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“Dwelling-in-Travel”: The Politics of Space
and Culture in Claude McKay’s
Home to Harlem

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Abstract

Contemporary scholarship on Jamaican-born writer and poet Claude McKay, an influential figure of the Harlem Renaissance, seems to be unanimous in approaching his work through a lens of inter- or transnationalism. Thereby, mainly two aspects are often emphasized: First, his traveler’s life which he has documented in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home*, and second his political position, traceable in both his fictional and his non-fictional publications. This essay explores a third aspect of McKay’s transnationalism: his politics of culture and identity. Assuming that experiences and practices of groundedness and movement go along with an understanding of the self, I analyze McKay’s 1928 novel *Home to Harlem* and argue that the built-in paradox James Clifford calls “dwelling-in-travel” is not only evident in the novel’s politics of space, but can also be traced in its politics of gender relations and his representation of race.

■ **Keywords** : Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, transnationalism, space, gender, black diaspora, Harlem Renaissance

*Returning I discovered happiness,
Though mingled with the thoughts of farewell pain;
Yet any pain was good that brought me this:
The joy of finding voice to sing again.*

Claude McKay, from “Note of Harlem”¹⁾

McKay’s Transnationalism

There have been many approaches among scholars and authors alike to describe Caribbean literature. While movements such as the Négritude movement and Pan-Africanism have emphasized notions of African-ness, others, such as the artists of the Antillanité or the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in London have been inspired by their locality, or by theories of cultural creolization (such as the Créolité movement). As it is typical for the Caribbean imaginary, the boundaries between these movements are often rather vague and shifting, and many authors can be attributed to several literary currents at once—or to none at all.²⁾ However, as for the Jamaican born poet and novelist Claude McKay, contemporary scholarship seems to be unanimous in employing yet another concept, approaching his work from a “transnational” angle.³⁾

Michelle Stephens (2003), in her programmatic essay “Re-imagining the Shape and Borders of Black Political Space”, explores the potential in conceiving black diasporic space from this transnational angle. She defines the transnational perspective as generally “allowing us to move beyond national boundaries” (p. 170), emphasizing that the African diaspora, from the very moment of the “middle passage,” needs to be understood as a transnational experience. Brent Hayes Edwards, in the equally programmatic preface to his book *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003), focuses on the time around the Harlem Renaissance for the analysis of black transnational thinking. Both Stephens and Edwards read McKay as a transnational writer, and many others have followed their lead.⁴⁾

Scholarship on McKay's transnationalism seems to emphasize mainly two things: First, his traveler's life, which he has documented in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home* (tellingly dedicated "To my friends everywhere"); second, his political position, traceable in both his fictional and non-fictional publications. In this essay I want to explore a third (but related) aspect of McKay's inter- or transnationalism: his politics of culture and identity. Assuming that an understanding of space, of grounded-ness and movement, can go along with an understanding of the self, I analyze his 1928 novel *Home to Harlem* and argue that the built-in paradox which we might—with James Clifford—call "dwelling-in-travel" and which is evident in the novel's politics of space can also be traced in its politics of gender relations and its representation of race.

Dwelling and Traveling

In his fascinating study *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) the anthropologist, historian, and literary critic James Clifford (1988) elaborates on an argument from his earlier book *The Predicament of Culture*. He argues that practices of movement, such as travel, migration, diaspora, etc., can be read as intertwined with an understanding of culture. Clifford (1997) observes that in the European imagination, the term "culture" derived its meaning from the enclosed space of the garden or the field. In this perception of culture, "[d]welling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes" (p. 3). This understanding of culture, I would argue, is most undisguised in manifestations of nationalism, but in a wider sense we can find the same recourse to structures and borders in heterosexual normativity, racialism and racism, and many other cultural manifestations that define the *Self* in opposition to a clearly demarcated idea of an *Other*.

Many questions can arise from Clifford's observation. Critical western scholarship has mainly asked: What if the garden is not as rigidly demarcated as we once thought? Most contemporary western schools of

thought seem to have embraced this question, from structuralism itself to queer and gender studies. For diaspora studies, the question could be: What if the direct relation to the ancestral garden is interrupted and movement is not just a supplement, but central to a culture? Answers to this question cannot rely on a simple binary scheme in which cultures are either based on dwelling or on traveling but will always be more complicated. But it could also be: Does the image of the garden even hold for the culture we are studying, or do we need to imagine it differently altogether? Alternatives to the garden model have been proposed, such as Homi Bhabha's *third space* or Édouard Glissant's *culture composite*, for example.

But instead of drawing on one single concept in order to “explain away” McKay’s transnationalism, what I want to do in this essay is to offer a close reading of his 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*. In doing so I show that the underlying pattern of the novel seems to be what I call—after Clifford—“dwelling-in-travel” (Clifford, 1997, p. 2). It operates on a built-in paradox, emphasizing roots and routes at the same time, where identity is both a longing for stability and a longing for change. The lines from McKay’s poem “Note of Harlem” I have chosen to prelude this essay reflect this exact paradox: “Returning I discovered happiness, / Though mingled with the thoughts of farewell pain” (McKay, 2004, pp. 235-236). McKay’s ability to linger with paradoxes resonates with Clifford’s search for approaches “that can preserve culture’s differentiating functions while conceiving of collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process” (Clifford, 1988, p. 10). Only after tracing this ability in some detail throughout the novel will I come back to some tentative theoretical approaches to McKay’s writing in my conclusion.

Politics of Space in *Home to Harlem*

With Harlem as the center of the novel’s spatial politics, *Home to Harlem* deliberately enters into the political discussion of McKay’s age. It was published in 1928, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance (or

New Negro movement) when the neighborhood of Manhattan was a political center of the African diaspora with international importance. If Stephens consistently uses the term *transnational*, not *international*, in order to describe McKay's writing, and Edwards calls it a "*vagabond internationalism*," this is to say that McKay does not quite agree with the major political currents and figures of his time. Critical of *any* nationalist endeavor, McKay did not sympathize with visions of a return to Africa, such as Marcus Garvey's, but he did also not necessarily advocate for the assimilation of African Americans into the overall (white) American society. This is where his ideas clashed with those of figures like Alain Locke and W. E. B. DuBois, the latter of whom famously wrote a very dismissive critique of *Home to Harlem*. If what we call black internationalism was the cooperation of black people from various diasporic nations, McKay with his reluctance toward nationalism per se does not easily fit in.⁵⁾

In another publication, *Claude McKay and Harlem, Black Belt of the Metropolis*, Michelle Stephens (2005) extends on her earlier observations. She writes that "McKay's autobiography and his earlier novels were works whose implications went beyond the consolidation of a national African American culture. If anything, they represented his attempts to effect a "*reconciliation between his internationalism and his desire for cultural belonging*" (p. 132). And a few pages later, "In *Home to Harlem* McKay wrestled with these *tensions between free mobility and the New Negro's desire to feel at home* in both the city and in the state" (p. 137). I have added the emphases in these two quotes because they express precisely the fruitful paradox I want to trace in the novel.

In *Home to Harlem*, this paradoxical longing for both security and freedom from national belonging is what preoccupies Jake, the main character, a young black man from Harlem. We learn that he is "very American in spirit" (McKay, 1987, p. 134) and that he goes to Europe to fight for America in WWI (p. 4). However, very soon he deserts the army: "Why did I want to mix mahself up in a white folks' war? It ain't ever was any of black folks' affair" (p. 8). He lives in London for a

while, but after experiencing the 1919 race riots there decides to turn his back on Europe and return home: to Harlem. So far the novel seems to portray semantically clearly charged spaces: the western world as hostile to black people, and Harlem as an island of refuge. Jake, the deserter, seems to have turned from a patriot to an anti-nationalist. However, as the plot develops this structure gets more and more complicated. Jake enjoys his life in Harlem, and his occasional experiences in other suburbs of New York mostly end with him escaping back “home to Harlem.” But at the same time he does not waste an opportunity to make a point of wearing British clothes and ordering drinks the way he got to like them in London, and he often refers to America as “God’s own country.” He also discovers that Harlem has a negative hold on him (p. 125), so that by the beginning of the novel’s Part II Jake has left Harlem again and works on the railroad. This job takes him to different American cities, but always also back to Harlem. We realize that Harlem has lost its idealized status, at least to some extent, and that Jake’s relationship to his hometown has become an ambivalent one: He feels attached to Harlem, but also constricted by it. If Part I traces Jake’s drive toward Harlem, and Part II his movement away from it, in Part III it is his relationship to America that changes. “This heah is you’ country, daddy. What you gwine away from it for?” Felice asks at the end of the novel. “This heah country is good and big enough for us to git lost in” (p. 332). America is not the place where Jake finally settles down—we can assume that he remains mobile, as he has been in Europe and in Harlem. He remains a traveler while dwelling in any of those places.

If Jake’s longing for and rejection of national belonging is written somewhere between the lines, his friend Ray is more explicit about it. In his mind “nations were things like skunks, whose smells poisoned the air of life” (McKay, 1987, pp. 153–154), but he also feels a nostalgia for his home country, Haiti (p. 155). Just as Jake does, he develops a love-hate relationship with Harlem:

Harlem! How terribly Ray could hate it sometimes. Its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood-red color of it! [...] He had known happiness, too, in Harlem, joy that glowed gloriously upon him like the high-noon sunlight of his tropic island home. (McKay, 1987, p. 267)

To some extent Ray seems to be the embodiment of black internationalism: He is very educated and knows about the political discourses of his time, some of which he also teaches to Jake. Far from being nihilistic, he feels strongly for Haiti and also for Harlem, but nevertheless he never identifies with any concept of nationhood. The idea of a nation is saturated with the European concept of civilization. “And civilization is rotten. We are all rotten who are touched by it” (McKay, 1987, p. 243). Therefore Ray, the most educated and most clearly political character in the novel, is not simply an “internationalist.” Torn between the identification with and the rejection of national feelings he remains in an intense struggle, and it is this struggle that saturates the novel’s portrayal of identity more generally, as I will argue throughout this paper.

The Portrayal of Gender Relations

The way *Home to Harlem* portrays relationships is one of the aspects where the struggle between stability and independence is apparent. Nearly all the female characters in *Home to Harlem* are confined to a place—Aunt Hattie to her restaurant, Rose, Susy, and Miss Curdy to their homes—while the male characters are vagabonds. Harlem with its cabarets principally offers free (sexual) mobility for all of them, but most women, it turns out, want to lure the men out of Harlem and into their homes. The song Rose sings for Jake is telling: “If I had someone like you at home / I wouldn’t wanta go out, I wouldn’t wanta go out [...]. / If I had someone like you at home, I’d put a padlock on the door” (McKay, 1987, p. 39). That Rose is trying to keep Jake locked up at home, and that Susy is

trying to do the same with Zeddy displays the gendered logic of the society portrayed: Women strive for stability and men long for freedom. Stephens (2005) even goes one step further, arguing convincingly that this logic is intertwined with ideas of nationalism as well: If women are the proponents of heterosexual domesticity, it is in their bodies that the nation is perpetuated. Therefore, in order “for transnational male protagonists to remain mobile, either within the nation or throughout the diaspora, they must forfeit a vision of home represented by women of color, domesticity, and heterosexuality” (p. 142).

The conflict between “hustlers” and “sweetmen”—men living off the money their female lovers make—perpetuates this gendered logic. The following conversation between Rose and Jake clearly shows how working is linked to masculinity:

“If you’ll be mah man always, you won’t have to work,” she said.

“Me?” responded Jake. “I’ve never been a sweetman yet. Never lived off no womens and never will. I always works.”

“I don’t care what you do whilst you is mah man. But hard work’s no good for a sweet-loving papa.” (McKay, 1987, p. 40)

Jake is proud of earning his own money, because it allows him independence from women. Sweetmen like Zeddy in his relationship with Susy, on the other hand, risk the scorn of the other men in Harlem and the nickname “skirt-man” (McKay, 1987, p. 87). “Hustling,” the casual work men do in Harlem, allows them financial independence, but in opposition to steady jobs it does not confine them: Ray at one point ponders all the men “who worked in nice cages: bank clerks in steel-wire cages, others in wooden cages, salespeople behind counters, neat, dutiful, respectful, all of them. God! How could they carry it on from day to day and remain quietly obliging and sane?” (p. 265). As Edwards argues, there is a certain agency in being a “hustler” or, in his words, part of the Marxian *Lumpenproletariat* (p. 204). In line with my overall argument, hustling could be described as “both working and not”—about the dockers in McKay’s *Banjo*, for example, Edwards writes that they “would rather

beg for food from sympathetic black crews on Mediterranean coal freighters than work under the racist capitalism that is the only available mode of labor relations” (p. 200), and Laura Doyle (2011) argues that McKay’s workers refuse to “feed a surplus-and-profit economy” (p. 124). Let me add that while hustling—a recurrent theme in Caribbean literature⁶—arguably has its advantages, a facile glorification is certainly not what I am trying to suggest. Importantly, some pages later Edwards (2003) describes it also as a “mode of survival” (p. 203). Arguing for agency becomes more difficult when Zeddy justifies his boycott of a union strike with his need for money (“I’ll scab through hell to make mah living.” [McKay, 1987, p. 48]) or when Ray defends Yaller Prince’s work as a pimp: “It’s all right to start out with nice theories from an advantageous point in life” (p. 242). The absence of social advantages and upward mobility constitute the flip side of the coin that buys Harlem’s men their independence.

In my reading, Jake’s relationship with Felice breaks out of the “female domesticity—male vagabondage” dichotomy. Felice certainly means a certain stability to Jake: “Maybe if he found her again—it would be better than just running wild around like that! Thinking honestly about it, after all, he was never satisfied, flopping here and sleeping there. [...] Maybe it was the lack of a steady girl that kept him running crazy around” (McKay, 1987, pp. 212–213). The scene of Felice serving him coffee and doughnuts in the morning after they first meet (p. 15) is the perfect idyll of domesticity, and while Jake habitually tries to keep his address secret from women (p. 223), he does not hesitate when taking Felice to his room (p. 304). While all this is true, it is important to note that Felice nevertheless subverts the novel’s gender norms: She has something of Jake’s (masculine) vagabond spirit, too (pp. 41–42). When they go to the movies toward the end of the novel, they laugh at the film’s depiction of domestic life, while the rest of the audience seems to enjoy it (p. 314).

In order to make sense of their relationship, it is important to examine the novel’s ending. Stephens (2005) argues that to some extent *Home to Harlem* can be read as what Doris Sommer has called a “national ro-

mance of the race” in which the quest for a female lover is linked to a quest for a heterosexual and domestic vision of national identification (p. 142). This reading is compelling: Jake, after losing Felice (his vision of female and national stability) in the beginning of the novel, spends the better part of the narrative looking for her, only to make their reunion in the end an even bigger celebration of heterosexuality and nationalism. For Stephens (2005), this romance is only troubled because they are refused the comfort of domesticity in this nation: “Lost in the nation these deserters reframe citizenship as exile” (p. 164). Black love cannot be nationalistic in her reading, because the nation denies them a home: “The reality of the nation-state as the enemy of black love and the black citizen prevents *Home to Harlem* from being an irresistible romance of the nation” (p. 164).

I agree with Stephens (2005) that Jake and Felice do not settle for domesticity when they leave Harlem. We know that they go to Chicago together, but tellingly it is not Chicago but the subway station where we last hear of them (McKay, 1987). They are not planning to settle down, but to “get lost” in America (p. 332). In this sense, the ending is not as much a closure in the sense of a happy ending, but much rather a rupture: Jake most probably continues his vagabond life, now together with Felice, even though the plot “stops.” The insufficiency of national projects for McKay’s black characters certainly plays a role in this. However, instead of simply blaming the nation for their intra-national vagabondism I suggest that McKay presents their refusal to settle down indefinitely and their ability to nevertheless find stability in their relationship as their own personal resource. On a political level they manage to live in the nation without being constrained by it. And on a personal level they give each other security outside of classic domesticity. It is in this way that *Home to Harlem* portrays a national romance while simultaneously contradicting the very notion. It portrays undomestic domesticity, transnationalist nationalism—in different words: dwelling-in-travel.

But Jake and Felice’s relationship is not the only element counteractive to *Home to Harlem*’s overall gender logic: A discourse of male bonding subverts the entire plot. Jake’s jobs always involve men-only

environments: as a docker, in the army, on ships, on the railroad. And his friendship with Ray is particularly close: Ray, looking at the sleeping Jake, can't help to think that he is handsome (McKay, 1987, p. 157), Jake calls Ray "awful queer" (p. 200), and he eventually moves into the same house as Ray (p. 223). I am not suggesting that we should read them as a gay couple (Jake even seems to be somewhat homophobic [p. 129]), but their relationship, also without a particular label, is exemplary of a solidarity among men that subverts hetero-normative domesticity (and thereby, in Stephens' reading, its nationalist implication [Stephens, 2005, p. 155]). There are also other hints toward queerness throughout the novel: Jake and Zeddy joking to kiss each other—"everywhere" (McKay, 1987, p. 18), a girl singing in a man's voice (p. 31), men dancing together (p. 54), a description of a man's long eyelashes (p. 42) and a rather sexualized description of a male dancer (p. 91) with Jake as the focalizer, McKay never quite calls it queerness and queerness is not the central topic, but the queering of gender norms and heterosexual normativity is nevertheless a recurring motive throughout the novel.

The Question of Racial Essentialism

If the paradoxical longing for stability as well as movement is traceable in *Home to Harlem's* gender relations, so it is in the novel's portrayal of racial essentialism. My 1987 edition features a quote from *the New York Herald Tribune* on its back cover that reads: "Here is realism, stark, awful but somehow beautiful. McKay has left no stone unturned, no detail unmentioned in this telling of things as they are." I am wondering how this quote made it to the cover. If the awkwardness inherent in the formulation "somehow beautiful" indicates that the novel remains a puzzle for the author, this is *precisely* because he or she reads it as realism, a description of "things as they are." If we took McKay by the letter, we would probably not praise *Home to Harlem* but rather side with DuBois who, equally reading it as realism, writes:

Home to Harlem [...] for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath. [...] It looks as though McKay has set out to cater to that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of the utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying—if enjoyment it can be called. (DuBois, 1928, p. 202)

To my mind there are several indicators that make it impossible to read the novel as realism. Let us first take a look at McKay's portrayal of skin color. A particularly rich example for the narrator's obvious fascination with the topic is this:

Civilization had brought strikingly exotic types into Susy's race. And like many, many Negroes, she was 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. [...] (McKay, 1987, pp. 57-58)

Two factors trouble the reading of this passage as a realist (and thereby racialist) typology of skin color nuances. On a formal level, the two ellipses [...] introduce moments of insecurity and subjectivity. It is neither McKay, the author, nor an omniscient impartial heterodiegetic narrator telling us about scientific *truth*, but an internal focalizer (even though it is not clear who it is—Zeddy? Susy? Jake?) whose language stutters from time to time while trying to come to terms with his or her feelings toward black skin color. Contentwise, it is the fuzziness of the proposed typology that troubles an essentialist reading. Clearly, it is exclusively the very personal approach of—again—the internal focalizer, his personal feelings and imaginations that could spell out the difference

between “brown, low-brown, high-brown, nut-brown” etc. Therefore I propose to read McKay’s descriptions of apparently “essentially” black bodies and emotions as what Shane Vogel (2009) calls an “affective mimesis” —not a mimetic description of “reality,” but a subjective exploration of blackness (p. 136).

If, as I argue, the narrative voice of the novel explores the potential to be found in blackness, the question is: Where does the motivation for this exploration originate? The answer, to my mind, is mirrored in the process Ray goes through. We learn, at various occasions, how different he is from Jake: While Jake embodies all the racial stereotypes whose depiction “nauseates” DuBois, they are completely alien to Ray. He often wishes to be like Jake, but his Eurocentric education has alienated him from any significance to be found in being a black man. Ray is the alter ego of the New Negro artist who rids himself of his colonial education:

[H]e had perception enough to realize that he had lived over the end of an era. And also he realized that his spiritual masters had not crossed with him into the new. He felt alone, hurt, neglected, cheated, almost naked. But he was a savage, even though he was a sensitive one, and did not mind nakedness. (McKay, 1987, p. 226)

In this crucial paragraph we learn about Ray’s struggle to find meaning in his racial identity. In order to do so he needs to take his African heritage seriously while also remaining “explorative and tentative, [...] always musing, probing, questioning,” as Makward (1992) writes in an insightful essay on McKay’s relationship to race (p. 102). In this way, his struggle is programmatic for the whole novel—McKay, himself part of the New Negro movement, explores a racial *essence* that, at the same time, remains *affective mimesis*. It is understandable that DuBois, whose interest it was to portray black people in a—for the white society—favorable light, did not approve of this project. But it was not McKay’s intention to be read favorably by a white readership. His project was an

exploration of the agency and the joy to be found in being black. This is also where I want to question Edwards' reading of "primitivism" as merely a "method of reading the pretensions and hypocrisies of 'civilization'" in *Home to Harlem* (Edwards, 2003, p. 223). I think that we can take McKay's portrayal of joy in being black, or the longing for this joy in Ray's case, quite literally—if we keep in mind its explorative quality. It is, in some way, the exploration of a "non-essentialist essence"—both essentialism and also not.

This very tension can also be observed with regard to the narrator's references to black music in *Home to Harlem*. Generally, music features as an integral part of the exploration of racial essence in *Home to Harlem*, as the following example shows:

The piano-player had wandered off into some dim, far-away, ancestral source of music. Far, far away from music-hall syncopation and jazz, he was lost in some sensual dream of his own. [...] Tum-tum ... tum-tum ... tum-tum ... tum-tum ... Simple-clear and quivering. Like a primitive dance of war or of love ... the marshaling of spears or the sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration. (McKay, 1987, pp. 196–197)

However, some references to music also strike a different cord. Listening to a song from Port-of-Spain at a restaurant, Jake thinks: "That song was curious, like so many Negro songs of its kind, for the strange strengthening of its wistful melody by a happy rhythm that was suitable for dancing" (McKay, 1987, p. 292). And Ray has similar thoughts on Blues: "That was the key to himself and to his race. That strange, child-like capacity for wistfulness-and-laughter" (p. 266). The point I am making is not a new one. Much has been written about black music's capacity to incorporate both sadness and joy. But it is significant that McKay takes up this thought: What he calls "wistfulness-and-laughter" expresses the explorative and ambivalent quality I am referring to here as "dwelling-in-travel."

The Paradoxical Quality as a Diasporic Perspective

As I mentioned earlier, my aim in this last section is not to find one single explanation for McKay's negotiation of paradoxical positions—if literature could ever be fully explained or if it was even the aim to explain literature. I will also not try to analyze his novel within a particular framework of cultural theory. As Clifford (1988) argues, there is no unifying model or framework that could account for hybridity in the modern world. Instead, I want to briefly touch on three different ideas that have been introduced by diaspora scholars and explore how they resonate with the idea of “dwelling-in-travel.”

The first of these ideas leads me to Paul Gilroy who, in the opening paragraph of his influential work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, writes:

Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 1)

Gilroy's observation that the diasporic subject is necessarily situated between various positions is crucial in my eyes. This plurality within the individual can help to understand why McKay's characters need to occupy various positions at once, and why this apparently paradoxical situation remains and is not easily dissolved. They are “striving to be both” or “occupying the space between,” to use Gilroy's words.

Implied in Gilroy's double consciousness—a term he takes from DuBois—is the idea of an inherent difference *within* the individual or

the culture, which leads me to a second influential concept. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall argues that

as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become.’ We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness.’ (Hall, 1990, p. 225)

Hall argues that the acceptance of internal difference is crucial to the concept of “culture,” and to diasporic culture in particular. Without this internal difference the productive nature that is fundamental for Hall’s understanding of culture—its constant reconstruction—would not be conceivable. Once we start seeing difference as constitutive instead of problematic many supposedly “negative” mechanisms can be seen in a new light. Misunderstandings and disagreement, without the need for uniformity, can be made fertile and advance a genuine dialogue. Tying the idea back to my argument, McKay’s (apparently) paradoxical propositions never lead to a dead end. His paradoxes are not paralyzing—on the contrary, they are much more intense and productive than simplifying compromises would be. In this sense, McKay’s “dwelling-in-travel” could be read as a refusal to unify various diasporic positions and an acknowledgement of their difference.

Finally, my observations resonate with some of the ideas Nadia Ellis (2015) develops in her book *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora*. Queerness, in her reading, is not necessarily limited to sexuality and gender, but more generally describes an intense “sense of insufficiency,” a longing for more than our available subject positions allow (p. 3). What she calls a “queered diasporic belonging” therefore “is at its most potent when it is, so to speak, unconsummated. The urgent sensation of a pull from elsewhere, when not fulfilled, con-

stitutes diaspora culture at its most curious, eccentric, and I would argue, paradigmatic” (p. 2). Simply bringing McKay in line with this argument because he had relationships with both men and women would certainly miss Ellis’ point. But whatever role his sexual preferences may have played for his understanding of identity, an unfulfilled “pull from elsewhere” is surely inherent in the quality I have described as “dwelling-in-travel.” In this sense, the paradoxical place Ellis describes as “queerness” might well be the only one McKay’s poetics could be said to be “dwelling” in.

Note

- 1) McKay, 2004, pp. 235-236.
- 2) Édouard Glissant, for example, is a case in point. The manifesto of the Créolité movement, *In Praise of Creoleness*, describes him as an author of the Antillanité, while simultaneously drawing very heavily on his work (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, & Confiant, 1993). At the same time, Glissant’s own notions, such as the “creolization of the world,” can be seen as literary programs in their own right.
- 3) For the “transnational turn” cf., e.g., Paul Jay’s *Global Matters. The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010).
- 4) For work on McKay and transnationalism cf., e.g., Karsten Piep, *Home to Harlem, away from Harlem* (2014); Shane Graham, *Black Atlantic Literature as Transnational Cultural Space* (2013); Joel Nickels, *Claude McKay and Dissident Internationalism* (2014); Aarthi Vadde, *Stories without Plots. The nomadic Collectivism of Claude McKay and George Lamming* (2017).
- 5) On McKay’s reluctance toward black internationalism cf. also Edwards (2003, p. 210) and Makward (1992).
- 6) Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) comes to mind, or Andrew Salkey’s *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (2009, first published in 1960), to name but a few.

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