

# AMERICAN DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES: MIGRATION AND MYTH IN CLAUDE MCKAY'S TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

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## ABSTRACT

Literary critics have narrated Claude McKay's early-twentieth-century Jamaican American migration in terms of a popular conceptualization of the American dream. This essay analyzes the ways in which McKay wrote in terms of and against the popular rhetorical tropes of the American dream and the American nightmare, especially in poetry submitted to and published by American editors, magazines, journals, and presses. In effect, this essay exposes the degree to which McKay represented the realization of the American dream as a myth and the pursuit of the American dream as a nightmare, especially for black Caribbean migrants and African American citizens.

KEY WORDS: American literature, Caribbean literature, Claude McKay, Harlem Renaissance, migration, myth, poetry, protest poetry, twentieth-century literature.

## RESUMEN

Los críticos literarios han descrito la emigración de Claude McKay de Jamaica a Estados Unidos en la primera parte del siglo XX como una conceptualización popular del sueño americano. Este ensayo analiza cómo McKay escribió en función de y en contra de las metáforas retóricas populares del sueño americano y de la pesadilla americana, especialmente en la poesía que enviaba y le publicaban editores, revistas, publicaciones y prensa americanos. En efecto, este ensayo expone hasta qué punto McKay personificó la realización del sueño americano como mito y la búsqueda del sueño americano como pesadilla, especialmente para los emigrantes negros del Caribe y los ciudadanos afroamericanos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura americana, literatura caribeña, Claude McKay, Renacimiento de Harlem, emigración, mito, poesía, poesía política, literatura del siglo XX.

In the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, the American historian James Truslow Adams reconsidered centuries of American history in terms of the conceptualization and realization of the American dream. Adams identified the American dream as the defining factor of American history in *The Epic of America*, which originally was published in 1931: "If America has stood for anything unique





in the history of the world, it has been for the American dream, the belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one" (135). In the epilogue, Adams clarified, "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (404). In addition, Adams represented community and intellectualism as integral factors in the realization of a more equitable American social order (411).

In twentieth-century American poetry, the Jamaican-born Claude McKay protested black Caribbean migrants' and African American citizens' exclusion from the American dream of equal opportunity. Although McKay periodically represented the American-controlled Panama Canal Zone as place where Jamaican workers could pursue better salaries than in the West Indies, such as in the 1912 poem "Peasants' Ways o' Thinkin'" (11; lines 81-88), he subsequently and repeatedly protested the degree to which black Caribbean migrants and African American citizens did not experience equal opportunities on American soil.<sup>1</sup> In effect, McKay's twentieth-century American poetry repeatedly exposed the realization of the American dream as a myth and the pursuit of the American dream as a nightmare, especially for black Caribbean migrants and African American citizens.

Literary critics have alluded to the popular conceptualization of the American dream, an individual's successful pursuit of socioeconomic advancement on American soil, while narrating McKay's Jamaican American migration in 1912. In the introduction to McKay's American autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, which originally was published in 1937, for example, the African American sociologist St. Clair Drake wrote (Untermyer 788), "Claude McKay was one of the more talented individuals in the stream of immigrants from the British West Indies who have been seeking their fortune in the United States since the turn of the century" (Drake x). As the educated son of a Jamaican landowner (Maxwell xiii), McKay did not share West Indian economic refugees' need to pursue socioeconomic advancement on American soil. In the "American Beginning" section of *A Long Way from Home*, McKay mentioned two more reasons for his American migration: "education" and "a bigger audience" (4, 20).

The early-twentieth-century American publishing industry afforded McKay more opportunities than were available in Jamaica, which as late as 1948, did not have a "general means of publishing books" (Herring qtd. in Ramchand 73). McKay was one of many Caribbean writers and intellectuals who migrated to the United States and published work in America, including Cyril Briggs (Hill 432), W.A. Domingo (Lowney 417), Marcus Garvey (Hill 1091-92), Hubert Henry Harrison (Perry 1230), Adolphe Roberts (Herring qtd. in Ramchand 73), Joel Augustus Rogers

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<sup>1</sup> See William J. Maxwell's *Complete Poems: Claude McKay* for poetry references.

(Ahmed 2361), Arthur Schomburg (Lowney 417), and Eric Walrond (Lowney 417). In *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*, Kenneth Ramchand noted “the large numbers of West Indians who emigrated to the United States in the Harlem era and before the immigration laws of the 1920’s” (240). Although McKay rarely submitted verse to American editors during his early years in the United States when he studied at Tuskegee and in Kansas (Ohrimenko xvi), he submitted four 1916 poems, “In Memoriam: Booker T. Washington,” “Remorse,” “My Ethiopian Maid,” and “My Werther Days,” to William Stanley Braithwaite, a black contributor to the *Boston Evening Transcript* and editor of the *Anthology of Magazine Verse* (Maxwell 302-03; McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 26-27).

McKay’s earliest American poetry submissions signaled his English colonial education. McKay’s English-born mentor, Walter Jekyll, questioned the masculinity, rationality, and maturity of McKay’s writing in the preface to *Songs of Jamaica*, a collection of McKay’s poetry published in Jamaica in 1912 (*A Long Way from Home* 250). Jekyll introduced McKay’s “negro” writing as “a feminine version of masculine English; preeminently a language of love” and as “naïve” (qtd. in Maxwell 283-84). McKay embodied Jekyll’s infantilization, feminization, and sensualization of his poetry in his early American poetry submissions. In 1916 and 1917, McKay used the following two pseudonyms when submitting poetry to Braithwaite and *The Seven Arts*, a monthly American magazine (Hart 681): Rhonda Hope, which echoed the name of McKay’s daughter, Rhue Hope McKay; and Eli Edwards, which echoed McKay’s mother’s name, Hannah Ann Elizabeth Edwards McKay (Maxwell 303-04; McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 26).

In response to McKay’s early American poetry submissions, Braithwaite advised the author “because of the almost insurmountable prejudice against all things Negro... to write and send to the magazines only such poems as did not betray... racial identity” (*A Long Way from Home* 27). Although McKay continued to mask his gender in poetry published under the pseudonym Eli Edwards in *The Seven Arts* in 1917 (Maxwell 303-04; McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 26), McKay did not follow Braithwaite’s advice to mask his racial identity. The sonnet’s speaker in “Invocation” referred to “my sable face” and “the Ethiopian’s art” (132; lines 10-11), and the sonnet’s speaker in “The Harlem Dancer” described “black players” and the Harlem dancer’s “black shiny curls” (172; lines 4, 9). Eventually, McKay published poetry in America under his own name, and by extension, more openly alluded to his identity as an accomplished, black, male, Jamaican American migrant.

After McKay lived and worked in the socioeconomic base of American society, he also emphasized the ways in which America’s social mores of racial segregation restricted blacks’ socioeconomic advancement and movement on American soil. In 1918 and 1919, McKay published poetry in *Pearson’s Magazine* (Maxwell 304-305), which Frank Harris edited from 1916 to 1923 according to “a policy of being ‘frankly opposed to the mad individualism we Americans name Liberty’” (Hart 577). In “To the White Fiends” in 1918 (Maxwell 304), for example, McKay protested fiendish, savage white men’s murder “[o]f my black brothers” (132; line 4). In 1919 and 1922, McKay also published poetry in *The Liberator* (Maxwell 304-05, 309-10), which Max Eastman founded after the American government



“suppressed” *The Masses* in 1918 (Hart 477). In “The Dominant White,” which McKay published in *The Liberator* in 1919, McKay presaged a reckoning day for those who “stultify the dreams of visioned youth / All in the prostituted name of Duty” (135; line 33); however, he did not prescribe the means to amend America’s racially segregated socioeconomic system and national space.

During the “Red Summer” of 1919, a term which James Weldon Johnson coined to describe race riots and lynchings in the United States (Erickson 2293), McKay continued emphasizing America’s unequal treatment of blacks and whites. In “A Roman Holiday,” which McKay published in *The Liberator* during the summer of 1919 (Maxwell 305), McKay contrasted the “torture” of blacks in the American South with American aid for Europeans during World War I (137; lines 4-5, 13-14). Near the poem’s conclusion, the speaker satirized American democracy: “Bravo Democracy! Hail greatest Power / That saved sick Europe in her darkest hour!” (lines 13-14). Similarly in the second and final stanza of “The Little Peoples,” which McKay also published in *The Liberator* that summer (Maxwell 305), McKay stated,

But we, the blacks, less than the trampled dust,  
Who walk the new ways with the old dim eyes,—  
We to the ancient gods of greed and lust  
Must still be offered up as a sacrifice[.] (136; lines 9-12)

During the “Red Summer” of 1919 (Maxwell 332), McKay represented death as an inevitably bleak outcome for blacks in “If We Must Die,” one of his most popular (Hegler 23), republished (Ramchand 243), and quoted poems (Brathwaite 19):

If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead! (177; lines 5-8)

As Ramchand has noted, “The piece was reprinted in almost every pro-Negro magazine and newspaper in America” (243). In 1919, seven years after migrating to the United States, McKay physically distanced himself from the violent symptoms of America’s racially exclusive democracy and industry; he sailed to England.

Britons’ racism destabilized McKay’s youthful admiration of England. Londoners did not even want McKay to “[i]nn” temporarily in England (McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 57); they repeatedly refused to rent him a room when they realized he was black (303-04). Yet McKay contributed to *Negro World*, which McKay described as “the organ of the Garvey Back-to-Africa Movement” (67), and Sylvia Pankhurst’s *Workers’ Dreadnought* (76). Although McKay published *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* in London in 1920 without the racial protest poem, “If We Must Die” (Maxwell 307; McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 147), reviewers still wrote racist reviews of the collection of poetry (Drake xii; McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 88). Even the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, whom McKay had



regarded as “the wisest and most penetrating intellectual alive,” encouraged McKay to exchange poetry for a more lucrative career for a black man: boxing (McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 60-61). McKay continued writing in England until the Scotland Yard investigated, arrested, and deported people affiliated with the *Workers’ Dreadnought* (82-83, 86-87). Then McKay accepted financial assistance, including from an Industrial Workers of the World affiliate who may have been deported from America to England, to return to the United States (87).

In the 1920s and 1930s, McKay contrasted the visual beauty of America’s industrial cityscapes with the ways in which America the beautiful rejected and harmed him. In the “Back in Harlem” section of *A Long Way from Home*, McKay wrote the following on his 1921 return to the United States:

Oh, I wished that it were possible to know New York in that way only—as a masterpiece wrought for the illumination of sight, a splendor lifting aloft and shedding its radiance like a searchlight, making one big and great with feeling. Oh, that I should never draw nearer to descend into its precipitous gorges, where visions are broken and shattered and one becomes one of a million, average, ordinary, insignificant. (95)

Despite the ways in which America had “broken and shattered” his “visions,” McKay returned to New York; “The grim pioneer urge of the great pragmatic metropolis was a ferment in my feeling” (133). In McKay’s first collection of American verse, *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay*, which was published in 1922, McKay personified the modern American metropolis as a mistress who lured him away from the Jamaican countryside, which he represented as the speaker’s natural love in Jamaican verse, such as “Sukee River” in *Constab Ballads* in 1912 (126-29), and American verse, including “North and South” (159) and “When Dawn Comes to the City” (180-81) in *Harlem Shadows* in 1922.

In the poem “America,” which McKay originally published in *The Liberator* in 1921 and republished in *Harlem Shadows* in 1922 (Maxwell 315), the speaker personified America and its culture as a bestial, vampiristic, formidable female monarch who invigorated him even as she embittered, strangled, and tested him:

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate.  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood. (153; lines 1-7)

The speaker’s emphasis on America’s feline attributes and teeth gestures towards reading McKay’s navigation of America as an interaction with the alluring and threatening Freudian figure of the monstrous-feminine.

The speaker in the poem “America” apparently loved and feared the ways in which America seduced him. The speaker’s “erect” entry into America and the capitalist society that she symbolized authenticated McKay’s masculinity and inspired





McKay's writing, which brought him great personal joy (153; line 6). McKay has described the significance of publishing *Harlem Shadows* in America as follows: "The publication of my first American book uplifted me with the greatest joy of my life experience... For to me America was the great, difficult, hard world. I had gone a long, apparently roundabout way, but at least I had achieved my main purpose" (*A Long Way from Home* 148). The speaker's description of the potentially emasculating teeth of the fierce feline beast in "America," imagery which McKay also used in the 1920s to represent "American capitalism" as "extraordinarily aggressive" (*The Negroes in America* 31), and later in the 1940s to represent the American "white man," and by extension, American "Democracy" ("The Cycle" 259; lines 1, 4), also indicated the degree to which fear and exclusion accompanied McKay's penetration of America's attractive veneer.

In "The City's Love," which also was published in *Harlem Shadows* in 1922 (Maxwell 319), McKay elaborated on the city's rejection of him and other black migrants. According to the poem, the city would love the speaker if unaware of the speaker's "skin" and "alien" birth (158; lines 3-4): "The great, proud city, seized, with a strange love, / Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove" (lines 7-8). "The White House," which McKay published in *The Liberator* in 1922 (Maxwell 309), similarly emphasized McKay's strong sense of exclusion from America. According to McKay, the title symbolized "the vast modern edifice of American Industry from which Negroes were effectively barred as a group" (*A Long Way from Home* 313). Elsewhere McKay described America's social mores of racial segregation as "the white unwritten law which prohibits free social intercourse between colored and white" (*A Long Way from Home* 132). In addition, the middle-class elements of literary movements, such as Alain Leroy Locke's New Negro movement (Wright 1642), and the aesthetically restrictive elements of proletarian publications, such as Michael Gold's *The Liberator*, tested McKay's allegiance to literary movements and publications.

In the 1920s, McKay met black radicals in order to discuss increasing class-consciousness in such organization as "the Garvey Back-to-Africa Movement (officially called the Universal Negro Improvement Association," and he met with "some of the more conservative Negro leaders, such as the officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" (McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 109). McKay wrote that he "lost the rare feeling of a vagabond feeding upon secret music singing in [him]" after only briefly circulating with the black "elite" (114-15). McKay also lost his desire to work for *The Liberator* after Eastman resigned and Gold significantly limited the aesthetic scope of the magazine's content in order to emphasize proletarian issues (*A Long Way from Home* 138-39). Despite McKay's expressed alienation from twentieth-century radical and conservative movements and publications, he has emerged "as a central figure" for these movements and publications (Smethurst 356). As James Smethurst has clarified in *American Literary History*,

In recent years such scholars as William Maxwell, Kate Baldwin, Michelle Stephens, Winston James, and Brent Edwards have advanced the poet, novelist, and activist Claude McKay as a central figure of this new black internationalist radicalism of

the twentieth century, a figure who disrupts many long-held assumptions about the moment, movement, and even the sociogeographical context of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly as codified and promoted by Alain Locke in, among other places, the 1925 Harlem issue of the *Survey Graphic* that became the core of the anthology *The New Negro*. (356).

Shortly after *The Liberator* became affiliated with the Communist party in 1922 (Hart 477), McKay further broadened his experiences with “internationalist radicalism” (Smethurst 356). McKay worked as a stoker on an Atlantic steamer in order to travel to Russia, a geographical center of proletarian reorganization (Drake xiii; Maxwell xvi; McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 150, 158; Ohrimenko xviii).

After living and writing in Jamaica, the United States, England, and Russia, McKay acknowledged that America afforded people more freedom of expression than England or Russia (*A Long Way from Home* 179-80, 198). America also afforded black West Indians more economic opportunities than in the British West Indies; however, America still limited black Caribbean migrants’ and African American citizens’ “individual freedom” (*Negroes in America* 51). In *Negroes in America*, which McKay wrote while traveling through Russia in 1922 and 1923 (McLeod vii), McKay stated, “The American Negro is the nightmare of American democracy. It never knows peace because the black spirit stands before its eyes day and night” (*Negroes in America* 51). Furthermore, McKay grounded blacks’ limited “individual freedom” in “the American system of racial oppression.” In order to express the extreme degree to which white Americans excluded blacks in America, McKay stated, “in the United States there is not room for a Negro, even in the area of sports. Only in the national American sport called lynching is he assigned first place” (53). Yet leaders of black and proletarian organizations historically had not focused on organizing blacks “as a group and as workers” (*A Long Way from Home* 353; *The Negroes in America* 23), which McKay has described as “historically the most exploited class in American life” (*The Negroes in America* 23).

Although McKay expressed blacks’ ability to organize as workers in America and his “love with the large rough unclassical rhythms of American life” (*A Long Way from Home* 244), he traveled through Europe after he left Russia. “[A]ntiradical surveillance,” according to Maxwell, “did its part to dislocate McKay from a number of black modernist movements, including the Harlem Renaissance” (xviii). In Europe, McKay read and discussed modernist literature, including James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha,” and Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (246-49). Whereas McKay questioned the originality of Stein’s work (248), he valued the modernity of D.H. Lawrence’s work, “the sexual inquietude and the incertitude of this age, and the psychic and romantic groping for a way out” (247), and the “artistic illumination of a certain quality of American civilization” in Hemingway’s work, that is, “the hard-boiled contempt for and disgust with sissyness expressed among all classes of Americans” (252). Ironically, McKay’s physical distance from modernists in the United States and proximity to modernists in Europe played a significant role in his movement towards the center of literary discussions on the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude, which Léopold Sédar Senghor has described as “*the sum of*



*the cultural values of the black world; that is, a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe*" (28). While living in Europe and Africa, McKay adapted his own experiences as an educated Caribbean migrant working in the American service industry in his first and best-selling novel, *Home to Harlem* (Cooper ix; Maxwell xix), and his experiences traveling through Europe in *Home to Harlem's* sequel, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*.

In *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, McKay gestured towards Pan-African solutions to modern American imperialism in the Caribbean and capitalist exclusion and exploitation in the United States. As John Lowney observed in "Haiti and Black Transnationalism: Remapping the Migrant Geography of *Home to Harlem*," "Ray's narrative in fact underscores the hegemonic power of primitivist stereotyping as it appeals to a pan-Africanist vision that can embrace such divergent experiences as those of Jake and Ray, of the African American and the African Caribbean, of the proletarian and the intellectual" (421). On the characters in *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, Leah Rosenberg similarly stated, "The internationalism of the group is an explicit rejection of nationhood" (223). Near the conclusion of *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, McKay specifically criticized the American nation vis-à-vis Ray's thoughts on the relationship among morality, social Darwinism, and racism: "It seemed a social wrong to him that, in a society rooted and thriving on the principles of the 'struggle for existence' and the 'survival of the fittest' a black child should be brought up on the same code of social virtues as the white. Especially an American black child" (319), because "the Negro child was a pathetic thing, entirely cut off from its own folk wisdom and earnestly learning the trite moralisms of a society in which he was, as a child and would be as an adult, denied any legitimate place." In effect, McKay used American racism to question the morality of believing in the realization of the American dream.

In *Banana Bottom*, the first novel that McKay published after the American historian Adams popularized the concept of the American dream in *The Epic of America*, McKay even more strongly rejected the American dream concept for West Indians. McKay emphasized the ways in which economic migration to the American-controlled Panama Canal Zone negatively affected West Indian migrants and West Indian communities. As the Reverend Priscilla Craig stated early in the novel, which was published in 1933, "Yes, but it is a pity that that Canal is swallowing up some of our best native lads who might be better here using their talents as preachers and teachers" (35). By extension, McKay rejected American imperialism in the Caribbean, which Adams also criticized in *The Epic of America*. On America's means of leasing the "Canal Zone" in perpetuity," Adams stated, "The rawness of such imperialistic methods beat almost anything that Europe had been guilty of or anything which the worst of our 'Christian men' might have attempted in the business world" (357). In *Banana Bottom*, McKay proposed a clear solution to American imperialism in the Panama Canal Zone and the outbound migration of 146,000 Jamaicans from 1888 to 1920 (Maxwell xiv); he proposed a return to one's cultural roots and native land vis-à-vis the novel's English-educated Jamaican protagonist, Bita Plant (1, 314-15). Yet McKay returned to the United States and did not return to Jamaica before his death in 1947.



The Harlem Renaissance had faded by the time McKay returned to the United States in 1934 (Lewis 1199), and McKay's romanticized portrait of America the beautiful continued to crumble under the pressure of America's nightmarish realities. Since McKay earned little from his prolific literary career (Maxwell xix), he entered a work camp and worked with the Federal Writers' Project (Maxwell 367-68), the United States government's work-relief program for writers and researchers (Hart 244). In the circa 1934 poem "Dreams" (Maxwell 219), which McKay included in the "Years Between" section of his 1935 "New Poems by Claude McKay" notebook (351), the speaker confessed that dreams had devolved into "horrible nightmares" (219; line 2):

They are not bountiful now as before  
More often they are horrible nightmares,  
So many have been murdered in the roar  
And bloody terror of the marring years. (lines 1-4)

In the second and concluding stanza of "Dreams," the speaker stated,

O I have even drugged myself to dream  
Of dear dead things, trembling with hope to capture  
The sunlit ripples laughing on the stream  
That bathed my boyhood days in foamy rapture. (lines 9-12)

The speaker, like the educated Haitian American migrant Ray in *Home to Harlem* (157), used drugs to cope with the "horrible nightmares" ("Dreams" 219; line 3) and "that the old dreams were shattered" (*Home to Harlem* 228). Ray's drug usage in *Home to Harlem* similarly resulted in dreams of his Caribbean "home" (157). In the circa 1934 poem, "New York," which McKay also included in the 1935 "New Poems by Claude McKay" notebook (Maxwell 367), the speaker stated, "Our thoughts, our dreams are little prostitutes" (240; line 32). In other words, McKay's prolonged separation from his Jamaican homeland apparently haunted him while he pursued literary dreams abroad.

In the 1940s, McKay used religion to emphasize and reorganize racial and class divisions. Early in "The Cycle," a collection of poems which McKay unsuccessfully attempted to publish in his lifetime, the speaker identified with Jesus Christ (Maxwell 368):

But though I suffered much I bore  
My cross and lived to put my trouble in song  
I stripped down harshly to the naked core  
Of hatred based on the essential wrong! (241; lines 5-8).

In "The Cycle," McKay also used the Bible to move beyond protesting perceived injustices and to propose solutions to injustices, such as America's focus on extending democracy to foreigners while oppressing blacks in the United States:

Remove the beam  
(Nearly two thousand years since Jesus spoke)



From your own eye before the mote you deem  
It proper from your neighbor's to extract! (253; lines 6-9)

After McKay joined the Catholic Church in 1944 (Drake xxi; Maxwell 384), he also published socially-conscious religious poetry in such publications as the *Catholic Worker* (Maxwell 385). In "The New Day," which McKay published in the *Interracial Review* one year prior to his death (Maxwell 387), for example, the speaker stated the following on "The Christ Child" (273; line 12): "His power through the world must penetrate / Till it is cleansed of cruelty and hate" (lines 13-14). In effect, McKay ultimately used Biblical allusions to inspire people to work collectively towards making a more equitable world. In this sense, McKay's rhetorical methods in the forties prefigured those of Martin Luther King Jr. in the sixties, who then also used religion in such popular speeches as "I Have a Dream" to expose injustices and to promote unity across racial, class, and national lines (Washington 217).

In conclusion, after McKay migrated to the United States in 1912, he used varying means, including proletarian writing in the 1920s and religious sonnets in the 1940s, to expose, protest, and change the ways in which America and Americans limited black Caribbean migrants' and African American citizens' experience of equal opportunity. Over time, McKay moved from protesting injustices related to American racism and imperialism to proposing national, transnational, and even global solutions to racial and class divisions. In effect, McKay's twentieth-century poetry and prose repeatedly represented the early-to-mid-twentieth century realization of the popular American dream trope of an individual's successful socioeconomic advancement through hard work as a myth and the pursuit of American dreams as accompanied by personal and collective nightmares, especially for black Caribbean migrants and African American citizens. More broadly, McKay's early-twentieth-century American migration and American publication history from the teens through the forties supplements traditional accounts of West Indian literature, which have focused on West Indian authors' "Drift Towards the Audience" in England (Ramchand 63). Early-to-mid-twentieth century Caribbean authors and intellectuals also migrated to the United States and published significant work in America in terms of and against the rhetorical tropes of American dreams and nightmares.

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