



McKay, Claude (1889-1948)

by Luca Prono

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Jamaican-born bisexual African-American poet, novelist, and essayist Claude McKay made compelling contributions to the development of the Harlem Renaissance. In his works, he put forward a revolutionary agenda of racial, class, and sexual liberation.

McKay was born in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica, on September 15, 1889 to a peasant family with middle-class aspirations. He was the youngest child of Thomas Francis McKay and Hannah Ann Elizabeth Edwards McKay. In order to assure that their son get the best available education, the parents sent him at age seven to live with his oldest brother, Uriah Theodore, who was a school teacher.

Under his brother's mentorship, he read widely in classical and British literature, as well as philosophy and science. He began writing poetry at age ten.

In 1906, McKay was apprenticed to a carriage and cabinet maker with the expectation that he would pursue a skilled trade. However, in 1907, he met a man, Walter Jekyll, an expatriate Briton, who recognized his talent as a writer and encouraged him to write in his native dialect.

Jekyll helped McKay publish his first book of poems, *Songs of Jamaica*, in 1912. These were the first poems published in Jamaican patois. In the same year, McKay published his second volume, *Constab Ballad*, based on his brief service as a police constable in 1911.

These books celebrate Jamaican folk traditions and the resilience of Jamaican peasant and working-class blacks in their struggle against capitalist and colonialist exploitation. They made McKay the first black recipient of the medal of the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences and are now considered crucial contributions to the founding of modern Jamaican literature.

With the money from this prize, the young author moved to the United States in order to further his education. He enrolled in an agronomy program at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, but disliked the semi-military regimentation he found there and soon left to study at Kansas State University. At Kansas State, he discovered W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which was to influence him greatly.

Despite excellent academic performance at Kansas State, by 1914 McKay decided that he did not want to become an agronomist. He soon abandoned formal education in order to "graduate as a poet."

He left Manhattan, Kansas for New York City. He soon married his childhood friend Eulalie Lewars and settled down in Harlem, which, in those years, was beginning to emerge as the home of the growing New Negro Movement and the most important center for African-American culture in the United States.

McKay began publishing poems under a pseudonym and supported himself by working as a waiter on the railways.



Claude McKay.
Photograph by Carl Van Vechten.
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He also came into contact with Communism. From 1919 until 1922, he served as the editor of *The Liberator*, a Marxist literary magazine. During his years with *The Liberator*, he began to have affairs with men, allegedly including novelist and critic Waldo Frank and poet Edwin Arlington Robinson.

McKay's poetry of this period became increasingly revolutionary and radical, expressing his militant opposition to racial segregation and the exploitation of the working class. Among his most famous poems from this era is "If We Must Die," which was composed as a response to the race riots of 1919. Some critics consider "If We Must Die" the first work of the Harlem Renaissance.

His most important collection of poetry, *Harlem Shadows*, was published in 1922 and is regarded as a seminal product of the Harlem Renaissance. The poems of *Harlem Shadows* include both protest poems and poems of exile, such as "Flame Heart" and "The Tropics in New York," in which McKay nostalgically evokes a lost community.

McKay became part of a group of black radicals who rejected both the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey and the middle-class reformers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This group, known as the African Blood Brotherhood, espoused black self-determination and socialist revolution.

Fearful that he was under surveillance by the FBI, McKay felt that he had to flee the United States. He arrived in London in the fall of 1919. He lived abroad for most of the 1920s and early 1930s, including stints in the Soviet Union and Africa, as well as various European capitals. In these years, he became involved in the European Communist movement.

Particularly important for the development of his Marxist thought was his sojourn in the USSR in 1923. He became a literary celebrity in post-revolutionary Moscow's intellectual circles. There he completed his collection of historical and sociological essays, *The Negroes in America*, as well as three stories published as *Lynching in America*.

While living in Europe, mostly in France, McKay wrote three novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928), its sequel *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933), as well as a collection of short-stories, *Gingertown* (1932).

Home to Harlem won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature and appealed to a wide audience. It is the first novel by an African American to become a best-seller. The story of an African-American soldier returning home after World War I, the novel depicts street life in Harlem, revealing sometimes shocking details of "uprooted black vagabonds." Although it was criticized by Du Bois as appealing to the prurient interests of white readers, the work is now regarded as a major contribution to African-American literature.

McKay's other two novels concern the difficulties of black individuals in establishing cultural identities in predominantly white societies. *Banjo*, which is set in Marseilles, examines the treatment of black colonists by the French; while *Banana Bottom*, which is set in Jamaica, tells the story of a young woman who returns to her homeland after having lived most of her life abroad.

In 1934, McKay returned to the United States where he not only distanced himself from Communism but became an anti-Communist. He criticized other black intellectuals for having been deceived by the Communist Party. He became an American citizen in 1940.

In spite of the critical acclaim received by his memoir *A Long Way From Home* (1937), in which he denounced Communism, and the commercial success of *Home to Harlem*, he was not able to support himself solely through his writing and took on a number of jobs, many of which involved physical labor.

During the last phase of his career, McKay became increasingly alienated from other black writers and intellectuals. In 1944, he joined the Roman Catholic Church.

In his last years, McKay focused on a second autobiography, mostly concerned with his mother country, *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, which was posthumously published in 1979.

A stroke suffered while working on a shipbuilding yard in 1943 left McKay in ill health, which plagued him until his death on May 22, 1948 in Chicago due to congestive heart failure.

McKay's queerness, like his radical ideas, are often erased from his biography. In addition, critics have generally minimized the significance of McKay's homosexuality for his works, notwithstanding the fact that, at a very basic level, it seems obvious that his repeated protests against oppression may well be motivated as much by his sexual orientation as by his race and class.

Biographer Wayne F. Cooper cites the poet's homosexuality as the reason for the failure of his marriage and reveals that he enjoyed New York's "clandestine" gay scene and had a "love life that included partners of both sexes." Yet Cooper hastens to insist that McKay "rarely discussed homosexuality in his writings" except in a few poems such as "Rest in Peace" and in the unpublished novel "Romance in Marseilles."

For Cooper, McKay's coyness in treating homosexuality as a theme means that he never seriously challenged the general censorship that discouraged literary representations of homosexuality. Cooper contends that even if social norms against homosexuality had been more relaxed, the African-American poet and novelist may still have chosen not to identify as a homosexual.

However, given the harsh stereotyping and discrimination to which McKay was already subjected as a black man and a leftist, it is not that surprising that he did not explicitly address sexual difference in the majority of his works. But Cooper ignores some instances of McKay's depictions of homosexuality, including the novel *Home to Harlem*, which has an openly gay character, Billy Baise, and detailed descriptions of the gay and lesbian scene in 1920s Harlem, including drag and gender bending.

As is the case with other gay and lesbian authors of the 1920s and 1930s, McKay scattered oblique references to queerness throughout his works to avoid censorship. The pioneering critical work of Gary E. Holcomb has shown that McKay's queerness and political radicalism were mutually-supporting forces in the writer's thought.

To Holcomb, McKay represented "the prototype for the unholy union of Red, black and queer." His agenda for liberation was based not only on race and class, but also included sexual dissidence. From this perspective, *Home to Harlem* is significant not merely for the presence of an openly gay character whose sexuality is accepted without problems by the two protagonists Jake and Ray. The novel goes beyond this portrayal to put forward a blueprint for a queer working-class black bohemia as a social model through the homoerotic relationship of Jake and Ray.

This model sharply contrasts with the characters' heterosexual middle-class aspirations. Faced with Jake's choice of settling down in a heterosexual relationship, Ray leaves Harlem (and his aspiring middle-class fiancée Agatha) for Europe. *Banjo* follows Ray to Europe where he encounters another soul-mate, the title character. Indeed, James Smethurst describes *Banjo* as "a gay screwball comedy . . . in which lovers meet, are attracted, are split up . . . and are ultimately reunited." Their friendship represents a "utopian marriage of the proletariat and the radical black intelligentsia."

After a long period of neglect, McKay's signal importance for African-American literature is now fully established. What needs more emphasis is the crucial role played by his homosexuality in his life and work.

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About the Author

Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.