

Through a Black Traveler's Eyes: Claude McKay's *A Long Way from Home*

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***Abstract:** This essay analyzes Jamaican-born Claude McKay's discussion of racism(s) and nationalism(s) in his travelogue/autobiography *A Long Way from Home* (1937), in which he chronicles his sojourn in Europe and North Africa and addresses his complex relationship to the United States. Much of McKay's social analysis draws, as this essay establishes, on his observation that racism and nationalism tend to be intertwined and feed on each other. While describing his travels, McKay presents himself as a bordercrosser who is "a bad nationalist" and an "internationalist" – a cosmopolitan whose home cannot be defined by any fixed national labels or by nationalist or racialist identity politics. This essay's dialogue with McKay's memoir ultimately reconstructs his difficult and oft-frustrated quest for democracy – the political condition that Ralph Ellison once eloquently equated with "man's being at home in the world."*

***Key words:** Claude McKay – nationalism – transnationalism – cosmopolitanism – race – racism – travel*

The way home we seek is that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy.

– Ralph Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion"

I said I was born in the West Indies and lived in the United States and that I was an American, even though I was a British subject, but I preferred to think of myself as an internationalist. The *chaoush* said he didn't understand what was an internationalist. I laughed and said that an internationalist was a bad nationalist.

– Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home*

The literary and cultural historian Steven Watson has characterized the poet and novelist Claude McKay as “Jamaican and American, homosexual and heterosexual, Harlemit and Greenwich Villager, revolutionary and decadent, servant and celebrity.”¹ McKay was a difficult figure to classify even for his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries. Many of them viewed him either as a precursor of or marginal to the Renaissance, although his *Home to Harlem*, the first novel by a black author to reach the American best-seller list, was published in 1928, at the very zenith of the movement. His colleagues’ marginalizing attitude to him resulted in part from his physical absence from the Harlem scene: McKay spent most of the 1920s and early 1930s sojourning outside the United States. In 1919, he traveled to London, where he worked for a while for the social activist Sylvia Pankhurst’s Marxist newspaper, the *Workers’ Dreadnought*. After Pankhurst was arrested in 1921, McKay returned to New York and became associate editor of another leftist publication, the *Liberator*, headed by Max Eastman. In 1922, McKay left America again, this time for Moscow, where he attended and addressed the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International. The trip to the Soviet Union was extended into a twelve-year sojourn in Europe and North Africa, mainly in France, Germany, Spain, and Morocco. During those years, McKay published three novels, *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933), as well as a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932). He returned to the United States in 1934, never to leave again. He wrote his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937),² after his travels.

A Long Way is a subjective travelogue. McKay writes down his personal experiences, rather than compiling an ethnographic or sociological study or a focused political treatise. He does, however, combine the private with the public and the political: he frequently expands his discussions of how he was received in the places that he visited into critiques of local manifestations of racism. This essay focuses on such commentary in *A Long Way* and, in so doing, reconstructs McKay’s oft-frustrated

1. Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995) 32.

2. Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970 [1937]); hereafter cited parenthetically in the main text and abbreviated as *LW*.

quest for democracy – the political condition that Ralph Ellison once eloquently equated with “man’s being at home in the world.”³

Much of McKay’s social analysis draws on the observation that racism and nationalism tend to be intertwined and feed on each other. In *Home to Harlem*, McKay’s fictional alter ego Ray (a Haitian vagabond and working-class intellectual whose family has suffered greatly from the U.S. occupation of their home island) articulates this linkage without any of the Victorian inhibition that characterizes the language of many of McKay’s early sonnets: “Races and nations were things like skunks, whose smells poisoned the air of life. Yet civilized mankind reposed its faith and future in their ancient, silted channels. Great races and big nations!”⁴ Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that in *A Long Way* McKay presents himself as a traveler who prefers to think of himself as “an internationalist” and “a bad nationalist” (*LW* 300). While aware of the Communist overtones of “internationalist,” McKay here primarily uses the term in the wide sense of “cosmopolitan.” Paul Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic* about travelers who “begin as African-Americans or Caribbean people and are then changed into something else which evades those specific labels and with them all fixed notions of nationality and national identity,” and who “repeatedly articulate a desire to escape the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes even ‘race’ itself.”⁵ McKay, as this essay demonstrates, belonged to this group of cosmopolitan writers and intellectuals.

Coming of Age in Jamaica

McKay’s national background was different from that of the other major Harlem Renaissance writers. His Jamaican origins distanced him from U.S. African American exceptionalism and, as his travelogue attests, rendered him attentive to black transnationalism; in this sense, the process

3. Ralph Ellison, “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” (1953) in Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 1995) 151-54 (154).

4. Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987 [1928]) 153-54.

5. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1993]) 19.

that resulted in his travels and in his awareness of what we would now call his diasporic existence began in Jamaica. The island is, moreover, one of the subtexts of his complex, ambivalent, and elusive concept of "home."

The youngest of eleven children, Festus Claudius McKay was born in Sunny Ville, Clarendon Parish, Jamaica, on September 15, 1890 (according to some sources, 1889). He lived until the age of six or seven with his parents, the farmers Thomas Francis McKay and Hannah (Ann) Elizabeth Edwards McKay, whose social status the biographer Wayne F. Cooper calls "atypical" – that is, higher than that of most black peasants in Jamaica.⁶ In the island's racial and social hierarchy, the white upper class was at the top and the mixed-race clerks and shopkeepers in the middle, whereas the lowest rung of the ladder was reserved for dark-skinned blacks, most of whom cultivated the land. Transcending this racialized social order, Thomas and Hannah McKay gradually achieved what in many ways resembled the position of the light-skinned middle class, although they never abandoned farming.⁷ Thomas even acquired enough property to qualify to vote in Jamaica's restricted electoral system – an extremely rare achievement for a black farmer at the time.⁸

At the age of about seven, Claude moved from Sunny Ville to a nearby small town into the household of his eldest brother, U'Theo (Uriah Theodore), to whom Thomas and Hannah entrusted their youngest son's education. A schoolteacher and a graduate of Mico College, U'Theo was an avid reader and independent thinker. He eventually became a planter, politician, and civic leader, well known both in Clarendon and beyond. At U'Theo's, Claude was allowed to read any (in practice, mainly British) fiction and poetry available in the school library and the household. He was introduced to agnosticism and Darwinism, and he gradually embraced freethinking, discreetly assisted by his brother: "[W]hen he [U'Theo] became aware of my omnivorous reading he put his free-thought literature in my way" (*LW* 12).

6. Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 9.

7. Cooper 7.

8. Cooper 8; Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London and New York: Verso, 2000) 16-18.

Claude returned to his parents' home around the age of fourteen and stayed there for two years. He then finished grammar school, received a governmental trade scholarship, and moved to Kingston. However, before the academic year started, Kingston was struck by the worst earthquake in the area since 1696. The facilities of the trade school that had admitted Claude were destroyed, and the education of the students needed to be rearranged. Claude found himself apprenticed to a wheelwright and cabinetmaker in Brown's Town, St. Ann's parish. During his two years in St. Ann, Claude McKay met Walter Jekyll, an English gentleman residing in Jamaica.⁹ Jekyll was a former Anglican clergyman who had renounced Christianity in favor of scientific rationality. He ended up collecting black folklore in Jamaica, where he led a simple and ascetic life, showing more interest in the life of the island's black peasants than most white Britons ever did and privately criticizing British imperialism.¹⁰ Jekyll became McKay's mentor, who not only helped the young poet to expand his reading but also encouraged him to write verse in his native dialect. Some have interpreted the latter gesture as expressing true appreciation of McKay's cultural heritage; others have seen it as an instance of a white Englishman romanticizing a black Caribbean "native" and patronizingly admiring his "authentic" diction while ultimately desiring to keep the black poet in his place as a colonial subject. Whichever the initial truth, the nature and dynamics of the two men's acquaintanceship seem to have changed over time. In *A Long Way*, McKay writes about Jekyll: "His interest in me was general at first. I was

9. Jekyll seems to have lent his name to one of Robert Louis Stevenson's most famous fictional characters; Jekyll and Stevenson were acquainted, and Jekyll was a great admirer of scientific rationalism (Cooper 23).

10. However, Jekyll's following comment on the British Empire, conveyed to us by McKay, discloses Jekyll's ambivalence about imperialism and colonialism: "Mr Jekyll hated the British Empire but he used to say, 'What is there to take its place, Claude? The Germans are still too young and arrogant; they will never do'" (Claude McKay, *My Green Hills of Jamaica*; and *Five Jamaican Short Stories*, ed. Mervyn Morris [Kingston and Port of Spain: Heinemann Educational Book (Caribbean) 1979] 70). Jekyll's embedded suggestion that imperialism by *some* European nation was necessary for the world's stability implies, after all, a belief in the concept of innate national characteristics and/or in white superiority. Cooper (32) suggests that McKay never criticized Jekyll in any way in his writings; however, a critical observation seems to come across – albeit very gently – in McKay's novel *Banana Bottom*, set in rural Jamaica. One of the characters, Squire Gensir, is modeled after Jekyll. According to the narrator's double-edged remark on Gensir, "The peasants were his hobby" (Claude McKay, *Banana Bottom* [San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1933] 71). The word "hobby," as Winston James argues (38), seems to voice a subtle critique embedded in what is otherwise a very sympathetic portrayal of Gensir/Jekyll.

merely a literate phenomenon among the illiterate peasants whose songs and tales he was writing. Then in time there was a subtle change from a general to an individual interest and he became keen about my intellectual development and also in my verse as real poetry" (*LW* 13).¹¹

After his mother's death in 1909, McKay was still in search of vocation. In a desperate attempt to find a direction for his life, he enlisted in the British Jamaican constabulary. The training he received there was, however, totally incompatible with his sensibilities. He later recounted this discovery in semi-fictionalized form in "When I Pounded the Pavement," included in his 1932 collection of short stories, *Gingertown*.¹² Yet, while the experiment failed to provide the poet with a regular profession and income, it equipped him, as Winston James observes, "with invaluable knowledge and insight into Jamaican society and class structure,"¹³ revealing to him how the colonial order, especially its racial politics, operated in various walks of life. McKay's seventeen-month experience in the police force thus significantly contributed to the emergence and formation of his political consciousness.

McKay's first two volumes of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, were published in 1912. In the same year, he met the black activist, orator, and actress Henrietta Vinton Davis, who had, among other things, worked as an assistant to Frederick Douglass. Davis was convinced of the importance of Booker T. Washington's mission and praised his school to McKay. Persuaded, McKay decided to move to the United States, in order to study agriculture at Tuskegee and to seek a larger audience for his poetry than was possible in Jamaica. As he entered this first phase of his travels, he wrote in a farewell poem: "The boy you know / Will come back home a man: / He means to make you proud of

11. Jekyll's tutelage of McKay has prompted speculation about whether their relationship remained platonic. However, such musings are doomed to remain guesswork unless new sources come to light; to the best of our current knowledge, neither man's extant private papers or published writings contain any implication of a romance. Frustrated with this line of inquiry, Winston James focuses on another issue related to Jekyll's mentorship of McKay: he suggests that the widespread assumption that U'Theo's and Claude's contact waned after the younger brother "passed over" to the white mentor is false (36). According to James, scholars have overestimated Jekyll's influence on Claude at the expense of U'Theo's important role in his life (40). James's argument is, notably, based on the two brothers' surviving correspondence and on interviews with Claude that were published during his lifetime.

12. Claude McKay, *Gingertown* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1932) 203-20.

13. James 45.

him, / He'll breast the waves and strongly swim / And conquer, – for he can.”¹⁴ He renewed this promise in another poem, written in London in 1920: “I shall return. I shall return again / To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.”¹⁵ Despite these sentiments, McKay never traveled back to Jamaica. He did, however, return there through his writings, especially the novel *Banana Bottom* and the posthumously published memoir *My Green of Hills of Jamaica*. The more disappointed he became with the United States, where racism was more flagrant than he had expected, the more nostalgic he, particularly in his later years, grew for Jamaica. However, the island McKay reminisced about was, as Sandra Pouchet Paquet points out, “the mythicized Jamaica of his vanished childhood”¹⁶ – a point of departure rather than a point of return.

“To Make a Canticle of My Reaction”: McKay and the United States

In 1912, McKay became one of the renowned writers – others including Nella Larsen, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray – who were affiliated with Tuskegee as students or instructors before launching their writing careers. McKay’s stay at Tuskegee was, however, even shorter than Nella Larsen’s: after two months, he switched to Kansas State College. He eventually abandoned the study of agriculture and the pursuit of a college degree altogether. As he says in *A Long Way* (4), he found himself seized by “the lust to wander and wonder” (a phrase later echoed in the title of Langston Hughes’s second autobiography). Even more acutely, McKay was driven by the passion to write: “I desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. Against its mighty throbbing force, its grand energy and power and bigness, its bitterness burning in my black body, I would raise my voice to make a canticle of my reaction” (*LW* 4). McKay relates how he became “a vagabond with a purpose” who earned his living as a “porter, fireman, waiter, bar-boy, houseman,” all the time dreaming of and working towards a literary

14. Claude McKay, “To a Friend,” *Jamaica Times* (August 17, 1912) 1. Quoted in Cooper 61.

15. Claude McKay, “I Shall Return,” *Cambridge Magazine* 10.1 (Summer 1920): 58. Quoted in James 46.

16. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Presentation* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002) 87.

breakthrough “on the American stage – one important point of the vast stage of life upon which all of us must appear” (*LW* 3).

This opening of the travelogue may seem to unduly romanticize McKay's “vagabondage” in the United States. As if anticipating this criticism, however, McKay tells in the same breath how he was arrested for vagrancy in Pittsburgh while on his way to his first meeting with the “Great Editor” Frank Harris in New York City. This quick insertion of a critique of the heavy policing of U.S. cities into a chapter that may, at first sight, seem to uncritically praise American “Opportunity” is characteristic of McKay's autobiographical strategy at large. On one level *A Long Way* is, as the biographer Wayne F. Cooper points out, “a pleasantly impressionistic book, a seemingly effortless account of his travels and his encounters with the great and near-great of international communism and the literary world of Europe and America.”¹⁷ At the same time, however, McKay's writing is thoroughly informed by critical observations on class stratification, xenophobia, and racial prejudice, even if some of the criticism is found between the lines rather than in explicit statements.

McKay's early years in the United States were marked by the shock of encountering American racism. He wrote in 1918: “I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction – color and race being hardly taken into account.”¹⁸ While this early passage's benevolent interpretation of the “prejudice of the English sort” has its own problems, the comparison that McKay draws between Jamaica and the United States undoubtedly reflects his personal experience. In Jamaica, his contact with the white upper class had mainly taken place through his encounters with Jekyll, who became his personal tutor and patron – hardly a typical way for an Englishman to assume his alleged white man's burden. Second, the examples of his parents and his eldest brother had convinced McKay that black upward mobility was possible in Jamaica. Third, in rural parts of the island McKay had socialized with whites who were neither members nor descendants of the wealthy British planter elite, but small-scale farmers of German origin. The interaction between black and white peas-

17. Cooper 318.

18. Claude McKay, “A Negro Poet Writes,” *Pearson's Magazine* 34 (September 1918): 275-76. Quoted in Cooper 65.

ants had defied the rules of the colonial color scheme: "Like the natives, they [the whites] eked out a living as agriculturists and artisans, sharing in the common community life. The blacks were not sycophantic to them because of their pigmentation, nor did they treat them with contempt as 'poor white trash'" (LW 36). In the segregated world of the United States, by contrast, McKay was powerfully aware of being constantly seen – and of learning to view others – through the lens of race.

Although McKay found his way from the American South to the Northeast, he soon discovered that the color line also existed in the "liberal" North. McKay clearly indicates in *A Long Way* that if he had envisioned New York's literary scene to be free from racial prejudice, he soon recognized his mistake. The depiction of his encounters with Frank Harris, the chief editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, is a case in point. As the story develops, McKay's initial observation, "I was surprised by his littleness" (a comment on Harris's physical stature, LW 10) takes on metaphorical significance.¹⁹ Harris's racial views come across, in particular, in his following exchange with McKay:

Suddenly he [Harris] said something like this: "I am wondering whether your sensitivity is hereditary or acquired." I said that I didn't know, that perhaps it was just human. [...]

"What I mean is, the stock from which you stem – your people – are not sensitive. I saw them at close range, you know, in West Africa and the Sudan. They have plenty of the instinct of the senses, much of which we have lost. But the attitude toward life is different; they are not sensitive about human life as we are. Life is cheap in Africa ..."

I kept silent. (LW 23-24)

After such disappointing conversations with Harris, McKay began to submit his work to the *Liberator*, steered by Max Eastman. McKay found it easier to breathe freely in Eastman's company and experienced him, in many ways, as Harris's opposite.²⁰ In 1919, the *Liberator* published what would become McKay's most famous poem, "If We Must Die." In the fol-

19. While Harris may have been, as he boasted to McKay, the man who "picked" Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Joseph Conrad when these writers were on the verge of their breakthroughs, his greatness as a headhunter and editor diminishes when juxtaposed, by McKay, with his self-importance, his petty rivalry with other editors, his belief in his exclusive rights to the literary production of his "picks," and his uninvited attempt to convert McKay to Christianity (LW Ch. 1).

20. McKay writes: "There was nothing of the 'I' first person in Max Eastman's manner. Nor did he question me to any extent about myself, my antecedents, and the conditions under which I lived and wrote at the time. He was the pure intellectual in his conversation and critical opinion" (LW 31).

lowing years and decades, Eastman and McKay developed a friendship that survived what Cooper calls the two men's "occasionally bitter disagreements that led to temporary silences between them."²¹ One such disagreement, which centered on the *Liberator's* policy on the race question, is documented in McKay's letter to Eastman dated in Moscow, April 3, 1923. McKay writes: "I never once thought you grasped fully the class struggle significance of national and racial problems, and little instances indexed for me your attitude on the race problem. It was never hostile, always friendly, but never by a long stretch revolutionary."²² The fact that McKay avoids addressing any of his conflicts with Eastman in *A Long Way* may have resulted from the poet's intermittent financial dependence on the white editor – an acute issue at the time when McKay was writing his travelogue. When he returned from Morocco to the United States in 1934, he was penniless and ended up spending several months in grim conditions in Camp Greycourt, a welfare camp in New York City. He could not leave the camp until Eastman came to his financial aid. While Eastman was no Charlotte Osgood Mason in terms of either wealth or attitude, the inhibitions arising from a dependence on white patronage – an issue that caused notorious problems for Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston – to a degree also make themselves felt in McKay's writing.

By 1919, McKay's frustration with the racialized atmosphere and politics of the United States had become more intense than ever. He was working at the time as a waiter on the Pennsylvania railroad and was constantly concerned about his and his black fellow workers' physical safety: "The World War had ended. But its end was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white. Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings" (*LW* 31). That year, McKay was offered the opportunity to travel to England for the first time in his life. Relieved, he temporarily left behind the racially charged atmosphere of the United States.

21. Cooper 94.

22. Claude McKay, Letter to Max Eastman, Moscow, April 3, 1923,

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/mckay/eastman.htm> (accessed July 1, 2005).

The Unfriendly “Climate” of England

In 1912, McKay had published a piece called “Old England,” where he had expressed his wish “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.”²³ In the same poem, he had also praised England’s “fact’ry chimneys pourin’ smoke up to de sky”²⁴ – but, as he remarks sarcastically in *A Long Way*, “after working in a factory in New York and getting well acquainted with the heat and smoke of railroad kitchens and engines, [he] was no longer romantic about factory smoke” upon arriving in London in 1919 (*LW* 66). And, having become more critical of British imperialism, he was no more in haste to “view Westminster Abbey, where de great of England sleep, / An’ de solemn marble statues o’er deir ashes vigil keep.”²⁵ Rather than yearning to see monuments, he was eager to meet a living person – the Dublin-born and London-based playwright Bernard Shaw, whom McKay considered to be “the wisest and most penetrating intellectual alive” (*LW* 60).

McKay came to London with a letter of recommendation from Frank Harris and was granted an audience with Shaw. However, if the acquaintanceship with Harris had proved disappointing, the meeting with Shaw was, against the backdrop of McKay’s great expectations, perhaps even more anticlimactic. The only thing Shaw had to say about his early 1910s visit to Jamaica was that he had enjoyed meeting his friend, the Governor Lord Sydney Olivier. His remark on McKay’s choice of profession did little to improve the conversation: “It must be tragic for a sensitive Negro to be a poet. Why didn’t you choose pugilism instead of poetry for a profession? [...] You might have developed into a successful boxer with training. Poets remain poor, unless they have an empire to glorify and popularize like Kipling” (*LW* 61). McKay satirizes this embarrassingly racist comment by dedicating an entire chapter of *A Long Way* to the issue of “Pugilist vs. Poet.” He subtly discloses the less than nuanced notion of black masculinity undergirding the white writer’s advice, and further ridicules Shaw’s position by depicting the flagrant racism that black boxers frequently encountered in England; McKay wryly observes,

23. Claude McKay, “Old England,” in McKay, *Songs of Jamaica*, with an introduction by Walter Jekyll (Kingston, Jamaica: Aston W. Gardner & Co.; London: Jamaica Agency, 1912) 63–65 (63).

24. *Ibid.* 63.

25. *Ibid.* 64.

in comparison, that “[t]he literary censors of London have not yet decreed that no book by a Negro should be published in Britain – not yet!” (*LW* 72).

On the whole, McKay depicts his English experience in negative terms: “I did not get a grand thrill out of London. And I felt entirely out of sympathy with the English environment. [...] [T]he English as a whole were a strangely unsympathetic people, as coldly chilling as their English fog” (*LW* 66, 67). Here McKay (whose original understanding of the “prejudice of the English sort” did not, as we have seen, include blatant racial bigotry) struggles with words and provisionally contents himself with an evasive use of the metaphor of the chilling climate. Towards the travelogue’s end, however, he is more outspoken about the pervasiveness of antiblack racism in British society and mentions such tangible examples as the effects of racial discrimination on London housing:

I remembered my difficulties, when I was studying at the British Museum, to get lodgings in that quarter. The signs were shouting: “Rooms for rent,” but when I inquired I was invariably informed that all rooms were rented. Yet when I passed that way again the signs were still there. I became suspicious. I asked English friends from the International Club to make inquiries. They found that the rooms were for rent. But when they took me along and declared the rooms were for me, we were told that Negroes were not desired as guests. When I left my London hotel I found rooms with an Italian family, and later, a German. And the nearest I got to living quarters close to the British Museum was when I found lodgings with a French family in Great Portland Street. (*LW* 303-304)

To survive “the ordeal of more than a year’s residence in London,” as he puts it, McKay began to frequent two clubs with an international membership (*LW* 67). One of them, located in a basement in Drury Lane, was a meeting place for “a host of colored soldiers in London, from the West Indies and Africa, with a few colored Americans, East Indians, and Egyptians among them” (*LW* 67). This club of transients provided McKay both with a circle of friends and acquaintances and with an opportunity to discuss politics with black expatriates and colonial subjects. Yet, his mention of the club in *A Long Way* seems brief and somewhat lacking in political content when compared to the way in which a West Indian writer of a later generation, George Lamming from Barbados (who emigrated to England in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 British Nationality Act) ponders his London experience in an interview with Caryl Phillips:

I'm extremely grateful to London for providing me with the opportunity of multiple encounters. You see, in 1950, London was still a major political capital. There was a gradual dissolution of empire, but its voice was still very potent and very influential. It meant, therefore, that [...] all colonial radical groups met in London. [...] [M]y generation's West Indian and Caribbean formation was, to a large extent, if not initiated, directed and reinforced in London, not before. Most of us were not West Indians until the London experience. I had not met a Jamaican until I got to London.²⁶

The germ of a similar experience is present in McKay's narrative. However, since the large-scale West Indian migration to Britain had not yet begun by the time McKay visited "Old England," his encounter with London did not expose him, to the same degree, to the kind of black Anglophone identity formation that Lamming describes so enthusiastically. Living in London almost three decades before the Windrush moment,²⁷ McKay did not find a permanent black community there.²⁸ His final comparison of England and the United States in *A Long Way* therefore favors the latter, despite his bitter encounters with American racism. Feeling isolated in London, he sorely missed the black communities of the United States: "England is not like America, where one can take refuge from prejudice in a Black Belt" (*LW* 304). He longed, in his words, to be reunited with "the Negro pale in America" (*LW* 304). Then again, the double meaning of "pale" in McKay's phrase is probably intended and reveals his ambivalence about African America. He was darker-skinned than most members of the Harlem literati, and the worldview of the nascent New Negro elite was not unaffected by the hierarchical meanings that American society habitually attached to different shades of blackness. McKay thus implies, even while articulating his homesickness for African America, that the object of his longing was not, in any unambivalent way, his obvious or uncontested site of belonging.

While struggling with what he saw as the absence of a black community rooted in London, McKay actively searched for transnational com-

26. George Lamming and Caryl Phillips, "Interview: George Lamming Talks to Caryl Phillips," *Wasafiri* 26 (Autumn 1997): 10-17 (13, 14).

27. The large-scale postwar immigration from the Caribbean to Britain began with the arrival of troopship *SS Empire Windrush*, with 492 West Indians (mainly Jamaicans) on board, at Tilbury Docks near London on June 21, 1948.

28. This is, of course, not to say that there were no black Britons in London at the time. (For a book unearthing the presence of black people in Britain since the third century A.D., see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* [London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984].) McKay, however, did not find the community he was looking for.

munion and solidarity. He gradually turned his attention from the exiles' Drury Lane club to a radical leftist establishment called the International Club, which was "full of excitement, with its dogmatists and doctrinaires of radical left ideas: Socialists, Communists, anarchists, syndicalists, one-big-unionists and trade unionists, soap-boxers, poetasters, scribblers, editors of little radical sheets which flourish in London" (*LW* 68). In this social environment, McKay was introduced to Marxist theorizing that was simultaneously intellectual and passionate: "The contact stimulated and broadened my social outlook and plunged me into the reading of Karl Marx. [...] These people believed that Marx was the true prophet of the new social order. Suppose they were not wrong! And if not altogether right, suppose they were nearly right?" (*LW* 68-69). The time McKay spent at the International Club started a process that resulted in his cooperation with Sylvia Pankhurst in London (launched when the *Workers' Dreadnought* published McKay's critical response to the *Daily Herald's* racist denigration of French African troops in Germany) and later in his associate editorship at the *Liberator* in New York. McKay's political process finally took him to Moscow at a time when Lenin was already fatally ill, and Trotsky, whom McKay met in person, seemed to be on his way to the leadership of the Soviet Union and international Communism.²⁹

McKay in the Soviet Union, France, and Morocco

In *A Long Way*, McKay's retrospective account of his relationship with Marxism in the late 1910s and especially in the early 1920s is colored both by his later disillusionment with Soviet Communism and by his frustrated mid-1930s conclusion that the American Communist party was more interested in exploiting than helping black labor. To draw an accurate historical portrait of McKay in the Soviet Union, one needs to examine a wide range of his published and unpublished writings and

29. While McKay did not consider Trotsky to be either a practically oriented or a charismatic leader, he was impressed by Trotsky's intellectual contribution to the Communist movement. During Stalin's reign, by contrast, McKay critically concluded that the Soviets were "now building another great nation-state, and international communism under Russian direction had become 'a stuffed carcass' devoid of any life of its own" (Cooper 294).

speeches, which together reveal the gradual transformation of his political views. To avoid duplicating the work already done by Wayne Cooper,³⁰ I limit myself to a brief account of how McKay felt about representing “his race” in Moscow – an experience that was a curious mixture of fulfillment and disappointment.

McKay was initially convinced that the opportunity he received to address the Fourth Congress of the Third International was a historic moment not only for himself but also for black people in general. He and the official black American delegate (who was originally from Dutch Guiana) were the first blacks to ever deliver speeches at a Comintern Congress. The following extract from McKay’s address reflects his recognition of the moment’s importance and expresses what was, at the time, his genuine belief in the potential of Communism to promote true equality and democracy in the world:

I feel that my race is honored by this invitation to one of its members to speak at this Fourth Congress of the Third International. My race on this occasion is honored, not because it is different from the white race and the yellow race, but [because it] is especially a race of toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water, that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world. The Third International stands for the emancipation of all the workers of the world, regardless of race or color, and this stand of the Third International is not merely on paper like the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is a real thing.³¹

McKay was happily surprised by the appreciative reception of his poetry and essays in Moscow and, even more so, by the overwhelmingly warm welcome he received from ordinary people in the streets: “Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black, and no mistake about it” (*LW* 168). Eventually, however, he began to feel that he was being exploited as a black celebrity by the Communist party – appreciated because of his usefulness for the Communist cause, rather than being embraced as a bard who mainly wanted to offer “the distilled poetry of

30. Cooper addresses McKay’s involvement in the British and American Communist movements, his tension-ridden relationship with the American Communist party, the spectacular moments of his visit to Moscow (where both the poet himself and his work were received extremely well), his gradual disillusionment with the Soviet system (which began to creep in during the same trip), his early recognition of the nature of Stalin’s rule as a violent dictatorship, and his eventual estrangement from Communism at large.

31. Claude McKay, “Report on the Negro Question: Speech to the 4th Congress of the Comintern, Nov. 1922,” <<http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/groups/abb/1922/1100-mckay-cominternspeech.pdf>> (accessed July 1, 2005) 1; originally published in *International Press Correspondence*, 5. 3 (Jan. 5, 1923): 16-17 (3).

[his] experience" (*LW* 354). He therefore decided to end the visit and began to explore continental Western Europe.

In May 1923, McKay left the Soviet Union for Germany. In October, he traveled from Berlin to Paris. By that time, he was seriously ill and was diagnosed in Paris with syphilis.³² Although he eventually left the Parisian hospital "with an essentially clean bill of health,"³³ the year 1923 nevertheless marked the beginning of his gradual physical decline.

During his several stays in Paris, McKay occasionally socialized with African American writers visiting the French capital. However, he experienced, as Cooper writes, "the same kind of ambivalence toward the Afro-American elite in Paris that he had felt [...] in New York City when he had first become acquainted with the NAACP's top leadership and Harlem's middle-class social set."³⁴ Several factors had alienated McKay from his Harlem colleagues. First, as noted earlier, he had spent much of the period later labeled the Harlem Renaissance in foreign countries – including the Soviet Union, which Americans hardly regarded as a Mecca for creative writers at the time. As McKay put it sarcastically in *A Long Way*, his fellow writers "thought that I had committed literary suicide because I went to Russia" (*LW* 321). Second, McKay had experienced his Marxist awakening earlier than any other major Harlem Renaissance author; Langston Hughes, for example, did not seriously embrace leftist influences until the early 1930s. Because his openly radical politics had put him out of step with such powerful fathers and patrons of the Renaissance as W. E. B. Du Bois (who eventually joined the Communist party in 1961, at the age of ninety-three) and Alain Locke, McKay had during his early New York years socialized more intensely with leftist intellectuals and activists – black and white – than with Harlem literati. Third, McKay's writing and life consistently demonstrated a deeper interest in black urban working classes than in the values and lifestyle of the emergent black bourgeoisie. While some Renaissance figures, such as Hughes, appreciated McKay's vision, opposing reactions were more common. Du Bois, for example, infamously remarked that after reading *Home to Harlem* he felt he needed a bath; in Du Bois's view, McKay's vivid portrait of Harlem's underside

32. Cooper 199. Cooper itemizes his sources concerning the nature of McKay's illness in p. 404, n17.

33. Cooper 200.

34. Cooper 263.

played into the hands of white racists who perpetuated pejorative essentialist misconceptions of blackness. Fourth, Paris was a site of black internationalism in the 1920s, but, as Brent Hayes Edwards points out, “black [African] and brown [African American] encounters on the Seine were uneasy due to the African American habit of thinking about Paris as liberatory and ‘free of racism’ precisely at the height of French colonial exploitation.”³⁵ McKay explicitly criticized African American intellectuals for this paradoxical perception.³⁶ The list could be continued, but even these few factors suffice to explain why many Harlem literati considered McKay “different.” In *A Long Way* McKay, in return, discussed his Harlem colleagues in ways that openly revealed his disenchantment with the Renaissance.

While McKay’s connections with African Americans in Paris proved disappointing, the other major aspect of his French experience, his 1926 summer in Marseilles, resulted in *Banjo* (1929), which was translated into French as early as 1931. Depicting a transnational black community of seamen, longshoremen, and vagabonds in Marseilles’s Vieux Port, *Banjo* was an important aspect of McKay’s effort to contribute to black internationalism on his own, non-elitist terms. The novel did not pass unnoticed among Africans and black Caribbeans living in France. As Edwards remarks, *Banjo* became “indispensable for the [black] students [in France] who would go on to found the Négritude movement a few years later.”³⁷ Influences did, in fact, flow in both directions; McKay states explicitly in *A Long Way* that *Banjo* was a response to the Senegalese intellectual and activist Lamine Senghor’s suggestion during a private conversation that McKay should write “the truth about the Negroes in Marseilles” (*LW* 278, 288).³⁸ That truth, as McKay perceived it, was twofold. On the one hand, the novel discloses the exploitation of black sailors and dockers as inexpensive labor in the Mediterranean seaport. On the other hand, *Banjo* powerfully celebrates the protagonists’ love of life – defining their transnational communion, in Edwards’s reading,

35. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2003) 6. Edwards here in part paraphrases Tyler Stovall.

36. Edwards 6.

37. Edwards 187.

38. See also Edwards 228-29. For a brief biography of Lamine Senghor, see Edwards 28-30.

“more than anything else by a certain relation to music.”³⁹ And, as the main characters tour the city’s bars, they fiercely debate the racial configurations of the world in tones and phrases that echo discussions that McKay no doubt listened to, and participated in, during his own stay in Marseilles.

Briefly before writing *Banjo*, McKay had finished *Home to Harlem*, which opens with what now seems an appallingly racist portrait of “dirty” Arabs. In *Banjo*, similar attitudes are expressed in somewhat qualified but still rather categorical terms that even evoke biological “differences”: “Negroes and Arabs are not fond of one another – even when they speak the same language and have the same religion. There is a great gulf, of biological profundity, between the ochre-skinned North-Africans and the black dwellers below the desert. The Negro’s sensual dream of life is poles apart from the Arab’s hard realism.”⁴⁰ McKay’s view of Arabs and Arabic cultures changed fundamentally, however, during the time he spent in Morocco. In *A Long Way*, he depicts his encounters with Moroccans in extremely positive terms and praises at length the poetry of the early Arab author Antar. His pleasant experience of “go[ing] native” (*LW* 295) in North Africa challenged him to think of “racial” differences in more relative terms than before. As a result, he articulates in *A Long Way* a sharp critique of raciology as a “scientific” enterprise: “When I was going to Morocco, some Europeans on the boat had remarked facetiously that Morocco was not a Negro country. Themselves divided into jealous cutthroat groups, the Europeans have used their science to make such fine distinctions among people that it is hard to ascertain what white is a true white and when a Negro is really a Negro” (*LW* 304). McKay also ponders the relativity of “race” while reflecting on the “name and complexion” of the extremely light-skinned NAACP leader Walter White:

When a white person speaks of Walter White as a Negro, as if that made him a being physically different from a white, I get a weird and impish feeling of the unreality of phenomena. And when a colored person refers to Walter White as colored, in a tone that implies him to be physically different from and inferior to the “pure” white person, I feel that life is sublimely funny. For to me a type like Walter White is Negroid simply because he closely identifies himself with the Negro group – just as a Teuton becomes

39. Edwards 190.

40. Claude McKay, *Banjo* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929) 166-67.

a Moslem if he embraces Islam. White is whiter than many Europeans – even biologically. I cannot see the difference in the way that most of the whites and most of the blacks seem to see it. Perhaps what is reality for them is fantasy for me. (LW 111)

In these passages of the travelogue, McKay takes steps towards suggesting that “race” is in the eye of the beholder, although he ultimately refrains from explicit conclusions and instead opts for voicing the confusion surrounding the concepts of race, blackness, and whiteness.

A Long Way ends with the anticipation of McKay’s return to the United States; it does not describe any of his life after the travels. McKay’s last fourteen years, all spent on American soil, were marked by constant financial problems and by a gradual decline in both his health and his career. A perpetual outsider, McKay gradually lost any faith he may have had, while younger, in the potential of the United States to develop as a genuine democracy. He received his U.S. citizenship certificate in 1940, but continued to feel that he was still a long way from anything he could call home. Deeply disappointed with all social and intellectual movements he had been affiliated with, he eventually converted to the Catholic faith in 1944, moved to Chicago, and began earning a living as a staff member of the Catholic Youth Organization. By the time of this change, however, his health had already failed. He died in Chicago in 1948.

Conclusions

My reading of McKay’s travelogue leads to three provisional conclusions. First, from the point of view of “race” and racial formation, *A Long Way* is an interesting and tension-ridden document that largely reflects the race-thinking of its era, but occasionally expresses a yearning to transcend any form of racialized thought. On the one hand, McKay frequently draws on his era’s “common-sense” notions of race, portraying whiteness and blackness as fixed, static, and mutually antagonistic cultural and political orders. This tendency surfaces, in particular, in his depictions of American racial conflicts, especially those of the explosive year 1919. The experience of witnessing both violent antiblack racism and more subtly expressed yet extremely consequential discrimination seems to have left McKay with little mental energy for what would

nowadays be called deconstructing or relativizing “race.” On the other hand, this is not the whole story emerging from *A Long Way*. McKay also had personal experience of interracial contacts that transgressed the era’s prevalent dogmas on “race relations.” As a result, some passages of *A Long Way* can be read as pointing – in an embryonic, preliminary way – to the possibility of critiquing not only racial prejudice but also the very idea of race. Primarily, however, McKay’s explicit criticism in *A Long Way* focuses on racism, rather being articulated as a critique of race-thinking writ large.

Second, while Wayne Cooper provides a detailed account of McKay’s Communism in the contexts of the British and American Communist movements, other scholars – such as Robin D. G. Kelley in *Freedom Dreams* and Theodore Kornweibel in *Seeing Red*⁴¹ – have recently taken steps towards contextualizing McKay’s life and work within *black* leftist radicalism specifically. The historical significance of this work goes beyond mere McKay studies, because McKay pondered the relationship between Marxism and black nationalism earlier than most black intellectuals in the United States.⁴² From the point of view of historical reconstruction, some pivotal questions about McKay’s locus within and contribution to his era’s black radicalism still remain unanswered. For example, in the last two decades of his life, McKay – who, understandably, could not foresee the power of black and interracial mass mobilization during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s – argued strongly in favor of all-black political organizations. Whether and how this vision related in his mind to the goal of democracy based on interracial cooperation and equality remains unclear on the basis of existing scholarship.

Third, *A Long Way* raises, through its mere existence, the issue of McKay’s understudied impact on Langston Hughes. Hughes’s style in his two memoirs, *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), is, in my reading, heavily influenced by the design of McKay’s travelogue. Like McKay, Hughes provides an impressionistic and seemingly easy-flowing commentary on the places he visits – often offering, however,

41. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns against Black Militancy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

42. See also St. Clair Drake, “Introduction” [undated], in Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* ix–xxi (ix).

sharp analyses and critiques of racism under the smooth surface of the stylistically unforced narration. Hughes's autobiographies are better known than *A Long Way*; perhaps for this reason, scholars who discuss his memoirs tend to ignore McKay's role as his autobiographical antecedent.

Typically of autobiography, *A Long Way* contains silences and omissions intended to safeguard at least some of the writer's privacy. McKay, for example, never explicitly identifies the illness diagnosed in Paris as syphilis; nor does he discuss his homosexual liaisons or mention that he and his wife had a daughter whom he never met. Yet, while his travelogue may not reveal every detail of his private life (and why, indeed, should it?), there is no reason to doubt the validity of his accounts of the racisms that he encountered during his travels and migrations. As a critique of racial orders, *A Long Way* is a perceptive text written by a widely traveled cosmopolitan who had personal experience of various political and geographical contexts and was highly adept at comparative political and intellectual analysis.