

# A Vision of Black Culture in Two Novels by Claude McKay

## Manfred Wolf

University of Helsinki - San Francisco State University

Is there a way of life, a mode of being, a culture, that is black? How has this been regarded by black writers? The question is asked evermore these days with the ideal of ethnic and cultural diversity spreading in the U.S. But it has been asked frequently before, among others by such writers as Claude McKay, a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the Twenties. McKay's novels, poems and essays focus less on the plight of blacks than on their manner of living and their way of thinking and being. Two novels especially, *Home to Harlem* (1928)<sup>1</sup> and *Banjo* (1929)<sup>2</sup> do so.

The subtitle of *Banjo* is "A Story without a Plot," and this is an accurate description, for it as well as McKay's earlier *Home to Harlem* mainly show scenes from a way of life and pictures of a state of being. While both books are clearly works of fiction, they are also highly evocative debates about blacks and whites, joy and bitterness, spontaneity and restraint, naturalness and civilization. McKay, a Jamaican who moved to the United States in 1912 at the age of twenty-one, became well-known at that time in the Twenties when, as Langston Hughes put it, "the Negro was in vogue," and whites went to Harlem in numbers to listen to jazz, to watch black people dance, to go to parties, and to meet black intellectuals. *Home to Harlem* is an episodic narrative about a young man's enthusiastic return to that time and place from Europe, while *Banjo*, equally episodic, is set among black drifters on the waterfront of Marseilles. Both works dare to ask what it is about the black way of life that so startlingly differs from the white. And *Banjo* actually offers an answer: blacks live more freely, more immediately, more whole-heartedly than whites.

<sup>1</sup> Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987. Original Public. Harper & Brothers, 1928.

<sup>2</sup> New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (A Harvest/HBJ Book), 1957. Original Public. Harper & Brothers, 1929.

That seems a cliché, and when said by whites about blacks a rather insulting one at that. To say that black people have "natural rhythm," for instance, has long been regarded as the ultimate put-down. Yet the narrator of *Banjo* says: "Chinese and Arab men are awkward in modern dances. They have nothing of the natural animal grace and rhythm of Negroes jazzing" (166). The difference would seem to be that when whites say such things, they feel that blacks can't do much of anything else and that they are "primitive" or "uncivilized," but when McKay says it, and when many black writers continuing into the present say it, they allege that the black way of life is in fact a rejection of civilization, that is, of the white brand of civilization which has somehow conquered the world. Black writers tend to depict a willed rebellion, a conscious choice; far from failing to be white, black people have chosen to be black, favoring a more expressive style and a fuller vitality.

In these two novels this vital mode of being is shown, explained, discussed, analyzed. In *Home to Harlem* one thing that makes such a way of life possible is the cultivated ability to forget, the graceful talent to turn hardship and squalor into music; while in *Banjo* it is the capacity for friendship and the shared pleasure in talk for its own sake. Moreover, despite the wide spectrum of black opinion in the latter novel—on subjects ranging from the Back to Africa movement to the way whites should be treated—all endorse this way of being: the thoughtful intellectual as well as the carefree banjo player engage in the dance-like talk and affirm the spontaneity and sexuality of the "earth-loving race."

The question of a specifically black way of life can be framed generally because McKay's books say what black writers, past and present, have frequently said. In an otherwise bitter essay written during the angry Sixties, LeRoi Jones wrote: "The legitimate cultural tradition of the Negro in Harlem (and America) is one of wild happiness, usually at some black man's own invention—of speech, of dress, of gait, the sudden twist of a musical phrase, the warmth or hurt of someone's voice."<sup>3</sup> Jones' remark about happiness is surprising in an essay about the miseries of Harlem and yet typical, for its view of the black experience is commonplace: to give one fairly recent example, the black psychologist Joseph White in his *The Psychology of Blacks* says flatly, perhaps too flatly, that "a quality of spontaneity, openness to feelings, and emotional vitality is expressed in the behavior styles of Black folks."<sup>4</sup>

What restrains this emotional vitality and inhibits this natural spontaneity is the behavior of whites and their all-powerful civilization. White civilization has darkened the earth with its oppressive rules, its tight-lipped prohibitions, and its concentration on all that is joyless. An exploitativeness and a sense of

<sup>3</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Home*, (New York: William Morrow, 1966), pp. 92-3.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph White, *The Psychology of Blacks: An Afro-American Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), p. 4.

superiority; an emotional unresponsiveness; a commercial view of pleasure; morality that condemns rather than affirms; deceit, deception and self-deception—these are the hallmarks of that civilization. "Leave them alone in their vanity and tigerish ambitions to fret in their own hell...."(284), says one character in *Banjo*, and the narrator notes that black people are not the problem of that civilization but its challenge (273).

Such thinking is strikingly close to that of Romanticism, not only in its celebration of the natural human being but also in the concept of the restraints brought about by civilization. These restraints create anguish and turn human beings into slaves. In Romantic literature, such manacles are variously represented, but in one famous depiction, the poet William Blake sketches a pale old man, Urizen, who measures the world with his puny compasses, and hence symbolizes the inner principle that curbs, narrows and limits. It is the basic metaphor of Romanticism and it is central to black literature as well. Possibly the similarity can be explained by the argument that all revolt is Romantic--or that Romanticism is essentially a matter of revolt. And perhaps it can be argued too that the connection between the motif of black revolt against restraint and the Romantic archetype of rebellion against an internalized authority figure is that each presupposes natural human beings who are capable of throwing off the prohibitions that limit them. But whereas Romanticism unveils the struggle towards such liberation, the fiction of Claude McKay, and that of many black writers, reveals the liberation that has already been attained, if indeed those free beings are left alone to pursue their own ends.

And that is where place comes in. Harlem and the Marseilles waterfront are both enclaves in a white world. White rules still dominate even these two places, but they do so in an attenuated form. The Harlem of Home to Harlem allows a style of life that the Jazz Age Expatriates found on the Left Bank of Paris. It is wild and orgiastic and free. Labor is performed but soon forgotten. In *Banjo*, Marseilles tolerates a collection of black drifters who scavenge, fight, dance, love, and talk. The Vieux Port is, as one character says, "a jazzing circus some'n' lak Harlem" (299). Both novels demonstrate that these characters have to be taken out of the ordinary, white-dominated circumstances to attain their more natural way of life. Harlem and Marseilles are insulated and somehow out of time. Not that these places are necessarily free from white encroachment--especially in the world of *Banjo*, the police, the pimps, the greedy shopkeepers, the corrupt officials are ever-near.

For one person in the novel, the rejection of the majority culture is utterly conscious. Ray, the resident intellectual among the beach boys, and clearly the author's alter ego, resorts to middle class methods by writing a beautiful letter to an American consular official urging repatriation for a hapless drifter, and that letter gets immediate results. This way to power is precisely what the black bourgeoisie has used, and in a good many books by black American and Caribbean writers the two ways are played off against each other. But

McKay's fiction rejects that other way; the black bourgeoisie is viewed as merely copying white people, and more important, Ray himself, though he has all the skills available to "succeed," refuses to use them. He feels ambivalent about having written the letter. And he is certain that the irrespressibly life-loving Banjo points the better way. His one concession on this point is that as a writer he also needs the "solitary delight of the spirit, different from and unrelated to the animal joy he felt when in company with the boys..." (260).

"With an intellect standing watch over his native instincts," (164) Ray could not be entirely like the others. But he has no doubt that they know how to live and that he can learn from them. He craves to be like them fully. They "represented more than he ... the irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race" (324). The strength he draws is from what they do and how they are: "Never had Ray guessed from Banjo's general manner that he had known any deep sorrow. Yet when he heard him tell Goosey that he had seen his only brother lynched, he was not surprised, he understood, because right there he had revealed the depths of his soul and the soul of his race—the true tropical African Negro. No Victorian-long period of featured grief and sable mourning, no mechanical-pale graveside face, but a luxuriant living-up from it, like the great jungles growing perennially beautiful and green in the yellow blaze of the sun over the long life-breaking tragedy of Africa" (322).

It is the character of Banjo who "in all matters acted instinctively" (164) who is presented as emblematic of what's best in black life. He lives in the moment and he values experience above all. Life is to him a great sensual event. He is not amoral, but he wears his morality lightly. And, as Helen Pyne Timothy has pointed out, "He carries with him the music of Afro-America with his banjo, and it is a music which unites all blacks in moments of complete abandonment and joy."<sup>5</sup> She also remarks perceptively that McKay reminds blacks that they are united by more than color; "their music, their stories, their attitudes can still appeal across national boundaries."<sup>6</sup>

Banjo is not the only one who defines this black way of life. Latnah, his girl-friend, shows one of its main features: she is presented as admirably lacking in jealousy at Banjo's involvement with other women, and while such sexual tolerance may not be exactly commonplace in black culture, at least it's a value McKay seems to think is possible in it. Where Latnah draws the line is Banjo's spending money on white women—in fact, when she suspects him of not **being** loyal to his people she turns against him. Here too McKay shows that whatever hedonism he values, a fierce black consciousness is not thereby ruled

<sup>5</sup> Helen Pyne Timothy, "Claude McKay: Individualism and Group Consciousness," *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, eds. Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

out. On the contrary, loyalty to each other, a black communalism, is an organic part of the best black life.

Not only sensuality and generosity and loyalty mark this life, but also creativity. The music of *Home to Harlem* and the talking of *Banjo* are linked to the love of play, of language, of word-spinning. Black language is intent on replacing "rotten-egg stock words" (217 and esp. 321). Words are generated partly to throw off white people—words like ofay, cracker, peckawood, Mr. Charlie—and partly for their own sake. Where white civilization uses language instrumentally, black civilization does so playfully, poetically, for the sheer pleasure in language itself. These new words are like new tunes, or jazz improvisations, and not only are they magical and reflect what McKay calls the "necromancy of language" (321), they also permit a greater freshness of perception and a deeper honesty.

It would be too great a claim to make that this highly idealized way of life has been lived by anyone, anytime, anywhere. But what haunts McKay's books, and those of other black writers, is that Africa before slavery may well have been such a time and place. It is hard to know, of course, but the evidence still clinging to the life of black people is that indeed it may have. And here McKay's books are very much in line with the thinking of scholars writing fifty and sixty years after he did: that black culture was not destroyed with slavery but survived in greater or lesser degree. Certainly the great many Africans in *Banjo*, with their dignity and self-assuredness, underscore the worth of that kinship.

McKay knows that the way of being he sketches is far more easily portrayed than practiced. The enemy is formidable and seductive. In passage after passage, he is deeply pessimistic about the survival of black culture. But he does not doubt its splendor. Like the Romantic poets of past ages, he offers his vision as a challenge, as a corrective, as a possibility for another life than the one that has become too narrow, too cerebral and too mean. The natural man like Banjo is an image of hope, the picture of an opportunity, for those who can see. Naturalness is a state of being, available to those, white and black, who dare to live.

Nor is this an opportunity for the individual only. The majority culture has the chance, as some present-day black intellectuals feel is beginning to happen, of assimilating into itself the best features of black life.