set out to develop his defense mechanisms."⁶⁸

McKay was deeply affected by the racial prejudice he experienced in his new home. And even though he would have broad experiences as a leftist, working on a leftist journal, it would be racial prejudice that would overwhelm all else, and, far from ignoring it, he would furiously react to it in every turn.⁶⁹ To him, it seemed his own personal horror. He once called it "the most powerful instrument in the world . . . a cancer in the universal human body and poison to the individual soul."⁷⁰ McKay related two incidents in his

⁶⁶McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

⁶⁷Arthur Drayton, "McKay's Human Pity," Black Orpheus, (June 1965): 39.

⁶⁸Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 223.

⁶⁹Stephen Bronz, The Roots of Negro Consciousness, p. 77.

⁷⁰A Long Way From Home, p. 134.

autobiography that clearly reveal how deeply racial prejudice bit into his soul. He described an occasion on which he and White friends took a ride to New Jersey to drink in the skyline of New York. On the way back, they tried to get a meal, but no restaurant would serve them, except one--but they had to eat in the kitchen. McKay wrote that

It was one of the most memorable meals I ever ate. I felt not only my own humiliation, but more keenly the humiliation that my presence had forced upon my friends. The discomfort of the hot bustling kitchen, the uncongenial surroundings--their splendid gesture, but God! it was too much. ... If I had to suffer in hell, I did not want to make others suffer there too.⁷¹

Another occasion revealing McKay's being nearly traumatized by a personal bout with racial prejudice occurred when he served as temporary drama critic for The Liberator. He had received a letter from the Theatre Guild's publicity agent inviting him to see Leonid Andreyev's play He Who Gets Slapped. McKay accepted with great anticipation, taking along cartoonist William Gropper. But when they approached the orchestra, the ticket stubs were snatched from both men (Gropper was White). The confused usher ran to get the manager, who promptly sent the men to the balcony. McKay said that he sat there, "apart, alone, black and shrouded in blackness, quivering in every fiber, [his] heart denying

⁷¹A Long Way From Home, p. 134.

itself and hiding from every gesture of human kindness." At that point, McKay felt that kindness could be found in "no nation or race."⁷²

When McKay wrote his review of the play for The Liberator, he also included an account of the incident as well as his accompanying outrage.⁷³ In a graphic display of bitterness and self-pity, McKay demonically taunts and jabs at the Whites who are hopelessly afflicted by Negrophobia. He cries,

Poor painful black face, intruding into the holy places of the whites. How like a specter you haunt the pale devils! Always at their elbow, always darkly peering through the window, giving them no rest, no peace. How they burn up their energies trying to keep you out!...Black face; make them uncomfortable; make them unhappy! Give them no peace, no rest. ...⁷⁴

McKay was so personally insulted and humiliated by the experience that he was nearly beside himself with rancor and hatred. But, according to a letter McKay later wrote to Max Eastman, his review and editorial comments were received enthusiastically by The Liberator readers all over the

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³McKay, "Review of He Who Gets Slapped" by Leonid Andreyev, in The Liberator 5 (May 1922): 24-25.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 25; also see A Long Way From Home, p. 145.

world.⁷⁵ As far as Eastman was concerned, McKay's review of "He Who Gets Slapped" was one of the "best pieces of English prose" ever printed in the Liberator.⁷⁶

For McKay racial discrimination was the most "abominable sin on the face of the earth" because it sanctioned "savage and vicious" hatred.⁷⁷ And despite the sympathy of well-meaning Whites, they could never know the agony of being Black in America, for

only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro's ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from other men.⁷⁸

The image of the Negro as a sacrificial Christ figure who must endure the pain of both persecution and loneliness clarifies the depth of McKay's personal pain. In the second stanza McKay's claim that what he writes comes from his blood, suggests that the message of White liberals and

⁷⁵McKay to Eastman, April 3, 1923, in Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 82-83.

⁷⁶Eastman to McKay, April 12, 1923, in The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 87.

⁷⁷McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," p. 11.

⁷⁸McKay, "The Negro's Tragedy," Selected Poems, p. 50.

intellectuals, who go about the world telling Negroes what they ought to do, is weak and ineffective since they can never really know the pain of being black.

There is no white man who could write my book,
Though many think their story should be told.
Of what the Negro people ought to brook.⁷⁹

McKay sees the only recourse for a Negro in this land, where the most powerful nation in this world practices the heinous "superstition" of racial discrimination, is to survive using his best tactics. McKay says his recourse is to laugh and "pray to God for Light!"⁸⁰ But McKay's laughter soon becomes the shrill cackle of hatred. McKay's defense mechanism seemed to be hatred, hatred against America. According to two psychologists, hatred was a stabilizing fact in McKay's personality.⁸¹ Through it he could maintain a sense of integrity by exhibiting nothing short of unyielding defiance in the face of those who would seek to destroy his dignity. In his cycle of "hate" sonnets, inaugurated by "To the White Fiends," in which McKay boasts to the Whites, "For

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, The Mark of Oppression: A Psychological Study of the American Negro, pp. 145-146, in Black Poets of the United States, p. 226.

every deed you do I could match--out-match," McKay challenges America, the evil giant of the West, to do its worse. Yet his hatred--the source of his integrity--will remain intact:

I will not toy with it [his hatred] 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 world's hell,
 Did not forever feed me vital blood.⁸²

In the sestet, McKay demonstrates conflicting emotions as he reveals a grudging admiration for the power that is America while he nurtures his precious hate:

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 dens I contemplate,
 Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate.⁸³

In "The White City," hatred is almost a sensual emotion which transforms hell to a sweet abode. The nurturing and cultivating of his hatred is pleasurable to McKay. And that is the point. He seems so caught up in rhapsodizing about

⁸²McKay, "The White City," Selected Poems, p. 74.

⁸³Ibid.

his own venomous reaction to American racism that he ceases speaking for the masses. In "The White City," McKay, as in many of the other "hate" sonnets to follow, establishes a taunting game with White civilization, in which he is the only opponent.

McKay's so-called hate poems are actually expressions of his own personal challenge to America. It is he that remains invincible, not the Negro race. In fact one critic charged that the entire canon of his so-called "hate" poems or militant poems are nothing more than "mechanisms" through which he sought to transform his personal problems (of racial oppression) into public issues.⁸⁴ Realistically speaking, one can say that very few of his sonnets reflect the reality of racial experiences. They are all more or less his own bitter personal hatred against the world.⁸⁵ In "The Baptism" the poet describes a baptismal ceremony in which the courageous speaker undergoes a "trial by fire" from which he emerges purified and invincible. The poem is ego-centered in that McKay speaks of his own stoicism:

⁸⁴Michael Stoff, "Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1972), p. 130.

⁸⁵Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 217.

Into the furnace let me go alone; [my emphasis]
 Stay you without in terror of the heat.
 I will go naked in--for thus 'tis sweet--
 Into the weird depths of the hottest zone,
 I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
 You will not note a flicker of defeat;
 My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,
 My mouth give utterance to any moan.
 The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;
 Red asphish tongues shout wordlessly my name.
 Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
 Transforming me into a shape of fame.
 I will come out, back to your world of tears,
 A stronger soul within a finer frame.⁸⁶

One finds it difficult to relate McKay's imagery and language in "Baptism" to an African/American context. His "trial by fire" could refer to any situation in which any protagonist gains stature from suffering. One critic argued that McKay's emphasis on the "individuality" of the speaker weakens the poem's relevance to the whole Negro movement in America. Instead of seeking ways to change the status quo, McKay's poem seems to express an attitude of grudging acceptance. He appears to be saying, "Whatever the white world does to me, it cannot crush my own strong individual spirit."⁸⁷

In "Baptism," McKay was so anxious to display his dauntless courage in the face of American "fire" that he overlooked the confusing imagery in the poem. For example, in the first stanza, line five, McKay promises that "[he will

⁸⁶McKay, "Baptism," Selected Poems, p. 35; first published in The Liberator 4 (October 1921): 7.

⁸⁷Stephen Bronz, Roots of Negro Consciousness, p. 73.

not quiver in the frailest bone." Certainly bones do not quiver. Also, there is a problem of mixed imagery when McKay says in line six of the poem "You will not note a flicker of defeat" since the flickering seems to come from him and not the flame in the furnace. As in his other sonnets, McKay, straining to adhere to a formal pattern, resorts to awkward inverted syntax.⁸⁸ In line seven he says, "My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet." Such assaults on logic and rhythm cause the poet a loss of artistic effectiveness. But his difficulty with style and language aside, one critic has simply charged that McKay's protest sonnets are without ideological substance.⁸⁹

In "America" McKay once again substitutes self-inflation and bravado for content. In the familiar rhetorical stance in which the speaker assumes the persona of the courageous stoic who willingly accepts America's bitterness as a personal challenge to his own inner metal, McKay confesses an ambivalent attraction for the evil and power that is 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.

⁸⁸Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, pp. 218-219.

⁸⁹Melvin B. Tolson, "Claude McKay's Art," in Poetry 83 (February 1954): 287-289.

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.⁹⁰

McKay's sonnet exhibits many faults, not the least of which is focus and unity. The first seven lines depict the image of a big and powerful America; the next three lines suddenly shift to the speaker, who stands within the walls of America, and the final four lines, reminiscent of Shelley's "Ozymandias," foresee a devastating future for America, which has little to do with the sentiment expressed in the first part of the poem. In addition, there are McKay's usual problems with imagery. In line seven there is the mixed simile--"Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood"--and in line five, there is a similar difficulty. He writes "Her vigor flows like tides into my blood." McKay is attempting to compare an abstract noun with a concrete noun. And once again the argument can be made that even if one could overlook McKay's ineffective language in "America," one cannot overlook the fact that this poem, like "Baptism," does little to reflect the reality of the lives of African/Americans during the early decades of the twentieth century.⁹¹

⁹⁰McKay, "America," Selected Poems, p. 59; first published in The Liberator 4 (December 1921): 9.

⁹¹Gross and Emanuel, Dark Symphony, pp. 87-88.

McKay's sonnet "Tiger" echoes McKay's "America." There is the same tiger image, the same reference to "bread for Negroes," the same suggestion of a monstrous evil force overpowering a smaller one, and there is the same boast of dauntless will on the part of the speaker:

The white man is a tiger at my throat,
 Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away,
 And muttering that his terrible striped coat
 Is Freedom's and portends the Light of Day.
 Oh white man, you may suck up all my blood
 And throw my carcass into potter's field,
 But never will I say with you that mud
 Is bread for Negroes! Never will I yield.⁹²

But there are two differences between "Tiger" and "America." In "Tiger," McKay does not express the love/hate feeling for America so evident in his sonnet entitled "America" (except that the tiger image is one expressive of strength and nobility as well as ferocity). And in the sestet of "Tiger," McKay introduces a new dimension--the spectacle of a hypocritical, corrupt, and materialistic democracy spreading its tentacles throughout the world. McKay predicts that

Europe and Africa and Asia wait
 The touted New Deal of the New World's hand!
 New systems will be built on race and hate,
 The Eagle and the Dollar will command.
 Oh Lord? My body, and my heart too, break--
 The tiger in his strength his thirst must slake!⁹³

⁹²McKay, "Tiger," Selected Poems, p. 47.

⁹³Ibid.

The hypocrisy of American democracy was a theme that would find expression in McKay's works throughout much of his life.

In "The White House," McKay once again sets himself up as the exemplary stoic who all alone endures the ravages of an impersonal force who would seek to alienate him from the fruits of civilization.⁹⁴ He cries out,

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
 And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
 But I possess the courage and the grace
 To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
 The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
 A chafing savage, down the decent street;
 And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
 Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.⁹⁵

In the sestet the speaker turns from his familiar professions of stubborn will and endurance to an admission of human weakness by praying to God to keep bitterness from his heart:

Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
 Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
 And find in it the superhuman power
 To hold me to the letter of your law!
 Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
 Against the potent poison of your hate.⁹⁶

⁹⁴Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 151.

⁹⁵McKay, "The White House," Selected Poems, p. 78; first published in The Liberator 5 (May 1922): 16.

⁹⁶Ibid.

But still the poem represents another instance of McKay's "distancing" himself from kinship with his African/American brothers. Once again he chooses to establish his "solitariness" rather than suggest a relationship of some sort with an ethnic world.⁹⁷ In this poem, McKay, speaking throughout in the first person, is once again venting his own personal gall concerning racial discrimination. "The White House" is definitely ego-centered.

As in many of the other "hate" sonnets, McKay's "The White House" has its share of lyrical difficulties. Both language and logic are offended in lines five through seven:

The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
A chafing savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass. ...⁹⁸

One may ask how pavement slabs burn loose, and other than McKay's penchant for the image of fire in these protest sonnets, one may wonder why the pavement slabs are burning in the first place. Who is the "chafing savage?" Is it the speaker? Exactly how does passion rend one's vitals? The images in this poem are carelessly conceived, making the overall image confusing.

⁹⁷George Kent, "The Soulful Way of Claude McKay," Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (1972): 36-52.

⁹⁸McKay, "The White House," Selected Poems, p. 78.

McKay's "Like A Strong Tree" is also a first-person declaration of strength and endurance. The poet draws an analogy between him and a strong tree. They will both endure despite the forces that endlessly threaten their survival. They will endure because their essence reaches far down below the surface of life:

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth
 Sends far its roots through rock and loam and clay,
 And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,
 When dry waves scare the rain-come sprites away;
 Like a strong tree that reaches down deep, deep
 For sunken water, fluid underground,
 Where the great-ringed unsightly blind worms creep,
 And queer things of the nether world abound:
 So I would live in rich imperial growth,
 Touching the surface and the depth of things,
 Instinctively responsive unto both,
 Tasting the sweets of being, fearing no stings,
 Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,
 Like a strong tree against a thousand storms.⁹⁹

The poem is lyrically effective because of McKay's careful use of imagery that emanates directly from the essence of the poem itself. Here we see none of the formula images--fire, tigers, furnaces, baptisms, and steel--so much a part of McKay's usual "hate" poems. Instead we see images of nature. In nature, McKay found a fertile richness that helped to unleash his creative lyrical genius. Whenever he spoke of

⁹⁹McKay, "Like A Strong Tree," Selected Poems, p. 45; first published in Survey Graphic 53 (March 1925): 662.

nature, his language was fresh and spontaneous. But as in the other "hate" poems, "Like A Strong Tree" celebrates only the speaker's strength and endurance.

In "America in Retrospect,"¹⁰⁰ the last poem in McKay's cycle of "hate" poems, he returns to the familiar bravado. Now his vision of America is recalled from memory--"vivid scenes stamped on a keen child's mind." Declaring that he now holds no hatred for America, McKay thanks her for making him a "stoic introvert." And then he makes quite clear his shunning of African/American realities and his reluctance to entangle himself with African/American relationships by requesting only one thing from America--the freedom and the peace to write.¹⁰¹ Perhaps McKay wanted from America and Afro-America the "peace and freedom" to write poems other than those of protest, poems that would allow him to demonstrate his skills as a lyricist.

Besides his compelling need in his poetry to stand alone against racial oppression, McKay found his role as spokesman difficult because within him he harbored a disdain for socially conscious poetry. He was the "reluctant" artist who felt pressed by circumstances into distorting his art to

¹⁰⁰McKay, "America in Retrospect," Opportunity 4 (November 1926): 342.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

accommodate the social and political realities of his time. Despite his declarations, McKay did not believe that art and propaganda were compatible. In a letter to Walter White, McKay says that he sees a great distinction between art and propaganda. He tells White that any time the artist stops presenting art as a personal expression of himself or life, and instead takes up making himself the "instrument of a group or body of opinion, he is performing an act of literary "prostitution."¹⁰² And in his Negroes In America, McKay complains to his chiefly Russian audience that in a capitalistic society, the artist quite often becomes a slave to propaganda. McKay says that in America he functioned as little more than a "machine" in order to serve the social exigencies of certain interest groups. But what redeemed him, says McKay, was his eternal spiritual desire to stand above propaganda.¹⁰³

Even though his first two collections of poems were in dialect,¹⁰⁴ McKay had always considered himself a writer in the English literary tradition and did not wish to limit his field in any way. His own use of the sonnet form to convey radical attitudes probably had more to do with his ties to

¹⁰²McKay to Walter White, September 7, 1925, White Correspondence, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁰³McKay, Negroes in America, p. 63.

¹⁰⁴See Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads, Chapter One.

his early reading and admiration of the British classics than with any inventiveness or literary rebellion on his part. Therefore one has to take with a grain of salt the accolades of critics who see McKay's use of the sonnet to express rebellious sentiment as a tour de force on the poet's part. For example, James Weldon Johnson thought that McKay's incongruous mixture of militancy with the formalism of the sonnet gave his work a "portentous note" far exceeding the verses of any other poet.¹⁰⁵ And one critic offered the possibility that McKay, by adhering to the sonnet form and rejecting the innovative modernistic versification that marked the poetry of writers like Langston Hughes, demonstrated to his other Black brothers that he knew how to achieve "authentic values."¹⁰⁶ Because McKay was so deeply affected by his British education, he saw little value in the cultivation of versification that would lead him outside literary English tradition.

McKay's reverence for the English literary tradition is underscored by an incident which occurred shortly before he left Jamaica for the United States. McKay said that he often read his dialect poems before various literary societies on the island, such as the Browning Club. But McKay recalled

¹⁰⁵James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, pp. 166-167; Black Manhattan (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968; reprint of Alfred A. Knopf, 1930).

¹⁰⁶Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 198.

that the response of the members of the club to his poetry would always be the same. "'Well,' they would say, 'he's very nice...but he's not a real poet as Browning and Byron and Tennyson are poets.'" He was deeply offended by their lukewarm praises and he vowed to himself that one day he would write poetry in "straight English" so that they would see just how "serious" and "profound" he was.¹⁰⁷

Another incident which highlighted McKay's attachment to formal literary tradition took place in the offices of The Liberator when he found himself embroiled in a literary dispute with his co-editor, Michael Gold. (McKay and Gold often found themselves at odds because of deep personal and philosophical differences.) McKay portrayed the incident in his autobiography as a conflict of opposing tastes. It seems that Gold, whom McKay describes as imbued with the revolutionary and social dogma of his day, wanted the magazine to print selections from those whom he felt best expressed those ideas, but McKay wanted all submissions appraised according to classical literary standards. He argued that "while it was most excellent to get material out of the forgotten masses . . . it should be good stuff that could compare with any other [classical] writing." He pointed out that since he himself had struggled hard to

¹⁰⁷McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

attain the "intellectual discipline" needed to craft "a fine stanza of verse," he could not welcome the "pathetic attempts of working people toward adequate literary expression."¹⁰⁸ Approximately ten years later, McKay would write a letter to Max Eastman commending him for his conservative literary stance revealed in his attack against the ultra-modernist poets in his critical study The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science.¹⁰⁹ According to McKay, such modernists would make literature a horrid spectacle of mass sentiment, "a popular ballyhoo," instead of a profession open to only the skilled and the disciplined.¹¹⁰ McKay revered classical literature and thus saw the particularisms of modern verse and the literary efforts of the untutored masses as vulgar incursions upon sacred Western literary tradition.

In another Liberator dispute, McKay again revealed his predilection for "pure" art. He was serving as associate editor of The Liberator when he came across a few poems written by an unknown poet named E. E. Cummings. McKay describes that afternoon:

¹⁰⁸A Long Way From Home, p. 139.

¹⁰⁹Max Eastman, The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science, (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931).

¹¹⁰McKay to Eastman, April 25, 1932, in Cooper Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 152.

One day I had sorted and read until my brain was fagged and I hadn't found a single starting line. Then I picked up a thin sheaf and discovered some verses which stimulated me like an elixir. They were mostly sonnets, a little modernistic, without capitals, a little voluptuous, yet restrained and strangely precise. ...¹¹¹

McKay wanted to make a full spread of the poems, but his co-editors objected, accusing McKay of being a "decadent," not a revolutionist since he admired the poems.¹¹² McKay's retort to his colleagues proves interesting since it places into perspective his assessment of propaganda vis-a-vis art. Arguing that E. E. Cummings' poems were good poetry, McKay declared that in any work of art the piece's "intrinsic beauty" was more important than its social significance. Then he announced that though he had strong social sentiments, he liked to keep them separate from his aesthetic emotions, "for the two were different and should not be mixed up."¹¹³ McKay felt the lyric poem too delicate a vehicle to carry the heavy weight of social bitterness. McKay expresses his conviction in a touching lyric.

¹¹¹A Long Way From Home, p. 102.

¹¹²The attitude of McKay's co-editors is ironic since McKay once reported that he preferred The Liberator to all other radical journals because it refused to allow social concerns to overwhelm artistic concerns.

¹¹³A Long Way From Home, p. 102.

O word I love to sing! thou art too tender
 For all the passions agitating me;
 For all my bitterness thou art too tender,
 I cannot pour my red soul into thee.

O haunting melody! thou art too slender,
 Too fragile like a globe of crystal glass;
 For all my stormy thoughts thou art too slender,
 The burden from my bosom will not pass.

O tender word! O melody so slender!
 O tears of passion saturate with brine,
 O words, unwilling words, yea can not render
 My hatred for the foe of me and mine.¹¹⁴

The adjectives that thread through this poem such as "tender," "haunting," and "fragile" reinforce the notion that McKay regarded "plain" poetry as a precious gem whose purely aesthetic quality made it superior to protest poetry.

McKay's apparent conviction that art ruined propaganda did not in any way enhance his already strained relationship with the Negro elite. He saw the Harlem intellectuals and their allies, the NAACP, as the enemy in his war to disentangle art and social problems. Although he had written of his admiration for DuBois in The Negroes in America (1922), calling him a writer unsurpassed by any other in Negro literature, McKay in 1928 dismissed him as a man who knew little of art since he had spent his life within the confinement of propaganda--which is but "a one-sided idea of

¹¹⁴"O Word I Love To Sing," Selected Poems, p. 43.

life."¹¹⁵ On more than one occasion, McKay accused the Harlem elite and the NAACP alliance of singlehandedly ruining Negro art by their propaganda programs geared toward artists. One case in point was the NAACP's custom of awarding literary prizes to Negro writers. McKay saw such a program as insulting and patronizing. He once wrote to a friend, "The very thought of a Spingarn Medal to reward the intelligence of American Negroes annoys me. ...I should have liked to be an American Negro just for the chance of refusing it in ringing words."¹¹⁶ Beyond just being "annoyed" by the awarding of medals, McKay believed that setting up such artificial standards for judging art would eventually stifle the creative growth of aspiring young writers who needed criticism and judgements from the real world. Such protectionism, he felt, could not be beneficial in the long run. Rather than awards, McKay argued that writers, all

¹¹⁵McKay to DuBois, June 18, 1928, in Cooper, Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 149-150. McKay's harsh judgement of DuBois's writing may have, in part, been a result of DuBois's scurrilous attack on Home to Harlem in The Crisis magazine, June 1928 issue, and McKay's discovery that in the very same issue in which DuBois massacred his novel appeared a set of poems that McKay had sent The Crisis two years before. From The Crisis McKay neither received acknowledgement of the poems or payment.

¹¹⁶McKay to Schomburg, July 17, 1925, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

writers, gained most from receiving accolades from their literary peers, from authentic literary groups in America.¹¹⁷

Despite the general consensus among critics today that McKay's militant poems are his best,¹¹⁸ McKay thought very little of them. (The fact that they were consistently flawed and artistically second-rate may demonstrate the value he placed upon them.) When he published his first cycle of "hate" poems in 1918 in Pearson's Magazine, along with them he included an introduction which made two things plain: his feeling that the poems merely represented his frenzied state of mind at the time they were written and his determination never again to write such poems.¹¹⁹ And fourteen years later in "A Negro to his Critics," McKay, wishing to establish his credibility as a lyric poet while distancing himself from his reputation as a militant poet, admits rather candidly that he was able to manufacture his protest poems quite easily, so

¹¹⁷McKay to Locke, July 27, 1926, Alain Locke Papers, Spingarn Collection, Howard University Library; McKay to Schomburg, July 17, 1925, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

¹¹⁸Emanuel and Gross in Dark Symphony, pp. 87-88 judged McKay's protest sonnets as having "permanent value" and on par with those polemic sonnets of Wordsworth and Milton; and Edward Margolies in Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia: Lippincott Company, 1968), p. 411, declared McKay's protest poems his best work.

¹¹⁹"Claude MacKay [sic] Describes His Own Life," Pearson's Magazine, p. 276.

easily in fact that his colleagues on The Liberator, who knew him as a lyric poet, were astonished at his ability as a "propaganda poet who could reel off revolutionary poetry like an automatic machine cutting fixed patterns."¹²⁰ And they, according to McKay, believed in "the highest standards of creative work." Their standards, according to McKay, certainly excluded propaganda.¹²¹

But despite McKay's negative evaluation of his own militant poems, he was not above using them to play "literary politics."¹²² When he had occasion to address an audience of Negroes or radicals, he would refer to his militant poems as objects of pride, but when he found himself in front of a mixed audience, he often expressed artistic contempt for them. When McKay read his "If We Must Die" to a celebration of the anniversary of The Red Army in Russia during his visit in 1922, he stated that when he delivered the poem, he was "transformed into a rare instrument."¹²³ But in a speech delivered to the impressive Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International, McKay not only told his audience

¹²⁰"A Negro to his Critics," p. 1.

¹²¹"Claude MacKay Describes His Own Life," p. 276.

¹²²David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue, p. 50.

¹²³A Long Way From Home, p. 210.

that he was pressed into the vanguard of Negro radicalism because of "If We Must Die," but he also implied that the poem wreaked havoc upon his "poetical temperament."¹²⁴

In his lyrical soul, McKay could not take pride in the bravado that served as the heart of "If We Must Die," and he was dumbfounded that the masses of Negroes embraced the poem so unreservedly. In his autobiography he notes the wide circulation of the poem within the grass roots Negro community:

It ["If We Must Die"] forced its way into the Negro pulpit. ... Ministers ended their sermons with it, and the congregations responded, Amen. It was repeated in Negro clubs and Negro schools and at Negro mass meetings. To thousands of Negroes who are not trained to appreciate poetry, "If We Must Die" makes me a poet.¹²⁵

In "A Negro to His Critics," McKay, as if offering an apology for having written the popular sonnet, assures his readers that it was created as a result of his distraught emotions during abnormal times: the poem was merely his cathartic response to racial tension.¹²⁶

¹²⁴McKay, "Speech to the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International, Moscow, reprinted as "Report on the Negro Question," International Press Correspondence 3 (January 5, 1923), pp. 16-17.

¹²⁵McKay, A Long Way From Home, pp. 227-228.

¹²⁶McKay, "A Negro to His Critics," New York Herald Tribune Books, p. 1.

Because of McKay's colonial orientation, he had a suspicion of and limited regard for literature marked by social and political content, even his own. But that circumstance alone does not call into question his role as poet of the people. There is one other factor that must be considered.

McKay was distressed about his image as spokesman for the Negro masses not only because he had a distaste for propaganda but also because he resented the notion that he spoke for a particular population. McKay, who believed that only those writers who understood life in its universal aspects created work of permanent value,¹²⁷ was understandably terrorized by the prospect of having his work particularized to a certain group of people. Black and White critics persisted in the notion that McKay's "If We Must Die" addressed a Black audience, exhorting them to "acknowledge and protest their common suffering,"¹²⁸ but McKay insisted that the poem was not written for a Black audience but rather a universal audience. Before his death, McKay had an opportunity to make a recording of the poem. But before actually reciting it, he offered introductory remarks that make his universal intentions quite clear:

¹²⁷McKay to Eastman, April 4, 1932, Passion of Claude McKay, p. 155.

¹²⁸Gross and Emanuel, Dark Symphony, p. 87.

"If We Must Die" is a poem that makes me a poet among colored Americans, yet frankly, I have never regarded myself as a negro poet. I have always felt that my gift of song was something bigger than the narrow confined limits of any people and its problems. Even though many of my themes are racial, I wrote my poems to make a universal appeal.¹²⁹

If what McKay says is true, he must have been less than honest in his autobiography when he reported that leaving the poem out of his 1920 collection Spring in New Hampshire was tantamount to a betrayal of race. In his recording McKay concludes his remarks by confessing a sense of pride he felt upon discovering that a young White American soldier had been found dead on the battlefield with a copy of his poem tucked in his bosom. McKay says that hearing of that incident fulfilled his universal intentions in that poem.¹³⁰

McKay's determination to stand his ground as a universal artist was first made patently clear in an incident involving Alain Locke, who had the charge of editing the Survey Graphic's 1925 issue featuring the art and literature of the Negro. For that particular issue Locke had received a great many poems from Harlem poets, including McKay. The trouble began when Locke, despite McKay's protest, overstepped his

¹²⁹McKay, Introductory Remarks to "If We Must Die," Anthology of Negro Poets (phonograph), ed. Arna Bontemps, Folkways Record FP91, Library of Congress.

¹³⁰McKay, "Introductory Remarks to 'If We Must Die,'" phonograph.

bounds as editor and arbitrarily changed the name of one of McKay's poems from its original title "The White House" to "White Houses." Locke's explanation for the alteration was concern that the public would think McKay was referring to the White House in Washington, D.C. McKay, of course, was livid, arguing that his title "The White House" was symbolic of the collective face of racism in America. McKay contended that changing the title made the poem appear "cheap," as if a man of creativity wished to enter uninteresting white houses.¹³¹ As a result of the incident, McKay gave notice to one of the impresarios of the Negro Renaissance that he felt himself emancipated from any implied obligations to be artistic interpreter of the Negro people. To Locke he exclaimed,

I am a man and artist first of all, the imprisoning quality of my complexion has never yet, and never will, move me to bend to lunkeyism and intellectual imprisonment with the sorry millions that are likewise tinted.¹³²

¹³¹McKay to Locke, August 1, 1916; McKay to Messrs. Simon & Schuster, July 1, 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Spingarn Collection, Howard University Library; A Long Way From Home, p. 313.

¹³²McKay to Locke, April 18, 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Spingarn Collection, Howard University Library.

Finally, an angry Locke closed the incident by wishing McKay the "abstract universal recognition" that the poet seemed to desire.¹³³

In many ways, McKay was the torchbearer of the spirit of the Negro masses. But as far as his art was concerned, he felt no particular obligation to speak for those of African/American ancestry. If he often wrote intelligently and knowingly of the experiences of Negro life, then that was all to the good, but if he felt himself restricted by the "exigencies" of the African/American world, then he demanded release from the bonds of race. After all his sojourn throughout Europe was simply his escape from "thinking and talking Negro all the time."¹³⁴ Although McKay often seemed to speak for the masses, it was really his own individual soul that he felt most bound to express. He made it quite clear from the outset that his loyalty was to himself and not to the group.¹³⁵ As early as 1918, McKay, in his first published assessment of himself and in his first published presentation to an American audience, avowed that "each soul

¹³³Locke to McKay, April 25, 1927; May 30, 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Spingarn Collection, Howard University Library.

¹³⁴McKay, "Right-Turn to Catholicism," p. 24, Unpublished Manuscript, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

¹³⁵Rebecca Chalmers, Witnesses For Freedom, p. 138.

must save itself."¹³⁶ He suggested the impossibility of seeking nobility and excellence in any source other than the individual soul. To him words like "patriotism," "nationhood," and "racial pride" were "hollow" sentiments.¹³⁷ Near the end of his life McKay confessed to the holding of one dream: to live and die as an "individual man of color and a member of the human race."¹³⁸ He wanted to be just another voice in the universe.

¹³⁶McKay, "Claude MacKay [sic] Describes His Own Life: A Negro Poet," Pearson's Magazine, p. 275.

¹³⁷"Right-Turn to Catholicism," p. 25.

¹³⁸Ibid.

Chapter III

The Dilemma of Primitivism

McKay had little difficulty establishing himself as a poet of some note during his first few years in the United States. Ostensibly his popularity rested upon his bold new approach to Black literature: he dared celebrate its primitive heart. But what emerges as significant irony is that McKay, while setting the groundwork for negritude, never fully committed himself to its spirit. From the very beginning of his efforts as a poet in the United States, McKay clearly demonstrated two opposing stances. The first was an unbounded celebration of the instinctual heart of Blackness. And the second, an indictment of all qualities that smacked of unbridled instinct and emotional uninhibitedness--the foundation of negritude.

In A Long Way From Home, McKay relates an incident which occurred in 1923 at a party he was hosting in Toulon, France. He says that in the middle of the festivities a young sailor quite suddenly leapt onto McKay's writing table and proclaimed that after the world revolution there would be no more White and Black and Yellow. He added "We shall all be one fraternity of men."¹ McKay writes, "My sense of the

¹A Long Way From Home, p. 260.

distinctive in the difference of color was outraged, and I said, "'We can still remain a fraternity of men and guard our complexions.'"² To McKay, a man endowed with a strong sense of racehood, embracing a hope for the annihilation of racial differences would be tantamount to desiring an escape from oneself. McKay wanted no part in the Utopian world proposed by the sailor. In rejecting a world in which each man would be absolved of color, he, in turn, was asserting pride and dignity in his own Black skin. But he had made such an assertion before, and to a much wider audience.

McKay's first poems published in America in 1917 quickly gave him national notice and established him as the spiritual ancestor of those poets who would promulgate the concept of Black pride during the 1960's. One writer bestows upon McKay the honor of having brought "a positive niggerhood" to the Harlem Renaissance.³ With his "The Harlem Dancer," published in Waldo Frank and James Oppenheim's Seven Arts Magazine,⁴ McKay quickly established himself as a revolutionary pioneer who spoke of color in a bold new way. He broke with a

²A Long Way From Home, p. 260.

³George E. Kent, "The Soulful Way of Claude McKay," in his Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, pp. 36-52.

⁴Eli Edwards (pseud.), "Harlem Dancer," Seven Arts Magazine 2 (October 1917): 741. The editors of Seven Arts Magazine published McKay's poem through the recommendation of Joel Spingarn, one of the patrons of the Renaissance. Frank and Oppenheim saw as their mission the cultivation of new revolutionary voices.

tradition of racial sentimentalism and timidity in Black poetry and offered the first conscious expressions of the "Black is Beautiful" theme that would later dominate the emotion and imagination of future artists.

Quite simply, the poem paints a colorful spectacle that must have taken place in hundreds of nightspots patronized by "slumming" uptown Whites. In "Harlem Dancer" a band of drunken young Whites and their companion prostitutes, obviously in pursuit of carnal pleasures, leer vilely at a young Harlem dancer who is performing. Throughout the poem, McKay juxtaposes the insensitivity and venality of the Whites against the purity and majesty of the dancer. He writes,

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players on a picnic day.⁵

The poem evokes the natural beauty of the dancer. She is Black, and she is obviously beautiful. And, what is more, that which makes her beautiful is that which is exotic and primitive--for example, her "half-clothed body" and her voice "like the sound of blended flutes blown by Black players. ..."⁶ McKay continues building a motif of island splendor

⁵"Harlem Dancer," p. 741.

⁶"The Harlem Dancer," p. 741.

within the hot house of Harlem, and against the sterile bleakness of Western civilization he opposes the graceful young dancer whose eloquence and dignity are born of her kinship with a tropical clime:

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 a storm.⁷

Her superiority to her surroundings and to those who gaze upon her, despite the suggestive dance she must perform, is made clear. She is pristine elegance; they are corruption. While her body is being "devoured," her soul stays pure and untouched because she has remained one with her primitive origin. She is one of the first alien/exiles in African-American literature. McKay writes,

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.⁸

Calling the dancer "a proudly swaying palm / Grown lovelier for passing through a storm," McKay suggests that her beauty has been enhanced by her ordeal.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

"Harlem Dancer" was no less than a seminal piece, expressing many themes that McKay would expand upon in later works. The poem was not only one of the first expressions of negritude and the alien/exile dilemma, but it was also one of the first to articulate the outrage felt by many artists who believed that Whites were making a whore of Black art. "The Harlem Dancer" is clearly an allegory. The dancer in the poem, in her innocence and nobility, symbolizes the unadorned purity of Black art. She becomes, however, the unwitting prostitute of the White spectators who exploit her body but cannot touch her soul. McKay writes, "But looking at her falsely-smiling face,/ I knew her self was not in that strange place."⁹

The charge that Whites fail at fully appreciating the intrinsic value of Black art dominated McKay's imagination for much of his life. He gave eloquent expression to his emotion in the sonnet "Negro Spiritual." The first eight lines of the sonnet are imbued with a deep mournful sadness that appropriately sets the tone for the lyrical grieving of the poet who "gives particularly fortunate expression to all the glorious, grievous overtones awakened in the black soul

⁹Ibid.

when hearing spirituals sung."¹⁰ And McKay offers more textual dimension to the sadness of the notes by blending in the startling images of slavery:

They've taken thee out of the simple soil,
Where the warm sun made mellow thy tones
And voices plaintive from eternal toil,
Thy music spoke in liquid lyric moans;
They've stolen thee out of the brooding wood,
Where scenting bloodhounds caught thy whispered note,
And birds and flowers only understood
The sorrow sobbing from a choking throat. ...¹¹

But the simple, primitive, pure beauty of these slave melodies are betrayed by the exploitative attitude of the Whites who approach black art with "the mentality of slaveowners."¹² These White "art lovers" desecrate the hallowed purity of the spirituals that bespeak the cruel memory of slavery by presenting them in a garish auditorium, too gaudy and too highly ornamented, and by arranging the spirituals in orchestration too brash and too glaring to carry the message of simple, yet dignified pain. McKay laments,

¹⁰Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 245.

¹¹Claude McKay, "Negro Spiritual," The Liberator 5 (May 1922): 16.

¹²Wagner, p. 245.

[They] set thee in this garish marble hall
of faces hard with conscience--worried pride,
Like convicts witnessing a carnival.
For whom an alien vandal mind has tried
To fashion thee for virtuoso wonders,
Drowning thy beauty in orchestral thunders.¹³

Here, just as in "Harlem Dancer," Negro art strikes a "false note" when presented in an alien environment to blundering White art lovers.¹⁴

In the same year that McKay published his "Negro Spiritual," he found himself writing on the same theme--White exploitation of Black art--in his modest Russian publication, The Negroes in America. McKay begins his chapter "Negroes in Art and Music" by describing for his Russian readers the rape of Africa and the pillaging of its treasures by the French, the Germans, and the English. In recounting the history behind the theft of African art, McKay is obviously disturbed as he accuses Londoners of raping Africa (particularly Benin) of its art without having any notion of the values of the treasures they had so shamefully procured. According to McKay, these "poachers" plopped their findings into the African Hall of the British Museum without so much as cataloging one shred of art or properly labeling

¹³Claude McKay, "Negro Spiritual," The Liberator 5 (May 1922): 16.

¹⁴Wagner, p. 16.

one object among the stolen treasures. Stealing them was bad enough, but handling them with so little dignity was unforgivable:

And there they lie without having
the honor to be shown at an exhibition, and
not being in need of it: sad, strange,
perfect, lonely--like the melodies of
African slaves and the stories of Negro
domestic animals of the West Indies, some of
which are finished, some of which are not, but
which are executed with unusual patience
and diligence. ...¹⁵

Several years later, in 1934, McKay would write "Black Belt Slummers," one of the sonnets included in his "Cities" manuscript, a collection celebrating the various cities that he had visited throughout Europe and North Africa.¹⁶ Although still absorbed by the theme of White exploitation of Black art, McKay has now become more direct and less subtle in his accusation. What we see now is a satirical embittered characterization of White art patrons. McKay says that they use Black art for self-aggrandizement:

¹⁵McKay, The Negroes of America, p. 58.

¹⁶Claude McKay, "Cities" manuscript, the McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Although the collection itself remains unpublished, some individual poems were included in McKay's 1953 Selected Poems.

One dilettante, a prince of his profession,
 Thinks Black Belt is a mine of finest ore,
 Pure gold and bronze and copper to explore
 Desires, enamoured of his own obsession,
 To write it up, a nice romantic story,
 Of leopards loitering along the street,
 And jungle maidens, sensuous and sweet. ...¹⁷

One cannot help wondering whether or not McKay had Carl Van Vechten in mind when he created his portrait of the "prince of his profession"¹⁸ since Van Vechten stole McKay's thunder by publishing his popular "slice-of-life" novel Nigger Heaven in 1926, two years before McKay would see the publication of his Home To Harlem, a novel in the same genre as Van Vechten's.¹⁹

In the concluding stanza of the poem, McKay's tone becomes heavily satirical as he suggests that the underside of White exploitation of art is the wish of Whites to subjugate the masses socially and politically, as indicated by the condescending utterances of the speaker who is portrayed as one of the grandames of Black art:

¹⁷McKay, "Black Belt Slummers," "Cities" ms., Claude McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University.

¹⁸Carl Van Vechten was a critic, novelist, photographer, and art patron who was first to establish a link between Harlem and Greenwich Village artists and elites. He is considered by many the foremost White patron of Negro art during the Harlem Renaissance.

¹⁹Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven, 1926.

They're so exquisite! exclaims midlady,
 Reminding me of Uncle Tom of Old,
 Whose burdened body held a heart of gold,
 His type made our American Arcady.
 I like all things unlike myself and strange,
 That's why I think they're agents of the devil,
 Who want to bring all folk to the same level--
 They love not Beauty who desire such change.²⁰

In "Black Belt Slummers," McKay portrays the art patron not as the clumsy thoughtless boor witnessed in "Harlem Dancer," but as a mean-spirited political and social reactionary. In this poem, an older and disillusioned McKay draws an inescapable connection between exploitation of Black art and racial oppression.

"Harlem Dancer" could not have come at a better time. Six months prior to its publication, The United States had declared war on Germany. And Americans who, perhaps a year ago, would have passed the poem off as scandalous were receptive to this new breath of fresh air celebrating Negro primitivism. The poem was first published in a White journal. And, because McKay blended a certain elegance with obvious atavism, the poem won the approval of a universal audience. It appealed even to the staunchly conservative Black critic William Stanley Braithwaite of the Boston

²⁰"Black Belt Slummers," "Cities" ms., James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University.

Transcript, who wrote that "Harlem Dancer" differed in "both visionary and artistic power" from anything so far produced by a Black poet.²¹

It is interesting that Braithwaite gave "Harlem Dancer" such unreserved praise. In 1916, one year before McKay was successful in placing his first poem in an American magazine, he had sent seven of his poems to Braithwaite, then poetry editor of the Boston Evening Transcript. McKay had become discouraged because his work had been invariably rejected by newspapers and magazines. Given his commitment to race consciousness as a part of the writer's expression, it is odd that McKay sent Braithwaite his work at all. He says that he had regularly read Braithwaite's column, written in the form of a literary dialogue, in the Boston Transcript and found the characters "intellectual Bostonians with Greek names [who] conversed in lofty accents that were all Greek" to him.²² He indignantly complained that in Braithwaite's writing one could not discern "the slightest indication of what sort of American he might be." He was astounded to discover that the conservative New England critic was a Black man.²³ Although Braithwaite encouraged McKay's poetic

²¹William Stanley Braithwaite, "Some Contemporary Poets of the Negro Race," in The Crisis 17 (April 1919): 275-280.

²²McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 27.

²³Ibid.

talent, he advised him to tone down the racial content of his poetry. After all, it would not be difficult for a reader to identify him as a Black poet. This McKay refused to do. Not satisfied with simply rejecting Braithwaite's advise, McKay found himself searching through the stacks at the public library for any samples of Braithwaite's poetry. After finding a few verses, he pronounced them "passionless lyrics."²⁴

Whether or not one can determine that the poet of "Harlem Shadows" is Black simply by reading the poem cannot be answered with certainty, but it is clear, given McKay's response to Braithwaite, that he intended his racial identity to be clear to the reader. McKay concludes the Braithwaite incident by stating that he could not have possibly considered his advice because he approached his writing in a personal, subjective manner, similar to the manner in which those writers he admired had written. He explains,

I felt more confidence in my own way . . . because of all the poets I admire . . . Byron, Shelley, Keats, Black, Burns, Whitman, Heine, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud and the rest--it seemed to me that when I read them--their poetry I could feel their race, their class, their roots in the soil, growing into plants, spreading and forming the background against which they were silhouetted. I could not feel the reality of them without that. So likewise, I could not realize myself writing without conviction.²⁵

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 28.

From the very beginning, McKay enthusiastically embraced his identity as a Black poet. Unlike the American-born Renaissance participants, he did not have to wait for Locke's 1925 manifesto, the "New Negro,"²⁶ or Langston Hughes's liberating words in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"²⁷ to declare his emancipation from a tradition that had considered a celebration of "Blackness" shameful.

"It feels good to be Black," McKay implied when he spoke of his joy at leaving the dampness of Paris in 1926 for the warmth of Marseilles and the companionship of Black seamen. "It was a relief to get to Marseilles to live in among a great gang of black and brown humanity." And he concluded that it was wonderful "to feel the strength and distinction of a group and the assurance of belonging to it."²⁸ Even when in France, finding himself moving through certain Paris cafes with the American expatriates--among them, Hemingway and Fitzgerald--he admits that though he got on congenially with them, they could not understand the profundity of being Black. McKay claims that they automatically assumed that he wished to be White like them, but he says that never for one

²⁶See Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," Survey Graphic (March 1925), p. 641.

²⁷Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Nation, June 23, 1926, p. 694. In his essay, Hughes demanded freedom as a Black artist from the hegemony of White literary standards.

²⁸Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 277.

moment did he wish to trade his Black identity for a White one. He lamented that, despite their intellect and sophistication, his American compatriots could never understand the "instinctive and animal and purely physical pride of a Black person resolute in being himself and yet living a simple civilized life like themselves."²⁹

Since being Black was an unreserved joy, McKay had no sympathy with Dunbar's sugar-coated world of quiet lyrical contentment whose underlying message was "Let us make the best of an inferior status." McKay's world, from his first American utterance, was wrought of a Whitmanesque arrogance and inclusiveness: his vision was vigorous enough to include every facet of Blackness--everything was welcome. Nothing was shameful. Everything had to be seen. And so Harlem became McKay's stage before it became that of any other writer.

In 1921, Shuffle Along--the first Broadway hit written, directed, and performed by Black artists--opened to New York audiences. At the time, McKay was serving as alternating drama critic for The Liberator and consequently reviewed the play. McKay stated that he had two reasons for wanting to write a piece on Shuffle Along. First of all he wanted to take issue with the critics who rather nonchalantly

²⁹A Long Way From Home, p. 245.

"dismissed" it, and second, he wanted to feature the play in order to challenge the thinking of Negro radicals who were too critical of Negro comedy: "They were against the trifling, ridiculous and common side of Negro life presented in artistic form."³⁰ And to McKay's way of thinking, if White people were busy laughing at the slow "syncopated motion of down-home negroes having a good time, perhaps that laughter would veer them away from lynching and prejudice for a while."³¹ McKay's review of Shuffle Along is actually a defense of the artistic validity of Negro primitivism. It is in this 1921 review that McKay publicly takes to task the Negro intellectuals for their self-conscious appraisal of Negro culture. McKay charges that because of fear of the bigotry and the censure of Whites, Black critics shun the natural uninhibited qualities in Negro art and instead gravitate toward Negro art which imitates Anglo-Saxon standards. McKay charges that "against the worthless standards of the whites, the black intelligentsia would oppose such solid things as the aristocracy of St. Phillip's Church, the compositions of Coleridge-Taylor,³² the prose of

³⁰A Long Way From Home, p. 141.

³¹Claude McKay, "A Negro Extravaganza" [Review of Shuffle Along, a musical review by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake], in The Liberator 4 (December 1921): 25.

³²Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was a nineteenth-century British composer of African descent celebrated for his classical pieces. During his visit to America he became friendly with some of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

Mr. DuBois, the poetry of James Weldon Johnson as the only expression of Negro Culture. For such a list would earn the solemn approval of the New York Times."³³ McKay charges that the Negro critics, whom he impatiently calls "filmy-sighted," "convention-ridden," and "head-ossified," will not be satisfied until all Negro art has been drained of every drop of Negro blood, and consequently drained of its "warmth, color, and laughter," so that the artist and his art can be "dignified and respectable."³⁴

In his review, McKay further charges that these self-conscious Black critics force Black writers, especially young Black writers, into a state of constant inner turmoil over whether or not to write honestly of their own unvarnished observations of African-American life or whether they should be concerned with writing of only those things which would be in the best interest of cultural propaganda, in other words, adhering to the progressive approach of the cultural elite. No doubt, expressing his own frustrating struggles in attempting to balance his artistic integrity with issues of group image and social progress, McKay charges that many young Black writers who attempt to render the "fundamental rhythm" of Afro-American life are condemned by Black critics. McKay laments that for the young artist who writes of homely

³³Claude McKay, "A Negro Extravaganza," p. 24.

³⁴Ibid., p. 34.

things--"Maundy's wash tub, Aunt Jemima's white folks, Miss Anne's old clothes . . . George's yessah-boss . . . chittling and corn pone joints--there is "not a line of critical encouragement."³⁵ McKay's 1921 review is the first articulate expression in prose of his commitment to an unapologetic negritude, and it is one of the early pieces that sets the stage for the all-out vicious attack against Negro critics that comes eleven years later in his "A Writer to His Negro Critics."

But the review also introduces a new thought to the concept of negritude, a thought implied in the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, but never really expressed in writing: Blacks, unlike Whites, have not been robbed of the joy of living. McKay extols the virtues of primitivism with a bluntness and a shamelessness that must have set on edge the teeth of the bourgeois Negro leaders and must have taken many White leaders by surprise, especially when he bragged that the American negroes cannot "satisfy the desire of the hypercritical whites for the Congo wriggle, the tribal war jig, and the jungle whoop" of which the confinement of civilization has robbed them.³⁶ Many members of the Negro elite were afraid that McKay's attention to Negro

³⁵McKay, "A Writer to His Negro Critics," New York Herald Tribune Books 8 (March 6, 1932): 6.

³⁶McKay, "A Negro Extravaganza," p. 26.

primitivism would cause Whites to judge them inferior and consider them not "ready" for immersion into the mainstream of civilization. They feared that White people would share Gunnar Myrdal's assessment when he wrote that the most striking trait of the Negro is his "emotionality and spontaneous good humor."³⁷ Although these qualities lend a certain enjoyment to life, says Myrdal, they also give to the Negro an inclination toward loss of self-control and a tendency to act on impulse. Myrdal concludes that such lack of control has allowed the Negro to take "sex more as it comes, without all the encumbrances and inhibitions" that plague Whites. But Myrdal concludes his remarks with the admission that Whites hold the Negro's instinctual enjoyment of life in contempt.³⁸

It was just such contempt that leaders such as James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Alain Locke feared, and McKay's emphasis of atavistic urges and exotic motifs was not what they thought the Negro needed. According to them, what the Negro needed was for his writers to prove to Whites that Blacks were just as cultivated and respectable as they. Perhaps if Whites could see that, then they could believe that Blacks deserved admittance into the mainstream of American culture. DuBois, optimistic about the feasibility

³⁷Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma, p. 959.

³⁸Ibid.

of such a premise, wrote in 1903 that, through the cultivation of its "Talented Tenth," the Negro would witness social advancement. He believed that these highly cultivated individuals, that is, cultivated in the higher standards of the popular world, would guide the Negro masses. He wrote, "The function of the Negro college, then, is clear: it must maintain the standards of popular education, it must seek the social regeneration of the Negro. ..."39 And along the same lines, Alain Locke in his message "Enter the New Negro" argues that Negroes will gain social advances if a talented group of Negroes should win cultural recognition, recognition which should "in turn prove the key to revaluation of the Negro which must precede any considerable further betterment of race relationships."40 And finally, James Weldon Johnson declared in the preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry that the world cannot know that a group of people have greatness within them until they produce great literature and art.41 But the question remains, what to Johnson was great art? It certainly was not the exotic primitivism McKay propounded, for Johnson pronounced even ragtime music as a lower form of art, declaring that it demonstrated only evidence of "a power that will someday be

³⁹W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, p. 87.

⁴⁰Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," Survey Graphic 6 (March 1925): 634.

⁴¹James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922), p. 17.

applied to the higher forms," but today it is not great art.⁴² Nevertheless, Johnson remained convinced that cultivation of great art, whenever it came, would be the answer to the Negro's problems. In a letter to a friend, he confided that such a route offered "the least friction."⁴³

Shortly after publishing his "Shuffle Along" review, McKay took his views of primitivism to a Russian audience. In his The Negroes in America, published in Russia in 1923 at the behest of the State Publishing House, McKay expresses once again his outrage at the Negro intelligentsia's blind fear about pure Negro art. In his chapter "Negroes in Art and Music" McKay makes the same point that he made in his 1921 review of Shuffle Along: Negroes who fear embarrassment and humiliation at the expression of authentic Negro life would rather see Negroes perform mediocre European music than "comic pieces" from "real Negro life."⁴⁴ McKay reasons that the final product of such insane deprecation of Black art by the Negro elite would be the spectacle of Negro singers avoiding singing even the spirituals, which McKay calls "the sole native American folk music."⁴⁵

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³James Weldon Johnson to Walter White, April 13, 1923, Walter White Correspondence, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

⁴⁴Claude McKay, The Negroes in America, p. 61.

⁴⁵McKay, The Negroes in America, p. 62.

McKay was a gifted writer who brought a new dimension to the Harlem Renaissance, but his tendency to explore the instinctual aspect of Negro culture would embarrass and frustrate the Negro elite throughout the twenties and the thirties. There is no doubt that McKay knew the controversy stirred up by his writing, and for much of his creative life he would continue beating the Negro elite with a "jungle stick."

It appeared that, for McKay, Harlem was a jungle thick with common Negro life, a concrete living symbol of the primitivism he had sought in art and literature. Here was the real thing, uncleaned and unpressed. When McKay wrote "Harlem Dancer" in 1918, he became the first poet to write of Harlem in poetry,⁴⁶ but it was not the raw, uncensored Harlem that he would later make sensational in his essays and fiction. This Harlem would be bold and unapologetic; it would not be the Harlem the Negro elite wanted to present to White readers. McKay tells of his first impression of Harlem in an article written in 1928 in which he reviewed his novel Home to Harlem. McKay writes that entering Harlem for the first time was like entering a paradise in "the dark warm

⁴⁶Claude McKay to Carl Cowl, January 13, 1948, Claude McKay Papers, JWW Collection, Yale University Library.

throbbing bosom" of the United States.⁴⁷ In this article, McKay compares Harlem to his home in Jamaica, and in so doing invests his West Indian countryside with a primitivism not so directly acknowledged by McKay in other writings. He writes, "It was as if my boyhood's seminude backwood's life, or the jungle if you will, was all dressed up and parading itself gaily in the biggest city in the world."⁴⁸ McKay writes further:

Here were our simple palm-booth tunes delightfully syncopated, our picnic jigs jazzed, the lazy animal movement of the tropics quickened to the beat of New York's double-marching time, the same variegated pigment and matty hair refined by beauty-shop bleaches and kink-no-more processes, the same ripe voices uttering a different vernacular, the same deep-moving African Rhythm.⁴⁹

In 1940, McKay once again raised the ire of the Negro elite by reveling in unadulterated negritude. He wrote an unabashed expose of Harlem from materials he had gathered while serving on New York's Federal Writers' Project. In order to write his social history, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, McKay had to penetrate the surface of respectable Harlem and dig down into the subterranean underside of the Negro

⁴⁷Claude McKay, "Significant Books Reviewed by Their Authors," [a review of Home to Harlem] McClure's 40 (June 1928): 81.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹McKay, "Significant Books Reviewed by Their Authors," p. 81.

capital. He purposefully ignored the academic and cultural aspects of Harlem, writing that it was his intention to give space only to the popular movements of his subject.⁵⁰ And he researched his subject well, visiting dark, dank, seedy occultist coves, shadowy tenements, popular Harlem beauty parlors and barbershops, barbecue joints, and clandestine basement bars. McKay's portrait of Harlem concentrated on explaining the operation of the illegal numbers game in Harlem, surveying the places of amusement in Harlem--the cabarets, the bars, and the eating joints, and writing colorful pieces on Harlem notables such as Father Divine, Madame C.J. Walker, Marcus Garvey, and Gambler Casper Holstein.⁵¹

In writing his social history of Harlem, McKay spared no glimpse into the naked underside of Afroamerica. He glossed over nothing, little fearing shame and embarrassment. But others were shocked and embarrassed by McKay's candor, especially the Negro elite. For example, Catherine Latimer, librarian at the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and

⁵⁰Claude McKay to Catherine Latimer, July 3, 1940, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

⁵¹Father Divine was the founder of the Peace Mission Cult, a non-ritualistic religious movement whose followers worshipped him as God incarnate on earth. Father Divine's cult was most active throughout the 1930's, 1940's, 1950's. Madame C.J. Walker became the first Black female millionaire in the United States as a result of her innovations in the cosmetics business.

History, housed in the Harlem branch of the New York City Public Library, admitted that she was embarrassed by some of the material McKay included in his study.⁵² In his chapter "Harlem Businessman," McKay, accounting for the success of Madam C.J. Walker and her system of hair "refinement," says "Before her time, nappy-haired negroes were apologetic about their fibrous scalps." McKay continued his brutal account by including hair straightening among Negro males. He writes, "The spreading of the hair-straightening custom among Negro males has spawned that singular phenomenon of the stocking on Harlem's head. Harlem's head is full of vaseline."⁵³

There is little doubt that Harlem: Negro Metropolis, written in a highly editorialized, colorful style, symbolized McKay's shamelessness about being Black. As far as he was concerned, there were no race secrets to be hidden from Whites. And he would have no part in a charade designed to gentrify Negroeness.

Without question, one of McKay's contributions to the Harlem Renaissance was his candid, aggressive, unapologetic portrayal of the "low down" Harlem dweller, the urban primitive. McKay gave to this person, previously considered

⁵²Catherine Latimer in Library Journal, quoted in an E.P. Dutton Press Release, McKay Papers, J.W.J. Collection, quoted in Cooper, Stranger and Pilgrim, p. 778.

⁵³Claude McKay, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, pp. 98-99.

frivolous and subhuman by the literary establishment (both white and black), an authentic cultural value. Unlike such contemporary writers as Jessie Fauset, Walter White, and Nella Larsen,⁵⁴ McKay seemed quite willing to share the secrets of this shadowy urban subculture with a universal audience. For the most part he appeared totally unashamed. But the question remains as to whether this assertion of the primitive represents McKay's authentic attitudes and feelings or mere posturing designed for effect.

McKay's "slice of life" portrait of urban Harlem must be placed within the context of his attitude toward city life. Born in the quiet Clarendon Hills of rural Jamaica and far from the congestion and confusion of Kingston, he displayed a disdain for city life. His Constab Ballads attests to his contempt for the brutality of the city, its rigid color-caste system, its crass materialism, and its deteriorated moral code. The message of Constab Ballads is clear--bad things happen to people who go to the city. With his negative attitude toward the city so firmly articulated in his Jamaican poems, how could McKay unreservedly embrace Harlem just a few short years later? The answer is that his

⁵⁴These writers restricted themselves to the depiction of middle and upper-middle class Negroes. Often the emphasis of their novels was the paradoxes and ironies of color and the desire to "pass," in other words to live secretly as a White person. Their novels were: Fauset's There is Confusion (1924), White's Flight (1926), and Larsen's Quicksand (1928).

celebration of Harlem was not unreserved. McKay's writings reveal that while he was being lauded as the poet who wrote honestly of the "real" Harlem, he simultaneously felt nothing but revulsion and contempt for this city. And McKay also felt revulsion and contempt for those "Harlem" qualities deemed exclusively Negro or primitivistic, causing him to feel both anger and pity for those Harlem inhabitants whose lives, he believed, were consumed by instinct and inhibitions. It seems that McKay the artist stood in judgement on the world he helped "create."

First of all, McKay's Harlem: Negro Metropolis demonstrates clearly that he saw Harlem as a failed community. For this, he blames not only the Black leaders who are so obsessed with integration that they neglect helping the people build an infrastructure of support within their own communities, but he blames the people themselves, who are so fatally gullible and ill-informed that they cause a "paralysis" to settle over their own community. McKay described the mentality of the Negro community as "chaotic and defeatist."⁵⁵ In "My Green Hills of Jamaica," written late in McKay's life, he confesses a bias against city dwellers. He says that they are simply not as intelligent as country dwellers: "Personally I believe that the masses of the cities are woefully less intelligent than people who make

⁵⁵Claude McKay, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, p. 184.

up the population of a country town or village."⁵⁶ To prove his point, McKay boasts that as a youngster in Jamaica he organized a band of native boys into a "free-thinking" club, in which they read the latest material published by the English rationalists, Spencer Haeckel, and Arnold. To further make his point, McKay says that the villagers in Jamaica subscribed to The Spectator, The Nineteenth Century, The Windsor, The Times (local edition), and the Jamaica Times. But in his critical study of Harlem, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, McKay calls the people "intellectually backward."⁵⁷

To illustrate the "backwardness" of Harlem, McKay recalls the Harlem riots of 1935 in which Blacks pillaged and looted White-owned stores along 125th Street, Harlem's main thoroughfare. While conceding that the action taken by the masses of Blacks was proper since the Whites had practiced employment discrimination--hiring only White employees in a predominantly Black neighborhood--he wondered at the actual motivation for the explosion of Black tempers. He charged that the riots were a result of a spontaneous reaction--nothing calculated or patiently reasoned. He said that for many months, the Harlem masses had been subjected to the haranguing of countless propagandists and agitators,

⁵⁶Claude McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

⁵⁷Ibid.

communists, and community leaders: "Harlem was excited by the continued picketing and the resultant 'incidents.'" Consequently, when a rumor began that a kid who had been caught stealing a trifle had been beaten by the police, Harlem blew up like a keg of dynamite. According to McKay, it was really Harlem's gullibility that caused the riot; the rumor about the kid was merely a trigger for an already smoldering community.⁵⁸ The problem, as he saw it, was that the people had no mind or direction of their own. The Harlem people, he charged, were so accustomed to running in varied directions and listening to a host of would-be leaders that when a lone voice screamed "riot," they followed. It is a bitter McKay who assesses the situation as such. He charges that Black people all over the world are "notoriously the most exploitable material," and those in Harlem are no exception. But what can one do, McKay seems to ask, about the flagrant exploitation of Harlem since the people not only take it, they invite it?⁵⁹

Finally, in a last assault against the notion of Harlem as a "joybelt," calling it the "sprawling, backward Negro community-breeding place of crime and disease, mumbo-jumbo

⁵⁸Claude McKay, "Harlem Runs Wild," Nation 140 (April 3, 1935): 382-83.

⁵⁹"Harlem Runs Wild," p. 382.

jungle of cultists and occultists,"⁶⁰ McKay warns that if changes are not brought about, Harlem will become a "menace to the American standard and conception of life."⁶¹ It is unmistakably clear here that McKay believes that ultimately we must judge Harlem by the same conventional standards and values by which we judge the larger, more traditional society.

In his poetry, McKay was never really convincing as a promulgator of aesthetic primitivism. He could never make his lyrics about the "noble savage" ring with authenticity. There was always a false note. For example in "Harlem Dancer," discussed earlier, other than the references to prostitutes, the poem gives no glimpses into the real world of Harlem. As a matter of fact, the only certain clue that the poem is about Harlem is the title. McKay was successful in keeping alive a fresh visual image in the octave of his poem, but what happens afterward represents a peculiar dilemma inherent in McKay's poetry intended to celebrate atavism: the lyrics become bogged down in nineteenth-century formalism. McKay persisted in an over reliance upon stale Victorian stock phrases to express putatively revolutionary themes. He writes,

⁶⁰Claude McKay, "Claude McKay Replies to Ted Poston on Solution to Negro Problems," New Leader (December 5, 1940), p. 5.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 5.

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.⁶²

McKay's description of the dancer's complexion as "swarthy," his insistence upon inverted phrasing, "luxuriant fell," and his use of "her self" instead of "she" indicate that he could neither extricate himself entirely from nineteenth-century formalism, nor could he make a wholehearted commitment to ethnic primitivism. Nathan Huggins lamented that McKay's insistence upon adhering to regular rhyme and the traditional iambic line force him into an awkward inverted syntax.⁶³

In "Harlem Shadows," written one year after "The Harlem Dancer," McKay (again flying in the face of traditional cultural convention) turned his eye toward an urban primitive as the subject for poetry--the Harlem prostitute.

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
 In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
 Its veil. I see the shape of girls who pass
 To bend and barter at desire's call.
 Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
 Go prowling through the night from street to street.⁶⁴

⁶²McKay, "The Harlem Dancer," Selected Poems, p. 61.

⁶³Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 218.

⁶⁴Claude McKay, "Harlem Shadows," Pearsons Magazina 39 (September 1918): 276.

In treating this taboo subject, McKay seems merely the objective observer who witnesses the buying and selling of sex in Harlem. He seems almost to condone the uninhibited, instinctual pleasures of "free" love. That is why as late as twenty years after the poem's publication, one Black critic admitted that he found the subject matter intolerable, feeling that "Harlem Shadows" was clearly "a sordid aspect of the race to thrust forward."⁶⁵ But McKay here is not the neutral chronicler of the business of sex in Harlem. He is quite clearly a strained and aggrieved narrator who wants to force standards of conventional morality onto the black streets of Harlem. With heavy-handed, self-conscious sentimentalism, McKay paints a portrait of the prostitutes of Harlem reminiscent of the wronged orphans and "matches" children of Dicken's London. In the first stanza, echoing 19th century melodrama, McKay calls his prostitute a "lass":

Through the long night until the silver break
 Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
 Through the one 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.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Robert A. Smith, "Claude McKay," *Phylon* 9 (September 1948): 270-273.

⁶⁶"Harlem Shadows," p. 276.

In the last stanza, McKay drops all pretense of being merely the artist who paints a realistic canvas of Harlem and its sexually free inhabitants. Now he becomes the moralist who charges that Harlem prostitutes are the product of racial oppression; in other words, the buying and selling of sex is an unnatural, degrading act resulting from the external social forces of Western civilization, having little to do with the natural uninhibited urges of a people not fettered by a stifling puritan ethic. By implication, then, McKay indicts the world he explores and invalidates the notion of a free instinctual society based upon its own code of behavior:

Ah, Stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
 Oh 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
 In Harlem wondering from street to street.⁶⁷

Jean Wagner laments that McKay's overt bias in "Harlem Shadows" deviates so markedly from his usual "realistic, objective manner."⁶⁸ But the didacticism of the final stanza is not surprising given the heavy dose of Victorian melodrama looming over the poem.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 246.

"The Negro Dancers" is a graphic example of McKay's ambivalence concerning the cultural legitimacy of the Harlem primitive, leading one critic to observe that on one hand, McKay rejoiced in the primitive strength of his group, but on the other hand, he condemned primitivism as a sign of weakness which stood in the way of group cooperation.⁶⁹ In this poem, McKay attempted an examination of the soul and emotions of the Negro dancers of Harlem as they respond to music. But what emerges here is a clear manifestation of McKay's despair as he writes of the spiritless people pathetic in their inability to rise above shallow hedonism. It is interesting to note that McKay, throughout the poem, remains an unmoved, neutral observer. Unlike Langston Hughes and Dunbar, who also wrote about Black dancers, McKay never allows himself to be "swept away by the vortex of the dance." There is always an insurmountable distance between him and the group of dancers, precluding any significant identification between him and them. He is definitely not one of the dancers.⁷⁰

Throughout the three stanzas of "The Negro Dancers," McKay interlaces the Negroes' supposed penchant for dancing and merrymaking with a note of sadness. They are reveling to forget life. In the first stanza he describes a basement den

⁶⁹Rebecca Chalmers, Witness for Freedom, p. 112.

⁷⁰Wagner, p. 246.

dimly lit with cheap colored lights, a setting that must have served as background for numerous Harlem parties. All around the room young Black men and women are seated "drinking and smoking and making merry." But then McKay veers away from what could have been a standard celebration of urban hedonism by focusing on the faces of the dancers. McKay describes their expression as "vacant-eyed" as they attempt to wring some spark of life from the "lazy" tune droning from a band that seems scarcely awake. And even when the band finally strikes a happy tune, there is still a deadness in the dancers' eyes as they dance about as if seeking to dispel the emptiness of their lives:

Then suddenly a happy, lilted note
 Is struck, the walk and hop and trot begin,
 Under the smoke upon foul air afloat;
 Around the room the laughing puppets spin
 To sound of fiddle, drum and clarinet,
 Dancing their world of shadows to forget.⁷¹

The dancers in this poem are not celebrating a way of life; they are merely "puppets" whose response to racial oppression is to spin and whirl in a joyless, shallow realm.

In the second stanza, however, McKay wishes to rescue his dancers from the gloomy fatalism he condemns them to in the first stanza. Now he wishes to celebrate their dancing

⁷¹Claude McKay, "The Negro Dancers," The Liberator 2 (July 1919): 20.

as a symbol of the Black aesthetic: these Negro dancers are artists, noble in their effortless gift for creative expression:

'Tis best to set and gaze; my heart then dances
 To the lithe bodies gliding slowly by,

 The laughter gay like sounding silver ringing,
 That fills the whole wide room from floor to ceiling,-
 A rush of rapture to my tried [sic] soul bringing--
 The deathless spirit of a race revealing.
 Not one false step, no note that rings not true!
 Unconscious even of the higher worth
 Of their great art, they serpent-wise glide through
 The syncopated waltz. ...⁷²

But McKay cannot long praise the dancers' God-given gifts without evaluating them in terms of the dancers' social and political position in the world. At the end of the second stanza, McKay says that the dancers are actually "Dead to the earth and her unkindly ways of toil and strife."⁷³

The final stanza of "The Negro Dancers" leaves no doubt that McKay denigrates primitivism as a valid gift in and of itself. And while he concedes the beauty of the dancers' art, the "poetry of their eyes" and their "dreamy loveliness" that no sorrow can dim, he cannot but judge their dancing as an inadequate response to the complexity of twentieth-century civilization.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

And yet they are the outcasts of the earth,
 A race oppressed and scorned by ruling man;
 How can they thus consent to joy and mirth
 Who live beneath a world-eternal ban?
 No faith is theirs, no shining ray of hope,
 Except the martyr's faith, the hope that death
 Some day will free them from their narrow scope. ...⁷⁴

It is clear that McKay sees their "natural gifts" as aesthetically pleasing, but ultimately superficial and meaningless when evaluated in terms of larger universal values. In the rhyming couplet which concludes the last stanza, McKay laments, "The gifts divine are theirs, music and laughter;/All other things, however great, come after."⁷⁵ McKay implies that it is only after death that the Negro dancers (Negroes) will achieve greatness, only after they have been released from their "narrow scope" and thrust into the "infinite breath" of the universe.

Perhaps McKay himself was uncomfortable with the direct condemnation of primitivism explicit in his poem, for he later censured Alain Locke for including "The Negro Dancers" in his anthology The New Negro. In a letter to Locke, a furious McKay wrote, "I wish you had asked me about 'The Negro Dancers'. ...I would have vetoed [its] publication." McKay tells Locke that he had purposefully eliminated the poem from his 1922 Harlem Shadows, and he had eliminated it

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

from his 1920 Spring in New Hampshire because the poem did not reflect "the artistic pattern" he had devised.⁷⁶ Locke agreed to leave the poem out of his third edition of The New Negro.⁷⁷

Whatever sparked McKay's desire to suppress the poem in 1926, he attempted to publish it in 1934 under a new title, "Harlem," as a part of his "Cities" manuscript, a collection that never reached publication.⁷⁸ But what is even more interesting is that in his new version of "The Negro Dancers" McKay emends the word puppets to figures, indicating that he, aware of his implicit portrayal of the dancers as unconscious doll-like figures, was attempting to soften his critical assessment of the quality of their lives. It is not certain that McKay consciously set about to question the validity of urban hedonism, but what is clear is that "The Negro Dancers" is in no way an apologia for cultivation of the instincts. What emerges from this poem is that while McKay sees instinct as a gift, he sees it as a limited, earth-bound gift. From it no greatness can come.

⁷⁶Claude McKay to Alain Locke, August 1, 1962, Spingarn Collection, Howard University.

⁷⁷Alain Locke to Claude McKay, April 25, 1927; May 30, 1927, Spingarn Collection, Howard University.

⁷⁸Claude McKay, "Harlem," "Cities" manuscript, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University.

In the final analysis, we see in McKay an artist unable to commit himself wholeheartedly to the aesthetic values of the Afrocentric world he helped create. He went about exhorting other Black artists and critics to free themselves from the rules and standards of a value system beset by inhibitions and the stifling chains of tradition, but what he demonstrated is that despite his determined efforts to portray a Black world, primitive and free, he, himself, was plagued by the Anglo-western value system that helped nurture his colonial soul.

Chapter IV

The Dilemma of Color

Besides his discomfort with spontaneity and primitivism, McKay--the poet most honored as a celebrant of distinctive Negro features--was not entirely comfortable with a purely "Black" aesthetic. Despite his censuring of the young French soldier who toasted the eventual melding of all races, and despite McKay's counter-toast that each man must proudly celebrate the beauty of his own distinct complexion (see Chapter Two), McKay remained, throughout much of his life, tormented by color consciousness. As one critic has observed, "Of all negro writers, McKay was perhaps the one most obsessed with the color differences within the race."¹

In his writing, McKay sought to present the image of the Black artist feasting on the exotic variations of Black skin, and his efforts were generally successful. However, beyond the vivid descriptions of the tones and hues of the African-American complexions and his haranguing of Black writers and critics to break with their disdain for these skin tones, there is an underlying note of ambivalence on McKay's part.

¹Arthur Davis, From the Dark Tower, p. 43.

Despite his struggle to free the purely aesthetic implications of skintones from political and social factors, he, more than he knew, was imprisoned by Western society's imposed hierarchy of color.

As an artist, McKay appeared to revel in the multiplicity of Negro complexions. He seemed genuinely enamored of Black skin. So convincing was he that Arthur Davis writes that McKay had a definite bias against light-skinned Negroes, making them "the sorriest" of the characters created in his fiction:² for example, the pathetic Miss Curdy in Home to Harlem; Crazy Bow Adair, the mindless musician, in Banana Bottom, whose complexion resembles that of a "ripe banana"; and the obnoxious Arthur Gengly, mulatto son of Busha Gengly also in Banana Boat.

But color so dominated McKay's psyche that his attention to complexion would stretch beyond the world of his fiction and play a part in other aspects of his life. Davis charged that McKay's attitude toward a person quite often depended upon his emotional response to that person's color.³ McKay quite often demonstrated conflicting responses when confronted with persons he regarded as mulattoes. On one hand, he was guarded and distant, and, on the other hand, he

²Ibid., p. 44.

³Ibid., pp. 40-41.

harbored a grudging admiration for them. A case in point was his attitude toward W.E.B. DuBois. In A Long Way From Home, McKay writes of his initial admiration for DuBois. He says that when a White teacher introduced him to DuBois's The Souls of Black Folk, "the book shook [him] like an earthquake."⁴ And in his Russian book, The Negroes in America, McKay places DuBois at the head of the Negro intelligentsia. But throughout the chapter recounting DuBois's contribution to Black culture, McKay finds it difficult to refer to DuBois without making reference to his "mixed blood," stating that DuBois's face resembles the many proud Spanish hidalgos painted by Velasquez.⁵ Finally, McKay admitted that he did not like DuBois. He said that upon meeting him, he found him "possessed of a cold, acid hauteur of spirit." And he added that most Negroes who meet DuBois find him "naturally unfriendly and selfish."⁶

McKay displayed a similar conflict in his relationship with Walter White, the African-American Secretary of the NAACP and one of the principal impresarios of the Harlem Renaissance, who acted as liaison between Black writers and the publishing industry. McKay was fascinated with the "whiteness" of White. And there is little doubt that McKay

⁴McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 110.

⁵McKay, The Negroes in America, p. 70.

⁶Ibid.

had a positive emotional response to White's appearance. In his autobiography, he writes of White's charming personality and the comic effect wrought by the sound of White's name and the sight of his extremely white complexion coupled with the incongruous labeling of him as a Negro. McKay continues for a half page discussing White's whiteness. "White is whiter than many Europeans--even biologically," McKay declares. And an astonished McKay admits that he "cannot see the difference in the way that most of the whites and most of the blacks seem to see it."⁷ Apparently White took exception to McKay's assessment of his whiteness, for in a letter to a friend, McKay alludes to White's "Foolish," "oversensitive" reaction simply because McKay had repeated about him [his whiteness] "what Lady Astor had so generously [my emphasis] repeated in London during World War II."⁸

Some years earlier McKay had admitted to another friend, Arthur Schomburg,⁹ that he feared Walter White did not like him.¹⁰ Schomburg, feeding McKay's obsession with color,

⁷A Long Way From Home, p. 11.

⁸Claude McKay to Max Eastman, August 28, 1946, quoted in Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 311.

⁹Arthur A. Schomburg was then a collection of objects which covered all aspects of black life. His private collection has since become The Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History now housed in the New York Public Library

¹⁰Claude McKay to Arthur Schomburg, June 15, 1933, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York public Library.

tells him, "I should not be surprised to know W W [Walter White] does not like you. Your fame has preceded you everywhere, and the light-skin artist [White was a novelist] dislike to have and to know [sic] that any other person may outshadow them. But we must play the cards until you have obtained your objectivity [object?]"¹¹ Here, Schomburg was referring to White's role as literary liaison for McKay.

White and DuBois were both important members of the NAACP, and it is possible that McKay's estrangement from this organization could have stemmed from his attitudes toward them influenced by color as well as from philosophic differences concerning the race issue. At the time of McKay's communication with the organization, not one member was dark brown. Even James Weldon Johnson, McKay's only friend among the group, once passed as a Latin American on a train going south.¹²

McKay's ambivalence concerning his feelings toward light-complexioned Negroes spilled over into his most personal friendships. Some time during his years on the Federal Writer's project, McKay became friendly with a young Catholic writer by the name of Ellen Tarry. Miss Tarry, who

¹¹Arthur Schomburg to McKay, June 29, 1933, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection.

¹²Wayne Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 333.

as an extremely fair-skinned Negro woman, writes of the first night she met McKay and of his ardent attention to her. Despite the fact that she had written a piece criticizing his Home to Harlem when it was published in 1928,¹³ he took her under his wing, helping her polish her prose and meet all the right people. One evening, McKay had occasion to invite Tarry to a meeting to hear James Weldon Johnson speak, and then afterwards, he took her to dine at a West Indian restaurant with him and Johnson. While Tarry was engaged in light conversation with Johnson, McKay blurted at her, "Just look at you. You're sitting here as white as alabaster. Why don't you buy yourself some brown power?"¹⁴ Tarry says that it was rumored that McKay once considered proposing to her but rejected the idea because he thought her "too white."¹⁵

Although Tarry probably believed that McKay rejected her because of her light complexion, there is room for doubt since McKay from time to time indicated his preference for fair-skinned women. In his review of Shuffle Along, McKay, while remarking on the scarcity of Black girls in Negro theatricals, defended the presence of an all-light Negro chorus by stating that he could understand the colored

¹³Ellen Tarry, The Third Door, pp. 130-131.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

actors' preferences for "lighter-skinned girls" because they are "vivacious, pushy, and pretty." In the conclusion of his review, McKay celebrated the "producing and fostering of new types" of Negroes in the Western world. In other words, McKay supported the melding of white skin and black skin so that ultimately a lighter Negro would emerge, and this new type of Negro, McKay proposed, would fly into the face of hateful Whites and those Blacks who harangue about racial purity--McKay called such Blacks "sable-ites."¹⁶ There is no doubt that McKay was advocating miscegenation and not racial distinctiveness. Although one could argue that McKay's review was written in 1921, while he was still formulating his philosophy of the Black aesthetic, it must be noted that his ambivalences about color spanned his lifetime as an artist.

McKay's inclination to admire light women reaches far back into his Jamaican childhood. In "Boyhood in Jamaica," written near the end of McKay's life, he discusses his first love, Agnes. He says that he became acquainted with her at his brother's school. McKay describes her as a very pretty "light mulatto with very black hair" and with a face that "radiated sunshine."¹⁷ McKay reminisced that he received

¹⁶McKay, "A Negro Extravaganza," A Review of Shuffle Along, p. 26.

¹⁷McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," pp. 137-38.

beatings from his brother and sister-in-law over the passionate love letters he and Agnes wrote to each other, but even so they "hugged [their] love very closely."¹⁸ And in a letter to James Weldon Johnson, McKay boasts that he and the rest of his brothers were married to "white" mulatto women in Jamaica.¹⁹

In McKay's 1937 autobiography, a work which covered the period spanning 1918 to approximately 1935, McKay chooses to highlight only one romantic female relationship, that with a young near-white Harlem socialite, Anita Thompson.²⁰ In his book, however, McKay refers to her as "Carmina." Thompson and McKay spend a rather passionate few weeks together in Tangiers until the relationship turns stormy: it seems that some sort of triangle persists between McKay, Thompson, and her White Dutch painter-lover. Throughout his chapter on "Carmina," McKay romanticizes her presence. He rhapsodizes about the fiery spirit she carries about her and how she is adored by the native North Africans because of her exotic beauty. Of course, the relationship ends in pain and bitterness when, McKay says, he refuses to marry her (McKay was already married). However, McKay still finds the

¹⁸McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

¹⁹Claude McKay to James Weldon Johnson, September 5, 1929, McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University.

²⁰Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 629.

generosity of heart to defend Carmina's worthiness to any would-be detractor. He quips that "besides having some of the best white blood mingled with black in her veins, which were blue, she came from the best Negroid middle-class stock."²¹ So much for the Black aesthetic.

McKay's admiration of mixed-blood looks extended to his male as well as to his female friends. For example, in a letter written to Harold Jackman, a peripheral figure of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay thanks him for the photograph that Jackman has sent to him but wants him to have another photograph taken by a photographer who could best capture Jackman's "classical Grecian features." McKay advises Jackman to seek out a Maurice Stearne, who is accustomed to doing "charming things of Eastern people, chiefly indians and Malays." McKay concludes that since Jackman "runs something to these types," Stearne could do wonders with him.²²

McKay's poem "The Barrier" reinforces the idea that McKay could be responsive to white skin, whether that of a mulatto or Caucasian. The speaker laments the social barrier

²¹McKay, A Long Way From home, pp. 329-335.

²²Claude McKay to Harold Jackman, June 3, 1927, McKay Papers, JWJ Collection, Yale University Library.

that prohibits a natural responsive relationship between him and a White girl. The poem shows him clearly receptive to her beauty:

I must not gaze at them although
Your eyes are dawning day;
I must not watch you as you go
Your sun-illumined way.

I hear but I must never heed
The fascinating note,
Which, fluting like a river reed,
Comes from your trembling throat.

I must not see upon your face
Love's softly glowing spark;
For there's the barrier of race,
You're fair and I am dark.²³

And once again, in "One Year After," the speaker expresses bitterness and disappointment concerning his inability to overcome barriers that divide him from his fair-skinned or White lover. In the beginning of the poem, he apologizes to his lover for never rendering up to her his whole self although she has surrendered hers to him. He explains that a "shadowy" cruel force has kept his soul weak and "beaten."²⁴

²³Claude McKay, "The Barrier," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 80, originally published in Cambridge Magazine 10 (Summer 1920): 58.

²⁴Claude McKay, "One Year After," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 106.

Oh, I was beaten, helpless utterly
 Against the Shadow-fact with which I strove.
 For when a cruel power forced me to face
 The truth which poisoned our illicit wine,
 That even I was faithless to my race
 Bleeding beneath the iron hand of thine, [race]
 Our union seemed a monstrous thing and base! I was
 an outcast from thy world and mine.²⁵

McKay's divided perspective about color has its roots in his Jamaican past. McKay's experience with a color caste system in Jamaica, more specifically Kingston, affected his attitude toward color drastically, causing him to experience the same ambivalences and conflicts as those emanating from his dual role as a colonial subject and a West Indian Negro.

Although McKay was protected from overt racial oppression in his village where dark-skinned West Indians were in the majority, when he traveled to Kingston he saw a different picture. There he discovered that a hierarchical caste system prevailed, with Whites on top, mulattoes following, and Blacks occupying the bottom rung. While McKay could grudgingly accept the higher position of the Whites as a phenomenon that might see destruction some day, he could not accept the inflated position of the mulattoes, whose

²⁵Ibid.

claim to superiority rested only upon their descent from Whites. He felt that "neither their individual worth nor even their dress justified their privileged situation."²⁶

And yet, though McKay was bitterly conscious of this caste system which legitimized racial oppression based on color, he demonstrated a conflict of values that plagued many of the other dark colonials: a tendency to respect, admire, and defend a system which relegated them to inferiority. For example, in speaking of the Sephardic Jews, who fled to Jamaica from Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition, McKay speaks of them as being "romantic" to all the people of Jamaica, claiming that West Indians thought of them as "Chosen People of God." Reflecting on their physical appearance, he says that they were "handsome, with their black hair and extremely white skin. . . ."²⁷

Similarly, McKay maintains a romantic perspective on the mulatto class. Despite his obvious appreciation of the injustices of the color-caste system, evidenced by his writings before coming to America and his criticism of intra-racial prejudices in his novel Banana Bottom, he defends the Jamaican mulattoes' right to exist as a distinct group, deserving of admiration and respect. McKay took to task more

²⁶Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 215.

²⁷McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," p. 143.

than one critic who dared expose the social and political inequities manifested by the color-caste system. In a letter to the Nation's editor Margaret Marshall, McKay lashes out furiously at Marshall's criticism of the near-Whites in Jamaica. He writes,

The near-white governing class of Jamaica... fought a battle in hell to become what they now are. ...As a class they were educated to run the slave estates for their were not enough whites to do the job. ...When slavery was abolished and the slave owners ruined, the only group competent to step into their places was the near-whites. No Jamaican near-white imagines a European or American [white] superior because he may be a pure-white. ...And no Jamaican black thinks a near-white is inferior because he has a "lick of Negro blood."²⁸

On another occasion, McKay once more found himself in the position of fending off attacks against the mulatto group in Jamaica by ignorant critics. This time the critic was Walter White. In reviewing McKay's novel Banjo, White touched on the mulatto class situation in Jamaica by stating that McKay's harsh judgement of them in Banjo stemmed from his experience with a wealthy class of mulattoes who isolated themselves from their poorer and darker brothers in Jamaica.²⁹ McKay angrily responded to White by insisting

²⁸McKay, "An Unpublished Letter from Claude McKay, Poet & Litterateur," Negro History Bulletin, p. 10.

²⁹Walter White, "Review of Banjo," New York World, June 9, 1929, quoted in Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 584.

that the tension between mulattoes and Blacks was not based on race at all, but on economics. Color had nothing to do with it. According to McKay, the culprit was British imperialism which had encouraged conflict between mulattoes and Blacks by spawning a system that promoted racial competition over employment and social opportunities.³⁰

While McKay's observation certainly has historical validity, he refused to address the fact that mulattoes, too, had cultivated their own society buttressed by color oppression. And in a final tribute to the mulatto class of Jamaica, McKay cast a loving, nostalgic eye upon this group as he released them from any onus of intentional ill-will toward Blacks. He confessed in one of his last works,

I have always cherished a respect for near-whites of Jamaica. They have sometimes been accused of callousness, not doing much about the poverty of the blacks but some of our best political leaders ... have come from that near white class.³¹

³⁰McKay to James Weldon Johnson, September 5, 1929, McKay Papers, JWJ Collection, Yale University Library.

³¹Claude McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p. McKay as a young man was fascinated by the exploits of the legendary "octoroon" leader of a Negro rebellion in Jamaica in 1865. George William Gordon. Gordon urged the Negroes to rebel because of their desperate economic situation. As a result of his exploits, he was hanged and the people were outraged. McKay wrote a poem about him and won third prize in a poetry contest sponsored by T.P. Weekly. See "George William Gordon to the Oppressed Natives," in the Daily Gleaner, May 3, 1912.

In his final tribute to the mulattoes of Jamaica, McKay not only attempted to exonerate these near-Whites from the stigma of being unkind to Blacks, but he also attempted to charge Blacks with unkind treatment of near-Whites. With emotion and convincing sincerity, McKay asserts that near-Whites have never (my emphasis) exploited the Blacks, nor have they ever written anything unkind about Blacks. But he adds that the Blacks have devised "unkind jokes" about the near-Whites.³²

McKay was never able to reconcile his divided attitude regarding color. He had lived too many years in a society that had not only condoned a hierarchy of color, but had legitimized a class as a result of it. There can be little doubt that, despite his own keen sense of personal dignity, he had absorbed some of the prejudices of his color-caste culture. Emigrating to the United States did not end McKay's dilemma of color; it compounded it. Here he saw a new dimension added, overt racial hatred between Whites and Blacks. And yet he saw an undefined color system, operating among Blacks and Whites alike, which implied that light-skinned Blacks were superior. But since he saw that these American light-skinned Blacks were just as vulnerable to racial oppression as darker Negroes, he felt free to reject the notion of their "higher worth." But McKay's Jamaican orientation in a well-defined color system would not allow

³²McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

him to dismiss entirely the notion of the superiority of these light-skinned Blacks. Ultimately, his fragmented perspective, his festering color-consciousness, and his preoccupation with color bordered on an obsession, making him the most painfully color-conscious artist of the Renaissance.³³

³³Michael Stoff, "Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism," The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, ed. Arna Bontemps, p. 143.

Part II--Gingertown: A Community of Color

The Short Stories

In the last year of his life, 1948, McKay wrote a letter to Ellen Tarry that demonstrated the firm grip preoccupation with color had on his consciousness. He admitted to Tarry that while the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia certainly played a part in luring him to seek and find other new worlds, thus leading to his twelve-year sojourn in Europe and North Africa, it was really an escape from "the suffocating ghetto of color consciousness" that he so desperately needed.³⁴ One critic remarked that McKay's perception of himself as a vagabond poet was nothing more than a device he used to "escape the denigrating effects of color-consciousness."³⁵

By the time McKay completed his collection of twelve short stories in 1931, he had been away from the United States for nine years. yet, except for six touching sketches that reveal a nostalgic glimpse of his Jamaican childhood,

³⁴Claude McKay to Ellen Tarry, April 9, 1948, McKay Papers, JWW Collection, Yale University. See also McKay's autobiography, A Long Way From Home, p. 150.

³⁵Michael Stoff, "Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism," The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, p. 143.

most of the stories in Gingertown³⁶ focus on Harlem's intra-racial color prejudice, indicating that color-consciousness still lay heavily on his mind.

In McKay's Gingertown community, color is the key to existence. In most of the stories, the protagonist is either obsessed with or has been victimized by a sickness called "yellow fever," a hunger for pale skin. The first story, aptly entitled "Brownskin Blues," is a rather flimsy tale about Bess, a reasonably talented cabaret singer, who suffers pain and heartache because of her coffee-colored skin. It seems that the man whom she has been "keeping" has dropped her so that he can take up a relationship with a "yellow" woman. Bess's boyfriend, Archie Rascoe, overlooks no opportunity to throw Bess's dark skin in her face. And Bess, determined at all costs to keep her man, sinks to extreme levels of debasement in order to whiten her skin. By the end of the story, she has disfigured her face by using an ointment reputed to have the capability of bleaching the skin several times over. But "Brownskin Blues" does have a happy ending. Bess, who can no longer perform because of her

³⁶Claude McKay, Gingertown (New York: Harper and Bros., 1932).

distorted looks, finds a job in a boarding house as a domestic. There she finds happiness with a fellow worker who loves her for herself, despite her dark skin.

McKay makes no pretense that his story concerns anything else but color. He makes no attempt at serious characterization, and his plot clearly follows a one-dimensional track. Although this narrative is told with "robustness," it does not go beyond a formula story about intra-racial prejudice.³⁷

McKay's "The Prince of Porto Rico," is another tale about a Harlem inhabitant who goes mad with "yellow fever." In this story, an attractive marooned-skinned Harlem "cutie" puts down her "rat-eyed" black-skinned lover, Hank, for an "almond-complexioned" Puerto Rican called "the Prince." Matters go well between Tillie and Hank until the Prince appears at the buffet flat where Tillie and Hank are passing an evening. But "The moment that Tillie set her eyes on the Prince's locks, curled and glossed, his almond complexion and large black eyes, she began dreaming of a change."³⁸

³⁷Benjamin Brawley, "The New Realists," in The Negro Genius: A New Appraisal of the Achievement of the American Negro in Literature and the Fine Arts, in Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 7 (Gale Research Company, 1982), p. 457.

³⁸"The Prince of Puerto Rico," p. 36.

Tillie becomes so smitten with the Prince's non-African appearance that she quickly denigrates all Black males: "The Prince flashed his teeth at her, and at that moment Hank became for Tillie merely a repulsive black beast." Ultimately, Tillie makes a comparison between all Black men and snakes. She tells the Prince that Black men, unlike the Prince, are just hateful niggers, like "rats in the canebrake."³⁹ This phenomenon of combining animal imagery with images of dark skin is not a rare occurrence in McKay's fiction. On the contrary, this combination is revealed in two of his novels, Home to Harlem and Banjo, to be discussed in later chapters.

"The Prince of Porto Rico" is simply another "race" story. As in "Brownskin Blues," McKay fails at characterization and significant action; he simply retraces a formula. The characters are nothing more than two-dimensional pasteboards charged with advancing a highly predictable and unimaginative plot. The Prince, merely a type, has come by his name simply because the Harlem Blacks admire his exotic almond complexion. McKay merely characterizes him by a repeated sentence, "The Prince's teeth flashed."

³⁹Ibid., pp. 37-40.

Although he ridicules his Harlem characters for their obsession with the Prince, McKay seems charmed by him also as he suggests that the Prince's masculine qualities exceed those of the typical Harlem male: "None of them was successful in acquiring the ways that were natural to him."⁴⁰

"Mattie and Her Sweetman" paints a pathetic picture of a middle-aged woman's penchant for young "yellow" boys. This situation was first introduced in McKay's novel Home to Harlem, where the reader watches in amazement as Miss Gin-Head Suzie and "putty-colored" Miss Purdy stalk Harlem in search of young "yellow" men. In this short story, McKay describes Mattie as a Black woman in her fifties who has worked hard to keep her codfish-complexioned "sweetman," Jay. She's a fool for yellow men, and the only way she can get them is to buy them: "Having an irresistible penchant for the yellow daddy-boys of the Belt, she had realized, when she was much younger that because she was ugly she would have to pay for them."⁴¹

In McKay's "color" stories the gravest insult one character can heap upon another is to call him black. And, of course, Mattie, who is willing to pay money and suffer humiliation for the privilege of being with yellow boys, is

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁴¹"Mattie and Her Sweetman," p. 65.

called back time and time again by her men. On one occasion, Jay and Mattie are at a house party, and he ignores her, wishing the company of another woman. Mattie, disturbed by Jay's attentiveness to the younger woman, begs him to dance with her. He replies, "Oh, foh Gawd's sake...gimme a chance! Shake a leg, black woman." The people who were within hearing distance of Jay's remark pitied Mattie, "for there is no greater insult among Aframericans than calling a black person black. ..."⁴²

Although McKay's "Mattie and Her Sweetman" could well be McKay's way of criticizing Black people's rather unique brand of color prejudice, one wonders at McKay's attitude when he writes that Mattie, though seeming docile, was indeed experienced and "carried a smoldering fire in her ugly black body."⁴³

Gingertown depicts not only intra-racial prejudice, but also relationships between the races and sexes. "Highball" concerns an obsession of a Black man for a White woman. As with the other stories, there is little success with characterization. The characters are two-dimensional types whose purpose is to play out the scenario of color madness. Nathan Roe is obsessed with the white skin of his wife; she

⁴²Ibid., p. 63.

⁴³Ibid., p. 60.

clearly has nothing else to offer. McKay describes her as a "rather coarse-fleshed woman, with freckled hands, beet-colored elbows, dull-blue eyes, and lumpy hair of the color of varnish."⁴⁴

Although McKay tells us that Nathan is a successful musician who has performed on Broadway, the only portrait he presents to the reader is that of a child-like, simple-minded man: "In his big body there was the sensitiveness of a child. All Nathan wants to do is sing, "chum with his white friends," and go home every evening to the loving arms of his wife, Myra."⁴⁵

Little happens in "Highball" other than the naive Nathan's discovery of his wife's contempt for his black skin. He happens to overhear her laughing with one of her friends about the foolish "prune" she is married to and how she has used him simply to gain access to the good life. At the conclusion of the story, Nathan, despite his "simple mind" and his "blind infatuation for Myra," throws her out.⁴⁶ It seems that Nathan's manhood is stronger than his obsession

⁴⁴"Highball," p. 106.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 122-23.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 125.

with white skin. But despite Nathan's ultimate victory, the story is still one based merely on the sensationalism of color played against color with almost no nod toward realism.

McKay's story "Nigger Lover," set on the docks of Marseilles, goes to extremes to make the point that White people can become obsessed with black skin. The color of the woman and her lover overwhelm all else in this rather thin story, so that the reader is left with no more than melodramatic propaganda for a plot and cartoons for characters. The story concerns how a prostitute called Nigger Lover earned her name. It seems that some months before the story's beginning, Nigger Lover was desperate to make money so that she could pay her rent. Consequently, she was forced to make love to a Negro for the first time in her life. McKay describes him as a "middle-sized prune-skinned stoker."⁴⁷ After taking Nigger Lover back to her place, the Black man, besides making love to her, made her feel at ease by treating her kinder than any other man she had known. What is more, after he left that next morning, he allowed her to continue sleeping because she "looked so dog-tired," and he left her three times her normal feel. Overwhelmed by his generosity, Nigger Lover searched for him so that she could render up to him her real self, not her business self, but she never found him. But from that day on, she becomes

⁴⁷"Nigger Lover," p. 254.

obsessed with black skin. This exceptionally silly story has no other purpose than that of depicting the phenomenon of white skin gone mad for black.

In his story "Near White," McKay gives us the obligatory "passing" narrative so popular during the first two decades of the twentieth century and a theme especially popular with those writers McKay liked to criticize, such as Jessie Fauset, one of the Negro elite. McKay gives a rather veiled negative appraisal of Fauset's novels when he declares that "some critics" consider Fauset's writing about the people in her own circle rather bland and uninteresting because the people themselves are bland and uninteresting. But McKay pronounces Fauset "dainty as a primrose" and her novels "quite...fastidious and precious."⁴⁸

In McKay's story, Angie Dove (her name says much about her complexion) is a "near white" girl who was once satisfied just to be the belle of Harlem, "outshining all of her darker friends." Angie's features "possessed no trace of the stigmata [my emphasis] of Africa."⁴⁹ But she meets Eugene Vincent, another near white, who shows her the glory of "passing" in downtown New York, where she is overwhelmed by the "white lights." She wines and dines in all the best

⁴⁸Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 112.

⁴⁹"Near White," p. 86.

restaurants and sits in the audience at all the best shows. She does things she could never do as a Negro. Of course, after her exposure, she considers the "Belt" of Harlem stifling and unbearable. But, quite suddenly, her guide into the White world has to go away, and Angie is forced to consider going back to her limited, narrow world. But that is a hell she can no longer endure. The city now holds a vast pleasure world that she cannot give up. After all, she felt that she was just as entitled to it as were the thousands of Whites--she was entitled by feelings, birth, and by her near-white color.

Ultimately, Angie finds another guide to show her the bright lights of the city, a White man--John West. Of course Angie falls in love with John, who does not know that Angie is a Negro. And upon the discovery of this awful fact, John tells Angie that before he would love her, he would "sooner love a toad."⁵⁰

To McKay's credit, and the one small gem that gives this story some significance beyond being simply another mindless narrative about passing, is the philosophy of Angie's mother. Although she herself is the pale enough to "pass" for White, she tells Angie that her near-White family has always

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 102.

harbored a dignified hostility toward Whites. And she tells her daughter that being Black is not just a matter of skin color, but a matter of integrity and loyalty.

Gingertown was not McKay's first "passing" project. In May of 1924, he completed the first draft of a novel entitled "Color Scheme." McKay says that the novel concerns an octoroon girl (with one-eighth negro ancestry) of the Black Belt who cannot decide whether she should marry a young Black businessman and live in the Belt, or whether she should pass over into the White world. Of course, she falls in love with a young White man.⁵¹ In a letter to a friend, McKay clearly demonstrates pride in this work as he tells him that the novel is closer to "the truth & [sic] tragedy & gaiety of negro life than Miss Jessie Fauset."⁵² But McKay was ultimately forced to become less than optimistic about this work since he found publishing it difficult. After pronouncing "Color Scheme" a bad novel, McKay destroyed the manuscript by tossing it into a fire.⁵³

⁵¹McKay to Arthur Schomburg, February 4, 1924, June 16, 1924, and August 14, 1924, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library; see McKay to Walter White, December 12, 1924, and Walter White to McKay, September 12, 1923, White Correspondence, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

⁵²McKay to Schomburg, April 28, 1925, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

⁵³McKay to Alain Locke, January 2, 1926, Alain Locke Papers, Spingarn Collection, Harvard University.

It is certainly not unusual that a Black artist during the early decades of the twentieth century should have written fiction about "passing." After all, during that time, such narratives were written by both Black and White writers.⁵⁴ What is unusual, however, is that a writer credited with feeling most at ease about dark complexions and who, therefore, exhorted those of African-American ancestry to discover their own nobility within their Blackness should have devoted so much creative energy spinning out formula plots about characters preoccupied with no other aspect of their lives, except that of skin color. There is no denying that intra-racial prejudice did exist in the Black community, and had McKay meaningfully explored the psychology of this phenomenon in a manner that went beyond mere sensationalism and exploitation, it would have been another matter. When McKay discusses the dilemma of intra-racial prejudice in his novel Banana Bottom, he discusses it with significant political, social, and economic consequences. We see the devastating effects of light-skinned Negroes discriminating against dark-skinned Negroes; we see the loss of jobs and the

⁵⁴See James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912), Walter White's Flight (1926), Nella Larsen's Passing (1929), Jessie Fauset's Comedy: American Style (1933), and Fannie Hurst's Imitation of Life (1933).

lack of educational opportunity. We see the humiliation felt by Bita Plant when she finds that a hotel in town will, not house her and her dark-skinned wedding party.

But in his Gingertown Harlem stories, McKay merely takes advantage of an unfortunate vogue in primitivistic literature: the exploitation of racial stereotypes in the Negro community. One critic lamented that since McKay's Harlem is painted with the same brush that fell into the hands of writers who pandered to "popular" literary fashion, his characters who should have been given more "depth and understanding are left wanting."⁵⁵

Despite McKay's contention late in his life that the stories in Gingertown contained some of his "best writing"⁵⁶ (he may have been referring to his Jamaican stories), one would have to conclude that in the majority of his Harlem stories, McKay was doing nothing more than catering to the commercial tastes of a white public who demanded that works written in the primitivistic vogue about Negroes conform to certain expectations.⁵⁷ McKay, in complying with the

⁵⁵ Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction (Washington, D.C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937; reprinted 1969), p. 135.

⁵⁶ Claude McKay to Claire Lennard, January 31, 1947, in Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 156.

⁵⁷ Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 126.

commercial practices of his time, not only betrayed the Negro community,⁵⁸ but betrayed his philosophy of a positive African ethos and his own reputed rebellious spirit.

⁵⁸Rudolph Fisher, "White, High Yellow, Black [Review of Gingertown]," New York Herald Tribune Books, March 27, 1932, p. 3.

Chapter V

The Problem of Africa

Many Black intellectuals credited with articulating a clearly defined African nationalism--Aime Cesaire, L.S. Senghor, Sembene Ousmane, Ousmane Soce--say that McKay's expression of an African ethos was inspiration for their own ideas. To them, his literature, which declared independence from White Western standards, "challenged" them to create literature and art that had its own distinctiveness and "integrity."¹ And for other Black intellectuals as well, McKay's art symbolized emancipation from a tradition that regarded Africa as a "land of errors and Egyptian gloom"² and, instead represented Africa as a land with a dignified and noble past.³ He was one of the first artists of the Harlem Renaissance to speak of Africa with a new consciousness and was a significant force in driving younger Black writers as well as his contemporaries, to a realization that their own cultural heritage was worthy of a place in the history and culture of civilization.

¹Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 178.

²Phillis Wheatley, "To The University of Cambridge, in New-England," in The American Tradition in Literature, 5th ed., vol. 1, edited by Sculley Bradley et al. (New York Random House, 1981), p. 182.

³Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture, p. 103.

But McKay's celebration of an African ethos soon fell victim to the ambivalences that continued to plague his commitment to an Afrocentric universe. Other Black Renaissance artists experienced a similar conflict concerning their identification with an African past, for example poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.⁴ But McKay's dilemma would carry him backward to the apologetic tradition.

Eight years before Alain Locke urged the Negro artist to adopt a more international consciousness regarding his art and relationship with other Black people in the world,⁵ Claude McKay had published "The Harlem Dancer." It was one of the first poems of the Harlem Renaissance to acknowledge a kinship between the American Negro and African motherland, a motherland offering revitalization and purification of the Negro soul lost in the turmoil of Western civilization. And published with "The Harlem Dancer" was McKay's "Invocation," a poem which represented a more overt acknowledgement of the Negro's bond with an African past than did "The Harlem Dancer."

⁴See Countee Cullen, "Heritage," in Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 166, and Langston Hughes, "I Thought It Was Tangiers I Wanted," in The Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1970, eds. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 196.

⁵Alain Locke, "Enter The New Negro," Survey Graphic 6 (March 1925), pp. 633-634.

In "Invocation" the speaker bids the African ancestral spirit to grant him a creative power comparable to that held by the great ancient Ethiopian artists. In this poem, McKay implies that superiority of the ancestral muse over the spirits governing modern poetry which sprang into existence after the dawn of Christianity. He prays,

Thou who from out the dark and dust didst raise
 The Ethiop standard in the curtained days,
 Before the white God said: Let their be light!
 Bring ancient music to my modern heart,
 Let fall the light upon my sable face
 That once gleamed upon the Ethiopian's art. ...⁶

Then McKay concludes his prayer with a lamentation of his status as an alien/exile. He cries,

Lift me to thee out of this alien place
 So I may be, thine exiled counterpart,
 The worthy singer of my world and race.⁷

In "To The White Fiends," published one year later, McKay echoes the same theme: Africa was a source of power for all those who share her blood. This poem represents McKay's first militant poem in which he cries out defiantly against the brutal violence American Whites commit against Black people. He begins by rejecting the notion that the

⁶Claude McKay, "Invocation," Seven Arts 2 (October 1917): 741.

⁷Ibid.

Black man must be content with playing the role of helpless victim. The implication here is revolutionary. McKay suggests that the Black man, if he so chooses, could be as violently vicious and as dangerous as the White man:

Think you I am not fiend and Savage Too?
 Think you I could not arm me with a gun
 And shoot down ten of you for every one
 Of by black brothers murdered burnt by you?⁸

Then McKay, as in "Invocation," resorts to his ancient source of African power; he utilizes the myth of primitive black magic and witchcraft to lend authenticity and credence to the potential threat he could pose against the evil White man. He challenges the White man,

Be not deceived, for every deed you do
 I could match--out-match: Am I not Africa's son,
 Black of that black land where black deeds are done?⁹

Essentially, McKay uses stereotypical images of "dark" Africa to suggest that the power of Black evil is greater than the power of White evil.

⁸Claude McKay, "To The White Fiends," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 38; first published in Pearson's Magazine 39 (September 1918), p. 276.

⁹Ibid.

In his poems "In Bondage" and "Outcast," McKay turns away from portraying an image of Africa as a land of powerful and menacing forces to portray Africa an idyllic paradise. And in so doing, he laments the loss of Africa's innocence to the material corruption of Western civilization. Once again he lights upon the alien/exile theme.

In the octave of the sonnet, McKay paints a romantic portrait of Africa, similar to the hazy, romantic sketches he painted of his faraway boyhood Jamaica,

I would be wandering in distant fields
 Where Man, and bird, and beast, lives [sic] leisurely,
 And the old earth is kind, and ever yields
 Her goodly gifts to all her children free. ...¹⁰

But then McKay, near the conclusion of this stanza, repudiates the materialism of Western civilization that has not only caused the destruction of Africa's innocence but has also ensnared the entire world:

Somewhere I would be singing, far way.
 For life is greater than the thousand wars
 Men wage for it in their insatiate lust. ...¹¹

¹⁰Claude McKay, "In Bondage," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 39; first published in The Liberator 4 (August 1921), p. 10.

¹¹"In Bondage," p. 39.

But, alas, he, as are all men, is caught in the jaws of the corrupt West. He moans, "But I am bound with you in your graves, / O black men, simple slaves of ruthless slaves [White men]."12

McKay's "Outcast," first published in Harlem Shadows in 1922, once again expresses the alien/exile theme. In the beginning of the sonnet the speaker mourns the loss of the land of his "fathers" and experiences a "racial homesickness for Africa."¹³ He writes, "For the dim regions whence my fathers came / My spirit, bonded by the body, longs."¹⁴ The speaker's intuitive recognition of Africa as his homeland, although he has never set eyes upon it, reflects McKay's application of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious to the alien/exile theme.¹⁵ Because of his psychic kinship with Africa, "a spiritual oneness,"¹⁶ the speaker's lips can form "words felt but never heard," and his soul can sing "forgotten jungle songs." As in "In Bondage,"

¹²Ibid.

¹³Eugenia Collier, "The Four-Way Dilemma of Claude McKay," p. 348.

¹⁴McKay, "Outcast," in Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 41.

¹⁵Eugenia Collier, p. 348.

¹⁶Arthur Drayton, "McKay's Human Pity," Black Orpheus, no. 17, (June 1965), p. 47.

the poet cannot return to his "darkness and peace" because the Western world holds him "in fee,"¹⁷ and in the concluding couplet, he reinforces his dilemma:

"For I was born, far from my native clime,
Under the white man's menace, out of Time."¹⁸

McKay's "Outcast" expresses the complex status of the Black man living in Western culture who is tantalized by the image of Africa he has never seen while suffering alienation in the land of his birth.¹⁹

Although McKay's "Enslaved" more or less repeats the alien/exile theme, this time McKay rejects the oblique condemnation of the West expressed in "In Bondage" and in "Outcast" and embraces a militant aggressive tone reminiscent of his rebellious stance in "To The White Fiends." The poem expresses the speaker's indignation at the racial oppression Black people suffer. The poet's anger and frustration are authentic and undisguised by metaphorical lyricism. McKay's sentiment is straightforward.

¹⁷"Outcast," p. 41.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Eugenia Collier, pp. 348-49.

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,
 For weary centuries, despised, oppressed
 Enslaved and lynched, 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.²⁰

Then in the sestet of this sonnet, McKay, as in "To The White Fiends," invokes the magic of the ancient god of Black power to bring about the destruction of the White man's civilization:

Then from the dark depth 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 earth's vast womb
 Or upward roll a sacrificial smoke
 To liberate my people from its yoke!²¹

Through his poetry, novels, and essays, McKay played a part in a cultural movement whose participants believed the solution to racial discrimination in one's homeland had to begin with one's recognition of his African roots.²² But looking toward Africa as a cultural ancestor proved a more

²⁰Claude McKay, "Enslaved," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 42; first published in The Liberator 4 (July 1921), p. 6.

²¹Ibid.

²²Saunders Redding, "Negro Writing in America," The New Leader 43 (May 16, 1960): 8-10.

difficult task than expected. Nathan Huggins writes that nearly all of the artists of the Renaissance had difficulty relating to Africa as a cultural source:

Africa was an essential enigma in this culture-building enterprise. It was not only impossible for twentieth-century Afro-Americans to pick up any unsevered threads back to Africa, but it was difficult to find correspondence between the cultures of Africa and that of the American negro.²³

They were caught up in a quandary about Africa and its relationship to their own culture. They were certain that Africa should mean something to them, but they were not positive about what or how. The issues remained puzzling. Countee Cullen's "Heritage" is an example of their dilemma. Throughout his poem, Cullen asks, "What is Africa To Me?" And although he paints enchanting pictures of Africa, his question is never successfully answered.²⁴ And Langston Hughes, though desperately wishing to reflect upon Africa as the lost homeland, finds that he must admit Africa cannot be realized by the American Negro. In "Afro-American Fragment" he speaks sadly, but honestly:

²³Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 81.

²⁴Countee Cullen, "Heritage," in Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 81.

So Long So
 So far away
 Is Africa
 Not even memories alive²⁵

And in his autobiography he admits that he was only an American negro who had loved "the surface of Africa," adding painfully that he was not Africa, but "Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem...."²⁶

Despite one critic's judgement that McKay had a healthier attitude toward Africa than did his American counterparts because he had grown up in a country with which he had a perfect identification and, therefore, needed no "substitute mother,"²⁷ McKay was certainly not immune to the perplexing soul-searching about an African homeland that affected the other Harlem writers. In fact, his poems about Africa clearly reveal a fragmented perception of the continent more reminiscent of the reactionary poetry of Phillis Wheatley than that of his fellow Renaissance artists.

²⁵Langston Hughes, "Afro-American Fragment," in Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 82.

²⁶Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 325.

²⁷Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 239.

McKay devoted very little of his poetry to Africa; the subject of Africa accounts for little more than eight poems and not one of them can be considered an "apologia" for Africa.²⁸ "The Harlem Dancer" and "Harlem Shadows" were mere romantic allusions to Africa. In them, McKay simply implies a connection to Africa by referring to the Harlem dancer as a "proudly-swaying Palm" and referring to the feet of the prostitutes in "Harlem Shadows" as the "sacred brown feet of my fallen race."²⁹ In "Outcast," although he longs for the Africa from which his "fathers" came, it is only a dim, obscure Africa that he is able to conjure up. Throughout the poem Africa remains faint and illusive. The Africa he longs for is undefined and shadowy:

For the dim [my emphasis] regions whence my Fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs³⁰

McKay, a lyricist, never attempts to delineate detailed images of Africa, unlike Cullen, who sings of a "copper sun" and "strong bronzed men,"³¹ or like Langston Hughes, who "bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young" and "built

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹McKay, "The Harlem Dancer," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 61; "Harlem Shadows," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 60,

³⁰McKay, "Outcast," Selected Poems, p. 41.

³¹Cullen, "Heritage," in Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 326.

[his] hut near the Congo."³² Instead, he paints grey, amorphous pictures in non-specific, tentative language. As he reflects upon what he would now be doing in Africa had he been left there in peace, he writes,

My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
I would go back to darkness and to peace. ...³³
(my emphases)

Africa remains vague and phantom-like.

Similarly, in "In Bondage" McKay portrays Africa in dream-like terms, and his nostalgic reflection does little to make it real. What he does achieve is a wistful romantic tone, speaking of "wandering in distant fields...were life is fairer, lighter, less demanding."³⁴ In this poem, it is clear that McKay drew upon the machinery of romanticism--nobility of the primitive, the innocence of childhood, and the mysticism of the faraway past--to establish a nostalgic mood. But because the poem is unspecific and quite unmistakably a representation of the nineteenth-century

³²Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in Black Insights: Significant Literature by Black Americans--1760 to the Present, ed. Nick A. Ford (Waltham, Massachusetts: Ginn and Company, 1971), p. 141.

³³McKay, "Outcast," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 41.

³⁴McKay, "In Bondage," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 39.

romantic lyric, one can easily interchange his images of Africa with those he created in his Jamaican poems. He writes that in Africa,

...the old earth is kind, and ever yields
 Her goodly gifts to all her children free;

 And boys and girls have time and space for play
 Before they come to years of understanding--
 Somewhere I would be singing far away [my emphasis]³⁵

Not a great distance from the African poems which present Africa as a hazy, shadowy ideal are the poems which portray Africa as a backward continent, peopled by natives who are both lazy and ignorant.

In many of the poems in McKay's 1912 collection Songs of Jamaica, he celebrates various aspects of the peasants' culture as a source of Black pride: their consummate skill in harvesting fine fruits and vegetables from the land, their sense of family kinship and consciousness of belonging to a certain village or town, and their recognition and preservation of West Indian roots. But what McKay does not celebrate as a source of Black pride in his Songs of Jamaica is the notion of an African homeland. In his "Cudjoe Fresh From De Lecture," McKay expresses an attitude about Africa that closely parallels that of Phillis Wheatley.

³⁵Ibid.

In this humorous poem, written in dialect, McKay presents a comical Cudjoe who has just returned from a lecture on evolution delivered by a White man. On the road he meets Cous' (cousin) Jarge to whom he wishes to relate what he has just learned. He explains to Cous' Jarge that, according to Buccra (the White man), all men began the same, and hardships came as a result of accident or birth. He also explains that black skin is not a result of a curse but exists only as a balance of white skin.³⁶

Suddenly the conversation turns to Africa. Cudjoe can only see Africa as an inferior place as he surmises that it "must ha' [have] been a berry [very] low-do'n place, / Mek it tek [that it took] such long time in tu'ning [turning] out a race."³⁷ And then in a brief allusion to slavery, Cudjoe offers a philosophy that comes astonishingly close to the sentiments of Phillis Wheatley when she wrote "Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land" in a reference to slavery.³⁸ Cudjoe reasons that slavery may have been a good thing after all because it rescued thousands of Blacks from Africa.

³⁶McKay, "Cudjoe Fresh From De Lecture," Songs of Jamaica, p. 56. (See Chapter One for full reference.)

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in Black Insights, p. 3.

Yes, Cous' Jarge, slabery hot fe dem dat gone
 befo': [slaver was bad for those in the past]
 We gettin' better times, for those days we no
 know;
 But I t'ink it do good, tek we from Africa
 An' lan' us in a blessed place as dis a ya.³⁹

Cudjoe reasons that had the black man remained in Africa, he would be as backward and uncivilized as the animals who populate the jungle.

Talk 'bouten Africa, we would be deh [there] till now,
 Maybe same half-naked--all day dribe buccra cow,
 [drive white man's cow]
 An' tearin' t'rough de bush wid all de monkey dem,
 Wile an' uncibilise, an' neber comin' tame.
 [wild and uncivilized and never becoming tame]⁴⁰

Although one critic defends McKay's perception of Africa in "Cudjoe" by suggesting that the poet was merely echoing a "widely held view," one held by such activists as Garvey,⁴¹ one has to consider McKay's assessment of Africa in "Cudjoe" in light of the African poems that were to come later.

Eight years after his Songs of Jamaica collection, McKay published "To Ethiopia" in which the speaker, though not indicting Africa, implies that it is not conscious of the changes that are taking place in the world. In the beginning

³⁹McKay, "Cudjoe Fresh From De Lecture," p. 56.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 57.

⁴¹Arthur Drayton, "McKay's Human Pity," p. 48.

of the poem, he bids a torpid Africa to awaken from centuries of sleeping in order that it may observe the dawning of a new day in the East. The poem is clearly a reflection of McKay's interest in socialism and reveals his enthusiasm for the Bolshevik Revolution. McKay writes,

.....
 Oh the night is sweet for sleeping, but the
 shining days for working;
 Sons of the seductive night, for your children's
 Children's sake,
 From the deep primeval forests where the crouching
 leopard's lurking
 Lift your heavy-lidded eyes--Ethiopia Awake!
 In the East the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn
 that is breaking,
 And its golden glory fills the western skies;--
 Oh, my brothers and my sisters, wake, arise!⁴²

The next stanza of the poem paints a picture of an earth torn asunder by its struggle to be re-born:

For the near birth rends the old earth and the very dead
 are waking,
 Ghosts are turned flesh, throwing off the grave's
 disguise,
 And the foolish, even children, are made wise;⁴³

⁴²Claude McKay, "To Ethiopia," *The Liberator* 3 (February 1920), p. 7.

⁴³Ibid.

And then in a final plea, at the end of the stanza, McKay urges his brothers, who have been "dreaming for long centuries," to "wake from sleeping," and turn their eyes to the East.⁴⁴

One year later, McKay was to write "Africa." This poem, unlike "To Ethiopia," does not merely label Africa as a sleeping continent, but it demonstrates McKay's willingness to become more judgmental in tone. In this poem he not only raises the issue of Africa as an inferior place, but he blames its reputed inferiority on its own moral shortcoming. In the beginning of the poem, he lauds the ancient African civilization for the glory and honor it once had:

The sun sough thy dim bed and brought forth light,
 The sciences were sucklings at thy breast;
 When all the world was young in pregnant night
 Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.⁴⁵

But McKay laments all that greatness is relegated to the past since Africa is no more a bastion of power. Instead, according to McKay, Africa is an ignorant whore among other nations, a shameful wretch. He writes,

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Claude McKay, "Africa," in Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 40; first published in The Liberator 4 (August 1921), p. 10.

Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!
 They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.
 Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,
 Of all the mighty nations of the sun.⁴⁶

It may be interesting to note that while McKay titled his poem "Africa," the images within it are clearly those of the Egyptian civilization. McKay is referring to North Africa, not West Africa. He writes of pyramids, the sphinxes, pharaohs, and Hebrew slaves. In his writing, McKay made little distinction between North Africa and West Africa. And it is no secret that he cultivated a kinship with the people of North Africa, not those of West Africa. McKay spent the bulk of his twelve-year sojourn in Morocco among the people with whom he felt most at ease.⁴⁷ There is evidence to indicate that McKay had planned to make a trip to West Africa, but because of financial difficulties he had to postpone such a venture.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he never set foot on West African soil.

In 1934, McKay found himself back in the United States, broke and bitter. In order to make ends meet, he tackled any sort of odd job that came his way. One such job allowed him

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 300.

⁴⁸Claude McKay to James Weldon Johnson, November 10, 1928 and February 1, 1929, McKay Papers, JWJ Collection, Yale University Library.

free tenancy in an apartment flat in exchange for his expertise as a writer. McKay found himself working for an old man who dubbed himself "professor." McKay wrote a friend in frustration. "The exasperating thing," he tells Max Eastman, "is that I am doing part-time work writing history to prove that African blacks were the founders of civilization for an eccentric old Negro." McKay said that the job would not be so irritating if the old man would cease "butting in on [him] with senile talk about Ancient African glory."⁴⁹ One can only wonder whether McKay thought romanticizing ancient African glory was "senile" talk. And one can only ponder McKay's almost cynical tone as he confides his feelings to Eastman--the White radical/conservative former publisher of The Liberator.

McKay's condemnation of Africa became more intense as the years took their toll on his health. In 1942, his health collapsed: he suffered influenza, high blood pressure, and heart disease. And, in 1943, he suffered a stroke and partial blindness. From that time on, McKay--in poor health--had to depend upon the small number of friends he had and acquaintances for moral support.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Claude McKay to Max Eastman, August 24, 1934, as quoted in Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 199.

⁵⁰Verda Person to Mary Keating, summer 1943, Keating Papers, Private Collection, quoted in "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 805-811.

In 1945, a bitter and disappointed McKay wrote "Sonnet II" later titled "The Wise Men of the East." His bitter indictment of Africa in this work echoes his reproof of Africa in his poem "Africa," discussed earlier. As in the other poem, McKay praises the Africa of the past, once so pure and noble that it sent forth one of its own as one of the wise men to attend the Baby Jesus.

Oh, One was black of the wise men
of the East.
Who came with precious gifts to Jesus'
birth,
A symbol all men equal were at least,
When Godhead condescended to the
earth.⁵¹

It is not clear whether or not McKay's use of the word "equal" in the third line of the first stanza implies a social equality of Black men or moral equality. Judging from the remainder of the poem, one would have to conclude that McKay means that Black men were then equal to White men and to other races in absolute worth. It is morality that concerns him in this poem. In the remainder of the stanza he reasons that once

⁵¹Claude McKay, "The Wise Men of the East," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 48; first published as "Sonnet II," in Catholic Worker 12 (October 1945): 4.

The Ethiopian in Jerusalem
 Was human [my emphasis] to the preacher of our Lord,
 Who drawn to him as to a precious gem,
 Bestowed him the message of the Word.⁵²

Again McKay raises the issue of morality and worth when he implies that then the Black man was considered "human," but today he is not. There is no indication that McKay is supporting the racist sentiment of those who believed the Black man inhuman, but he does imply that the Black man, himself, has become less than other men. In the final stanza, McKay concedes that Black men were the first to break the chains of paganism to take hold of Christ's teachings, and they did once stand in a "high place," but,

From the high place...they grew drunk
 With power, oh God, how gutter-low have black men
 sunk!⁵³

In "The Wise Men of the East," McKay's point is clear. The "Black Empire" once had its chance for greatness but lost it because of some committed unpardonable sin. Now it must be cast in darkness.

⁵²"The Wise Med of the East," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 48.

⁵³Ibid.

In one of his poems on Africa, McKay has the speaker express the desire to go back to "darkness" (Africa), but "the great western world holds [him] in fee."⁵⁴ Whether or not one accepts the premise that the speaker is indeed McKay, he certainly must accept the fact that McKay was very much held "in fee" by Western civilization; as a matter of fact, despite his assertions to the contrary, like many other Jamaican colonials, it was for England and Spain that his heart longed, not Africa. Africa was nothing to him. McKay admitted as much when he sought to answer the question as to why Garvey's Back-to-Africa Movement, so successful in the United States, was so unsuccessful in Jamaica. McKay says that since most educated West Indians are more politically conservative than many Britons, they feel very little kinship with African natives and consequently wanted nothing to do with going back to Africa."⁵⁵

McKay, as many other British West Indians, was in love with the myth of England. Like all other colonial children, he was fed a regular diet of Britishism through the educational system, which of course was decidedly English. They read exclusively English textbooks and took examinations

⁵⁴McKay, "Outcast," Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 41.

⁵⁵McKay, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, p. 146.

composed entirely of British material.⁵⁶ In his "My Green Hills of Jamaica," McKay writes, "Our education was so directed that we really and honestly believed we were little black Britons."⁵⁷ Consequently, it was England that McKay had a burning desire to see, not Africa. His poem "Old England," published in 1912, captures the sense of cultural dualism he must have experienced as a colonial subject. One could reason that if Jamaica was his native land, and Africa was his motherland, then England certainly must have been his "cultural homeland."⁵⁸ In "Old England," written in dialect, the poet expresses his deep-down yearning for the England that once captured his youthful imagination. He writes,

I've a longin' in me dept's of heart dat I can
 conquer not,
 'Tis a wish dat I've been havin' from since I could
 Form a t'o't [thought]
 'Tis to sail athwart the ocean an to hear de billows
 roar,
 When dem ride aroun' de steamer, when dem beat
 on England's shore.⁵⁹

⁵⁶George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile, p. 27. (See Chapter One.)

⁵⁷McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

⁵⁸Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, pp. 221-222.

⁵⁹Claude McKay, "Old England," in Songs of Jamaica, p. 63.

In the next stanza, it is clear that McKay's perception of England is that portrayed in the literature he had read so much as a school boy. It is the England of Dickens, Shakespeare, and the Romantic poets. To McKay, it would be glorious

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets
 of London walk,
 An' to see de famous sights dem 'bouten which
 dere's so much talk,
 An' to watch de fact'ry chimneys pourin' smoke up
 to de sky,
 An' to see de matches-children, dat I hear 'bout,
 passin' by.⁶⁰

Almost as if in reverent worship, in the fifth stanza of "Old England," McKay expresses an implied debt to the masters of Western literature. On his imagined visit to England, he would

...view Westminster Abbey, where de great
 of England sleep,
 An' de solemn marble statues o'er deir ashes vigil
 keep;
 [he] would see immortal Milton an' de wul'-famous
 Shakespeare, [world]
 Past'ral Wordsworth', gentle Gray, an' all de great
 souls buried dere⁶¹

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 64.

In the last stanza of "Old England" McKay concludes his imaginative journey by visiting the place where England's kings lay, including "de lone spot where in peaceful solitude rests de body of our Missis Queen, Victoria de Good." And sensing that through his pilgrimage he will have captured the spiritual and cultural essence of England (at least the England of his imagination), McKay in the final stanza of the poem says that he can now rest content "forevermore."⁶²

From Africa, McKay expected nothing, but from England, he expected the greatness of its past and the myth of its literature. But on his real journey through England, from 1919 to 1921, he received nothing, except the assurance that he indeed was not British. (See Chapter One.)

But England was not the only Western country that filled the head of the young Jamaican colonials. Spain equally dominated much of the natives' imagination. McKay says that for most West Indians, Spain was the romantic country which gave the Caribbean Islands their early names and hypnotic tales of "Caribs and conquistadors, buccaneers and golden galleons and...African slaves."⁶³ Unlike his disillusioning trip to England, McKay found Spain a veritable paradise. He wrote friends that he found Spain in harmony with his

⁶²Ibid., pp. 64-65.

⁶³McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 41.

temperament.⁶⁴ McKay's love affair with Spain led to his embracing of Catholicism near the end of his life (to be discussed in a later chapter). In his autobiography McKay writes, "Barcelona took my sights and feelings so entirely that it was impossible for me to leave."⁶⁵ McKay's poem "Barcelona" pays tribute to his love affair with the Spanish culture.

In the first stanza, McKay paints a colorful scene of nighttime merriment. Though the first stanza shows a touch of strained syntax, McKay is successful in portraying the care-free joy that exists among a people imbued with community spirit and a sense of fun:

In Barcelona City they dance the nights
 Along the streets. The folk, erecting stands
 Upon the people's pavements, come together
 From pueblo, barrio, in families,
 Lured by the lilting playing of the bands,
 Rejoicing in the balmy summer weather,
 In spreading rings they weave fine fantasies
 Like rare mosaics of many colored lights.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Claude McKay to James Ivy, September 9, 1929, McKay to Mrs. Osgood Mason, September 10, 1929, McKay Papers, Spingarn Collection, Harvard University Library.

⁶⁵Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, p. 295.

⁶⁶McKay, "Barcelona," in *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*, p. 85. The poem was first written by McKay in 1931, while he was residing in Morocco. See *A Long Way From Home*, p. 295.

In the final two stanzas, McKay reaches a crescendo of emotion as he cries,

Oh Barcelona, Queen of European cities,
 From dulcet thoughts of you my guts are twisted.
 With bitter pain of longing for your sights,
 And for your hills, your picturesque glory singing.
 My feet are mutinous, mine eyes are misted.
 Upon my happy thoughts your harbor lights
 Are shimmering like bells melodious ringing.
 With sweet cadenzas of flamenco ditties.⁶⁷

McKay's poetic difficulties here are evident--the juxtaposing of "dulcet thoughts" and "twisted guts," are lyrically unsatisfying, to say the least. His inverted syntax makes understanding difficult, for example "Upon my happy thoughts your harbor lights are shimmering," and the reference to his "mutinous" feet is confusing as well as aesthetically unpleasant. The final stanza offers more of the same:

I see your movement flashing like a knife,
 Reeling my senses, drunk upon the hues
 Of motion, the eternal rainbow wheel,
 Your passion smouldering like a lighted fuse. ...⁶⁸

Here we have the inverted syntax--"reeling my senses...the eternal rainbow wheel," and we have the incongruous mixture

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 86.

⁶⁸Ibid.

of "passion smouldering" with "a lighted fuse." But what is important is the harmony and essence McKay draws from Spain as he concludes,

But more than all sensations, oh I feel
Your color flaming in the dance of life."⁶⁹

McKay had great difficulty reconciling his cultivated Western values with the notion of any identification with an African homeland. He desperately longed for the tradition of Western culture and conceded quite freely his commitment to it. Once he wrote that it was not unusual for a man to have a "predilection" for a culture other than the one in which he was born, stating that he did not regard himself as a "stranger of Western civilization," but rather a "child" of it.⁷⁰ And although McKay stated that he was very conscious of his African origin, he found himself ultimately rejecting the notion of a spiritual search for one's African roots as promoted by Harlem intellectuals, arguing that Black artists and intellectuals could little benefit from living in Africa but would experience the most artistic growth remaining in Western civilization.⁷¹ And, finally, McKay puts an end to

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰McKay, "A Negro to His Critics," New York Herald Tribune Books, p. 137. (See Chapter Two.)

⁷¹Claude McKay, "McKay Says Schuyler is Writing Nonsense," New York Amsterdam News, 20 November 1937, p. 12. In this article McKay takes George S. Schulyer, a black

any credence to search for African roots by declaring that a "pure" Negro state exists nowhere in the world.⁷² Consequently, the existence of a Black Africa has no place in reality.

Had McKay's skin been white and not black, possibly he would have settled in an old European city rife with tradition, but because his skin was black, he had to press on in his search for answers.

columnist, to task for going to Africa and learning nothing except slaves exist there. McKay charges that it was not the Europeans who introduced slavery to Europe, but the Africans.

⁷²McKay, "A Negro to His Critics," p. 137.

THE FRAGMENTED VISION OF CLAUDE MCKAY:
A STUDY OF HIS WORKS

BY

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Chapter VI

Home to Harlem: Barbarism versus Civilization

McKay's novels Home to Harlem, Banjo, and Banana Bottom reflect his sense of cultural dualism. They embody both his private ambivalences and his feverish attempt to reconcile them. In these works, McKay wished to celebrate the cultural validity of primitivism and the dignity inherent in the Black aesthetic. All three novels portray Black characters who attempt to respond instinctively to the natural pleasures of life.¹ Through these characters, he was successful in creating a clear primitive ethos. But that part of his mind gripped by Eurocentric values forced him eventually to question the dignity of these characters and their lifestyle.

McKay's Home to Harlem was the most popular novel of the Renaissance, so popular indeed that it went through five printings in less than two months and was the only novel of the Renaissance to reach the New York Herald Tribune's best-seller list.² Its popularity rested primarily upon its "slice of life" naturalistic style: the people of Harlem were portrayed as urban primitives who lived life fast and

¹James R. Giles, Claude McKay (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 70.

²Singh, The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, p. 46.

hot. Nathan Huggins in Harlem Renaissance wrote that Home to Harlem's commercial success was doubtlessly tied to its "lurid and sensational" quality. The book, he argued, was nothing short of an "apotheosis of the savage."³ In the novel the Harlem characters, bound by no stultifying moral order, live their lives naive and free, with guiltless sensuality, vitality, and spontaneity.

Predictably, the Negro elite, the old guard, attacked McKay's novel with a vengeance. They argued that his portrait of Negro life was one-sided, embarrassing, and very antagonistic to the positive image of Negroes they wished to promulgate. The problem was the absence of middle-class types in this novel. All the major characters are either those who earn their wages through menial labor--longshoremen, railroad workers, housemaids, waiters, wash-room attendants, cooks--or those who make money through the manipulation of Harlem's underground: "sweetmen," gamblers, cabaret entertainers, petty hoodlums, and prostitutes. One critic called Home to Harlem a story of the "lost generation of colored folk."⁴ To the irritation of the many, there are no lawyers, no teachers, no businessmen, and no doctors. To DuBois's way of thinking, the public had no need for such a

³Nathan Huggins, p. 125.

⁴Burton Rascoe, "The Seamy Side," The Bookman 67 (April 1928): 183-85.

novel that was simply a "race story told from the inside" with nothing more than a portrayal of slum dwellers and nothing of "the educated and aspiring classes."⁵ In fact, DuBois stated that in general McKay's novel nauseated him. And after reading "the dirtier parts of its filth," he felt a strong compulsion to take a bath.⁶ It was Benjamin Brawley's opinion that the novel was characterized by baseness. He believed that McKay's "emphasis on certain degraded aspects of life" did little justice to his abilities as a writer. One newspaper columnist charged that McKay's pursuit of money was so desperate that he held "up his own race to ridicule and contempt before the Caucasian world."⁷ And another regretted that McKay felt it necessary to prove to Whites what they had assumed all along: that Blacks were nothing more than "buffoons," "thugs," and "rotters."⁸

⁵W.E.B. DuBois, "The Younger Literary Movement," Crisis 27 (February 1924): 162.

⁶"The Browsing Reader, 'Home to Harlem,'" in The Crisis 35 (June 1928): 202.

⁷William H. Ferris, "Ferris Scores Obscenity in Our Literature," Pittsburgh Courier, March 21, 1928, in Cooper's "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 560.

⁸Dewey R. Johnson, "The Bookshelf: More 'Nigger Heaven' [Review of Home to Harlem], Chicago Defender, March 17, 1928 in "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 560.

Such negative criticism of the Negro press prompted one of McKay's intimate Harlem friends, Harold Jackman, to send McKay (who was at the time in France) a teasing letter about the uproar the book was causing in Harlem:

The Negro critics are certainly roasting you and if you have read the reviews I have sent you, you know what they are saying. You expected that of course, since you weren't dealing with 'nice colored people,' 'those people we know' 'those in our set,' etc. etc. [sic]⁹

However, for younger Negro writers, like Langston Hughes, McKay's Home to Harlem was a breath of fresh air, a lively example of the new liberated Negro writing that truly broke with traditionalism and the past. In a letter to McKay he assured him that the novel was "the finest thing we've done yet."¹⁰ And F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote McKay a congratulatory letter, declaring his novel one of the most impressive books of the season.¹¹

⁹Harold Jackman to McKay, April (?) 1928, McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University Library.

¹⁰Langston Hughes to McKay, March 5, 1928, McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University Library.

¹¹F. Scott Fitzgerald to McKay, May 25, 1928, McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University Library.

Despite the negative criticisms leveled against his novel by Black critics, McKay saw his work as more than just Black exploitation. He saw it as an opportunity to fulfill his convictions concerning the artist's responsibility to write honestly and accurately of life, no matter what his observations might reveal.¹² To him, that meant writing with the same frankness and brutal realism he associated with the stories of Hemingway.¹³ He also saw his book as an opportunity to develop more extensively a theme he had touched upon in his poetry: the superiority of instinct and spontaneity over the sterile rationalism and the stifling Victorian moral codes of middle-class Western culture. He could at least through fiction portray characters who were free of the inhibitions that plagued their Anglo-Saxon brothers.

Jake is the definitive hero, "the unrestrained child of civilization,"¹⁴ who incorporates the principles of the hedonistic world McKay wished to idealize in the novel. His vagabond spirit, marked by a predominance of innate gut instincts over reasoning; his personal ethics and common

¹²See McKay's "A Negro Extravaganza," [Review of Shuffle Along] in the Liberator 4 (December 1921): 24-26, for his discussion of the negro intelligentsia's sensitivity about the portrayal of Blacks.

¹³A Long Way From Home, pp. 252-254.

¹⁴Michael Stoff, "Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism," p. 134.

sense; his personal wit and natural charm make him more than equal to his environment. When the story begins, he has just arrived in Harlem as a deserter: he has simply walked away from an all-Black work crew in Brest during World War I to return to the warmth of Harlem. On his first night in Harlem, he reveals his instinctive capacity for taking life as it comes. He meets a lovely prostitute with whom he makes love. Her fee is fifty dollars, all the money Jake has left in the world; but he is more than willing to sacrifice it all for this one night of lovemaking. For Jake, it is natural to choose a night of passion over inhibiting thoughts of the future. Afterwards, he experiences no regrets:

He woke up in the morning in a state of perfect peace. She brought him hot coffee and cream and doughnuts. he yawned. He sighed. He was satisfied. He breakfasted. He washed. He dressed. The sun was shining. He sniffed the fine dry air. Happy familiar Harlem. ... "I ain't got a cent to my name," mused Jake, "but ahm as happy as a prince, all the same. ..."15

For Jake the essence of life is the moment. He takes Felicia as he takes life, free and easy.

After their rendezvous, Felicia disappears into the anonymity of Harlem. But Jake soon discovers she has placed in his pocket the fifty-dollar fee he had given her as

¹⁵Claude McKay, Home to Harlem (New York: Harper and Bros., 1928), p. 10.

payment along with a note reading, "Just a little gift to a honey boy from a baby girl."¹⁶ Thus, the frame of the novel quickly becomes Jake's pursuit of a lost Felicia. She is his grail, representing the key to a blissful life that comes from living freely and naturally.

McKay's style in the novel is "appropriately impressionistic,"¹⁷ with the slim plot existing merely as a device to catapult Jake into the rich, exotic underground dens of Harlem where he is an insider. He appreciates the free and easy love, the fried chicken and chitterling joints, the cabarets, and the gambling flats. Harlem is a "carnal jungle," "a cabaret Congo"¹⁸ in the heart of New York, and Jake loves it. In an orgiastic frenzy, Jake cries,

"Harlem! Harlem! Where else could
I have all this life but in Harlem?
Good old Harlem! Chocolate Sweet Harlem!
Harlem, I've got you' number down. ..."¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁷Robert Bone, The Negro Novel In America, Revised edition. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 68.

¹⁸Stoff, p. 134.

¹⁹Home to Harlem, p. 14.

Jake's cathartic response to Harlem is similar to that of McKay when he returned from England in 1921. McKay wrote that it was difficult to contain himself when he spotted the people strutting up and down Fifth and Lenox Avenues in front of the spareribs, corn pone, fried chicken, and sweet potato joints. He reflected, "A wave of thrills flooded the arteries of my being, and I felt as if I had undergone initiation as a member of my tribe. And I was happy."²⁰

Yet, Jake is more than an aesthete who lives purely by instinct and who considers physical satisfaction--whether through food, sex, or drink--of primary importance. His existence is more than simply "an injunction to enjoy life...work when the mood strikes you...take life easy."²¹ Contrary to the assessment of Nathan Huggins, Jake is not a man driven solely by "drink, food, dance, and sex."²² McKay intended Jake to represent the primitive epitomized.²³ Among the primitives of Harlem, he is a natural aristocrat. He has a nobility that makes him appealing to others. Throughout the novel, people are naturally drawn to him--both men and women. McKay writes,

²⁰A Long Way From Home, pp. 95-96.

²¹Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 68.

²²Harlem Renaissance, p. 122.

²³Stoff, p. 135.

Jake was a high favorite wherever he went. There was something so naturally beautiful about his presence that everybody liked and desired him. Buddies, on the slightest provocation, were ready to fight for him, and the girls liked to make an argument around him.²⁴

Women throw themselves at his feet. He happens to wander into a cabaret with one his friends, Zeddy. Zeddy, whom McKay describes as physically repulsive--possessing none of Jake's "magic and charm"--has hopes of conquering the affections of Rose, the cabaret singer. But one look at Jake causes the svelte songstress to lay her body against his "like a lean lazy leopard" and whisper "If you'll be mah man always, you won't have to work."²⁵

Besides Jake's natural elegance, his inflexible set of personal standards claim for him superior status within the fabric of his hedonistic realm. Richard Barksdale calls Jake "a paragon among men," who, despite his hedonistic lifestyle, has disciplined instincts that allow him to function in a controlled manner among people who are often out of control.²⁶

²⁴Home to Harlem, p. 103.

²⁵Ibid., p. 24.

²⁶Richard Barksdale, "Symbolism and Irony in McKay's 'Home to Harlem,'" in CLA Journal 15 (March 1972): 338-44.

Jake has limitless opportunities to live "sweet,"²⁷ but his own sense of right and wrong makes such a living arrangement impossible for him. He tells Rose, who begs him to stay home and lounge at his leisure around her little flat while she works, that he could never be a "sweet man." He declares that he has never lived off women and never will. "I always works," he boasts.²⁸ Even though Jake does move in with Rose, he insists that their relationship be one in which he maintains his individual respectability, which meant a rejection of living "in the usual sweet way," brutalizing her and beating her up.²⁹ Rose, accustomed to the barbaric treatment of previous sweet men, taunts Jake into a violent confrontation. In a moment of frustration, he gives her "two savage slaps full in her face" that send her "moaning at his feet."³⁰ Even though Jake realizes that Rose has goaded him into a violent physical response, he suffers pangs of remorse because he has violated his sacred moral code. Remembering his mother's advise "Nevah hit no woman," Jake glaring dismally at his hands in shame, packs up and leaves. He whispers in grief, "It wasn't what I come back to

²⁷Living "sweet" is an arrangement in which a male is supported by the earnings of his female lover. McKay writes that in Harlem, ... "There was something so romantic about the sweet life, to be the adored of a negro lady. ..." (See Home to Harlem, p. 82.)

²⁸Ibid., p. 40.

²⁹Ibid., p. 113.

³⁰Ibid., p. 116.

Gawd's own country foh."³¹ Jake understands Rose's perception of their relationship; he understands the disorderly environment they both share, but he never loses his perception of himself, nor is his sense of order changed by imprisonment in the chaos of Harlem. It seems that nothing can touch his secure identity. Unlike Rose, and the other characters who seem "inextricably enmeshed into the disorder," Jake can always "carefully extricate himself in time to remain his own man."³²

Jake's personal code reaches beyond his views of women and love to encompass social and political issues. Although he is out of work and down to his last fifty dollars, he turns down an opportunity to scab, working in place of dock workers who have gone out on strike. He simply tells his friend Zeddy that scabbing "ain't decent." Like Rose, Zeddy attempts to coax Jake into compromising his moral principles by arguing that White men have always "scabbed" skilled Black men out of the best jobs in the city. But Jake stands his ground, maintaining that despite what White men have done or not done, "scabbing is a low-down deal."³³ Jake's perception of scabbing as an act of dishonor demonstrates his intuitive understanding of the moral code that must lie at the

³¹Ibid.

³²Barksdale, pp. 339-40.

³³Home to Harlem, pp. 44-49.

foundation of a capitalistic society. His sympathies on behalf of the disenfranchised worker disproves Nathan Huggin's judgement that Jake's moral code pertains exclusively to his own world and is totally disconnected from the "larger moral order."³⁴

Jake's vagabond spirit allows him to be both within and without the Harlem that ensnares those within its grasp. One Harlem "sweet man" claims:

Jake played for the fun of the game and then quit. Gambling did not have a strangle hold upon him any more than dope or desire did. Jake took what he wanted of whatever he fancied and ... kept going.³⁵

Jake understands the game. He knows how to play and then let go. His philosophy "to take life easy" helped him cope during hard times at Brest, at Havre, and in London during the war.³⁶ Buoyed by his innate vagabond spirit and his secure moral identity, Jake never loses his perspective or his self-respect.

³⁴Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 125.

³⁵Home to Harlem, p. 209.

³⁶Ibid., p. 104.

Jake's sense of himself is solid and well-defined until he meets Ray, whose introduction not only kills the picaresque rhythm and tone of Home to Harlem but also destroys the novel's implied premise: in the microcosm of Harlem, living by one's instincts (exemplified through Jake) is a valid alternative to the repression of the larger traditional society. He is described as a young Haitian waiter consumed by a passion to write. Although he and Jake immediately become friends, they are opposites. Jake has natural wit and gut instincts; Ray is educated, depressingly reflective, and exemplifies "the dilemma of the inhibited over civilized intellectual."³⁷

One would assume that a Jake is what Ray needs to become in order to survive Harlem. Since Jake has mastery over his environment and is secure in his relationship to his world (his moral codes), and since he seems to have a clear perception of himself, it would seem that he would be the superior character who teaches Ray "the ropes." Huggins, indeed, sees Jake as the dominant force in the relationship between the two characters: "It is Jake who sustains Ray and defends him against the antagonists among the dining-car crew. Jake "patronizes" Ray, and Huggins cites the fact that Jake continues working as a cook on the railroad despite his desire to quit only because Ray needs him as protection

³⁷Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 68.

against the taunts of the other men, who call him "Professor."³⁸ However, it is the relationship in which Ray patronizes Jake that proves substantially dominate. Once Ray is introduced, Jake shrinks in size, and the educated Haitian emerges as mentor.

When Jake first sees Ray, the sensitive Haitian is sitting at a table reading. Despite the fact that from the beginning of the novel, McKay has insisted upon a protagonist who refuses to be dependent upon anyone, he has Jake "shuffle up" to Ray to ask him for two dollars so that he can continue gambling.³⁹ Only a Jake who has suffered some traumatic event could have "shuffled up" to Ray with hat in hand.

Indeed, in the face of Ray's intimidating education, Jake becomes a child. For example, in the beginning, when Jake spies Ray reading a book, like an awe-stricken child, he willingly places himself in the position of being tutored by Ray. Jake asks, "Wha's this here stuff you reading? Looks lak Greek to me." Then more like a dim-witted school boy than a grown man, he spells the title aloud--"S-A-P-H-O, Sahpo."⁴⁰ When Ray tells him that Sappho was a Greek poet,

³⁸Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 123.

³⁹Home to Harlem, p. 127.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 127-28.

Jake replies, "So theah is some Greek in the book!" A patient and amused Ray answers, "In a sense, yes."⁴¹ Ray goes on to teach Jake about the legend of Sappho and about how her legend gave two beautiful words to the language: lesbian and sapphic. When Jake hears the word "lesbian," he cries, "That's what we calls bulldyker in Harlem. Them's all ugly womens." A now impatient Ray tells Jake that "bulldyker is "a damned ugly name" and he angrily takes Harlem (and Jake) to task for insensitivity. But undaunted by Ray's scolding, Jake "[c]harmingly, like a child that does not know its letters," turns the pages of the book and begins to read.⁴² Up to this time, Jake has not yielded his knowledge or perception of life to any man.

If Jake seems merely innocently curious when he asks Ray about the book he is reading, he seems downright thick-headed when he engages Ray in a conversation about the French language. In the beginning of Home to Harlem, we meet a Jake who has just come from the rawness of the French seaport towns. Quite naturally, we suspect that he is at least familiar with the French language. One would not expect him to be thrown into shock by its sound nor by the sight of a Black man speaking it. (In Marseilles surely he must have met various French-speaking Black men from Africa and the

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 129.

Caribbean.) Ray tells Jake that French is his natural language. "C'est ma langue maternelle." After making a face and scratching his head (minstrel-like gestures), Jake replies, "Tell me in straight United States."⁴³

The two of them are immediately drawn into a conversation in which Jake challenges the authenticity of Ray's revelation. Their dialogue fast becomes an opportunity for McKay to stress Ray's intellectual superiority and highlight Jake's ignorance. Jake tells Ray, "Don't crape me . . . Ain'tchu--ain'tchu one of us, too? Ray answers, "Of course I'm negro . . . but I was born in Hayti, and the language down there is French." Jake cries, "Hayti . . . Hayti. Tha's where now? Tha's --" Ray finishes his statement, "An island in the Caribbean."⁴⁴ McKay writes that "Jake sat like a big eager boy and learned many fact about Hayti." The Haiti lesson spans three pages of the novel, with Jake plying Ray, his instructor, with questions. Eventually, Ray expands his lecture to include the history of the ancient civilizations of West Africa and Ethiopia.⁴⁵ All the while, Jake gazes at his mentor with respectful admiration.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 128-29.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 129.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 134-137.

Ray's intellectual superiority over Jake becomes an issue in the novel, thus destroying the book's logical premise: a protagonist with natural smarts and natural eloquence survives the man encumbered by the hardware of Western culture. McKay places such emphasis on Ray's education that near the end of the novel, the primitive hero laments his lack of a formal education, effectively losing confidence in his own way, and compromising his near-legendary status in his own sphere.

McKay makes it clear to the reader that Ray simply cannot take sex as freely and as naturally as Jake. One important incident in the story clarifies Ray's sexual inhibition. Jake takes him to a bordello at a stopover in Philadelphia. Ray at first refuses, claiming that the females who work there have mouths "loaded with filth."⁴⁶ But then he decides to go along. When they arrive at the bordello, it is Jake who take control (one of the times in which he patronizes Ray). He emerges as the natural leader, taking charge and placing Ray, whose discomfort he senses, under his protective wing. To Madame Laura, the head madam, he says, "My friend's just keeping me company. ... He ain't regular. ... And I want him treated right."⁴⁷ Now it is Jake who is the father and Ray who is the child.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 191.

The bordello scene emphasizes more than any other Ray's sexual dilemma. Here he is surrounded by free spirits and the hedonistic pleasures achieved by sexual abandon, yet he cannot take part because his education has emasculated him, robbing him of his natural physical instincts:

Ray felt alone and a little sorry for himself. Now that he was there, he would like to be touched by the spirit of that atmosphere and, like Jake, fall naturally into its rhythm. He also envied Jake. Just for this night only he would like to be like him.⁴⁸

Later that evening Jake questions Ray about his rejection of a young beautiful girl at the bordello who attempts to draw Ray out of his reclusion. Ray replies that although she was nice, she wore perfume that turned his stomach. An incredulous Jake comments, "Youse awful queer, Chappie."⁴⁹ In the microcosm of Jake's world, inasmuch as Ray cannot submit himself freely to life as it comes, he is "queer," and it is Jake who emerges as the natural man.

But that premise is soon subverted, and Ray quickly regains his superiority over Jake. After the bordello incident, Jake is stricken with syphilis, which provides Ray an opportunity to assert his moral values and much touted

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 194.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 200.

sensitivity. As Jake lies sick and helpless on his back, intuition and sexual instinct are discounted by Ray's protracted sermon on the dangers of sexual promiscuity. Now Jake is no longer the natural man, but instead, the sick man who falls because of undisciplined physical urges. Now Ray is the healthy man who sits by Jake's bedside and teaches him about safe sex. He tells Jake that he ought to consider using condoms because of his voracious sexual appetite. And Jake, who has bedded down with girls from one side of the ocean to the other, answers, "Them things foh edjucated guys like you who lives in you' head." Then he goes on to use a simile that demonstrates a wanton ignorance on his part (one that belies the common sense of pre-Ray Jake). He quips, "Ise lak a sailor that don't know nothing about using a compass, but him always hits a safe port."⁵⁰ Jake's irresponsible reply gives Ray an opportunity to put Jake's sexual carousing into what Ray would consider a proper moral perspective as he explains to him:

...This is a new age with new methods of living. You can't just go on like a crazy ram goat as if you were living in the Middle Ages. ...Those devices that you despise are really for you rather than for me or people like me, who don't live your kind of free life. If you, and the whole strong race of working men who live freely like you, don't pay some attention to them [condoms], then you'll all wither away and rot like weeds."⁵¹

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 205-206.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 207.

Once again Jake's supposed strengths are diminished by Ray's more traditional way of seeing things.

As the novel progresses, Jake goes on to commit other irresponsible acts that are antithetical to the pre-Ray Jake. During his recuperation from syphilis, against the advice of his doctor, he leaves his sick bed to go foraging through Harlem on a drinking spree. Of course after consuming large amounts of liquor, he collapses to the floor and is taken home by friends. Afterwards, Jake and the reader is subjected to another Ray lecture. Scolding Jake for his delinquent behavior, Ray warns, "But you must be careful, Jake. You're too sensible not to know good advice from bad."⁵² Ironically, the reader must concur with Ray's judgement. Jake is too sensible to fall so mindlessly into one life-threatening situation after another. He is much too sensible constantly to make the drastically poor decisions McKay has him make, leaving the reader to ponder at Jake's sudden loss of self-respect and self-control since Ray has drifted into his life.

There is little doubt that Ray's presence in Home to Harlem is problematical. Nothing he does advances the action; in fact, his long-winded speeches slow down the pace of the novel to a standstill. So why did McKay feel

⁵²Ibid., p. 22.

compelled to place Ray in this Harlem story? The answer is that Ray is the embodiment of McKay's fragmented vision. McKay was never completely comfortable touting a hedonistic, intuitive approach to life, unattached to traditional Western values. But as a Black artist deeply influenced by the primitivistic aesthetic, he was not prepared to reject its validity.

First of all, McKay has trouble separating his identity as a writer from his fictional character Ray. It is obvious throughout the novel that he is McKay's alter ego, his "fictional counterpart." Both men are West Indian intellectuals who attempt to fashion for themselves a framework for coming to grips with their own "cultural roots in Black America."⁵³ As expatriates, both are driven toward a sentimental romanticization of Harlem because of nostalgic visions of their distant, unobtainable, West Indian past. Ray marvels at Harlem's "rich blood-red color, and its laughter and rhythms with the highnoon sunlight on his tropic island home."⁵⁴ But they both fail to realize the simplicity of their vision because, as expatriates, their fantasized

⁵³Lloyd Brown, "The Expatriate Consciousness in American Literature," Studies in Black Literature 3, 2 (Summer 1972): pp. 9-11.

⁵⁴Ibid.

image of home hardly squares with the reality of Harlem, and as intellectuals, their White education alienates them from the innocence of the Black Eden.

The second problem is that, despite the fact that the novel purports to be a Harlem story in which characters and scenes are portrayed realistically and without "sissyness," it is Ray's very "non-Harlemness" that makes him superior. McKay separates Ray from the others throughout the novel in which McKay implies that Ray's Haitian origin elevates him above the other Blacks. In an important passage, Ray reflects upon the past and how happy he was to be "the son of a free nation." He remembers his pride and his [condescending] pity for "poor African native" and "ten millions of suppressed yankee 'coons." But alas, "Now he was just one of them," he muses gloomily, only rallying at the recognition that he was really not one of them. McKay writes, "he possessed another language and literature that they know not of."⁵⁵ And whenever Ray chances to reflect upon his native Haiti, he falls into a lyrical ecstasy that lifts him from the ordinariness of Harlem:

⁵⁵Home to Harlem, p. 155.

Immediately he was back home again. His father's house was a vast forest full of blooming hibiscus and memosas and giant evergreen trees. And he was a gay humming-bird, fluttering and darting his long needle beak into the heart of a bell-flower.⁵⁶

Surely, Jake and the others have no such memories.

But Ray's supposed superiority rests not only upon his West Indian background, but also on his Western education and his refined sensitivities. Interestingly, it seems that McKay inadvertently, but self-consciously, uses Ray as a mechanism to display his (McKay's) own appreciation of Western values, as if he, the writer, needs to assure readers that despite his focus on primitivism, he has been educated in the finer tradition of European civilization.⁵⁷ Throughout the novel, McKay has Ray give lip service to his disdain for traditional education. To an old college acquaintance who visits him while he is tending the bedridden Jake, Ray says that a formal education is "old dead stuff," a commodity especially useless to Blacks. And he also charges that Western Civilization is "rotten, false, and hollow."⁵⁸ Despite his condemnation, however, Ray fails to

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 157.

⁵⁷It was the contention of John Chamberlain, in "The Negro as Writer," in The Bookman 70, 6 (February 1920): 603-611, that Home to Harlem was saved from gross naturalism by the refined sensitivity of Ray.

⁵⁸Home to Harlem, pp. 242-243.

offer viable alternatives.⁵⁹ Not only does he neglect to ponder the issue significantly but there is the implication that it is actually his association with both Western society and education that grants him superiority over people like Jake. McKay writes that "Life burned in Ray perhaps more intensely than in Jake." He says that "Ray felt more and his range was wider and he could not be satisfied with the easy, simple things that sufficed for Jake."⁶⁰

There are countless passages in this novel devoted exclusively to Ray's rhapsodizing about his sensitivity and learning. Such instances provide an opportunity for McKay to display his own extensive background in European literature as well as to lend more poignancy to the enlightened Ray's lamentable entrapment in the jungle of Harlem. After Ray visits Jake, who is suffering a relapse from his bout with syphilis, he muses that Jake is "happy as a kid," but he himself is not. He wonders at his presence in the "naked" reality of Harlem when he has always dreamed of being a writer and being at one with the great minds of the universe:

⁵⁹Singh, The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, p. 48.

⁶⁰Home to Harlem, p. 265.

There were the great books that dominated the bright dreaming and dark brooding days when he was a boy. Les Miserables, Nana, Uncle Tom's Cabin, David Copperfield, Nicholas Nickleby, Oliver Twist. From them, by way of free-thought pamphlets, it was only a stride to the great scintillating satirists of the age--Bernard Shaw, Ibsen, Anatole France, and the popular problemist, H. G. Wells. He had lived on that brilliant manna that fell like a flame-fall from those burning stars. ...But he was a savage, even though he was a sensitive one. ...⁶¹

Ray's self-conscious exhibition of his reading background continues as he boasts of being "startled by James Joyce in The Little Review," Sherwood Anderson in Winesburg Ohio, and "all that D.H. Lawrence published."⁶² Finally, Ray ponders whether or not he will ever use the words he has acquired and whether or not his accumulated vocabulary can adequately serve as a vehicle for his vivid impressions. Ray's attitude hardly defines a mind repulsed by a Western value system.

It is not long that Ray openly reveals contempt for the Harlem primitives. At an uncomfortable stopover in Baltimore, Ray makes plain his revulsion at the sight of his fellow crew members. As he tries to fall asleep, he hears the "masticating noises of their fat lips, like animals eating." At that moment, he resents the very idea that he and they share a common bond:

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 224-227.

⁶²Ibid., p. 227.

They were black like him. ...He ought to love them and feel them (if they felt anything). He ought to if he had a shred of morality in him. ...Yet he loathed every soul in that great barrack-room, except Jake. ... Why should he have and love a race?⁶³

McKay expresses the same sentiments regarding the absurdity of allegiance to racehood and nationhood in one of his essays.⁶⁴

And Ray's rancor at and disgust with the inhabitants of Harlem is illuminated as he rejects the idea of a marriage to his girlfriend, Agatha, who he fears will force him to give up his penchant to wander and simply resign himself to become just one of the "content hogs in the pigpen of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black piggies." Repulsed by the sideshow that is Harlem, Ray cries,

Harlem nigger strutting his stuff. ...
Harlem niggers! How often he had listened to those phrases, like jets of saliva, spewing from the lips of his work pals. ...He was afraid that some day the urge of the flesh... might chase his high dreams out of him and deflate him to the content animal that was a Harlem nigger strutting his stuff. ...⁶⁵

⁶³Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁴See Claude McKay [sic] Describes His Own Life: a Negro Poet," Pearson's Magazine 39 (September 1918): 275.

⁶⁵Home to harlem, p. 263.

Although Ray professes an attraction for the "rich blood-red color" of Harlem and its "blinding nakedness" and "fertile reality," ultimately he sees Harlem as "one big disease" from which his mind can create nothing.⁶⁶

Ray sprang into life as a consequence of McKay's unresolved conflicts. Ray is the obtrusive Western voice within the psyche of McKay that mocks the primitivistic ethos the artist McKay wished to promulgate. For all intents and purposes, Ray ought not to exist. His presence only signifies a loss of artistic control on McKay's part, for whenever he appears, one senses a breakdown in the fiction, and one sees a writer become helplessly caught up in an attempt to clarify his own philosophy.

Finally, it cannot be denied that McKay's Home to Harlem includes some aspects of negritude seen in his earlier works such as Jake's stated preference for brown-skinned women as opposed to light-skinned women and an aesthetic presentation of varied African complexions--exemplified by McKay's attention to skin tones. The novel is punctuated with his descriptions of complexions that range from "nut-brown, low-brown, high-brown, maroon, olive, mauve to gold, lemon, and almost-white." Also, his affirmation of the rich color and vitality inherent in urban primitivism, demonstrated by

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 226, 228.

Jake's energetic embrace of life and Ray's anemic withdrawal, evokes the Black aesthetic. But ultimately, the book is an indictment of Harlem itself.

Harlem is not a hedonistic "joybelt," a warm haven antithetical to self-conscious, lifeless Western society, but, rather, a cutthroat Hell where life is cheap and disorder reigns. As McKay guides the reader through the gambling joints, speakeasies, bordellos, and buffet flats of the city, "[t]he implication is that Harlem represents disorder as much as Brest or London." Indeed, the title of McKay's novel is ironic, for Harlem is no home at all. It is simply "snare and delusion."⁶⁷ As one of McKay's low-down characters puts it, "Harlem is a stinking sink of iniquity."⁶⁸ Even Jake is not exempt from brutal confrontations. He barely escapes shooting his close friend, Zeddy, when the two of them are locked in a contest over the rediscovered Felicia, but his own sense of order keeps him from falling into the pit of violence. After regaining his perspective and sense of objectivity, Jake takes a sweeping look at Harlem and judges it as a place where "Niggers fixing to slice one another's throats." He concludes, "Wese too close and thick in Harlem. Need some moh fresh air between

⁶⁷Richard Barksdale, "Symbolism and Irony in McKay's 'Home to Harlem,'" in CLA Journal 15, 3 (March 1972): 338-344).

⁶⁸Home to harlem, p. 99.

us."⁶⁹ In one particularly graphic battle, a Harlem "sweet man," Yaller Prince, who is described as the yellow complexioned "Prince of all the day joints and night holes of the Belt" is beaten by a male companion of one of the Prince's women. He slashes Yaller Prince savagely with a broken bottle, while Prince's spurned girlfriend eggs on her brutal assistant by screaming out her desire to see more blood.⁷⁰ In this Harlem inferno, self-defense is as important as spontaneity and intuition.

In accordance with McKay's evaluation of Harlem as chaos in the heart of the city, he describes the people who live there as animals who inhabit a sprawling dark zoo. Even Jake is not spared such symbolism. He is often described as a hound. When he first arrives in Harlem after deserting the European front and thrills to its rhythm and color, McKay writes, "His blood was hot." As he roamed about the streets searching for adventure, "he sniffed the street like a hound."⁷¹ Ray, in one of his lectures to Jake about his spontaneous sexual lifestyle, refers to him as "a handsome hound," who is "quick to snap up any tempting morsel of poisoned meat thrown carelessly on the pavement."⁷² And in

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 287.

⁷⁰Home to Harlem, pp. 282-85.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 276.

⁷²Ibid., p. 228.

the same scolding session, as Ray attempts to convince Jake to use condoms to stave off another attack of syphilis, he calls him "a crazy ram goat" who lives in the past.⁷³ Even early in the novel when Jake first sees Felice, his elusive prostitute, McKay describes Jake's admiring eyes as "hungry wolf's eyes."⁷⁴

Zeddy, Jake's friend and later opponent in the Felice triangle, is the primordial creature in Home to Harlem. Described by the author as a gorilla, he is the unattractive creature least endowed with Jake's charismatic qualities or his sense of personal nobility. He fights dirty, relying exclusively upon a razor always concealed in some unknown place on his person; he has no qualms about union scabbing; he repulses women; and he feels no dishonor in reneging on paying off bets that he has made or money that he has borrowed: in his own world he is a sleeze. In one particular incident, Zeddy, who finds himself challenged by a man to whom he owes money, is portrayed as a jungle creature. As he lunges at the man, McKay says that he "threw his muscular gorilla body upon his opponent and hugged him down to the floor." But when the proprietress threatens to throw

⁷³Ibid., pp. 205-206.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 11.

the brawlers out of her buffet flat, "Zeddy, the ape [my emphasis], who was scared of no man in the place, became humble before the woman."⁷⁵

Throughout the novel, other males are described as jungle animals. The chef of Jake and Ray's train crew is described as a "short, stout, hard and horny rhinoceros,"⁷⁶ And McKay describes one fighter in a brawl that breaks out at a crap game at Gin-Head Suzie's, the pathetic middle-aged Harlem woman obsessed with "yellow" young men, as a "tiger-cat" who butts the forehead of his opponent like "an enraged ram goat."⁷⁷

Not only are men endowed with animal characteristics but women as well. McKay exhibits little reserve as he evokes animal imagery to describe the "jungle atmosphere" that hangs over the apartment of Gin-Head Suzy. Miss Suzie and her equally miserable friend, Miss Lavinia Curdy, whom McKay says resembles "an old braying Jenny when she laughs," throw parties so that they can freely pursue the light-skinned youths of their race. Of course, all other females are excluded from these gatherings where Suzie and Lavinia, "like shameless wild animals hungry for raw meat, savagely [search]

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 51-52.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 123.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 72.

the eyes of the males."⁷⁸ On one occasion Jake, at the insistence of Zeddy, walks into one of these renowned parties. He, the thoroughbred, is immediately repulsed by the base "ugliness and nastiness" of Suzy and Miss Curdy. Deciding to leave, he looks around and quips that the women he has been with, like Congo Rose, may be akin to "rearing wild animals," but these two other pitiful women are merely "skunks, tame skunks."⁷⁹

At times, McKay's use of animal imagery seems reminiscent of the negritude that marked his earlier poetry such as that found in "The Harlem Dancer."⁸⁰ At a party held at the flat of Madame Suarez, a local hostess known for providing an evening's worth of dancing, dining, gambling, and drinking, McKay paints a scene in which young beautiful women employed by Madame Suarez are responding to the sound of jazz. They are beautiful animals:

The women, carried away by the sheer rhythm of delight, had risen above their commercial instincts ... and abandoned themselves to pure voluptuous jazzing. They were gorgeous animals swaying there through the dance, punctuating it with marks of warm physical excitement. ...⁸¹

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 68.

⁷⁹Home to Harlem, p. 71.

⁸⁰See Chapter two for a discussion of "The Harlem Dancer."

⁸¹Home to Harlem, p. 108.

But more often than not, McKay's use of animal imagery in his novel can be seen as simply one manifestation of his underlying contempt for Harlem.

In addition to resorting to animal references, McKay was not above using stereotypes in order to pander to the tastes of White readers who had become accustomed to seeing Blacks portrayed in a familiar light. Not even Jake escaped McKay's brush. Despite Jake's touted masculinity and his proud nobility, McKay reports that he "shuffled up" to the couch to caress a woman with whom he wishes to make love.⁸² McKay's use of the word "shuffle" here could have no purpose other than to foist upon his protagonist some elements of the minstrel tradition for the satisfaction of those White readers uncomfortable accepting the idea of a Black lover merely walking up to a woman and making love to her.

Finally, it appears that McKay rummaged through a bag of traditional American stereotypes of Blacks and plucked out two characters; a razor-toting strikebreaker named Liver-Lip and a friend of Zeddy's by the name of Strawberry Lips. It could be argued that these portrayals are not types at all but merely seem so because of McKay's uninhibited penchant for delving into areas that proved embarrassing for Black progressives who concerned themselves with presenting a

⁸²Ibid., p. 115.

positive Negro image before the public. Had these characters functioned in roles that advanced some aspect of the novel, perhaps McKay could not be accused of creating them as devices for White entertainment, objects of ridicule and derision designed to sell books. But alas, they exist to advance no point.

McKay describes Liver-Lip, whom we meet in a pool room after a group of White men have beaten him and his gang for strikebreaking, as a "blue-black lad whose name comes from the plankiness of his lips."⁸³ Although the White men injure Liver-Lips' head and arm, he brags to Jake about his ultimate victory because of his skill with the razor:

...I got out mah shaving steel and draws it down the goosey flesh o'one o' them, and, buddy, you shoulda heah him squeal. ... The police? His massive mouth molded the words . . . if they hadn't did entervention I woulda gutted gizzard and kidney outa the white tripe.⁸⁴

If he, Liver-Lip, represents McKay's straddling the fence between free creative expression and sensationalism, then his portrayal of Strawberry Lips falls headlong into racial exploitation. Strawberry Lips is described as,

⁸³Ibid., p. 82.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 47.

burnt-cork black, who was thus nicknamed from the peculiar stage-red color of his mouth. Strawberry Lips was typically the stage Negro. He was proof that a generalization has some foundation in truth. ...⁸⁵

In his description of Strawberry Lips, McKay looks backward to the plantation tradition as he reinforces persistent Black stereotypes. To White readers he says,

...You might live your life in many black belts and arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as a typical Negro--no minstrel coon off the stage, no Thomas Nelson Page's nigger . . . no lineal descendant of Uncle Tom. Then one day your theory may be upset through meeting with a type by far more perfect than any created counterpart.⁸⁶

Like Liver-Lip, Strawberry lips was devised simply to satisfy the White public's appetite for debased Negro caricatures, leaving one critic to charge that stereotypes from the plantation tradition are alive and well in novels such as Van Vechten's Nigger Haven and McKay's Home to Harlem.⁸⁷

Akin to the creation of stereotypes is McKay's surprising acceptance of an offensive popular value system that ridicules and denigrates dark-skinned people. Gin-head

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction, p. 149.

Suzie is described as having a complexion Negroes call "spade or chocolate to the bone." McKay adds that "her eyes shone like big white stars."⁸⁸ Jake is convincing throughout the novel as a man who prefers brown-skinned women. (Felice is described as brown-skinned.) But that does not stop him and Yellow Prince from implying the necessary partnership between dark-skinned women and ugliness. For example, Yellow Prince complains that, although Gin-head Suzy is generous with her liquor, "she is sure black and ugly." Jake agrees, "You said it boy. ...Black and ugly is exactly Suzy."⁸⁹ And Suzy herself reasons that since "yaller men" are more physically appealing and thus are more likely to stray, a woman's desire to be supported for life is best served by a "black plug-ugly" man.⁹⁰

In defense of his portrait of Harlem characters, McKay, in his autobiography, argued that since White writers have been exploiting Black people without the latter receiving a dime, it was not so terrible for a Black writer to exploit his own people and receive some credit for it.⁹¹

⁸⁸Home to Harlem, pp. 237-238.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 61.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 63.

⁹¹A Long Way From Home, p. 314.

McKay's dilemma in this novel is obvious. Although it was his desire to tell a plain story without propaganda, he found himself compelled to thrash out the same contradictory themes that plague much of his other writing. There is the same conflict of instinct versus reason manifested in the relationship between Jake and Ray. As Huggins observes, "He tried to be light and amoral with Jake, yet he was burdened by the heavy seriousness of Ray," Ray who could not allow Jake to drift peacefully in his small world oblivious to the problems of the larger civilization.⁹² There is the same fragmented objective, which sought to promulgate primitivism and condemn it at the same time. He wanted to say that "primitive values were life sustaining and humane," but all he could focus on was the death and disease borne of prostitution, gambling, and violence.⁹³ And finally, there is the same colonial perspective which cannot decide whether to judge American Blacks as noble brothers or "clowns and coons."⁹⁴ Ironically, McKay's Home to Harlem, begun as a colorful, light-hearted journey through Harlem, ends as a heavy-handed indictment of both Harlem and its inhabitants.

⁹²Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 124.

⁹³Ibid., p. 124.

⁹⁴In "My Green Hills of Jamaica," McKay reminisces that Jamaicans thought of American Blacks as "clowns more or less."

When Jake finds Felice at the end of the novel and comes close to shooting his friend Zeddy, he decides to take Felice and escape Harlem. In his judgement, "things have gone too far."⁹⁵

⁹⁵Home to Harlem, p. 300.

Chapter VII

Banjo: The Primitive Spirit in Europe

McKay intended his second novel, Banjo, published in 1929, to be the European counterpart to Home to Harlem. He wanted to explore primitivism on an international scale, at the crossroads of Western civilization, at "the port of all men." In Marseilles, he saw a microcosm in which he could place Black men from all over the world--from Africa, from the Caribbean, from the United States--who for any number of reasons had rejected the staleness and rigidity of Western culture. The Beach Boys are a vagabonding joy-loving group of Black men from all over the world. Some have been stowaways, and some have been seamen who jumped ship to take their chances panhandling along the docks. But they have all come seeking an alternative lifestyle. Through his loosely-constructed plot, his "slice-of-life" technique, McKay is for the most part successful in capturing the light and amoral qualities of their subterranean world. Although there are as many stabbings, shootings, and as many heated squabbles between "touts" (pimps) and their prostitutes as there are in Home to Harlem, in this work, McKay is never heavy-handed or judgmental. The vices he portrays are simply colorful expressions of a non-traditional lifestyle.

As in Home to Harlem, however, McKay again finds it difficult to sustain his vision of primitivism as a valid and worthwhile alternative to a traditional approach to life. His attempts to emphasize those qualities are thwarted once again by his compulsion to evoke the presence of a Ray, who destroys the unity and focus of his book.

The Beach Boys, who have no counterparts in Home to Harlem, express the positive, life-sustaining, joyful side of primitivism. They are innocents who live by their wits. Their lives are one big free-spirited celebration because they are artists who know how to survive. What they cannot or will not buy, they "bum." They bum food, wine, and quite often, after swilling down a day's steal from unwatched kegs, they lie contently on the Mediterranean seashore, sweetly intoxicated and lazily dozing under the noon-day sun. After waking, they bathe in the Rhone, wash their garments, and let them dry slowly in the soft breezy air. Yes, they understand how to live sweet and easy. Of course, all life along the docks is not sweet and joyous, but the Beach Boys take all in their easy stride.

Although the Beach Boys spend a good portion of their day bumming around the docks, the Ditch is what they call home. The Ditch is McKay's most important symbol in the novel because it sets the atmospheric flavor of the book. It

"altogether" one of them. Even though he panhandles like them, he has a sense of personal integrity that will not allow him to "make a happy business" of it like them. He often finds himself unable to tolerate the insults they have to endure and the cruel manner in which they are often turned down.⁴ Another incident which exemplifies Banjo's superiority and which possibly led one critic to charge that, in Banjo, McKay insults Blacks for the pleasure of White readers,⁵ occurs soon after Banjo joins the Beach Boys. A ship's officer allows the bums around the dock (not just the Beach Boys but others as well) to come up on the deck of the ship to eat discarded food, "thick long slices of boiled beef, immense whole boiled potatoes, pork and beans, and lettuce." Banjo stands back repulsed at the disgusting display of manners exhibited by the men as they rush to the food like hogs, "elbowing and snapping at the other to get his hand in first." He cannot allow himself to fall into that brutish revelry. With "anger and contempt," he watches them "stuffing themselves, smacking, grunting, and blowing with the disgusting noises of brutes." Finally, after the swinish feast turns into a food fight, with porridge and potatoes flying in different directions, the ship's cook comes out on deck to tell the men that they are a "good foh

⁴Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 71.

⁵Aubrey Bowser, "[Review of Banjo]," Amsterdam News, May 8, 1929 in Cooper Stranger and Pilgrim, p. 584.

nothing" lot.⁶ When one of the Beach Boys, Buggy, asks him why he will not at least "put some a this heah stuff under [his] shirt," in his reply, Banjo makes plain those standards he must live by that distinguish him from the others:

Theah's some things that this heah boy won't evah get used to. ... I heah that officer call you all 'a damned lot a disgusting niggers,' and I don't want no gitting used to that. You fellas know what the white man think about niggers and you-all ought to do better than you done whe he 'low you on his ship to eat that dawggone grub. I take life easy like you-all, but I ain't nevah gwine to lay mahself wide open to any insulting cracker of a white man.⁷

Another positive quality that both Jake and Banjo share is their irresistible appeal to women. Long before Banjo joins the Beach Boys, their previous leader, Malty, had unsuccessfully attempted to gain the attention of a much admired prostitute whom the Beach Boys befriend on occasions. But when Latnah sees Banjo, she falls in love with him immediately and takes him as her lover.⁸ And for his part, Banjo takes her as effortlessly as he takes all women. However, he refuses to allow his relationship with her to violate his own sense of dignity and independence. He rejects her demands that he play his banjo for only those

⁶Banjo, pp. 40-41.

⁷Banjo, p. 42.

⁸Ibid., p. 32.

listeners who pay. He tells her that no woman has ever dominated him and no woman ever will. To his friend, Malty, who later censures him about his seeming lack of appreciation for Latnah, Banjo boasts, "...I ain't gwina bury mah head under no woman's skirt and let her cackle ovah me."⁹

And finally, Banjo, like Jake, has an inordinate exuberance for life that inspires those who have contact with him. To him, life is a holiday made merrier by his joy-making and his banjo. To one of the Beach Boy members of his little orchestra who complains about the endless round of bistros they bring music to, Banjo quips, "The joy stuff a life ain't nevah finished for this heah strutter. ...Ise got moh joy stuff in mah whistle than you're got in you' whole meager-dawg body."¹⁰ Even the immigration officials at the American consulate in Marseilles are affected by Banjo's free and easy spirit. McKay writes that the men "liked his presence" and his sense of adventure and imagination.¹¹ At some point in the story, Banjo becomes separated from his group because of the changing economic tides sweeping through Marseilles. Consequently, he finds it necessary to take on a job as a coal worker. After his brief departure, it becomes immediately evident that Banjo is the genie who brings a

⁹Ibid., pp. 26-27.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹Ibid., p. 12.

magic vibrancy to the other characters. McKay writes that "his going away with his instrument left them leaderless and they fell apart." Now that Banjo was gone "the spell was broken."¹²

Throughout much of the novel, Banjo retains his position as natural leader by virtue of his vagabond philosophy, his sense of independence, integrity, and his understanding of how to play the game. Banjo's willingness to play by the rules of the game is graphically demonstrated when he calmly accepts an undeserved beating by the French police, reasoning that "you can't get away with the stuff all the time."¹³ His infectious vagabond presence along with the light-hearted bantering of the Beach Boys succeeds much of the time in keeping Banjo a novel of primitive positive joy making within the confines of Marseilles. But when Ray (the same Ray from Home to Harlem) appears, the novel abruptly loses unity and focus. His presence symbolizes McKay's inability to separate his fiction from the conflicting voices within his mind.

Ray is first introduced to the reader in chapter six when he rescues a confused Banjo from the wrath of a French-speaking waitress.¹⁴ Shortly afterwards, they become

¹²Ibid., pp. 22-23.

¹³Ibid., pp. 262-263.

¹⁴Banjo, pp. 63-64.

friends, and, like Banjo, Ray becomes an "honorary Beach Boy," roaming the streets of Marseilles, tasting the primitive life. Although McKay makes an attempt to portray Ray as a fictional character functioning within the fabric of Banjo's spontaneous world, what he really represents in the novel is McKay's uncontrollable compulsion to superimpose himself--his own personal background as well as his social, political and philosophical views--upon his fiction.

As in Home to Harlem, like McKay, Ray is the expatriate who must depend on the kindness of friends in order to keep body and soul together so that he can write. Consequently, like McKay, he is "always writing panhandling letters to his friends" so that he feels a certain loss of his own creative spirit and individuality.¹⁵ He tells Banjo and the Beach Boys that at one particularly difficult time in his life, he was forced to pose nude at a studio in Paris.¹⁶ It comes as no surprise that McKay, too, worked for a while as a nude model in Paris in order to earn his "daily bread."¹⁷ Throughout Banjo the reader is treated to a sampling of McKay's own personal and literary preferences. For example,

¹⁵Ibid., p. 65. McKay often wrote begging letters to friends asking them for money and favors. See letters from McKay to Walter White, August 4, 1925, September 9, 1925, November 25, 1925, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress, and see Chapter 7.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁷See A Long Way From Home, p. 253.

we learn--through Ray's professions of his own idiosyncrasies--that McKay dislikes being singled out as a poet.¹⁸ And McKay considers prose a higher art than poetry. Ray echoes McKay's critical philosophy when he lectures a young would-be writer. He tells Crosby that some day "youth" passes "from the colorful magic of poetry to the architectural rhythm of prose."¹⁹

McKay himself received that same lecture from his mentor Frank Harris who told him that for the artist "[p]oetry comes first"; and then "prose follows with maturity."²⁰

Not only do Ray's personal history and literary preferences directly express McKay's own, but, throughout much of the novel, McKay sacrifices his rather slim storyline so that Ray can deliver a series of speeches which reflect the same social and political ideas he himself expressed on so many occasions: color discrimination, criticism of the Negro middle class, and the dilemma of the Black intellectual. Throughout Banjo there are interminable arguments among the Beach Boys about race and color discrimination, leaving one to ponder why free spirits who

¹⁸Banjo, pp. 114. And see A Long Way From Home, pp. 114-116.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 264.

²⁰A Long Way From Home, p. 20.

escaped society because of its absurdity would spend a major portion of their precious time debating. Eventually, one realizes that their discussions of color establish a springboard for McKay's pent-up anger and frustration regarding the color discrimination he experienced in the United States. In one discussion, Ray avows that he hates civilization because of its attitude toward people of color. Civilization, says Ray, "robs" the Black man of his own sense of humanity, so that he is ever conscious of his black skin. Consequently, it is not uncommon to see,

Educated Negroes ashamed of their race's intuitive love of color . . . ashamed of Congo-sounding laughter, ashamed of their complexion (bleaching out), ashamed of their strong appetites. . . .²¹

McKay voiced much the same sentiments in many of his essays, especially in his review of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake's Shuffle Along, in which he took Negro critics to task for suggesting that the Negro "get the warmth, color, and laughter out of his blood," if he wants the approval of the larger White culture.²²

²¹Banjo, pp. 164-165.

²²"A Negro Extravaganza," The Liberator 4 (December 1921): 25.

In his autobiography McKay wrote, "What, then, was my main psychological problem? It was the problem of color. Color consciousness was the fundamental of my restlessness."²³ Among the Harlem writers, it seems that he was most plagued by color. And so quite naturally, Ray, the artist, the intellectual, the sensitive human being, was more deeply plagued by the stings of color discrimination than were the Beach Boys. To him racial prejudice seemed his own private hell. For those people of pure instinct like Banjo, racial discrimination was rather easy to handle, but, for a thinking man like him, racial discrimination meant always having his intellect consciously guiding his natural instincts. "Always he was caught by the sharp afterthought of color, as if some devil's hand jerked a cord to which he was tethered in hell."²⁴ McKay expressed much the same painful, personal response to discrimination after he, a drama critic assigned to review a play, was relegated to the balcony of the theater. He charged that in "the world-embracing Anglo-Saxon circus, the intelligence, the sensibilities of the black clown were slapped without mercy."²⁵

²³A Long Way From Home, p. 245.

²⁴Banjo, p. 164.

²⁵A Long Way From Home, p. 145. Also see Review of "He Who Gets Slapped," The Liberator 5 (May 1922): pp. 24-25.

In Banjo, McKay not only imposes his own obsession with color discrimination upon his characters, but he also uses Ray to continue his war against the Negro middle class, a war fought by McKay in many of his early essays and especially in his social history of Harlem, Harlem: A Negro Metropolis. First of all, it is Ray's contention that there is no such thing as a Black middle class. Using his West Indian cultural perspective as a standard, Ray considers American Negro society a farce. In one of his verbal marathons with the Beach Boys, Ray attacks Goosey (one of the Beach Boys) for requesting that Ray write a story about fashionable upper-class American Blacks who are making a name for themselves in Paris. Ray tells him that back in Haiti, the upper class status was reserved for only those Blacks who had "big money and property and power," unlike the situation in the United States where lowly school teachers and government clerks formed groups and ordained themselves members of the higher classes.²⁶ In his autobiography, McKay levied the same charges against the so-called Negro elite: he argued that such a group did not exist in the United States,²⁷ and like Ray, he reinforced his contention with his own West Indian cultural bias. It is well documented that McKay found forming friendships among the Negro elite in America a difficult task. But it is interesting to note that his

²⁶Banjo, p. 116.

²⁷A Long Way From Home, p. 319.

discomfort with educated Blacks extended to his sojourn in France. Although there were many intellectual Blacks as well as Whites residing on the Left Bank, McKay preferred living life among the uneducated Negroes in Marseilles.²⁸

Not only does McKay cram into his fiction his own obsessions with color and his strained relationship with the Negro middle class, but he also imposes upon his own dilemma of instinct versus rationalism, or the values of Western civilization versus those of a non-traditional lifestyle.

On one level, McKay's novel seeks to indict many of the values of Western society. Ray accuses Americans of spreading the plague of commercialism and materialism around the rest of the world without making an effort to understand fully the value systems that operate in other cultures.²⁹ Along with this cancerous spread of commercialism comes an international form of racism; for the Americans, the reputed industrial conquerors around the world, have exported their hatred of the Black man along with their material luxuries.

²⁸Stephen Bronz, Roots of the Negro Racial Consciousness, p. 83.

²⁹McKay levies these same charges in "Boyhood in Jamaica," Phylon 13, 2 (2nd quarter 1953): 143.

Ray emphasizes this phenomenon as he charges that attitudes for or against Negroes around the world are controlled by "the exigencies of the white man's business." He notes,

Business! Prejudice and business. In Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa, America, those were the two united terrors confronting the colored man. He was the butt of the white man's indecent public Prejudices. ...Prejudices. Prejudices like the stock market--curtailed, diminishing, increasing changing chameleon-like, according to place and time. ...³⁰

One evening the Beach Boys and Ray come face to face with the long tentacles of racism when they happen to walk into the British-American Bar in the Ditch. Their gay party mood is quickly killed by the icy stares and hostile remarks from the American and British patrons.³¹

Besides polluting the world with excessive commercialism, the West, according to Ray, is also responsible for smothering the world with the false, sterile philosophy of Christianity. He charges that "the world-conquering and leveling machine" of capitalism has

³⁰Banjo, p. 193. Also, in "Soviet Russia and the Negro," The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 98, McKay warns Blacks that as capitalism spreads around the world, especially in Europe, Americans will have a greater opportunity to influence world politics and social attitudes; consequently, it is necessary for all "struggling minorities of the United States" to come together to bring their "grievances" before the world.

³¹Ibid., pp. 191-192.

traditionally relied upon Christianity as an ally in subjugating the minds of people everywhere, even the minds of intellectuals. "It was depressing to [Ray] that the energy of so many great intellects of the modern world had been . . . vitiated in a futile endeavor" to keep alive the mysticism of Jesus.³²

To Ray's way of thinking, most simple peoples are victimized by Christianity, and even he once fell victim to its appealing lure of faith and goodness when he left some manuscripts and books at the Christian Seamen's Mission for safe keeping. However, when he returned for his articles, he discovered that they had been stolen. He blames his misfortune on his momentary relapse into religious faith. Scolding himself, he mutters,

That's where I get plugged up for fooling with Christian charity. . . . I've never believed in the thing and yet I went messing with that damned mission with the Archbishop of Canterbury's angel flying over it. Better I had left my stuff in the African Pub.³³

³²Banjo, p. 66. In A Long Way From Home, pp. 24-25, McKay revealed much of the same sentiments as Ray when he expressed his disappointment at his mentor Frank Harris lecturing him about the sanctity of Jesus. McKay says that he answered Harris by suggesting that he thought the adoption of Christianity was "the curse of Western civilization" because it implies a certain hypocrisy: Western civilization needs force and exploitation to endure, but Jesus exemplifies weakness and denial.

³³Banjo, p. 236.

Finally, in Banjo, Ray charges that the West, with its deadening materialism, has robbed individuals of their animal vitality and sexual naturalness. Ray's aversion to sexual spontaneity and his inhibition is indicative of his Western orientation. Although he preaches that sex is natural to primitive peoples and problematical only to Whites, he must admit that he finds "something fundamentally cruel about sex."³⁴ Unlike the Beach Boys, who see sex as a natural aspect of their lives, Ray sees sex as "alien to his nature."³⁵

McKay suggests that a natural alternative to the stagnating morality of the West is the primitivistic life-style of Banjo and the Beach Boys. We see them operate freely and spontaneously away from the larger society, living solely by mother wit and instinct. Even Ray, the Western-educated writer, implies a rejection of Western civilization and an acceptance of primitivism when he throws in his lot with the Beach Boys and attempts to savor their rich animal spirit. He "loved being with them in constant physical contact, keeping warm within." He felt that they could teach him, a man bowed down with intellectualism, "how to live--how to exist as a black boy . . . and rid his conscience of the used-up hussy of white morality."³⁶ And

³⁴Ibid., p. 252.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 321-322.

when the story operates on its natural, logical level, it is Ray who becomes "the disciple" to the "free-spirited" philosopher Banjo.³⁷

But forced upon the natural logic of the story is McKay's dilemma. As in Home to Harlem, he contradicts the obvious premise by implying that Ray, castrated by Western culture and therefore unequal to the easy-going milieu of Banjo and the Beach Boys, is the ultimately superior character. Ironically, his sensitivity and familiarity with Western culture make him so.

Just as in Home to Harlem, McKay has Ray make speeches that prove to readers that he is sensitive and well-versed in Western learning, thus certainly not an individual to be lumped among the panhandling characters that inhabit the Ditch. Time and again, the reader is treated to an elaborate passage whose sole purpose is to display the expressions of a properly cultivated mind. Even though all of the Beach Boys, including Banjo, are vagabonds, surviving each day by virtue of their wits and love of adventure, Ray makes it clear to the reader that his own penchant for the vagabond life stems from some grand motivation. Unlike his purposeless acquaintances, he wanders so that he can write:

³⁷Singh, The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, p. 164.

Since he had turned his back on Harlem he had done much voyaging, sometimes making a prolonged stay in a port whose aspect had taken his imagination. He had not renounced his dream of self-expression.³⁸

Ray's compulsion to write succeeds in distinguishing him significantly from the Beach Boys. In their limited world, they have no dream, no goals, no idols; but he has Tolstoy. "For Tolstoy was his ideal of the artist as a man."³⁹ It is Tolstoy, the writer vagabond, with whom Ray feels a natural identification and not Banjo the hedonist panhandler:

It was strange to Ray himself that he should be so powerfully pulled toward Tolstoy when his nature, his outlook, his attitude to life, were entirely turned away from the ideals of the great Russian. Strange that he who was so heathen and carnal, should feel and be responsive to the intellectual superiority of a fanatic moralist.⁴⁰

Ray remarks that he admired Tolstoy not so much for his "mighty art," but rather for his unending "restless" search to find himself.⁴¹

³⁸Banjo, p. 65.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 65-66.

⁴¹Ibid.

In a chapter entitled "Reaction," McKay's voice becomes so strong and intrusive that he finds it necessary to separate Ray physically from the fabric of the novel. The author tells us that Ray takes a room away from the Ditch to be near a young American acquaintance. Crosby has asked Ray to move out of the Ditch so they can communicate regularly. When Ray leaves the Ditch, he not only severs communication with the Beach Boys, but he also condemns their primitive lifestyle by suggesting a preference for Crosby's more intellectual companionship.

For Ray, who is keen and sensitive, the Beach Boys fulfill only the basest part of him. Crosby, however, satisfies a higher need. Ray says that being with Crosby "was a solitary delight of the spirit" that quite differed from "the animal joy he felt" whenever he was in the company of those from the Ditch. When he was with Crosby he felt a keen intellectual energy and stimulation, but, whenever he was with the Beach Boys, "thought was in abeyance and he was mindlessly vegetating."⁴² As in the case of the Beach Boys, Ray uses the young white representative of middle-class America as a sounding board for many of McKay's own pet issues, from the treatment of Blacks by imperialist France to his annoyance at being called "Joseph" (a familiar term suggesting servitude) by a mere waiter.⁴³ These speeches do

⁴²Ibid., pp. 260-261.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 270-274.

nothing to advance the action of the novel. The Crosby episode, obviously superimposed upon the novel, clarifies McKay's discomfort with unconditioned primitivism. He needed to have present the character who most resembled him in education and philosophy in order to raise an objection to the amoral world inhabited by the others.

The ambivalences that plague Banjo are similar to those that plague Home to Harlem, and that point is emphasized when in the conclusion of Banjo, Jake from Home to Harlem jumps off a ship docking in the Marseilles port. McKay actually refers to him in the novel as "Home-to-Harlem Jake." He has become what one would expect him to become after his sobering association with Ray, a reformed traditionalist. He has married Felice, the prostitute, and they now have a son, whom they have named Ray. Jake says he wants him to be educated like Ray "and write poems."⁴⁴ Indeed, such sentiments leave no doubt that in the Ray-Jake relationship, Ray's non-primitive perception of life has prevailed. And similarly, after reading Banjo, the reader must conclude that Ray's philosophy of life will leave a dominating pall upon the free and easy lifestyle that existed in the primitive world of Banjo and the Beach Boys before Ray's arrival.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 293.

According to one critic, McKay, through Ray, twisted his light, exotic story into a blatant personal attack against Western civilization.⁴⁵ There is little doubt that McKay wanted Banjo to be a clear indictment of Western civilization and a "decisive" affirmation of a Banjo-like lifestyle. But his insistence of the heavy-handed verbiage of Ray, "whose intellect will never allow him to be a Banjo," destroys his plans.⁴⁶

Despite McKay's failure in Banjo to achieve a unified philosophy, and despite his own confession that the novel fails to "run smoothly" because of its being "clogged up with the problem of the Negro,"⁴⁷ one cannot entirely dismiss the book as a totally failed experiment in primitivism. First of all Banjo's free and easy perception of life is never really destroyed by Ray's rigid Western views; despite Ray's opinions, Banjo remains secure and independent within himself. And, finally, at the very end of the novel, it is Banjo who challenges Ray to run off with him to explore the world, leaving one critic to liken Banjo to a Huck Finn who leads Jim to the adventure of his life.⁴⁸ Because McKay

⁴⁵Huggins, The Harlem Renaissance, p. 176.

⁴⁶Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 71.

⁴⁷McKay to James Ivy, September 9, 1929, in Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 147.

⁴⁸Singh, The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, p. 52.

allows Banjo's charismatic personality to shine through so triumphantly in the glare of Ray's opposing vision, it is not unreasonable to believe that had he written a third novel in the genre of Home to Harlem and Banjo, he would have been able to abandon Ray as the superimposed spokesman.

Chapter VIII

Banana Bottom: Jamaica versus Western Culture

In 1933, McKay turned away from writing novels about the exploits of expatriates "living on the edge of society" and turned his attention to depicting the lives of characters "rooted in the landscape."

When McKay published his last novel Banana Bottom in 1933, scholars and critics declared that he had finally reconciled the disparate elements within himself. At last he had forged a synthesis between the world of instinct and the world of reason. In Banana Bottom Bita Plant, a West Indian girl, has returned to her native Jamaican home after spending seven years in England receiving a proper British education. She was afforded that opportunity by the Craigs, a White missionary couple residing in Jamaica, who send the twelve-year-old Bita abroad (with her father's permission of course) after she has been sexually molested by Crazy Boy Adair, a deranged Jamaican musician. It is the Craig's hope that Bita will return to them properly schooled in the conventions of English culture so that she will be capable of assuming many of the responsibilities they now bear at the mission at Jubilee, such as ministering to the souls of the West Indian natives.

Bitá does not disappoint them. Not only has she mastered the basic objectives of her English training, but she has excelled beyond everyone's expectations. McKay writes that what the Craigs had achieved in Bitá was "impressive." When she returns to Jubilee after a seven-year absence, the townsfolk are speechless to behold "the developed brown beauty."¹ Bitá not only impresses them with her cultured elegance but with her newly learned abilities. So confident are the Craigs in her skill as an accomplished pianist that on her first Sunday at Jubilee, they arrange for Bitá to accompany the renowned Coloured Choristers in a musical recital. Determined to test Bitá's competence, and in their own way show her that they are not intimidated by her education, the group delivers their song in a manner designed to challenge her skills. Bitá passes their test with no difficulty, even though she has practiced the music just once. The Choristers are profuse in heaping praise upon her performance as they shout, "Perfect accompaniment! Welcome to Jubilee!"²

Yet Bitá, who is the successful native returned, must now live in an environment that values intuition over reason, spontaneity over restraint--an environment that can accept the naturalness of sex as easily as it can accept the warmth

¹Banana Bottom, p. 1.

²Ibid., p. 2.

of the sun. Early in the novel, McKay makes plain the stark contrast between the Craigs' (Priscilla and Malcolm) view of life and that of the natives. Because of the gap that separates the two perspectives, one assumes that Bitá, who has been submerged into a Western value system, must cross a wide chasm in order to regain a place in her native culture.

McKay suggests that, unlike the Anglo/Saxon Protestants who are weighed down by a strict, rigid moral code, the West Indians remain free and light, blessed by a code of behavior which allows for flexibility and an understanding awareness of human nature. Sister Phibby Patroll, a village character, has been "read out of church membership exactly three times" for being a "moral backslider." She has been guilty of such crimes as abusing her position as midwife by engaging in sexual intercourse with the waiting father, becoming drunk while helping to prepare a body for burial, and carrying malicious gossip from one household to another. Yet she is forgiven and taken back into the fold time and time again because, according to McKay, in communities like Banana Bottom it is,

commonplace for people to fall from grace and return again and again, as if their native philosophy was that in the enjoyment of life there must be constant sin and repentance.³

³Ibid., p. 89.

At the center of the natives' implied moral laxity is their free and natural acceptance of sex. They take sex as easily as they take life. In fact, adhering to an iron-clad moral line is so difficult that many young West Indians falls short of their professional goals because the "rigid respectability and the moral strain" cause them to lose footing and fall "back upon the mass" and into the "sweet snare of the flesh."⁴ There seemed to be few native women in Banana Bottom who escaped the rite of early sex or sex outside the bonds of marriage. Such practices as concubinage was a way of lie, and no child of such an arrangement need hold his head down in shame. For example, Belle Black, the leading soloist of the Coloured Choristers and friend to Bitá, was the daughter of Nias Black, the village drummer, and his concubine. Although Belle's parents of their own accord chose not to be church members, they were included in all the festivities sponsored by the church.⁵ And Belle, like her parents, mingled with the church folk, but resisted membership. Her decision was fine with them. Belle once remarked, "I got to follow mi feelings. ...Ain't nobody loosing and tying mi pettycoat string ... but meself when I get ready."⁶

⁴Ibid., p. 54.

⁵Ibid., p. 39.

⁶Ibid., p. 76.

Even Anty Nommy, Bitas's aunt who raised her after her mother's death, is not exempt from the uninhibited sexual mores of the island folk. After her sister's death, Anty Nommy--one year later--marries Jordan Plant, her sister's husband and Bitas's father. To the marriage, Anty Nommy brings a young son, whom the villagers suggest is Jordan Plant's possibly conceived while Jordan was courting Bitas's mother. But there is no fuss. Anty Nommy and the child are embraced by all.⁷

Needless to say, the casual approach the natives take toward sex mightily disturbs Priscilla Craig and her fellow ministers in Christ. She complains to her colleagues that their problem [the natives'] is a "lack of restraint." Certainly they are not "oversexed," she reasons. But,

they seemed to lack that check and control that was supposed to be distinguishing of humanity of a higher and more complex social order. ...⁸

Without a doubt Priscilla Craig represents the antithesis of instinct. Her Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethic and her British orientation will not permit her to accept the unbridled passions she sees about her. Her tendency is to suppress

⁷Ibid., p. 52.

⁸Ibid., p. 16.

spontaneity, not only in the natives' lives but in her own. Out of her passionless but respectful marriage is born a son, whom the natives call Patou.⁹ He, the only fruit of the Craig's union, symbolizes the death of their family line, for Patou's undeveloped mind and body trap him in a pathetic world of isolation. Although Priscilla Craig strives to demonstrate motherly concern for Patou, she is repulsed by his presence.¹⁰

Despite her British tutelage and her estrangement from Jamaica, Bitá remains a child of her native clime; she does not lose her love for exotic island colors and the natural intuitive approach to life of her homeland. Although she shares a bond of education with Ray of Home to Harlem and Banjo, she differs from him in three ways. Bitá returns home to rediscover her land and herself; unlike Ray, she is not launched upon the world a restless, homeless vagabond. Her education is perceived by her as a completed thing, an accomplished task that must fit somewhere within the fabric of home and heart. Also, unlike Ray, who uses his learning to condemn the primitive world that surrounds him, Bitá never sets herself up as superior to her own people: she is never condescending nor patronizing. And finally, because her

⁹Patou is the dialect word for screech-owl. The name was given to the Craig child because he had the habit of suddenly doubling up and making eerie noises.

¹⁰Banana Bottom, p. 27.

education appears to have merely enhanced not annihilated her own bright nature, she never loses her identity as an individual or as a West Indian. Consequently, Bitá, unlike Ray, is able to embrace the best of both worlds.

A few days after her return from England, Bitá accompanies the Craigs' cook Rosyanna to the market, a gathering place of the peasants, at Jubilee. There she experiences a wave of peace and contentment that comes only to one who feels at home. In a lyrical passage, McKay describes Bitá's emotional responses as she feasts upon the richness and exotic simplicity of her Jamaican world:

Bitá mingled in the crowd, responsive to the feeling, the colour, the smell, the swell and press of it. It gave her the sensation of a reservoir of familiar kindred humanity into which she had descended for baptism. ... The noises of the market were sweeter in her ears than a symphony. Accents and rhythms, movements and colors, nuances that might have passed unnoticed if she had never gone away, were now revealed to her in all their striking detail. ...¹¹

Unlike other natives who return to Jamaica haughty and arrogant after experiencing a European education, and sometimes even despising the very West Indian village from which they had received their earliest nurturing, Bitá, as a consequence of having been abroad, feels all the more urge

¹¹Ibid., pp. 40-41.

"to touch and fondle" all the life she sees before her,¹² including the native food. On Emancipation Day, August 1, a West Indian holiday, Bitá is allowed to leave the mission home of the Craigs to visit her father and Anty Nommy. On that occasion, Anty Nommy places before Bitá and her friends an abundant meal cooked the West Indian way. Bitá, falling enthusiastically into feasting, remarks that although she has been dining on native food at the mission, the Europeans prepare it in "their own way," making it "not just the same."¹³

Bitá does not simply observe and appreciate the native culture, but despite those natives and Europeans who wish to place her up on a pedestal, she totally identifies with the peasants by becoming one of them. At the market Bitá purchases a pineapple and totes it homeward on her head, despite the hysterics of Rosyanna, who tells her that cultured West Indians consider such an activity "disgraceful."¹⁴ And although Bitá is aware that Priscilla Craig wishes her to don European style dresses for special occasions, at the Emancipation picnic, she decides to "go bandanna," the wearing of bright vivid colors. Bitá chooses a copper-red dress. She attributes her choice of a color

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 41.

that resembles "the under side of a star-apple leaf," to her peasant soul: Bitá "loved bandanna colours, like all the peasant folk of the West Indies."¹⁵

And like many other West Indian natives, Bitá remains free of sexual inhibitions; she sees sex as a natural response to physical urges. The rape that sent twelve-year-old Bitá to England was not rape at all. It was Bitá who enticed the twenty-five-year-old insane musical genius, Crazy Bow, to lovemaking. It was she who climbed upon his chest that day in the field as he tried to ignore her and play his fiddle under a low shady tree. Even though he managed to fling her away from him once, she again mounted his chest and began hugging him "passionately." Finally, Crazy Boy lost control and they made love.¹⁶ Since Bitá's father, Jordan Plant, was well off by native standards (he owned the best acreage of any small landowner in Banana Bottom) and since he was a church leader and friend to Malcolm Craig, it was sweet music to the natives to learn that, like any other healthy peasant girl, Bitá managed to fall "in the sweet snare of the flesh."¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 9-10.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 14.

Another incident which testifies to Bitá's easy acceptance of sexual passions occurs after she returns to Jamaica a grown woman. It seems that Bitá's European training has done little to cause her to view her naked body as something other than a natural facet of herself. On one warm afternoon, Bitá slips naked into an isolated pond where she used to swim nude as a young girl. McKay writes that Bitá "turned on her back to enjoy the water cooling on her breasts...dreaming there between fancy and reality." But soon her meditation is violated by Tack Tally, a local dandy, who spies her swimming naked in the pond and childishly hides her clothes under an apple tree. Even Tack's teasing does not cause Bitá to become shamefaced about her body.¹⁸

Bitá's inclination to assume a value system outside the perimeters of her Western orientation coupled with her stubborn sense of independence causes conflict between her and Priscilla Craig. Mrs. Craig has made it no secret that she and her husband hope for Bitá to become a proper lady and marry the Craig's protege, Harold Newton Day--a rather pompous, ridiculous young native who is studying to become a minister. It is the hope of Priscilla and Malcolm Craig that someday Bitá and Harold will succeed them as head of the mission, and in that way they will have made their contribution to Christianity by elevating a Black couple to

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 117-118.

stewardship. But Bitá, a naturally free spontaneous soul despite her education, is repulsed by the sterile, conforming young would-be minister and prefers the young flashy dandy, Hopping Dick, who comes calling on Bitá at the Craigs' wearing cream-flannel "pantaloons," a blue-grey tweed cutaway and sporting tan gloves and a gold-headed cane. Mrs. Craig, irritated by his colorful presence, remarks that he resembled "a low peacock." But when she adds to his list of faults the tendency to "[murder] his h's" and an inclination to speak "in a vile manner," Bitá quips that her parents also speak broken English, thus defending the validity of a culture that approaches life differently.¹⁹

Bitá seeks friendships with not only Hopping Dick, but with others who live counter to Western middle-class expectations because of their freewheeling lifestyle and lack of sexual inhibitions. Bitá prefers such people, and they in turn gravitate toward her and warmly encourage her to explore her native urges by attending gatherings considered socially unacceptable by the mission as well as those persons aspiring toward a middle-class social status. At first reluctant to attend, Bitá, in an act of defiance, agrees to accompany her friends and finds herself caught up in the vortex of these primitive celebrations.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 209-210.

It is at one such celebration that Bitá's native roots are revealed as undeniably strong and enduring. There is no doubt that the West Indian passion of her soul will prevail over any tinge of Western affectation. Despite the fact that Bitá goes to her first tea meeting (an island equivalent to the rent party in Harlem where peasants sell rum, orange wine, ginger beer, and cakes to raise money for various pressing circumstances) as simply an observer of the peasant spectacle of dancing and singing, the sound of the drum strikes a cord within her and forces her body to respond. Not able or willing to deny the native longing within her, she abandons all restraints and dances with the others;

Her body was warm and willing for that native group dancing. It came more natural to her than the waltzes and minuets. ...Bitá danced freely released, danced as she had never danced ...dancing down the barrier between high breeding and common pleasures under her light stamping feet until she was one with the crowd.²⁰

To emphasize further the vibrancy and deep authenticity of Bitá's response to native music, as opposed to that of a spectator merely fascinated by the antics of the West Indians, McKay writes that Bitá, after dancing, glances at Squire Gensir, a wealthy Englishman living in Jamaica among the peasants. She wonders about the extent to which he, a

²⁰Ibid., p. 104.

White man, has been touched by the music. She wonders whether or not his response is "merely cerebral," or whether his "nerves and body cells" were stimulated as were hers.²¹

Bitá's ethnocentric perspective makes it possible for her to release herself quickly from the missionary world of Priscilla Craig. But she finds that retaining her own identity means rejecting the principles that define Priscilla Craig. Bitá rejects Christianity. In a conversation with a friend, she declares that she does not "have to swallow everything the Bible says."²² Then Bitá finds herself rejecting Priscilla Craig's general view of the world. After a while, she knew that it was time to leave the home of Priscilla Craig because she felt a tremendous discomfort to live with a person "whose attitude of life was alien to hers."²³

Bitá's philosophy, one which underlines all of her rebellious actions since arriving at Jubilee, is simply to be no one but herself. To Bitá, the greatest human tragedy is that of a person wishing to be something other than his "natural unchangeable" self.²⁴ Not understanding Bitá's

²¹Ibid., pp. 85-86.

²²Ibid., 132-33.

²³Ibid., p. 211.

²⁴Ibid., p. 169.

ethnocentric perspective, Priscilla Craig, an individual whose own instincts have dried up and who is actually a faithless missionary who detests the people she serves, declares Bitá too "atavistic" for social redemption. Both Bitá and she agree that Bitá must return to her father's village.²⁵

Bitá's return to the home of Jordan Plant signifies her complete acceptance of her heritage. Despite her British education, which guarantees her a special place in Jamaican society, she consciously chooses to live out her life among the simple peasants. Even Bitá's father, Jordan Plant, though troubled by his daughter's abrupt retreat from Jubilee, cannot help taking pride in her commitment to discover home. Her defiance has particular significance to him:

...the presence of this only child, now a cultivated young woman, in his own home made him happy. She had grown out of that soil, his own soil, and had gone abroad only for polishing. Her choosing of her own will to return there filled him with pride. ...²⁶

²⁵Ibid., pp. 225-226.

²⁶Ibid., p. 234.

Bitá represents the culmination of Jordan Plant's life of richness and abundance. Through her accomplishment, he realizes an even higher sense of dignity among the peasants and White missionaries with whom he has been friends.

Back home in Banana Bottom, Bitá is quickly absorbed into the traditions of her mountain village. One such village tradition is that of primitive religious practices. Bitá, once heard confessing her "indifference" toward Christianity,²⁷ is nearly pushed to the peak of her emotions by the "Supple-Jackers," a primitive religious band whom McKay describes as deeply rooted in the peasant culture. These Supple-Jackers manage to break into the evangelical revivalist temple where a cynical and religiously skeptic Bitá sits with her father and several others from the community. Once Bitá hears the unrelenting beat of their toms and sees the rhythmic swaying of their whips, she, like many others of the congregation, feel compelled to follow them out of the rear door of the church. Soon she is emotionally overtaken by the power and energy of their religious rite that seems African in origin. The drums beat furiously, people bounce and whirl, and as they faint, the Supple-Jackers pounce upon them with their whips. Bitá too falls under their spell: She draws "nearer and nearer into the inner circle until with a shriek she [falls] down." In

²⁷Ibid., p. 212.

her frenzied state, her collective conscious invokes ancestral images of "savage rites," "tribal dancing," and "the clashing of triumphant spears."²⁸ Later, a recovered Bitá admits that although she was affected by the Supple-Jackers' magic for only one night, their religion seemed "stranger and stronger" than traditional Christianity.²⁹

Another custom that Bitá throws herself wholeheartedly into is that of the tea meeting. In Jubilee, she had attended one much to the disapproval of Mrs. Craig, but now she could go with complete freedom. McKay writes, "There was nothing to restrain her now from doing the things that did not go against her conscience." There is no one around now who seeks to make her reject her native or peasant identity. She was free now to attend as many tea meetings as she pleased, and she attended many. Appropriately enough, it is at one of these peasant gatherings that she meets the man who will later take her as his wife.³⁰

More than any custom or tradition, Jubban represents Bitá's unequivocal embracing of West Indian values. He is nothing short of an idealization of the Jamaica peasant. He symbolizes the strength and the nobility of the land, and he

²⁸Ibid., pp. 248-250.

²⁹Ibid., p. 250.

³⁰Ibid., p. 274.

is at peace and harmony with nature. McKay writes, "Jubban had a way of coaxing and taming mules and horses and making them work willingly."³¹ When Bitá first notices Jubban, one of her father's strongest and most trusty drayman, she is taken aback by "his frank, broad, blue-black and solid jaws" and his "velvety indigo-black skin."³² He exudes a masculine confidence that Bitá so seldom witnessed in the world from which she has run. Appropriately enough, before Jubban makes his feelings plain to Bitá, he comes to her defense on two occasions: when Arthur Glengly, the mulatto son of a wealthy landowner, calls Bitá (who has rejected his advances) "only a nigger gal"³³ and when Tack Tally maliciously repeats the Crazy Bow story about Bitá's rape.³⁴ It is significant that Jubban uses his fist to defend Bitá's honor. It is the peasant's way--natural and strong. Unlike the other peasants, Jubban is oblivious to Bitá's education as well as of the pretentious social-climbing world outside of the village. He is a man at peace with his own integrity and West Indian identity. Bitá is swept off her feet.³⁵

³¹Ibid., p. 252.

³²Ibid., p. 115; p. 279.

³³Ibid., p. 62.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 68-69.

³⁵Ibid., p. 279.

The marriage of Jubban and Bitá symbolizes McKay's reconciling of Western culture and the natural intuitive spirit. Despite the negative reaction Bitá receives from most of the bourgeois in Banana Bottom (Reverend Lambert refuses to marry the two because he contends that by marrying Jubban, Bitá is "burying her talent and education in the mud"),³⁶ she settles gracefully into a routine peasant life with Jubban. She is contented with him: "She had become used to his kindly-rough gestures, and they had adjusted themselves well to each other."³⁷ They have found a deep abiding earth-bound love, based not upon romanticism, but upon admiration and respect. They had never said "I love you" to each other, but as Bitá reflects, "The thing had become a fact without declaration." Because Bitá found such satisfaction in her union with Jubban, McKay writes that within her mind grew an "intrinsic" love "that . . . flowered out of the mind of her race."³⁸

In Bitá and Jubban, McKay achieves a synthesis. Before Jubban, Bitá is contemptuous of her education, finding in it no meaning. But after discovering a secure place for herself within her own culture, she concludes that the purpose of education is not to dominate one's life so that one winds up

³⁶Ibid., p. 292.

³⁷Ibid., p. 312.

³⁸Ibid., p. 313.

seeking empty degrees and status; but merely to add richness to one's existence, whatever that existence may be.³⁹ Bita's realization that her education is an intrinsic thing within herself is reflected in her attitude toward Jubban. She has no desire to change him or make him "other than what he was," or to force into him "that grace and refinement" local bourgeois types contend is necessary for a person of education. Rather, she has a desire to share her learning with him, to play for him and to read to him.⁴⁰ And for his part, Jubban allows Bita freedom to explore her intellect and express the fruits of her learning, reasoning that just as he excels in cultivating the land and bringing prosperity to their lives, she should excel in those activities for which she was trained. Their union symbolizes a common spiritual bond:

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.⁴¹

Jubban and Bita do more than complement each other, for they are not needy souls. Rather, they are complete individuals who give to each other the permission to be free.

³⁹Ibid., p. 314.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 313.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 313.

Banana Bottom concludes with Bitá's being awakened by the sound of crying from her backyard. It is the cry of her son, Little Jordan (named for her father), who is angry that Anty Nommy has prevented his overstuffing his belly with fruits from the Kidney-Mango tree. As he kicks and yells, Bitá can see that he is willful and strong. He is certainly a loving testament to the rightness of her decision to come home.

Without a doubt, Banana Bottom is McKay's most unified novel. In it he comes close to achieving the synthesis of ideas that had eluded him nearly all of his life. But in this final work of fiction, he is still not prepared to abandon entirely the self-conscious point of view that plagued his first two novels. McKay's insecurity still requires the presence of a Western intellect (other than Bitá's) to validate much of the ethnocentric judgments made by native Jamaicans. In other words, only the approval of Squire Gensir, the British emigrant, can grant authenticity and dignity to the native West Indian culture.

Squire Gensir's existence is testament to McKay's inability to free himself from his colonial past since Gensir is nothing more than a fictionalized portrait of McKay's

British mentor, Walter Jekyll.⁴² McKay's psychological and intellectual dependence on Jekyll during his early years in Jamaica is well documented, and the fact that he invokes his presence in Banana Bottom shows that he is not yet psychologically prepared to detach himself from the sanctioning voice of his Western teacher. Consequently, what is otherwise a thematically unified novel becomes confusing in its need to accommodate McKay's cultural father.

McKay does not portray Gensir with the same honesty and naturalness that he depicts the other characters; he is idealized and romanticized. McKay's subjectivity shines through as he makes Gensir stand larger than life. He is practically worshipped by the West Indian peasants. McKay writes, Squire Gensir "was held in high esteem everywhere."⁴³ Although McKay wishes to suggest that Gensir is admired by the natives because of his modest way of life and genuine interest in West Indian folk culture, it is obvious that

⁴²Throughout the novel, there are striking similarities between Gensir and Jekyll. Also in the author's note in the introduction of the novel, McKay states that all the characters are imaginary, "excepting perhaps Squire Gensir." Finally, Banana Bottom is dedicated to Walter Jekyll.

⁴³Banana Bottom, p. 91.

Gensir's aristocratic origin and his sense of high British culture, and his Western intellect do much to enhance his image among his neighbors (both native and European). McKay says that

it was not just the fact that the Squire was a member of the most self-contained remnant of feudal aristocracy in the world, which made him so generally respected and liked But he also dominated the mind of the gentry because he was a rare intellectual. . .⁴⁴

Just the mention of his name brings out "magical" transformations in people. On one occasion Priscilla Craig is prepared to upbraid Bita for attending a tea meeting. But when Priscilla discovers that Bita attended the meeting in the company of Squire Gensir, her mood softens, and she sees Bita's presence at the tea meeting in a "happier colour."⁴⁵

Even Kojo Jeems, a native West Indian whose raucous tea meetings and spirited drum playing have earned him near legendary status among the islanders, is overcome with emotion when he discovers that Squire Gensir is among the revelers at his home. In a welcoming speech at the start of the festivities, Kojo Jeems says,

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 93.

Wese got here tonight some scrumptious
 visitas and one dat we all most appreciate
 causen he's a gen'man who appreciates
 us too. A big gen'men who showing
 that though he's a highmighty he can
 appreciate us ordinaire folkse an' what
 we doings. ...⁴⁶

And Bitá, herself, looks at Squire Gensir as a man who has within himself "by education and by birth the flowering of that culture she had been sent abroad to obtain." Even in England, where she has an opportunity to visit some of the better homes of her school friends, she has seen no one of his refinement. To her, he is the quintessence of Western Civilization.⁴⁷

Bitá and Squire Gensir's friendship and conversations in Banana Bottom serve much the same function as those of Ray and Crosby in Banjo, which is to allow the educated Black character an opportunity to display learning and intelligence with a cultural peer. In Banjo, Ray finds stimulating dialogue impossible with the Beach Boys, so he has to find Crosby, and in Banana Bottom, Bitá can find no native companion informed enough to discuss meaningfully the great

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 81.

ideas of Western civilization, so she must find a Gensir. However, because of McKay's deference for Jekyll, he casts Gensir as the teacher and Bitá as his eager student. He writes,

He [Gensir] marvelled that Bitá was devouring his profoundest books on religions and their origins and scientific treatises . . . and that she did not merely parrot the ideas she picked up but interpreted them intelligently.⁴⁸

But more than merely clogging up the novel with self-conscious tributes to Walter Jekyll and to Western civilization, the discussions between Bitá and Gensir cause the sudden evolution of an ambivalent Bitá in place of the single-minded young woman who occupied the early part of the novel. Gensir's "superior" self-assurance, Western background, and intellect places him in the position of absolute arbiter of right thinking.

Before Bitá meets Gensir, she is very confident about the value and nobility of her peasant culture. Because she is so plain and truthful about her ethnocentric sentiments, the reader trusts the credibility of her vision and sees her Jamaican world as a viable alternative to Western society. But after Gensir's introduction, Bitá displays tension in her

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 240.

Thinking about instinct and reason. In one conversation, Bitá tells Gensir that because he is an educated White man, he is "a thousand times freer" than the Jamaican natives. When Gensir rejects her premise, replying that the natives know no words such as "freedom" and "restraint" because they are truly free, Bitá asks, "What freedom have they?" To Bitá's way of thinking, the peasants who must dig and plod all day and "never have any fun but tea meetings" cannot possibly be happy. The Western half of her fragmented value system causes her to assume that in order for the peasants to be happy, they should "have had the run of the world," like Squire Gensir. Pre-Gensir Bitá would not have formulated such an argument. Bitá ends her dialogue about freedom by calling the natural instincts of the natives "animal."⁴⁹

And in a very real sense, Squire Gensir is placed in the rather untenable position of teaching Bitá--Bitá the returned native--to appreciate the nuances of her own native culture. Although for most of the early chapters of Banana Bottom, Bitá has convinced the reader of her West Indian perspective, it is Gensir who teaches her that Obeah (the West Indian form of African magic) is a part of her folklore when she denigrates its authenticity. He tells her that Obeah is the spiritual link between her and her ancestors and wonders at her tolerance of the Greek and Roman gods and her intolerance

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 121.

O f Obeah. And, it is Gensir who convinces a shamefaced Bitá that she need not feel embarrassment for her hypnotic response to the magic of the Supple-Jackers since no person could resist submitting to the "authentic power" they had within them.⁵⁰ It is also Gensir who teaches Bitá the superiority of the Anancy stories over many European fables.⁵¹

And, finally, Bitá, who early in the novel is ready to embrace Jamaica as a homeland rich in color and tradition, later declares the island a stark and lonely place as she wonders at Gensir's desire to remain there:

She could not quite believe that he who had grown up a favoured child at the hub of mundane life could be satisfied with existence there in that remote place. With her it was different. She was born to that rude and lonely mountain life. ...⁵²

At this instant, Bitá, under the influence of the sanctioning Western mind of Gensir, sees Jamaica not as a native but as an Anglocentric observer. When Gensir returns to England and eventually dies there, Bitá reasons that perhaps his final departure from Jamaica was best, since his "high intellect

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 253.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 124-125.

⁵²Ibid., p. 123.

and acute intelligence" made it impossible for him to sink completely into "the austere simplicity of peasant life."⁵³ In other words, when Bitá is in the company of Squire Gensir or when she simply reflects upon his existence, she cannot see the synthesis between instinct and reason that she realizes at other times throughout the novel. Her plight is similar to that of McKay, who cannot escape the dominating influence of Walter Jekyll.

Banana Bottom ends ideally with the union of Bitá and Jubban--two supposed independent souls. But even near the conclusion of the novel, McKay clings tenaciously to the image of Squire Gensir as the Great White Father. For example, days before her wedding, Bitá and her bridesmaids go to Kingston to shop. While there, they are denied accommodations at a Black-owned hotel. Even though Squire Gensir, aware of intra-racial discrimination in the capital, has given Bitá a note to pass onto the Black hotel owner, a man he knows, the hotel's light-skinned housekeeper, substituting for her absent employer, will not accept them. Bitá and her party are then forced to sleep in "a cheap unpleasant hotel." Immediately, Bitá dispatches a note to Gensir about her plight, and he arrives on the next

⁵³Ibid., pp. 308-309.

afternoon's train. Of course, he rather efficiently resolves the matter, and certainly not before lecturing the Black man about the proper relations that must exist between Black people.⁵⁴

Not satisfied with having Gensir serve as Bitá's patron saint, McKay forces an intimate connection between Jubban and Gensir that has no basis in the novel. Jubban, whose superiority above other men rests in his independence and secure identity, asks Squire Gensir to be his best man.⁵⁵ McKay strains the limit of common sense when he has this man of the land and its tradition turn away from his own people to request that a foreigner with whom he has had virtually no conversation to speak of serve as his best man. Possibly, McKay wished to tie Jubban into a dependent relationship with Gensir so that in turn his marriage with Bitá would receive Gensir's complete blessing.

Finally, Squire Gensir dies in England and leaves Bitá an inheritance that symbolically tethers the young Jamaican couple to his patronage forever. He leaves Bitá his land, his house, and the possessions contained within it. In addition, he leaves her five hundred pounds. Upon discovering her good fortune, Bitá is emotionally overwhelmed

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 295-298.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 301.

and weeps for joy; but then she collects herself, reasoning that her inheritance serves as vindication for the material rewards she sacrificed by leaving the Craigs at Jubilee. Implied in Bitá's rationale is the belief that she left smothering dependent relationship with the Craigs for a free and open friendship with Squire Gensir. She thinks she has completely liberated herself.⁵⁶ But in a sense she has actually swapped an oppressive and direct tutelage for a benign, subtle one. At the end of the novel, it is Squire Gensir's generosity and teachings that we long remember, and not that of her Jamaican father, Jordan Plant, who harvested much wealth and abundance from the land and made a name for himself among the villagers and missionaries.

However, despite McKay's compelling need to tie Squire Gensir into this Jamaica story, Banana Bottom does not fall into the extreme fragmentation of Home to Harlem and Banjo. When he wrote Banana Bottom, McKay was standing on familiar ground: He knew very well the village of Banana Bottom, its people and its tradition. Consequently, he did not have to rely upon sensationalistic episodes and exaggerated stereotypes to tell his story. Instead, he was able to write a unified, well-crafted work about characters whose lives evolved naturally from the land and the culture. And finally, in Bitá, McKay created a successful protagonist who,

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 309.

despite her occasional lapses into confusion brought on by her over reliance upon the approval of Squire Gensir, had dignity and strength in her own right. In Bitá's story we are able to see beyond the ambivalences and contradictions to what McKay wanted us to see, what he intended us to see. Ultimately, we see the tale of the Black islander who received the benefit of a truly "proper" British education but who despite it returned home in possession of her West Indian soul and identity intact prepared to play out the ritual of life on her own terms.

Chapter IX

Claude McKay: Evolution of a Conservative

In 1944, four years before his death, Claude McKay wrote the following to his friend Max Eastman: "I must announce to you that on October 11, The Feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I was baptized into the Catholic (Roman) Faith."¹ Just four months before McKay's announcement, a frantic Eastman had begged the poet not to yield to religion but to "stand fast" in agnosticism. Eastman pleaded,

"All these years, at such cost and with such heroism, you resisted the temptation to warp your mind and morals in order to join the Stalin Church. Why warp it the other way now for the Catholics? Why not die firm, free and intelligent as you have lived? . . . so sick a finish. . . ."²

Undeterred by Eastman's objections, McKay joined the Catholic Church, explaining that he had always needed religion in his life, that essence of life "divinely" opposed to the rational.³

¹Claude McKay to Max Eastman, October 16, 1944, in Wayne F. Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 304-305.

²Eastman to McKay, June 7, 1944, Wayne F. Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 817-818.

³McKay to Eastman, October 16, 1944, Cooper, in The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 305.

Many acquaintances of McKay's regarded his conversion as an apostasy, a betrayal of integrity, because to them the theme of his life had been independence. Even as a young ten-year old in Jamaica, determined to do his own thinking, he defied his father, the stern Senior Deacon in the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, by greedily ingesting free-thinking literature found in his older brother's library.⁴ And a few years later a young McKay would dramatize his religious independence from his father in a tender lyric poem written in the West Indian dialect memorializing his mother's death. McKay idolized his mother, and her death brought a grieving to his heart that would last a lifetime. Yet throughout "Mother Dear" McKay refuses to accept comfort in notions of immortality offered by revealed religion. In the poem, she is dying, but her senses are acutely fixed upon the natural physical world just outside her bedroom. She whispers,

Husban', I am going'--
 Though de brooklet is a-flowin'
 An' de coolin' breeze is blowin'
 Hark, how strange de cow is mooin',
 An' our Jennie's pigeons cooin'
 While I feel de water growin',
 Climbing high⁵

⁴Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 17.

⁵"Mother Dear," in McKay's Songs of Jamaica, p. 77.

The symptoms connected with his mother's fatal condition, excessive fluid pressing upon the heart ("de water"), are intermingled with the elements of nature. In the poem, the husband of the dying woman, obviously McKay's father, begs his wife to seek solace in the protective tenets of Christianity:

Wife, de parson's prayin'.
 Won't you listen what he's sayin',
 Spend de endin' of your day in
 Christ our Lord?⁶

But despite his admonition, the mother can take comfort only in those things that symbolize ordinary, everyday existence.

But de sound of horses neighin',
 Baain' goats an' donkeys brayin',
 twitt'rin' birds an' children playin'
 was all she heard.⁷

McKay's rejection of the religion of his father gave to the young artist symbolic permission to question and challenge many of the traditions and values of the twentieth century.

For much of his life, McKay would be the "aesthetic radical," the artist who would make a religion of professing the sacredness of his "non-social personality." In the

⁶Ibid., p. 78.

⁷Ibid.

twenties, an age of burgeoning social and political organizations, McKay considered himself "the natural man," willing to be loyal only to himself.⁸ To a friend, he once wrote, "I think intellectuals unworthy of their name when they abdicate the right to independent thinking."⁹ As a matter of fact, McKay's cultivation of the independent spirit affected his relationship with many organizations at their peak during the twenties. His involvement with them was often marked by tentativeness and ambivalence.

For example, his maverick quality drove him to seek affiliation with left-wing radical movements, but it also caused him to establish a distance between him and them. A case in point was McKay's lukewarm relationship with the African Blood Brotherhood, a socialist group composed of West Indians. While McKay served as associate editor of The Liberator, he sponsored various meetings between the Brotherhood and certain members of The Liberator staff. But, although they spent time exchanging ideas, it is interesting, says Wayne Cooper, that no member of the Brotherhood, though many were writers in their own right, ever published in McKay's magazine, and McKay never published in any of their various organs. Probably the reasons for this circumstance

⁸Frederick Hoffman, The Twenties, pp. 382-384.

⁹McKay to James Rorty, "Open Letter to James Rorty," in Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 227.

was the members of the African Blood Brotherhood's "primary orientation toward politics and labor organization," and McKay's toward "art and literature."¹⁰ At any rate, he never compromised his literary preferences. McKay had the same ambivalent relationship with the Communist Party. Despite his espousal of Communist doctrine and his sympathetic regard for socialism,¹¹ he could not fully commit himself to the Communist Party. Near the end of his life, McKay would even deny ever being a Communist, but the facts dispute his claim. He was by all indications a Communist. He was simply not a good Communist because he could never subordinate his own ideas to their dogma.¹²

Although various members of the NAACP did contribute occasionally to The Liberator, and although McKay did form a social relationship with a few members, such as James Weldon Johnson and Jessie Fauset, his deep-seated resentment of their middle-class orientation, their persistent opposition to his defiant brand of negritude because of their concerns with race image, and their total rejection of socialism as an option for Negroes made it impossible for him to seek out a close association with them.

¹⁰Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 334-336.

¹¹Claude McKay, "Soviet Russia and the Negro," Crisis 27 (December 1923-January 1924): 61-65; 114-118, in Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 95-106.

¹²Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 336.

McKay never became a member of any political organization in Harlem or outside of Harlem. Time and again he would boast of his independence from political alliances and would admonish anyone who sought to bind him with one group or another. For example, when Reverend Adam Clayton Powell called McKay a "Trotskyist" because of his beliefs that Negro leaders should be more labor conscious,¹³ McKay fired back by calling Powell an "opportunist" and declaring himself "intellectually independent" and an individual not to be labeled with any "isms." And when George S. Schulyer, Black columnist for the Pittsburgh Courier described McKay as a man "wallowing in the black Fascist Trough" because of his pro-labor union stand, McKay defended his position by admitting that though he was "interested" in progressive labor movements, socialism, and communism, he had never aligned himself with a political party because he believed that the approach of the artist to social problems must differ radically from that of the politician.¹⁴

But despite his apparent hunger for independence, McKay had an opposite side, a pathological need to depend on others. This dependence took two forms: a willingness to submit to the intellectual dominance of others McKay deemed

¹³Adam Clayton Powell "Soap" Amsterdam News (October 30, 1937): 13.

¹⁴Claude McKay, "Labor Steps Out in Harlem," Nation 145 (October 16, 1937): 400-402.

intellectually superior (usually Whites) and an arrogance which permitted him to assume that others less talented owed him a living.

First, in Jamaica, there was Walter Jekyll, a member of the British aristocracy who had taken up residence among the Jamaican peasants. McKay credited Jekyll with helping him attain "complete spiritual development and faith in himself" and revealing to him the nobility of the peasantry and the nobility inherent in Jamaican dialect poetry. McKay admitted, "I never thought that any beauty could be found in the Jamaican dialect. Now this Englishman had discovered beauty and I could see where my poems were beautiful."¹⁵

As servants are often impressed by the high station of their masters or employers, McKay exhibited genuine pride in Jekyll's membership in the upper echelon of British society. McKay boasted that Jekyll's closest friend in London was the private secretary of King Edward VII and that his brother was a governor in India. And yet said McKay, "He had chosen to give up all this and come out to Jamaica to live like a peasant. ..." ¹⁶ Indeed, McKay respected and admired Jekyll's aristocratic station. Once he even bragged that the British

¹⁵"My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p. Ms., Claude McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

¹⁶Claude McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p., Schomburg Collection.

upper class would know how to handle radicals. But the most telling incident of all which reveals McKay's sycophantic regard for Jekyll occurred one weekend when the Governor of Jamaica, Lord Oliver, visited Jekyll's cottage while McKay was present. McKay reported that the Governor had spent a long, tiring night and wanted to stay over. Jekyll, however, refused his request. Angrily, Lord Oliver looked at McKay as if to say, "He stays here." After the governor's departure, a puzzled McKay asked Jekyll how, then, he could tolerate him because after all he was from the peasant class. Jekyll's answer to him was "English gentlemen have always liked their peasants." McKay, undisturbed by Jekyll's noblesse oblige, took great pride in his mentor's response, demonstrated by his statement that after Jekyll's answer, he walked about the place puffed up with a snobbish attitude and greatly admired Jekyll for taking the Governor "down a step."¹⁷ McKay even admitted that once he ran away from home "just to be near him."¹⁸ And Jekyll, for his part, did not take lightly McKay's worship of him, for he devoted significant energy to molding McKay's art, philosophy, and education.¹⁹

¹⁷McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," n.p.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Jekyll sponsored the publication of McKay's Songs of Jamaica (1912) and he also sponsored his education at Tuskegee and Kansas State through a one-thousand dollar gift. And it was also Jekyll who provided McKay with the financial support he needed to open his own restaurant in Harlem. (See

Six years later in the United States, McKay would meet Frank Harris, editor of Pearson's Magazine, a journal which published McKay's poems in 1918. Harris fit McKay's requirements for an American Jekyll: he was steeped in a rich background of Western culture and he had just the right combination of kindness and arrogance which would allow him to accept the role of McKay's mentor. McKay described his first meeting with Harris in the editor's home: "That evening ... Harris laid down the Commandments of literature 'like a God.'" McKay said that he listened as if fearing to miss a drop poured from "the great editor's" cup.²⁰ That evening, McKay was wined and dined and lectured to by Harris for five hours. At the evening's end, McKay said that he was so exhilarated and agitated to action that he wondered whether or not someone like Harris had inspired Browning to write his tribute to Shelley.²¹

As in the case of Jekyll, McKay wanted more from his relationship with Harris than that of a writer and publisher. He wanted a father figure, a guiding hand. And Harris cooperated fully. It was Harris who encouraged McKay to write prose, telling him that prose was a more mature mode of

James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 166, and Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 129; 163).

²⁰McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 3.

²¹Robert Browning, "Ah, Did You Once See Shelley Plain," in McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 22.

expression than poetry. "You must write prose," said Harris. "Yes, you must and you will." Of course, McKay spent the next several weeks writing prose. As soon as he finished his first story, he showed it to Harris who examined it rather deftly with a red marking pencil.²² McKay always felt more secure about his work if one of his selected father substitutes examined it critically with a red pen.

On more than one occasion, Harris' authoritative opinions exceeded the limit of literary criticism. And it is surprising to witness McKay's willingness to suspend racial or even masculine pride in order to defer to Harris' judgement about matters beyond the publisher's purview. Harris once asked McKay whether or not he thought his sensitivity was hereditary or acquired, since Africans by nature are not as sensitive about human life as are Europeans. In answer to Harris' question, McKay "kept silent."²³ The independent, outspoken militant artist had no words to defend the dignity of his race or himself, for that matter. One incident in particular throws light upon the peculiar need for approval that McKay needed from Harris.

²²McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 20.

²³Ibid., p. 24.

Shortly after McKay returned from England in 1921, he showed Harris his English publication, Springtime in New Hampshire (1920). McKay, however, had left out of his volume (at the suggestion of his British publishers) his militant poem "If We Must Die." The poem was a particular favorite of Harris' since he felt that it was he who had inspired McKay to write it. When Harris discovered its absence, he demanded an explanation from McKay. McKay wrote that he grew ashamed and his face became "scorched with fire" as he mumbled his explanations to Harris about the poem's whereabouts. Then Harris, accepting the role of father, censured McKay for his transgressions, calling him a "bloody traitor to [his] race" and a "damned traitor to his own integrity." McKay remembered that Harris shouted at him, "That's what the English have done to your people. Emasculated them. Deprived them of their guts." McKay not only tolerated Harris' scolding in silence, but afterwards, like a penitent child, he experienced a catharsis as a result of the punishment: "Frank Harris' words cut like a whip into my hide . . . Yet I felt relieved after his castigation."²⁴ Like a lost, wayward son, McKay ached for Harris' approval.

In the late summer of 1919, McKay traveled to England. Armed with a letter of introduction secured from Harris. McKay was at last to meet George Bernard Shaw. He had been

²⁴Ibid., pp. 98-99.

fascinated by Shaw ever since he was a young man in Jamaica. And as he set off to England, to McKay, Shaw was still the "wisest and most penetrating intellectual alive."²⁵ Although they spent only one evening together, it is quite possible that their conversation planted the seed for McKay's eventual conversion to Catholicism. The interview between Shaw and McKay must have proved uncomfortable and painful for Shaw because McKay reported that Shaw jockeyed from one subject to another until he finally settled upon the subject of cathedrals, their "architectural grandeur, the poetry in their spires and grand arches, and the prismatic beauty of their great windows."²⁶ McKay considered Shaw's discourse on cathedrals exceptional, so exceptional, in fact, that he stated that during all of his years in Europe, he would never miss visiting the cathedrals of noted cathedral towns. And in the grandeur of "cathedral silence" he would feel the "musical vibrations of Shaw's cathedral sermon."²⁷ Several years later McKay would write that although he discovered the

²⁵Ibid., p. 60.

²⁶Ibid., p. 62.

²⁷Ibid., p. 65.

"glory" and grandeur of Catholicism through his European sojourn, it was not until he visited Spain and visited its majestic cathedrals that he "fell in love with Catholicism."²⁸

If Walter Jekyll can be called McKay's first cultural father, Max Eastman, publisher and chief editor of The Liberator can be called McKay's last cultural father in the poet's secular existence. Their relationship proved the most serious and enduring of McKay's dependent alliances. McKay clearly worshipped Eastman as a superior figure.

McKay became infatuated with Eastman's presence the first time he saw him. Eastman was planning to publish some of McKay's poems in The Liberator and an introductory meeting was arranged at Eastman's home. To McKay, Eastman was the "epitome of elegance." He had just the right combination of a radical spirit and aristocratic breeding. McKay was irresistibly attracted to the lifestyle Eastman symbolized.²⁹ Shortly after their meeting, Eastman invited McKay to his home at Croton-On-Hudson, just north of New York. McKay enjoyed himself there and wrote to Eastman:

²⁸McKay, "Right Turn to Catholicism, Ms., McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection.

²⁹Wayne Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 207.

I was glad to see how you live--so unaffectedly free not striving to be like the masses like some radicals, but just yourself. I love [my italics] your life--more than your poetry. ...³⁰

It was not necessarily Eastman's proletarian leanings that captured McKay's imagination, but rather the suggestion of privilege and good breeding that surrounded him.

Because McKay so deeply worshipped Eastman, he would throughout his life consider his critical opinions more valuable than those of any other person, including himself. In 1925, while residing in Paris, McKay tried unsuccessfully to publish his first novel, "Color Scheme." In the spring of 1925, he sent the final draft of his manuscript to Arthur Schomburg with the instructions that he place it with Alfred A. Knopf, an old established company, despite the fact that McKay had been advised by Walter White to send his manuscript to Viking Press, a new company anxious to prove itself through the successful marketing of a new writer. Eventually Knopf rejected McKay's manuscript, quite possibly because of its candid realism. McKay was devastated; he desperately needed the money. Throughout the summer of 1925, he bombarded Walter White with letters of self-pitying frustration. He begged him to place his book anywhere just as long as he could get an advance, and he begged White for

³⁰McKay to Eastman, July 29, 1919, in Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 207-208.

money, crying that he was always cold and discouraged. In one of his letters, McKay told White that he was at "the end of [his] rope," and nearly "paralyzed" with hopelessness.³¹

But in his darkest hour, McKay was saved by Eastman. Eastman and his wife happened to be in France during the summer of 1925. In a letter to White, McKay reported that the Eastman brought him to their home and granted him the privilege of eating there free of charge until he could afford other arrangements.³² But what was most important to McKay was Eastman's reading "Color Scheme." The elated McKay wrote to White that Eastman was able to "put his finger on every point that he thought objectionable and impossible for the American market. . . ." Also he said that he showed Eastman the stories he was working on and "with great patience and care" he explained to him how to make them suitable for American consumption. McKay came to life under Eastman's encouragement. "I was discouraged and demoralized," he wrote to White, but, "Max Eastman has put heart into me again to continue."³³

³¹McKay to White, 8/4/25, 9/7/25, 9/25/25; White to McKay, 5/20/25, 7/8/25, 7/25/25, and 8/28/25; and White to Schomburg, 7/25/25, White Correspondence, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

³²McKay to White, 9/25/25, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

³³Ibid.

Ten years after the "Color Scheme" fiasco, McKay was still guided by the literary judgement of Eastman. A case in point was McKay's behavior after the publication in 1933 of his novel Banana Bottom. The book was a disappointment for the artist. Although the novel proved an artistic success, it was a financial flop and caused McKay to lose confidence as a writer. Consequently, when he turned to drafting his next novel, a light and playful treatment of the Black smart set in Paris, he systematically sent pages to Eastman for approval. In a letter accompanying one of his drafts, McKay said to Eastman,

I wish I was neurotic and didn't know what was wrong with me. But the trouble is I do know. ... I need somebody to look after me. ...³⁴

McKay's confession to Eastman not only demonstrates his obsessive regard for the man but also reveals, to some degree, his willingness (or rather his desire) to abdicate responsibility for himself to someone he deemed superior.

McKay's novel about the "smart set" never got beyond the first draft state. Next he turned his attention to writing non-fiction. But still convinced that the solution to his

³⁴McKay to Eastman, June 28, 1933, in Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 656.

problem was the guiding hand of a substitute father, he begged Eastman "to guide [his] hand" through his attempts to write "journalese."³⁵

When McKay returned to the United States in February of 1934, his dependence upon Eastman continued as he sought to find a secure place within American society. In May, after his return, McKay, hoping to establish his reputation as a poet, wrote Harcourt, Brace and Company asking if they would be interested in publishing a collection of his poems celebrating the many North African and European cities he had visited while aboard. They were interested and asked McKay to come to the offices so that they could review the poems and negotiate an appropriate price. McKay panicked, and instead of attempting to manage his affairs himself, he persisted in nagging Eastman for three months to find him an agent. Because McKay had to handle the project himself, the poems were never published.³⁶ Ten years later McKay would continue his obsessive belief that only Eastman could make his work better. In 1945 Harper's wrote to McKay asking for anything he might have; he sent them a manuscript of what he called his "Cycle Sonnets" (to be discussed below). They returned the poems to him, asking him to revise and rework

³⁵Max Eastman, Love and Revolution, p. 611.

³⁶McKay to Eastman, August 25, 1934; McKay to Eastman, November, 1934 in Cooper's The Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 197-208; and Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 686.

them, as they were too "bitter and personal." Once again McKay turned to Eastman. He begged him to "make any corrections" he (Eastman) deemed necessary, adding, "I should like to get your opinion and also see the mark of your blue pencil, for I am aware there is no more excellent judge."³⁷ After McKay received the corrected manuscript from Eastman, he replied jubilantly, "And the poems! They are wonderful to look at after you chop them up! That makes me think of the old days."³⁸

It was not simply intellectual support that McKay required from Eastman, but financial support as well. In 1933, Eastman wrote to James Weldon Johnson seeking funds for McKay's return to the United States. Eastman told Johnson that McKay was ill, lonely, and isolated, without funds and sorely in need of companionship from fellow intellectuals. From Johnson and others, Eastman managed to collect \$144.50. He sent it to McKay, but McKay remained abroad. This time he was able to get \$150.00 from James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and certain other members of the NAACP. McKay finally returned to the United States.³⁹

³⁷McKay to Eastman, January 26, 1945, in Passion of Claude McKay, p. 307.

³⁸McKay to Eastman, March 21, 1945, in Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 308-309.

³⁹Eastman to James Weldon Johnson, May 24, 1933; James Weldon Johnson to Max Eastman, June 3, 1933; James Weldon Johnson to McKay, September 30, 1933; McKay to Eastman,

Although Eastman clearly admired McKay's creative genius, the mentor/student aspect of their relationship never diminished. McKay persisted in his habit of calling on Eastman throughout the remainder of his life, and Eastman continued to respond.

If McKay's dependence on his "superiors" was a habit of life, his over reliance on his equals and his "inferiors" was just as established a pattern. He believed others should be willing to make sacrifices so that he could pursue his creative efforts. That aspect of his personality explains why critics such as Arthur P. Davis describe McKay as a "chronic highly skillful moocher" who took for granted the support of his friends, patrons, and acquaintances.⁴⁰ If McKay "touched" many well-known and little known figures of the Harlem Renaissance, it was Walter White and Arthur Schomburg who received the brunt of his need to be taken care of. Throughout McKay's years in Europe and North Africa, Walter White served as one of his major links to important events happening in the United States. White served as McKay's unpaid literary agent, probably unwillingly, given the fact that McKay felt White did not like him and given the fact that White admitted he found McKay's later poetry

October 30, 1933, McKay Papers, Yale University Library;
McKay to Eastman, July 23, 1933 in "Stranger and Pilgrim,"
pp. 658-659.

⁴⁰Arthur P. Davis, From the Dark Tower, p. 43.

second-rate.⁴¹ White also served as McKay's welfare agent and principal source of news about Harlem. Their relationship began when White wired \$100 dollars to McKay in Paris as a result of a letter he had been given written by an ailing and impoverished McKay. That letter was the first of a series, calculated to win sympathy, favors and money from White.⁴²

White's position as Secretary of the NAACP placed him in an extremely advantageous situation. It allowed him a degree of accessibility to influential people in the community. He used that advantage often to benefit McKay. In August of 1924, White wrote to McKay inquiring about the progress of his first novel "Color Scheme" (discussed earlier). White decided to use his newly cultivated friendship with Sinclair Lewis to help McKay toward the completion of his work.⁴³ Lewis agreed to stop in Paris on his way to Switzerland to advise McKay on the novel. During his visit, Lewis managed to boost McKay's morale, give him a critical assessment of his manuscript, secure a six-month extension of his Garland

⁴¹McKay to Schomburg, June 15, 1933, McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection; David L. Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, p. 140.

⁴²McKay's letter was written to Grace Campbell, a Harlem socialist, but she passed it on to Walter White. See Cooper's, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 486.

⁴³Cooney, "White and the Harlem Renaissance," Journal of Negro History 57 (July 1972): 235-240.

Fund Grant, and lend him money.⁴⁴ McKay mentioned the Lewis episode in his autobiography. His reminiscence of the evening spent with Lewis smacks of the patron-dependent syndrome as McKay remembered that Lewis had "chastised" him and he "liked it." McKay reported that on that night, Lewis set down the cardinal points of writing and he never forgot his lesson when he wrote Home to Harlem.⁴⁵

McKay's letters to White, requesting that he place his materials with publishers, or that he send McKay money, or that he cheer up his spirits were all designed to make White feel guilty. Typical of such a letter was the one written on November 25, 1925, after the "Color Scheme" fiasco. McKay whined to White, "I feel as if I was entirely deserted by everyone just at a time when I have failed and am down and out." He also told him that had it not been for a check from the Nation, he would be finished.⁴⁶ It is no wonder that White once confessed to Schomburg that as far as McKay was concerned, he was tired. And the fact that he thought

⁴⁴White to Lewis, October 15, 1924; Lewis to White, November 12, 1924; McKay to White, December 4, 1924, White Correspondence, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress; Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 497.

⁴⁵McKay, A Long Way From Home, p. 259.

⁴⁶McKay to White, November 25, 1925, White Papers, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

McKay's work during that time as "distinctly third rate"⁴⁷ did not make him altogether gleeful about devoting time and energy to McKay to the detriment of his own creative projects.⁴⁸

In his relationship with Arthur Schomburg, Curator of the Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library, McKay assumed the role of temperamental genius, while foisting onto Schomburg the role of wet nurse to the creative artist. As with Eastman and White, McKay pestered Schomburg for favors, but with his "friend" his tone was much more direct and demanding. In a letter to Schomburg, clearly designed to manipulate the latter's guilt for not sending McKay money he had requested, McKay gives him a real "dressing down." He writes, "The truth is I am very disappointed and disgusted with you folk. Not because none of you could afford to give me anything when I was broke, [but] because all [his emphasis] of you stopped writing when a word of encouragement from a member of my own would have meant so much to me." Near the close of his letter, McKay tells Schomburg that he feels shame when he must ask White people for help, but that they treat him so much better than

⁴⁷Walter White to Langston Hughes (n.d.), White Papers, NAACP Collection, Library of Congress.

⁴⁸White had already made his debut as novelist with Fire in The Flint, published in 1924, and in 1925, he was in the process of writing his second novel, Flight, published in 1926.

do his Black acquaintances.⁴⁹ And more than once poor Schomburg found himself in the untenable position of acting as McKay's literary agent. McKay, showing his disinclination to depend upon himself and knowing Schomburg's inexperience in the field, time and again would make Schomburg responsible for placing his manuscripts with a publisher. Each time Schomburg's efforts would end disastrously. And so it went with McKay's doomed manuscript, "Color Scheme," completed in the summer of 1925. Schomburg failed at placing the novel and McKay wailed, "But what can I do? I am in the hands of you people."⁵⁰

In the summer of 1926 an amusing situation developed between Schomburg and McKay that throws light upon the tenor of the relationship. It seems that Schomburg told McKay (who was in France) that he would be coming to Paris soon and would love to see him. In order to give McKay the necessary funds to come visit him in Paris, Schomburg offered to pay him money for a handwritten copy of Harlem Shadows. McKay jumped at the offer. He quickly finished handwriting the copy and turned to Schomburg for his money. But in the meantime, Schomburg reneged on his offer. McKay, bitter and disappointed, wrote, "I have waited most anxious for a word

⁴⁹McKay to Schomburg, February 4, 1924, Schomburg Papers, Schomburg Collection.

⁵⁰McKay to Schomburg, August 3, 1925, Schomburg Papers, Schomburg Collection.

from you about the handwritten copy of 'Harlem Shadows.'" McKay then told him that he was broke, in debt, and in trouble.⁵¹ McKay and Schomburg repeated this up and down cycle throughout the many years of their friendship.

When McKay returned to the United States on February 1, 1934, he had spent twelve years traveling through Europe and North Africa. At home, things had changed: Harlem was no longer the joybelt, and he was forty-three years old. As far as publishers were concerned, the primitivism fad was over, and they had better things to do than publish books by and about Negroes. Although all Harlem artists suffered from the new economic circumstances, McKay's case was more pathetic. His estrangement from the United States for so many years, and his cultivation of the vagabond spirit left him without the benefit of social and cultural alliances within the States. He had never learned to operate as a member of any thriving interest group that could have provided him with the resources he needed to function within society. Instead McKay persisted in his pursuit of one-on-one dependent relationships. Within his dark despair he continued to write pleading letters to Max Eastman, begging him to "scrape

⁵¹McKay to Schomburg, August 1, 1926; McKay to Schomburg, August 26, 1926, Schomburg Papers, Schomburg Collection.

a little money together somewhere" to send him.⁵² Of course Max responded. For the next fourteen years of his life McKay would suffer one disappointment after the other, from being housed at New York's Camp Greycourt, a facility for indigent men, to waging relentless struggles against high blood pressure and heart disease. Compounding his health problems was the hostile reception given his recent works by Harlem leaders, angered by McKay's candid criticism of the Harlem community in his 1937 autobiography and in his 1940 brutally frank study Harlem: The Negro Metropolis.

Broken and disappointed by his failure to regain his standing as an artist, McKay found himself turning in another direction. In 1942 he lay in his basement apartment alone, poor and sick with influenza and heart disease. He was nursed back to health by Ellen Tarry, a Catholic writer with whom McKay had worked on the Federal Writers Project. Recovered, McKay expressed his gratitude by reading his poems at Friendship House, a lay Catholic organization.⁵³ But in 1943, forced to take a strenuous job as a riveter in a shipyard, McKay suffered a stroke which left him partially blind and paralyzed. This time other Catholic friends lent him a cottage in Connecticut to aid in his recuperation. It

⁵²McKay to Max Eastman, October 25, 1934, Passion of Claude McKay, p. 203; Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 675-76.

⁵³Ellen Tarry, The Third Door, p. 187.

was there that McKay began to assess his life, and it was there that he began the first draft of his "Cycle" manuscript, a collection of fifty-four sonnets which remains unpublished.⁵⁴ These sonnets, which represent McKay's first meaningful steps toward Catholicism, are almost embarrassing in their revelation of personal pain, but they clearly show McKay's anger at the secular world that had abandoned him. To Eastman he wrote that after his severe illness, "the only hands that ministered to [him] were those of strangers from the Catholic Mission stretched out to snatch [him] from the Shadow of death."⁵⁵

The subjects covered in his "Cycle" collection were not new. Here again was McKay's disdain of integration as a solution to racial oppression, condemnation of Black intellectuals, and hatred of Communists. He had discussed these issues in various essays and articles over the years. And that is why it is puzzling that he chose poetry to express his sentiments rather than prose which could have more suitably accommodated his direct, heavy-handed didacticism. McKay himself must have wondered at his choice when he wrote Eastman in 1945 that Harpers had rejected his poems, calling them "too bitter and personal," and Dutton had

⁵⁴Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 811-815.

⁵⁵Letter from McKay to Eastman, 9/3/43, in Wayne Cooper, Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 303-304.

considered them not poems at all.⁵⁶ But at that point in his life even he knew that the poetic spirit was dead within him as he confessed to Eastman, "Oh, I wish I had the old style!"⁵⁷

In his "Cycle Manuscript" McKay takes four major stands: first he condemns the political and social world he had once been a part of; second he rejects intellectualism as a means to truth; third he recants his own literary works as representations of the secular world; and finally he recognizes the Catholic Church as savior and protector of humanity.

The opening sonnet serves as preparation for the autobiographical nature of the collection. McKay, convinced that the world cruelly mistreated him, parallels his life of misery with that of Christ's. He writes,

⁵⁶McKay to Eastman, January 26, 1945, in Passion of Claude McKay, p. 307.

⁵⁷McKay to Eastman, March 21, 1945, in Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 308-09.

These poems distilled from my experience,
 Exactly tell my feelings of today,
 The cruel and the vicious and the tense
 Conditions which have hedged my bitter way
 of life. But though I suffered much I bore
 My cross and lived to put my trouble in song
 I stripped down harshly to the naked core
 Of hatred based on the essential wrong!⁵⁸

McKay clearly implies here that he, like Christ, has been sacrificed to the "essential wrong," "essential wrong" being man's inhumanity to man, or more specifically man's inability to recognize him as the artist/prophet, the link between man and God. Yet in the concluding sestet McKay--though having established his identification with Christ as the sacrificial lamb--makes one last bid toward artistic independence:

But tomorrow, I may sing another tune,
 No critic, white or black, can tie me down,
 Maybe a fantasy of a fairy moon,
 Or the thorns that soldiers weaved for Jesus' crown,
 For I, a poet, can soar with unclipped wings,
 From earth to Heaven, while chanting of all things.⁵⁹

McKay's tension here between independence and submission reflects the transitional stage in which the sonnet was written. He was in the process of recuperating from a serious illness and had not yet made a full commitment to Catholicism.

⁵⁸McKay, "Opening Sonnet," "Cycle Ms.," McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁵⁹McKay, "Opening Sonnet," "Cycle Ms.," McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

But his painful ambivalence concerning the integrity of artistic and individual freedom in a Christ-centered world is reflected again in his Sonnet 2. In the first six lines, the independent and rebellious McKay brags of his rejection of conformist ideas and his willingness to forego peace and personal well-being for the sake of his beliefs. With pride he boasts,

Now, really I have never cared a damn
 For being on the wrong side of the fence,
 Even though I was as naked as a lamb,
 And thought by many to be just as dense.
 But being black and poor, I always feel
 That all I have and hold is my own mind. ...⁶⁰

Here is the old McKay, the stubborn non-conformist who revels in his history of defying tradition. But then McKay, in the final couplet, makes a drastic turnabout: He abandons his steadfast commitment to independence and professes total submission to the authority of God. He declares, "But whatever it may be, This is a fact, / I care not if my mind remains intact."⁶¹ Although in this instance he sounds cavalier in his resolve to elevate faith in God over mental independence, toward the end of the collection, his tone will become more focused and serious.

⁶⁰McKay, "Sonnet 2," "Cycle Ms.," McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁶¹Ibid.

Sonnet 30 represents McKay's bitter rejection of the symbols of his old secular world, and in that world the White intellectual played an intimate part. It is he that McKay accuses of enticing the Black man into his world of ideas only to set the trap for his imminent embarrassment and rejection. And once the Black man has been spurned by the larger society, his friend, the White man, can go off innocent and free to explore other compelling interests. McKay's biting tone leaves one to ponder whether or not Eastman could have been his target, Eastman who always came to McKay's aid, but who was always better off, or perhaps McKay had in mind his well-meaning White friends, liberals, who quite often led him into traps of racial humiliation, oblivious of his pain. McKay charges,

...Like me big little white man wrote books alright,
Then turned to other fields, which he could choose,
Not difficult for one talented and white....⁶²

These so-called friends and fellow intellectuals who befriended him when it was fashionable to know Negroes have now gone on to explore other sources of amusement. In the final line of his poem, McKay declares that he holds such White men in "contempt!"⁶³ Whoever McKay's particular

⁶²McKay, "Sonnet 30," "Cycle Ms.," James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁶³Ibid.

target, it is clear that he sees the White intellectual liberal as a hypocrite who gives lip service to democratic principles and intellectual equality but allows the Black man, even a fellow intellectual, to travel alone down the long road of hardship and racial oppression. But even though McKay bristles at the White man's arrogant and condescending "innocence," he wonders at the Black man's role as ally in reinforcing the suggestion of a racial hierarchy.

And we blacks treat such whites as superior men,
 And try to emulate them on their tricks!
 We shout Democracy around their den
 Of iniquity of jobs and politics.⁶⁴

McKay implies that the Black man who blindly embraces the touted Democratic ideal of America, a disguise for falsehood and deception, is nothing more than a duped co-conspirator.

Then turning from the White intellectual, whom McKay sees as a hypocrite who gives only lip service to democratic ideals, he focuses on the radical in Sonnet 49 and cries, "There is No Radical The Negro's Friend."⁶⁵ Within this poem, McKay resumes his long-standing argument with liberals, both Black and White, who see integration as the ultimate

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵McKay, "Sonnet 49," "Cycle Ms.," published later as "There is No Radical The Negro's Friend," Catholic Worker 12 (October 1945), pp. 4-5.

solution of racial oppression. McKay takes to task members of the Negro elite, like Alain Locke, who subscribe to the theory that the masses of Negroes somehow benefit when a privileged Negro gains entree into White circles. He asks,

Must fifteen million blacks be gratified,
 That one of them can enter as a guest,
 A fine white house--the rest of them
 denied
 A place of decent sojourn and a rest?
 Oh, Segregation is not the whole sin.
 The Negroes need salvation from
 within.⁶⁶

Although McKay in this poem presents his familiar opposition to integration as a solution to racial oppression, his unfamiliar overlay of religious reference presents a dilemma in the last line, "The Negroes need salvation from within." Is he saying that Negroes need first to purify themselves from their own sins before they can achieve racial parity with Whites, or is he saying that Negroes can receive racial equality only when they find solutions within their own community? Or is he implying that the only salvation necessary is that which comes through Christ? McKay's problem here is emblematic of his own inner conflict concerning his judgement of Black culture.

⁶⁶Ibid.

In Sonnet 46, it is obvious that McKay can hardly contain his rage as he points an accusing finger at the White man who is "puffed up" with conceit and pride, thinking himself a "paragon of creation" for whom the rest of the nations should bow down and be his "footstool." But McKay, suggesting a symbiotic relationship, indicts the Black intellectual for being a willing Uncle Tom. He writes, the "many back scratchers of the Negro race" keep the White man secure in his place.⁶⁷

In Sonnet 6, a disillusioned McKay does not spare the Negro masses from censure. To McKay, the Black masses, who believe the myth of the American dream taught to them by two-faced intellectuals, are willing dupes in their own destruction. Ignorance, stupidity, and a lack of inner group resources make them pitiful. In the poem he charges that Negro schools foolishly teach little Negro children that

⁶⁷McKay, "Sonnet 46," "Cycle Manuscript," James Weldon Johnson Collection.

"they are just like other Americans." Consequently, they grow up "educated semi-fools," vulnerable to the smooth words of hypocrites and "charlatans." In their sad state they are

... ready for any crazy scheme,
That carries with it an offer of escape,
Although elusive as a bright sunbeam,
Or empty as the cranium of an ape....⁶⁸

McKay's reference to "any crazy scheme" of escape probably refers to Garvey's Back-to-Africa Movement, which he once called "stupendous vaudeville."⁶⁹

In his last few years, McKay, losing some perspective of his place in the scheme of the world, expressed gloomy hopelessness and suspicion about a great many things. Not only did he question once again the morality and value of political organizations such as labor unions, calling them "mere signs and symbols" that oppress Blacks, "pushing them around in every cruel way,"⁷⁰ but he also questioned the motive and worth of those he once held close to him intellectually and personally. In 1947, McKay refused to

⁶⁸McKay, "Sonnet 6," "Cycle Ms.," James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁶⁹See McKay, "Garvey As A Negro Moses," The Liberator 5 (April 1922): 9.

⁷⁰McKay, "Cycle 38," "Cycle Ms.," James Weldon Johnson Collection.

appear in the same anthology with Langston Hughes,⁷¹ explaining to his agent that their ideas were "too radically opposed." He further suggested that they had nothing in common except color.⁷² But in 1927, McKay had not only referred to Hughes as "an old friend," but once wrote about him, "I love his personality and his work."⁷³ Twenty years later, McKay would claim that Hughes's poetry had little value because it lacked "backbone," and he charged that only his ties to the Communists kept him in "the public eye."⁷⁴

By this time the Communists too had become his enemies. After McKay's return from Russia in 1922, he had become a critic of Marxism.⁷⁵ In 1937, their differences had become so pronounced that McKay, in his autobiography, found it necessary to defend himself against their attack on him in the New Masses. They had said that he was nothing more than "a fat radical" grown useless. McKay called their criticism

⁷¹The anthology in question was Poetry of the Negro, (1949) edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. However, McKay ultimately agreed to be one of the contributors to the anthology but he refused to honor the editors' request for current biographical data, demanding that they use standard biographical references already available.

⁷²McKay to Carl Cowl, November 11, 1947, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁷³McKay to Harold Jackman, June 27, 1927, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁷⁴McKay to Carl Cowl, November 14, 1947, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁷⁵Wayne Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 399.

nothing more than "personal spite and slander" in disguise for his refusal to subordinate race consciousness to class consciousness.⁷⁶ In his Harlem: Negro Metropolis (1940), McKay accused the Communists of attempting to destroy Negro culture by their attempts to control Negro writers and Negro organizations such as A. Phillip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Urban League, and the NAACP.⁷⁷ But by 1947, he had become so embittered and enraged by the Communist Party that he regarded them as mortal enemies bent on destroying him personally. According to McKay, the Communists were controlling the minds of people closely associated with him. McKay once admonished his agent for allowing Arthur Schomburg, a friend McKay heavily depended on for many years, to see a manuscript because he feared that "the bastard" would "tip off" the Communists who had agents planted "everywhere in the publishing, magazine, and newspaper business" and could prevent McKay's work being placed. After all, said McKay, "they hate my guts."⁷⁸ McKay saw the Communists as just one more "bully" out to threaten his happiness. Everyone was bent on seeing him fail: the

⁷⁶McKay, A Long Way From Home, pp. 226-227.

⁷⁷Harlem: Negro Metropolis, p. 197; See also McKay to Carl Cowl, November 14, 1949, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

⁷⁸McKay to Carl Cowl, May 16, 1947, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

Negro elite, White radicals, Black radicals, political organizations, the press, and his so-called friends. Indeed, McKay felt he needed protection from these "bullies," and only the Catholic Church was big enough to do it.⁷⁹

In the Catholic Church, McKay had at last found the superior being that could take care of him, that would allow him to surrender his control and independence and become the child. In his essay "Right Turn to Catholicism," he explained his reasons for embracing the Catholic Church. Chief was his belief that because the Catholic Church promoted brotherhood and goodwill, they could accept him "as a child of Christendom," despite the reality that most White people regarded him as "an outcast child."⁸⁰ In the Church he would receive succor and guidance.

McKay took the first step in his total surrender to God by rejecting his rational past. Immediately after his baptism in 1944, he recanted all of his major works. In his essay "On Becoming a Roman Catholic," he expresses regret for his earlier philosophy and writings. "I swung around from

⁷⁹McKay to Eastman, September 16, 1946, in Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p. 314.

⁸⁰"Right Turn to Catholicism," Ms., McKay Papers, Schomburg Collection, p. 1. See also The Negroes in America, p. 50, which discusses McKay's belief that the Catholic Church more than any other was capable of administering to brown and Black people.

place to place in the circle of disillusioned liberals and radicals," McKay confesses. "I forgot about social revolution, instead I wrote risque stories and novels."⁸¹ And in a symbolic gesture of atonement, he prays to God for forgiveness, promising,

My Pagan life of arrogance
and dross,
I lay down all and humbly
at your cross⁸²

As he looked backward, McKay could take no pride in his many articles, essays and works of fiction which demonstrated his bold and independent spirit.

The second step in McKay's surrendering authority to the church manifested itself in the rejection of those people, no doubt intellectuals and fellow artists, whom he associated with his secular existence. In a poem, published The Catholic Worker, McKay, while continuing to seek God's grace and mercy for the sins of his past life, lashes out bitterly at those who he believes exploited his gifts and intellectualism. He writes,

⁸¹McKay, "On Becoming a Roman Catholic," photocopy in McKay folder at Schomburg from published article in Epistle 11 (Spring, 1945): 44.

⁸²McKay, "Sonnet 51," "Cycle Ms.," James Weldon Johnson Collection.

Around me roar and crash the pagan isms
 To which most of my life was consecrate,
 Betrayed by evil men and torn by schisms
 For they were built on nothing more than hate!
 I cannot live my life without the faith

 And so to God I go to make my peace,
 Where black nor white can follow to betray.⁸³

McKay's representation of his past ideas as Godless idols whose destruction must come through "roar[ing]" and "crash[ing]" evokes the image of Jesus' violent cleansing of the temple as he overturned and sent crashing to the floor the merchandise of the money changers. Also McKay's poem expresses the bitterness, despair, and disappointment of a man who "had seen better days," but now was forced to realize that his past as a celebrated artist and his past associations with those people of influence, both Black and White, of whatever political and social persuasion, could not be counted on to lift him from his desperate circumstances.⁸⁴ But perhaps the Church could.

Finally in "Truth" McKay challenges the notion that man can find absolute understanding in intellectualism. In this poem, he symbolically rejects the philosophical theories that once captured the imagination of his youth such as agnosticism, Darwinian evolutionism, and revolution:

⁸³McKay, "The Pagan Isms," Catholic Worker 12 (July 1945): 4; also in McKay's Selected Poems, p. 49.

⁸⁴Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 818.

I found [truth] not in years of Unbelief,
 In science stirring life like budding trees,
 In Revolution like a dazzling thief--
 Oh, shall I find it on my bended knees?⁸⁵

McKay here implies that faith in rational approaches to truth are useless, for only faith in God can make complete understanding possible.⁸⁶ His resolution at the end of the poem to exchange revolution for total submission on "bended knees" is a startling reversal of fortune for the Black artist who once defined rebellion for his generation.

Certainly, notes Wayne Cooper, the possibility exists that McKay's conversion was motivated by practical factors as well as by religious ones. After all the Catholic Church definitely satisfied his needs at the lowest point in his life as no other entity could have. It satisfied his persistent need for dependence by serving as his last symbolic father. Also, within the bosom of the church, he found a sustaining philosophy to which he could submit totally. And finally from the church he received a job and medical care which allowed him a means to live what little

⁸⁵McKay, "Truth," Selected Poems, p. 46.

⁸⁶Despite McKay's expressed sentiment in "Truth," he continued throughout the remainder of his life to demonstrate an interest not only in the political and social developments pressing upon the world after the war, (see letter written to Eastman, 9/16/46, in Passion of Claude McKay, pp. 312-314), but he continued to write, completing the final draft of his Selected Poems, published posthumously in 1953.

life he had left in dignity.⁸⁷ McKay himself was not unaware of the practical benefits he gained from Catholicism. In a letter to his agent Carl Cowl he wrote, "It was a good thing I hooked up with the Catholics. ...for they have certainly taken good care of me."⁸⁸ On another level, McKay's conversion may have symbolized his final rejection of an Afrocentric world. Ever since he, as a young boy, had pasted to his wall a Catholic picture whose colors he adored, he had been in love with the aestheticism of Western civilization exemplified in the church's lush paintings, marble sculptures, majestic cathedrals, and long rich history of Western tradition.⁸⁹

After his conversion, he marvelled that there was "grandeur and wonder" in the church's role as link between modern man and the past, and he lamented that his education had been neglected since he had not studied the early Christian fathers as intensely as he had studied the Greek philosophers.⁹⁰

⁸⁷"Stranger and Pilgrim," p. 830.

⁸⁸McKay to Carl Cowl, 3/33/47, McKay Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection; Cooper, "Stranger and Pilgrim," pp. 830-831.

⁸⁹McKay, "My Green Hills of Jamaica," Ms. Schomburg Collection.

⁹⁰McKay, "Right Turn to Catholicism," Ms. Schomburg Collection.

Perhaps after all is said and done, McKay's conversion was his way of putting peace back into his life again. Or perhaps, McKay was just another twentieth-century exile making a gesture toward reconciliation with conformity. What did it matter that his skin was black. "Thornton Wilder wrote a Christian novel. ...Hemingway joined the Catholic Church. ...[and] dozens of young men followed T. S. Eliot's example and called themselves royalists, Catholics and classicists."⁹¹ Perhaps McKay's baptism represented an end to the warring contradictions within him--the Black aesthetic versus Western values. But in the end there would be no synthesis. The Jamaican colonial would finally claim his share of Western civilization.

⁹¹Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return, p. 239.

Epilogue

The intention of this study is not to pass judgement on McKay's personal and philosophical ambivalences or to suggest that his fragmented vision, in any way, negated his commitment to Black issues. His Songs of Jamaica in dialect, his articles, books, and letters over the years reveal him as not only an artist passionately dedicated to articulating a positive Black ethos but also as a human being concerned with human rights and justice in general. According to Wayne Cooper, even near the end of his life McKay held on to his ideals. He remained a "passionate advocate of honesty and justice in both life and literature."¹

But despite his untiring commitment to expressing an authentic Black vision, McKay was plagued throughout his life by a dual perspective: Afrocentric values versus Eurocentric values and a rebellious spirit versus conciliatory dependence.

¹See McKay's letters to Max Eastman, 1942 and 1946, which confirm Cooper's assessment of McKay's stubborn idealism in the face of serious illness, in Passion of Claude McKay, (New York: Shocken Books, 1973), pp. 300-314.

McKay's dilemma is understandable. When he left Jamaica in 1912, he thought that the promises of life were before him. He had done all he could do as an artist in Jamaica, and now America, with her energy and spirit, beckoned to him. In America, he would "raise [his] voice" in song.²

But McKay quickly discovered that America was deaf to his lyrical expressions. He wanted to write freely about life and love, but he found himself pressed into the forefront of writing about social and racial injustice. He soon discovered the dilemma that many Black intellectuals faced in America: the difficulty of producing in the wake of social, economic, and racial pressures. But unlike them, he responded in kind: He turned his "song" into a shriek and declared his hatred for America. According to one critic, McKay's hate poems were a "defense mechanism":

His own hatred is thus an antidote that enables him to fight, on an equal footing, against the hatred that burns in the oppressor.³

²A Long Way From Home, p. 4.

³Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 227.

McKay's "hate" poems quickly gained the "ear" of the country.⁴ But despite his vitriolic posture, he never lost his passionate desire for lyrical expression.

McKay was also unique in his desire to comment upon many issues of the twentieth century. His interests were not limited to the ethnic worlds of America and Jamaica. He had a voice in many other significant twentieth-century issues: Communism, European and American imperialism, and religious skepticism. One critic notes, "There seems to be little which he has not observed, participated in, or speculated about."⁵ His soul was a restless one; his extraordinary span of interests carried him throughout Europe and Africa. But he soon discovered that the specter of racism affected even the so-called universal concerns. Once more he was pressed into the role of "defending" or "explaining" the Negro to an indifferent audience. The plight of the Negro could not be escaped, racism could not be escaped, and he could escape neither.

⁴McKay's "hate" sonnet "If We Must Die" was cited in the Senate document entitled Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as reflected in Their Publications (1919), p. 167. See Wagner, p. 226.

⁵Rebecca Chalmers Barton, Witnesses For Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography, with a Foreword by Alain Locke (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 135.

But McKay's own natural rebellious spirit gave him the stubborn determination to build a positive Black ethos in the wake of racial oppression. His philosophy of negritude and primitivism--though positive and life-sustaining--made it possible for him to challenge the arrogant White world that sought to invalidate his existence. His Black ethos was his way of maintaining his own sense of personal dignity.

But the seed of his dualism was planted early. In Jamaica, as a colonial, he was given a double vision of life: He saw the noble, simple values of peasant life, and he saw the intellectual wonder of British culture. The two vied for his loyalty, and they both captured his soul.

Although McKay epitomized the dilemma of the twentieth-century Black man, plagued by his "double consciousness, his "two thoughts," and his "two warring ideals in one dark body,"⁶ his battle was especially hard. He spent the latter part of his life unsuccessfully attempting to get his works placed. Because of the social and political climate, most companies had ceased publishing works by and about Negroes. McKay, who had been isolated for much of his life from Black Americans because of his Jamaican origin, his years of

⁶W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: The Blue Heron Press, 1953), pp. 3-4.

residence outside the United States, and his volatile personality and who found maintaining close ties with White American friends difficult, died alone and bitter.

In a very real sense, McKay's life was a tragedy. He died with the conviction that he was an artistic failure and that the world had turned its back on him. But, despite his pain, his disillusionment, and his conflicts, one cannot help but admire the fierce struggle he waged to define himself on his own terms.

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