GIANFRANCA BALESTRA

Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom:* a Fictional Return to Jamaica

To consider Claude McKay exclusively as a Harlem Renaissance figure limits appreciation of the variety and complexity of his work. A colonial representative of the black Diaspora, he can be seen as a prototype of the modern migrant writer, divided between different homes: his native land (Jamaica), the colonial mother country (England), the land of emigration (the United States), the land of his temporary expatriation (France), the land of his ancestors (Africa). In fact, as Heather Hathaway points out, he remains an outsider everywhere, characterized by a constant sense of dislocation.[1] After his emigration to the United States in 1912, McKay never went back to Jamaica. His creative return is through memory and imagination, physical and psychological distance bringing to it both nostalgia and a comparative critical attitude. In 1918, in a short presentation of himself and his poetry for an American journal he writes:

> I am a black man, born in Jamaica, B.W. I., and have been living in America for the last six years. […] It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race, and my feelings were indescribable. [...]
> The whites at home constitute about 14% of the population only and they generally conform to the standard of English respectability. The few poor ones accept their fate resignedly, and live at peace with the natives. The government is tolerant, somewhat benevolent, based on the principle of equal justice to all. I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction — color and race being hardly taken into account.[2]

The shock of his first encounter with American racism, the audience he is addressing, the distance from his country of origin, and his British colonial education, all contribute to putting in a more lenient perspective the situation in Jamaica. Particularly striking in this passage is the positive vision of British colonialism and the exclusion of "color and race" prejudice. As Cooper points out in his introduction to *The Passion of Claude McKay,* "as an educated youth of black peasant origins, McKay displayed to a painful degree the psychological ambivalence inculcated among West Indians under British colonialism. [...] Custom and education mandated his adherence to British imperialistic values and traditions."[3] In his autobiography and in other writings, however, he can be more critical of the racial stratification in the colony. In *A Long Way from Home,* the autobiography written in 1937, for instance, he describes an almost Edenic rural Jamaica, where the white presence is almost invisible, but he contrasts it with a bleaker analysis of social conditions in Kingston, based on racial discrimination:

> In the city there were subtle social distinctions between white and light-colored and between light-colored and black. These distinctions were based upon real class differences which were fixed by the distribution of positions. Generally the whites were the ruling and upper class, the light-colored were the shop-keeping and clerical class, the blacks were the working class.[4]

In this and other passages, McKay's race consciousness is always connected to class consciousness, developed through his Marxist militancy. The connection with the colonial situation is in some respects more difficult, because of the internalization of British values through his colonial education.[5] His gender consciousness appears to be problematic as well: usually absent from his discussion, it does surface in a political essay like *The Negroes in America,* where he sees the question of women's liberation as inseparably connected with the Negro question.[6]

All of these issues — race, class and gender — are represented and successfully intertwined in *Banana Bottom,* the

novel published in 1933, where he goes back to turn-of-the century Jamaica to stage the culture clash which is at the center of his personal and poetic world. His previous novels *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) were set respectively in Harlem and Marseilles, and were centered on male protagonists: in both cases we find a pair of black men, one the embodiment of instinct and naturalness, the other of intellectual westernized culture — in other words, primitivism *vs.* civilization. In both novels a black folk hero is contrasted with Ray, a black intellectual exile caught between two cultures and alienated from both, explicitly defined as a social misfit. Obviously here the question is not simply one of expatriation, but of color, as exposed in the novels and explained in the autobiography. In *A Long Way from Home,* McKay in fact writes: "My damned white education has robbed me of much of the primitive vitality, the pure stamina, the simple unswaggering strength of the Jakes [the character type in *Home to Harlem]* of the Negro race" (p. 229). And, about expatriation: "Frankly to say, I never considered myself identical with the white expatriates. I was a kind of sympathetic fellow-traveler in the expatriate caravan. The majority of them were sympathetic toward me. But their problems were not exactly my problems. They were all-white with problems in white which were rather different from problems in black" (p. 243). After listing the white expatriates' problems, he defines his own:

> It was the problem of color. 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. For they were not black like me. Not being black and unable to see deep into the profundity of blackness, some even thought that I might have preferred to be white like them. They couldn't imagine that I had no desire merely to exchange my black problem for their white problem. For all their knowledge and sophistication, they couldn't understand the instinctive and animal and purely physical pride of a black person resolute in being himself and yet living a simple civilized life like themselves. Because their education in their white world had trained them to see a person of color either as an inferior or as an exotic (p. 245).

The final affirmation of black pride is in many respects analogous to that of the protagonist of *Banana Bottom,* who declares: "I thank God that although I was brought up and educated among white people, I have never wanted to be anything but myself. I take pride in being colored and different, just as an intelligent white person does in being white. I can't imagine anything more tragic than people torturing themselves to be different from their natural unchangeable selves."[7] These words by Bita say a lot about this female character, who represents McKay's solution to the dualism between nature and culture, spontaneity and repression, instinct and intellect. Instead of having these poles embodied by two different characters as in the previous novels, they are conflicting aspects within Bita, who seems to be able to reconcile them in the end, however awkwardly.[8]

Bita Plant is a young Jamaican peasant girl who is raped and consequently adopted by a couple of white missionaries who send her to England for a formal education. After seven years she returns to Jamaica: the "exile's return" to her homeland brings to the foreground the inevitable conflict between cultures. She is expected to marry a black divinity student and dedicate her life to the mission, but chooses instead to marry a peasant and live a simple life, while still playing the piano and reading Pascal's *Pensées* in French. As Huggins suggests, bringing into the discussion the question of gender, "McKay could imagine his English-educated Bita willfully committing herself to Jamaican peasant life (he could not)".[9] In fact, as we have seen, McKay never returned to Jamaica, and neither did his male protagonists in his previous novels, who continue their vagabond life. Perhaps the creation of a woman who renounces the pursuit of an intellectual life in favor of body, instincts and family, however sympathetically depicted, can be read as part of a male fantasy of femininity. The ambiguity of gender representation in the novel and the dangers of over-emphasizing instinctual life are more evident in the rape scene, which shows a twelve year old Bita practically seducing a twenty-five year old man.[10]

However, the core of the book lies in the dramatic staging of cultural conflicts and in the sometimes didactic explanations of the

value systems presiding over them — Anglo-Saxon civilization and Jamaican folk culture. The binary system of oppositions is very marked: culture/nature, intellect/instinct, repression/sexuality, mind/body, sterility/fertility, high art/folklore, classical music/spirituals, western religion/obeah magic etc. Basically the "rational" pole is represented by white European culture, the "emotional" pole by the black Afro-Caribbean culture. This perspective is close to the *negritude* concepts which were influential in asserting the distinctive qualities of African culture and identity, but came under scrutiny for incorporating European stereotypes and embracing the essentially binary nature of the Western philosophical tradition.[11] However, in the narrative plot McKay attempts to subvert the binary system and overcome the oppositions. While some characters remain blocked in their rigid cultural frame and totally embrace it — this is the case for instance of the white missionary Mrs. Priscilla Craig — others come closer to mingling the two cultures and appreciate what seems to be best in both. There is no easy way out of the binary system and the solutions offered in the book may be unsatisfactory, and necessarily marginal. We have seen Bita's problematic solution, the other is Squire Gensir's, a British white collector of native folk tales and music, a romanticized figure modeled on McKay's own mentor Walter Jekyll. As the champion of an open-minded subversive attitude, he receives the best tribute after his death, when Bita recognizes "how different his life had been from the life of the other whites. They had come to conquer and explore, govern, trade, preach and educate to their liking, exploit men and material. But this man was the first to enter into the simple life of the island Negroes and proclaim significance and beauty in their transplanted African folk tales and in the words and music of their native dialect songs" (p. 247).

I will concentrate now on the "color scheme" of *Banana Bottom*, to use the title of another projected novel of McKay.[12] As we have seen, Bita is black and takes pride in her ethnicity,[13] but she is aware that the dark color of her skin constitutes a limitation on the marriage market, and marriage is considered an obligation for a nice girl.

> After all she would have to marry. That was the proper thing, the main objective for a nice girl. And what could a cultivated Negro girl from the country hope for better than a parson. Marrying a good parson was a step higher than marrying a schoolmaster. If she had happened to be born a light-brown or yellow girl, she might, with her training, easily get away with a man of a similar complexion — a local functionary of the law courts, revenue or some other department or a manager of a business worthwhile in the city. But she was in the black and dark-brown group and there were no prospects of her breaking into the intimate social circles of the smart light brown and yellow groups (p. 79).

The narrator is here focusing on Bita and evaluating her prospects for the future in what appears to be a realistic outlook. Through the omniscient narrative voice, Bita seems to have internalized the dominant social rules of early 20th century Jamaica in terms of gender, race and class: not only is marriage the inevitable destiny even for an educated girl, but her options are also limited by color shades. Her acceptance of the status quo is justified as a refusal of "climbing and pushing and trying to crash the barred gates" (p. 79), but it is significant that when the plot eliminates from the scene the obnoxious perspective parson, Bita will reject a light-brown local Government official who, in spite of tradition and his sisters' opposition, intends to make her his wife. A brown man marrying a black woman, no matter how educated and accomplished, is considered a disastrous choice, but her refusal is even more unacceptable and incomprehensible by the suitor, the enraged sisters, and society in general. Bita is given this option precisely in order to turn it down and make her acceptance of a dark skinned peasant a free choice, not dictated by lack of other opportunities, however improbable. Hathaway points out that "McKay uses the standard literary convention of marriage in his attempt to signify the union of Bita's peasant roots with her Western education, but throughout the novel, the symbolism falls short and borders on cliche". Moreover, she questions the validity of Bita's attraction to jubban, the man she chooses to marry and is characterized as good but inarticulate, indicting the author's inability "to create a life for Bita outside of sexual and domestic realms" (pp. 80-82).[14] This can be attributed

to a gender bias typical of McKay's time and culture, as well as to a realistic anchorage in a novel that otherwise often verges on romance.

Similar explanations can be found for the color bias in the text. The lack of mobility within the "color scheme" of *Banana Bottom* is not limited to Bita's perception, but is discussed by the narrator at other points and finds confirmation in more recent studies of class and race in Jamaica. I am going to quote a rather long passage to show McKay's didactic intentions.

> For the island colony was divided into three main groups in a political and social way. The descendants of the slaves were about three-fourths of the population and classified as black or dark brown. The descendants of Europeans and slaves were about one-fifth of the population and classified as colored or light brown. The rest were a few thousand East Indians and Chinese and perhaps the same number of pure European descent.
> The demarcations were not as real as they seemed. East Indian and Chinese blood were mingled in the dark-brown group and obviously there were thousands who were drawn in from European stock. One could easily pick out individuals by texture of hair, contour of face, shape of nose. But a strong transfusion of black African blood had determined their pigmentation and group. In the colored group were many of a light complexion distinguished by Sudanese features and hair, while others of original colored stock had approximated to and turned white.
> But the social life of the colony was finely balanced by the division. The 'colored' group stood between the mass and the wealthy and governing classes and all the white collar jobs of business and government were reserved for it (p. 4).

This is a very accurate description of race and color stratification in Jamaica in the early 20th century and shows McKay's awareness of the complexity of the situation and its class implications, due to the common Caribbean experience of colonization, slavery, indenture, miscegenation. Toward the end of the novel, in fact, he confronts the historical reasons for color prejudice in Jamaica. When Bita goes to Kingston with her friend to buy the wedding clothes, they have problems finding a hotel, because "the respectable hotels and boarding houses (most of them owned or managed by light-skinned colored people) had developed a policy of excluding black or dark-brown guests"

(p, 236). The narrator doesn't accept the common explanation given, that the policy was determined by the increasing number of American tourists who objected to the presence of dark-colored guests, but admits instead that the "social life of the colony was rooted upon shade and color prejudice" (p. 236), and proceeds to explain the deep causes of discrimination. He goes back to the epoch of slavery, when "the lighter-skinned offspring of white men and black women had privileges that the black slaves had not", sometimes came into possession of landed property and even became slave owners themselves. With the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, this group of "Euroafricans" was able to take advantage of their favorable condition, qualified for Government positions and white-collar jobs, married among themselves and developed a strong group pride. "As the Euroafricans developed in wealth and power they also approximated to the social standards and attitudes of the white planters with little sympathy for the freed blacks and their problems"(p. 237).

The narrator's explanation of racial stratification in Jamaica is realistic and takes into account the effects of colonization and slavery. The accuracy of McKay's historical and social portrayal can be confirmed by a comparison with later social studies such as Fernando Henriques's *Family and Colour in Jamaica*, Madeline Kerr's *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* and some ofthe essays included in *Consequences of Class and Color. West Indian Perspectives.*[15] If we look for instance at Rex Nettleford's essay "National Identity and Attitude to Race in Jamaica", first published in 1965, after Jamaica's independence, we find a description of the system of color stratification and residual racial prejudice very similar to that denounced by Garvey and explored by McKay in his novel. Thirty years later, this essay confirms on the one hand a classification of a society made of lower class blacks, middle class privileged brown men and rich or wealthy white men, together with the permanence of a white bias, and on the other hand and self-image of Jamaica as a non racial society, projecting the idea of a tolerant country where a mixture of races lives in perfect harmony and as such can provide a useful lesson to a world torn apart by race prejudice.[16] This situation, together with a strong

presence of Chinese and Indians, has brought an idealization of mixed blood to the detriment of the African element and, as a consequence, various types of reaction, from mild forms of *negritude* to Ras Tafari doctrines. Nettleford's conclusions call for bold economic and social changes, but they confirm a rather bleak situation: "The fact is that we are still enslaved in the social structure born of the plantation system in which things African, including African traits, are devalued and primacy is given to European values in the scheme of things" (p. 54).

Some of the contradictions and problems analyzed in these studies are anticipated in McKay's novel. Particularly complex is the representation of light-colored characters, which reveals a dislike for those he calls "yellow negroes", offspring of miscegenation and holders of class privileges and pretensions. It is not by chance that Bita's rapist is a light-colored young man known as Crazy Bow, and that another potential rapist, who sexually assaults her, is the almost white bastard son of a wealthy country gentleman.[17] McKay is careful to stress the problematic multi-ethnic social reality of a country where status, jobs and marriages are determined by degrees of skin shades; he shows prejudice against mulattos, but also tries to establish a new black aesthetics. In this respect, it would be interesting to analyze the lush metaphoric structure of the book, which should not be perceived as merely exotic. In fact, there are beautiful descriptions of "broad warm faces of all colors between brown and black" (p. 31), with skin pigmentation often compared to natural elements, so that for instance "Jordan was black, Anty Nommy the color of a young cocoa-plant leaf, and Bab was as ripe as a banana" (p. 40), the Lambert girls are "the cashew-brown daughters of the ebony parson" (p. 51), and the members of a party were "basically black, but charmingly variegated with the tints of some of the finest flowers of miscegenation" (p. 154). Here is the description of the light-brown sisters of Bita's suitor: "Their complexion was the color of a ripe banana peel — not a fine ripe one like those that mature and yellow upon the tree in Jamaica, but rather the kind that is harvested green three-quarters fit so it can reach the far foreign market without rotting, and therefrom becomes a little bruised and blotchy" (p. 201).

With all its limitations, McKay's work was an early attempt to expose color prejudice in Jamaica, in its multiple social, cultural, aesthetic reflections, and to propose a re-evaluation of the African roots within a somewhat problematic frame of reconciliation with its other elements. When Bita, for instance, is made to recognize that a popular native tune is in fact a Mozart melody with few variations, she is excited by the discovery, and accepts Squire Gensir's explanation that "everybody borrows or steals and recreates in art." He continues along these lines: "Next to enjoying it, the exciting thing is tracking down sources and resemblances and influences. That is one reason it's so interesting to go to the tea meetings and to listen to the Anancy stories. I think some of our famous European fables have their origin in Africa. Even the mumbo-jumbo of the Obeahmen fascinates me" (p. 97). This and similar episodes can be read along the different perspectives in post-colonial theory, especially Caribbean: they can be seen as traces of colonial ideology in the text and/or as an imaginative exploration of the possibilities of cultural hybridization.

Banana Bottom is a strange and complex book. Perhaps, as Hathaway maintains, it illustrates dramatically the impossibility of return (p. 75). Precariously balanced between social realism and romance, it is a good example of McKay's loose manner and subjective feeling in writing that he has defined as "emotional-realist thread".[18] While some critics have found it his most flawless creation, others have argued about its oversimplified characterizations, plot contrivances, and traditional literary form.[19] It is possibly in the interweaving of its various threads that lies the book's most original contribution, it is in the knots beneath the mimetic surface that the colonial disruptions that cannot be reduced to a smooth Western idea of perfection emerge. Crowded with themes, incidents, characters — in spite of its central protagonist — the text doesn't fully realize its subversive potential, but it foreshadows some of the crucial issues addressed by post-colonial theory and is especially representative of the Caribbean experience of hybridism, migration, displacement, colonization, and slavery. Moreover, it is representative of the sometimes neglected multicultural layers of American literature.

By high-lighting McKay's roots and background, *Banana Bottom* serves as a useful counterpoint to his participation in the Harlem Renaissance, "a long way from home".

1 See Heather Hathaway, *Caribbean Waves. Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall,* Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999, p.80.

2 Claude McKay, "A Negro Poet", first published in *Pearson's Magazine,* September, 1918, pp. 275-76, reprinted in *The Passion of Claude Mckay, Selected Poetry and Prose,* 1912-1948, ed. Wayne F. Cooper, New York, Shocken Books, 1973, p. 48.

3 Cooper is here referring to McKay's first collections of poetry — *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* — which show "his attempt to embrace his black Jamaican origins, while simultaneously clinging to Britain as a spiritual homeland", but the argument can be extended to his attitude in general *(The Passion,* p. 5).

4 Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home,* New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1937, p. 36.

5 McKay becomes more aware of the perverse effects of colonialism through his experience in North Africa. In articles like "North Africa and the Spanish Civil War" and "North African Triangle" he is very critical of the French and Spanish colonial regimes and points out relations between the native North African problem and the Afro-American problem in the South *(The Passion,* pp. 285-294).

6 See Marian B. McLeod, "Claude McKay's Russian Interpretation: 'The Negroes in America"', in *CLA Journal,* XXIII, 3 (1980), pp. 336-51.

7 Claude McKay, *Banana Bottom,* London, Black Classics, 1998, p. 132. Hereafter page references will be given in the text.

8 See Michael B. Stoff, "Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism" in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered,* ed. Arna Bontemps, New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972, pp. 126-46. As Stoff explains, Bita doesn't reject intellect or education, "but rather the 'civilized' value system in favor of the primitive values of a black folk culture [...]. McKay distinguishes between education, or the cultivation of the intellect, and the necessary acceptance of the value system implied by that education."

9 Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance,* London Oxford New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 189.

10 The scene is particularly disturbing: "As they romped, Bita got upon Crazy Bow's breast and began rubbing her head against his face. Crazy Bow suddenly drew himself up and rather roughly pushed Bita away and she rolled off a little down the slope. Crazy Bow took up his fiddle, and sitting under a low and shady guava tree he began to play. He played a sweet tea meeting love song. And as he played Bita went creeping upon her hands and feet up the slope to him and

listened like a bewitched being. And when he had finished she clambered upon him again and began kissing him passionately. Crazy Bow was blinded by temptation and lost control of himself and the deed was done." (p. 8). According to Heather Hathaway, "McKay describes Bita's own involvement in the encounter to emphasize what he portrays as her 'natural' tendency, as a 'primitive' and 'instinctive' peasant child, to express her sexuality openly (like the urban drifters of his previous novels) — free from the repressive forces of white 'civilization'" (p. 76).

11 In fact, African intellectuals like Senghor were apparently influenced by Harlem writers and McKay in particular. (See Huggins, pp. 187-88).

12 See Cooper, *The Passion,* p. 26. This novel, written while in France in 1924-25, was never published and the manuscript was destroyed by the writer himself.

13 At another time, after rejecting the assault of Marse Arthur, who spitefully calls her only a "nigger girl", she thinks: "but she was proud of being a Negro girl. And no sneer, no sarcasm, no banal ridicule of a ridiculous world could destroy her confidence and pride in herself and make her feel ashamed of that fine body that was the temple of her high spirit. For she knew that she was a worthy human being. She knew that she was beautiful" (p. 212).

14 On the other hand, Tillery argues that, "given the male-dominated character of Jamaican society at the time, it is unlikely a woman, especially a dark-skinned one, would have the freedom and independence of a Bita." (Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay. A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity,* Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, note 15, p. 207).

15 Fernando Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica,* London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1953; Madeline Kerr, *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica,* London, Collins, 1963; David Lowenthal and Larnbros Comitas, eds., *Consequences of Class and Color. West Indian Perspectives,* Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1973. I wish to thank Velma Pollard for pointing out these books to me and for sending me copies from Jamaica.

16 Rex Nettleford, "National Identity and Attitudes to Race in Jamaica", in *Consequences of Race and Color,* pp. 40-42. Nettleford's explanation in terms of Jamaica's historical antecedents of slavery, the plantation system, and colonialism would be worth quoting for its confirmation of McKay's analysis, especially when it comes to the colored middle class, and their capacity to assimilate completely the ideals of the masters (pp. 46-47). The social scenario changes considerably from the seventies on.

17 See Tillery, *Claude McKay,* pp. 132-33.

18 Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home,* p. 250.

19 Cooper, for instance, considers *Banana Bottom* the high point of McKay's career as a novelist, for its unity of style and theme, as well as the richness of its detail *(The Passion,* p. 35). Among other positive evaluations: Robert A. Bone, The *Xegro Novel in America,* New Haven, Yale U. P., 1958. More critical approaches: George E. Kent, "Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* Reappraised", *CLA Journal,* XVIII. 2 (1974), pp. 222-42, and Heather Hathaway.