

THE EROTIC FOLK: ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES AND RESISTANCE NARRATIVES  
IN THE NOVELS OF CLAUDE MCKAY

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2008

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To Cosme

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Leah Rosenberg, for all of her useful feedback and direction. I would also like to thank Julie Kim, for her guidance during my time at the University of Florida.

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May 2008

Chair: Leah Rosenberg

Major: English

This study focuses on Claude McKay's three most prominent novels *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo*, and *Banana Bottom* in order to illustrate that the distinct sexualized folk cultures presented in each novel act as a counter-culture where blacks are able to express themselves freely. Normative and stereotypical sexualities are at the root of colonial oppression as they are utilized by colonial and imperial forces to maintain dominance. McKay's characters are able to experience sexual possibilities within the folk spaces that would not exist in the dominant society. As a result, these folk spaces create a resistant counter-narrative which is crucial to understanding presentations and critiques of oppression in McKay's work. McKay's inversion of dominant erotic notions is an important site for evaluation as it shows a direct resistance to Western hegemony and thus a subversion of colonial power in the ideologies presented in his texts.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Jamaican-born author, Claude McKay, focuses his novels on a black folk culture comprised of subaltern individuals, spaces, and bodies, in order to locate the folk as a site for liberating expressions of sexuality. In *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933), McKay's presentation of this liberating, sexual folk culture is a means for providing an alternative to oppressive sexual and gender norms imposed on black people by colonial authorities in the British Empire and white authorities in the United States. As a result, his novels present strong critiques of U.S. and British colonialism. The dual focus on the folk and sexuality constitutes a strong continuity in all three of his novels. The key difference lies in McKay's predominant use of male protagonists in his first two novels. McKay finally uses a female protagonist to convey and critique colonialism, through the folk culture he presents as its antithesis, in his last novel, *Banana Bottom*.

*The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power*, published in 2007 by Greg Thomas, presents a useful framework for what is at the very core of this paper, which is that McKay critiques Western hegemony through his use of protagonists who exhibit non-normative erotic and sexual identities, and thereby reject the dominant categories of oppression that normative British colonial and American imperial society promote. British colonialism and American imperialism are inextricably linked with the Euro-privileged systems of power they utilize to uphold oppression, specifically, with regard to oppressive sexual norms and stereotypes. By providing alternative folk forms of sexual expression in his novels, McKay provides an alternative, progressive vision that contrasts with the ideas fostered by British colonialism and American imperialism. It is clear in all three of McKay's novels that the characters gain power by having control over their bodies and how they experience the world through their erotic sensibilities.

Further, music and dance are positioned as folk productions and a means of attaining liberation from the oppressive erotic constrictions that dominant Western society has forced on people, especially those of African descent. In a world where colonialism and imperialism have maintained dominance through the eroticization of skin color and the control over black bodies that it implies, McKay's characters invert this order by eroticizing their bodies in their own way and through their own folk culture. The focus on the erotic, though perhaps limited, is crucial, because, as Thomas asserts, white rule is historically and currently tied to eroticism. He explains:

whether we think of the ceaseless assault on Black family existence, the obscene hysterics of apartheid lynching, the physical violations of direct and indirect colonization, or the sadomasochistic torture of formal enslavement and its transoceanic trade in flesh, we see that the rule of Europe has assumed a notably erotic form. (1)

Greg Thomas's *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power* illuminates McKay's critiques of Western hegemony. As a result of European conquests, European history and sexual norms are accepted as the standard in Western societies, when, in reality, this is not the case nor does it have to be. In order to understand the ways in which the various systems McKay presents are critiqued, it is useful to consider Thomas' assertion that the social ideas and societal structures, especially those regarding bodily control have been firmly put in place by colonialism in large scale. As Thomas explains, "The white world is always renaturalized as a universal standard of human civilization and its erotic practice; and the mechanics of race that inscribe it are erased from the category of sexuality itself. No one else exists; *nor does the sexual violence waged against us, by them*" (23). It is from Thomas' model here, that this study borrows terms like "dominant white society" and "Euro/Western-privileged." The use of these broad categories is based on Thomas' conception that colonialism has greatly and undeniably influenced the dominant power structures that control societal norms. It is in this line of thought that these terms are adopted in this study to address the dominant culture.

McKay's novels not only present erotic possibilities that resist Western norms, but they also create a resistant counter-narrative to dominant structures by destabilizing the erotic status quo and refusing to ignore the effects of white sexual violence and its eroticization of blacks. Further, it is through his folk culture and its subaltern protagonists that McKay critiques white sexual norms. This is critical to understanding McKay's resistance politics, because he is attacking dominant Western society through individuals that would be deemed vulgar and primitive. Thomas explains that Western societies "are societies in which human sexuality is systematically designated for white bodies and sexual savagery for non-white ones, Black bodies most of all" (23). The "sexual savages," which are the protagonists of McKay's novels, provide the reader with an alternative narrative in which the colonial order is inverted. The literary inversion of the colonial order provides a subversive critique, in which the sexually deviant is privileged over the normative. If white hegemony is held in place through the "erotics of empire" and its focus is on controlling the physical, sexual body, then McKay's inversion of this colonial strategy, through the use of body erotics and hyper-sexualized characters, can be read as a form of opposition to the erotic bodily control enacted by colonizers, and, therefore, a deliberate act of resistance to colonial oppression.

CHAPTER 2  
HOME TO HARLEM: MCKAY COMMENCES POLITICAL CRITIQUE IN A NOVEL  
GENRE

In *Home to Harlem*, McKay's protagonists perform non-normative sexualities, thereby placing them in opposition to Western forms of domination. McKay achieves this by overtly sexualizing his characters. Further, McKay critiques Western ideals by using the narrative and dialog of characters that would be considered lower-class or vulgar by dominant society. These subaltern characters convey his criticisms of dominant white society, and, they act as the vessel and ironic weapon for his commentary, as he is critiquing what this dominant society deems proper. McKay chooses to focus on the subaltern folk culture of Harlem, because it provides a great site for diversity, rebellion and power with regard to sexuality. As a result, McKay's use of vulgar, subaltern characters as protagonists creates a narrative that allows for erotic and sexual possibilities that would not be acceptable in the dominant society; this is because U.S. nationalism and British colonialism, which are at the base of the dominant social structure, utilize sexuality as a central form of control. Importantly, McKay's use of characters that reject normative forms of sexual expression illustrates his awareness of the relationship between gender and sexuality and how colonialism has influenced and impacted this relationship. Essentially, distinct stereotypical sexual norms are attributed to each gender: a masculine set for males and a feminine set for females. Thus, in addition to critiquing imperial and colonial influences, McKay's characters reject gender norms as they reject sexual norms.

The erotic potential McKay allows his characters inverts the dominant order by refusing the normative erotic and sexual ideals that Western control has used as a foundation for its continued dominance. In his book, *Exotic Journeys: Exploring the Erotics of U.S. Travel Literature, 1840-1930*, Justin Edwards provides useful insight into the sexual and erotic possibilities in *Home to Harlem*. He is keen to note that McKay's Harlem "is presented as

offering a multiplicity of identities: abundant sexual identities, a multiplicity of desires, as well as numerous and fluid representations of gender” (164). Harlem is then constructed as an erotic, sensual place where things are possible that would not be in dominant white society.

Edwards’s awareness of the erotic possibilities in McKay’s work provides useful support for this study, especially when considering that many scholars did not recognize these possibilities at all, and, instead, focused on the vulgarity and alleged racism in McKay’s novels. Most notably, W.E.B. DuBois found *Home to Harlem* to be distasteful, because he felt that it painted the African American population in a savage and primitive light. DuBois believed that African American authors should not present such images of blacks and instead should promote Harlem’s “talented tenth” as the representative members of their community (Edwards 156-7). But it is precisely through the other nine tenths of the black population that McKay attacks Western hegemony by challenging normative, limited sexualities and erotic notions that have been put in place by colonial oppressors.

*Home to Harlem* tells the story of Jake, an ex-soldier who has deserted WWI. Jake visits London and France; he then boards a ship to New York, which will finally take him “home to Harlem.” On his first night back, Jake is enchanted by a young woman at a cabaret, but loses track of her the next day when he forgets her address. After living with another woman, Rose, for a short while, Jake decides to work as a cook on a passenger train. It is on this train that Jake meets Ray, an educated student from Haiti, who is working to earn money for tuition. The conversations between Jake and Ray are some of the most revealing, with respect to McKay’s politics in the novel, as they detail the complex interactions between the U.S. and the Caribbean, in addition to the pervasive effects of racism in America. Jake leaves the train for a while after becoming ill; it is assumed that he has contracted syphilis (this may be seen as an interesting

biographical detail as McKay also battled syphilis during the first part of his exile when he began writing *Home to Harlem*). After Jake recovers from his illness, Ray decides to work on a freighter that will travel overseas. At a late-night cabaret, Jake spots Felice, his lover from his first night back in Harlem. They are reunited, but with much turmoil. A fight breaks out between Jake and his friend and fellow soldier Zeddy, because Zeddy was dating Felice in the time she has been away. As a result of their fight, Zeddy denounces Jake as a deserter. Jake and Felice are then forced to leave Harlem to start a new life in Chicago.

The folk spaces in Harlem are focal points for McKay, as he uses them to present the folk in opposition to white hegemony. For example, the cabarets that play jazz music and feature beautiful women and men singing to the crowd, and the pool rooms, where the law put in place by whites does not necessarily apply, are spaces where African Americans are the center of reality; and, therefore, they are able to break free from some of the constraints put in place by colonials. Many of the individuals participating in the folk scene reject dominant notions of gender and sexuality; this is critical because, in such a rejection, they are able to undermine white authority, as hetero-normativity and normative sexualities are at the root of colonial oppression (Thomas). By positioning folk culture in opposition to dominant Western culture, McKay presents a critique of Western control and also depicts the folk as a heroic site of resistance and subversion.

McKay locates the cabarets as spaces where African American culture, sexualities, and identities exist (somewhat) outside the Western-privileged norms of dominant American society. Although the cabarets are still in New York and governed by the laws of dominant white society, they are also in Harlem and frequented primarily by black patrons, which allows them to exist as

unique spaces for resistance to dominant cultural norms. One cabaret in particular, The Congo, is described as a specifically black space. McKay writes:

the Congo remained in spite of formidable opposition and foreign exploitation. The Congo was a real throbbing little Africa in New York. It was an amusement place entirely for the unwashed of the Black Belt . . . The Congo was African in spirit and color. No white persons were admitted there. (19)

McKay makes it apparent that The Congo is primarily a black space and also a space for working class black people; it is where the unpretentious, pleasure seeking cooks, maids, dish-washers etc. go to let loose and be themselves. McKay also describes The Congo as playing the “drag” blues that were banned in the upper class clubs. This form of blues, which is considered vulgar in mainstream culture, can be seen as a folk product in *Home to Harlem*, and it plays a significant role concerning resistance to hetero-normative ideals and the white hegemony these ideals promote. As LaMonda Horton-Stallings explains in her book *Mutha’ is Half a Word* (2007), folk traditions, such as the use of vernacular and folklore, “present a much needed and distinct commentary on sexuality and the representation of sexuality in Black communities” (164). In *Home to Harlem*, the music and actions inside the cabarets have the same function as the use of vernacular, or other folk machinations, would in creating a commentary on sexuality and its representations. Therefore, a commentary on sexuality is then produced out of the “drag” blues, creating a unique space where issues of sexuality can be broached.

Music creates a backdrop and an atmosphere for folk spaces in this text, and the main character of Jake often has lyrics playing in his head that coincide with incidents in the text. The soundtrack, then, plays an integral role in the overall tone and action of the novel. More importantly, the song lyrics often convey overtly sexual messages and discuss topics that would be taboo to mention in dominant society. It is in this way that the song lyrics in *Home to Harlem* lend to McKay’s constructions of the folk as a site of resistance to dominant culture, as they

exemplify aspects of sexual transgression and alternative lifestyle. In one song in particular, the issue of sexual preference is broached through catchy lyrics:

*and there is two things in Harlem that I don't  
understand  
It is a bulldycking woman and a faggoty man.  
Oh, baby how are you?  
Oh, baby, what are you? (McKay, Home to Harlem 25)*

The song accepts the presence of non-hetero sexualities as a part of every-day life in Harlem. In the last line of the song, the phrase, “what are you?” indicates that one cannot be too sure of the sexual preferences of anyone else at the cabaret and therefore must ask right off. The casual discussion of non-normative sexualities found in these lyrics would not be present in the popular social scene outside of certain cabarets and nightclubs in the late 1920’s. These cabarets create spaces where issues of sexuality need to be recognized and addressed instead of politely ignored. This reality acknowledges the existence of numerous sexual identities and potentially allows erotic possibilities that would be taboo in dominant society. McKay clearly chooses to present disparate sexualities as normative within the folk culture in *Home to Harlem*. This choice indicates that he is using the folk culture and what Western society deems vulgar, in order to illustrate the African American community’s resistance to dominant society. Therefore, he creates his own critique of Western ideals by examining issues of sexuality. McKay uses the underground blues of the cabaret to challenge and critique Western dominance and social/sexual control.

The alternative sexualities McKay allows his characters, and the spaces these sexual identities can be experienced in, comprise the liberating folk culture that counters the dominant culture in America, which is predominately influenced by U.S. imperialism. Therefore, it is useful to examine the manner in which alternative sexualities critique imperialism. Further, it is

important to note how McKay presents gender and sexuality as being negatively affected by oppressive imperial control.

Jake, the protagonist of *Home to Harlem*, resists the sexual norms prescribed to his gender and thus provides a compelling critique of the ways in which Western privileged sexual stereotypes affect notions of gender. Jake refuses to become a stereotypical black man. Jake abhors the cliché of the angry, violent, lazy African American. When Rose offers to make him her “sweet man” and pay his way so he does not have to do manual labor, he resists. Later, Jake tries to resist again as Rose wants him to be violent toward her and display his black masculinity. As the masculine protagonist in *Home to Harlem*, Jake’s rejection of violent and lazy stereotypes redefines notions of black masculinity. It is useful to note McKay’s negative presentation of Rose, as she is one of several women who play a negative, secondary character in his novels. Later on, when Jake explains the event to his friend Billy, he says that he had to leave Rose because she would have “made [him] either a no ‘count or a bad nigger” (*Home to Harlem* 150). Jake chose to leave Rose rather than be made into a stereotypical “bad nigger.” Jake’s desire to be something other than the stereotype of a hyper-masculine, violent black man, is admirable to the reader, indicating that McKay sets up his protagonist as a subaltern character who is admired for his rejection of the status quo.

The negative effects of United States imperialism are experienced by Jake even in his personal relationship with Rose. McKay focuses not only on gender and masculinity, but also on the repercussions of U.S. imperialism and British colonialism on the body of the colonized subject (as they are manifested through erotic expression). For example, McKay highlights the violent and sexual nature of racist oppression in the U.S. through his treatment of skin color and inter-racial characters. In one section, McKay makes it clear that many light skinned African

Americans are the product of rape, and, more specifically, a form of institutionalized rape rooted in racism.

The rape of black women by white men is addressed in a section where the train chef insults the pantry man, calling him a “bastard begotten.” The pantry man becomes extremely upset by this slight, as the narrator relates that his father was a redneck white “who had despised his mother’s race and done nothing for him” (McKay, *Home to Harlem* 117). The sexual violence and rape that results from racist oppression is a theme that is brought up repeatedly in this novel as a reminder of slavery and colonialism.

In addition to acknowledging the institutionalization of rape by American slavery, McKay highlights the extent to which African American society has perverted this colonial reality and fetishized light skin. This critique is embedded in the dark-skinned character of “gin-head Susy,” whose role also introduces the place and function of women in McKay’s work. McKay presents the eroticism associated with skin-color through the sexual erotics of the body, which as Thomas explains, is largely how American imperialism and British colonialism maintain their dominance; sexual norms form the foundation for racial dominance.

In one passage, McKay uses Susy to critique colonialism in terms of the forced mixing of bloodlines caused by colonial violence and the fetishism of skin that resulted. McKay segues into this critique by explaining that gin-head Susy fetishizes men of a yellow or light complexion.

McKay explains:

civilization had brought strikingly exotic types into Susy’s race. And like many, many Negroes, she was a victim to that. Ancient black life rooted upon its base with all its fascinating new layers of brown, low-brown, high-brown, nut-brown, lemon, maroon, olive, mauve, gold. Yellow balancing between black and white. Black reaching out beyond yellow. Almost-white on the brink of a change. Sucked back down into the current of black by the terribly sweet rhythm of black blood. (*Home to Harlem* 40)

McKay points to the obsession with skin color and its correlation with class and opportunity; basically, light skin has become directly associated with belonging to a higher class. Further, this quote also illustrates McKay's awareness of the eroticization of skin color. Susy's obsession with light-skin illustrates that colonialism has assumed an erotic form, whether it is manifested in sexual violence, obsessions and fetishes pertaining to skin, or otherwise (Erotics 1). Susy exposes the damage caused by the colonizing mission. The eroticization of skin color and the associations that come with one's racial identity are explored throughout the novel, but they are considered in detail by the character of Ray.

Ray continues McKay's critique of colonialism and empire. In a section where Ray lies in his bunk, sleep-deprived, and thinking of his native Haiti, he ponders the meaning of race and the differences between them. In reference to the white race, Ray thinks:

there must be something mighty inspiring in being a citizen of a great strong nation. To be the white citizen of a nation that can say bold, challenging things like a strong man. Something very different from the keen ecstatic joy a man feels in the romance of being black. Something the black man could never feel nor quite understand. (McKay, *Home to Harlem* 106)

Ray realizes that whether a black man is from Haiti or America, the color of his skin will never allow him to feel the way white men do. He realizes that the "romance of being black" is something different altogether. McKay words this sentence beautifully, noting the "keen ecstatic joy" one gets from belonging to the black race; however, he observes that this joy is not the same as the joy that a white man must experience in belonging to "a great strong nation." Additionally, McKay positions a white man as being able to say bold things like "a strong man." It is evident that this is something the "black man could never feel or quite understand." Again, McKay is framing his description of race and color difference in terms of masculinity and femininity, which are constricting categories of Western domination. In Ray's mind, black men can never quite understand what it feels like to speak freely like strong, masculine men, because they have

been emasculated by white racism and imperialism. The critique of colonialism and of the privileging of white races is evident, especially as it appears in a section where Ray is also thinking of the American occupation of his once free home, Haiti.

The emasculation of black men under imperial/colonial rule is detailed further towards the end of the novel through Jake's description of conquest and desire. The eroticization of empire, specifically as it relates to the colonial desire for conquest, is critiqued when Jake and Zeddy get into a fight over Felice. McKay parallels Jake's experience in having to display masculinity by fighting with Zeddy over a woman with white men who exact violence on black men due to their anxiety over what they feel are "their" women. He writes:

these miserable cock-fights, beastly, tigerish, bloody. They had always sickened, saddened, unmanned him . . . Oh, he was infinitely disgusted with himself to think that he had just been moved by the same savage emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men who, like hyenas and rattlers, had fought, murdered, and clawed the entrails out of black men over the common, commercial flesh of women. (*Home to Harlem* 228-229)

This passage nods to the history of colonialism, with its paternalistic assault on black men based on the premise of their inherent savagery and primitive status, as well as American imperialism and the legacy of slavery and apartheid which it influenced. During the early post-slavery years, black men were lynched due to their supposed sexual threat to white women. McKay's main character is saddened and revolted by the oppression and violent tradition that masculinity has positioned him within. Further, this passage comments on masculinity, as illustrated by violence and conquest of the feminine, a concept that Thomas explains is inextricably tied to the history of colonialism, specifically, through its Western privileging of masculinity and femininity as the accepted categories of heterosexual normativity. Undeniably, McKay ties the violence of masculinity with colonialism by critiquing white men who exact violence on black men. This violence occurs because the white men are afraid of black male sexuality and how it threatens their own sexuality. Through this fictive example, McKay comments on the damage that the

Western category of masculinity has inflicted on black men. Interestingly, I would argue that McKay's position on the repercussions of the broad category of femininity is unclear in this passage. A critique on McKay's part cannot necessarily be gleaned from the "common, commercial flesh of women," which brings me to question the merely symbolic role that women seem to play in McKay's first two novels; it is not until his last novel, *Banana Bottom*, that McKay utilizes a female character to critique and resist oppressive systems in a positive way like he does with his male characters in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*.

*Home to Harlem* reveals McKay's desire to undermine oppressive colonial norms by creating literary spaces that exist outside of these norms and flourish in their absence. McKay's characters express non-normative sexualities through the liberating folk culture and spaces in Harlem. Critiques are presented of British colonial and American imperial forces and the way their influences are intertwined within American culture. Through these critiques and McKay's presentation of alternative sexualities and lifestyles, a resistance narrative is built out of the burgeoning folk culture in Harlem. Interestingly, this novel also reveals a trend in McKay's use of female characters. Women are not used to critique the oppressive femininity that the colonial system has forced upon them in the same way that the male characters are utilized to critique masculinity. In *Home to Harlem*, there are also no female protagonists to stand alongside the important and likable Jake and Ray. Instead we have Rose, a woman who seeks to manipulate men, Gin-head Susy, who fetishizes skin and symbolizes the conflicts that have been created by the forced mixing of blood, and, finally, there is Felice, who appears at the beginning and end of the novel and seems to be nothing more than a symbol for Jake's discovery and conquest of his national identity as an African American. *Home to Harlem* provides an entry point into the subversive literary imagination of McKay. His use of subaltern characters to critique oppressive

forms of control and his resistant folk counter-narratives are revisited in the second novel for evaluation, *Banjo*, in addition to further examination of McKay's use of women as secondary characters.

CHAPTER 3  
BANJO: A TRANSNATIONIONAL COMMENTARY EMERGES

*Banjo* furthers McKay's project of utilizing non-normative erotic identities and subaltern characters as literary weapons capable of undermining dominant Western-privileged systems of power. *Banjo* acts as a kind of sequel to *Home to Harlem*; it continues and shares many of the elements of McKay's first novel. *Banjo* focuses directly on non-normative, subaltern black sexuality and culture; most of the action occurs in bars and meeting places, with characters that are usually associated with low society. McKay uses the hard-drinking and promiscuous character of Jake as his protagonist in *Home to Harlem*; in *Banjo*, he uses the wine guzzling, vagabond Banjo. His characters--bums, alcoholics, philanderers, etc.--are moral standards in this novel, as they are full of the beauty of life that is lacking in many of the normative, upstanding citizens that his critiques target. Additionally, an analysis of *Banjo* illustrates that McKay's critique of American imperialism and British colonialism becomes a larger focus and is more developed in this novel.

*Banjo* takes place in the French port of Marseilles. The text relates the adventures of Banjo, Malty, Ginger, Buggy, Toloufa, Goosey, Dengel and Ray; they are a group of American, African, and West Indian vagrants. This group of individuals is referred to as the "beach boys," because they often sleep and hang out on the beach. The surrounding area, which houses the other lower-classes of the port, is referred to as "the ditch." The main storyline revolves around the conversations that transpire between the characters, while they are hanging around in bars or bistros or in the bum square, places they go to look for handouts from the incoming vessels and visitors. McKay presents much of his political critique through the dialog that takes place between his male characters. At first, the homeless life of the characters is easy and free. They are able to gather enough money to eat at restaurants and drink generous amounts of wine every

day, while others in the ditch must prostitute, steal, and murder for their subsistence. In the last portion of the novel, as the economy is down, life becomes harder for the beach boys, because it is more difficult for them to get a free handout. The drop in the French economy is a result of the rise of U.S. imperial power and the consolidation of the strength of European nationals. Notably, all of the rising forces, which contribute to a difficulty in subsistence for the beach boys, were founded on a “white” concept of citizenship which excluded black people.

As mentioned earlier, *Banjo* continues the project begun in *Home to Harlem*. This continuation also occurs in elements of the narrative’s plot. At the end of *Home to Harlem*, Ray left Harlem to work on an international ship. His shipping experience brought him to Marseilles, where he meets the protagonist of this second novel, Banjo, at a bistro and is subsequently introduced to the rest of the beach boys. Banjo bears many resemblances to Jake from *Home to Harlem*. Like Jake, he has a distinctly American, southern way of speaking. Also, he is charming around women, and, soon after arriving in Marseilles, he manages to establish a relationship with a prostitute, Latnah. Further, like Jake, Banjo was disenchanted as a black man in the army, and, significantly, he also becomes the best friend of Ray from *Home to Harlem*. In the end, Ray decides to write the story of his friends, though much of his own story takes precedence in the concluding section of the novel, as his personal struggle to understand race is described in detail. The conclusion of the novel suggests that *Banjo* is Ray’s transcription of the lives of Banjo, himself, and the rest of the beach boys.

McKay utilizes aspects from the lives of subaltern characters to critique dominant society and the unjust oppression that it creates for minorities. The ditch and its residents are bums, pimps, prostitutes, drunks and drug-users. Although McKay portrays many of these characters in a negative manner, such as the pimps and prostitutes of the ditch, the lifestyle is described in a

mythical and intriguing manner. It is through the subaltern characters of this mythical landscape that his critique emerges. One of the initial descriptions of the port is useful, as it illustrates the unique, non-normative lifestyle and state of mind of Banjo. McKay writes:

Banjo's soul thrilled to the place--the whole life of it that milled around the ponderous, somber building of the Mairie, standing on the Quai du Port, where fish and vegetables girls and youthful touts, cats, mongrels, and a thousand second-hand things were all mingled together in a churning agglomeration of stench and sliminess. His wonderful Marseilles! ( *Banjo* 13)

Banjo loves the feeling of Marseilles so much that he gives himself completely to its lifestyle.

When he first arrives, he takes up with a prostitute who leaves him when his money runs out.

Although he has been taken advantage of by "his wonderful Marseilles," Banjo has no regrets; he prefers this type of life to any other. Of course, Banjo's lifestyle choices are not what is expected of an average American or Frenchman, which is that he work a steady job, have a wife perhaps, and stay relatively sober; Banjo prefers an existence where he can do as he pleases. McKay's choice to make Banjo his protagonist illustrates that he is privileging the rejection of Western ideals, as far as lifestyle choices are concerned. Although this complete rejection of normative living accommodations, sexual partners, and social obligation may seem a bit unrealistic to the average reader, the alternative lifestyle McKay chooses to portray allows him to make a clear political statement through his novels and what the stories represent.

In relation to the folk culture presented in *Banjo*, it is useful to observe scenes in the nightclubs where music and dancing provide an erotic experience that can be seen as resistant and liberating, in so much as they contrast the practices of the dominant culture. Like *Home to Harlem*, much of the folk culture in *Banjo* takes place in bars and night clubs. In both of these novels, these black folk cultural spaces are sites where dancing is a practice which is a source of erotic power and resistance for its black patrons. The duality of power and resistance is found in primarily black spaces, which illustrates McKay's point: those of African descent are better

served finding their identity and power within their own race, communities, and culture. A similar contrast can be made between The Congo of *Home to Harlem*, where the most authentic African American folk experience took place, and the Café African where the most authentic black folk experience of *Banjo* is located. Like The Congo in Harlem, the Café African is a place where the white people do not encroach on the fun of the black pleasure seekers.

The Café African provides the venue for some of McKay's most descriptive moments, as he depicts the erotic aspects of dancing and the liberating sexual possibilities it provides. In these descriptions, McKay posits folk dancing and black unity as an alternative to the harsh realities of a world ruled by white oppressors. Banjo is eager to get a band together so he can "show [the] Ditch some decent movement---turn themselves loose in a back-home, brown-skin Harlem way" (McKay, *Banjo* 47). Banjo is eventually able to get a group together, and they get the entire Café African worked up into a dancing frenzy. During this frenzy, many rich examples of McKay's use of disparate erotic possibilities can be seen and evaluated. McKay writes of the scene during which Banjo's band plays their hit song, "Shake That Thing:"

a coffee-black boy from Cameroon and a chocolate-brown from Dakar stand up to each other to dance a native sex-symbol dance. Bending knee and nodding head, they dance up to each other. As they dance up to each other, the smaller boy spins suddenly round and dances away. Oh exquisite movement! (McKay, *Banjo* 50)

This description relates an erotic sex-dance between two men, but the sexual encounter between the men does not indicate that they are lovers or even prefer those of the male sex as lovers; it simply relates erotic movement and an encounter between these two men. McKay's deliberate choice to not classify the sexual preferences of the men allows for non-normative possibilities, because it resists the limiting, Western trend of labeling and categorizing sexuality by what gender one is attracted to. An abstract description of what is happening occurs after the

description of the two boys' dance. It is reminiscent of an account that would be found in the portrayal of a blues dance in *Home to Harlem*. McKay presents the moment as:

black skin itching, black flesh warm with the wine of life, the music of life, the love and deep meaning of life. Strong smell of healthy black bodies in a close atmosphere, generating sweat waves of heat. Oh, shake that thing! (*Banjo* 50)

Interestingly, the sensual description of black flesh seems to play on the fetishistic eroticization of black skin resulting from colonial desire; however, McKay is inverting this eroticization, making it a love of oneself and one's own flesh and skin color.

In a later description of the same night, McKay illustrates that dancing is a form of resistance and erotic power for black people. Interestingly, he does this through a description of sex and violence; McKay usually presents sex and violence in relation to colonialism and the sexual violence it allows. Thus, the description of violence and sexuality in tandem creates an interesting parallel here, as it seems to illustrate the manner in which colonial oppression is coped with or replicated by the oppressed. McKay describes the mood in the room after it is clear that a prostitute's actions have placed her in danger of her pimp at the bar: "The girls were now tiptoeing to another kind of excitement" (*Banjo* 54). The excitement and change in feeling of the dance in the bar reaches a climax when the woman is murdered by her pimp and the band goes to play music at a different bar in which "Shake That Thing" is again revived as the song of choice. The erotic sensuality of the music has a notably dark, violent element here, tying sexuality to violence and life to death. The great night of dancing closes with an ominous description by McKay:

shake to the loud music of life playing to the primeval round of life. Rough rhythm of darky-carnal life . . . Play that thing! On movement of the thousand movements of the eternal life-flow. Shake that thing! In the face of the shadow of death . . . Shake down Death and forget his commerce, his purpose, his haunting presence in one great shaking orgy . . . Sweet dancing thing of primitive joy, perverse pleasure, prostitute ways, many-colored variations of the rhythm . . . Oh, Shake That Thing! (*Banjo* 57-58)

This section ends the chapter and can be seen as McKay's explanation of the role that dancing plays in this text; it is a form of resistance and erotic power for black people. Dancing is shown as an escape, a performative reinterpretation of the reality of a life that is unsafe and unfair for those with dark-skin. It is also important to note that the passage first says to "shake that thing in the face of the shadow of death," personifying death. Then, it tells one to "Shake down Death and forget his commerce, his purpose, his haunting presence in one great shaking orgy." In this description, death is associated with Western rule and oppression, and the people are being asked to forget Death/Western commerce, cruel purpose, and haunting presence, by dancing together in "one great shaking orgy." This passage makes it very clear that McKay is positing folk dancing and black unity as an alternative to the harsh realities of a world ruled by white oppressors.

In addition to locating music and dancing as liberating spaces for black culture in *Banjo*, the characters' choices to identify with their instinct, and not hegemonic white society, acts as a mode of liberation, and, subsequently, a rejection of dominant white culture. As Ray continues to struggle with his identity, as a black man and a Haitian, he realizes that what inextricably ties him to other blacks is that white dominance has attempted to rob him of his instincts, of a love for a native culture. In a world where Western dominance has eroticized blacks in a harmful way, Ray chooses to eroticize his own race in a positive manner. He explains how his choice to follow his instincts as a black man was not as easy for him as it was for Banjo. As an intellectual, Ray felt conflicted by many things on his path to self-determination. McKay writes of Ray:

it was not easy for a Negro with an intellect standing watch over his native instincts to take his own way in the white man's civilization. But of one thing he was resolved: civilization would not take the love of color, joy, beauty, vitality, and nobility out of *his* life and make him one of the poor mass of its pale creatures. Before he was aware of what was the big drift of his Occidental life he had fought against it instinctively . . . Educated Negroes ashamed of their race's intuitive love of color, wrapping themselves up in a respectable gray, ashamed of Congo-sounding laughter . . . No being ashamed for Ray. Rather than lose his soul, let intellect go to hell and live instinct! (*Banjo* 165)

In this passage, Ray chooses to follow his instincts, instead of the dominant culture that Western rule has deemed appropriate for him. He does not want to double-guess himself by worrying whether his natural inclinations will place him in a position that many are prejudiced against. McKay creates a critique of Western society by having his character reject the eroticization of the other that Western society has put in place. Although “Western rule has taken a notably erotic form,” as Thomas states, Ray does not eroticize Western culture. Instead, he chooses to eroticize the beauty and vitality of black culture.

The privileging of black culture brings with it the need to critique the prevalent, and very much American, view of blacks as a savage race with uncontrollable and aggressive sexuality (especially towards white women). This critique is relayed through Ray’s narrative of a job he held in Paris, which entailed posing nude for art students. Ray explains how he attained the position:

the woman who owned the studio was a Nordic of Scandinavia. The artist by whom I was recommended said that she was worried about engaging me, because there were many *Americaines* in the class. They were the best-paying students, and, as I belonged to a savage race, she didn’t know if I could behave. (McKay, *Banjo* 129)

The implication here is that the owner of the studio feared that the American students may be concerned with being exposed to a naked black man. The thought of having an incident, where the best paying students may be threatened and quit the class because of their anxiety over a naked black male and his exposed genitals, almost kept Ray from getting the job. The danger of the eroticization of race and black sexuality, as described by Thomas, which offers that black males and masculinity are constructed as hyper-masculine and violent, is present here; the owner of the studio knows the prevalent attitudes of Americans towards blacks; therefore, she makes sure to control her hired black male, suppressing his dangerous sexuality. In an all too common gesture, the perpetuation of racist assumptions and ideas, with respect to the black

body, is based on American imperialist sensibilities, which have clearly extended beyond the borders of America. Interestingly, Ray's posing goes fine (meaning that his sexual behavior is controlled), until one day when he begins daydreaming of Harlem. Ray explains that he began thinking about the Sheba Palace and the warmth of bodies that cannot be found in any Paris studio. Suddenly, he gets an erection and has to run for cover (*Banjo* 130). Though the common fear is that black males will not be able to control their sexual desire in the presence of white women, Ray, ironically, does not feel any sexual arousal until he begins daydreaming of Harlem and the warmth of the black people and places there. By using Ray to illustrate an alternative, subversive reality that undermines colonial control, McKay manages to invert the stereotypical eroticization of black bodies used by Western forms of hegemonic control. As Thomas suggests, in order to escape the damaging norms put in place by Western hegemony, "we need to plot a way out of the world of social ideas and structures analyzed here, to replace the world put in place by colonialism (154). By creating protagonists whose erotic identities do not match the eroticized stereotypes situated by colonials, McKay, as Thomas suggests, symbolically replaces the world put in place by colonials through his textual inversion of hegemonic norms.

Still, symbolically replacing the order of the day cannot undo the damage that colonialism has inflicted upon people of African descent throughout the world. These realities are detailed by McKay in *Banjo*. Similar to *Home to Harlem*, the subject of race is usually illustrated through the ponderings of the protagonist, Ray. In both of these texts, Ray's desire to understand his own racial identity opens a dialog for discussing pan-African ideology. In *Home to Harlem*, Ray ponders his race mostly in relation to what it means to be black in Haiti and America; whereas in *Banjo*, Ray develops a sense of what his blackness means in a global

context. McKay details Ray's thoughts on race and love for the docks when discussing his thoughts on the global port of Marseilles:

barrels, bags, boxes, bearing from land to land the primitive garner of man's hands. Sweat-dripping bodies of black men naked under the equatorial sun, threading a caravan way through the old-time jungles, carrying loads steadied and unsupported on kink-thick heads hardened and trained to bear their burdens. Brown men half-clothed, with baskets on their backs, bending low down to the ancient tilled fields under the tropical sun. Eternal creatures of the warm soil, digging, plucking for the Occident world its exotic nourishment of life, under the whip, under the terror. Barrels . . . bags . . . boxes . . . full of the wonderful things of life. (*Banjo* 67)

This quote details Ray's wonderment with the port and the commerce that takes place there between many races of the world; however, he is also amazed at the Occidental enslavement of so many black and brown people. A critique emerges from his observation of the toil so many have endured under the sun for the benefit of Western, commodity-driven markets. Further, the last line emerges as a disturbing contrast to the beautiful description of the hard-laboring men and goods, as it reveals that they have been forced to provide the Occidental world with the exotic goods they desire through slavery and torture. The whip and the terror of colonial force have made the black and brown men Ray describes the slaves of Western commodity. As

Thomas explains:

positing scientific reason as the gift of classical Greece to modern Europe has entailed conceptualizing Black people, in particular, as an undisciplined mass of sexual savages. The very notion of Western civilization is therefore founded on a primary opposition between white and non-white persons that is graphically sexualized. (7)

McKay's critique of Occidental enslavement parallels Thomas' here, as Ray is recognizing the continued influence that Occidentalism has on the world. Further, McKay mirrors Thomas' assertion that Western rule has assumed a notably erotic form, as he describes the laboring men in the sensual terms of the body, thus assessing the primitivism the West associates with black bodies. McKay describes them as the "sweat-dripping bodies of black men naked under the equatorial sun" and the "eternal creatures of the warm soil."

McKay's presentation of liberating sexualities, through subaltern identities and erotic practices, the dancing and movements of the body (which can be read as performative practice), allows the characters to take control of their bodies. In the end, it provides a method to resist the colonial oppression which seeks to control their bodies. *Banjo* is significant as a marker for McKay's growing critique of colonial forms of oppression and the alternative lifestyle he positions against it. Specifically, the character of Ray provides an alternative notion of black identity and sexuality. The direct assessment of transnational issues and black oppression illustrates McKay's desire to engage in novelistic endeavors that are critical of these systems. In *Home to Harlem*, issues of colonialism and imperialism are broached, whereas in *Banjo* they are absolutely central to the text.

Notably, although McKay's politics are clearly more present and developed in *Banjo*, he does not critique the manner in which women are oppressed by colonial and imperial practice with the same rigor he uses for the men. Women play a flat, secondary role in comparison with the males in the text. The only woman described in any kind of detail is Latnah, a prostitute and friend to the beach boys. Latnah occupies the role of a secondary character similar to that of Congo Rose in *Home to Harlem*. She is nurturing and faithful to Banjo and his friends, but ultimately she is not utilized to critique oppression like many of McKay's male characters. Conversely, McKay's last novel, *Banana Bottom*, is centered on a female protagonist, whose struggle to escape colonial oppression through her own folk culture is the primary focus of the text. It is then necessary to complete this analysis with *Banana Bottom*, and, to evaluate how McKay's critiques develop, as well as how he continues to allow his characters alternative erotic identities (including women), giving them power over their bodies and thus inverting the colonial order.

CHAPTER 4  
BANANA BOTTOM: THE EROTICISM OF THE RURAL FOLK AS AN ALTERNATIVE  
TO COLONIAL AND IMPERIAL CONTROL

It is in *Banana Bottom* where McKay's political critique is most strategically developed. In this text, he utilizes a female protagonist, Bitia Plant, to critique and counter Western hegemonic forms of control through her complete rejection of colonial society. Through Bitia, McKay depicts the distinctly erotic manner in which colonial oppression is manifested. Her sexuality--how it is controlled and compromised--is a major theme of the text. The text follows Bitia, as she realizes that she is only able to control her own sexuality after she experiences erotic pleasure through dancing and participating in her native folk culture. These experiences lead her to reject the eroticized identity that her colonizers have attributed to her, as a black woman who needs to be civilized or become a sexual deviant. Further, as mentioned previously, McKay does not provide any major female protagonists, or even central characters in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, making it difficult to assess his critiques of colonialism, and the culture he presents as its counter, in a complete manner.

In *Banana Bottom*, McKay gives an account of Jamaican rural life that can be read for its strong commentary on actual issues Jamaican society was facing at the time, issues such as: colonial influence in the post-slavery Jamaican society, the wide reaching effects of the United States as an emerging economic power, classism, racism, and immigration by individuals from China and India. Jamaica, like other British-colonized Caribbean islands, was affected by historic power structures put in place during the British colonial period, as well as by U.S. imperialism; the U.S. was one of its closest and most powerful trade partners. Thomas explains the Caribbean's unique position, indicating that "The place between colonialism and neo-colonialism, even British and U.S. imperialism, is then captured through a literature of West Indian or Caribbean migration" (xi). The space between British and U.S. imperialism makes

McKay's *Banana Bottom*, which takes place in Jamaica, McKay's native country, which he lived apart from for a great deal of his life, an ideal end point to the analysis of his critique of Western hegemonic power structures.

*Banana Bottom* tells the story of a Jamaican adolescent, Bitá, who is born in the rural town of Banana Bottom. The plot is revealed in a manner which exposes the life of the characters but also the conditions of Jamaica, which was/is in transition, as it lies in the wake of colonial control and the effects of American trade and tourism. McKay sets the town of Banana Bottom within a distinctly colonial history; the town had a white-run plantation as its economic center. The plantation was owned by a Scottish man who produced many mixed-race descendents, one of whom rapes Bitá. The plantation house, which was the main source of colonial control at one time, sits in shambles, but it remains a revered and valued property in Banana Bottom. After Crazy Bow rapes Bitá, her story is carried to the neighboring town of Jubilee, where it is told to the minister's wife, Priscilla Craig. After informing her husband, Malcolm Craig, Mrs. Craig decides to save Bitá's otherwise ruined reputation by adopting her as a daughter of the mission.

Bitá is sent to boarding school in England and returns a cultured and educated young lady. The Craigs would like to form Bitá into a respectable native woman, who could possibly take over the mission with a respectable native husband, who they have also adopted and educated, Herald Newton Day. Upon her return to Banana Bottom, Bitá develops a new interest in her native culture. She desires to engage in her native culture, which is viewed by the Craigs as unfit for a respectable lady of the church. Despite the wishes of the Craigs, Bitá begins attending town parties called tea-meetings in the company of male suitors. She also meets, Squire Gensir, a respectable English man who has rejected his old way of life in order to live in Banana Bottom

and record Folk tales and music. Gensir encourages Bitá to think freely, and, for Bitá, he serves as an antithesis to the Craigs.

After Bitá resists the lifestyle the Craigs have taught her, Priscilla Craig, realizing her control over Bitá is deteriorating, becomes upset. Priscilla Craig then attempts to rectify Bitá's behavior through an engagement to Herald Newton Day. Eventually, Bitá realizes the extent of the Craigs' oppressive grasp on her lifestyle and decides she must leave the mission. She returns to her hometown of Banana Bottom, where she develops a relationship, and, eventually, marries an employee of the family, Jubban, who tends the horses and other aspects of the family farm. As the story ends, news is received of Squire Gensir's death. Gensir names Bitá the recipient of his estate. In an ironic and victorious ending, Bitá uses the money she receives to purchase the old plantation house, symbolically reclaiming control over her colonizers.

To better understand Bitá's progression, it is important to see the ways in which McKay promotes and valorizes folk traditions and spaces in *Banana Bottom*. Further, the folk is a crucial point for evaluating McKay's critique of Western hegemony. The rural, folk culture of Banana Bottom acts as a site of resistance outside of the dominant colonial/imperial structure. In order to understand the manner in which the folk works in opposition to Western hegemony in Banana Bottom, it is useful to turn to the work of David Nicholls.

In his essay "The Folk as Alternative Modernity: Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* and the Romance of Nature," David Nicholls explains that McKay, after experiencing disparate cultures and politics all over the world, strategically chose to return to his folk roots in Jamaica, in order to relate a specific, anti-colonialist message through the use of the folk. Nicholls explains:

so while *Banana Bottom* argues for a return to folk roots and a celebration of the anti-modern, it does not do so for the sake of nostalgia alone; rather, McKay returns home in this novel to offer a careful analysis of the modern global economy and Jamaica's place within it. In *Banana Bottom*, McKay argues for the rejection of colonial cultural ideology-

-most notably, Christianity--and the return to folk roots as a route to autonomy for Afro-Jamaican peasants. Such autonomy is imagined not only as an alternative to the modernity of the colonial mission, but also as a form of resistance to the vagaries of the global commodities market and to the incursions of low-wage immigrant labor. (79-80)

In Nicholls's theorization, McKay's message is clear: the colonial system has not done the Jamaican peasants any favors, and neither has the global economy for that matter. The only way for them to develop any autonomy is to break from oppressive systems and rely on their native, folk culture. In this sense, rejection of the dominant system is the most powerful resistance, and that is exactly what McKay relates in *Banana Bottom*. Although Nicholls asserts that McKay is critiquing colonial control mainly in terms of its affects on the economy and religion, instead of in terms of a black folk sexuality as in this study, his essay lends support to this project in its conclusion that the folk culture is McKay's site for resistance politics in his novels.

Ultimately, Nicholls does not explain the folk culture of dancing or the sexual possibilities it allows in *Banana Bottom*. However, in agreement with this study, his work does explain the message that a return to the folk creates a critique of colonial control. In contrast to Nicholls's focus on the return to the folk, in terms of bringing power to the Jamaican economy, it is more useful, here, to evaluate McKay's development of a subtle and well-crafted argument against oppressive forms of colonial and imperial control; this argument is made evident through Bitia who rejects the social, sexual, economic, and ideological principles that those forms deem correct by taking control of her own body and sexuality. The novel, essentially, begins with the rape of Bitia by a creole descendent of the plantation owner's family, which symbolizes a lack of autonomy for native Jamaicans. Bitia's rape results in her living at the mission house with the Craig family where her sexuality is controlled further. This leads to her seeking out erotic experiences available at the community gatherings, with her native folk culture; these experiences act as a catalyst for her realization that a rejection of the colonial culture is necessary

to her happiness. Eventually, Bitá rejects the dominant colonial order by embracing her native folk culture, specifically, the dancing and the erotic sensations it invokes. Thus, sexuality is the key to the emphasis McKay places on the folk. It is a liberating alternative to the colonial conceptions of sexuality he presents, as well as a source for his critique of colonialism.

The counter-hegemonic role that the folk plays in *Banana Bottom* is crucial in understanding the function of the liberating sexual possibilities that the folk allows in McKay's work. Through her rediscovery and appreciation of her native culture, Bitá finds her identity outside of the civilizing mission of the Craigs. Specifically, the tea-meetings or community parties, where Bitá is able to express herself freely, play a central role in her realization that she is happy as a member of rural Banana Bottom. Importantly, a stress is placed on the dancing as an erotic folk experience. Like in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, the erotic sensations of dancing are described in terms of the physical body. The use of the eroticism of the body is significant in its association with dancing as a liberating folk practice, because it provides a direct inversion of the colonial practice of controlling the body. The Craigs oppress Bitá by attempting to control her sexuality and erotic experiences. Bitá is then able to regain control over her sexuality by controlling her body and the erotic sensations she experiences through movement. It is in this way that McKay has positioned the folk as a transcendent erotic practice that both counters Western systems of control and acts as a liberating practice for his characters.

The significance of Bitá finding her identity after attending the community parties, which are sites of native music and dance, can be evaluated as more than a return to the folk. As mentioned earlier, the Craigs attempted to exert bodily control over Bitá and her sexuality; at the tea-meetings, Bitá is able to take control over her body and actions. Symbolically, the tea-meetings are posited as spaces where Bitá can assert her own values and power, which are in

opposition to the forced values of the Craigs. McKay details Bitá's feelings, upon attending a tea meeting, in terms of the erotic sensations she experiences: "her body was warm and willing for that native group dancing" (*Banana Bottom* 84). Bitá's desire to dance with her native people is presented as a sensual desire that is strongly tied to her body's "warm and willing" response. As the scene is detailed further, McKay reveals Bitá's pleasure.

Bitá danced freely released, danced as she had never danced since she was a girl at a picnic at Tabletop, wiggling and swaying and sliding along . . . and she danced forgetting herself, forgetting even Jubilee, dancing down the barrier between high breeding and common pleasures under her light stamping feet until she was one with the crowd. (*Banana Bottom* 84)

Bitá's physical participation reminds her of her childhood, recalling the physical pleasure that is associated with breaking the barrier between "high breeding and common pleasures." If, as Thomas explains, "the rule of Europe has assumed a notably erotic form," then Bitá's eroticism, which opposes colonial forms, in that it is eroticizing her native culture instead of European culture, can be viewed as resistance to colonial control, which is what occurs when Bitá visits the tea-meetings.

In another dance scene that comes later in the text, Bitá's dancing at tea-meetings is read directly against the British forms of dancing that she encountered during her education overseas. This opposition is necessary in reading her native dancing as a form of resistance to oppressive colonial control.

It was the first time since she left college that she had done the dances practiced there for physical and esthetic training. Now it was for the sheer joy of dancing. Not in physical-culture uniform, but in a pretty frock among men and girls who were happy in their fun and who made up in spontaneous warmth for the lack of cultivated refinement to which she had been trained. (*Banana Bottom* 196)

The structured, British forms of dance in which Bitá was "trained," and then practiced in "physical-culture uniform," are presented as superficial and confining. The folk dances are done for enjoyment, by individuals who are content with their lack of British cultivation. The Craigs

gave Bita an education that stressed the value and importance of this British refinement. Her appreciation and enjoyment of her native people, who can be happy and enjoy themselves without anxiety about colonial standards, illustrate a critique of oppressive colonial traditions. Bita chooses to engage in her native forms of dance, which alienate her from the civilized world of the Craigs. As mentioned earlier, McKay's actual socio-political stances changed throughout his life, and his critique of dominant power structures is most developed here in *Banana Bottom*. The Jamaican peasantry is clearly positioned positively, where the urban/dominant white ideology of England is posited as oppressive. This critique comes from an individual who had changed greatly from his early poetry, which "declared his love for the Mother Country, Britain" (James 58).

The oppressive grasp of English structures and rule is evident in the legacy of the colonial slave culture, explained, specifically, through its control of the sexuality of native populations. Further, it is a predominant element in the plot of *Banana Bottom* and worth discussing as an initial example of McKay's critique of British colonialism in this novel. The Craig household is presented as an allegory for colonial society, for colonials living under the white colonizer's rule. In one section, Priscilla Craig, who is responsible for the notion of adopting Bita, in order to make her into a cultured (read British) lady, is physically described as the queen on her throne. The queen, as the symbol for the mother country of England, is invoked by McKay to provide a direct link to colonial ideals. He writes, "Emphasizing the last word, Priscilla Craig straightened herself in her chair and although she was rather rigid, with her golden-white hair upgathered into a crown, she was undeniably queenly" (McKay, *Banana Bottom* 182). After her time abroad at boarding school, where she receives a proper (British) education, Bita returns to the Craig household and discovers a newfound appreciation for her native culture, a discovery that greatly

disturbs the Craigs. At this point, Priscilla and Malcolm Craig attempt to maintain control over Bitá, ensuring that she does not forget the ideals of a respectable lady, and, subsequently, regress into an ordinary Jamaican girl, which is clearly posited as less respectable in their eyes. It is important to note that this power struggle takes form in terms of Bitá's sexuality, which makes it an important point for analysis in this discussion of body erotics and the continuation or resistance of empire through these erotics.

McKay posits Mrs. Craig as an allegorical figure that represents the oppressive structures of colonial control, as she constantly attempts to control Bitá's sexuality throughout the novel. Thomas illustrates the Eurocentric notion of colonialism as the loving(civilizing) mother when he explains that "the so-called civilizing mission or white man's burden was to put an end to this projected savagery, which is largely sexual" (99). Mrs. Craig consistently attempts to civilize many aspects of Bitá, the most prevalent being her sexuality, which she sees as a huge threat to Bitá's status as a proper lady. After Mrs. Craig receives word that Bitá has attended a tea-meeting, she attempts to keep her from potential sexual engagement by pushing her to marry a man that meets Mrs. Craig's ideal model of respectability:

Priscilla's mind was not altogether tranquil about Bitá and that tea-meeting. And that night when she related the incident to Malcolm he also shared her inquietude. They came to the conclusion that it might be a wise step if Bitá were married as soon as possible. Within a year Herald Newton Day would be graduated from the theological college and ready for holy orders. And he was coming that very week on a vacation to Jubilee it was decided to start propaganda at once to get Bitá thinking about the happy idea. (McKay, *Banana Bottom* 94)

The Craig's desire to command and confine Bitá's sexuality is portrayed as an obvious method of control. According to the Craigs, Bitá is unable to make sexual decisions for herself, an attitude which is linked to the concept of primitivism, as it was believed and used to justify racist oppression by many European-colonizers, mainly because European colonizers needed to uphold their status as superior in order to rationalize the exploitation of those inferior to themselves. The

Craig's desire to choose a mate for Bitá is also strongly reminiscent of the arranged marriages during slavery. A master chose who their slaves would wed in order to keep them under control by controlling their sexuality. In the frame of this novel, slavery and its practices were supposedly gone, though not in the distant past. The plot of the novel is entwined with the legacy of slavery, providing the reader with a strong criticism of that system.

Bitá's refusal of the Craig's ideals, and their control over her sexuality, becomes a counter-narrative to the colonial structure the Craig's represent. Bitá recognizes her oppressed position in the Craig household, and she eventually comes to understand that she must get outside of their control if she is ever going to have any freedom. Bitá's moment of realization is described by McKay, "Now all thought of her idea of being honest to herself and frank with Mrs. Craig was banished from her mind. She knew that she could not do it and stay at the mission" (*Banana Bottom* 207). It is interesting to note that McKay's solution for Bitá comes only when she is able to escape the oppressive gaze/control of the Craig's and be with her own people. This privileging of her return to the folk provides a strong affirmation of folk resistance in this novel.

A critique of the civilizing mission of white colonizers emerges from the colonizer/colonized dynamic that occurs between Bitá and her benefactress, Priscilla Craig. This dynamic is described in detail when McKay explains the fetishistic manner in which Mrs. Craig views her culturing/civilizing of Bitá. As Bitá realizes that she must leave Jubilee and the Craig household to escape her oppression, she also begins to realize the true nature of her oppression:

and retracing the memorable stages in her growth, it became clear to Bitá now that although Mrs. Craig had never referred directly to it before that unhappy day there had always been some thing about the woman proclaiming: You are my pet experiment!" (McKay, *Banana Bottom* 211)

This passage reveals many issues surrounding the relationship between the two women. Note that the "unhappy day" referred to is the day when a confrontation transpires between the women

resulting in the first mention of Bitá's rape since she has been at the Craigs. The fight occurs over Bitá wanting to spend time with a young man, Hopping Dick, because she wants to go to social events. Mrs. Craig then reminds her why her father had sent her "to be trained" by the Craigs, because apparently she needed help controlling her sexuality, or having it controlled for her (McKay, *Banana Bottom* 210). Besides Mrs. Craig's disappointment over her inability to control Bitá and her sexuality, there is another power dynamic at play here. The language used by Mrs. Craig in these passages indicates her conception of Bitá; she is her "pet experiment," who has been sent to her "to be trained." The language and principles McKay is putting to play references to the continuation of colonial ideals, mainly the practice of the early colonial British elite, especially women, in which they would see colonized individuals, usually slaves, as pets and commodities that they were responsible for. This relationship is detailed in Srinivas Aravamudan's book, *Tropicopolitans*, which was published in 1999.

In *Tropicopolitans*, Srinivas Aravamudan asserts that European women fulfilled their desire for the Other by having Africans as "pets," who served their emotional and sometimes sexual desires (38). Aravamudan describes this as the "exoticism, bondage, and theatricality of colonial acquisition, seen as sexual acquisition," affirming that the fetishistic desire to conquer the other illustrates the theme of colonial occupation (38). In his analysis, Aravamudan refers mainly to the use of men and boys, and the time period he describes is long before the scene depicted in *Banana Bottom*; however, his concept is relevant, as the relationship that McKay presents between the women in this passage is similar to the mistress/pet relationships depicted by Aravamudan. Both situations describe colonial white women whose participation in colonialism is channeled as a sexual desire to control the African Other. Bitá, emotionally, supports Priscilla Craig by allowing her to feel like a benevolent white woman; Priscilla uses

Bitá's sexuality to condemn the primitive nature of rural Jamaicans, thus affirming the correctness of her own white Christianity. The continuation of the fetishistic desire to control the other, privileged by British colonialism, is highlighted in this passage, as Bitá finally realizes that Mrs. Craig's language, referring to her as a "pet experiment to be trained," was not as innocent as she had once thought. Indeed, Mrs. Craig's relationship to Bitá is presented by McKay as one based solely upon control. Further, when Mrs. Craig realizes that she has lost control, the fantasy of her colonial civilizing mission is lost, and she abandons her experiment altogether. The experience is explained through Mrs. Craig's point of view. McKay writes:

Mrs. Craig felt convinced that it was impossible now for Bitá to continue living at the mission, whether she stopped her nonsense with Hopping Dick or not. The differences between them and the encounters had been so sharp that the even rhythm of the mission house had become broken and upset. Bitá could never again take the place in that life that Mrs. Craig had made and reserved for her. Mrs. Craig could never now accept her as her own daughter in Christ. She realized that her experiment had failed." (*Banana Bottom* 219)

Bitá has not fit into Mrs. Craig's prescribed role of proper lady. Bitá has failed to be what Mrs. Craig wanted and cannot be her "sister in Christ." It is important to note the use of Western religion as a civilizing force, particularly, where being a proper Christian is conflated with the acquisition of whiteness. By rejecting the ideals of the Craig's, Bitá has chosen her own path, illustrating that she privileges her folk lifestyle over their British one. Bitá's love of her own culture leads her to reject the gifts Mrs. Craig would give her-- Christianity and a western lifestyle. It is when Bitá's rejection becomes obvious that Mrs. Craig decides to abandon her "pet experiment." By illustrating Bitá's successful escape from her oppressive benefactress, McKay makes his message clear: although Mrs. Craig and the church may be able to help Bitá fit into what they deem civilized society, this is not right for Bitá, for she is ultimately happier living in the way of her own people.

*Banana Bottom* utilizes its female protagonist, Bitá, to critique oppressive systems in Jamaica. It is through this female protagonist that McKay also depicts the distinctly erotic manner in which colonial oppression is manifested. For example, Priscilla Craig enjoys having Bitá as her “pet experiment;” the idea of her benevolently training a native girl and helping her to control her sexuality is pleasing to Mrs. Craig. This follows the plantation legacy of colonial Jamaica, where the sexuality of Afro-Jamaican women was controlled in order to control their labor as slaves. When Bitá exercises control over her own body, she is able to develop an alternative erotic identity through her native folk culture. McKay uses the reclaiming of Bitá’s sexuality, as Jamaican peasant woman, to redefine tropes of rape, controlled labor, and sexuality for women in Jamaica. Thus, Bitá’s erotic experiences, with regard to her folk culture, are liberating and act as the stimulus for her self-discovery.

McKay’s inversion of dominant erotic notions is an important site for evaluation, as it shows a direct resistance to Western hegemony, and, thus, a subversion of colonial power in the ideologies presented in his texts. McKay’s choice to return to his native Jamaica for his last novel, especially, considering that *Banana Bottom* is his most politically developed novel, illustrates his desire to critique the colonial and imperial systems that influence Jamaican society. Although the message of this novel, which is a complete return to the folk, is not possible for contemporary Jamaican society, it is successful in its critique of the devastation that colonialism and imperialism have caused. It also continues McKay’s trend of countering the hegemonic order by giving his characters control over their erotic identities. Further, when considered alongside *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, *Banana Bottom* illustrates that sexuality functions as McKay’s key emphasis in relation to the folk, both as a site for critiquing Western-privileged society and for providing a liberating space that counters these oppressive norms.

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