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ARTICLE

Claude McKay's Harlem Renaissance Public (with a Note on McKay's Afterlife)

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Abstract

While Jamaican émigré, New Negro author Claude McKay's desired reading public by the mid-1920s became and remained the general American readership, at various moments during the (Long) Harlem Renaissance he enjoyed a diverse if limited reception. After early attention in Jamaica as the British Crown Colony's first Black poet to publish a collection of verse, McKay eventually gained a measure of notice among North American politically progressive poetry enthusiasts, and then at various stages of his career gathered interest among British, French, Pan-African, and even Russian readerships. In the late 1920s, when McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* became a bestseller, the New Negro author believed his star was finally rising with the broad spectrum of US readers, but the novel's popularity was momentary, and the author's glory transpired to be fleeting. In his lifetime, McKay never again realized the level of popular American readership he sought. During the early 1920s, the concept of an emergent, transnational American identity forged McKay's aesthetic and accordingly his ambition to reach a US public. By the late 1930s, however, McKay rejected the idea that organized leftist politics was invested in aiding the struggling Black masses. Around the same period, he abandoned his former unique vision of a transnational America.

Keywords: African American literature; Black communism; Harlem Renaissance; New Negro; transnationalism

While Jamaican émigré, New Negro author Claude McKay's desired reading public by the mid-1920s became and remained the general American readership, at various moments during the (Long) Harlem Renaissance he enjoyed a diverse if limited reception. After early attention in Jamaica as the British Crown Colony's first Black poet to publish a collection of verse, McKay eventually gained a measure of notice among North American politically progressive poetry enthusiasts, and then at various stages of his career gathered interest among British, French, Pan-African, and even Russian readerships. In the late 1920s, when McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* became a bestseller, the New Negro author believed his star was finally rising with the broad spectrum of US readers, but the novel's popularity was momentary, and the author's glory transpired to be fleeting. In his lifetime, McKay never again realized the level of popular American readership he sought. During the early 1920s, the concept of an emergent, transnational American identity forged McKay's aesthetic and accordingly his ambition to reach a US public. By the late 1930s, however, McKay rejected

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the idea that organized leftist politics was invested in aiding the struggling Black masses. Around the same period, he abandoned his former unique vision of a transnational America.

A product of Clarendon, Jamaica, McKay's earliest reading public was among his Caribbean island compatriots, where at the age of 22 he published two poetry collections, both released in 1912: *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*.[1] The title and content calling to mind Kipling's two immensely popular dialect collections that included such pro-Empire verse as "Gunga Din" and "Mandalay," the first titled *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (1892), *Constab Ballads* reflected McKay's stint in the Jamaican Constabulary Force. In the vein of fin de siècle African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's two poetic styles, McKay's compilations mixed *literary* and dialect poetry. The *Jamaica Times* glowingly reviewed *Songs of Jamaica*, and the *Daily Gleaner* published a selection of his patois poetry.[2] Awarded the Institute of Jamaica's Silver Musgrave Medal, McKay did not bask long as an emergent Jamaican Bard but instead used the accompanying stipend to travel to the United States in 1912, where he enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute.[3] McKay's stated intention was to study agronomy and eventually return to Jamaica to advise the island's struggling farmers, though he also hoped to earn a name for himself as a poet in the US literary field, and after three years, he decided against returning to Jamaica.[4]

McKay's aspiration to establish a foothold for himself in the US literary sphere took some seven years, with initial interest in him arising with socially and politically progressive readers. After the brief spell at the Tuskegee Institute and then two years at Kansas State College, where he read W. E. B.'s *The Souls of Black Folk*, the book that presented the revolutionary theory of "double consciousness," he made his way to New York in 1914.[5] McKay's experience of living in the American South and reading Du Bois radicalized his perspective.[6] By 1917, he published two poems under a pseudonym in *The Seven Arts*, a forum for a diverse cast of leftist and countercultural intellectuals. Among the most influential contributors was Randolph Bourne, the author of the revolutionary "Trans-National America," a 1916 critique of American Pragmatism and denunciation of compulsory assimilation, identified generally as the melting pot metaphor, in favor of a more cosmopolitan vision of the United States, where immigrants may retain their "spiritual [i.e., cultural] country" and still identify as American.[7] The short-lived *Seven Arts* was coedited by Waldo Frank, who soon would publish his radical transnational vision, *Our America*.[8] Frank's close friend Jean Toomer developed his own cosmopolitan views of American identity, rendered in the literary genre-mixing, early Harlem Renaissance text *Cane*.[9] The concept of an emergent, transnational American identity forged McKay's aesthetic and accordingly his ambition to reach a US public.

[1] The title *Constab Ballads* reflects McKay's stint with the Jamaican Constabulary Force, a national police force, McKay 1912a, 1912b.

[2] Cooper 1987, 49–51.

[3] Cooper 1987, 55–57.

[4] Cooper 1987, 58 and 76.

[5] Du Bois 1903.

[6] Cooper 1987, 65.

[7] For the reference to Bourne, see Cooper 1987, 83. The melting pot metaphor has a long history, going back to Crèvecœur's 1997. Closer to McKay's time and location, James 1968, 116 refers to cultural fusing in New York City as "a vast hot pot."

[8] Cooper 1987, 81; Frank 1919.

[9] Toomer 1923.

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The next year McKay moved toward the mainstream, publishing more of his poetry along with an essay outlining his biography and perspective on poetics in the September 1918 issue of Frank Harris's *Pearson's Magazine.*[10] And in 1919, he met Max Eastman, the friendship leading to his greatest triumph thus far, publishing an assortment of poems in Eastman's the *Liberator*, a magazine with appeal among American progressives.[11] Among these poems was McKay's *cri de coeur* "If We Must Die," inspired by the white supremacist violence of the Red Summer of 1919. At the time, McKay worked as a Pullman car waiter and was likely a member of the underground, racially mixed socialist labor union the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Eventually located in Harlem and spending much of his time in Greenwich Village, McKay found himself negotiating his way through diverse if intersecting groups: Black, white, leftist, bohemian, and Caribbean migrant. McKay was motivated by an enthusiasm for internationalist socialist politics to relocate to London at the opening of the 1920s where for over a year he worked as a journalist for Sylvia Pankhurst's splinter socialist periodical *Workers' Dreadnought.*[12] His first publishing breakthrough after Jamaica taking place not in the United States but in Britain, he published *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems.*[13]

When McKay returned to the United States in 1921, Eastman invited him to coedit the *Liberator* with the Communist writer Michael Gold, and he expanded the slim, London-published volume into *Harlem Shadows*, released by the established Manhattan publishing house, Harcourt, Brace and Company.[14] *Harlem Shadows* formed McKay's literary reputation among American progressives and poetry enthusiasts, and he now had the potential for a passage into the nation's wider reading public with the emergent New Negro movement as his vehicle. The collection included "If We Must Die" along with such verse as "The Tropics in New York," "On a Primitive Canoe," "The Harlem Dancer," and "Baptism." Also included was the 1921 sonnet "America," which displays not only McKay's ambivalence about his chosen home but also the complex disposition with respect to his pursued public, even during the early stages of the Harlem Renaissance: "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."[15]

As McKay worked to cultivate interest in the US literary scene, he contributed to the growing literature of the evolving, revolutionary Pan-Africanist movement. In the early 1920s, encouraged by New Negro radical Hubert Harrison, McKay published articles in fellow Jamaican Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*, a magazine with a mass international circulation among members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.[16] While serving briefly as co-editor of the *Liberator*, McKay assisted in the founding of the underground revolutionary organization the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), a small society partly inspired by the secretive IWW, making the *Liberator*'s offices available for the ABB's meetings.[17] Consistent with the IWW internationalist, anti-segregationist ideology, McKay's view was that revolutionary Pan-Africanists must join in common cause with the worldwide, organized white proletariat. On December 17, 1919, McKay wrote to

[10] Cooper 1987, 89–90.
[11] Cooper 1987, 99–100.
[12] Cooper 1987, 112–120.
[13] Cooper 1987, 125–126; McKay 1920.
[14] McKay 1922.
[15] McKay 2004, 153.
[16] Cooper 1987, 109.
[17] Cooper 1987, 143.

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Garvey: "[R]adical Negroes should be more interested in the white radical movements. … I don't mean that we should accept them unreservedly + put one cause into their hands. No: They are fighting their own battle + so are we; but at present we meet on common ground against the common enemy."[18]

Another early encounter with a discrete reading public came in 1923 when for a brief period the New Negro writer enjoyed a Russian readership that almost certainly surpassed his American audience. Traveling to Moscow and presenting himself as an ABB independent representative in 1922, McKay observed the Fourth Congress of the Comintern. He would later refer to his Russian visit as his "Magic Pilgrimage," when he reconnected with friend Max Eastman, met a number of Communist Party leaders, and was celebrated by the Russian masses as the voice of the Black proletariat.[19] He interviewed Peoples' Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs Leon Trotsky, who invited him as an influential Black intellectual to remain in the Soviet Union for several months as a guest of the state. Trotsky also encouraged McKay to spread the internationalist revolutionary message to Black workers when he left Russia.[20] The year after he left Russia, the Soviet state press published two of his books in translation: *Negri v Amerike* ("The Negroes in America"); and his first short fiction collection, *Sudom lincha* ("Trial by Lynching").[21] On July 8, 1923, McKay wrote to journalist and activist Walter White from Berlin, posted under another nom de plume, proud of his Russian books and hoping to see one published in the United States: "I am back out of Russia after a great triumphal trip there. [Although] I am a Communist, I am a fearless champion of race rights even when that championship should reflect in the American Comrades. … I have done a book on the Negro [i.e., *The Negroes in America*] in Russia treating the whole question from the economic end. … It is translated in Russian and now I am trying to place it in America."[22] *The Negroes in America* would not appear in print until decades after McKay's death.

Fatefully, McKay's successful Soviet sojourn caused him to become a target of US state surveillance, which would obliquely affect his opportunities as a Black author. McKay was aware of the continuing climate of right-wing, anti-immigrant paranoia in the United States, exemplified by Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World-Supremacy*.[23] What he almost certainly did not know is that his attendance of the Soviet Comintern in Moscow provoked the US State Department to take an interest in his activities, leading to the Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI) creating a fat classified file on him. The state in fact became another of McKay's readerships, if a deeply perverse one, as his dossier includes obsessive analyses of "America" and other poems as evidence of a Black subversive threat against the nation. After McKay's months in Russia, he moved on briefly to Weimar-period Berlin, then relocated to Paris. McKay would wind up remaining, unplanned, for several years in France.

[18] McKay, letter to Marcus Garvey, December 17, 1919, Hubert H. Harrison Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, in McKay 2025, 30.

[19] In *A Long Way from Home*, McKay 2007, 121–80 remembered his experience in Russia as his "Magic Pilgrimage."

[20] McKay, letter to Leon Trotsky, February 20, 1923, summarizes his relationship with the Bolshevik leader, McKay 2025, 50–52.

[21] The original English manuscripts now lost, both books were back translated into English in the 1970s, McKay 1977, 1979b.

[22] McKay, letter to Walter White, July 8, 1923, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Library of Congress, in McKay 2025, 61.

[23] Stoddard 1920.

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While McKay regarded himself as a radical during much of the 1920s, a period during which poetry underwent a profound transformation, he almost never veered from traditional poetics, his avowed influences continuing to be those he had emulated as a Jamaican Bard: the British Romantics and the Victorians. During the 1920s, two trends emerged in American poetry that vividly swayed public taste, modernism (avant-guard free verse, starting with the Imagist movement) and vernacularism. When McKay arrived in the United States in 1912, American poetry was on the verge of the earthshaking modernist turn. In March 1913, Ezra Pound published "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," widely regarded as the earliest modernist manifesto of American poetry.[24] Abandoning classical form, diction, content, and theme, modernist poetry was distinguished by T. S. Eliot's intellectually demanding, fragmented verse, commonly shunning the idea of poetry as a medium for political and social commentary. Modernist poets endeavored to fashion a verse that was generally unconcerned with what they often regarded as the transience of modern social and political existence.

North American folk vernacular poetry, characterized in African American poetry by Langston Hughes's blues and jazz poems, situated itself as antithetic to the modernist commitment to abstruse nuance and distrust of art that suggested social themes. Dedicating its aesthetic to the diverse, democratizing voices of American experience and expression, vernacularism sought inspiration from the common, regional speech of the working-classes, ethnic cultures, and other disregarded voices across social fields. In vivid contrast with the modernist school, Black folk-inflected vernacular language poetry generally imparted messages that confronted racist ideologies, among its aims to supplant the blackface minstrel fiction published in mainstream American periodicals.[25]

McKay did not participate, however, in either the modernist verse revolution or the New Negro movement folk vernacular recuperation project. Although McKay admired some modernist poetry, he practically never tried his hand at *vers libre.* In a January 9, 1917 letter to white literary critic and NAACP cofounder Joel E. Spingarn, McKay sketches out the verse aesthetic that he would adhere to until the end of his life: "I was nourished or, to be correct, nourished myself on the old forms.... the sonnet I find admirable for a moment's thought. I am prone to be diffuse + repetitive and rhyme and metre help to check these faults."[26] After McKay's two 1912 Jamaican collections, moreover, he never again generated dialect poetry. While many of his poems expressed overt political and social themes, he almost exclusively composed verse in established forms, from his *literary* verse written in Jamaica to his very last efforts. His favored form was a slight variation on the Shakespearean sonnet, as in "If We Must Die," "America," and "The White House," its final heroic couplet ending with a courtly poetic diction: "Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate/Against the potent poison of your hate."[27]

[24] Pound 1913.

[25] McKible 2024 uncovers how the magazine's powerful white editor George Horace Lorimer maintained a ruthless campaign against Black progress by commissioning a team of white authors to crank out a relentless flood of minstrel fiction calculated to reinforce racist ideology. McKible also examines how Harlem Renaissance literature and art directly answered the *Post*'s white supremacist crusade. Indeed, *Circulating Jim Crow* considers how in significant ways New Negro artists shaped their aesthetic against the *Post*'s white-authored, racist dialect fiction. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, explained in a 1932 letter "that she wrote the stories that would be collected in *Mules and Men* (1935) in part because 'it makes me furious when some ham like [*Post* minstrel drone Octavius Roy] Cohen gets off a nothing else but and calls it a high spot of Negro humor and imagery.'" See McKible 2024, 178.

[26] McKay, letter to Joel E. Spingarn, January 9, 1917, Joel E. Spingarn Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, in McKay 2025, 26.

[27] McKay 2004, 148.

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James Weldon Johnson's preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) offers an insight into the formation of early 1920s New Negro poetics and McKay's lifelong commitment to writing traditional, literary verse. Johnson expresses his genuine admiration for Dunbar's art but is ambivalent about the range of vernacular poetry, calling instead for "a form that is freer and larger than dialect, ... but also capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations" of modern Black consciousness, and Johnson singles out McKay as a model voice of emerging African American poetry.[28]

McKay's well-known conflict with renaissance midwife Alain Locke over the dissemination of his poetry provides another insight into how the author deemed his literary art and his intentions regarding his targeted public. While guest editing the 1925 *Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro* special issue of the US magazine *Survey Graphic*, a collection that would define African American writing from the mid- to late 1920s, Locke was apparently anxious that the title of "The White House," evoking one of the chief symbols of white American purity, would offend white readers. Without McKay's consent, Locke published the sonnet as "White Houses," and later that year Locke repeated the infringement in the groundbreaking anthology, *The New Negro*.[29] In a state of frustration and fury, McKay wrote Locke:

> The whole symbolical import of my poem is lost under the title you have chosen to give it & allowed to remain after I had called your attention to it. If you understand how an artist feels about the word that he chooses above other words, ... then you will understand how I feel about 'The White House.' I do hope you will set this matter right in future editions of your book.[30]

The New Negro, McKay knew, would send tidal waves through the United States reading public as well as influencing how prominent publishers, editors, reviewers, and book distributors perceived the authors whose work appeared in the anthology. McKay, that is, understood that the anthology would serve as the foremost representation of Black literary arts among the universal American readership and thereby would determine how each author who appeared in its pages would be defined in the US public sphere. Given McKay's hope to court the mainstream American public, one might expect him to have conceded some logic in Locke's correction, but, as his correspondence restates throughout his career, an imperative was that his art be regarded as inviolable. As "The White House" says, the "heart" must remain "inviolate." It is not surprising that as future editions of *The New Negro* sustained Locke's affront, McKay never forgave him.

When McKay left the Weimar period subculture in Berlin to settle in Paris, he stepped into an environment where the twentieth-century modernist revolution was on the verge of a milestone transformation. The Lost Generation, led by Ernest Hemingway and including such novelists as John Dos Passos and James Joyce, was seizing the stage in Paris's Latin Quarter and Montparnasse, the epicenter of the city's literary scene. The sensation of Joyce's challenging modernist novel *Ulysses*, published in 1922 by the Left Bank bookstore and Lost Generation locus Shakespeare and Company, inspired expatriate American poets to turn to fiction writing.[31] McKay also was stirred to write fiction in the Lost Generation atmosphere, though, as with his poetry, not in the modernist style.

[28] Johnson 1922, xli, xliii.

[29] Locke 1925.

[30] McKay, letter to Alain Locke, August 1, 1926, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University in McKay 2025, 159.

[31] Joyce 1922.

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McKay's initial attempt at novel writing for the American literary scene was the now nonextant "Color Scheme." A late June 1925 letter to bibliophile Arturo Schomburg typifies the in-absentia Black expatriate author's many attempts to press into service influential New Negro intellectuals like Schomburg to act as his literary proxy and flog his writing with Manhattan publishers. The letter shows a McKay who saw himself as an experienced professional author with a clear strategy for disseminating "Color Scheme." And the impressions of both the Weimar Republic-era sexual revolution and the brash Montparnasse modernist artistic transformation are present in the budding novelist's blunt statement of confidence in his freshman novel's innovative potential: "I make my Negro characters yarn and backbite and fuck like people the world over. … About the new firm Viking—I think I should see Knopf or Harcourt Brace first. An older firm can always sell a book better than a very new one. Especially if the book is of merit."[32] What McKay could not have foreseen was that in the United States *Ulysses* had been banned for obscenity, and in this chilling environment for innovative fiction his preferred publisher, the prestigious Midtown Manhattan publisher Alfred A. Knopf, would balk at the frank sexuality of "Color Scheme." In later letters, McKay complains to Schomburg about letting him down, and finally frustrated with the rejection of "Color Scheme," he relates that he has destroyed the only manuscript.[33]

Following *Harlem Shadows*, McKay did not publish a book in the United States until 1928 when Harper and Brothers released *Home to Harlem*, a novel that holds fascinating dialogs with Bourne, Frank, and Toomer's transnational American visions. The novel's unmistakable conversation with two influential Lost Generation novels, Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and, in ways both deferential and subversive, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), also draws attention to McKay's intention that his creative prose should be read and disseminated as contributing to contemporary popular if trailblazing US fiction.[34] McKay evidently scavenged from his own writing, moreover, as the protagonist of "Color Scheme," the Haitian immigrant Ray, is made the secondary character of *Home to Harlem.* The digressive story follows African American proletarian Jake Brown, dissatisfied with the treatment as a Black US Army recruit sent to serve in the Great War, who absconds while stationed in France. Following McKay's own crossings, Jake loiters in England for a period, then sails as a merchant sailor back to New York to resume a vagabond life in Harlem. He enjoys the jazz club and rent party nightlife, playing the field with several female characters, including an especially-liked sex worker who disappears after a single night of romance.

McKay's notion of a transnational America is a truly cosmopolitan society. The Harlem speakeasies welcome both straight and queer, the novel depicting "pansies" and "dandies" alongside a wide range of Black humanity.[35] Halfway through the novel, Jake meets Ray while the two men are working as railway Pullman waiters. The bisexual Ray is in exile due to the brutal US military occupation of Haiti, and the West Indian refugee, an intellectual like McKay himself, teaches Jake about African kingdoms and Black Caribbean resistance to enslavement and colonial rule.[36] At the end of the novel, Jake reunites with the misplaced

[32] McKay, letter to Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, late June 1925, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, in McKay 2025, 122.

[33] McKay, letter to William Aspenwall Bradley, April 15, 1927, William A. Bradley Literary Agency Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, in McKay 2025, 180.

[34] See Edward 2007, 117–25.

[35] McKay 1928, 30–32.

[36] McKay 1928, 131–39.

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sex worker named Felice, and feeling vulnerable as a deserter, Jake decides to relocate with her to Chicago. Meanwhile, the Haitian castaway Ray, unable to cope with American racist conditions, departs for France, iterating McKay's later passages.

Although white reviewers generally praised *Home to Harlem*, few identified it, as McKay intended, as a revolutionary transnational American text but rather praised the Black author for finally portraying primitive migrant Negro life.[37] On the other side of the color line, Black critics, also not appreciating its cosmopolitan message, generally complained that *Home to Harlem* pandered to white fantasies about an exotic Negro underworld, with W. E. B. Du Bois issuing one of the severest reproofs. Two years before reviewing *Home to Harlem*, Du Bois had published in the NAACP magazine the *Crisis* a lecture titled "Criteria of Negro Art," his contention being that New Negro authors should produce literature that reflected the fact that "all art is" political "propaganda."[38] In his June 1928 *Crisis* review of McKay's novel, he raged that *Home to Harlem*'s "filth" made him "feel ... like taking a bath."[39]

By the late 1920s, Du Bois wished to declare his wrath not only against McKay but also with an iconoclastic rising generation of Harlem Renaissance artists including Hughes, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Wallace Thurman, editor of the 1926 one-off arts magazine *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists.* Designating its contributors the "younger Negro artists," the aim of the magazine was to present a Black perspective that the New Negro literary establishment, like Locke and Du Bois, was incapable of reaching.[40] At least part of what unmistakably made Du Bois feel unclean about *Home to Harlem* was its queer Black drag parade. The review was no doubt particularly upsetting, as Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* was the book that as a college student McKay had regarded as a revelation. Taking Du Bois's denunciation "personally," McKay returned the rage, posting to his onetime idol in June 1928 one of his most blistering rebukes: "nowhere in your writings do you reveal any comprehension of esthetics and therefore you are not competent nor qualified to pass judgement upon any work of art." McKay's letter derides Du Bois for trying "to pass off propaganda as ... art."[41]

Despite the critical scolding from Du Bois and other Black critics, McKay was not done with exploring the idea of same-sex attraction among identifiably heterosexual Black males. In his next novel and something of a sequel, the Marseille-set *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929), Ray again plays second fiddle, this time to African American wandering jazz musician Banjo. Jake makes a cameo near the end of the novel, leaving behind Felice and child to recross the North Atlantic in search of his Ray, and when they reunite in a Vieux Port bar, Ray greets his friend with a "French-kiss."[42] Says Ray: "'That's all right, Jakie, he-men and all. Stay long enough in any country and you'll get on to the ways and find them natural.'"[43] With Banjo,

[37] A standout is Dorothy Parker's *New Yorker* review, which declares the novel "a vitally important addition to American letters." Parker 1973, review of *Home to Harlem*, 352.

[38] Du Bois 1926, 296.

[39] Du Bois 1928, 202.

[40] Six years later, Thurman 1932, a caustic satire on the state of the New Negro arts movement during the grim early Great Depression period. Taking inspiration from modernist themes, Thurman's *enfants terrible* insisted that in order to renew what they regarded as a played-out renaissance, a Black literary art that included depictions of outlawed sexuality must become part of the new artistic order, their outcry resonating with McKay's defense of the discarded "Color Scheme."

[41] McKay, letter to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 18, 1928, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, McKay 2025, 262.

[42] McKay 1929, 292.

[43] McKay 1929, 292.

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McKay shifts the cosmopolitan theme from Harlem to France's major port city, portraying the Vieux Port as a significant Black Diaspora hub. Whereas *Home to Harlem* could claim to be the first major success by a Black author, *Banjo* was a financial disappointment. The American reading public that McKay all but created for his revolutionary Harlem narrative was not there for his Black Atlantic cruise.

While *Banjo* failed to sell to McKay's targeted public during the early 1930s, it attracted to his surprise and delight a modest if historic French readership.[44] As the Négritude movement flourished in the 1930s, Paris publisher Éditions Rieder issued a translation of *Banjo* and in due course *Home to Harlem* and his final novel, *Banana Bottom*.[45] McKay's revered reputation among Black intellectuals located in Paris is exemplified by Négritude authors Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léopold Sedar Senghor stating that they had committed to memory entire passages of *Banjo.*[46] McKay's French was rudimentary, but the Jamaican émigré nevertheless considered himself a Francophile, his aesthetic and artistic discernment shaped significantly by French literary culture. New Negro notables like Hughes, Locke, and Countee Cullen also claimed Paris, specifically, the neighborhood of ("Black") Montmartre, as a kind of home away from Harlem, but as McKay wrote two Pan-Africanist novels set in Marseille, his art is perhaps the best example of Black literary transnationalism in the New Negro period. McKay's dissemination among French readers was limited, however, and a wider reading public in France would not materialize until long after his death.[47]

Despite McKay's fondness for Gallic culture, he decided to withdraw from France in the late 1920s, probably motivated by an unexpected police investigation.[48] McKay evidently avoided state interest for the first few years in France but was eventually accused—ironically, considering his critique of Du Bois—of being a radical "propagandist," which became a factor in his sojourns in Spain and eventually his settlement in Morocco.[49] Living in Tangier, he published two more books, starting with the short story collection, *Gingertown*.[50] The contents resemble a kind of Black Diaspora map, with stories set in Jamaica, New York, and France, focusing on a variety of Black characters. The book's exceptional character led to the unusual text's failure in the marketplace, as his publisher, Eugene Saxton, was somewhat understandably unsure of how to vend it.[51] The last novel McKay published, the 1933 *Banana Bottom*, also written in Morocco, is set in the rural part of Jamaica where he spent his youth and again pursues the Black transnational theme. Bita Plant is sent to England and then returns to the island as an educated woman and potentially something of an outsider among the Banana Bottom community. McKay's novel of rural Jamaica also did not have a ready public. An October 20, 1933 letter to Max Eastman spells out the situation:

> I wanted to get back to America this year and had written 'Banana Bottom' with that expectation. ... I also want to get back to Jamaica for a visit by hook or crook. I felt convinced that I should return after the publication of 'Gingertown' last year.

[44] See Fabre 1990 and Stovall 1996.

[45] See, for example, Edwards 2003; McKay 1933.

[46] Cooper 1987, 259.

[47] In yet another irony, McKay is now enjoying a resurgence in France with the translations of *Amiable with Big Teeth* and *Romance in Marseille.*

[48] Cooper 1987, 252.

[49] McKay lived in Morocco off and on for three years, where he experienced the most intense political pressure of his life from French and British colonial powers in "international zone" Tangier, actions that contributed to his return to the U.S. in 1934. Edward 2007, 65.

[50] McKay 1932.

[51] Cooper 1987, 275.

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> ... I couldn't think of a short story there that would go over ... because my kind of writing when it is good really belongs to the popular magazines—what I lack is the genteel sophisticated touch.[52]

How McKay saw his work as aimed at American readership is reinforced periodically in correspondence posted during the 1920s and early 1930s. In a December 7, 1929 letter to Max Eastman, McKay laments missing the chance to meet with his old friend in Paris and comments on how he saw his identity as a writer vis-à-vis an established publishing scene: "I am sure a talk with you would have done me lots and lots of good. I'll have to wait until I come 'home' next year."[53] Caribbean émigré McKay repeats the gesture of placing *home* in quotation marks in the same letter, and wrapping the word in quotes would recur in several later letters.[54] At the height of the Great Depression, McKay was eager to end his exile and return to the United States, referring to his "homecoming" in a January 27, 1933 letter to Eastman.

As the titles of *Home to Harlem* and McKay's 1937 memoir *A Long Way from Home* suggest, home is a layered theme in his writing. Considering McKay spent virtually his entire writing career as an exile, the quotation marks signifying America as his acknowledged home make a deeply paradoxical figure. McKay's fiction calls attention to the paradox, as McKay's alter ego in two novels, the Caribbean refugee Ray, has fled US-occupied Haiti for, a surreal and brutal irony, America. McKay's reference to the United States as home in scare quotes articulates the idea that while America oppresses him, as in the sonnet "America," the United States was his targeted reading public, even while the author was being targeted as a threat and, at the time of writing the letter, being denied the privilege of returning to the United States.

No doubt the abrupt arrival of the Great Depression and the bottom falling out of publishing books played a role in McKay's setbacks during the early 1930s, as it did for other New Negro writers. But it appears that in McKay's case, the cause was not primarily the summary death of the "Negro Vogue," as Hughes mordantly communicates the circumstances in his first memoir, *The Big Sea* (1940).[55] McKay after all was able to continue to publish, and his publisher did try to market his books to a general US reading public.

While all three texts shared the common misfortune of not selling well, McKay did not begin writing *Gingertown* and *Banana Bottom* immediately after publishing *Banjo.* Despite *Banjo*'s disappointing reception, McKay began to work on another novel set in Marseille, ultimately titled *Romance in Marseille.*[56] The author reasoned that with *Romance in Marseille* he could accomplish with American readers what *Banjo* failed to achieve. McKay's protagonist was a disabled West African named Lafala, based on a Nigerian friend who had been fictionalized as a supporting character in *Banjo* named Taloufa. Like *Banjo*, the cast is chiefly a motley of Pan-African émigrés, several of whom scrounge their way without legal immigrant status.

[52] McKay, letter to Max Eastman, October 20, 1933, Max Eastman Papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University, McKay 2025, 454.

[53] McKay, letter to Max Eastman, December 7, 1929, Max Eastman Papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University, in McKay 2025, 322.

[54] Fed up with police persecution in the Tangier "international wasps' nest," McKay wrote to Eastman on October 20, 1933: "I feel better all over with the idea of a voyage and going 'home,'" emphasizing the concepts by underlining them.

[55] Hughes 1940, 223–233.

[56] McKay 2020.

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Martinican Communist Party labor organizer Étienne St. Dominique is a fictional version of another Marseille friend, Senegalese activist Lamine Senghor.[57] Unlike *Home to Harlem*'s outré pansies and dandies effectively serving as a Jazz Age sexual revolution tableau, *Romance in Marseille*'s queer characters are portrayed as living three-dimensional lives and play pivotal roles in the plot. Eventually unsure of whether he could pull off a novel about a protagonist who becomes a double amputee, however, the author set the manuscript aside in the early 1930s to write *Gingertown* and *Banana Bottom.* When the two books did not sell, McKay, though still feeling tentative about the project, resumed writing *Romance in Marseille.*

Indigent and ill, McKay hoped he could produce a book that would realize a profit, a product that would appeal to the US marketplace, which is why, unlike *Banjo*: *A Story without a Plot*, McKay gave *Romance in Marseille* a plot. The Marseille gendarmerie scheme with the shipping line against Lafala, and rival characters conspire against one another. McKay's difficulties with the Tangier authorities may have inspired the novel's overlapping machinations: the French colonial police in league with the British consulate, that is, accusing him of being a subversive. Again, however, McKay underestimated the potential to imagine and shape a public for his writing. Because *Romance in Marseille* simply seemed to reiterate *Banjo* and somewhat due to its frank representation of homosexuality, the émigré author ended up losing his publisher, Harper and Brothers, and failing to find another, he shelved it in 1933. With the help of influential civil rights activists led by James Weldon Johnson, McKay was able to return to the United States in 1934.[58]

McKay's mid- to late Great Depression years in Harlem were characterized by persistent infirmity, hardship, and increasing disappointment as a writer. He resumed writing poetry, resulting in "The Cities" verse, a collection that also failed to find a publisher.[59] Several years later, he published *A Long Way from Home*, a rousing memoir he hoped would put him back on the map of the competitive Manhattan publishing world. It seems likely that the lively, gossipy book that covered McKay's travels and sojourns from New York to London, Moscow, Berlin, Paris, Marseille, Barcelona, and various locations in Morocco, highlighting Tangier, would have done well except that his new publisher, Lee Furman, went bust soon after the book's release, which meant that the project benefited from virtually no marketing campaign—a terminal case for any book intended to compete in the marketplace.[60] In the late 1930s, he returned to fiction with *Harlem Glory*, a novel about a weary Black protagonist who returns to New York from abroad and encounters a distressingly altered Harlem of internal Black antagonism (apparently abandoned, *Harlem Glory* remained unfinished when it was published in 1990).[61]

At the same time, McKay's problems with the state resumed during the Little Red Scare period of the late 1930s when he was called before Martin Dies's House Special Committee on Un-American Activities. McKay cooperated, and his writing signaled his turn against internationalist leftism. The WPA-supported collection of essays *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* reflected McKay's disenchantment with the Left's effect on the Black population.[62] Shifting away from leftist politics did not help bring him closer to the public he desired, however, as

[57] See Edward and Maxwell 2020, vii–xxxix.
[58] Cooper 1987, 289.
[59] McKay 2004, gathered formerly unpublished verse including the "Cities" Poems.
[60] Cooper 1987, 338.
[61] McKay 1990.
[62] McKay 1940.

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Harlem: Negro Metropolis, the last book he published in his lifetime, fared no better than previous efforts.

McKay's last novel, the circa 1941 *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, also was not published in his lifetime.[63] As its sardonic subtitle suggests, *Amiable with Big Teeth* is an incensed satire about the white-run CPUSA manipulating Black intellectuals and the Harlem masses. The novel puts into fictional form *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*'s anxiety over the forfeiture of Black autonomy, a vivid volte-face from McKay's early 1920s conviction, expressed to Garvey, that the white-run Communist Party could be trusted to aid the struggling Black masses. It also marks a reversal with respect to his unique vision of a transnational America. Also a novel with a plot, *Amiable with Big Teeth* relates the elaborate story of two competing Harlem organizations during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War: the Black-operated Hands to Ethiopia and the CPUSA-sponsored White Friends of Ethiopia, led by an iniquitous, shadowy communist agent, a character that foresees Cold War-period Hollywood melodrama. McKay's final novel would have made a significant complement to the emergent Black satire during the interwar and Second World War periods, alongside such works as George S. Schuyler's similarly rowdy *Black Empire*, an early Afrofuturist caper narrative about a Black Fu Manchu-like character who plots to seize Africa from European imperialism, serialized from 1936 to 1938 in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.[64]

In the mid-1940s, a finally down-and-out McKay converted to Catholicism and, envisioning Catholic readers as his final public, wrote his last attempts at verse, a sonnet series he called "The Cycle." As McKay himself acknowledged, his skills were diminished and the quality of the poetry was wanting, with only a few published in his lifetime, mostly in the *Catholic Worker*.[65] He also began to work on another memoir, focusing on his Clarendon youth, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (also published posthumously, in 1979).[66] In 1948, after many years of privation and obscurity, he died in Chicago of myocardial infarction at 57. Buried in York City, Claude McKay's modest flush marker is mustered among the millions in Queens's vast Calvary Cemetery.[67]

A note on McKay's afterlife

An astonishing example of a Black writer's work experiencing an afterlife, McKay's writing is now more widely appreciated than it was even during the height of his success as a Harlem Renaissance writer in the late 1920s. In 2009, Jean-Christophe Cloutier found the sole typescript of *Amiable with Big Teeth*, hitherto unknown to the world, in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library's Samuel Roth archive. In view of McKay's publishers fretting about US obscenity laws, *Amiable with Big Teeth*'s undiscovered residence in the Roth archive is something of another grand if pitiless irony. From the late 1920s to the late 1930s, McKay's most active period as a prose writer, Roth was intermittently incarcerated for publishing obscene material. In 1957, Roth won a historic US Supreme Court victory, launching subsequent, historic legal reinterpretations of the First Amendment, transforming the publishing industry and therefore the American reading public's access to

[63] McKay 2017.
[64] Schuyler 2023.
[65] McKay 2004, 367–68.
[66] McKay 1979a.
[67] My thanks to Agnieszka Tuszynska for leading me to McKay's grave.

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literature.[68] Cloutier and Brent Hayes Edwards edited the novel and then published it in 2017 as a Penguin Classic.

The release of *Amiable with Big Teeth* paved the way for the publication of *Romance in Marseille.* Unlike the circa 1941 satire, however, McKay's circa 1933 novel with a plot was not a lost text. *Romance in Marseille* endured a ghostly afterlife, undergoing at least two moments of near resuscitation before eventually finding a receptive public in 2020. During the Black Arts period, McKay's Black militant poetry received renewed attention. Hoping to call attention to the unpublished novel, Carl Cowl, McKay's last literary agent and earliest executor of the Claude McKay Literary Estate, asked eminent poet and novelist Clarence Major "to write an introduction to three unpublished Claude McKay manuscripts," as he relates in "Claude McKay: My 1975 Adventure."[69] Major says that at one point the University of Chicago Press showed keen interest, but the project fell through for reasons that were never clear, leaving him "with a pile of notes."[70] Some 25 years later, the University of Exeter Press moved to publish a similar volume, with *Romance in Marseille* accompanied by a selection of short fiction, but this edition also never materialized.[71] *Romance in Marseille* lingered in legal limbo for two more decades, until 2018, when the estate commissioned fellow McKay scholar William J. Maxwell and me to edit *Romance in Marseille.* In 2020, Penguin Random House published our edition. Stirred by its forward-looking depiction of interwar-period Black Diaspora and queer subcultures, reviewers warmly recommended the novel to contemporary readers.[72] In terms of its public reach, the Penguin Classic trade paperback has sold well in the United States and has made a good showing in the United Kingdom, Canada, and other countries.[73]

A theme running through the contemporary journalism praising *Romance in Marseille* is the idea that the novel needed nearly a century to discover its public. In so far as McKay had to imagine and create a receptive public, this is an understandable presentist view of the text. To assert in absolute terms the idea that the novel was ahead of its time, however, potentially effaces how very much *of its time* the novel was. Such a view also bears the potential to overlook the diverse public McKay hoped would read his fiction. If McKay now resonates with contemporary readers, it should be because his art strived to create an intensely liberated vision of Black reality that the publishing establishment of the early twentieth century felt reluctant to take a risk on. And it can never be known whether the public McKay attempted to reach was prepared to appreciate this revolutionary novel.

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[68] Roth v. United States 1957. See Cloutier and Edwards 2017, xxxv–xxxvi.

[69] Major 2020, 264.

[70] Major 2022, 264. Major confirmed this situation in an October 9, 2022 email.

[71] See Edward and Maxwell, 2020, xlvii–xlviii.

[72] The *Washington Post*'s Michael Dirda, for example, stated, "Today *Romance in Marseille* seems ... strikingly woke, given that its themes include disability, the full spectrum of sexual preference, radical politics and the subtleties of racial identity." Dirda 2020.

[73] *Romance in Marseille* has sold close to twenty thousand copies worldwide.

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