

Reading Migration, Sexuality, and the Urban Folk: Discussion Questions for Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*



Wayne F. Cooper's forward to Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* states, "Of all the major Afro American writers who emerged in the 1920's, Claude McKay remains the most controversial and least understood" (ix). In many ways this statement explains the motivation for this project. It is our hope that this project could be used by instructors and students alike to explore McKay's work, bringing more interest and understanding to the role of McKay in the formative cannon of the New Negro Renaissance. Particularly of interest to us has been an exploration of the sexual themes of McKay's novel *Home to Harlem*. This book was the recipient of harsh criticism from a collection of important figure of the Harlem Renaissance, foremost being W.E.B Du Bois. At issue was the representation of an emerging African American society and culture. McKay is central to this issue as he fails to back away from what many African American leaders at the time considered base and vulgar behavior, in short speak-easies, night clubs, blues and jazz and their role in the cabaret.

We feel that the best way to address the interrelated issues of class, sexuality, and folk aesthetics in McKay is to focus on McKay's choice to represent the folk as urban and in particular to locate the core of that urban folk culture in cabarets and clubs where blues was played. These places were not only sites where sexuality was expressed but also where queer sexuality in particular was expressed. By combining folk elements in the tradition of African American representation with the fast pace black entertainment district of Harlem in the 1920s, McKay is able to comment on diverse and queer sexualities, leftist politics, and burgeoning notions of a black diaspora in a way that contemporary scholarship often cannot, given its tendencies to separate these ideas into separate and exclusive fields of study. We hope to show McKay's usefulness in a variety of fields of study, but most importantly, we want to prompt scholarship on McKay that will attempt to identify and imagine the creative possibilities of McKay's elaborate diversity represented in his life, the language of his poetry, and (as is our preliminary focus) his narrative representations of black experiences (emphasis on the plural).

The pages below are designed to help develop ideas and discussions on Claude McKay's use and representation of diverse, black sexualities with the hope that these ideas and discussion will open new avenues of inquiry and scholarly work.

Components:

- Overview and Analysis of Secondary Material
- Cultural Context Material, Sexuality and the Blues
- Teaching/Reading Sexuality in *Home to Harlem*

Overview and Analysis of Secondary Material

It is important to note that the writings of Claude McKay are used in a variety of different ways by scholars and teachers from a wide range of fields. Our focus is clearly gender and sexuality; therefore, first we offer a selective annotated bibliography of sources that were particularly influential in our study of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*. We feel that these particular sources speak expertly for issues of sex and sexuality found in McKay's work, and any or all of these would be useful for student projects, supplementary reading material for a class on McKay, or for that matter anyone who is interested in McKay's diverse and productive representations of sexuality.

Next, we felt it would be pedagogically useful to also outline some of the more basic research and topic possibilities in regards to McKay's texts as well as his important inclusion in discussions about African-American/Caribbean studies and transnationalism, modernism and urbanity, psychoanalysis, as well as interests in class and his engagement with Marxism. Of course any such list has limitations and ours is certainly not meant to be representative of all work being done on McKay. Nevertheless, we hope that by locating these broad categories and offering what we feel to be quality representations of these varying publications, students and instructors will be able to expand their interests and research on McKay, providing more inroads to other primary texts, secondary material, subjects, courses, and ultimately reinforcing the appeal and importance of this complicated figure within American Literature.

Next we will provide a fairly up-to-date (as of 2007) inventory of the secondary material that has been influential in our close readings of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, as well as other primary sources such as lyrics from blues and jazz songs with photographs of the famous cabaret and blues performers that may provide context for McKay's setting of 1920s Harlem. All of these selections are meant to enrich the reading experience of McKay's work and all could be considered for inclusion on a secondary or optional reading list for a class concerned with McKay's creative uses of gender and sexuality.

Annotated Bibliography: Sexuality and the Urban Folk

Carby, Hazel. "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991.

This essay, published in 1986, remains an integral piece of scholarship in the study of the intersection between women's blues and sexuality. Carby suggests that through the study of the blues in the 1920s, scholars can begin to provide representations of middle-class black women, in contrast to the more critically-recognized (and notably more upper-class) figures of the era (e.g., Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset). Specifically, the author argues that the blues in the 1920s allowed black women to exercise "power and control over sexuality" (757), claiming that blues and its performance created a site that offered women such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey a geographical as well as sexual mobility.

Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.

Davis' study examines the life and work of three prominent women blues singers, arguing that this biographical, literary, and musical analysis uncovers tenets of feminism specifically for "working-class black communities" (xi). Davis goes on to claim that blues expression permits Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday to construct their own lyrical and performative sexualities—a reaction against the practices in slavery where women's bodies became the properties of others as well as the numerous sexualities imposed upon women by male society. The author also focuses on the parallel theme of lesbianism that occurs in the lives and music of each of the three blues performers.

Holcomb, Gary E. *Claude McKay, code name Sasha: queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007.

Gary Holcomb provides excellent scholarship that addresses the multilayered queer black Marxism the New Negro author's writing. He aims to create a common ground in often exclusively discreet critical spheres of African American literary scholarship including postcolonial studies, Caribbean literature, Marxism and class politics, and queer and gender studies. Holcomb appropriately situates McKay within the tension of these diverse fields while proposing new ways of approaching the notions of a black diaspora literature, with a particular link between sexual (mis)behaving, leftist radical politics, and how black modernism is often linked with both of these.

Spencer, Suzette. "Swerving at a Different Angle and Flying in the Face of Tradition: Excavating the Homoerotic Subtext in *Home to Harlem*." *CLA Journal* 42.2 (1998): 164-93.

Suzette Spencer responds to an elision of homosexual themes in African American literary criticism that predates this article by performing a close reading of *Home to Harlem's* gay subtexts. Spencer's textual and historical analysis of the ties between black folk culture and queer sexuality, exemplified most tellingly in the blues tradition, comprises an important contribution to literary scholarship on folk sexuality as well as the field of black queer studies.

Sources Exploring Transnationalism

Philipson, Robert. "The Harlem Renaissance as Postcolonial Phenomenon." *African American Review*. 40 (2006): 145-60.

Ramesh, Kotti Sree. *Claude McKay: The Literary Identity from Jamaica to Harlem and Beyond*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.

Modernism

Kalaidjian, Walter. *The Edge of Modernism: American Poetry and the Traumatic Past*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.

Rosenberg, Leah. "Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys." *MoMo 2* (2004): 219-38.

Psychoanalysis

Comprone, Raphael. *Poetry, Desire, and Fantasy in the Harlem Renaissance*. Lanham: UP of America, 2006.

Marxism and Class

Holcomb, Gary E. "Diaspora Cruises: Queer Black Proletarianism in Claude McKay's a Long Way Home." *Modern Fiction Studies* 49 (2003): 714-45.

Maiwald, Michael. "Race, Capitalism, and the Third-Sex Ideal: Clauce McKay's *Home to Harlem* and the Legacy of Edward Carpenter." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 48 (2002): 825-57.

Blues and Jazz

Albertson, Chris. *Bessie*. Revised and expanded edition. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003.

Braziel, Jana Evans. "'Bye, Bye Baby': Race, Bisexuality, and the Blues in the Music of Bessie Smith and Janis Joplin." *Popular Music and Society* 27.1 (February 2004): 3-26.

Garber, Eric. "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem." *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Eds. Martin Baum, Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. New York: NAL, 1989. 318-31.

Jackson, Buzzy. *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them*. New York: Norton, 2005.

Jones, Hettie. *Big Star Fallin' Mama: Five Women in Black Music*. New York: Viking Press, 1974.

Lewis, Nghana tamu. "In a Different Chord: Interpreting the Relations among Black Female Sexuality, Agency, and the Blues." *African American Review* 37.4 (Winter 2003): 599-609.

Lieb, Sandra R. *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981.

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Lutz, Tom. "Claude McKay: Music, Sexuality, and Literary Cosmopolitan." *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. Ed. Saadi A. Simawe. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000: 41-64.

Oakley, Giles. *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues*. 2nd edition. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997.

Rubin, Rachel and Jeffrey Melnick. *New Approaches to the Twentieth Century: American Popular Music*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2001.

Spencer, Jon Michael. *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1995.

V, Maria. "Jelly Jelly Jellyroll': Lesbian Sexuality and Identity in Women's Blues." *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 7 (2003): 31-52.

Ward, Geoffrey C. and Ken Burns. *Jazz: A History of America's Music*. New York: Knopf, 2000.

Lyrics:

Bogan, Lucille. "B.D. Woman's Blues." *Harry's Blues Lyrics & Tabs Online*. 09 Aug. 2007. <<http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/>>.

Rainey, Ma. "Prove It on Me Blues." Davis 238.

---. "Sissy Blues." Davis 242-3.

Smith, Bessie. "Foolish Man Blues." Davis 280.

Recordings:

Bogan Lucille. "B.D. Woman's Blues." *Shave 'Em Dry: The Best of Lucille Bogan*. Columbia/Legacy, 2004.

Rainey, Ma. "Prove It on Me Blues." *Hustlin' Blues*. United States Dist., 2005.

Rainey, Ma. "Sissy Blues." *Hustlin' Blues*. United States Dist., 2005.

Smith, Bessie. "Foolish Man Blues." *Young Woman Blues*. Proper, 2004.

Various Artists. *Sissy Man Blues: Straight & Gay Blues*. Vintage Jazz, 1989.

Images:

"Gladys Bentley in Top Hat." *Queer Music Heritage*. J.D. Doyle. 09 Aug. 2007. <<http://www.queermusicheritage.us/DEC2004/BentleyTopHat.jpg>>.

Sexuality, the Blues, and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*

In reading Claude McKay's novel *Home to Harlem*, you may be struck by the reoccurrence of jazz and blues throughout. The novel's setting of Harlem teems with bustling jazz clubs, haunting blues lyrics, and colorful caricatures of blues singers. Thus, an examination of the blues and jazz of the novel's era provides a vivid context for Harlem in 1928; however, recent scholarship on blues in the early twentieth century has revealed the even more complex many facets to what was once seen as vulgar burlesque.

Writers such as Hazel Carby and Angela Y. Davis have studied the music and lives of blues and its singers and both argue that blues provides a special insight into the era's sexual identities. As Hazel Carby explains in her landmark essay "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," "Blues Women reclaimed black women's bodies from male objectification" as well as the minstrel stereotypes of the mammy or "loose" woman ().

Not only do these writers suggest that blues music and singing provides women with a forum to explore a freedom and sexuality often denied them by male society, they also recognize the alternative sexualities that emerge through blues lyrics and performance. Jana Evans Braziel explains in her essay "'Bye, Bye Baby': Race, Bisexuality, and the Blues in the Music of Bessie Smith and Janis Joplin," that "blues offered an audible, if not always heard, site for mapping queerness within blackness" (15). Indeed, Harlem in the 1920s contained a thriving gay and lesbian subculture in its various drag balls, rent parties, gay bars, and buffet flats. So, through this lens, readers can now align the dandies, pansies, and sweetmen that populate Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* to the sexualities depicted in the blues songs McKay would have listened to himself.

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey



One of the first blues stars, Ma Rainey was equally famous for her gritty, bawdy singing and songwriting and her overly-elaborate stage shows as for her backstage exploits, which often included run-ins with the law and promiscuous and drunken encounters with both men and women. Also part of her popularity was her music and performance's emphasis on the rural and the South (Rainey avoided touring farther north than Virginia until her fame forced her to expand her tour routes). This emphasis of Rainey's folk qualities speaks to the theory, delineated by Hazel Carby, that blues arose from the tradition of the black traditions of slavery and the working class: "The blues were certainly a communal expression of black experience which had developed out of the call and response patterns of work songs from the nineteenth century" (750). Blues here becomes a tool of the lower/working class in order to explore sexuality.

Probably Rainey's most famous songs is her self-penned "Prove It on Me Blues." Rainey's lyric blatantly discusses lesbianism when she boldly asserts, "Went out last night with a crowd of my friends / They must've been women, 'cause I don't

like no men" (). She also declares, "It's true I wear collar and a tie" (), alluding to the drag performances prominent in the gay clubs and buffet flats of 1920s Harlem. Seen here is another blues singer, Gladys Bentley, who became famous for her drag king persona, often queering popular blues songs by changing pronouns:



These depictions of same-sex (specifically lesbian) relationships are paralleled in the burgeoning relationship between Jake and Ray. In fact, when Jake first meets Ray on the train, Ray is reading *Sappho* and comments that "Her story gave two lovely words to modern language.... Sapphic and Lesbian." (129)

Jake responds with the colloquial name for lesbians in Harlem, "bulldyker" (129). This reference was a common parlance of the times, and blues singer Lucille Bogan even wrote a song about this lesbian figure entitled "B.D. Woman's Blues" ("B.D." standing for "bulldagger" or "bulldyker," both terms for a butch lesbian).

These verbal cues also recur with the use of the word "sissy." Ma Rainey's "Sissy Blues" (1926) tells of a woman who has lost her man to another man—a "sissy." This term pointedly surfaces in McKay's *Home to Harlem* in reference to the character of Jake. Berated by Congo Rose (herself a blues-style singer) for his passive and nonviolent behavior towards her, Jake eventually hits Rose, after which he overhears her confiding to a friend, "A hefty-looking one like him, always acting so nice and proper. I almost thought he was getting sissy" (117). Our reading of the word "sissy" takes on even

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more weight through the lens of Rainey's song, alluding to the homoerotic relationship that occurs between Jake and Ray in the second part of the book.

So, these songs provide us for a cultural context that brings the issues of homosexuality McKay explores in his novel to the fore. By reading these lyrics and listening to these songs, the audience can now hear the slang and the music that not only McKay but also his readers would have been familiar with and understood.

Resources

- "Prove it On Me Blues" on [Rhapsody](#), [Red Hot Jazz](#), and [Jazz-on-line](#)
- "B.D. Woman's Blues" on [Rhapsody](#), [Red Hot Jazz](#), and [Yahoo](#)
- "Sissy Blues" on [Rhapsody](#), [Queer Music Heritage](#), and [Amazon](#)



Bessie Smith

The blues of the 1920s and 1930s was utterly dominated by the presence of Bessie Smith. A protégé of Ma Rainey, Smith eventually eclipsed Rainey in fame, popularity, as well as in her hard-living.

Much like the initial reception of *Home to Harlem* by the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia (W.E.B. Du Bois, in particular, felt the urge to bath after finishing McKay's novel), Bessie Smith was seen as common and crude, often rejected by upper-middle class blacks:

Bessie Smith signified a version of American blackness [many wealthy, educated African Americans] had yet to confront. She was the summation of all the stereotypes, all the prejudices, all the projected racial and sexual fantasies, all the watermelons and pickaninnies and dialectic speech, and all the externally imposed self-hate. It was Bessie who, in her first studio test in 1922, was rejected for being 'too rough'; it was Bessie whom both Okeh and Black Swan—the black label for which W.C. Handy and W.E.B. Du Bois sat on the board—turned down because her voice was too rough, too Negro, too black; it was Bessie who had been born in abject poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and it was Bessie who was the most popular singer of 'classic blues,' which many educated, upwardly mobile blacks in the 1920s condemned as a crude art form and, ultimately, a 'racial embarrassment.' (Kun 312)

Indeed, the story goes that Smith was ousted from the Black Swan label when she stopped a recording session to declare, "Hold on, let me spit!" (Jones 48)

If this "vulgarity" allowed Bessie Smith to exercise a more liberated sexuality in the raunchy double-entendres in songs like "Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl" ("I need a little hot dog on my roll" [Davis 319]), it also allowed her to the alternative sexualities present and visible in 1920s Harlem. In "Foolish Man Blues," written in 1927, Smith decries the suspicious behavior of men, in particular, lamenting that "There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't understand / A mannish actin' woman and a skippin' twistin' woman actin' man" (). McKay mimics this line almost verbatim in *Home to Harlem*, when Jake hears a blues tune that runs, "And there

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is just two things in Harlem I don't understand / It is a bulldycking woman and a faggotty man" (36). (The same chapter that contains these lyrics also includes a scene with a cabaret singer named "Bess" [31].) The similar lyrics not only reinforce the fact that McKay and his writing was influenced by the music of Bessie Smith, but that his purposeful placement of this particular song adds an extra layer to the complex sexual relationships that occur throughout the novel (especially the central relationship between Jake and Ray).

So, by examining these 1920s blues songs in concert with the text of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, the sounds of the eponymous city can literally be heard. By hearing what McKay and his audiences would be hearing, we, as modern readers, are now privy to the attitudes and coded language that defined the sexuality of the era—a sexuality that plays no small part in McKay's life and work.

Resources

"Foolish Man Blues," [on Rhapsody](#) and [on Amazon](#)

Teaching/Reading Sexuality in Home to Harlem

Note to Instructors

This handout provides a few structuring questions for a classroom discussion on situating the African American folk tradition within an urban context by focusing on themes such as migration, mobility, and sexuality in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*. The themes of travel and migration are particularly important and interconnected for McKay, who was bisexual, and whose own migration from Jamaica to Harlem facilitated a freer exploration of non-heteronormative lifestyles. While the novel's title and narrative structure situate Harlem as the place to which travelers return, thus placing it in opposition to travel, Harlem itself is represented as constantly in motion. Though Harlem may be "home," it is also a meeting place for migrants and locus of migration; a center for cultural collision among West Indians from various islands, black Americans of various shades, and white exoticists with various agendas.

McKay inscribes the physical proximity of Harlem's cross-cultural and cross-class inhabitants within the realm of Harlem nightlife and its characterization by sexual mores that defy bourgeois conventions, provoking racial uplift advocate W.E.B Du Bois to remark that the novel made him want to take a bath. For McKay, then, the urban folk allows for the representation of a certain sexual freedom and non-normative sexual possibilities that the rural folk arguably elides. The questions below can be used to start a class discussion on the relationship between migration and sexuality in the urban folk, using *Home to Harlem* as a case study.

Dandies, Pansies, and Other Urban Sexualities

McKay's descriptions of pansies and dandies in cabarets are a prime example of the text's cursory treatment of queer sexuality within the ostensibly hyper-heterosexualized world of Harlem nightlife. When Jake returns to the Baltimore to look for his "honey brown gal," the club's strutting songstress sings about being "plumb crazy about a man, mah man," as a result of which "the pansies stared and tightened their grips on the dandies [and] the dandies tightened their grips on themselves" (32). Pansy and dandy, as Suzette Spencer points out, are slang terms for, respectively, effeminate and manly homosexual men. Here McKay explicitly inscribes the pansy-dandy dynamic in terms of excess sexuality—an asymmetrical flow of erotic energy, which leaves the more masculine partner oversexualized. Interestingly, when the text abandons the pansies and dandies, Jake, whom the novel for the most part represents as entirely comfortable with his masculinity and sexuality, becomes the main locus for uneasy and excessive sexuality in this scene. Listening to the "moaning" saxophone and watching the dancing in the club, "Jake was going crazy. A hot fever was burning him up" (32-3).

What is Jake's relationship to dandies and pansies? Is his masculinity compromised here, and if so, how so? How would Ray feel in this kind of atmosphere? Compare this scene to Jake and Ray's "One Night in Philly," particularly the party scene beginning with "Ray suddenly felt a violent dislike for the atmosphere" (192) and Jake and Ray's conversation the following morning. Is the relationship between hetero and queer sexuality reversed in the latter scene or is it the same as in the former scene? How does the night in Philly differ from the multiple nights in Harlem depicted in the novel? What kind of variation in the urban folk does McKay present us with and why?

The Folk in the City

While maintaining a faithfulness to the African American folk tradition—where the folk is typically represented as rural, agricultural and spiritual—may seem antithetical to representing alternative sexualities, cultural historian Eric Garber suggests otherwise: "The social and sexual attitudes of

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Harlem's new immigrants were best reflected in the blues, a distinctly Afro-American folk music that was open to countless subtleties" (320). Here Garber is describing a distinctly urban "folk" atmosphere, one which McKay addresses in his defense of *Home to Harlem*. In the urban black working class McKay finds "physical and sensuous delights, the loose freedom in contrast to the definite peasant patterns by which I had been raised—all [of which] served to feed the riotous sentiments smoldering in me" (135), a statement that clearly aligns McKay's attitudes with those of his character Ray.

What does this division between urban and rural cultural landscapes suggest about the definition of "folk"? Does blues music represent a combination of a folk and urban aesthetic or is it simply folk music? In other words, are the folk and urbanity opposed? Is urban folk "authentic" folk?

Camouflage at Home and Abroad

During Jake and Ray's "One Night in Philly," Jake expresses his distaste for French courtesans, who are "all straight raw business and no camouflage" (201). Jake has set ideas about women at home and abroad, preferring the former for being less mercenary and dealing more subtly with sexual matters. Evoking military occupation, the word camouflage is an interesting choice for war deserter Jake. The trope of camouflage appears in a number of contexts in the novel: Jake's philandering, Ray's marriage to Agatha, and the operations of Harlem speakeasies during Prohibition are just a few examples. Furthermore, travel and migration function as ways of living "under the radar" for characters such as Jake, Felice, Ray, and Maunie Whitewing, "a traveled woman of the world [who] had been abroad several times with and without her husband" (324), and whom we meet at Billy Biasse's party in the final chapter.

With these examples in mind, how does the trope of travel and migration relate to McKay's depiction of a spectrum of sexualities? Does travel broaden or narrow this realm of possibilities? In light of Ray's cosmopolitanism, what do we make of his comment that all women are the same to him, regardless of race? (202)

McKay, Claude. *Home to Harlem*. 1928. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1987.