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Claude McKay's Idealized Black Man from the Caribbean International Perspective: A Study of *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*

カリブの国際的視野から描かれたクロード・マッケイの理想化された黒人像——『ハーレム帰還』と『バンジョー』の考察

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In this essay I will discuss two novels of Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1927) and kind of its sequel, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929), focusing on the protagonists of both novels, Jake Brown and Lincoln Agrippa Daily, called Banjo. I will argue that the two characters are McKay's idealized image of a black man created from his political and international perspective as a Caribbean, rather than characters to be considered as an African American featuring the black lower-class life in the context of the Harlem Renaissance.

First, I will refer to some reviews on the two novels issued when they were published. *Home to Harlem* won high praise generally but also got severe attacks. The comment by W.E.B. DuBois is well-known. He said that the novel "for the most part" nauseated him, and that "after the dirtier parts of its filth" he felt "distinctly like taking a bath" ("Two Novels" 202). A famous Caribbean in the period of the Harlem Renaissance, Marcus Garvey, also criticized it as a "damnable libel against the Negro" (1). Both of them felt the black life in his book appear not decent enough for the respectability of the race, but debased just as white racists would like to see. This response that came from double-consciousness imposed on African Americans in the history of the United States was, according to McKay, too ideological to appreciate art.

According to McKay's biographer, Wayne F. Cooper, the negative response of DuBois stung McKay, because he highly respected DuBois as artist (*A Biography*, 244). In his political essay *The Negroes in America*, a book written in Russia when he attended the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International from 1922 to 1923, McKay introduced DuBois as a writer who "deserves first place in the field of literature, unsurpassed by anyone else," referring to his use of language as follows: "There is no other Negro American writer who has such a clear, pure, and at the same time elevated and colorful language" (71). However, McKay denied his own literary judgement he had pronounced as was cited

above, in his letter to DuBois, on June 18th, 1928, when he refuted : “nowhere in your writings do you reveal any comprehension of esthetics and therefore you are not competent or qualified to pass judgment upon any work of art” (Cooper, *The Passion* 150). He ascribed the reason of such incapability of DuBois to his choice of career as activist rather than artist:

Certainly I sympathize with and even pity you for not understanding my motive, because you have been forced from a normal career to enter a special field of racial propaganda... Therefore I should not be surprised when you mistake the art of life for nonsense and try to pass off propaganda as life in art! (*ibid.*)

McKay's argument about art is often considered to show the generation gap that characterized the period, when the rise of new artists like Langston Hughes was hailed, who could find an artistic expression to the black lower-class life free from any consciousness of the eye of white people the older generation like DuBois had.

Critic William J. Maxwell rather takes notice of the fact that DuBois's review was favorable when McKay's next novel *Banjo* was published. He argues that the reason for his different attitude toward the later novel is because of the location of the story: Marseille. By comparing *Banjo* with DuBois's own novel, *Dark Princess*, Maxwell points out the international scope they had in common characterized the age of the Harlem Renaissance. He argues as follows:

Banjo and *Dark Princess* are hardly the only fictions of the Harlem Renaissance to record the nomadic enthusiasms of the New Negro. As critic Brent Hayes Edwards explains¹, black intellectuals eagerly scrutinized the League of Nations and kindred western international institutions as they emerged in the wake of World War I, building by the 1920s “a multilingual and ‘cosmopolitan’ black print culture” of their own in the interstices of counter-international organizations such as Du Bois's (*sic*) Pan-African Congress and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). (172)

Maxwell considers the Harlem Renaissance “as a global happening in addition to a sequence of New York stages” (*ibid.*), finding in *Banjo* and *Dark Princess* the “resolutely anti-imperialist transnationalism” (173). In this context both of them share black international ideological perspectives.

Critic Tyrone Tillery also considers DuBois's compliment on his second novel came from its ideological aspect. He says that “Du Bois (*sic*) did note that McKay's race philosophy was of great interest, since McKay was an international Negro and a direct descendent of Africa” (108). It can be

assumed that DuBois appreciated McKay's international political scope, which was not so obvious in his first novel.

However, Tillery rather focuses on the negative side of DuBois's review on *Banjo*, referring to the difference of background between the two writers. He points out the fact that "Du Bois's (*sic*) sentiment that West Indians knew little about African Americans was one shared by many black Americans" (108). Referring to another view of *Banjo* by Walter White, Tillery argues that "White like Du Bois, was seriously disturbed with McKay's derogatory references to certain classes of African Americans" (*ibid.*). In this case, it was not his attitude toward a lower class life of black people:

As both White and Du Bois correctly observed, *Banjo*, despite its French setting, is marked by McKay's contemptuous opinions of middle-class black Americans. (109)

Banjo alarmed African American critics for another aspect it had. Tillery assumes that it was kind of response of McKay against "the black Babbits," who was bitter "over the raking he had received for *Home to Harlem*" (109).

Tillery also offers more fundamental explanation. He cites the comment by White that McKay's prejudices were stemmed from his being born in the West Indies, "where a rigid caste system divided the population into three distinct groups—whites, colored (mixed blood), and blacks—whereas in the United States any person with any amount of Negro blood is classified as a Negro":

In the West Indies, both the white and the colored classes look down on blacks, creating an understandable black resentment against both of the other groups. This reality, White concluded, was the foundation for McKay's frequent derisive allusions to people of mixed blood and to the Negro intelligentsia. (109)

This explanation of how the class rather than the race matters in the Caribbean countries also applies to the reason why McKay chose to praise a lower-class life of black people in the first novel. As a Caribbean writer McKay knew the colonialist system in the world that the Western civilization had reigned over black people of African origin beyond national borders. Such background, I will argue, gave Caribbean writers international and ideological perspectives like McKay's. As Tillery pointed out, the antipathy existed between African American and Caribbean writers that had derived from their different background, and their criticism against McKay's novels could be ascribed to such fundamental difference of their experience and knowledge. As Winston James points out in "Prologue" of his book on "Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America," "[one] of the most intriguing sociological

and historical facts about American radicalism in the twentieth century has been the prominence and often preeminence of Caribbean migrants among its participants” (1). Claude McKay was one of them.

If we follow McKay's carrier, it is easy to see he was not to be considered only in the African American literary tradition. Before he came to the US, he was already a poet with two books published. McKay came to the US in 1912, stayed in Alabama for half a year, then for two years in Kansas, and during his stay in New York for about six years, he began publishing poems in radical journals and joined the literary circle there. From 1919 to 1921, he was in London working on activities connected to the Marxist journal, and also published a collection of poems. In 1921 he went back to New York and got acquainted with people of various literary circles and worked actively. However, the next year found him leaving for Germany to visit Russia. McKay did not come back to New York till 1934, never to leave the US since. His migration was obliged by various police forces whose oppression he suffered after his visit to Russia. He supposed that his participation in the communist movement would bar his admission to his native Jamaica, too. Maxwell argues that in the *Banjo* years McKay should have learned that this “curse of homelessness and enforced exile was not confined to the enslaved past, the bygone world of removal from Africa” (175). It is obvious that his wandering experience in Europe and Northern Africa had greatly contributed to enriching McKay's transnational awareness of black people. It was when he wrote two novels with African American protagonists.

McKay began to write his first novel “Color Scheme” in France, and after giving up publishing it, he worked on *Home to Harlem*. After he left Paris for the warmer weather to the South, he stayed in Cap d'Antibes, Toulon, Marseille, Barcelona, Nice, Casablanca, and Tanger. In 1931 McKay settled in Tanger, Morocco. When his books failed to earn enough money, McKay could not but ask his American friends for help, and it led to his final return to the US. It was rather natural that *Banjo* became a story of Marseille, and on the contrary, Harlem in *Home to Harlem* must have been a place of memory remembered in a far country.

When we read McKay's essay *The Negroes in America*, we notice he could talk about racial issues from a wider comparative perspective, as a Caribbean, even before his long experience in Southern Europe. For example, he mentioned the different attitudes toward black people between Catholic and Protestant countries. He says “Catholic countries, by tradition, treat Negroes tolerantly and in a friendly fashion” (50). He also distinguished the types of oppressive life American and Caribbean black people had suffered like this; one from American democracy and the other “under the strain of unbearable exploitation by British landlords” (50). However, what he had learned in his migrant life surely affected his career as a thinker and writer. We know near the end of his life McKay became a Catholic. According to biographer Wayne Cooper, his religious interest had been originated in his visit to Spain: “...only in Spain had he felt for the first time the full significance of Catholicism as a way of life and bedrock for an

entire civilization" (*A Biography* 352).

The Harlem we see in *Home to Harlem* was multi-ethnic. For example, according to Jake's introduction, the cabaret that "was leading all the Negro cabarets" (28-29) was owned by a Jewish proprietor. It had "Afro-Oriental garishness" (30), and another cabaret, the Congo, where "no white persons were admitted" (30), was "a real throbbing little Africa" (29). Some of the customers of the Congo were identified as "West Indian girls" (96). According to critic Winston James: "From a population of twenty thousand in 1900, the foreign-born black population in the United States had grown to almost a hundred thousand by 1930. ...The overwhelming majority of these migrants came from the Caribbean islands, over 80 percent of them....By 1930, almost a quarter of black Harlem was of Caribbean origin" (12). In his research Winston James showed so many Caribbean immigrants such as Marcus Garvey, Cyril Briggs, Wilfred A. Domingo, Otto Huiswoud, Claude McKay, George Padmore, Arturo Schomburg, and Eric Walrond, had been actively working during the so-called era of Harlem Renaissance. As for New York City, part of which was Harlem, at the beginning of the 20th century, it had become a great international city, with its population doubled in 50 years, with so many immigrants coming especially from Europe because of the World War.

Unlike McKay, Jake the character was an African American from Georgia, but as an ex-soldier he had had the experience of working in foreign countries. For example, he could explain the different nuance of racism. He said when an English called them "darky," and a Yankee said "nigger," the former meant friendly contempt while the latter meant hatred. Jake said he "preferred white folks' hatred to their friendly contempt" (5). While working with them in a freighter as a stoker, Jake also noticed how Arab people were hated because of their religious food custom. Such experiences with various people were not limited to Jake.

Critic Mark Whalan refers to the World War experiences of African Americans as "the largest transatlantic movement of black men since the days of the middle passage" (776). He says, "200, 000 African Americans would serve in France during and after the Great War," and their movement "to a country without the social and sexual segregation of the US left a lasting legacy—in France, in the white South, and in African America" (*ibid.*). According to the research by Tyler Stovall, half the number of African American volunteers were sent to France (5), and 80 % of them were not soldiers but workers (7). French people who had suffered and helpless at the time sincerely appreciated the help of African Americans, and the 369th Infantry Regiment was awarded the highest military honor, *Croix de Guerre*, by French government. On the other hand, veterans were rejected with coldness and hatred at home, because they were gaining more confidence and power to make white workers fear getting robbed of their jobs. So many riots occurred from racial conflicts after the World War I and the most turbulent summer with riots in 1919 was called the "red summer." Because of such contrast, France became a kind

of symbol of true equality and democracy among African Americans, contrasted to their native country. The year 1919 also served to emphasize the difference of the two countries, when the Pan-African Congress was held on February 19–21 in Paris, organized by DuBois. As many as 57 people from 15 countries or regions participated in it (Stovall 34).

In Paris during 1920s, Stovall could locate Black Montmartre, while white expatriate writers lived on the Left bank of the Seine, Montparnasse. He explained it was a small community consisting of veterans who had stayed after the war, some of whom became college students, one a jazz musician. Its number of about 25 people in 1924 expanded rapidly after the entertainer and singer Bricktop, aka Louise Smith, became popular in her own jazz night club. Josephine Baker, who came to Paris in 1925, would remain a great star for 50 years., Jazz had come with the African American soldiers to France. The famous 369th Infantry Regiment from New York City had a jazz band of 44 pieces. In Paris black jazz musicians were in great demand. With such popularity of clubs in Black Montmartre, it can be assumed to be another Harlem sharing the contemporary Harlem Renaissance. Stovall listed up literary black figures of the period who came to Paris even for a short stay: Langston Hughes, in 1924, Alain Locke, 1924, McKay, 1923, Countee Cullen, 1926, Walter White, 1927, Jean Toomer, in the mid-1920s, Jessie Fauset, 1924–25, and, Gwendolyn Bennett, 1925–26, and Nella Larsen, 1931.

Stovall focused on the First World War as the background of the new trend of cultural interest in Paris. In 1920s Paris was the center of artistic creation, with the publishing of *Ulysses*, in 1922, and artists' presence like Stravinsky, Picasso, Hemingway, and so on. Those artists who had lost belief in the European civilization because of the devastating effect of the tragic war had been seeking some alternative values in African culture, something more alive, naïve, sensual and spiritual, quite opposite to the cold and rational Europe.

In 1921 *Batouala: A True Black Novel*, a novel by Re René Maran (1887–1960), who was born in Martinique and had been working as a French colonial official in Africa, won *Prix Goncourt* as the first black author. It was a story of an African tribe chief under the colonial oppression just before the First World War. In the novel Batouala's young wife finally killed him in the plot with a young lover of hers. The theme of the novel that pure and sensual love leads to homicide, is the same motif we see in the novels that delineate black primitive life, *Nigger Heaven* (1926) by Carl Van Vechten and *Home to Harlem*, though the tragedy was barely prevented in McKay's novel. In the book *The Negro in America* McKay referred to *Batouala*, admiring the French decision to give the award to the novel which "is an indignant denunciation of activities of the French government in Africa" (52). The first prize given to an African story with sensuous passages² seems to show French interest in Africa in those days, even when they were accused of colonial oppression. The "primitive" was, as in the works of D. H. Lawrence, a positive word in the European context.

Paris was the key place for McKay as a writer. He left Berlin for Paris in the early fall of 1923, where the German Right was gaining power over their opponents. According to Wayne F. Cooper, McKay read Hemingway's *In Our Time*, though he refused to visit Gertrude Stein's famous salon. He preferred D.H. Lawrence to James Joyce, especially impressed at his *Sons and Lovers*. Because of his health problems he left Paris in January, 1924. However, during the short stay there, he met Sinclair Lewis, Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, and many students and travelers from Africa and the French Caribbean. His encounter with Paulet Nardal from Martinique was especially important, whose Parisian literary salon in 1920s had propagated ideas eventually incorporated into the *Négritude* movement in the 1930s and 40s. McKay brought Nardal into contact with Alain Locke, and Locke introduced them, in turn, to Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Jean Toomer. Referring to the episode, Wayne F. Cooper commented that getting acquainted with their contemporary African Americans led young Africans and Caribbean people including Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire to read their works (215). McKay met Senghor at Marseille and when his novel *Banjo* was published, it "became a bible of inspiration" (259) for the Négritude writers. Stovall also points out that the novel "presented themes of international black cultural unity that would become very influential in the development of negritude" (110). Stovall argues that "negritude seemed to be a transatlantic reflection of the Harlem Renaissance" (105).

In his next novel, *Banjo*, McKay himself changed its location to Marseille. While *Banjo* was an African American like Jake, people around him working on the dock were more multi-ethnic than in Harlem. "Finns, Poles, Italians, Slavs, Maltese, Indians, Negroids, African Negroes, West Indian Negroes--deportées from America for violation of the United States immigration laws--afraid and ashamed to go back to their own lands, all dumped down in the great Provençal port, bumming a day's work, a meal, a drink, existing from hand to mouth, anyhow any way, between box car, tramp ship, bistro, and bordel" (6). *Banjo*'s dream was to create a jazz orchestra to earn money, playing the banjo, ukulele, mandolin, guitar, and horn. In chapter 6 *Banjo* met Ray, who had been Jake's friend in *Home to Harlem*.

Raymond called Ray was a Caribbean from Haiti. In *Home to Harlem*, he taught Jake about Toussaint L'Ouverture and Wordsworth's poems. He was an atheist and wanted to create something in his own words. Obviously he is a character close to McKay himself. Unlike Jake he could not enjoy the life such as most black workers lived, and was isolated among them. He finally decided to leave Harlem, about which he described as follows:

No wonder the whites, after five centuries of contact, could not understand his race. How could they when the instinct of comprehension had been cultivated out of them? No wonder they hated them, when out of their melancholy environment the blacks could create mad, contagious music and high laughter...

Going away from Harlem...Harlem! How terribly Ray could hate it sometimes, its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood-red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its “blues” and the improvised surprises of its jazz. (269)

He could admire and appreciate the black Harlem to the full, but he also felt repulsive to it as an intellectual with a Western colonial education. Also in the next novel *Banjo*, unlike Banjo, Ray could not quite identify himself with black life on the dock.

It was easy enough for Banjo, who in all matters acted instinctively. But it was not easy for a Negro with an intellect standing watch over his native instincts to take his own way in this white man’s civilization. (164)

Hindered from education, as a colonial Caribbean, Ray could not live like Jake or Banjo. The two African American protagonists were, as it were, the idealized Other, created by a Caribbean writer McKay, who could not become such a pure black man. It was just like primitive Africa idealized by modernist artists in France.

Near the end of the novel *Banjo*, Jake reappears in Marseille to join Ray and Banjo. When Banjo had the last chance to go back to America, at the last moment he decided not to go. Both Ray and Jake approved his decision. While both of them had left Harlem, they would stay (in “the Ditch”) on the dock of Marseille. Marseille rather than Harlem was the idealized place for black life with the two protagonists Jake and Banjo.

Notes

- 1 Edwards, 293.
- 2 In the Japanese translation of *Batouala*, which was published in 1922, almost two pages of censored words are replaced by X’s in Chapter 5 .

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【Abstract】

カリブの国際的視野から描かれたクロード・マッケイの理想化された黒人像——『ハーレム帰還』と『バンジョー』の考察

三石 庸子

本論はクロード・マッケイの二つの小説『ハーレム帰還』(1927)とその続編といえる『バンジョー』(1929)に登場する二人の主人公、ジェイク・ブラウンとバンジョーと呼ばれるリンカン・アグリッパ・デイリーを取りあげ、二人はアフリカ系アメリカ人として描かれているが、実はカリブ出身者らしい国際的な観点から造形された、マッケイの理想とする黒人像であったことを認識すべきであると指摘する。最初に、アメリカ合衆国で出版されたこの二作品へのアフリカ系アメリカ知識人階級からの批判を考察し、マッケイがカリブ出身者であることがその批判の要因であると分析する。つぎに二作目の舞台はハーレムからフランスのマルセイユに移っているが、この二作品がいずれもヨーロッパ放浪中にフランス近郊で書かれたことを考慮すれば、自然な移動であり、ハーレム・ルネサンスの延長としてパリに国際的な黒人文化が隆盛する背景の中に位置づければ、二作品の主人公は西洋文化に対抗する新たな価値であるアフリカ性を体現した、モダニズムと同様の視点をもつ理想化された黒人像であったと捉えることができる。