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The Anti-Essentialist Poetics of Claude McKay's *Banjo*

Abstract

This article analyses Claude McKay's 1929 novel *Banjo* focusing on its anti-essentialist approach to black identity. Such prevalent anti-essentialism differs from the racial pride politics of the Harlem Renaissance, the literary movement with which McKay is usually associated. The rhizomatic poetics of this work will be explained through the fluid character which Glissant and other later Caribbean regionalist critics ascribe to the Caribbean text. This approach favours a hemispheric perception of the Americas which aligns with McKay's ideas on black identity. Thus, it will be concluded that the prevalence of the American influence in *Banjo* despite its European setting reflects Quijano and Wallerstein's model of Americanness for explaining the modern world order which saw its dawn in the Caribbean with the arrival of the Europeans.

Keywords: Caribbean, nationalism, colonialism, rhizome, Americanness

1. Introduction

In most companions to Postcolonial Studies where a chapter is devoted to the Caribbean, authors often signal the culturally nationalist origins of its literature, illustrated with the writings of important figures such as Aimé Césaire or Nicolás Guillén. Nevertheless, in the study of the unclassifiable and early figure of Claude McKay, cultural nationalism is not productive; he rather reflects later poststructuralist positions regarding Caribbean identity taken by critics like Édouard Glissant or Antonio Benítez-Rojo. Claude McKay's fluid and anti-essentialist approach to national and cultural identity resembling postcolonial theories on the iterability of identification becomes striking because of its timing. As such, Wayne Cooper rightly chose the term "Rebel Sojourner" for the title of his biography.

This article analyses Claude McKay's 1929 novel *Banjo* taking into account the rhetoric, aesthetic, and ideological mechanisms it makes use of in order to depart from Eurocentric and colonial conceptualisation, but also from ethnocentrism. In his description of proletarian life in the Ditch of Marseilles McKay never re-enacts

colonial paradigms in order to assert racial pride. This approach of plurality and difference – uncommon at the time – will be associated with a Caribbean epistemology brought to the United States. This view was extensively explored in the 1990s by anti-essentialist critics who defended that the Caribbean sense of place, its colonial and postcolonial history, and the *island condition* create a particular “way of being” (Benítez-Rojo 23). The mobility which defines the Caribbean character and its double diaspora – “migration to the Caribbean from elsewhere between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and from the Caribbean to other parts of the globe, beginning in the middle of the twentieth century” (Otto 96) – have contributed to the shaping of a discourse in McKay which anticipated many theoretical currents. These other parts of the world are many in his case, but the most influential one as portrayed in his novels was Harlem. This analysis defies traditional viewings of diasporic Caribbean literature as a response to the colonial discourse of the metropolis to explore problematics intrinsic to the New World. Combining these two views would enhance a hemispheric reading of the Americas, following Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of “Americanity,” by which the Caribbean character and writer cannot be understood without the influence of the United States and *vice versa*.

2. Critical Approaches to Claude McKay as an Author

Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson-Welsh relate Claude McKay’s ambivalence regarding black identity to a folklorist approach resulting from a still too present colonial epistemology (5) by contrasting him with the authors associated with the Independence and Black Power movements which turned out extremely prolific during the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Donnell and Lawson-Welsh fall into the tendency of only assessing the Anglophone context within Caribbean writing. But during the 1930s decade, when McKay was most prolific, the culturally nationalist discourses of Négritude denoting a racial pride similar to that of the Black Power movement were present in the region though mostly embodied in Francophone authors such as Aimé Césaire (also in the Hispanic Caribbean with the Negrismo movement and authors like the Cubans Nicolás Guillén and Juan Marinello). Though Césaire’s famous *Cahier du Retour au Pays Natal* was published in 1939, Tracy Denean Shapley-Whiting points out that less iconic writers had already been experimenting with these ideas much earlier (5).

In Jamaica, where McKay is from, this tendency was embodied in the journalist and entrepreneur Marcus Garvey, who founded the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) in 1914 and later relocated it to Harlem (Wintz and Finelman 1194). The association was initially aimed at promoting training in industry for black people (1194), but it soon grew to develop other initiatives like

the eccentric nativist project “Back-to-Africa” which advocated for the necessity that American blacks move *back* to the mother continent (Bernard 34). The project even materialised in a fraudulent steamboats line (the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation) which costed Garvey his imprisonment (Chaney 53). This idea was well known in the Harlem Renaissance circles in the United States, where Garvey promoted his initiatives through performances and the establishment of different sorts of businesses (Hutchinson 4; Chaney 52). Apart from that, some Harlem Renaissance authors, connected to Negrismo through Nicolás Guillén’s and Langston Hughes’ friendship (Otto 98), also denoted nativist views regarding the African *mother land*, which they “appropriated [...] as a primitive land and transformed [...] into a symbol of pride [when] their perception of it was naively romanticized and inevitably filtered through the mostly white portrayals of African primitivism” (Benito 322–323). Even if authors did not take such a primitivist approach, the idea of racial pride was prevalent. Obviously, McKay knew these last two well. His insistence on departing from these views – which other members of the movement associated with the radical Left shared – is well informed and intentional, as shown in his novel *Banjo* with the well-constructed discourses uttered by the character Ray. As McKay expressed to Josephine Baker in 1924, with *Banjo* he did not want to write another “race problem” novel (qtd. in Tillery 84). Therefore, McKay’s supposed ambivalence does not result from a colonial influence of rejecting all things black and native; it is rooted in a deeper understanding of the intersections of race and class, among others.

Claude McKay’s *Banjo* offers a more accurate portrayal of black urban life than the Negro Intelligentsia of Harlem did, and criticises initiatives such as Marcus Garvey’s because of perpetuating the idea of America as legitimately white: “That theah Garvey had a White man’s chance and he done nigger it away. The White man gived him plenty a rope to live, and all he done do with it was to make a noose to hang himse’f” (1929, 76). Being aware of the existence and circulation of nativist essentialist discourses around his time, he proposes a different view which resonates with what will come after him. It is true that not all of the Harlem Renaissance members shared Garvey’s ideas. The Harlem Renaissance was a heterogeneous movement and, since the publication of Booker T. Washington’s more conservative *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900), the ideological positioning of artists more loosely or more tightly associated with the movement has changed and diversified. In particular, Claude McKay and his closer artistic relations associated with the radical Left rejected Garvey’s views and parallelly organised meetings to provide the struggle with a clearer class consciousness (Pedersen 189). However, McKay’s approach in *Banjo* is original because of the inclusion of elements which can be associated with the Caribbean ethos such as a deeper acknowledgement of the routes which compose identity. This is creolisation, a particularly Caribbean mode of hybridity which acknowledges the cultural crossbreeding that has taken place in the Americas (Otto 98).

McKay's uncommon philosophy can be associated to his own life and figure as a writer, and his self-defined status in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, as an internationalist (1937, 231). According to what Wayne Cooper states in his biography, his ambivalence always brought him back to his identity as the son of a black Jamaican peasant, while also maintaining the conviction that humanity cannot be associated with an essential identification such as a race or a nation (1996, n.p.). Precisely the poems of his Jamaican period already denote a hybridity based on the contradictions of colonial life in the Caribbean. In *Roots* Edward Kamau Brathwaite criticised McKay's use of traditional English forms such as the sonnet and, like others, attributed him the attitude of a colonised person enacting the colonial conceptualisation inflicted upon him (274–276). Close reading these poems would instantly debunk these ideas. His combination of traditional English forms and Jamaican dialect becomes the mimicry that Homi Bhabha contends “disrupts [colonial] authority” (126). His technique is not based on appropriating colonial stereotypes and tainting them with pride like others did but on, clearly shown in the poem “Peasants’ Ways of Thinking,” assertively stating that Jamaicans were continuously being represented and conceptualised by others. “‘We hea’ a callin’ from Colon, / We hea’ a callin’ from Limon” (2004, 11),¹ he claims, but despite that, they are the ones who “Mus surely know wha good fe us” (2004, 9). However, what gave McKay his ideas about race and power was his experience of the United States. As such, McKay's characters and their behaviour always refer back to Harlem and the racial dynamics of this country (Hutchinson 5).

3. The Caribbean: *Banjo* as a Rhizomatic Life Narrative

Mostly remembered as a member of the Harlem Renaissance, it is easy to forget that Claude McKay was Jamaican, although he described himself as an American in his autobiographical work “A Long Way from Home”:

A chaoush (native doorman and messenger) from the British Consulate had accosted me in a *souk* one day and asked whether I was American. I said I was born in the West Indies and lived in the United States and that I was an American, even though I was a British subject, but I preferred to think of myself as an internationalist. The *chaoush* said he didn't understand what was an internationalist. I laughed and said that an internationalist was a bad nationalist. (1937, 231)

Rather than this being an uprooting from his land, it is an assertion of trans-Americanism and rhizomatic identity which aligns with contemporary discourses and theories on Caribbeaness like those of Édouard Glissant or Antonio Benítez-Rojo. Similarly, rather than being one more member of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay can be said to be the one who pointed out its weaknesses (Jarret 2007, xxxi–ii), adopting a rhetoric which anticipated later anti-essentialist positions.

This is not to say that McKay advocated for a Caribbean or Jamaican identity in opposition to an American one; rather the opposite. As the previously quoted fragment shows, McKay often emphasised the importance of the United States for his identity, as also suggested by his poem "America": "I love this cultured hell that tests my youth. / Her vigor flows like tides into my blood, / Giving me strength erect against her hate" (2004, 153). George Hutchinson explains that the racial politics operating at the heart of American society gave many diasporic workers their ideas on what consisted to be racially targeted:

The mulatto elite of Claude McKay's Jamaica did not consider themselves "black," but he came to embrace the meaning of Negro as the United States institutionalized it. Even when we speak of "transnational" aspects of the Negro renaissance, we are speaking of something profoundly shaped by American racial culture and American power. (5)

As explained in *A Long Way from Home*, McKay never intended to return to Jamaica (1937, 9) and yet can be said to embody this Caribbean discourse, the image of the Caribbean Sea as: "a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc" (Glissant 1997, 33) for, as this essay contends, American and Caribbean history are inseparable.

Martinican thinker and writer Édouard Glissant describes Relation as a poetics based on the principle of rhizomatic thought (1997, 11) taken from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Glissant, though not exclusively, associates this concept to the Caribbean reality. The experience of having gone through the Abyss, which he describes as a presence in the Caribbean social imaginary – having been captured in Africa and taken to the Caribbean crowded in boats among death and illnesses – "in the end became knowledge. Not just a specific knowledge, [...] but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole" (1997, 8). This Relation and its close tie with Caribbean literature are better understood with Glissant's words:

The Caribbean, as far as I am concerned, may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly [...] This has always been a place of encounter and connivance and, at the same time, a passageway toward the American continent. Compared to the Mediterranean, which is an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea that concentrates (in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin antiquity and later in the emergence of Islam, imposing the thought of the One), the Caribbean is, in contrast, a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts. Without necessarily inferring any advantage whatsoever to their situation, the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean [...] provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation. What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word *creolization*, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible (1997, 33–34)

The rhizome, as expressed in Deleuze and Guattari's theorisations, is a model of thought illustrated by this particular stem system. It is likened with the idea of multiplicity described in opposition to the root-book or root models, which can consist on dichotomous roots, pivotal taproots, or fascicular roots. The French philosophers explain that: "[t]his is as much as to say that this system of thought [root models] has never reached an understanding of multiplicity: in order to arrive at two following a spiritual method it must assume a strong principal unity" (5). A rhizomatic book, in opposition, explores interconnections in dispersal. Many writings can be considered rhizomatic, but in an attempt to delimit the scope, or rather inspired by it, what better to represent the subaltern rhizome than Caribbean literature? Its writers were deprived of the language of their ancestors but explored whatever was left of their African culture with Western languages, which were nonetheless different from those spoken in Europe, languages "whose genius consists in always being open, that is, perhaps, never becoming fixed" (Glissant 1997, 34). What more rhizomorphic, having modified European languages thanks to the connections of the stems? There are many writers who take images of expansion, mobility, renewal, horizontal ancestry, and multidirectional memory to apply them to the Caribbean character and history, their genesis a tragic combination of people from different backgrounds, customs, languages, and religions meeting the coloniser's ones and transforming them, turning the image of multiplicity into their identity.

In poems like Derek Walcott's "The Sea is History" biblical images are combined with submarine ones in a tracing of the slaves' journey, thus creating an emancipated narrative of the past which defies and parodies colonialist discourse. But, most interestingly, there are those who establish such Relation in their literature as a way to articulate not the past but the present and the future. Non-coincidentally, the work I chose for this analysis does not make use of relational or rhizomatic thought and structures in order to analyse its characters' past, but the way in which they relate to the world. In his chapter "Errantry, Exile," Glissant interprets the epistemological principles lying behind the conquests of antiquity as the fixation of the Western root (1997, 14), transplanted in an arrowlike nomadism that had nothing to do with the thought of errantry. With this root becoming fixed, "populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders [...]. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit" (1997, 17). It is my belief that Claude McKay's *Banjo*, with its non-linear plot and its challenge to hegemonic systems of organisation like the nation and systematised work, defies such rooted epistemology of identification and difference, a perception in which one can only be conqueror or conquered, visitor or visited (Glissant 1997, 17). Defying this dualism, one encounters errantry (17), named vagabondage in Claude McKay's *Banjo*.

4. Europe: Subversive Vagabondage

Rhizomatic thought is what lies behind *Banjo*'s vagabond philosophy and what Ray, the author's autobiographical persona, comes to realise throughout the novel. As he expresses it: "the vagabond lover of life finds individuals and things to love in many places and not only in one nation" (1929, 137). Anthony Reed explains in his article that *Banjo* proves the inadequacy of "the norms of national and racial identification" (785). Ray, a Haitian writer, develops and explains throughout the novel the life philosophy of Banjo, who does not normally theorise but just acts: "I ain't edjucated, buddy, Ask mah pardner, Ray" (1929, 102). This philosophy aligns with criticism to the weaknesses of the culturalist branch of the Harlem Renaissance, who McKay allegedly thought reactionary (1937, 241). According to Jesús Benito, some of the dominant ideas of the Harlem Renaissance reflected a nationalist attitude which replicated hegemonic ideas traditionally used to justify colonialism (321–322). This novel, on the contrary, describes such nationalism as "a monstrous system for plundering weaker peoples" (1929, 137). Ultimately, the novel serves to reject the adaptation to pre-established Western forms of life, thought, work, and governance. By rejecting the job that they are offered at the end of the novel and sticking to the vagabond lifestyle, Banjo and Ray establish that their international resistance is not based on acquiring the commodities and means of the white people but on articulating new ways of relation and living. As Ray clearly lets us know, "If you think it's fine for the society Negroes to fool themselves on the cheapest of imitations, I don't" (1929, 117).

Glissant's critique of the nativist views which impregnated independence nationalist movements is expressed in terms of the root and the rhizome too. According to him, these movements imitated the Western model for establishing roots: "the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root – rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other" (1997, 14). The internationalist perspective of McKay's novel defies linearity, something belonging to the Western historical articulation of the world, as Glissant believes. According to the Martinican thinker, Christian religion, like natural history evolution, the two tenets of the Western idea of progress, "universaliz[e] linear time," establishing a before and an after, thus "retain[ing] [...] the power of the principle of linearity and that "grasped" and justified History" (1997, 48–49). In opposition, one can only describe McKay's novel in horizontal terms, like a rhizome. According to Bridget Chalk, the lack of a unified linear plot serves to defy symbols of identification such as the nation, since these are complicit with linear narratives, illustrated in *Banjo* and *A Long Way from Home* when suspects of breaking the immigration laws have to provide the authorities with accounts of their life *stories*, in an ordered way (93, 98). Banjo's way of arriving to Marseilles – by getting deported from his own country – turns him into a nationless international errant who, by avoiding the rules of national identification, manages to achieve his purposes (Cannon 147). The novel's description

of the “Nationality Doubtful” papers, which were the excuse for deporting black workers from Europe in times of economic hardship (1929, 311–313), opens up a third space which these black men inhabit, devoid of the tightness of identification, even though they continue to be the victims of the mobility laws just because “the police were strong-armed against the happy irresponsibility of the Negro in the face of *civilisation*” (1929, 313; emphasis mine).

Banjo is an African American vagabond who is based in Marseilles at the time the novel takes place, in the 1920s. There he comes into contact with many black workers, either coming from the colonies in Africa, from the United States, or from the Black Atlantic diaspora. Their bonding as a group is not based on acknowledging Africa as their common mother land, but on exploring their differences and common experiences. Relation with the Other is essential in this novel, not a colonial relation by which the self is described in opposition to the Other, but rather in heterogeneous difference. That is, next to the Other, this “fundamental relationship with the Other” (14) defined by Glissant not as “exclusion but, rather where difference is realized in going beyond” (1997, 82). Describing colonial epistemology, Elleke Boehmer claims that:

The concept of the Other, which is built on the thought of, *inter alia*, Hegel and Sartre, signifies that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined. The West thus conceived of its superiority relative to the perceived lack of power, self-consciousness, or ability to think and rule, of colonized peoples. Psychoanalysis, too, in particular as refracted by Lacan, has postulated that Self-identity is constituted within the gaze of another. (21)

This way of articulating difference as opposition would result in a dangerous imitation of the colonial ethos, perpetuating its oppression mechanisms, like Ray explains: “The Northern Negroes are stand-offish toward the Southern Negroes and toward the West Indians, who are not as advanced as they in civilized superficialities” (1929, 200). In fact, Ana M^a Manzanás explains that the very existence of ethnicity and “race” as identity markers points to a certain artificiality in the construction of communities derived from their desire to perpetuate power and marginalisation through the creation of categories (29). Therefore, the conditions and characteristics of ethnicity change depending on the time and location (29). In *Banjo* the rhizomorphic community that the characters create throughout the narrative has nothing to do with the kind described by Manzanás and, thus, such mechanisms do not exist and are consistently criticised.

When Banjo meets Ray in Marseilles, the latter is coming to terms with popular ideas about “the Race,” such as his doubts regarding the adequacy of the Back-to-Africa movement led by Marcus Garvey. It is through contact with one another in the form of musical improvisation that the black people in the novel arrive to self-knowledge (Reed 758) and not only survival in a hostile place. A heated encounter

between Goosey, one of the beach boys, and Ray (Chapter XIV) reflects in the most explicit way popular racial debates taking place at the time McKay wrote his works. Although he seems to agree with *Banjo*'s detractors, Tyrone Tillery explains how the criticism McKay's two first novels received went "along with the general debate over the black artist's obligation to his race" (107). Goosey's idea of fighting "for the race" amounts to not having a behaviour that differs from the one of the whites, as he criticises Banjo's jokes as "niggerism" claiming that "white people don't make jokes like that about themselves" (1929, 182). Goosey – aligning with culturally nationalist discourses – dismisses the parodic mimicry that Homi Bhabha defines as subversive, constructing instead a homogenised version of the race (suffice it to say that this is a highly inadequate term nowadays). "There is a crucial difference between this colonial articulation of man and his doubles," Homi Bhabha contends, "and that which Foucault describes as 'thinking the unthought'" (130), that is, there is not any desire for a "true essence" anymore; by mimicking, the colonised redefines the very terms of reality (130). Ray accuses Goosey of merely repeating what could at that time be found in sensationalist newspapers about black people, "full of false ideas about Negroes" (1929, 183), which were attempting to speak for them as a unified mass. According to Benito, this anti-essentialist position observable in Ray is the trend in theory that will come after the culturally nationalist period (323), which confirms my view that McKay anticipated to his time. As Glissant explains, "[g]radually, premonitions of the interdependence at work in the world today have replaced the ideologies of national independence that drove the struggles for decolonization" (1997, 143). Banjo's and Ray's minds seem to have already been decolonised.

Glissant explains that before the establishment of Western nations, civilisations were not rooted in a single place, "conquerors [were] the transient root of their people. The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed" (1997, 14). The opposite of this sort of mobility is errantry, since "one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this – and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides" (1997, 20). A rhizomatic Caribbean text cannot be considered without the image of the errant; in McKay, this is the vagabond. Banjo has dominated "errant thought" (Glissant 1997,18) and, therefore, according to Glissant, has achieved a level of decolonisation by which the Western episteme of the root is destroyed (1997, 17). Furthermore, errantry in this novel relates to defying the economic powers at work, which dispossessed and exploited the people in the colonies for the sake of Capitalism (Lenin 5) to later force them to adapt to these powers (Piper 15–18). This is the colonial ambivalence which prevails much post 1950 Caribbean literature, the sense that the only way to find an identity is becoming part of the system that oppresses you (Gikandi 15). What brings together the characters in the novel is pleasure and not only economic survival (Reed 759), as their habit to share any amount

of money they receive among each other for drinking and diversion shows. They create a universe of alternative options of community formation and a narrative of history and identification other than that of a “legally documented identity” (Cannon 141).

5. The United States: From Segregation to Community

Banjo and Ray’s final decision defies Western Capitalist modes of existence and, by furthermore refusing to be targeted by any “documentary apparatus” (Chalk 109), they also defy nationalist notions of identification. They do not only reject rootedness but also unrootedness, since “[e]rrantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment” (Glissant 1997, 18). Harlem in these times reflected a challenge to roots: “There one found a complex and culturally productive concentration of peoples of African descent” (Hutchinson 5) which McKay many times claimed to love and find inspiring (Maxwell xv; xviii). Ray, whose time in the United States is narrated in *Home to Harlem*, an earlier novel by McKay, vindicates the importance of the United States in the development of a black identity because, according to him, communities of their own are formed in there. In Hutchinson’s words,

at the heart of [*Banjo*] is an argument (by the Haitian stand-in for McKay himself) that working-class Negroes in the United States (but not exclusively American Negroes) are the most powerful and avant-garde of all black groups because they inhabit the most vital, rough-and-tumble, powerful capitalist and quasi-democratic nation in the world, while American-style racism helps bind them into a cohesive, racially conscious group. The transnational romance of race, for McKay, centers in the United States, and its most important material as well as intellectual and even cultural resources emanate from there, ineluctably shaped by the race-producing disciplines of America’s one-drop rule. (5)

The vibrant community formed in Harlem, where one quarter of the workers came from the plantation Caribbean and American South (Maxwell xiv), supposed a reconsideration of affiliative symbols and motifs in their engagement in resistance to the mainstream: “You see race prejudice over there drives the Negroes together to develop their own group life” (McKay 1929, 205). It is precisely the country’s institutionalised racism that evidences the racial dynamics across the modern world system as defined by Quijano and Wallerstein, which are not so visible in metropolitan Europe. Despite what many of the characters in the book believe, Europe is not such a paradise for black people. As Ray discusses with a student,

from what I have seen of the attitude of this town toward Negroes and Arabs, I don't know how it would be if you Europeans had a large colored population to handle in Europe [...] Here like anywhere (as the police inspector had so clearly intimated by his declaration) one black villain made all black villains as one black tout made all black touts, one black nigger made all black niggers, and one black failure made all black failures. (1929, 274–275)

According to Homi Bhabha's reading of Frantz Fanon's theories, culture emerges as political struggle (52), following a poststructuralist approach to identification by which cultures derive from hybrid moments or third spaces of enunciation which break with the Western linear progression of history. In the false illusion of Europe as tolerant with difference, the break of continuity created by cultural translation phenomena such as Harlem cannot happen. Such fallacious and naïve approach to European societies favours the alienation and neurosis described by Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*. In this illusory space, Ray observes how the black men he meets are stuck with stereotypical colonial ideas about "the race."

In *Home to Harlem* Ray makes a bigger emphasis on the West Indian experience in the United States. He teaches the African-American protagonist the history of his West Indian nation – Haiti – which the latter understands as a sort of Utopia: "a romance of his race, just down there by Panama. How strange!" (2011, 60). Carl Pedersen has claimed that McKay's decision to place Haitian characters as protagonists – instead of Jamaicans like himself – not only pays homage to the Haitian revolution, which proved that an alternative order was possible, but also speaks for his opposition to the American occupation of this country (191). As Ray explains to Jake, *Home to Harlem*'s African American protagonist, in the new world order of the Americas the United States has supplanted its European metropolitan counterpart. Ray's primitivistic definition of the West Indian island is soon forgotten as an idealised non-reality as the accurate detailed description of Harlem's nightlife gradually gains relevance as the affiliative force of this community. Despite criticism of the novel by the Harlem Intelligentsia of the time because of its depiction of what they considered debauched behaviours (Tillery 109), McKay's way of looking at Harlem's power for subversion emphasises the cabarets, the jazz clubs, and the shared lodgings as the mechanisms blacks in Harlem establish to survive "heedless American capitalism" (Cooper 1996, 13). A homesick Ray admits this in *Banjo*:

With the identity card regulation and the frequent raffles the French police had unlimited power of interference with the individual and Ray had arrived at the conclusion that he had really had more individual liberty under the law in the Puritan-ridden Anglo-Saxon countries than in the land of 'Liberté, Egalité, et Fraternité.' (1929, 263)

Harlem, as shown in *Home to Harlem*, is the crystallisation of these aforementioned third spaces that are created in order to "take control of [their] own

destiny” (Cooper 1996, 13). Though finding its origin in the European slave trade, the United States institutionalised within its society – through segregation, for example – the workings of racial power dynamics that were later extended on a planetary scale (Quijano and Wallerstein 551). The interconnections of Europe, the United States, and the Caribbean pervading McKay’s works become essential for defining this order which saw its dawn in the Antilles (Saldívar 126).

6. Conclusion

Claude McKay’s 1929 *Banjo* is an enigmatic novel taking into account the author’s connection with the Harlem Renaissance tradition which sought to taint the American black with racial pride resorting in some cases to cultural elitism so as to deny racist conceptions of blacks as brutish (Bernard 36). While other later members of this movement have resented this view too, none of them focuses on the mundane detail of daily life as much as McKay does in *Banjo* with its description of the international proletarian class of Marseilles. Paradoxically, as Tyrone Tillery explains, there was discussion among Harlem Renaissance members at the time of *Banjo*’s publication regarding the novel’s representation of African Americans (108–109), which helps us to conclude that the racial politics of the United States were constantly at the centre of discussion. McKay’s novel is a powerful book both in the African American and postcolonial traditions – as many men from the West Indies and Africa also feature among the beach boys group. McKay, on the one hand, defies nativist positions in the articulation of an American ethnic identity and, on the other hand, proposes a non-nationalist look at postcolonial literatures² by stressing the role of African American culture within the transnational community of the Black Atlantic.

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant wrote his famous phrase “we are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship” (1974, 67). This sentence appears in the context of his praise to Brathwaite’s notion of submarine unity. He explains that:

To my mind, this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depth the seeds of an invisible presence*. And so transversality, and not the universal transcendence of the sublime, has come to light (1974, 66–67; original emphasis)

With his reference to the drowned Africans Glissant does not advocate for the Négritude position which preceded him and rejected “anything European, and [...] identif[ied] with everything African, turning erstwhile ‘negative’ terms applied to people of African descent (such as ‘Negro’ and ‘savage’) into signifiers of black pride” (Otto 98), but rather takes this image as a reminder of the Western manipulation of the concept of history and the Caribbean potential to subvert it.

This episode of history, which is in fact a deleted chapter of it, binds the Caribbean together with the United States. Is it not this Black Atlantic diaspora an essential part of the United States' history, when the plantation social organisation was shared with the Caribbean? Derek Walcott reminds us of it in his essay "The Caribbean: Culture of Mimicry":

What has happened here has happened to us. In other words that shadow is less malevolent than it appears, and we can absorb it because we know that America is black,³ that so much of its labor, its speech, its music, its very style of living is generated by what is now cunningly and carefully isolated as 'black' culture, that what is most original in it has come out of its ghettos, its river-cultures, its plantations. (1974, 4)

He vindicates the hemispheric notion of the Americas by stressing its shared culture, a culture not transplanted like the European one into the United States.

Claude McKay's novel resonates with these ideas: it defies linear storytelling and narratives of historical progress, as it already announces with its subtitle: "a novel without a plot." Furthermore, by including conversations about "the race" in the novel, McKay expresses in its pages an intent rejection of the colonial epistemology employed by Caribbean anti-colonial writers such as Aimé Césaire who repeated colonial stereotypes to taint them with pride (Gikandi 11). On the contrary, *Banjo* advocates for an original hybrid culture which is essentially American and Caribbean, resonating with Walcott's words. The spirit of the American black should stand transnationally, that of the New World which, from the pan-Caribbean rejection of nation-states and their bounded classification, establishes a conception of history and identification completely apart from the old colonial world order and the postcolonial coloniality of power.

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Notes

- 1 While the reference to Colon might be clear, it is probably pertinent to clarify that McKay's use of the word Limon refers to the extensive working-class migration of Jamaicans to this province in Costa Rica. In this way, McKay alludes both to European colonisation and the neocolonialism of the United States in the Caribbean at the end of the 19th century when

- projects such as the construction of the Panama Canal or the Costa Rican railroad were undertaken (Torres-Saillant 19; Pedersen 186–187; Hutchinson Miller 5)
- 2 I am using the term postcolonial even if places like Jamaica or the African nations had not reached decolonisation at the time of the novel's publication because I consider "postcolonial" the body of literature written by native authors who engaged in the practice of self-representation devoid of colonial models of conceptualisation.
 - 3 As Glissant, when Walcott uses the word "black" he does not take an essentialist Négritude premise, but equates it with creolisation. As he has repeatedly done throughout his oeuvre, Walcott refers to the blend of cultures in the Caribbean, which can be exemplified with one of his most quoted poems, "The Schooner's Flight": "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (2014, 238).

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