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DIASPORA CRUISES: QUEER BLACK PROLETARIANISM IN CLAUDE MCKAY’S A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Gary E. Holcomb

I guess when the gang sees me with these here, . . . they’ll be thinking that I’m turning queer.

Michael in McKay, *A Long Way from Home*

Over the past fifteen years or so, literary critics and historians have been going about applying stimulating new methods of inquiry to Harlem Renaissance authors, and two recent critical modes have radically revised studies of Claude McKay. As well as recognizing McKay’s role with respect to the Black Diaspora and black nationalism, recent scholarship has shown that it is also vital to bear in mind McKay’s part in socialist internationalism, his participation in radical politics, both Black Marxism as well as pluralistic leftism.¹ Just as important, critics have retrieved McKay in view of his role in black and white gay subculture during the Harlem Renaissance. Foregrounding the vogue of gay sexual comradeship among several of the Renaissance’s axial figures, current scholarship challenges perfunctory conceits about sexual orientation during the New Negro Renaissance, placing McKay at the core of Harlem gay black social intercourse in the 1920s.² The study of Festus Claudius McKay (1889–
incendiary anti-imperialist poet, radical proletarian novelist, and queer transnational voyager, was ready for a more elastic analysis. Until the advent of New Negro proletarian historicism and the application of queer theory to black modernists, scholars almost exclusively interpreted Harlem Renaissance figures through a post-Black Arts inflected criticism. Through such a filter, McKay was acceptable as a black nationalist firebrand poet, but his exhibition of Communist politics and the implication of a same-sex carnal appetite were beyond the pale.

And yet, scholars currently treat McKay's radical politics and homoeroticism as if such aspects of his work and being never met. In the first of his planned volumes of work on McKay, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice*, Winston James's declared objective is to restore the Afro-Caribbean radical sources and affinities in McKay's politics. This is an essential and timely critical act, yet James wishes to achieve his recovery by nullifying—and evidently suppressing—another thread fabricated into McKay's radicalism, a genealogy that is no less consequential than any other: McKay's sexuality. The most troubling character of James's discourse is an uneasiness with McKay's relationship with the gay patron Walter Jekyll. The nature of McKay's relationship with Jekyll, whether genital or not, is exiled to the endnotes of James's scholarship. James's banishment of McKay's sexuality from an analysis of the New Negro author's political trajectory discloses a ruling problematic in James's work. However, even those critics who have discussed McKay's sexual proclivity have tended to insulate his libidinous inclination from his political predilections. Those critics who have been occupied with studying the signs of his sexuality, in other words, have been content on the whole to pursue the homosexual trace in McKay's texts. Adjusting the clinical lens on McKay's sexuality—focusing in on homosexuality—inhibits the possibility of observing ways in which McKay's sexual difference, his queer dis-positionality, vitalized and enhanced his political dissidence.

At this stage in the study of Claude McKay, the various critical communities that are interested in this author would benefit from a discussion of how McKay's sexuality informed his sense of race consciousness and radical intellectual work. The discursive presence of McKay's queer politics insists on an inquiry into his work that confronts the discourses of New Negro proletarianism and black anticolonial resistance. The text that most dramatically performs McKay's complex disposition toward these discourses is his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937), a document to which scholars have given scant critical attention and virtually no theoretically informed analysis. Because McKay's memoir restages his later personal history in collateral ways, *A Long Way from Home* calls for a reading
informed by queer cultural theory. The fully imagined query into McKay's aesthetic sensibility and political consciousness must situate the author's thirties memoir as a document that stages the social discourse that encompasses and composes it. Listening to the various "speech acts of silence," to use Eve Sedgwick’s locution (Epistemology 3), in McKay’s autobiographical performance enables a reading that offers ingress into McKay’s textual closet. Such an act of attendance ultimately elucidates aspects of McKay’s political consciousness that are unavailable through other means. My analysis of A Long Way from Home subjects the memoir’s closeted narrative to a poem collected in one of McKay’s first publications, the compilation of mostly dialect poetry published in Jamaica, Constab Ballads (1912). Another text whose queer unveilings remains critically neglected, Constab Ballads is far less willing than A Long Way from Home to check its queer voice at the closet door. By exposing the later text to the prior, my intention is to show that foregrounding McKay’s queer voice is indispensable in understanding his commitment to the advocacy of black proletarian social movements, both in the US and beyond the boundaries of the New Negro Renaissance. By reading an openly queer dialect poem by McKay, moreover, I unpack elements of the author’s disposition toward patronage. In support of this refashioning, I include an analysis of the historical context for the late Victorian Sex Panic over transgressive sexuality and the role social anxieties played in colonialism. Another text that holds a telling conversation with McKay’s memoir is his best-selling novel, Home to Harlem (1928). Home to Harlem limns a convergence of Jazz Age sexual subculture with black proletarian struggle, and the Harlem Renaissance novel’s elevation of "primitivism" and repudiation of "civilization" resurfaces in the narrative of A Long Way from Home. I also read two sections of A Long Way from Home in the interest of accentuating the significance of McKay’s travels and sojourns abroad, particularly his years in Tangier, Morocco, and his autobiographical performance of his early years in Harlem. Finally, I examine a closeted restaging of patronage that McKay includes in A Long Way from Home, an act that ultimately teases out McKay’s representations of patronage, sexuality, and the role of the radical socialist black worker. Though the voice of McKay's queer dis-positionality permeates the document, A Long Way from Home takes steps to suppress this discursive field. Intended to be a popular autobiographical account of McKay’s encounters with the illuminati and literati, the memoir conceals its same-sex presence. The text also takes pains to veil another unacceptable utterance. As an anti-Stalinist repudiation text, it proportionately endeavors to tame the still very much vital inflection of McKay's Marxism. Traces of both McKay’s sexual politics and the authentic history
of his Communist cultural work dwell in *A Long Way from Home*, the vérité of McKay's lived history that his autobiography cannot expunge. Though shadowy, such imprints may be traced—despite McKay's care in suppressing the entangled presences of "the love that dare not speak its name"6 and his onetime persistent dedication to Communism.

A scholar of race and sexuality in US culture and a cultural theorist of black masculinity together furnish useful speculative strategies for analyzing McKay's queer proletarianism. Gender and race scholar Siobhan Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* offers a gainful approach to analyzing "how sexuality might also intersect with multiple categories of identification and difference" (5). A critical point in Somerville's scholarship is the insistence that the term "sexuality" is historically situated rather than a universal signifier. The term refers "to a historically and culturally contingent category of identity": "As such, 'sexuality' means much more than sexual practice per se. One's sexual identity, while at times linked directly to one's sexual activities, more often describes a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on the culture's mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one's response to that interpellation" (6). Somerville proceeds to show how sexuality intersects with race to make an ideological site of engagement, but the initial work on this topic, as Somerville herself says (5), was carried out in Kobena Mercer's groundbreaking "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race." Mercer's work offers an approach to understanding McKay's complex disposition toward the politics of sexual difference. Beginning with the premise that masculinity is socially constructed, Mercer contends that dominant views of masculinity are historically forged as well. Mercer says, moreover, that the notion of masculinity as "natural" may be assessed in ideological terms (136). Patriarchal power perpetuates and enforces politically reactionary designations of acceptable social markings for class and labor. However, patriarchy is not a stable signifier; it is always in a state of transformation, of adaptation. Like Gramsci's hegemony, patriarchy thus adapts to prevailing conditions in order to resituate its power when contingencies dictate: "Patriarchal culture constantly redefines and adjusts the balance of male power and privilege, and the prevailing system of gender roles, through a variety of material, economic, social and political structures such as class, the division of labor and the work/home nexus at the point of consumption" (Mercer 136–37). Within the masculine construction matrix of patriarchal force influencing class and labor Mercer locates issues of race and ethnic difference: "black male gender identities have been historically and culturally constructed through complex dialectics of power and subordination"
Queer Black Proletarianism in McKay's *A Long Way from Home* (137). In other words, black masculinity is constructed in compliance with dominant masculine identity formations. Finally, Mercer offers a Foucauldian general theory: "questions of sexuality, pleasure and desire have always been on the black political agenda insofar as our aspirations—for freedom—have always found cultural forms of expression" (140). Black cultural assumptions of masculinity are policed by patriarchal hegemony. By "black male gender identities," Mercer means to indicate those identities that are perceived as "natural," acceptable, sanctioned: that is, heterosexed identities. Such a theoretical point of departure suggests that those human subjects who do not participate in the policing of gender identities are obliged to resist. Accordingly, McKay must be understood as a writer who not only struggled against class, labor, race, and colonial domination. He must be understood, as well, as a subject who, laterally, with varying displays of directness and obliqueness, exposed more acceptable forms of resistance—class and race struggles—to a sexual dissidence. For McKay, without forcing class and race struggle to acknowledge the importance of a sexual dissidence in a global liberation politics, no meaningful effort against colonialism, racism, and capitalism would be worthwhile.

Although almost universally excellent in terms of textual study, scholarly work on McKay has not theorized the ways in which race, sexuality, and ideology meet in the author's life and labor. In his biography of McKay, Wayne Cooper's principal discussion of his subject's sexuality considers McKay's relationship with his first patron, the English ethnomusicologist Walter Jekyll. Jekyll, a "homosexual" Englishman, relocated to Jamaica during the late nineteenth century (30). Though willing to engage in broad speculative analysis elsewhere in his excellently researched biography, Cooper does not consider the obvious way in which Jekyll's actions were likely motivated by a local history of sexuality. Although he notes that Jekyll would have been familiar with "the Wilde affair, the most infamous case of homosexual persecution in nineteenth-century England," Cooper rules out the possibility that Jekyll's departure from England was occasioned by the volatile historical events of the 1880s (30). Cooper's critical hesitancy needs to be reexamined. An upper-class exclusively same-sex oriented man with the credentials of the voluptuary, Jekyll withdrew from England after Wilde had been tried under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. The law enacted Henry Labouchère's attack on those he labeled "Snob Queers": aristocratic aesthetes who corrupted manly, liberal English youth (Dellamora 202).7 The Wilde trials influenced anxieties over identifiably homosexual public figures in Britain, particularly those who hailed from the aristocracy (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 217). Gay Englishmen of
Jekyll's class felt obliged to flee England during the late Victorian assault on "deviant" sexuality occasioned by the scandalous trials of Oscar Wilde; the late Victorian "Panzy Craze" posed a threat to the construction of masculinity propagated for empire maintenance (Weeks 18). According to McKay's article in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1918, McKay the pupil and Jekyll the mentor explored the work of three literary masters in their intimate literary salon. These three writers framed the principles and aesthetic values of nineteenth-century English and American gay writing: Edward Carpenter, author of the pioneering protogay manifesto, *Homogenic Love and Its Place in a Free Society* (1894); Wilde, martyr of sexual autonomy; and Walt Whitman, both Carpenter's and Wilde's ideal of the sexually emancipated national poet. Moreover, it is instructive that in order to name a character who leads a secret sexual life, Robert Louis Stevenson chose the cognomen of his friend Walter Jekyll, as Cooper himself notes (23). The historical Jekyll was an authority on culture and language, thus Stevenson's use of his friend's name. The fictional Dr. Jekyll characterizes late Victorian anxiety over a crisis of masculinity, the Sex Panic of the 1880s.

*Constab Ballads*, McKay's second collection of poems published in Jamaica in 1912, openly portrays Jekyll's lessons in valuing "homogenic love." During the early teens, Jekyll discouraged his young pupil from writing the sort of classically metered lyrics that, in a desire to be seen as cultured, McKay wished to compose, and convinced his youthful friend instead to write more of his "dialect" or, to be more precise, creole poetry. For Jekyll, the euphony of the Afro-Jamaican male voice vocalizing creole speech was a quality that could arouse what amounts to sexual stimulation, an aspect of the Jekyll-McKay relationship that deepens the meaning of interaction within the colonial contact zone. Remarks in Jekyll's 1907 study, *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Tunes, Dancing Tunes, and Ring Tunes*, impart a sexual preference for and homoeroticism of Black Jamaican Creole: "The [Black Jamaican] men's voices are of extraordinary beauty. To hear a group chatting is a pure pleasure to the ear, quite irrespective of the funny things they say; their remarks are accompanied by the prettiest little twirks and turns of intonation, sometimes on the words, sometimes mere vocal ejaculations between them" (6). An awareness of this aspect of Jekyll's desire to see McKay write dialect poetry, therefore, sheds meaning on the situation between the two men. Several of the dialect poems in *Constab Ballads* deal with a same-sex love affair, or perhaps multiple affairs. In other words, for Jekyll, whose influence on McKay can be traced judiciously, two marginal expressions—Black Jamaican basilectal English creole and sexual difference—should be thought of
as tethered to one another; and his influence on McKay was to see this idea realized, to hear "vocal ejaculations" in McKay's verse.

*Constab Ballads* also documents McKay's first black proletarian social experience. Black Jamaicans filled the ranks of the Royal Jamaican Constabulary, and nearly all of the *Constab* poems celebrate the "peasant class" Jamaican. Accordingly, the text also represents McKay's first experience with the ingenious technology of colonial hegemony. The British ascendancy populated the colonial constabulary force with Jamaican "colonials," motivating the bourgeois colonized to police their kinsmen, thereby fashioning a military police class that perceived of itself as aligned with the colonial power—a shrewd articulation of colonial hegemony. But the *Constab* poems demonstrate another strain in McKay's trajectory, as well. Some of McKay's *Constab* poems describe or refer to the painful separation the speaker experiences when a comrade is suddenly relocated to another district. "Bennie's Departure" is perhaps the most helpful because, though its voice employs what seems an acceptably heterosexed convention—the recognizably Kiplingesque jaunty, homosocial, imperialistic esprit de corps diction and cadence—it's message of transgressive sexuality is unambiguous:

> Once his cot was next beside me,  
> But dere came misfortune's day  
> When de pleasure was denied me,  
> For de sergeant moved him 'way;  
> I played not fe mind de movin'  
> Though me heart wid grief be'n full;  
> 'Twas but one kin' o' de provin'  
> O' de ways o' dis ya wul'. (19)

Passages of *Constab Ballad* 's poems make perfunctory attempts at dissembling their queer meaning by offering alternative readings: representations of asexual homosocial relationships, manly comrades in arms. But the stanza above does not even attempt such a flimsy exteriority. One may contextualize the narrative's subject. Though we cannot be sure why the two black proletarian-class gay constables were separated, we can speculate judiciously, considering how colonial authorities operating under the consensus of late Victorian imperial assumptions about sexual "inversion" would have looked on a possibly same-sex relationship. One should note the stanza's withering conclusion: "de ways o' dis ya wul.'" McKay's "special friend" Walter Jekyll, an influential Englishman, was able to help the young Jamaican. Jekyll intervened with colonial authority, and McKay was transferred to a constabulary unit located in the district where Jekyll resided; in this way the two friends were able to spend more time
together. Eventually, Jekyll was able to have McKay, unhappy as a colonial police officer, released early from his term with the constabulary (Cooper 34). Constab Ballads autographs the colonialist-imperialist policing of queer black proletarianism at the outset of McKay's vocation.

When McKay went abroad, leaving Jamaica behind for the rest of his life, he would seek out forms of society where he could cultivate his early tendencies, forms of fellowship that were both black male proletarian and same-sex. In the late twenties, McKay would imaginatively record the experience of sexually emancipated Harlem by publishing the queer proletarian New Negro Renaissance novel, Home to Harlem, which joins divergent sexuality to proletarianism and social freedom. The novel draws attention to Harlem lesbianism and gay sexuality by twice paraphrasing a popular blues song sung by Bessie Smith, "Foolish Man Blues" (1927): "And there is two things in Harlem I don't understan' / It is a bulldyking woman and a faggoty man" (36, 129). Pansies openly people the nightclubs in Home to Harlem. Like Greenwich Village, Harlem of the 1920s vaunted Manhattan's own Pansy Craze. One pansy is a dancer in a nightclub:

a straw-colored boy who was a striking advertisement of the Ambrozine Palace of Beauty. The boy was made up with high-brown powder, his eyebrows were elongated and blackened up, his lips streaked with the dark rouge so popular in Harlem, and his carefully-straightened hair lay plastered and glossy under Madame Walker's absinthe-colored salve "for milady of fashion and color." (91)

The pansy is so vital to Jazz Age Harlem that to exclude him while reimagining the cultural landscape would be to portray an incomplete history. Another character and one who is more integrated into the narrative is Billy, the "Wolf," Biasse. Billy, a gambler, is queer: "Billy boasted that he had no time for women," but Billy describes himself as the "happiest, well-feddest wolf in Harlem" (88). Billy may characterize himself so, another character wryly observes, because Billy "eats his own kind" (92). If this isn't plain enough, the text reports that Billy "swerved off a different angle" (237). A tough, proletarian, mannish type himself, Billy keeps the company of the "straw-colored boy" dancer, the nightclub pansy. Queer life in Home to Harlem is diverse indeed, the ambit running from pansies to wolves.

Through the comradeship of its doubled protagonists—Jake, the proletarian-class, Great Migration nomadic "primitive," and Ray, the educated-class, West Indian exile and revolutionary intellectual—Home to Harlem lavishly enacts its pluralist Diaspora queer counterhegemonic articulation. When Jake and Ray meet, Ray is read-
ing the French novelist Alphonse Daudet's *Sapho* (1884). Sappho's "story gave two lovely words to modern language," Ray says: "Sapphic and Lesbian" (129). Ray, the novel's most autobiographical version of McKay himself, takes a kind of Nietzschean view of the corruption of modern social institutions: "modern education is planned to make you a sharp, snouty, rooting hog. A Negro getting it is an anachronism. We ought to get something new, we Negroes. But we get our education like—like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for" (243). While the hetero Jake at first shows an intolerance of lesbianism, Ray demonstrates a repressed same-sex penchant, fixated on Jake's comely boxer's physique. Ray and Jake work as waiters for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and one night while the two are out on an extended run, Ray suffers a sleepless night, evidently struggling with his sexual predilection. Ingesting some cocaine he has found in Jake's coat pocket in the hope, curiously, that the hydrochloride stimulant will help him sleep, Ray experiences revealing dreams. He dreams that he is "a gay hummingbird" (157). Then, apparently on the same wavelength as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Ray dreams of an "Orient-blue carnival," with "gleaming-skinned black boys bearing goblets of wine and obedient eunuchs waiting in the offing." Eventually, "[t]aboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights, orgies of [the] Orient carnival," evidently a site where Western taboos have no relevance (158). When Ray is coming out of the hallucinatory dream, he calls Jake's name. Later in the novel when Jake takes Ray to a brothel, Ray is repulsed at the idea of casual sexual intimacy with the women who labor as sex workers. Casual sex involving financial exchange isn't Ray's cup of tea. Still, Jake, puzzled with his chum's behavior, remarks to Ray that he is "awful queer" (200). Yet throughout the novel the "uncivilized"—uncorrupted by bourgeois refinement—Jake exhibits a clinically unclassifiable passion for Ray, at one point verbalized as a "frank savage affection" (272).

Black labor class issues figure as centrally in *Home to Harlem* as references to divergent sexuality. In 1928, the Sixth World Congress of the Soviet Comintern took the position that African Americans constituted an "oppressed nation" in the rural South and a "national minority" in the urban North, thus directing the CPUSA toward recognizing the special condition of African-American workers (Dawahare 77–78). *Home to Harlem*, published in the same year as the Comintern's ruling, immediately anticipates the Leninists' vanguardist identification of the exceptional circumstances of the new black proletariat. At one point Jake takes a short job as a long-shoreman, only to find out that he has been duped into scabbing.
But the situation is complicated by the fact that their own corrupt union does not support the white striking workers. Jake has belonged to a union in Philadelphia, but New York unions disregard the needs of black workers. When a white striker, carrying a little red book, invites Jake to join, Jake responds, "I won't scab, but I ain't a joiner kind of fellah [either]. I ain't no white folks' nigger and I ain't no poah white's fool" (45).

The broad consensus among black reviewers was that with *Home to Harlem*, McKay was trying to exploit the success of queer Harlem Renaissance writer Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), thus aligning McKay's novel with Van Vechten's reputed exploitation of black culture. But even Van Vechten's novel of riotous black jazz and unfettered sexual pursuit does not broach *Home to Harlem*'s homoerotic jouissance. Of the Harlem Renaissance published literary archive, only Bruce Nugent's unapologetically queer story, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926), is more out than *Home to Harlem* in its presentation of outré sexual camaraderie. Yet *Home to Harlem* links queer sexuality with black Marxist resistance politics, a revolutionary performance that Nugent's story does not undertake. What is the relationship between queer sexuality and black proletarianism in *Home to Harlem*? In his *Crisis* review of the novel, Du Bois comments that "after reading the dirtier parts of its filth I distinctly felt like taking a bath," and critics have noted that the comment must be understood as a reaction against the novel as a "low-down" fiction (202). Far more deleterious for black queer literature like McKay's, however, was the crusade launched in 1929, the year after *Home to Harlem* appeared, by Adam Clayton Powell, pastor of the First Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, to wipe out once and for all homosexuality in Harlem (Chauncey 253–56). Social freedom, the struggle of black workers, and transgressive sexuality are represented in *Home to Harlem* as originating from a single upheaval: the effort of the displaced black Great Migration labor class to create a new, revolutionary environment, unencumbered by any potentially oppressive or limiting convention, institution, or identity-marker. McKay's novel enacts the black proletarian struggle against delimiting conformity, whether the limitation represents white racist distress about black mobility and labor organizing or black Christian middle-class anxiety about New Negroes being portrayed as genetically disposed to be substance users, ancestrally predisposed to irrational violent behavior, and hereditarily fixated on sexual unrestraint with multiple partners—in a word, "primitive."

Once again, Mercer's comments on black sexuality and politics offer a useful reading of McKay's work: "questions of sexuality, pleasure and desire have always been on the black political agenda inso-
far as our aspirations—for freedom—have always found cultural forms of expression” (140). *Home to Harlem* is a Black Renaissance queer code novel. For those situated to decode the Wildean bivocality, the novel was clearly a queer black proletarian bulletin, a text representing an early stage for the marginalized black working-class society to vaunt its physical, fleshly presence. McKay’s interest in establishing and chronicling fringe, unacceptable black communities ranged beyond Harlem, both fictively as well as in his lived experience. In *A Long Way from Home*, McKay autobiographically portrays black Marseilles—the small assembly of African, African-American, and West Indian dock workers and merchantmen—as an opportunity to develop a Diasporic subculture of international black worker’s community. This performance is creatively documented in his second novel and *Home to Harlem’s* complement, *Banjo* (1929), in which *Home to Harlem’s* Ray appears again, once more paired up with an "uncivilized" African-American proletarian, the title character. *Banjo* sets *Home to Harlem’s* uniting of proletarianism with a queer dis-position in Marseilles. Ray, who has had seven years to grow as a European expatriate, is no longer ambiguous about his own "difference": "To me the most precious thing about human life is difference. Like flowers in a garden, different kinds for different people to love," Ray says (208). In his still unpublished novel of proletarian black life, *Romance in Marseille* (composed between 1929 and 1933), moreover, McKay would portray the dislocated Diaspora black laborer fellowship in Marseilles as no less in need of locating a refuge as the marginalized gay workers in the novel. McKay had joined Sylvia Pankhurst’s Workers’ Socialist Federation while in Britain during the early twenties (*A Long Way* 73–85). During the 1920s, McKay was a member of the African Blood Brotherhood "and almost certainly encouraged its affiliation with the American Communist Party" (Cooper 143). When he idealized and romanticized both the black and gay (and black gay) proletariat, McKay attempted to unite acceptable and unacceptable black disentitled communities. McKay wishes to couple the black *lumpenproletariat* (the criminal subculture)—in McKay’s case, black homosexual subculture—with the acceptable proletariat, the heterosexed working classes. McKay in effect radically revises twentieth-century Marxism to include those who would be in traditional Marxist terms perceived as criminal subclass, thus making a major contribution to what Cedric Robinson terms "Black Marxism," a renovated form of Marxism that recognizes the circumstances of the black working classes.11

After Marseilles, McKay traveled to Spain in the late twenties, then to Fez, Morocco. Almost immediately accused by the French colonial police of being a "Bolshevik agent" (*A Long Way* 302), McKay
was forced to abandon Fez, and he inevitably settled in Tangier. Critics have never adequately assimilated the allure of "oriental" Tangier for McKay during the early thirties (A Long Way 298). That is, scholars have registered the importance of Nigeria and the Belgian Congo for Langston Hughes, but McKay's years in North Africa have not attracted any genuine critical reflection. Yet one must ask: As a traveler of the African Diaspora and the foremost black nationalist poet, why didn't he go further south, to Ghana or Nigeria or the Congo, to the "real Africa"? Such a question necessarily ignores the fact that McKay experienced his most mature prose-writing period while living in Morocco, completing Banjo, Romance in Marseille, the short-story collection, Gingertown (1932), and his last published novel, Banana Bottom (1933). Such texts are remarkable for synthesizing critiques of domestic American racism, European colonialism in Africa, and sexual hegemony. One wonders what kind of criticism would exist on McKay if he had even taken a holiday in "black Africa"! The critical lack with respect to McKay's years in Morocco indicates that scholars transparently reckon that the Diaspora cruising author was simply in the wrong part of Africa and never made it to the right part. But it is just as if not more convincing to envision why McKay did not want to leave Morocco.

Rather than proceeding, if implicitly, as if McKay were marooned in Morocco, incapable of journeying into the heart of ancestral Africa, one could more persuasively argue that the peripatetic queer writer desired to be in Tangier more than anywhere else. No critic has reflected on the significance of McKay's choice of Tangier—not only as a Black Diaspora harbor, but also as a safe queer port. No critic has considered, in other words, McKay's evident desire to spend several years in a city known to same-sex inclined Europeans and Americans as a queer refuge. In his biography, Cooper notes tentatively that McKay lived in Tangier, that McKay socialized with gay expatriates, and that Tangier had a manner of "homosexual" colony (277). But Cooper does not venture that McKay sought out Tangier for the culture of open homoerotic society. Arabic North Africa's attraction to queer white artists and writers commences with Oscar Wilde's visit to Algeria in 1895, where he happened on André Gide at the Grand Hôtel d'Orient. Wilde relished North Africa's "Oriental" spirit—that is, its open queer sexual culture—and introduced Gide to the same-sex trade in Arabic Algiers. When it was made into a "free" or "international zone," neighboring Tangier, with its easy access to southern Spain, became a magnet for gay white Europeans and Americans, including Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac, as well as Joe Orton, Charles Henri Ford, and Paul Bowles. It is essential to note that by far McKay's most fecund period transpired while residing in Tangier,
and that this period marks the moment in his life when sexuality as a point of divergence directed McKay toward his most tangible challenge to the discourses of colonialism.

McKay enjoys Tangier for two related reasons, one expressed, the other implied by the permissibly expressed reason. As he chronicles the experience in *A Long Way from Home*, McKay is most comfortable in Muslim Tangier because he feels that he is no longer subject to the mastery of a society where blackness is a polarized category of racial difference: "For the first time in my life I felt myself singularly free of color-consciousness" (300). Among the characteristics of Arabic Muslim Tangier culture that McKay values most is the presence of Diasporic blacks who are not subjected to much self-consciousness of racial values, McKay suggests (304–05). Consequently, unlike Black Diaspora communities he has encountered previously, Tangier's Diaspora black minority isn't policed by the dominant culture, in this case, Muslim society. Islamic Moroccan society wasn't in the position to police anyone outside of its legal environment, in any case, because Morocco itself was a colony of an imperialist industrial capitalism. Throughout his poetry, McKay disrobes the elemental language performance, the immanent deconstruction, in the hierarchy of white-black color codification, turning inside out the surface notion of color classification in an effort to shift the manner of racial representation from one of biological to discursive signification. McKay's poetry forces linguistic hierarchies to submit to color as language signifier—in other words, not a biological category—and in this way he is able to turn the tables on racist and colonialist discourses. In *A Long Way from Home*'s ludic morphology of Tangier, color takes on an even wider angle, encompassing other forms of cultural vitality. A form of tolerance, an unfettered gay spirit dwells in McKay's Tangier that vexes other forms of social control.

In both Tangier's expatriate community and much "native" society, sexual difference was a far more fluid category of social interplay than anywhere McKay had inhabited or frequented, including London, Paris, the Village, and even Harlem. For queer intellectuals and artists, the attraction of international zone Tangier was its offer of a considerable amount of freedom from social constraints, apparently something like the "pagan delights" and "orgies" of Ray's dream in *Home to Harlem*, interaction with the "Oriental" homoerotic Other. Jointly administered since the Great War by several European nations, including France and Great Britain, Tangier continued to remain culturally a part of Morocco (Vaidon 192–229). Spanish, French, Italian, and British subjects were protected—more often, policed—by their respective colonial power. Because no central authority controlled the multicolonial society, international zone Tangier became a
morass of intrigue and transgression. McKay was a subject of the British Commonwealth, though a "bad subject," to use Althusser's term for those who actively resist repressive and ideological state apparatuses. Faced with such an extraordinary display of social dissent within the sphere of colonial power, a delighted McKay "goes native," as he remarks playfully in the pages of *A Long Way From Home*, celebrating the various meanings of "color" that he finds in Tangier (299).

Nevertheless, McKay must have miscalculated the limits colonial hegemony permitted a notorious "internationalist" to reach in international zone Tangier (*A Long Way* 300). After residing for three years in Tangier, McKay was once again censured by colonial authority. As he had been imputed in Fez to be a Russian agent, McKay was interpellated by the British consular authority in Tangier as a "radical propagandist" (*A Long Way* 302). McKay had to acknowledge that his passport had been stolen from his modest house situated outside of the zone, the only "home" to which McKay could ever lay claim. Apparently under surveillance for some time, McKay's passport was in fact stolen by agents dispatched clandestinely by the international zone administration, the authorities that were investigating McKay for his intentions in Morocco (302). When colonial administrators returned his passport, he found that the British imperial authority had removed his right to travel in Commonwealth and colonial territories, including the British West Indies (Cooper 279). Facing the prospect of deportation, McKay would have preferred to return to Jamaica. When his resources were exhausted, and with nowhere else to go, an exile without a haven, a Commonwealth "subject" literally without a country, McKay was compelled to return to the US.13

Although the colonial ascendancy technically didn't deport McKay, their manifest objective was to force him to withdraw from Morocco, and in truth they were instrumental in effecting his banishment, if chiefly more through psychological assault on McKay than tangible action against him. McKay's de facto expulsion transpired for several reasons. Although it seems straightforward enough to say that he was denounced as a radical, the means used to assail McKay oblige attention. McKay resided outside of the zone boundaries, in a sector that only Moroccans were permitted to live in. While in Tangier, McKay socialized most of the time with Moroccan friends—all are clearly represented in *A Long Way from Home* as young men—staying overnight at their houses while celebrating the holiday Ramadan, for example, enjoying the life of a "native." Other acquaintances included two celebrated inhabitants of the American and European expatriate gay community in Tangier, Paul Bowles and Charles Henri Ford.14 McKay's Moroccan friends "rather liked" Ford, and remarked that he
"looked wonderfully like the cinema portraits of Marlene Dietrich" (*A Long Way* 338). As for the other notable American writer, McKay knew Bowles well enough to accuse the author of Moroccan-set *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) of being responsible for causing his expulsion from Morocco. The narrative of how authorities discovered that McKay was living outside the zone and how they put this information to use sheds light on the intimacy of social existence among same-sex expatriates in Tangier. When Bowles first came to Tangier, McKay was entangled in one of his curious occasional, ephemeral, and chronically unsatisfactory heterosexual relationships, a relationship that was complicated by the intrusion of the third party—McKay being the third. Bowles met McKay through his friendship with the other two participants in the "lovers' triangle" (Cooper 277). McKay invited Bowles to his house outside the zone for a carousal, where Bowles observed how McKay lived. While later engaged in procuring opium from a Moroccan who showed a mysterious interest in McKay, Bowles imprudently revealed where McKay was living. The opium merchant was in the covert employ of the zone police, thus McKay's harassment by colonial authorities. With considerable justification, McKay blamed Bowles for his troubles with the French administration. By way of commenting on the persecution he experienced while in Tangier, McKay revisits the "mad and hungry dogs" imagery of his celebrated protest sonnet "If We Must Die" (1919): "And now even in Africa I was confronted by the specter, the white terror always pursuing the black. There was no escape anywhere from the white hound of civilization" (*A Long Way* 304).

The narrative of McKay's effective expulsion from Morocco incites a singular inquiry. Cooper notes that McKay "actually revealed very little about his personal life in *A Long Way from Home*." Rather, the memoir "became, as McKay intended it to be, a pleasantly impressionistic book, a seemingly effortless account of his travels and encounters with the great and near-great of international communism and the literary world of Europe and America." Unquestionably, "*A Long Way from Home* failed to convey the complexity of [McKay's] life" (Cooper 318). McKay himself ends his memoir admitting as much, on some level, volunteering this elliptical comment: "all I offer here is the distilled poetry of my experience" (*A Long Way* 354). What McKay means by "poetry" is in need of a discerning hermeneutic. McKay's *poetry* is his deep self, his ecstatic life, in a word his queerness. Indeed, much presence persists in the narrative absences of McKay's memoir. Foremost in McKay's analogical "civilization" is sexual control. Which provokes the question: Could McKay's different sexuality be related to his difficulties in Tangier? As McKay himself suggests when he describes the act of protesting his innocence against
the allegations initially that he was a "Bolshevik agent" and ultimately a "radical propagandist," colonial authorities had nothing to go on except appearances (A Long Way 302). A necessary question is what threat the Diaspora cruising author posed to what Jeffrey Weeks has called "empire maintenance" (18), the repressive imperial standard enacted on sexual difference. Knowing that McKay was not terribly forthcoming about his personal life in A Long Way from Home, however, actually does not inhibit prospects for a clearly articulated hermeneutic toward his sexual-textual life. In fact, such an absence opens up McKay's life and work to a resourceful analysis. A presence survives in McKay's ellipses, in other words; an epistemology may be traced to McKay's closet. It is possible, that is, to infer that among the attributes representative of the "white hound of civilization" McKay desired to flee by living in Tangier was compulsory heterosexuality (A Long Way 304), boundaries raised in cognizance of how Somerville describes sexual difference: as "a complex ideological position" (6).

As well as his harassment in Morocco being likely linked to his habit of living the life, McKay also confronted impediments as a writer of queer black proletarian fiction. McKay's unpublished novel during the period, Romance in Marseille, openly portrays the relationship of a queer couple.16 This singular novel limns the diverse forms of cultural dislocation and alienation, in the shape of nation, race, and sexuality, that two gay workers—one a proletarian socialist merchant sailor, the other a sex worker—encounter while residing in Marseilles during the 1920s. The novel is indeed a queer longing for brotherhood, for same-sex community. After an initial lukewarm assent in the late 1920s, McKay's publishers, Harper and Brothers, ultimately refused to consider including the novel in their catalogue during the early 1930s. To ascertain whether Harper and Brothers declined the novel for its sexual content cannot with certainty be confirmed through archival evidence, though one piece of correspondence may illuminate this query. McKay had already met with resistance from Knopf when he tried to publish his first attempt at a novel, "Color Scheme" (c. 1925–26). Knopf deemed "Color Scheme" too racy for publication.17 Consequently, years later, desperate after Harper and Brothers' rejection to find a home for Romance in Marseille and very likely working under the memory of the rejection of "Color Scheme," McKay appealed to his lifelong friend and leftist patron Max Eastman for assistance. Eastman then asked Clifton Fadiman, an editor associated with Simon and Schuster, to look at Romance in Marseille. In September 1933 Fadiman wrote to Max Eastman concerning "Savage Loving," or Romance in Marseille. The letter shows that Fadiman adamantly disliked McKay's novel, dismissing it as "sex hash." While
living in sexually progressive Tangier, McKay wished to fictionalize his most intimate imaginings of Marseilles. If one is to form an opinion from reading his still almost universally unread *Romance in Marseille*, what McKay had relished about Marseilles—as he transparently had delighted in Harlem and Village bohemian sexual subculture during the 1920s—was the relative sexual freedom for blacks. But McKay may have found that openly portraying unacceptable sexuality was a risk. Considering the climate of anxiety surrounding the coming out of African-American public figures, exposing one’s sexual orientation meant jeopardizing one’s career and worse. Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and Wallace Thurman, for example, were scrupulous that their sexuality not be publicized (Watson 48–61). After experiencing the prevailing antipathy toward his unique novel, McKay decided against pursuing its publication and opted instead to publish the collection of short fiction, *Gingertown*. Although *Gingertown* is invested in performing narratives of sexual oppression, it is far less open than *Romance in Marseille* about staging divergent sexuality.

From this point on, McKay began to disclose textually his sexual identity in more oblique ways. An indispensable theoretical framework for a critical reading of McKay’s later work as a reflection of sexual difference is the notion of the "epistemology of the closet," Eve Sedgwick’s tactical advance into the interstices of sexuality, knowledge, and power. "'Closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence," Sedgwick says, "that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (*Epistemology* 3). What is needed is to exhibit how McKay’s later text, *A Long Way from Home*, may "accrue particularity" of a subdued language of transgressive sexuality "by fits and starts." When this aim has been achieved, the inquiry into McKay’s art may place his textual production "in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it."

*A Long Way from Home* also ludically performs another concealment: McKay’s Communism. By 1937, when McKay published *A Long Way from Home*, he had grown disillusioned with international radicalism, or disaffected with its institutional form, at any rate. Much has been made of McKay’s "repudiation," and certainly by the 1940s he did become "conservative," if idiosyncratically—conservative in a way into which McKay seemed specially suited to develop—when he joined the Catholic church. But McKay’s repudiation of Communism during the late 1930s was, like so many other Old Leftists, fundamentally a reaction against Stalinism. It is interesting to note that under Bolshevik doctrine, before the advent of Stalinism, the Communist Party in Russia had no real policy on homosexuality. Among other retrogressive changes, Stalinism proscribed homosexuality in
the Soviet Union, identifying same-sex union as criminal behavior, as a form of insurgency against state hegemony. Many Communists, particularly those no doubt who counted among the "folk," viewed different sexuality as a reflection of anticapitalist liberationism, as another form of resistance against bourgeois capitalist ideology—antithetical to the Soviet's newly adopted position. Whether McKay was aware of the Stalinist criminalization of homosexuality or not, many radical Left intellectuals like McKay renounced Communism during the 1930s when the Stalinists came to power in the USSR. Critics of African-American Communism have relied on *A Long Way from Home* to demonstrate that during the 1930s black intellectuals eventually saw through the schemes of the radical Left, using McKay's memoir to show how a black intellectual divulges the truth about Red betrayal of African Americans. McKay's memoir does contain his early condemnation of Communism, a disapprobation that would reach its apogee in his journalistic *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). Nonetheless, McKay's autobiographical representation of his own repudiation in *A Long Way from Home* is unreliable. *A Long Way from Home* suggests that McKay was turning anti-Communist as early as 1920, while he was working for Sylvia Pankhurst as a socialist journalist in England. Material evidence—particularly McKay's own writings during the 1920s—contradicts this claim. The pro-Communist *Romance in Marseille* flatly gainsays McKay's own assertion that he was wholly anti-Communist during the 1930s. The fact is that McKay was Communist in affiliation and affinity for far longer than *A Long Way from Home* purports. McKay's dedication to an internationalist radicalism extends right up until the mid-1930s, when he first formulated the idea of writing his memoir. Yet even though *A Long Way from Home* consists of sections in which McKay discredits Communism, the text also retains traces of a more complex archive. The following demonstrates how the act of disclosing particular speech acts of silence in his autobiographical performance permits a reading of McKay's work that opens the door of his closet, both sexual and political—or rather in a way that shows how the sexual is the political in McKay.

McKay felt indebted to Walter Jekyll and even felt that Jekyll was his only sympathetic comrade in Jamaica. Still, McKay shows signs throughout his life of ambivalence toward Jekyll's incontestable influence. Many years after publishing *Constab Ballads*, McKay restages the conditions of Jekyll's patronage in *A Long Way from Home*, though this time the roles are reversed, with McKay as the protector and a young white male as the patronized. At the beginning of the memoir, McKay follows a chapter titled "White Friends" with one titled "Another White Friend." The chapter offers a critical
moment in McKay’s work, a performance that permits the teasing of McKay from his textual closet. In contrast to the language of one of his most celebrated angry sonnets, "To the White Fiends," the white friends of his chapter’s title were important literary people and patrons like Max Eastman and Frank Harris. But the other white friend from the following chapter title is a young pickpocket McKay meets named Michael. The modifier another in "Another White Friend" signifies both the marginalization of unnamed "friends" as well as a recognizably McKayean impish irreverence for respected white patrons. It is important to note, in addition, that McKay composed *A Long Way from Home* during the mid-1930s, ten years after the events that McKay depicts here. In other words, the performance the reader experiences in the first part of the book, in which McKay relates his experiences with Michael—events that took place before McKay went abroad—are colored by his experiences in Tangier and even experiences before coming to Harlem, particularly in Jamaica.

Early in the text, McKay finds himself one night downtown, a kind of black sightseer touring the white world, and he meets Michael, a single-name only character in McKay’s memoir. Michael is fleeing from the police and asks McKay not to give him away; he has "escaped by a ruse that cannot be told" (46). Appreciating Michael’s refreshing honesty about his transgressive activities, McKay brings the small-time malefactor back uptown to his modest apartment in Harlem. Much is revealed in a brief section involving McKay’s girlfriend, Manda. Evidently accustomed to entering his room without knocking, Manda barges in on the boys and exclaims, "Foh the land’s sake! I wonder what will happen next!" The narrative volunteers no more than this, specifically to what spectacle Manda is reacting in such an "excitable state." Manda and Claude’s relationship exhibits a legerdemain that McKay frequently demonstrates when depicting his heterosexual, nominally genital relationships: "There was always a certain strangeness between Manda and me" (46). McKay indicates that essentially Manda, a Southern migrant and "a real peasant type," cleaned and cooked for him, and their affiliation seems to have no other feature to it (48).

Most intriguing is how McKay stages a way to consider sexuality, work, and the male body. One day McKay and Michael are in McKay’s bedroom, and McKay is dressing to go to work as a waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad. McKay "was suddenly made self-conscious by Michael remarking: 'If I had your physique, I wouldn't work.'" Michael also tells McKay that he finds it "queer, you liking a woman like Manda" because Manda is "so homely, she couldn't do any hustling to help you out" (emphasis added). Evidently Michael wishes to suggest that McKay procure, and then McKay could acquire the finer
things in life, like the services of "a pretty woman." When McKay declares, "Every man has his style and limit," Michael, offended, assumes that his companion does not approve of his own vocation, which is on the surface petty theft. Michael then throws back McKay's obliging attitude toward menial labor for blacks, his willingness to be a Pullman waiter, waiting on white folks: "But ain't it hell to be a slave on a lousy job?" (53).

Indeed, as Somerville says, "sexual identity . . . often describes a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on the culture's mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one's response to that interpellation." The circumstances of the bedroom scene suggest the need for critical attention. The passage seems to present the reader with, though somewhat iniquitous, an acceptably heterosexed, nongenital homosocial situation. Yet the frame of the dialogue stimulates certain questions; the reader is presented with imagery charged with sexual meaning. One man watching another dressing remarks on the shape of the other's body and the way that such a matter relates to physical work. Although the text informs the reader that Michael is asserting McKay should become a pimp and pay for a female sex worker, Michael's comment about McKay's "physique" sends a different signal. The intimation is that McKay should himself engage in financial exchange for sex, which also suggests that this is a form of "work" Michael engages in. In fact, Michael relates accounts that imply that he is a hustler, rough street trade. Each story Michael tells conveys an act of extortion, in which Michael coerces a male victim into giving him money. The "big-time representative of an ancient business" is shaken down in a subway toilet; the anecdote summons the record of Wallace Thurman's arrest for public indecency in a men's washroom (52). Implied in the relating of the stories is McKay's suggestion that Michael's comic situation, prolonging the act of "robbing" the men, means accompanying them somewhere so that he may be given an amount of cash. Yet each man negotiates with Michael over money he seems to owe the "pickpocket." Though he is a bantam-weight in a physically hazardous occupation, Michael nonetheless refuses to carry a weapon because it will only cause complications with the "bulls," or undercover police (54). Yet how he manages to force victims—all clearly inscribed as males—to hand over their money is left unexplained, a substantial lack. In each story Michael relates, the gag turns on the suggestion that Michael will expose his victim. The respected businessman is anxious that he not be implicated in a "scandal." One pauses over how being robbed could provoke scandal against the victim! One then lingers over the waggish implications of "pick[ing] a man's pockets" (45).
Years later, McKay has begun to enjoy some success as a writer, and Michael looks him up in his *Liberator* office. Apparently it is 1922, the year of McKay's coeditorship of the magazine. Michael's career as a petty criminal has been replaced by more grave criminal activities, and he has fallen in with a "rotten gang" (106–07). Feeling sorry for Michael, McKay gives the young man two volumes of poetry, one of which is McKay's most recent, evidently *Harlem Shadows* (1922). Moved, Michael says, "I guess when the gang sees me with these here, . . . they'll be thinking that I'm turning queer" (108; emphasis added). Despite the signals directing readers toward challenging the essential meaning of what they are reading, McKay attempts to present his relationship with Michael once again according to certain acceptable autobiographical discourses. One discursive frame is that of homosocial, manly camaraderie, the acceptability of the hearty, muscular working man of the 1930s, a characterization closely bound to the meaning of being masculine and Left-leaning. McKay's coeditor at the *Liberator*, Mike Gold, for example, wore torn work shirts and, wishing to settle once and for all the conflict between himself and McKay over the editorship of the leftist magazine, challenged McKay, or so McKay's memoir says, to a boxing match (140). Beyond the valences McKay raises in order to permit his reader to be comforted by a permissible homosocial masculine relationship, however, the persistence of unsettling questions is written into the text that, on some level, necessitate answers. What most distinguishes the scene is that the reader is compelled to consider the idea of Michael exhibiting—or unveiling?—himself as "queer," an identity his "gang" evidently would not tolerate. Attacked by black cultural leaders for writing an obscene novel, *Home to Harlem*, McKay could sympathize with Michael. McKay's "gang" also would not permit him to be queer, for the black poet of masculine proletarian sonnets and novels must be a respectable Representative of the Race: healthy, normative—in a word, heterosexual.

Moreover, by the early 1930s, McKay was still reflecting on his relationship with Walter Jekyll. In *Banana Bottom*, Squire Gensir helps Bita Plant regain her Afro-Jamaican's culture's natural, "rhythmic" folkways. *Banana Bottom* is a permissible autobiographical portrayal of McKay's relationship with Jekyll. In *A Long Way from Home*, however, McKay sets an epicone, coded restaging of his relationship with Jekyll, suggesting McKay's ambivalence toward his several patrons, especially those who, like Jekyll, navigated his life for a lengthy period. In this case, McKay becomes the patron, first making sure, as Jekyll did for McKay, that Michael is able to pursue his choice of profession by providing sustenance and a place to work from. Not only may Michael eat at McKay's boarding house, but McKay allows...
Michael to use the Harlem apartment for his "hideout" while Michael performs his "petty tricks" downtown (50). And McKay later provides Michael with literary material meant to promote his spiritual growth, a coded reworking of the Jekyll-McKay literary salon focused intensely on Whitman, Wilde, and Carpenter: the value of "homogenic love" and homoerotic aesthetics. It is crucial that McKay chronicles a meeting with G. B. Shaw in *A Long Way from Home* (59–65). The chapters devoted to Michael suggest *Pygmalion*, Shaw's comic portrait of a linguist, a social scientist analogous to an ethnographer—Jekyll's occupation—who takes in an underclass pupil and refashions her into the simulacrum of a civilized Victorian lady. The farce for McKay, however, was in the illicit nature of Michael's career, at the very least a pickpocket, with cues suggesting that he was a male hustler.

The major difference between the two situations, however, is that McKay and Michael are both underclass, or, in Marxist critical terms, constituents of the *lumpenproletariat*. Whereas in Jamaica Jekyll was upper class and McKay "peasant middle" class, Michael is *lumpen* because he is a miscreant and queer, McKay because he is black, queer, and a part of Harlem's hard-pressed laboring majority. In this case, McKay is a kind of proletarian patron, and Michael is his underclass or *lumpen* prole rehabilitation project. As Mike Gold "sentimentalized" proletarianism, according to *A Long Way from Home*, a "European woman" misconstrues Michael as a "significant symbol of the unity of the white and black [American] proletariat" (56). Although McKay enjoys the irony of a white petty criminal using Harlem as his hideout while he performs his "tricks" downtown, and though McKay savors the idea of a white sexual delinquent living in Harlem during a time when white tourists visit Harlem for its attractions as a sexual contact zone, McKay is nonetheless ambivalent about what Michael symbolizes, or, more fittingly, embodies. Although he is mistaken as a member of the proletariat by some of McKay's crowd, who romanticize Michael without knowing anything about him, Michael is decidedly not a member of the proletariat, McKay's memoir implies. In this passage, McKay demonstrates that he sees the proletariat in classical Marxist terms, as the politically informed working classes, cognizant of their oppression and alienation from labor, working toward dialectical materialist praxis. The proletariat is the antithesis of the *lumpenproletariat* because the *lumpenproletariat*’s criminal activities impersonate capitalism.

Key to understanding McKay's disposition toward Michael and what Michael embodies is McKay's autobiographical representation of masculinity. The pansy is vital to Jazz Age Harlem as McKay portrays the Black Belt in *Home to Harlem*, but McKay's autobiographical persona demonstrates a vexation with the idea of the typical gay
man being represented as sissified. In his lived experience, McKay's idiosyncratic queer identity was inflected by a recognizably 1930s homosocial complexion, including a fascination with bull fighting, a technical interest in boxing, and in general a hearty, muscular, masculine outlook. So it isn't surprising when McKay expresses his "vast admiration" for Hemingway in *A Long Way from Home*, his veneration including a respect for the celebrated Hemingway manliness. McKay says that he doesn't care about Hemingway's personal life and reputation, the Hemingway cult of masculinity. What McKay respects is Hemingway's sinewy writing style, which McKay signs as masculine. McKay admires the way that Hemingway's ironic and chiseled style "shot a fist in the face of the false romantic-realists" (251). The pugilistic image demonstrates excellently McKay's regard for not only the Hemingway "style" but also, despite McKay's assertion of disinterest in it, the Hemingway masculinist identity politics. In another example, echoing Ray in *Home to Harlem*, McKay indicates his assent to the Nietzschean antipathy for "civilization." Discussing *Home to Harlem*, McKay responds to an unnamed "peeping critic"—a curious depiction of concealed sexual surveillance into McKay's literary output—who assumes that the protagonist Jake Brown is autobiographical. McKay denies this, restaging Ray's invective against the hypocrisy of "civilized" behavior: "I couldn't indulge in such self-flattery as to claim Jake . . . as a portrait of myself. My damned white education has robbed me of much of the primitive vitality, the pure stamina, the simple unswaggering strength of the Jakes of the Negro race" (229). The gesture is revealing. On one level McKay is suggesting that his actual autobiographical semblance is Ray, not Jake, the closeted homosexual in *Home to Harlem*. On another level, one may conclude that McKay wishes to conceal his sexual orientation by performing a recognizably hard-boiled masculinism, and certainly there is something in this. Yet McKay genuinely was interested in prize fighting and other manly arts, and he indeed did respect Hemingway's portrayal of primitive instincts and rejection of civilized behavior, psychological encumbrances that McKay saw as a form of social conditioning, as one can see in McKay's own writing. But McKay does not demonstrate the need to choose between heterosexual and homosexual masculinity. McKay's proletarian queer black male exemplar—as much Jake as Ray—is both hard-boiled and primitive, manly in a traditional sense and intractable toward anything that would place limits on his "simple unswaggering strength."

McKay's autobiographical persona being constructed on a kind of hard-boiled masculinism lies at the heart of McKay's ambivalence about Michael as a model of proletarian harmony. In fact, it is McKay himself, or *A Long Way from Home*’s autobiographical characteriza-
tion of McKay, who qualifies as the model for "the unity of the white and black proletariat," not a constituent of the lumpenproletariat like Michael. Despite its anti-Communist revisioning, A Long Way from Home is a representative Depression-era socialist document, elevating the worker and denigrating capitalism, the modern economic byproduct of "civilization." Throughout the memoir, McKay takes pains to point out that he has lived the life of the common worker, without the benefit of financial peace of mind or a middle-class background to fall back on, supported only by the encouragement of other proletarian men. McKay may be "a slave on a lousy job," but he is a true worker, aware of his enslavement, ennobled by participating in the international proletarian struggle. "Every man," McKay tells Michael, "has his style and limit." In a sense, McKay ironizes his patronage of Michael. Yet there is the suggestion, as well, that McKay sees his role as patron as an earnest undertaking, for McKay believes that he may help Michael forswear his criminal life and begin to contribute to and participate in the proletarian cause. When he sees McKay's name over a poem in a newspaper—probably "If We Must Die," reprinted in black newspapers—Michael "surprised" McKay "by saying that he was thinking of getting a job" (56). By implication, chief among the changes McKay suggests he would like to see includes Michael no longer prostituting himself and promising to become a clean-living, healthy proletarian gay man! As he demonstrates in texts like Home to Harlem, McKay drew no lines between proletarian society and transgressive sexuality. The needs of the proletarian included sexual emancipation, a revolution against sexuality as commerce. Prostitution and pimping are activities inappropriate for a liberated proletarian black man. Sexuality unencumbered by the boundaries of civilization and the exigencies of capitalism, however, is necessary.22 The queer proletarian man must be, queerly, manly.

Still, one must pause over the idea of McKay's Harlem apartment serving as a place to hide out. McKay must have seen himself as also hiding from certain tyrannical communities, those who would police his own transgressive tendencies. Moreover, the echo of Ray's comment about "pimps" and "civilization" in Home to Harlem must be heeded. Ray proclaims that civilization is "rotten," and that he would prefer to keep the company of pimps over that of "dictees." Though McKay may have carried a somewhat narrow definition of what was permissible as a gay man, he was even more intolerant of those who buried their sexual impetus in the name of decency and being civilized. The proletarian, particularly the black worker, was virtuous. And though the pimp and prostitute only served capitalist and colonialist ideology, below him, in McKay's estimation, was the black man who, through the act of embracing the "civilized" and
"educated," had divested a necessary native primitive vitality. The proletarian black man, qua Jake Brown, in his perfection and purity, never faced such absence. Race leaders envisioned the New Negro as married, with children, of the professional class, and, above all, manly, which meant that such a male was endowed with integrity, stable, and rational. McKay claims the same sort of manly virtues for the queer proletarian black male, thus at once laying open the deconstruction inherent in the myth of black manliness while simultaneously attempting to construct a more inclusive black masculinity.

Finally, written into McKay's portrayal of his relationship with Michael are hints at ambivalence over such patrons as Walter Jekyll. Significantly, though Jekyll introduced McKay into a world where being a celebrated poet was possible, he was at the same time the patron responsible for initiating McKay into Western modes of inquiry, the kind of education Ray impugns in *Home to Harlem* and McKay himself gainsays in *A Long Way from Home*. Moreover, the aristocratic flourish of directing McKay to write "dialect poetry," whereas the young poet originally wished to write in "classic" form, must have generated in McKay some ambivalent feelings. After the two volumes of dialect poetry he published in Jamaica, McKay never again composed poetry in his somewhat distinctive version of basilectal Jamaican creole. Neither did McKay choose vers libre; he almost invariably composed in traditional, or "classic," form, as he termed it. The circumstances also suggest issues surrounding white patrons insisting that their black disciples write in dialect form. Paul Laurence Dunbar's relationship with William Dean Howells offers the archetypal example. Yet in McKay's case, laid atop such matters is the issue of McKay's dialect poems staging almost entirely open themes of queer sexuality. At the very least, Jekyll recognized what McKay was doing in *Constab Ballads*. It is likely, moreover, that Jekyll encouraged his project to write sexually charged dialect poems. Jekyll was denied participation in late Victorian and British Empire constructions of masculinity, yet Jekyll's version of control over McKay's literary product mimics the colonial relationship, a relationship that is *au fond* gendered and sexualized.

McKay's *A Long Way from Home* subverts the colonial relationship by staging the colonial contest. First McKay controls the level of information about sexual difference in the passages dealing with Michael. As Jekyll no doubt needed to be careful in Jamaica, McKay was cautious in the US. But both works were written by McKay: *Constab Ballads* and *A Long Way from Home*. Representing divergent sexuality in autobiographical form forced McKay to consider the risk of doing so openly, as he had done in *Romance in Marseille* and *Constab Ballads*. In addition, McKay directs not only the portrayal of
patronage and sexuality, he determines the form it takes: an autobiography, where the writer shapes personal history according to his or her terms. And McKay controls not only the form, but what is being said about transgressive sexuality as well, directing his own persona to be the patron. The black proletarian places himself in the position where he may undermine racist and colonialist values by determining the conditions for patronage.

Those of us interested in recovering McKay need to recognize that his ideal society included not merely black and labor class, but also queer, and neither category should be seen as discrete in terms of a contribution to revolutionary action and literary art. In Harlem, he participated in establishing a gay network, where racial, political, and sexual resistance merged. In Marseilles, McKay appreciated the black proletarian resistance to bowing to conservative black values about sexuality. In Tangier, he celebrated the freedom of race consciousness and sexuality available to a black queer man. When McKay came "home to Harlem" in the mid-1930s, he produced *A Long Way from Home*, a text that restages his beginnings and demonstrates some old antipathies. An inquiry into McKay's writings that opens up the way in which the New Negro West Indian proletarian writer staged dissident sexuality offers benefits to several critical communities. Opening McKay's closet offers African Americanists, Caribbeanists, black social movement theorists, black liberation struggle scholars, and critics interested in recovering African-American literary radicalism a fuller understanding of the author than has been available previously. However, such an activity also offers scholars from several disciplines strategies for reading that contemplate the interstices of sexuality, the politics of work, and the hegemony of colonialism. Along with gender and sexuality studies, concentrations ostensibly as far afield as Victorian studies figure substantially in discerning how such matters figure in McKay's work. The present analysis proposes, finally, to offer a case study for investigations into other black writers who evince affiliations between the descent of colonialism, the genealogy of radical black proletarianism, and the traces of dissident queer sexuality.

**Notes**

1. Maxwell reevaluates McKay in terms of both his role on *The Liberator*, the foremost leftist periodical of the early 1920s, and McKay's globally focused proletarian politics as they are outlined in the book *The Negroes in America* (1923). LeSeur is also useful. For more revisioning of black Communists during the 1920s and 1930s, see
Dawahare, Smethurst, Solomon, and Wald. Such scholarship issues a challenge to work asserting that "Reds" and blacks were fundamentally at odds, as in, for example, Hutchinson's *Blacks and Reds*, a text that presumes such a rift. As scholars from Maxwell to James have suggested, the likely source of the subsequent untested surmise about a disparity between black intellectuals and "white Communists" is Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. For a discussion of the current critical reconsideration of the role of black intellectuals in US Communism, see my review of Maxwell's *New Negro, Old Left* and Robinson's *Black Marxism*.

2. For social history concerned with McKay's role in black gay society, see Chauncey, Garber, and Watson. Watson's scholarship recognizes as gay the following Renaissance personalities: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Harold Jackman, Alain Locke, Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman, and Carl Van Vechten—a notable list of Renaissance figures. Perhaps the most controversial section of the text discusses the possibility of a ménage à trois involving Cullen, Locke, and Hughes (54–56). Wirth's *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* is an invaluable recovery of Richard Bruce Nugent, a nearly forgotten queer *artiste* and *auteur*. Wirth points out that "Richard Bruce's" (Nugent's) "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," published in Wallace Thurman's one-time black bohemian arts journal *Fire!!* (1926), registers the beginnings of an unapologetic queer fiction for US letters (40–41).

3. Several scholars have produced work that explores the importance of McKay's West Indian roots, most recently Hathaway.

4. James's historical scholarship seeks to be painstaking, yet James's assertion that Jekyll must take a backseat to U. Theo gainsays McKay's own insistence, in writings spanning McKay's career, of Jekyll's sway over his life. As early as 1918, McKay published a piece in *Pearson's Magazine* that discusses Jekyll's influence; and as late as 1937, McKay's memoir, *A Long Way from Home*, reiterates Jekyll's influence over his life. Moreover, what are we to make of McKay's 1933 roman à clef, *Banana Bottom*? In classic colonial fashion, Bita Plant—McKay's queerly inscribed self-fictionalization—is sent to England by Christian missionaries. The missionaries want to prove that the European enlightenment they are attempting to impose on black Jamaican hill country people may be modeled by Bita's mimicry of fine manners and feminine reserve. With the help of Bita's only genuine ally and confidant, the Englishman Squire Gensir—a character to which Walter Jekyll is the unmistakable factual correlative—Bita rejects her metropolitan education and embraces her "primitive" roots, most insistent of which is an emphatically non-Victorian sexuality. It is true that McKay's attitude toward the patronage of his "special friend" Walter Jekyll was complex, as the second half of the present essay explores. Yet throughout his life, McKay also stressed repeatedly that his English patron performed a pivotal part in shaping his intellectual and artistic selfhood. McKay does not impute U. Theo with such penetrating influence. James's expulsion of Walter Jekyll from McKay's labor demonstrates a central critical problem in McKay
The anxiety over Jekyll's sexual orientation that occupies James's thesis is disconcerting. At once fraternal and patriarchal, the hereditary and heterosexual U. Theo is the acceptable fountainhead for McKay, where the role of the "homosexual" patron and (white) personal friend Jekyll is abrogated. Another scholarly work that demonstrates a lack of interest in and likely distaste for McKay's sexual difference is Tillery's *Claude McKay*. In his introduction, Tillery admits that his subject was gay, then dismisses the import of this fact in an otherwise well-researched analysis of McKay's political aesthetic.

5. Cobham analyzes McKay's *Banana Bottom* in terms of the significance of the Jamaican author's relationship with Walter Jekyll. The article is useful in terms of material research on Jekyll and *Banana Bottom*. However, notwithstanding its appearance in a collection titled *Queer Diasporas* and a reference to Foucault and Halperin, the essay is concerned with pursuing the sort of homosexual trace in McKay's 1933 novel, confirming that the novel has a gay subtext rather than tracing its queer genealogy, to use Foucault's term. Pursuing the clinical "homosexual" textual origin is an always already circumscribed mode of analysis. Uncovering a document's gay subtext is an activity that does not engage with retrieving the text's queer textuality, its queer intercourse with its moment. Moreover, Cobham's essay neglects to account for the importance of McKay's black proletarianism with respect to his sexuality, a necessary condition for contextualizing the novel. Spencer also offers a useful discussion of the pansy elements in McKay's bestseller. Still, Spencer's article does not consider the political contexts in *Home to Harlem*. Woods gives a broad literary analysis on the same theme. My forthcoming full-length analysis of McKay, titled *Diaspora Cruises*, devotes a chapter to *Home to Harlem's* queer radicalism.

6. This oft-quoted phrase appears in Lord Alfred Douglas's 1894 poem "Two Loves."

7. As for the use of the term "queer" as a disparaging term for a homosexual, usage occurs as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. Its use among gay society in the US was common during the 1920s and 1930s, as was the more positive term "gay."

8. Cooper points out this fact himself in *Rebel Sojourner* (30–31), but does not treat its significance with the weight it deserves.

9. Jekyll used the term "special friend" to describe to the colonial governor his relationship with McKay (Cooper 29).


11. Edwards offers well-researched new readings of McKay's disposition toward the notion of a black *lumpenproletariat* in *Banjo*, arguing that in *Banjo* McKay begins to articulate a kind of anti-Marxist "Diaspora internationalism." But Edwards's conclusions do not take
into consideration McKay's capacity for negotiating spaces between a Communism bent on becoming an ideology and a (Black) Marxist praxis that is flexible with respect to contingencies and conditions. McKay helped innovate a kind of black internationalism during the late 1920s, but he was doing so within the sphere of Marxist internationalism, of common interest among all disenfranchised workers.

12. Jonathan Fryer’s *André and Oscar* discusses Gide and Wilde's meeting in detail.

13. At first McKay feared that even the US, with its severe anti-West Indian immigration legislation, wouldn’t take him. However, James Weldon Johnson intervened on his behalf, and McKay was able to gain entry into the US via Europe (Cooper 284).

14. With Parker Tyler, Ford was coauthor of "America's first unashamedly homosexual novel" (Watson 136), *The Young and Evil* (1933), a semiautobiographical roman about two gay writers, set in the Village. When his Moroccan friends comment that he "looked wonderfully like the cinema portraits of Marlene Dietrich" (*A Long Way* 338), McKay’s Arabic companions are doubtless referring to Josef von Sternberg's film *Morocco* (1930). Dietrich portrays the café chanteuse Amy Jolly, who takes up with a French Foreign Legionnaire played by Gary Cooper. Cooper’s emblematic feature is unquestionably a set of silent film star eyelashes, elongated after the fashion of Valentino—Hollywood's original seductive "Sheik of Araby." At the film's climax, in probably Hollywood's first drag scene, Dietrich croons a provocative tune while decked out in top hat and tuxedo mufti, in the style of Alberta Hunter, the black lesbian Jazz Age cabaret diva. The impression of Tangier as a site of sexual border crossing, in other words, was a component of 1920s and 1930s Western popular sexual imagination.

15. Bowles discusses his role in McKay's difficulties with the international zone police in his own curiously aloof *Without Stopping: An Autobiography*, more travel narrative than "autobiography." Bowles composes a comic portrait of the affair, with McKay showing up at Bowles’s squalid hotel in Tangier brandishing a cane and threatening the young writer and composer (147–49).

16. While drafting the novel, McKay first referred to the manuscript as "The Jungle and the Bottoms," then "Savage Loving." His ultimate title was *Romance in Marseille*, generally spelling Marseilles by omitting the ordinarily appended final "s."

17. Frustrated with the rejection of "Color Scheme" while second-guessing the merit of his first try to write a novel, McKay burned the only manuscript in 1926. No copy is extant.

18. The University of Exeter Press has been planning to publish *Romance in Marseille* for several years. To my mind the novel's advent will mark a significant moment in Harlem Renaissance, black proletarian, and modernist period gay fiction studies.
19. For a discussion of Bolshevik and Stalinist attitudes and policies with respect to homosexuals, see Schulter 117–37.

20. Thurman was the author of the Harlem Renaissance novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932), a roman à clef that satirized the Harlem Renaissance "niggerati," most sensationally, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, and Bruce Nugent. He also edited the 1926 single-issue black bohemian review, *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, which, along with pieces by Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen, Helene Johnson, Hughes, and Hurston, contains the controversial queer fiction, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," by "Richard Bruce" Nugent. Thurman, who expended much energy denying his sexual orientation, remained uneasy for the remainder of his life that the story of his arrest for public homosexual solicitation in a subway toilet would become known (Chauncey 265).

21. See my earlier queer analysis of Jekyll’s role in *Banana Bottom*; my dissertation, "Writing Travel and Anglophone Caribbean Literature," addresses the matter in detail.

22. McKay also discusses this matter in the chapter titled "The New Negro in Paris." Throughout his travels in Europe, McKay was sometimes asked to be "a guide or procurer," but he could not do so because such acts would damage his "personal morale" (*A Long Way* 315–16).

**Works Cited**


