
Book Review**Book review: *Claude McKay: The Making of a Black Bolshevik*, by Winston James**Owen Walsh^{1,*} 

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The number of Black intellectuals who have enjoyed two-volume biographical studies is few and their names are distinguished. The short list includes David Levering Lewis's treatment of W. E. B. Du Bois and Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes*. With the publication of *Claude McKay: The Making of a Black Bolshevik*, Winston James begins his two-volume assessment of this major Jamaican-American poet, novelist and essayist.

James is the ideal person to author such a work. He has been writing on McKay since his 1998 book *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia* and he published in 2001 a dedicated study of McKay's early Jamaican poetry, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice*. Since then, James has continued to contribute new essays to the scholarship on McKay, which has itself mushroomed in recent decades. This book, however, is the first attempt at a new biographical assessment since that of Tyrone Tillery¹ and is set to overtake that of Wayne Cooper² as the most authoritative and comprehensive study of McKay.

James's work builds on the collective scholarly project to understand McKay as a major thinker in the Black radical tradition, a vernacular poet concerned with the colonial condition and a queer writer committed to progressive social values. James's readings of McKay are often aided by his own familiarity

with the various contexts of McKay's life, which include Jamaica, the United States and London. The scope and insight of the book is further extended by James's very capable efforts to situate McKay at various historical junctures and to provide materialist explorations of McKay's lifeworld.

The book moves through three sections organised around the key locations of McKay's life to 1921. The first section – and perhaps the best – is devoted to McKay's youth in Jamaica. Here, James situates McKay in a period of relative social peace on his home island – a period shadowed by the defeat of the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865 and foreshadowing the major labour struggles of the 1930s.

In this section, perhaps the signal intervention is James's recovery of U'Theo McKay, Claude's elder brother, as his most formative intellectual influence. While accounts of McKay's early life in Jamaica have typically focused on his White patron Walter Jekyll, James argues convincingly that U'Theo was in fact the source of much of the young McKay's politics and world view.

The second section of the book moves with McKay to the United States, where he began by studying at the Tuskegee Institute before moving into a series of working-class employments, and where his socialist radicalisation occurred. The discussion of the 'silent years' of McKay's life here is valuable, and there is especially useful analysis of McKay's poetry, though the years between 1912 and 1918 remain the least understood period of his life. In addition, James's coverage is weakened by a seeming reluctance to give significant attention to a second of McKay's mentors, Frank Harris, whose important role in publishing some of McKay's best poems cannot be disputed. Even so, James provides only passing comments on Harris and his relationship with McKay.

In the third and final section, James examines McKay's most intense period of political activism. In London, McKay became a full-time journalist for Sylvia Pankhurst's *Worker's Dreadnought*. He also built comradely networks with other Black and colonial residents in the city and sustained a productive (and previously underappreciated) friendship with the philosopher C. K. Ogden. Here again, James's biography makes important interventions. Especially notable is the claim that London and not Marseille provided the original model of intercolonial community which later fed into McKay's fiction. James also proves adept at accessing McKay's emotional life in London – a city where McKay discovered in a new and visceral way just how deeply false the paternalistic claims of British imperialism were.

Throughout the book, the focus is on McKay's political thought and commitments. For some readers, this focus may be vexing. McKay's self-writing presented a man principally devoted to poetry and creative writing, and his achievements in these domains are remarkable. McKay's early poetry pioneered the use of patois, and his early American sonnets – especially 'If We Must Die' – became iconic statements of New Negro militancy that helped to energise the Harlem Renaissance.

Yet McKay was, and remains, an important political intellectual, whose time in England, for instance, was most notable not for the volume of poetry published there, but for McKay's energetic involvement in anticolonial and Communist circles. In the US, meanwhile, McKay was among a pioneering group of Black radicals who sutured the struggle for Black emancipation with class-struggle militancy. What's more, James's biography provides ample evidence that McKay's poetic oeuvre is itself an indispensable archive of his political thought. The biography engages in numerous extensive discussions of McKay's verse. While James's readings are principally attuned to McKay's evolving politics, they are also sensitive and insightful commentaries on his artistic contributions.

The only significant argument in the book which invites more critical commentary is James's unqualified celebration of McKay's attitudes to women. James marshals convincing evidence in support of his view that McKay held remarkably progressive gender politics, but he never complicates or problematises this emphasis. Most notably, James's coverage of McKay's initial residence in the US merely footnotes his brief, unhappy and neglectful foray into family life. Coupled with what Brent Hayes Edwards describes as McKay's 'uneven' characterisation of leading women in his fiction, as well the unambiguously masculine terms of some of McKay's resistance poems, James's discussion of gender in the book feels unusually shaky.³

The second volume in this biography will have to contend in more detail with McKay's representations of women in fiction and with his bisexuality. *The Making of a Black Bolshevik* gives good reason to expect further authoritative discussions of key episodes in McKay's life, including his editorship of *The Liberator*, his consequential attendance at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International and his period as a vagabond novelist in Europe and North Africa.

Notes

¹Tillery, *A Black Poet's Search for Identity*.

²Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*.

³Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 209.

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