



the Harlem Renaissance

OLLI Spring 1, 2021 — Week 4



Agenda

Claude McKay

poetry, novels, politics

Biography

- Who was Claude McKay?
- Who was Claude McKay in proximity to the Harlem Renaissance? Why was he important to the movement?

Bibliography

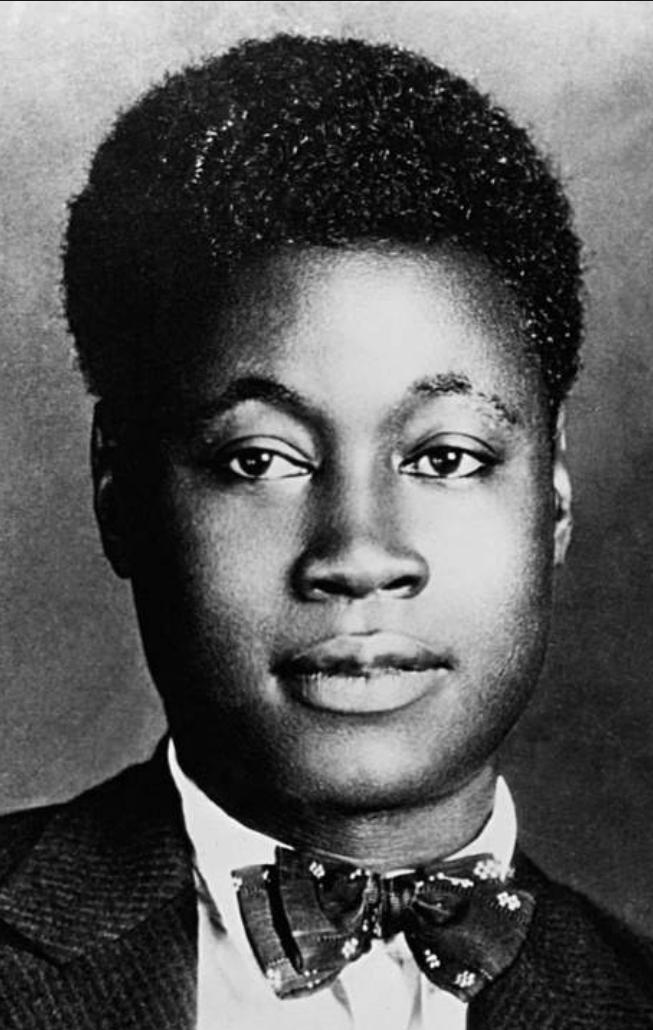
- What were Claude McKay's distinguishing aesthetic choices/techniques?
- How should we see Claude McKay's work fitting into our understanding of American Literature, World Literature, African Diasporic Literature, Migration Literature, etc.?



1 Biography



- Born Festus Claudius McKay in Jamaica in 1889
- He grew up in a middle-class farming family and left home at age 9 to live with his older brother, Theo, who was a teacher and who first inspired him to read British literature canon like Shakespeare.
- At just 23, he published his first collection of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* (1912), the first publication of writing written in Jamaican patois dialect
- Beloved poet, activist, theorist, and author, he would speak at the Comintern of the Third International to argue that communists had an untapped asset ready for radicalization: Negroes in the U.S. living under the terrorism of Jim Crow but that they needed to handle their own prejudices first.
- He committed himself to leftist struggles, often wrote about the working class (of which he was a part for his entire life). While he was one of Harlem's most cherished voices, he struggled financially for his entire life and often had to take up gigs in order to survive



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Radicalism & Joining Harlem

- He went to the Tuskegee Institute in 1912 to study agronomy but left because of what he saw as the militaristic discipline required of students there (he had been a constabulary officer and disliked it as a function of imperialism). He then went to Kansas State Univ. but dropped out after he read W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, bound for New York City. There, he met Max and Crystal Eastman, two Communists who founded the leftist art and literary magazine ***The Liberator***. After reading his work and getting to know him more, the Eastmans hired McKay. He would serve in the role of co-executive editor until the early 1920s.
- During this time, he became politically involved with leftists—particularly communists like the Eastmans. He wrote that neither Garveyism's nationalism nor the NAACP's reformism appealed to him. His friends during this time included other Afro-Caribbean writers and radicals like frequent Socialist Party political candidate Richard B. Moore and Cyril Briggs, founder of both ***The Crusader*** (an art and literary magazine hugely popular among members of the New Negro Movement) and the African Blood Brotherhood (a Black liberation organization that later became affiliated with the Communist Party, USA).
- It was during this time in his life that he traveled to the U.S.S.R. (then headed by Lenin) to speak at the Fourth Congress of the First Communist International (Comintern)



Report on the Negro Question: Speech to the 4th Congress of the Comintern, Nov. 1922.

- My race on this occasion is honored, not because it is different from the white race and the yellow race, but [because it] is especially a race of toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water, that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world. The Third International stands for the emancipation of all the workers of the world, regardless of race or color, and this stand of the Third International is not merely on paper like the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is a real thing.
- In Europe, we find that France had a Negro army of over 300,000 and that to carry out their policy of imperial domination in Europe the French are going to use their Negro minions. In America we have the same situation. The Northern bourgeoisie knows how well the Negro soldiers fought for their own emancipation, although illiterate and untrained, during the Civil War. They also remember how well the Negro soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War under Theodore Roosevelt. They know that in the last war over 400,000 Negroes who were mobilized gave a very good account of themselves, and that, besides fighting for the capitalists, they also put up a very good fight for themselves on returning to America when they fought the white mobs in Chicago, St. Louis and Washington.
- The situation in America today is terrible and fraught with grave dangers. It is much uglier and more terrible than was the condition of the peasants and Jews of Russia under the Tsar. It is so ugly and terrible that very few people in America are willing to face it. The reformist bourgeoisie have been carrying on the battle against discrimination and racial prejudice in America. The Socialists and Communists have fought very shy of it because there is a great element of prejudice among the Socialists and Communists of America. They are not willing to face the Negro question.



"If We Must Die"

- His first breakthrough into the literary scene of the New Negro Movement was with "If We Must Die," published in *The Liberator* in 1919. The poem was in response to massive racial violence throughout the country during the summer of 1919, called the Red Summer by James Weldon Johnson (journalist for the NAACP at the time).
- It was during this summer that in Omaha, for example, a Black man by the name of Will Brown was lynched by a mob of 10,000 white people and then his body was burned and dismembered. Similar public lynchings occurred in Elaine, Arkansas; Chicago, Illinois; Wilmington, North Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia; Charleston, S.C.; Washington, D.C.; Longview, Texas; Bisbee, Arizona; Indianapolis, Indiana; Knoxville, Tennessee; and Jenkins County, Georgia
 - In Washington, D.C., for example, after several days of white mobs (including off-duty military) destroying Black businesses and publicly beating Black men, the Black population fought back because the police did nothing. Then, in response to this, President Woodrow Wilson sent the National Guard to stop the Black populations from responding to the violence that had been carried out against them without repercussion.
- The press coverage of the riots was often racially-charged anecdotes against Black communities, including accusations that it was Black organizations like the NAACP who sent 'radicals' to 'stir-up trouble.'

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***white mob posing with charred body of
Will Brown in Omaha, NE in 1919***

"If We Must Die" (1919)

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!

Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!



Success & Failure in the New Negro Movement

- His poetry was beloved by the Harlem community and those adjacent to the New Negro Movement. It often appeared in journals like *The Liberator* as it often featured either racist violence encountered by Black Americans under the terrorism of Jim Crow or depictions of Jamaican society, including the different classed distinctions between people in Jamaica at the turn of the century.
- His fiction, however, was not as welcomed by the community. While his first novel *Home to Harlem* (1928) was a huge success, its depiction of Harlem life as rugged, with drug use, prostitution, and sexual excess warranted bad reviews from people like W.E.B. Du Bois, who had been a friend and mentor for McKay. McKay responded with "A Negro Writer to His Critics" (1932):

"This peculiar racial opinion constitutes a kind of censorship of what is printed about the Negro. No doubt it had its origin in the laudable efforts of intelligent Negro groups to protect their race from the slander of its detractors after Emancipation, and grew until it crystalized into racial consciousness. The pity is that these leaders of racial opinion should also be in the position of sole arbiters of intellectual and artistic things within the Negro world. For although they may be excellent persons worthy of all respect and eminently right in their purpose, they often do not distinguish between the task of

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"A Negro Writer to His Critics" (1932)

- "A Negro writer, feeling the urge to write faithfully about the people he knows from real experience and impartial observation is caught in a dilemma (unless he possesses a very strong sense of aesthetic values) between the opinion of this group and his own artistic consciousness. I have read pages upon pages of the denunciation of young Negro poets and storytellers who were trying to grasp and render the significance of the background, the fundamental rhythm of Aframerican life. But not a line of critical encouragement for the artistic exploration of the homely things—of Maundy's wash tub, Aunt Jemima's white folks, Miss Ann's old clothes for work-and-wages, George's Yassah-boss, dining car and Pullman services, barber and shoe shine shop, chittling and corn pone joints—all the lowly, things that go to the formation of the Aframerican soil in which the best, the most pretentious of Aframerican society still has its roots."
- "They seem afraid of the revelation of bitterness in Negro life. But it may as well be owned, and frankly by those who know the inside and heart of Negro life, that the Negro, and especially the American, has bitterness in him in spite of his joyous exterior. And the more educated he is in these times the more he is likely to have. The spirituals and the blues were not created out of sweet deceit. There is so much sublimated bitterness in them as there is humility, pathos and bewilderment."



"A Negro Writer to His Critics" (1932)

- "What does it matter that the superior class of Negroes are all aware of the existence of the Jakes and Strawberry Lips and Billy Glasses, the Congo Roses, Susies, and Madam Lauras of the race; that they sometimes get up round the robins for the white landlord to put them out of the nice Black Belt streets when they flaunt themselves too boldly in the face of Colored Respectability. The best Negroes will gossip and joke about such people in their drawing rooms, but as soon as they are captured as characters between the covers of a book and made to live in black and white, these same people set up a howl of protest, and all their organs from the littlest newspaper in Alabama to the heaviest magazine in New York burst forth in denunciation of the writer as a traitor to his race."
- "A sincere artist can present characters only as they seem to him, and he *will* see characters through his predilections and prejudices, unless he sets himself deliberately to present those cinema-type figures that are produced to offend no unit of persons whose protest may involve financial loss."
- "The time when a writer *will* stick only to the safe old ground of his own class of people is undoubtedly passing. Especially in America, where all the peoples of the world are scrambling side by side and modern machines and the ramifications of international commerce are steadily breaking down the ethnological barriers that separate peoples of the world."



Aesthetics: poetry

- McKay uses form, especially the sonnet or song forms. He, like Shakespeare before him, and Langston Hughes along with Countee Cullen alongside him, uses the form as a meditative and critical form. Instead of the beloved, there is a societal diagnosis happening in the form. Shakespeare is more satirical than McKay; however, since the latter uses form as if to refer to the systems of oppression acting out their presence in our daily lives quietly **while at the same time** referring thematically to these systems within the poem. This use of poetic form is innovative and perhaps only as a Black man experiencing racist terrorism in America was he able to come to this use of form.
- Throughout his poetry, McKay uses imagistic techniques, aligning him at least somewhat with Modernists of his time. However, many of the self-proclaimed Modernists abhorred the use of forms such as the sonnet. In this way, Modernist Studies often see Harlem poets as 'catching up' to the other, white Modernists. (This is, of course, a description of the poetry that serves white supremacy in Anglo-American Letters).
- In his early poetry, McKay uses dialect and imagism to engineer for the reader a depiction of Jamaica. As a sort of 'far off' place to New York writers, the depiction of the Caribbean Afro-Diaspora was popular. The use of dialect was innovative and, in fact, his poetry was the first published writing in Jamaican Patois.
- His later poetry was to do with politics. As he moved to Harlem, he depicted its scenes imagistically and

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Aesthetics: fiction

- McKay stops writing poetry altogether in the late 1920s. It is unclear why he finds fiction a better use of his writing energies, but he nonetheless spends the remainder of his life writing prose—either non-fiction, fiction, or essays.
- His three main novels center around Black experience in the 1920s-1930s: *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933).
 - Each of these play with form, including the interpolation of fiction and poetry within the same text.
 - *Banjo*'s subtitle is 'a novel without a plot,' indicating that plot was not the goal but instead was an epiphenomenal part of the depictions in the text.
 - *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, especially, depict the use of drugs and prostitution not as bad things but as realities that can lead to both good and bad outcomes.
- By the time *Banana Bottom* (1933) is being written, McKay is beginning to turn back toward his political writings. His next novel is *Harlem Glory*, a cacophonous depiction of Harlem as the center of a multitudinous Black American life (the subtitle of the novel is 'a fragment of Aframerican life,' indicating again the Modernist ideal of not necessarily plotted storyline but of three-dimensional depiction in prose).
- In his final novels, all of which go unpublished until the 2010s, deal with world political events like the Italian campaign in Ethiopia (*Amicable with Big Teeth*) and Black radicalism in Southern France (*Romance in Marseille*).
- All of his novels depict the Black working class struggling against the systems of oppression under which they toil and against which they pose discursive and physical threats.



Next week...

***Gay Harlem:
Ma Rainey, Richard Brice Nugent,
Langston Hughes***

