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CLAUDE MCKAY

PAPERS

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Schomburg Center for Research  
in Black Culture  
515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, New York 10037

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**CLAUDE MCKAY (1889-1948). PAPERS, 1915-1952.**  
**(bulk dates, 1937-1947). 6 boxes ( 2.5 lin ft.).**

### Biographical Sketch

Claude McKay was born in Clarendon Hills, a parish in Central Jamaica, in 1889 to Ann Elizabeth Edwards McKay and Thomas Francis McKay, peasant farmers of some social stature in the local community. At age six he moved into the home of his older brother, Uriah Theophilus, an elementary school teacher, and under his instruction, McKay received his early education and exposure to the philosophy of European free thinkers and socialists. His education included access to his brother's personal library of English novels and poetry, scientific works, and various scholarly works. McKay's early education was also aided by Walter Jekyll, a white British expatriate and folklorist who worked and resided in Clarendon Hills. Jekyll made his knowledge of literature, the literary world and his library available to McKay.

McKay resided at his brother's home, in Montego Bay until he turned sixteen, when he won a scholarship from the Jamaican colonial government and moved to Kingston to become an apprentice to a joiner (furniture maker) in Brown's Town, in the Parish of St. Ann. Sometime later McKay abandoned the idea of learning a trade, and instead decided to join the Jamaican police force or "constabulary." Exposure to overt racism in Kingston and his dislike for the rigid discipline of police work, along with the injustice the work visited on the civilian population, led to McKay's retreat to the security of the hills of his early years.

In his childhood and teenage years McKay demonstrated a strong love for and desire to write classical English poetry. This interest was cautiously encouraged by Jekyll, who patiently persuaded him that the dialect used by the people native to the island was the more appropriate medium for McKay to use in his writings. Under the mentorship of Jekyll and with his help, McKay had his first book of verse, *Songs of Jamaica*, published in 1909, at age twenty.

By the time McKay left Jamaica in 1912 he had a second book published, *Constab Ballads*; both books of poetry were written using the Jamaican vernacular. That same year, McKay came to the United States to study agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. His stay at Tuskegee was brief (a few months), he then transferred to Kansas State College where he completed two years.

Deciding to change from agriculture to writing, he moved to New York to cultivate his writing career, a decision prompted by his

receipt of a small inheritance, many believed to have come from Jekyll.

Bad investment decisions depleted the inheritance, forcing McKay to take menial work to sustain himself and support his career as a writer. Among his various jobs was a stint as a dining-car waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Also during this time, McKay proposed to and asked Eulalie Imelda Lewars, his hometown sweetheart, to join him in New York. They were married in New York and their union produced one child, Hope Virtue McKay.

From 1914 to 1919 McKay wrote poetry and became involved, professionally and socially, with the political and literary radicals of New York City. He joined the International Workers of the World and the African Blood Brotherhood. He also met Frank Harris, the editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, and Max Eastman, the editor of *The Liberator*, who introduced him to many Communist sympathizers in New York metropolitan area. McKay and Eastman established a long standing relationship and McKay would later become an associate editor for *The Liberator*. *The Liberator* began publishing McKay's poems in 1919, the most famous poem to be premiered was "If We Must Die." Known as the symbolic manifesto of the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, this poem was in fact penned in response to the racial violence that erupted throughout the United States in the Summer of 1919. It emerged out of the fear and foreboding experienced by blacks in the U.S., especially the men who worked for the railroad as Pullmen porters, during the time of the racial riots. Many critics compared "If We Must Die" to James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" the Negro national anthem.

The publication of "If We Must Die" in *the Liberator* was considered McKay's literary debut in the United States. He had mixed feelings about his new success, and wanted to escape the fanfare. His opportunity to do so would come in the form of a gift - a paid vacation from the Grays, a brother and sister whom Jekyll had introduced him to in Jamaica. This was the initial trip in McKay's extensive travels throughout Europe and North Africa, which occurred from 1919 through 1934. His vacation trip to Europe, included a year and a half stay in England during which he developed a working relationship with Sylvia Pankhurst and the *Workers Dreadnaught*, the radical socialist newspaper she published. While in England, McKay continued to submit articles to black publications in the United States. He returned to New York briefly in 1921 for the launching of his first American volume of verse, *Harlem Shadows* (1922).

With the publication of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay became the most famous poet among black Americans. This volume later became known

as a classic of the Harlem Renaissance. It was during this trip that he probably met many of the writers and artists who would become associated with the Harlem Renaissance, as well as Arthur A. Schomburg, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and Charles S Johnson.

Always mentioned as a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance, his relationship with Du Bois among others was both distant and strained, although his relationship with Arthur Schomburg remained constant throughout Schomburg's life. Although McKay's first novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928) was negatively reviewed by black critics, particularly Du Bois, it was the first novel by a Harlem writer to be on the best seller list.

Upon his return to New York, McKay reestablished contact with Eastman, who offered him the position of associate editor at *The Liberator*, an offer he accepted. He also wrote several articles for the *Negro World*, the literary organ of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) movement. Advocating for black unity, determination and pride, McKay also warned white radicals that the racial problems of America needed to be faced head on. By 1922 his world was in an uproar - he abandoned the UNIA after disagreements with Garvey and he was experiencing ongoing problems with his comrades and colleagues at *The Liberator*.

In late September 1922 McKay signed on as a stoker on a merchant ship and left New York for Liverpool in order to secure a visa in Liverpool to go to Russia to attend the Fourth Congress of the Third International, scheduled to be held in late November. Unsuccessful in securing the necessary travel visa in Liverpool he went to Berlin hoping to get the documents there. Armed with a letter signed by Crystal Eastman, McKay convinced his interviewer that although not a member of any official Communist Party delegation, his attendance at the Congress was valuable because he would be writing about it for black America. McKay arrived in Moscow to find that his presence there and his request to attend the Congress was strongly challenged by the American Communist Party delegation.

Sen Katayama, the leading Japanese communist at the Fourth Congress, was instrumental in securing special delegate status for McKay to attend the proceedings. He was also invited to address the Congress after conversations with Comintern members ignited interest in the "Negro Question," thereby becoming the first black person to present the American race problem before the Third International. McKay's strongest exposure to communist and socialist ideologies had been derived from his work at *The Liberator* and his association with the African Blood Brotherhood founded by Cyril Briggs, a former member of the Communist Party.

In his address to the Fourth Congress, he lamented the fact that race prejudice among socialist and communists of America prevented them from facing the "Negro Question." He wanted the attendees to understand the significance and potential of the international communist movement for blacks. Motivated by McKay's speech, the Comintern formed a Negro Commission, however, McKay was not selected to be a member, although the party's embrace of him was echoed by the general population in Russia. Throughout his stay in Russia, which ended in 1923, he was feted as a great writer. Later, in the 1930s, McKay's open criticism of international communism as a mechanism for the spread of anti-democratic dominance by the Soviet Union led to his being viewed with suspicion. He distanced himself from the Party and never became a member of the Communist Party.

In the period between 1923 and 1934 McKay had three novels published, *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933), along with a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932). Credited for pioneering his own literary course and style, McKay rebelled against the traditions of older black writers and offended the leaders of black protest by celebrating leaderless rural black migrants and their predicaments in the modern, mechanistic, urban West. This is demonstrated in the natural resilience and ingenuity of the heroes in his novels, *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. In addition, his ironic protest poem style would set the tone for the writing of the Harlem Renaissance. Acknowledged as a major writer of that era, though he spent most of the period outside of the United States, and in spite of intense debate among critics about the merits of McKay's fiction, his fiction provided encouragement to younger black writers to find their own voice. By stressing that blacks could and should build upon their own cultural values he, especially in his work *Banjo*, influenced the founding generation of the Francophone Negritude Movement.

On his return to Harlem in 1934 McKay wrote extensively on the Harlem labor movement for publications like *American Mercury* and *The Nation*. His two final major works, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *Harlem, Negro Metropolis* (1940), were based primarily on materials about the life of Harlem folk he collected as an employee of the Writers Project (Negro Unit) of the Work Projects Administration in New York City.

In 1942, McKay became ill and would never fully recover. He became a Roman Catholic in 1944 and would spend his final years living and working in Chicago for the Catholic Youth Organization. By the time of his death in 1948 McKay had created a literary legacy which included works of dialect verse celebrating peasant life in Jamaica, militant poems challenging

white authority in the United States, fictional works realistically depicting black life in various parts of the world as he had experienced and understood it, along with philosophical but ambitious novels about the efforts of blacks to cope with western society. Additional information on the life and works of Claude McKay can be found in the numerous biographies and biographical sketches written about his life and work.

### **Bibliography**

- Logan, Rayford W. and Winston, Michael B., ed. Dictionary of American Negro Biography. New York: Norton. 1982.  
New York.
- Dictionary of Literary Biography. 1987. S.v. "Claude McKay," by Ali, Mali Schavi.
- The Oxford Companion to African American Literature. 1997.  
S.v. "Claude Mckay." by Heather Hathaway.
- Cooper, Wayne F. Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press. 1987.

### Scope and Content

The Claude McKay Papers, 1915-1952, consist of **LETTERS, Sent 1915-1947** and **LETTERS Received, 1937-1952** and **WRITINGS**. Included are letters from McKay to Carl Cowl, his literary agent; Max Eastman, a friend and patron; and Carl Van Vechten, the author of *Nigger Heaven*. Among the letters McKay received are letters from Louise Bryant, the wife of communist John Reed and one of McKay's patrons, Cedric Dover, and Arthur A. Schomburg. Included writings are typescripts of *Banana Bottom* and *Banjo*, the unpublished novels *Harlem Glory* and *Romance in Marseilles*, a musical score for McKay's most famous poem "If we must die," a notebook containing a holograph draft of *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, an unpublished poem "Pushkin," and the essay "Why I became a Catholic."

### Provenance

Purchased from Black Sun, Inc. in 1973, *Banjo*, *Banana Bottom*, and in 1974, *Harlem Glory*, and *Romance in Marseilles*. The following items were purchased in 1992 from Hope Virtue McKay, "Why I became Catholic" and *My Green Hills of Jamaica*.

Processed by Rosalie P. Jeter

Date: February, 1999.



Container List

Reel Box Folder

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
1	1	1	LETTERS SENT
			Burrows, Miss Edith. Sunny side, Long Island. April 19, 1947. (Carbon copy)
			Re: "Right turn to Catholicism"
		2	Cowl, Carl. Two letters and one telegram. September and October, 1943
			Re: McKay's illness in Connecticut
		3	Eastman, Max. September 16, 1946. (Carbon copy)
			Re: Catholicism, capitalism, and communism
		4	Editor of the Nation, n.d.
			Re: Margaret Marshall's Notes on Jamaica
		5	Johns, Arrack, Director, Federal Writers' Project. N.D. (Typed copy)
			Re: McKay's work with the Federal Writers'
		6	Sheil, Bishop Bernard J. Chicago, Illinois. January 3, 1947. (Carbon copy)
			Re: "Why I became a Catholic"
		7	Smith. Charlie. October 15, 19____ (Carbon copy)
			Re: Bishop Sheil's proposed preface
		8	Van Vechten, Carl. Five letters July 27 - October 26, 1941 (carbon copies)
			Re: Manuscripts to be presented to James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, Yale University
		9	Virtue, Mrs. Hope McKay. New York August 30, 1915 (Post Card from St. Meinrad, Indiana)
		10	Bryant, Louise, Paris, France February, 19_ Re: Two stories
		11	Dover, Cedric, London, England October 21, 1946
			Re: "Singing Brown"
		12	Eastman, Max, Croton-on-Hudson, New York April 27, 1937
		13	Flodin, Jack, Washington, D.C. May 20, 1947
			Re: Recording "Be patient weary body" (The Tired Worker)
		14	Schomburg, Arthur A Re: Starting a new Negro magazine; poem on verso "Desolate"
		15	Virtue, Mrs. Hope McKay (To Carl Cowl) August 24, 1952
			Re: Claude McKay Night

<u>Reel</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
			WRITINGS
1	2	16	"Banana Bottom," Chapter 1-12 - Corrected typescript
		3	"Banana Bottom," Chapter 13-end
		4	"Banjo," Chapters 1-12 - Original typescript
		5	"Banjo," Chapter 13-end
		6	"Harlem Glory" - Unpublished novel
		21	"If we must die" - Sheet music (Score by Jack Flodin)
		22	"My Green Hills of Jamaica" - Notebook (holograph draft)
		23	"Pushkin" - Unpublished poem.
		24	"Romance in Marseilles"
		25	"Why I became a Catholic" - Essay.
		*26-32	PHOTOGRAPHS

\*See Separation Record

**SEPARATION RECORD**

The following items were removed from:

**Name of Collection/Papers** Claude McKay

Purchased from Hope McKay Virtue, 1992

**Date received:** 1948, 1992

**Date transferred:** 1950s

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

**Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:**

Bayen, Dr. Malaku E. and Justice James S. Watson

deMille, Arnold

Jackman, Harold

Locke, Alain

McClendon, Rose

McKay, Claude and Max Eastman (illustration from a magazine)

Bayen