

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Alina Ababei for the Master of Arts

In English presented on June 21, 2004

Title: Queer African American Male Identity in Claude McKay's *Romance in Marseille*

Abstract approved:



In trying to categorize McKay's literary identity, old approaches to his work have oversimplified the meaning of his artistic achievement. In the context of the broader process of recovering and reevaluating the literary production of the Harlem Renaissance and of the cultural stage of the 1930s, modern criticism has proposed a more comprehensive theoretical framework, based on the emergence in recent years of queer theory, which challenges all forms of power and hierarchy at work in the society. McKay's novels emphasize the importance of the Harlem Renaissance in the occurrence and the evolution of queerness as a form of manifestation of African American male identity. McKay presents the image of the highly sexualized black body and the socially unconventional habits of homosexuality, even if mostly encoded, in relation to labor and black bohemian proletarianism. *Romance in Marseille*, still in manuscript, is a literary and social document of the black proletarian diaspora. In this novel, for the first time in his work, McKay clearly refers to a homosexual relationship. The queer proletariat in Quayside expresses its views freely on the background of the open multicultural life that is developing in Marseilles. The *lumpenproletariat* gains in McKay's perspective the power and the

means to bring about the desired social change, and one of the most radical and efficient steps in this sense is the sexual revolution.

QUEER AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE IDENTITY IN CLAUDE MCKAY'S

*ROMANCE IN MARSEILLE*

-----

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

-----

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

-----

By Alina Ababei

June 2004

Thesis  
2004  
A

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael J. [unclear]", written over a horizontal line.

Approved by the Department Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert [unclear]", written over a horizontal line.

Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents and my family for all their love and support. Without their sacrifices I could have not possibly achieved so much. Even though they are miles and miles away, I have always felt them so close to me. Their pride and constant trust in me always kept me going.

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Gary Holcomb, whose classes opened for me a whole new world of ideas. His contribution was essential to my formation as a scholar. He always knew how to make me trust in my own forces.

I do not know what my four semesters in the English Graduate Program at ESU would have been like without Dr. Mel Storm's cheerful support. Dr. Storm guided me and he was always there when I needed somebody to listen to me.

Also, I want to acknowledge the professionalism of all my teachers and especially the friendliness, humor, and enthusiasm of Dr. Richard Keller.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my boyfriend, Brian Young, who made me feel in Emporia like home. I thank him for his unconditional love, for his great help, and for his encouragement to follow my dream.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL SHEET.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii

### Chapter

Introduction .....	1
Queerness: Some Theoretical Considerations.....	8
Claude McKay—Queer Diasporic Identity.....	18
Black Proletarian Queerness in <i>Romance in Marseille</i> .....	23
Works Cited.....	47

## Introduction

“In the world through which I travel I am endlessly creating myself.” (Fanon *Black Skin* 229)

“Associated with [the instigator of the campaign] was a male ‘expert’ who produced certain ‘facts’ about the physiological peculiarities of African sex, which only a prurient-minded white man could find. . . . It is necessary to face the fact that prejudices, however unreasonable they may be, are real – individual, national, and racial prejudices. . . . the Anglo-Saxon mind becomes morbid when it turns on the sex life of colored people. Perhaps a psychologist might be able to explain why.” (*A Long Way from Home* 74-76) (McKay about the campaign against the French employment of black people in the army)

There have been many attempts to pin down in strict categorizations Claude McKay's literary and personal identity. He has been defined plainly as a gay writer of the Harlem Renaissance because of his tumultuous bisexual life and of the homoerotic theme apparent to different degrees in his works, or as the black Leftist militant who inflamed the masses of oppressed black people with the poem "If We Must Die" (1919). Also, McKay, together with other writers like Carl van Vechten, was criticized for being just an enhancer of superficial stereotypes of black people as primitives. Accordingly, the approaches to his literary work have undeservedly simplified the quests and meanings governing his whole life and his artistic endeavor.

Modern criticism has proposed new and more comprehensive theoretical frameworks to be used in an inclusive inquiry of McKay's texts. Thus, recent scholarship proposes that McKay's homosexuality or the homoerotic theme should not be considered any more as an end in itself, separate from the other themes. It is not coincidental that homosexuality, leftist, and bohemian discourses are employed simultaneously in texts like *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Romance in Marseille* (c.1932), or *A Long Way from Home* (1937), to mention just two fiction titles and his autobiography. These discourses intermingle and inform each other, and their constant interaction represents the key to a full understanding of McKay's work. Gary Holcomb aptly synthesizes these new critical approaches, linking together McKay's crucial roles on the black queer stage of the 1930s and in the Black Diaspora, black nationalism, socialist internationalism, and radical politics ("Diaspora" 714). Holcomb explains the importance of a critical position that recovers McKay's work by analyzing the connections between issues of colonialism, race, class, sexuality, and political activism, as opposed to old, limiting approaches,



which ignored the significance of McKay's sexual difference as an underlying feature of his political beliefs and desires for social changes:

. . . 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 . . . inhibits the possibility of observing ways in which McKay's sexual difference, his queer dis-positionality, vitalized and enhanced his political dissidence. ("Diaspora" 715)

Thus, Holcomb demonstrates that the proletarian black man's struggle in McKay's texts is to be understood in the context of the queer scene of the Harlem of the 1930s, which McKay used as a form of class and race resistance: ". . . 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" ("Diaspora" 716).

Holcomb's approach clearly underscores the queerness of McKay's entire work as a revolutionary act. He explains that McKay's ideal society includes queerness, which is inseparable from the black labor class. Only together can these categories be successful in their revolutionary acts ("Diaspora" 739). Such a critical stance in the case of McKay's literary work is necessary, if we consider Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorizing of queerness, which strongly supports Holcomb's critical view on McKay. Sedgwick emphasizes queer theory's referral to a range of work "that seeks to place the question of

sexuality as the center of concern and as the key category through which other social, political, and cultural phenomena are to be understood” (qtd. in Kirsch 32).

Using queer, Marxist, and postcolonialist approaches and owing an obvious debt to the complex theoretical framework proposed and developed by Holcomb, this paper will try to investigate the whole meaning of *Romance in Marseille*, McKay’s queer novel still in manuscript. This text, which, as McKay states, was meant to “set the tone for future work” (qtd. in Cooper 268), is an instance of the mode of interaction of McKay’s sexuality with the political context of his work, more specifically with his black proletarianism. However, this is not the first text of McKay’s that puts forth this particular perspective.

The vitality of the gay subculture in Harlem at the beginning of the century played a central role in the development of the modern, urban American society, providing gay people with “the resources necessary to reject the dominant culture’s definition of them as sick, criminal and unworthy” (Chauncey 5). McKay’s *Home to Harlem* supports George Chauncey’s emphasis on the importance of the Harlem Renaissance in the occurrence and evolution of queerness as a form of manifestation of African American male identity. Even if homosexuality is encoded, this document of the Jazz Age in Harlem presents in detail the tumultuous life in Harlem’s night clubs, which reveals the image of the highly sexualized black body and the socially unconventional habits of homosexuality in relation to labor and black bohemian proletarianism. *Home to Harlem* parallels Chauncey’s attempt to deconstruct the three prevalent myths included in the spatial metaphor of the closet from which the gay men “came out” after the Stonewall events: the myth of invisibility, the myth of isolation, and the myth of internalization.

Behind the superficial black stereotypes, such as violence, vice, blues or laziness, as constructed by the whites, *Home to Harlem* introduces the reader to the black proletariat of the beginning of the century and to transgressive sexuality as a revolutionary act.

According to Chauncey,

. . . being forced to hide from the dominant culture did not keep them hidden from each other. Gay men developed a highly sophisticated system of subcultural codes – codes of dress, of speech, and style – that enabled them . . . to carry on intricate conversations whose coded meaning was unintelligible to potentially hostile people around them (4).

Indeed, McKay alludes to the gay sexuality in Harlem at that time only by means of a fragment from Bessie Smith's popular blues song: "And there is two things in Harlem I don't understand/ It is bulldyking woman and a faggoty man" (129). Holcomb draws attention upon the fact that

Smith's lyrics in "Foolish Man Blues" (1927) are slightly different than those that McKay includes: "There's two things got me puzzled,/ there's two things I can't understand . . . / That's a mannish actin' woman/ and skippin', twistin', woman actin' man." ("Diaspora" 721)

These lines reflect Chauncey's analysis of the gender dynamics of homosexuality and the multiple sexual discourses in the beginning of the twentieth century. Based on the fact that the present hegemonic sexual regime has only recently been created, at that time men were usually classified, especially in the culture of the working class, according to how masculine or feminine they were. "One had a gender identity rather than a sexual identity, [and] the fundamental division of male sexual actors was . . . between conventionally

masculine males who were regarded as men, and effeminate males” (Chauncey 48). Thus, the borders between male and female were extremely fluid: there was a world of varied sexual options: *fairies, queers, trade, pansies, faggots, gays, queens*, (even *horticultural lads*) and so on. In *Home to Harlem* the night clubs are full of pansies, like the straw-colored boy who was a striking advertisement of the Ambrozie 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)

At the same time, the chef, whose brutal discourse shows that he has absorbed the oppressing ideology and embraced what Marx defines as “false consciousness,” trying to become an embodiment of the white man, is described as “a great black bundle of consciously suppressed desires” (160). Also, Ray dreams of “orgies of Orient-blue carnival” where “taboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights” (158). These are clearly further allusion to divergent suppressed sexuality. Especially relevant are the novel’s subtle references to Ray’s idealization of sensuality and to his covert interest in homoeroticism, as this character represents McKay’s voice in his ideology critique.

Another revealing aspect that needs to be looked at is the moment when McKay meets “another white friend,” Michael, an episode described in his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home*. McKay met this “little pick-pocket” (46) when he was trying to escape from the police. He helped him and took him to Harlem, to his place, to find out

later that he was doing his “escapades” in places frequented usually by gay men. The text does not openly tell what Michael’s occupation really was, but it offers the reader enough clues to understand that he may have been a sex worker. For example, at some point he “made [McKay] self-conscious by . . . remarking: ‘If I had your physique, I wouldn’t work.’” (53). In his study of the debates about work and how to live between McKay and Michael, Holcomb concludes that McKay may have intended to try to help Michael become involved in the proletarian cause, because of the belief that “. . . he needs of the proletarian included sexual emancipation, . . . and prostitution and pimping are activities inappropriate for a liberated proletarian black man” (“Diaspora” 737). As such, throughout McKay’s novels, the discourse of socially unconventional sexual habits in the context of the political scene reflects McKay’s intention to underscore the inseparability of the sexual liberation, the struggle of black proletarians, and the changes of the economic system in the creation of a new, revolutionary society.

## Queerness: Some Theoretical Considerations

“Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her [sic] stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time.” (Warner xiii)

African American identity and the multiple ways of constructing it in literature have offered grounds for various theories, assumptions, and questions, in the attempt to address the deepest and most significant elements determining its different shapes and modes of expression. Especially interesting is the way African American male identity reveals itself as a strongly dynamic entity struggling throughout history to express itself and overcome the limits imposed by the hegemonic structures. One of the most controversial issues has been the role of sexuality and, more precisely, of homosexuality in constructing gender patterns and identities.

Some recent theories by prominent scholars like David Halperin criticize the “presentism” of those who impose modern concepts like sexuality on past societies. On the other hand, many sociologists and literary critics consider the concepts of sexuality, gender, and homosexuality (as gender transgressive) to be essential elements in understanding the cultural history, the politics of identity, and especially the construction of the African American male profile in literature. In one of her works on the history of homosexuality Susan Cahn points out to the importance of the “interplay between dominance, power, pleasure and resistance in sexual relations” (630), and of the various forms and meanings of homosexuality. Thus, the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are seen as indissoluble from those of race, class, or spiritual beliefs and should be interpreted as “historically specific formations and not as the given essence of identity” (Murphy 488). Especially relevant for this study is Siobhan Somerville’s definition of sexuality as “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). Strongly connected to this stance is Judith Butler’s questioning of

gender as stable and coherent category as essence. Butler contends that gender—besides being a social construction, as other queer theorists also argue— is a performance, a set of repeated acts and signs that are part of our daily social performances, which constitute the response to the ideological interpellation discussed by Somerville. Consequently, Butler calls for a deconstruction of identity itself, a contestation of the received notions of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, she challenges the idea of the existence of the natural self before the construction of the cultural identity:

. . . the category of sex is neither invariant, nor natural, but is a specifically political use of the category of nature that serves the purpose of reproductive sexuality. In other words, there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of sexuality. (*Gender Trouble* 143)

In Butler's view, performativity of gender consists of citational repetitions, that is, miming or imitating hegemonic gender-related conventions. This is why she contends that drag acquires subversive powers, reflecting and exposing heterosexual impersonations (*Bodies* 231). Moreover, queer appropriates "the performative mimes" and "exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law and its expropriability" (232).

Historical, theoretical, and literary approaches have focused on the emergence and development of concepts referring to homosexuality and on their relation to racial ideologies. Somerville mentions Ellis's analysis in *Sexual Inversion*, where race "became an explicit, though ambiguous, structural element" (25), and she shows that "sexologists



writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inherited this tendency to racialize perceived sexual ambiguity, but they used a new framework to interpret its meaning” (27).

Several problems have arisen and recent criticism has challenged the old, limiting assumptions on which the cultural, sociological, and historical studies were based. First, the Stonewall Riots movement was considered the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement. However, sociologists or historians like George Chauncey succeeded in restoring the awareness of the homosexual scene that existed in New York during the early twentieth century. Chauncey described and analyzed minutely the flourishing, diverse, and open gay life at the beginning of the century; in this setting gay men were able to create their own spaces and resist the dominant culture’s attempt to suppress their free expression. The reconstruction of all these aspects is of capital importance for understanding the different stages of the African American male’s search for an identity and a free voice: “The gay world that flourished before World War II has been almost entirely forgotten in popular memory and overlooked by professional historians; it is not supposed to have existed” (1), argues Chauncey. Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1994) “reconstructs the gay world that existed before the hetero/homosexual binarism was consolidated as the hegemonic sexual regime in American culture – before, that is, the decline of the fairy and the rise of the closet” (23).

Here Chauncey points to another problem, namely the modern understanding of homosexuality and queer identities, and this issue is also largely debated by one of the founders of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick illustrates the modern queer reaction against the very distinction of masculinity and femininity, established by

heterosexuality, and, starting from the basic binarism homo/heterosexual she analyzes the derived binary oppositions, showing how they are meant to limit one's free sexuality. She considers that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (1). Thus, Sedgwick attempts to throw a new light on "the incoherent dispensation" and "the indis severable girdle of incongruities" in modern culture (90) – or, more precisely, the contradictions in the modern views on homosexuality.

Considering the poststructuralist *donnée* that language creates meaning, modern queer theory started from gender studies and gay and lesbian studies, attempting more than a mere analysis of the sexualities and identities seen as "abnormal" in the heterosexual hegemony. Holding that gender and sexualities are acquired social and historical structures rather than something genetically inherited, and departing from the gay movement's assimilationist rhetorics, queer theory becomes a more complex anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist political positionality based on the idea that identities are provisional roles imposed on individuals by society.

In *Gay New York*, Chauncey makes an analysis of the gender dynamics of homosexuality and the multiple sexual discourses at the beginning of the twentieth century and shows that the term *queer* did not necessarily have a deleterious meaning in the 1920s: "The cultural stance of the queer embodied the general middle-class preference for privacy, self-restraint, and lack of self-disclosure, and for many men this constituted part of its appeal" (106). Yet, Somerville points out that Butler's understanding of the meanings of the term *queer* within that specific historical context

differs from Chauncey's: "at the time, it seems, 'queer' did not yet mean homosexual, but it did encompass an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual" (qtd. in Somerville 214). Somerville concludes, "[I]t was not until the 1940s that 'gay' became a term around which a later generation consolidated a new understanding of their identity against an older and now negative model of the 'queer'" (143). It is well known that, by the time queer theory emerged, the term *queer* was a term of stigmatization used for interpellating, to use Althusser's term, lesbian and gay persons. Queer theorists appropriate the term and turn it against the ideological oppressor, *queer* becoming "a token of pride" (Rivkin and Ryan 678), as can be seen in the convergent definitions given by different theorists to the new movement.

According to Andrew Hostetler's definition,

Queerness highlights deontological concerns, raising the contestation of existing forms of power and hierarchy – including sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia – to the level of moral imperative. The queer also valorizes sexual variation and experimentation, and refuses to neatly label or categorize his or her sexual desires, attractions, fantasies, or behaviors, although s/he may be primarily homoerotic, bierotic, or even primarily heteroerotic; s/he is defined more by political commitment and social vision than by "sexual orientation." (17)

In an attempt to examine and understand the whole cultural and historical context of various sexualities' discourses, theorists have looked beyond deconstructing identities and beyond the taxonomy of deviance.

Hostetler synthesizes:

Cultural discourse and social movements that attempt to legitimize gay and lesbian identities, most commonly through the procurement of civil rights, reinscribe normative taxonomic structures that can operate only through the articulation of an excluded other. Queer, a formerly pejorative term reclaimed by nonheterosexual and/or antihomophobic subjects, signifies an open, multiperspectival and fluid—if slippery—conceptual space from which to contest more effectively a heteronormative and heterosexist social order. (3)

Along the same line, Timothy Murphy adds:

Queer identity is distinguished from static gay and lesbian categories of identification, although not mutually exclusive of them. . . . Queer identities are characterized by their standing against normal. As such, queerness is not defined in opposition to heterosexuality . . . rather, “queer” disrupts the hetero-homosexual dichotomy by being ambiguously situated outside such frameworks. (487)

Queers always resist the normative ways of being and try to form an agency defined by openness to change and exclusion of everything imposed as normative.

Referring to the conceptualizations of other queer theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, to whom the term *queer theory* was originally attributed, Hostetler also warns that, as

an unspecified form of sexual difference, a fluid and an unfixed horizon of sexual and political possibility, [it] creates a new “closet,” a rhetorical

erasure of the gay or lesbian subject, thus undermining the specificity and concrete embodiment of his or her experience and subjectivity. (4)

But, according to Michael Warner,

[Q]ueer activists are also lesbians and gays in other contexts . . . . Queer politics has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay identity; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear. (xxvii)

Queer theorists draw attention to the queerness of various aspects of what was considered “normal,” questioning in this way the line drawn between normal and non-normal, as Scott Bravmann maintains: “[Q]ueer criticism reveals the normal and the natural themselves to be cultural fictions enabled only through their dependent relationship with the abnormal and the unnatural” (qtd. in Jankowsky 202). Queer becomes a boundary-crossing anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist positionality. It resists the normative ways of being and tries to form an agency defined by openness to change and exclusion of everything imposed as normative. Gloria Anzaldúa also reflects this idea in her works: “We are the queer groups, the people that don’t belong anywhere . . . and because we do not fit we are a threat” (qtd. in McRuer 228). As such, queer theory focuses on several broad areas of cultural theory. It examines the forms of oppression of gays and lesbians over time, at the same time revisioning the various forms of these minorities’ cultural manifestation; criticizes the ideology that imposes a certain sexual hierarchy and certain political structures; and analyzes the formation of subjectivities and the indeterminacy and instability of all gendered identities.

When trying to explore the traces of the subtle and sophisticated discourses of homosexuality and, more broadly, of queer identities, one should take a take a close look at the Harlem Renaissance period, a key moment in the development of the African American male discourse and in cultural history in general. The sexual terminology that developed then is of great sociological interest, and the few writers who dared to manifest freely, despite the reticence of publishers and scholars, offered their works as lively documents of the time of the “New Negro.” The literary texts contended, even if veiled and coded, the new discourses of homosexuality in African Americans. Somerville shows that these writers “found in fiction an important medium for instantiating political agency and for contesting dominant cultural stereotypes [because], to varying degrees, these authors were able to resist, contest, and appropriate the dominant discourses” (11). A careful study of such works of the Harlem Renaissance is essential, because, as Sedgwick argues, “many major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, new endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century” (*Epistemology* 1).

Good insight into the analytical strategy of queer theory, which criticizes the sexual “normality” in terms of differences in other received categories such as class and race, can lead to a more thorough understanding of broader social aspects, as demonstrated by Somerville’s discussion of the “*intersectionality* of race and gender” and of sexuality with ‘multiple categories of identification and difference’ (5). Sedgwick convincingly supports this idea of the tight connections between homophobia and the

contradictory views on homosexuality of the Western culture on one hand and the larger social, cultural, and political contexts on the other hand:

The historical manifestations of [the] oppression of homosexuals have been savage and nearly endless. Louis Crompton makes a detailed case for describing the history as genocidal. Our own society is brutally homophobic; and the homophobia directed against both males and females is not arbitrary or gratuitous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, class, and race relations. Our society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged. (qtd. in Fuery and Mansfield 191)

## Claude McKay – Queer Diasporic Identity

“Go, better than stand still, keep going” (*A Long Way* 150)

“All my life I have been a troubadour wanderer, nourishing myself mainly on the poetry of existence.” (*A Long Way* 354)

“And so I became a vagabond – but a vagabond with a purpose. I was determined to find expression in writing.” (*A Long Way* 4)

The prison is vast, there is plenty of space and a little time to sing and dance and laugh and love. There is little time to dream of the jungle, revel in rare scents and riotous colors, croon a plantation melody, and be a real original Negro in spite of all the crackers.” (*A Long Way* 146)



McKay, one of the most controversial figures of the Harlem renaissance, as well as his fictional counterpart, Ray, could be considered an instance of what Manuel calls “project identities,” that is, those “social actors [who] on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society, and, by doing so, seek the transformation of the social structure” (qtd. in Kirsch 6). On the other hand, trying to define McKay’s identity becomes highly problematic if we also consider Butler’s rejection of any category of identity: “[I]dentity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (qtd. in Kirsch 8). As such, in modern critical approaches new and different dimensions of McKay’s life have been involved in the analysis of his literary work, as keys to the full understanding of his multi-faceted literary and political enterprise.

An important aspect of McKay’s life and work is his incessant moving through different geographical and spiritual spaces. Considering the title that McKay had thought of for his autobiography, *Keeping Going*, Heather Hathaway believes that McKay’s life is dominated by a “pattern of nearly constant movement,” insisting that McKay should be viewed as a migrant, rather than an immigrant (29). Indeed, driven by “the dominant urge to go” (*A Long Way* 153), McKay’s life was marked by extensive travels in Europe and in Africa. He explains: “Color-consciousness was the fundamental of my restlessness. And it was something with which my white fellow-expatriates could sympathize but which they could not altogether understand” (245).

Edward Said's consideration of the notion of the traveler reinforces this assessment of McKay's trajectory in the world, mirrored by Ray, his alter-ego in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*:

The image of traveler depends not on power but on motion, on a willingness to go into different worlds, use different idioms, and understand a variety of disguises, masks, and rhetorics. Travelers must suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals. Most of all, and most unlike the potentate who must guard only one place and defend its frontiers, the traveler *crosses over*, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions, all the time. ("Identity" 404)

Furthermore, using Theodor Adorno's discussion of the "prefabricated homes" of modern society, Said also refers to the provisionality of these homes in our contingent world. McKay, as well as some of his fictional characters, like Ray, Jake, or Banjo, is representative for those exiled identities for whom "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home" (Adorno qtd. in Said 184). In McKay's novels, home represents the colonialist, bourgeois society, associated with the heterosexed family. In his struggle to find new directions and to resist the imposed bourgeois norms, McKay never establishes himself in one place, always refusing to make of his life and beliefs mere commodities of "civilization."

But a discussion of McKay's lifetime travel cannot be unproblematic. As in the case of an attempt to pin down McKay's identity, referring only to geographical travel would oversimplify the meaning of his constant movement through contradictory beliefs, values, and attitudes and of his search for new directions for society. Accordingly, the

spatial travel is to be interpreted as support of what is a more important dimension in McKay: his *writing travel*, which, according to Holcomb, is his “discursive act of representing and addressing perceptions in terms of ‘movement’” (Holcomb *Writing Travel* 11). Thus, Holcomb explains that McKay’s identity reflected in his fiction has to be analyzed in terms of this notion of literary movement (27), which needs to be connected with his “*traveling sexuality*, a sexuality that allows McKay through a form of renegotiated primitivism to keep moving through worlds unavailable to the writer of the travel who does not pursue what the metropolitan world condemns as deviance” (13). Thus, McKay experiments sexually and artistically and constantly reshapes his identity.

Holcomb’s investigation of what McKay calls “the distilled poetry of my experience” (*A Long Way* 354) is very revealing for the scope of this study and for an insight in the complex notion of McKay’s travel. Exploring McKay’s geographical itinerary, Holcomb answers to those who may wonder why McKay, as a nationalist black poet, did not travel further to the south of “real Africa” (“Diaspora” 725). He calls attention to the fact that McKay wrote his more mature literary works (*Banjo*, *Gingertown*, *Banana Bottom*, and *Romance in Marseille*) while he was in Morocco. Pointing out that these texts “are remarkable for synthesizing critiques of domestic American racism, European colonialism in Africa, and sexual hegemony” (725), Holcomb argues that “the peripatetic queer writer desired to be in Tangier more than anywhere else” (725). One of McKay’s letters to Max Eastman displays this attitude: “[N]o place has satisfied me since I left home as much as Morocco . . . . After my experience here the ‘Jungle’ seems rather thin and cheap” (qtd. in Cooper 271). Holcomb’s study is relevant for the linkage between McKay’s travel and his queerness,

completing Wayne Cooper's biography of McKay. Cooper shows that, in Tangiers, McKay finally broke away from his sense of rootlessness (271) and then he mentions that "... one of the attractions of Tangier for McKay must have been its tolerance of homosexuals, though, as usual he remained circumspect" (277). On the other hand, Holcomb explains that the open homoerotic environment of Tangier, which was not only "a Black Diaspora harbor, but also ... a safe queer port" ("Diaspora" 725), made McKay want to spend a longer period of time there. Tangiers allowed McKay to compare a free community where all sexual manifestations are seen as natural, and thus, are permitted, with the bourgeois society where heterosexuality is imposed as the natural given. The critique of the imposed sexual regime is an essential aspect of McKay's overall critique of colonialist and capitalist ideology.

## Black Proletarian Queerness in *Romance in Marseille*

“My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (Fanon *Black Skin* 232)

“Poor, painful black face, intruding into the holy places of the whites. How like a specter you haunt the pale devils! ... How apologetic and uneasy they are – yes, even the best of them, poor devils – when you force an entrance, Blackface, facetiously, incorrigibly, smiling or disturbingly composed. Shock them out of their complacency, Blackface; ... How can they bear your presence, Blackface, great, unappeasable ghost of Western civilization!” (*A Long Way* 145)

“White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro . . . what is often called the black soul is white man’s artifact.” (Fanon *Black Skin* 14)

It is the merit of modern literary criticism to emphasize that

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 act. 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. (Holcomb “Diaspora” 26)

Indeed, *Romance in Marseille*, written in the early 1930s, while McKay was in Morocco, is an amazing literary and social document of the black proletarian diaspora. Entitled at first *The Jungle and the Bottoms*, the novel seemed to be very important to McKay. In the correspondence to his editor, McKay states that wants this novel to be “more fully realized,” explaining: “as the book is a more serious attempt than the others and will set the tone for future work, . . . I should like to make it as perfect as I can” (qtd. in Cooper 269).

The novel produces different powerful discourses related to class, race, and gender, which function in a dialogic relation, to use Mihail Bakhtin’s concept, constantly informing and enforcing each other. Bakhtin’s theory of the novel best explains the interplay of these multiple voices and discourses: “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (1192). Moreover, Bakhtin emphasizes that these languages are not just “linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word, . . . but

also—and for us this is the essential point— . . . languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, “professional” and “genetic” languages, languages of generations and so forth” (1199). *Romance in Marseille* reflects these “ideologically saturated” languages in “vital connection to the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (Bakhtin 1198).

The fact that the manuscript has remained unpublished is partly due to the resemblance with *Banjo* as far as the location and the main characters are concerned, but another reason is probably the openness with which McKay presented the multiple manifestations of the social classes focused on and the freedom of sexual expression, all understood as a constant revolutionary act. Although sex novels were being published at the time, *Romance in Marseille* was rejected. This entitles us to think that the openly-presented gay relationship in the novel bothered the publishers. The “sex hash,” as Clifton Fadiman characterized the novel in 1933, disturbed the conservative ways of perceiving the literary act and the New Negro’s concerns (Holcomb, “Diaspora” 729).

In Quayside, the queer black proletariat manifests freely on the background of an extraordinary, tumultuous and open multi-cultural life that is developing. The *lumpenproletariat* gains in McKay’s perspective the power and the means to bring about the desired social change, and one of the most efficient and radical steps in this sense is the sexual revolution. A panoply of races, cultures, and identities react against and with each other at the same time, in an internationalist effort to annihilate the boundaries of the hegemonic, capitalist system. In essence, *Romance in Marseille* is a novel of alienation, of the symbolic search for a communion, for a place of one’s own. It is also a novel of the nature of sexual desire and of the agency that the full control over one’s own body can

confer to oneself. The novelty of *Romance in Marseille* stems from the clear focus on sexuality as a radical revolutionary act and the unusual main character, who is an African.

The novel begins in a poetical manner, with sensitive and sensuous descriptions of certain parts of the body, namely, the feet. Lafala is the black protagonist of the novel. Wayne Cooper comments: "Lafala, the handicapped African, was not a character McKay could completely understand . . . . Throughout the novel's composition, McKay remained acutely aware that Lafala was not developing into an engaging character" (266-67). Next Cooper quotes McKay, who wrote to Bradley, his editor, that Lafala was "standing up strong on his own corks . . . but the Arab girl is growing bigger than I ever dreamed and running away with the book and me" (267). However, this study attempts to demonstrate that Lafala's part is an essential one for the general meaning and purpose of the novel, which is to reveal the queerness of the black body intersecting with revolutionary acts against imposed values about black people.

Lafala awakens on a hospital bed, and now, "more vividly than ever in his life he visualizes the glory and the joy of having a handsome pair of legs." He remembers "the rare delight the members of his tribe felt always by the sight of fine bodies supported by strong gleaming legs" (1). There is a rich imagery of the body, which seems to be for the members of the community in which he grew, the criterion used in analyzing and evaluating a person. One's body is worshiped, almost fetishized, as it represents one's inner self and his or her position in the community. Lafala's body occupies a central position in the first part of the novel and requires careful scrutiny. The protagonist's experience reflects the complex ideological process of "making" and using the body under capitalism. The dismembering of and the changes in Lafala's body cannot be



separated from the social and ideological context in which the queer black body acquires free forms of manifestations. In the second part of the novel McKay subtly investigates the role of ideology of gender and of the body in the representation of black proletarianism. At different points in the novel various characters will also have to put their body on the line in the resistance against the imposing of hegemonic values. One's body and sexuality become central in the context of this revolutionary struggle.

Lafala "remembered lying down naked under the moon and stars while his playmates traced his image with pieces of crockery. . . . [H]e remembered . . . the heavy dew bathing his naked skin" (2). The body has significance and becomes one of the most valuable assets of these people outside the watching eye of "Civilization," that is capitalism. Even if the jungle where Lafala grew up was occupied by the whites, they didn't bring any "civilization" to the black people. "Stay here, where Civilization can protect you and leave the jungle Africa to white men," Diup advises Lafala, when he declares that he wants to return home "to make good" (46-7).

Lafala experiences completely different ways to valorize his body at home and in capitalist society. The most important part of his body, his legs, makes Lafala a perfect instance of diasporic identity. When he talks about his legs, he creates a discourse that betrays his racial awareness and his unique, black sensibility: "Legs of ebony, legs of copper, legs of ivory moving pell-mell in columns against his imagination . . . . Dancing on the toes, dancing on the heels, dancing flat-footed. Lafala's dancing legs had carried him from Africa to Europe, from Europe to America . . ." (2).

After being cheated on by one of Quayside's sex workers, "on an impulse of self-disgust," Lafala stows away to America because "only in that country theah's miracles

still working.” (48) The first impact of capitalism on Lafala seems to be a fatal one: detected on the ship, he is locked up in a very cold place for a sustained time, which causes his legs to freeze:

Being very black Lafala had hoped to escape detection in the gloominess of the bunker. But they found him. He was locked up in a miserable place. It was very cold crossing the Atlantic. When the mess boy brought him food, Lafala tried to explain that he was freezing to death . . . and the mess boy did not think Lafala’s signs were serious enough to call an officer. (4)

This episode reflects the black man’s status in the whites’ world, that of no more than a mere object without feelings or bodily pain. This attitude toward black people and *the Others* in general is rendered by McKay through the briefness with which he explains what happens to Lafala next: “From the ship he was taken to the immigration hospital. There the doctors told him that they could save his life only by cutting off his legs” (5). It seems that in the case of a black person there is no need for more examination. Thus, the doctors may have rashly amputated Lafala’s legs. The keyword here is “immigration,” referring to the one who comes from outside, *the Other*, the black man. The conciseness of these two sentences, in contrast with the following long, detailed, poetic passage in which Lafala dreams of, thinks of, and remembers his life as a complete individual, tells more of Lafala’s fate in the hands of the white surgeons than it would appear. To use Frantz Fanon’s words, Lafala was “sealed into that crushing objecthood” (*Black Skin* 109) imposed by colonialism and capitalism on black natives, which led to the loss of his feet. A brief general remark in the text about hospitals makes this idea more explicit:

He had often heard his ignorant companions say that hospitals were the final passage to the grave for the poor and unknown persons. The black drifters were superstitiously afraid of hospitals. They said the doctors never had enough corpses for laboratory work and would not worry about the life of a poor unknown beggar when a body was wanted for dissection.

(5)

If that was the case, then it is not insignificant that Lafala's life is saved and, after having his legs amputated, he receives "terrible attention and kindness" (5). Lafala's inner thoughts can make us interpret this apparent benevolence as being meant to make the black man aware of the inferior status he has now, as compared to his previous proud life, for what was he going to do with himself when he was better and discharged? With the crutches in his armpits would he have to squat down on the hard-hearted city pavement and beg, he who had gone so headlong proud through life? (5)

In this episode McKay clearly makes use of both Marxist and colonialist notions, which are necessary in an analysis of the message of his entire literary work. The poor, a marginalized category in the capitalist system, and "the unknown," the marginalized ones in colonialist structures, share the same fate. Later, in the text, queer identities will also join this group of the excluded *Other*.

According to the white doctors, Lafala's life could have been saved only by amputating his legs. But the brevity of the explanation of this situation with apparently no other alternative raises questions. The doctors might have not considered the black man's condition very carefully. At a more symbolic level, the doctors' decision, whether hasty

or not, is of no importance because Lafala has to go through this amputation in the capitalist system. He is a strong character, representative of the black people's tumultuous life style – according to the whites' representations, too – and his experience reflects his whole race's destiny in the world of the white people. Lafala's life as it used to be is not really being saved in the hospital, because the essence of his identity is represented by his legs and by the entirety of his body. After the amputation, Lafala's life and his body seem to have lost meaning. The only agency he had and the only complete control he could exercise over his own body no longer exist. Lafala's identity was invested in his legs; therefore, the loss of his feet represents the loss of his identity because for black men "the body is not something opposed to what you call the mind" (Fanon *Black Skin* 127). On the other hand, as Kobena Mercer points out, "Classical racism involved a logic of dehumanization, in which African peoples were defined as having bodies but not minds: in this way the superexploitation of the black body as muscle-machine could be justified" (138). Consequently, Lafala's dismembered body represents a great loss both from the point of view of Lafala's tribe, where the body and the soul are not opposed, but rather considered a whole, and from the point of view of the superficial stereotypes of the white people about the black man. In a capitalist society the body belongs to the system, becoming a commodity. Consequently, capitalism takes its share, enhancing in Lafala an inferiority complex. As Fanon explains, "If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: - primarily, economic; - subsequently, the internalization—or better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority" (*Black Skin* 11). Lafala's case is a perfect illustration; because of his economic status Lafala's only way to leave is to stow away on that foreign ship. The horrible treatment he

receives once caught leaves him in a permanent condition of alienation, “in a strange land, without home, without friends, without resources, without his greatest asset – his faithful feet!” (5). It is not enough that the black man be aware of his attributed inferiority. This inferiority must be inscribed and felt on his body, as well. Once again Fanon is proven right when he considers that the black identity is determined from outside (116).

The capitalist society makes Lafala impotent in much the same way as “deviance” in sexuality can contribute to equally impotent and estranged feelings. A meaningful part of his body, his feet, which defined him as a person, no longer exists. In his own eyes and in society’s eyes, Lafala appears different in the same way as homosexuals and deviants, inverted identities are perceived—lacking something that characterizes the majority. In this way the capitalist society pushes Lafala on a new path, a different, changing, and thus, queer-like identity in search of ways to resist and appropriate a space where he does not seem to belong: “Peering, exploring, the world that he saw was a ball heavy with mist, with no light or warmth” (6).

It is also quite possible that McKay presents Lafala in such a way as to make the condition of a homosexual apparent to non-homosexuals. Within the given historical perspective and context of the time, McKay knew that the reader would have been more ready and willing to empathize with the frustrated and hopeless feelings of an amputated character than of a homosexual. By doing this, the reader is presented the experiences of a homosexual without knowing it.

Despite his apparently hopeless condition, Lafala soon learns how to use the hegemonic system of values against itself. He finds that in the capitalist system his

misfortune allows him to attain money from the company that deprived him of the entirety of his body and of the essence of his existence. From the beginning, money seems to symbolize to Lafala his return to “normal” life. If Schwartz considers that “. . . economic power does not constitute an essential part of black masculinity in McKay’s fictional work” (111), Lafala is an instance that demonstrates exactly the economic power as a last resort for regaining and preserving manliness both in his eyes and in the eyes of the others, especially Aslima, the woman who left him and would come back to him. Also, it is the mere thought that he could defeat the system that makes Lafala feel whole again. Maybe this very fact that he can defeat the system is the most important side of his transformation. The return to normality can be possible only by regaining mobility; however, he understands that in return for the mobility ensured by his legs, now he is about to acquire through money something completely new for him, something even more important in capitalism—social mobility:

Sometimes a wave of regret swept over him dampening his heart when the music tickled his upper half and the lower could not respond to it. But that sadness soon vanished under the sensation of the new power that having money gave him. (46)

He acts accordingly and occupies, by means of his actions, a world in which he used to have no control. Assisted by a white lawyer he obtains a large sum of money as compensation for the mistreatment he was subject to on the ship, which caused him the loss of his feet. Ultimately, as a final revenge, Lafala turns against his lawyer, who represents the system itself: “ ‘entitled to more money’ . . . let the big white men battle it out over him. All he wanted was to come out from under it with what was left of his skin

and all that he could possibly get” (29). The episode of the confrontation between Lafala’s lawyer and the official can be interpreted as an instance of reappropriation and change of meanings of certain gestures. Lafala’s apparent passiveness in the confrontation parallels that of colonized Africa. The difference is that Lafala chooses this attitude, because this time it will work for the colonized black man. It may seem disempowering that Lafala cannot choose Fanon’s solution, violence as “a cleansing force [which] frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction [and] makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (Fanon *The Wretched* 70). But his supposedly helplessness and passivity gives Lafala exactly what he wants. When his lawyer tells him that it all depends on him, Lafala consciously uses his inferior position in his advantage:

You are a good lawyer; this gentleman is a big official. I am nothing. I put the case in your hands and you handled it fine. But now you bring me here and put me in the hands of this gentleman as my official representative. I’ll have to follow the advice of this gentleman now. If I am entitled to more money I want it. (29)

Thus, at this point, the novel’s focus on Lafala’s evolution under capitalism clearly reflects Max Kirsch’s assessment of queer theory:

Queer theory’s highlighting of the impossibility of identity and the relativity of experience closely follows the development of current capitalist relations of production, where the self-contained individual is central to the economic goal of creating profit through production and its by-product, consuming. (17)

Lafala's own body becomes the product that allows him to be part in the capitalist trade and occupy a place in the system. As we will see later, the body as a commodity represents the bond of the various marginalized characters in the novel (homosexuals, prostitutes, and proletarians populating Marseille). As Kirsch also explains,

What queers have in common with others in oppressed positions is the social structure of interpersonal exploitation that creates the conditions for being the receptacles of anxiety transfer and for the carrying of negative affects for those with the power to exploit others. (106)

Thus, it becomes clear that queerness does not face barriers of class, economic power, or any other kind of status. It links to all those marginalized, who fail to conform to the established social standards. This is why, even if in McKay's novels few characters are openly queer, one must not neglect the queerness of his work.

In the beginning of the second part of the book a new world opens up, a world of "diverse forms of cultural dislocation and alienation, in the shape of nation, race, and sexuality" (Holcomb *Writing* 16). This is the multi-racial and multi-cultural world of Marseille at the beginning of the twentieth century, a space so well known to McKay, who wanted to "fictionalize his most intimate imaginings" of it (Holcomb *Writing* 16). Starting with this section the sexual content of the book becomes very dense, most likely the main reason why the novel remained unpublished. Here McKay's artistry is at its highest level, the author constantly playing with meanings, encoding significances and requiring from his audience a reading informed by Black Marxism, internationalism, and queer theory.

A new development takes place in Lafala:



Like all vain humanity who love to revisit the scenes of their sufferings and defeats after they have conquered the world, Lafala (even though his was a Pyrrhic victory) had been hankering all along for the caves and dens of Marseille with the desire to show himself there again as a personage and especially to Aslima. (35).

Once in Quayside, he had the money to establish himself in a superior position; however, this money did not equal the wholeness of his body. His carnal appetite and the free manifestation of his sexuality became the dominant form of expression of his masculinity. Both his money and his body made a series of characters fight to gain Lafala's attention, in sexual, social, and political ways.

Examining Lafala's relationship with Aslima, the prostitute who had left him, one cannot fail to notice the recurrent imagery of the pig, which appears throughout McKay's whole work. For example, in the poem "If We Must Die" he urges his folk:

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. (1-4)

In *Home to Harlem*, Ray, following Marxist and prefiguring Gramscian theory, considers that "modern education is planned to make you a sharp, snouty, rooting *hog*" (243), and he does not want to get married because "soon he would become one of the contented *hogs* in the *pigpen* of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black *piggies*" (263). It is clear from these examples that this pig-symbol refers to the way the blacks were viewed by the white capitalist hegemony, to the inferior status attributed to colored people. On the other

hand, in *Romance in Marseille* Aslima repeatedly refers to herself and Lafala as “honey pig,” “true pigs for life,” “darling pig,” “happy wild pigs,” “loving pigs,” and so on. In this way they appropriate the white discourse and use it against the hegemonic system, reversing the binarism *pig/queer/black/overt sexuality – white/normal/clean*. There is a double opposition involved here: *black – white* on one hand and *overt sexuality/sex workers – “normal” people* who repress their sensuality, fitting in the normative patterns, on the other hand.

There is a significant difference between Aslima and Lafala in the way they perceive the appellation “pig.” Aslima, being aware of her status as a black person and as a prostitute, internalizes the dirty connotations of the word as defining her life, which involved no feelings until meeting Lafala: “‘I’ve been a pig all my life,’ said Aslima. ‘But with you I don’t feel like it’s just a mud bath. I feel like we’re clean pigs’” (54). From her words one can infer that this imposed status will stay with them their whole life. They cannot escape being *black*, and thus, being *pigs*. But their feelings and emotions are not different from the “white affect.” This is why their love makes them *clean pigs*. Aslima makes it clear that, even if, as Fanon has put it, “Sin is Negro, as virtue is white” (*Black Skin* 139), when it comes to feelings, there is no distinction any more between white and black: “‘Oh, pig-pig-pig, piggy-pig,’ Aslima chanted in an ecstatic fit . . . ‘We are all pigs’” (57). On the other hand, before his accident Lafala used to take pride in his race and in his body. Now, when he does not have his feet anymore, he thinks: “I can’t be as piggish as in my able-bodied days.” (54)

In their romance, Lafala and Aslima erase the dirty connotations and add an exacerbated affection and sensuality to the word that is not an insult any more. By doing

this, they interpellate in their turn the coldness and superficiality of the whites who categorize them. At the same time, as in the case of all black people who are forced to internalize the humiliation of the attribute *pig*, Aslima and Lafala reappropriate the term as a symbol of survival.

In Marseille the whole range of cultures, races, and classes that mix in Quayside become the real protagonists of the novel. McKay reveals himself as a “queer transnationalist voyager” (Holcomb “Diaspora” 715), reconstructing for the reader a unique image of the black *lumpenproletariat* inhabiting the Quayside and some aspects of the open queer relationships existing in this “. . . port of the fascinating, forbidding and tumultuous Quayside against which the thick scum of life foams and bubbles and breaks in a syrup of passion and desire” (“Diaspora” 36).

Recent scholarship has challenged assumptions about McKay’s sexuality as separate from the political aspects he wrote about. For example, Holcomb insists on the “ways in which McKay’s sexual difference, his queer dis-positionality, vitalized and enhanced his political dissidence” (“Diaspora” 715). *Romance in Marseille* illustrates 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 anti-colonial resistance” (Holcomb “Diaspora” 715).

The whole community in Quayside represents the embodiment in the queer sense of the *Other* in Western society; this place reflects in certain ways parts of Harlem’s reality. Within the community there is the same race and class awareness, and masculinity is also socially constructed:

. . . some of the Arabs had taken Quayside girls away from prostitution to become their mistresses and by doing that created a feeling of hostility against them among the protecting class. Indeed it was quite a joke among that class that the Arabs preferred male prostitutes to female. (116)

Mercer provides, as Holcomb also notes, the key to understanding race and gender issues in texts like McKay's. Mercer states that the ideas about masculinity "are not natural but are historically constructed, and this construction is culturally variable" (136). At the same time, those dominated by stereotypes perpetuate themselves these representations, under patriarchy, which "constantly redefines and adjusts the balance of male power and privilege, . . . 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" (137). Thus, the black community in Marseille replicates the prejudices the black men have had to suffer from. Mercer explains:

Through such collective, historical experiences black men have adopted certain patriarchal values such as physical strength, sexual prowess and being in control as a means of survival . . . . The incorporation of a code of "macho" behavior is thus intelligible as a means of recuperating some degree of power over the condition of powerlessness and dependency in relation to the white master subject. (137)

This is why on Quayside Lafala has to prove his manliness to the woman who had abandoned him before and to the whole community. This time, however, his natural bodily integrity is replaced by a more powerful representation of manliness: social power ensured by money. At the same time, as will be shown, in this community a queer couple,

as well as the Arabs, has to face the anti-gay prejudices and the “natural,” socially accepted images of male identities, which are, as Holcomb points out, those accepted in the context of the compulsory heterosexuality (“Diaspora” 718). It is further useful for a comprehensive view on McKay to see how Mercer’s theorizing of the cultural construction of what seems natural about gender roles is very well mirrored in the discussion about homoeroticism of McKay’s characters Jake and Ray. When they meet again in *Banjo*, they embrace and kiss each other:

[Jake:] “The fust time I evah French-kiss a he, chappie, but Ise so tearing mad and glad and crazy to meet you this-away again.”

[Ray:] “That’s all right, Jackie, he-men and all. Stay long enough in any country and you’ll get on to the ways and find them natural.” (292)

Although Lafala’s relationship with Aslima, the woman to whom he wants to demonstrate his masculinity, seems to be the focus of this part of the book, Caribbean islanders, African Anglophones and Francophones, and African Americans come on the stage, interfering with and determining Lafala’s development. Sometimes McKay openly reveals the queer relations and identities, while in other cases the reader becomes puzzled, caught in the author’s game involving meanings hidden in discourses. Thus, we witness the white queer couple, Big Blonde, in whose “natural roughness there was a singular and foreign air of refinement” (123), and Petit Frère, “fascinating with his pale prettiness and challenging deep dark-ringed eyes and insolent mouth” (148). Petit Frère’s description reveals him as the effeminate part of the couple; at the same time, Big Blonde, a “big firm-footed broad-shouldered man, splendidly built” (123), also reflects through his “haunting eyes of a lost child” (123) the queerness of their relationship.

Moreover, in French and English—following the French usage—*Blonde*, with the ending *e*, is the feminine form of the word. Thus, the name itself warns the reader about the queer nature of the man’s sexuality. These descriptions alone and the way these men perceive each other are enough to make the nature of their relationship clear to the reader. But besides that, we also know that,

Big Blonde replied that he was engaged for the night with Petit Frère and he became quite lyrical about it. Nothing could make him break the engagement. Not for the love of a drinking party which always delighted him, nor the bouquets of rarest wines, nor the music of the hymen though sweet with the honey of the queen bee and glorious like the songs of Solomon’s loves, no not for the virgin stars of the sky nor a brighter shining moon. (148)

However, these are not the only textual elements that point to the queerness of the couple: “Once Big Blonde broke up the furniture in the saloon of the loving house of La Creole, because a boy companion of his was insulted there” (123). At the same time, Big Blonde is presented as an intellectual, going to the Seamen’s Club and reading all the time. If we consider Michael’s remark in *A Long Way From Home*: “‘I guess when the gang sees me with these [books] here,’ said Michael, ‘they’ll be thinking that I’m turning queer.’” (108), Big Blonde’s behaviors also reflect his queerness. Schwartz notices another aspect: the “gay-friendly” atmosphere of the café where this queer couple isolates from the rest of the world, late in the novel:

The café Petit Frère and Big Blonde frequent is thus described as an

atypical hangout for the latter's "manly" friends. It constitutes a "retreat" in which Big Blonde enjoys spending time alone with Petit Frère in an apparently "gay-friendly" atmosphere dominated by the presence of men who can easily be linked to same-sex desire: men "of middle class respectability" who go "slumming" with "lads"; "fine and handsome sailors"; and a soldier sitting alone at a table, maybe waiting to be picked up. (106)

The world, in the persons of Babel, St. Dominique, Falope, or the two prostitute girls comes to them, invading their intimacy. Moreover, the couple cannot escape the society's homophobia, which becomes apparent through an old woman who is trying to sell dolls to them. She makes the anti-gay attitudes clear, insulting and accusing Petit Frère; Babel tells her that "she was in the wrong place," to which she answers: "Indeed I am, there's no doubt I am when you have that thing there between you,' . . . fixing Petit Frère with a malevolent finger" (158). Later she calls him "little sucking pig" (158) and takes "a paper full of filth from her basket and slap[s] it in Petit Frère's face [yelling] 'There! That is your life'" (159). This episode is open-ended, with Big Blonde crying with his head on the table, as if drunk, and it calls for interpretation. He may be crying because he cannot escape violence, which he has to face in the form of this old woman. Violence is against his nature, but he gets engaged in it, against his will.

In *Home to Harlem* the queer nature of relationships is encoded by means of symbols accessible only to the initiated ones. The Harlem lesbianism and gay sexuality is alluded to through words and phrases loaded with gay significance, which tell nothing to those outside this sexual minority: Billy is the "happiest, well-feddest wolf in Harlem"

(88), who “eats only his own kind” (92). In *Romance in Marseille*, for the first time in his work, McKay clearly refers to a homosexual relationship.

It is interesting to notice the ease with which McKay describes this queer *white* proletarian couple. When it comes to another black, Babel, things become more veiled and require a more aware and informed reading. Babel, “a huge West Indian from a British island” (106), has been with Lafala on the ship to America and sees him being taken to the hospital without knowledge of what happened to him. He manages to arrive in Genoa, and when he hears about his old friend, he decides to go back to Marseille with “the thought of having an irresponsible gay time in Quayside with Lafala” (147). After having described the heavily sexually loaded atmosphere and relationships in Quayside, McKay deliberately uses the adjective *gay* to reflect Babel’s thoughts, even if in this case the word’s connotations do not refer to homosexuality, but “merely” to happiness. McKay expects in a way a queer reader for his text and he renegotiates the act of reading itself. He excites the reader’s expectations and sensuality and makes him anticipate clear gay traits in Babel, only to discover immediately that he is “normal,” according to the normative definition of normality.

But it is Babel himself who raises questions later when he is speaking with St. Dominique about the girls working as prostitutes and “their little brothers” (the male sex-workers). He understands their relationships and affection for each other, because “they are all young and jolly and working together at the same trade,” and he agrees with Lafala that “our little brothers are liked and tolerated, because they’re good business” (157). Later Babel sings the “Moon-struck” song, in which the central symbol, the moon, represents the feminine. When Lafala tells him “Look out the moon madness don’t get



you too” (158), Babel replies that he is “crazy all ways bar none” (158). His words call for a deeper reading, especially considering what Steven Watson explains:

In the homosexual iconography of the period, the black male vied with the swarthy Italian youth and the sailor in uniform as the iconic love object. Negroes were also regarded as sexually flexible. (A common pick-up line at the time among available blacks: “I’m a one-way man – now, which way would you like?”) (134)

What Babel says can be interpreted as an expression of the queerness politics of the whole novel. His words also illustrate what Sedgwick defines as the “universalizing view” in the modern understanding of homosexuality. She holds that the homo/heterosexual definition is “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (1); that is, homosexual traits exist in virtually everyone.

It may be that McKay presents the queer black and white bodies differently in order to reveal queerness as indeed a natural manifestation, occurring irrespective of race. Thus, by describing openly a white queer couple accepted in the black community, McKay does not expose homosexuality as an evil or perversion of the black body, but as a natural manifestation possible in *any* body. McKay deconstructs in this way the heterosexual ideology of homosexuality as pathology or aberration of the black body. He shows that homosexuality is a social reality that has the same significance in the white and in the black communities. McKay further reveals through the anti-gay episode in the café how white gay men suffer in their turn from the same prejudices as black men. Again, this may be another strategy used in order to make the white reader more

perceptive and sensitive to the sufferings provoked by misconceptions. Once again McKay places homosexuality within the larger racial and political struggles.

The Quayside community represents capitalism itself in the least glamorous aspects, with all the prostitutes using their bodies as a commodity. As a reaction to the hegemonic system, the Communists and the proletarian people like St. Dominique, Big Blonde, or Falope gather and are active members of the “Seamen’s Club.” In the original manuscript one may see that McKay tried to use the name “Proletarian Hall” for this place, then crossed this out and replaced it with the “Seamen’s Club,” though this establishment “following the era of the Russian Revolution” (98) didn’t bring too many seamen there. The club has “lecture and reading room, billiard room, theatre, bar and restaurant, office, phonograph and piano” (101); the pictures of Lenin, Marx, and other leaders from Soviet Russia, as well as the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite to Break Your Chains!” define this Communist meeting place where St. Dominique tries to attract Lafala. St Dominique knows that

Lafala was just another of the many working folk he had known who were a little ashamed of proletarian places of amusements before respectable people. And it had always amused him that while bohemian radicals of the better classes were romantic or sentimental about common proletarian pleasures the proletarian themselves were contemptuous of such and hankering after the better-class patterns. (100)

In his analysis of the queer black proletarianism of Claude McKay, Holcomb explains:

When he idealized and “romanticized” the black and gay (and black gay) proletariat, McKay attempted to unite acceptable and unacceptable black disempowered communities. McKay wishes to couple the black *lumpenproletariat* (the criminal subculture) – in McKay’s case, black “homosexual” subculture – with the acceptable proletariat, the heterosexual black working classes. (“Diaspora” 724)

The discourse of these activists is, of course, informed by Marxist, proletarian and internationalist radical ideas related to “the new social truth.” They see Lafala as being with them as “the symbol of the all-embracing purpose of the new social ideal.” To them, Lafala’s race represented the very lowest level of humanity, biologically and spiritually speaking. But that was no hindrance to its full participation in the coming social order. For it would be a universal order including all peoples without difference of race and religion. (102)

It is St. Dominique who emphasizes the proletarian significance of the novel: “Take this Lafala case for example. There is little race to it besides his color. It’s a stinking proletarian case, from Marseille across the ocean to New York and back” (136).

The queerness of the whole community presented by McKay in *Romance in Marseille* relies on the *othering* of almost every character. Everybody is oppressed in one way or another by the white system and also by the system within the smaller, marginalized community. They have to conform to the hegemonic roles and also to their own subculture’s roles, and they all fight against the prejudices in their own ways. Thus, Lafala wins the fight with the capitalist system, and even if he loses his natural bodily entirety, he regains through money and social power a form of masculinity that is

valued even more in capitalism. Aslima, the prostitute who comes to love Lafala to the point of sacrificing her life, is oppressed within her own race because of being a sex worker. She is valued as less than a human being, and nobody but Lafala can conceive the idea of marrying her. When she decides that she wants to escape this role, she takes her actions to the limit, endangering and losing her life, but she does not comply with the system any longer and she wins her own battle. The queer couple has to endure the humiliation of the anti-gay acts, while the members of the Seamen's Club choose political activism as a form of fighting for universal order. Thus, the novel is the story of everybody's struggle. As queer stands against the "normal," *Romance in Marseille* reveals the queerness of all those "not normal" fighting back against the norm.

Although there have been attempts to publish it, the novel, whose title in drafts was also *The Jungle and the Bottom* and *Savage Loving*, is still in manuscript and thus is not available to the public at large. The merit of the novel is that it adds to the meaning of McKay's previous novels, proving once again to the modern reader that, as Somerville puts it,

It was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of the bodies as either "homosexual" or "heterosexual" emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between "black" and "white" bodies. (3)

At the same time, McKay's literary work and his own personal trajectory through different geographical and spiritual spaces prove that, as Kirsch defines it, queerness is characterized by fundamental questioning of social relations through a discourse of resistance and alliance (3).

## Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. From *Discourse in the Novel*. Leitch 1190-220.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- - -. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cahn, Susan. "Sexual Histories, Sexual Politics – Hidden from History." *Feminist Studies* 18.3 (1992): 629-47.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Cooper, Wayne F. *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora. Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Tran. Charles Lamm Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967.
- - -. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1961.
- Fuery, Patrick, and Nick Mansfield. *Cultural Studies and Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Halperin, David. "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 416-31.
- Hathaway, Heather. *Caribbean Waves. Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall*.

Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999.

Holcomb, Gary. "Diaspora Cruises: Queer Black Proletarianism in Claude McKay's *A Long Way from Home*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.4 (2003): 715-45.

---. *Writing Travel in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: Claude McKay, Shiva Naipaul, and Jamaica Kincaid*. Diss. Washington State U, 1995.

Hostetler, Andrew. "Culture, Sexual Lifeways, and the Developmental Subjectivities: Rethinking Sexual Taxonomies" *Social Research*. 65.2 (1998). 20 Apr. 2003 <[http://articles.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2267/is\\_n2\\_v65/ai\\_20964253](http://articles.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2267/is_n2_v65/ai_20964253)>.

Jankowsky, Theodora A. *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000.

Kirsch, Max H. *Queer Theory and Social Change*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Leich, Vincent B., et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001.

McKay, Claude. *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot*. New York: Harper, 1929.

---. *Home to Harlem*. New York: Harper, 1928.

---. *A Long Way from Home*. New York: Furman, 1937.

---. *Romance in Marseille*. c. 1929-1933. Ms. Miscellaneous Claude McKay Papers.

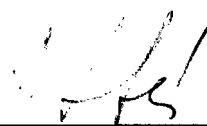
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York: New York Public Library.

---. "If We Must Die." *Liberator* 2 (July 1919): 21.

McRuer, Robert. "A Genealogy of Queer Theory. Review" *NWSA Journal*. 14.2 (2002): 227-30.

- Mercer, Kobena. "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race." *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 131-70.
- Murphy, Timothy F, ed. *Reader's Guide to Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000.
- Said, Edward. "Identity, Authority, and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveler." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000: 386-404.
- - -. "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000: 173-86.
- Schwartz, Christa A. B. *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2003.
- Sedgwick, Kosofsky Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham, 2001.
- Warner, Michael. Introduction. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. vii-xxxi.
- Watson, Steven. *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African –American Culture, 1920-1930*. New York: Pantheon, 1995.

I, Alina Ababei, hereby submit this thesis to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available to use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author.



---

Signature of Author

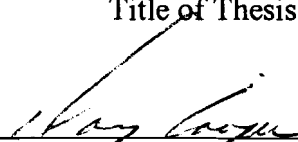
07/26/2004

---

Date

Queer African American Male Identity  
in Claude McKay's *Romance in Marseille*

Title of Thesis



---

Signature of Graduate Office Staff

7-26-04

---

Date Received