

## Bita Plant as Literary Intellectual: The Anticolonial Public Sphere and *Banana Bottom*

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From his early poetry to his work as a journal editor to his novels or autobiographical reflections, Claude McKay's career was closely tied to the establishment of a literary public sphere—the idea that publication and debate could create a forum to give all parts of society a voice in the governance of the nation through free and open criticism of society and the state. In this essay, I will examine *Banana Bottom* as an exploration of the possibility for that kind of Jamaican public sphere, as well as an evaluation of the representatives who such a public sphere might empower. The novel articulates the anticolonial ideal of the intellectual whose authority is literary, not only because it makes him or her especially attuned to listening to and speaking for all parts of the nation but also because it allows him or her to stand apart from colonial social structures and capitalist instrumental reason. In *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature*, Leah Rosenberg describes how middle-class writers of the colonial era such as C.L.R. James or Alfred Mendes positioned themselves as “giving voice” to the nation through their twin depictions of the upper class as unsuited to the task and the lower class as in need of representation to enter the public sphere. *Banana Bottom*, through its critique of popular modes of expression like gossip, participates in this advocacy for a literary public sphere; but the novel also shows how even within this middle class, conflicts existed over who is best-suited to occupy this role of spokesperson. I want to examine the divide within the middle class between the literary and the technocratic to discuss how anticolonial writers sought to occupy the space of the literary as a way of distinguishing themselves from the utilitarian ideologies of the professional middle class.

The standard reading of *Banana Bottom* is of the novel's protagonist, Bita Plant, rejecting her early allegiance to European high culture and discovering the pleasures of Jamaican popular culture. As the back cover of the 1986 Pluto Press edition of *Banana Bottom* puts it, “rejecting her European education, Bita is emotionally drawn to her Black culture” such that “her search for independence coincides with the rediscovery of her roots.” Kenneth Ramchand summarizes the novel as depicting how Bita “gradually strips away what is irrelevant in her English upbringing” (259). *Banana Bottom* thus demonstrates the successful process of “self-assertion” (272) that leads to “Bita's final liberation and embrace of the folk” (260), an emplotment of West Indian history that Alison Donnell points out dovetails nicely with the nationalist project. The marriage to Jubban is seen as the final achievement of this process: in Wayne Cooper's words, “Instead of marriage to a proper black clergyman, educated to disdain the folk life of the peasants, she chooses to marry her father's drayman, Jubban, whose strength and reliability are

emphasized by his total commitment to traditional farming. [...] With the creation of *Banana Bottom*, McKay's picaresque search for psychic unity and stability, begun with *Home to Harlem*, came full circle to rest in the lost paradise of his pastoral childhood" (282). Like Cooper, other critics often read this process within the context of McKay's novelistic trajectory as a whole, as when Tyrone Tillery argues for *Banana Bottom* as McKay's "last attempt to advance the theme he had unsuccessfully begun in *Home to Harlem* and carried through to *Banjo*: that Western civilization was the Negro's cultural hell and should be rejected in favour of the simple values of the 'folk'" (129).

Recent readers have begun to question this reading: Belinda Edmondson, for example, notices that rather than Bitá distancing herself from European high culture, that culture maintains its prestige throughout the novel and even into the final scenes of her reading Blake and Pascal. The novel narrates Bitá's rejection of a series of potential suitors on her way to eventually choosing Jubban, clearly ending with her marriage to the folk. But as Bitá explores and discards these different possibilities, Edmondson rightly notes that the novel never really rejects the character most directly associated with European high culture, Squire Gensir; Rhonda Cobham even makes the case that far from rejecting Gensir, Bitá eventually marries her body to Jubban but her mind to the Englishman (143). Critics often chalk up McKay's inability to fully reject Europe to his middle-class background: Edmondson calls this the "paradox [...] engendered by the position of black West Indian intellectuals [...] who in effect mediated between English discursive and African-derived political systems" (37). Rosenberg concurs, that "even as McKay inverts Jamaica's moral order by legitimating peasant practices, he betrays his indebtedness to the middle-class cultural nationalism that he criticizes" (118). In these readings, *Banana Bottom* thus cannot quite fulfill the radical politics to which it aspires. Maureen Lewis and Rupert Lewis make this case most explicitly, calling "McKay's principle failure in the novel" (45) his "simplistic handling of emotional interaction" that "derives from his simplistic depiction of inter-class relationships" (48); "the root of this ambivalence lies firmly in McKay's class background—that he grew up in a British colony, that he came from the peasantry, that his father was a prosperous farmer, and that his family therefore occupied leadership status in the local community" (50). Instead of the earlier reading of *Banana Bottom*, as Bitá (and by extension, the author) successfully casting off privilege and aligning with the folk, these readings argue that McKay's location within the middle class prevent him from accomplishing that objective.

But what if the "middle class" to which McKay belonged is thought of not as homogeneous, but itself a conflicted entity? We might then read *Banana Bottom* as built around a conflict within the Jamaican middle class rather than between Jamaica and Europe; the novel's political project may not be the casting off of Europe, but an examination of racial as well as occupational differences within the

Jamaican middle class, to make the case for the best form of leadership for the local nation. As much as Bitá's education in Europe provides a backdrop for the story, that experience is already in the past when the novel begins; as the novel moves forward in time it invests much more narrative energy in depicting and critiquing class and race hierarchy within Jamaica than in rebuking Britain or its presence in the West Indies. What the novel explores through Bitá's different suitors are various models of middle class allegiance, so that the primary opposition is not really between European literary culture and Jamaican popular culture. What Bitá ends up rejecting is becoming part of the professional technocratic middle class in order to value another alternative middle class identity—the literary intellectual—as part of the case for the writer's role in Caribbean anticolonialism.

The idea of the writer as literary intellectual, particularly well-suited to leading the nation, underlies many of the publishing ventures of the modern colonial period. These newspapers, journals, and novels formed an early literary public sphere, together articulating the idea that publication could create a forum which could give all parts of society a voice in the future of the nation through public debate. McKay's early career is closely connected to the institutions of the modern colonial period's nascent Caribbean public sphere, with his early poetry published from 1910 to 1912 in Kingston newspapers the *Daily Gleaner* and the *Jamaica Times*. McKay's poem "The Daily Gleaner," published in that newspaper in December of 1911, posits the newspaper as a discursive space open to all—"read by white man, read by nigger"—and explicitly equates its founding in 1834 with freedom for "cullud folks" (McKay, *Collected Poems* 5). The poetry McKay publishes in Jamaica from 1910 to 1912, as Winston James discusses, explicitly means to speak for those traditionally excluded from this public sphere—poems such as "Quashie to Buccra" voices the point of view of a "we" meant to indicate the black peasantry, while others such as "Passive Resistance" name a "we" that is the urban underclass. *Banana Bottom*, though, steps away from trying to directly speak in those voices—the voices of the folk—and I'm interested in this distancing strategy on McKay's part as typical of and perhaps even demanded by literary anticolonialism. The novels remain invested in the wisdom of that folk's knowledge, but with an awareness that even McKay's early poetry is not the unmediated voice of a group: even if we are willing to take McKay as articulating the perspective of a member of the underclass, the poet as individual is condensing the multiple perspectives of a plural and diverse group of people, and as spokesperson necessarily becomes a mediator between that group and a broader audience. *Banana Bottom* focuses much more on this process of representation: the novel reflects on the public sphere as a vehicle for the pedagogy and leadership necessary for creating the nation, as well as the qualities this mediator needs in order to fairly represent the hopes and aspirations of the Jamaican public.

*Banana Bottom* begins by establishing both the lack of an ideal literary public sphere in the Jamaica it describes, as well as the institutions that the peas-

ants do create, such as the local church where Bitá's return is received, which serve as a black counterpublic. While the novel opens by introducing Bitá and briefly sketching out the social relations in the town—setting up in the second paragraph an opposition between “the folk of the tiny country town of Jubilee” and “the Press and official persons” (McKay 1)—the story almost immediately takes what appears to be a 6-page digression to tell the story of Crazy Bow. The detour eventually arrives at Crazy Bow's connection to Bitá's story, as it is their sexual encounter that gets her sent to be educated in England. But investing so much narrative space at the beginning to establishing Crazy Bow's back-story makes him the first of what will become a series of men who become mirrors for Bitá and show us what paths she might take. His story begins with his descent from the “strange liberator” and “progenitor” (3) of Banana Bottom, a “Scotchman [who] bought the vast mountain estate of Banana Bottom, liberated the slaves and married one of the blackest of them” (2). The story of this village's origins, then, blurs the distinction between European and West Indian, suggesting right away that this will not be the central division within the novel. As important as shade may be to the hierarchy the novel describes, it is always tied to the class system, so that the progenitor's descendents are distinguished by being “hardy peasants” but not “little politicians or preachers” (3). The distinction here is not just between peasant and middle class, but between the kinds of work each group does, as the “Scotchman” is described as “the passive enemy of word-mongering people” (3). The folk and their honest work are thus set up against the intellectuals and their “word-mongering,” although Crazy Bow himself offers a hint as to how the novel attempts to resolve that conflict: while he is described as having “an intellectual bent” (4), he expresses himself through music rather than words. Though he is thus an intellectual, his talents lie with the sensual instead of the logical: Rhonda Cobham points out that both he and Squire Gensir embody for Bitá “a culture of sensibility” (136) that is more intuitive than rational. The intellectual as artist thus lays the groundwork for a formulation of the literary intellectual who commands words, but can still be distinguished from the more calculating leaders of society.

Crazy Bow's tragedy is an inability to find a place where his artistic expression can be recognized. Described as an especially “precocious child” who early demonstrates artistic talent and even has the advantage of light skin, Crazy Bow is sent to school with the hope that “the boy would be good for an official job some day” (4). But during his education his love of music “knocked everything else out of his head. Composition and mathematics and the ambition to enter the Civil Service” (5). Crazy Bow is in this way an alter ego for Bitá, who despite being darker-skinned is nonetheless destined for a “nice bringing-up” (14) and of the class “bound on a preaching or teaching way, the main civilizing professions of the dark peasantry” (15). This career-oriented track is only diverted by Bitá's attraction to Crazy Bow. By learning his story, we can see that what is deemed craziness is in fact his preference to follow his artistic longing rather than a practical career,

especially in a place where “there were no pianos in Banana Bottom” (6). When Crazy Bow returns later in the novel, Bitá recognizes him as “a true artist” whose performances make his listeners weep, but one who still has no place and “was always wandering” (257). Crazy Bow thus presents for Bitá an alternative to entry into the traditional professional class even while his story acts as a warning about the inability of the sensitive intellectual to draw nourishment from his or her people or to locate himself or herself in the local space.

At the same time that Crazy Bow’s story demonstrates the lack of opportunities for local intellectuals and artists, his outcome demonstrates an additional danger in the absence of a free and rational public sphere: throughout *Banana Bottom*, gossip is presented as a mode of disseminating knowledge that circumvents official channels but repeatedly results in misunderstanding and tragedy. Gossip appears frequently in Caribbean literature of the modern colonial period as a sort of counterpublic where those excluded from the dominant public sphere pass along knowledge; yard fiction like C.L.R. James’s “Triumph” and *Minty Alley* or Alfred Mendes’s *Black Fauns* deploy gossip and rumor as a way for its working-class characters—especially black women—to pass along information relevant to them but ignored by dominant forms of communication. In *Banana Bottom*, gossip appears regularly, as when it is announced that Bitá will be going abroad and “the peasants [...] gossiped about nothing else” (29), or when the reader learns of Herald Newton Day’s fall from grace as “the rumour ran through the region that [he] had suddenly turned crazy and defiled himself with a nanny goat” (175). Gossip transmits knowledge back and forth between Banana Bottom and Jubilee and crosses all class lines; even when Bitá’s adoption by the Craigs makes her seem to be “too high above Banana Bottom” (88) and too removed from the everyday life of her neighbors to be ever again subject of “evil gossip” (88), after her trip to a tea-meeting she finds that the circulation of rumors and stories knows no boundaries. When the Craigs and the Days discuss “the controversial articles in the daily newspaper” (96) or Teacher Fearon leads one of the “debating and [...] literary societies” that “nearly all the villages had” (239), they participate in a literary public sphere but one available to them only because of their privileged status; gossip appears throughout the novel as a more democratic, oral alternative.

While the novel explores gossip as this sort of counterpublic, it is also frequently the catalyst for harmful or even disastrous results. After the sexual encounter between Crazy Bow and Bitá that the novel suggests is natural and consensual, Bitá’s father tries to “hush the matter up” but cannot now that Sister Phibby Patroll, the “village looselip” (10) whose name suggests the disciplinary side of her activity, has begun to spread news of a rape; as a result, Crazy Bow is given over to the institutions of the official state, tried by an unsympathetic “criminal court” (11) and institutionalized in a madhouse, while Bitá is sent abroad and uprooted from her home. Sister Phibby’s gossip repeatedly leads to this sort of danger or

harm, including Pap Legge's death (147) as well as Tack Tally's suicide after he is mistakenly led to believe that his participation in obeah killed Pap Legge (151). The novel's final tragedy comes when a hurricane strikes and the island's telegraph system fails. Amidst this void of official news, wild rumors spread about the destruction suffered in Jubilee, prompting the white missionary Malcolm Craig and Bitá's father to die trying to get back to the village. As the novel puts it, "thus Malcolm Craig went down to his death carrying Jordan Plant. And all because of exaggerated news" (284). In addition to the unreliability of gossip, the novel also presents it as sometimes manipulated by malicious actors. In the early story of how the peasants of Banana Bottom try to collectivize to get a fair price for their coffee, the experiment is undermined as "some native persons, chiefly those who were employed in minor posts by the whites as shop clerks, foremen on estates or domestics, and who delighted in putting on airs over those who tilled the soil" (20) spread rumours that destroy the peasants' confidence in their collective. These false leaders—who are in this incident and elsewhere connected to religious opportunists like Jacob Brown and Evan Vaughan—mislead and misinform the peasants for their own gain. This trope of gossip as a dangerous counterpublic created by the restrictiveness of the official public sphere suggests McKay's interest in exploring how groups excluded from official discourse still express themselves; but associating gossip with what the novel depicts as the irrational practices of obeah and "loose-lipped" women becomes part of the case for how the codification of those networks by male literary intellectuals would benefit the entire nation.

The "minor" functionaries and managers who undermine the plan for collective action are the first of a series of technocrats and professionals who become the novel's foils or even villains. As much as *Banana Bottom* demonstrates a desire for the creation of a more formal public sphere where community desires might be openly articulated, the novel shows its suspicion of the class of leaders who were already dominating the existing versions of this forum. Bitá's personal story of deciding on a mate thus becomes a reflection on the various possible entry points into the colonial middle class, whether in the materialism offered by Tack Tally's association with the United States or the respectability of Herald Newton Day's position in the church. This question of who she will marry—a question with which everyone in the novel concerns themselves, from the Craigs trying to arrange a marriage for her, to her English schoolmates who wonder "what kind of man" (82) he will be, "a white one" or "a cannibal" (83), to the conversation between Busha Glengley and Squire Gensir about whether or not "her education has put her out of touch with her own people" (129)—becomes a primary means for the novel to address the issues of acculturation, upward mobility and the future of the Jamaican nation.

As a man who makes his living through the use of words, Herald Newton is himself an intellectual. He appears as Bitá's most serious potential mate and is another of her male alter egos: Herald Newton is also a project of the Craigs, who

nearly adopt him before deciding to adopt Bitá (28) and sponsor an education for him that creates what Kenneth Ramchand calls “a Negro who gets a white man’s education and learns to despise his own people” (269). Carolyn Cooper thus sees Bitá retracing the same “split” in Day created by his “formal education” (42), a model which she must move away from as she “deconstructs the education she receives” (52). Rhonda Cobham argues that along with their parallels, what distinguishes Bitá and Herald Newton is differing levels of allegiance to European culture, that “unlike Bitá, Day embraces his position of social and intellectual inferiority to his white patrons” (140). In framing his desire for Bitá in terms of her nearness to whiteness—in declaring his intention to marry her, he notes that she has “been trained like a pure-minded white lady” (McKay 100)—he certainly seems to be what Cobham calls a “racial sycophant” (141). As frequently as the novel articulates Herald Newton’s relationship with his people in terms of race, though, it also calls attention to his relationship as preacher to the people as audience: after one sermon he tells Bitá “I kept imagining all the time that it was a bigger and better audience” (McKay 99), and later the narrative notes with some derision that he doesn’t vary his sermons depending on context, but speaks “in the same tone [...] without much thought of the audience” (108-9).

As much as Herald Newton is victim to a colonized racial consciousness, then, he is also caught up in a certain idea about professionalism as well as in the limitations of his chosen vocation; this insensitivity of the specific needs of the Jamaican public suggests the ways in which the sermon or lecture is a less suited model of leadership than a mode of teaching that can listen to and engage in dialogue with the pedagogical subjects. Herald Newton’s concept of the professionalized intellectual comes across as Bitá notices how “he enjoyed being addressed as reverend” (166). Herald Newton appears to be pursuing his theological studies primarily to obtain a position, precisely the idea of education Bitá denounces in the novel’s final scene: “well, she thought, if my education has been wasted it is a happy waste. They were right perhaps who said it was wasted who believed that the real aims of education were diplomas and degrees and to provide things of snobbery and pretension” (314). She is certainly not rejecting the idea of education here, or even the values that it has taught her: she is rejecting the “realm of the practical, which her higher training had always emphasized” (191), and aligning herself with something different from “training,” the idea that the life of the mind should be pursued purely for its own pleasures.

Herald Newton Day comes out of the clerical tradition that represents in the novel both upward mobility for the individual and a potential source of leadership for the community; his eventual discrediting and flight from the story suggests the novel’s overall emphasis on that tradition’s limitations. Bitá’s cousin Bab, who “did not warm to the notion of a pedagogic or clerical career” (54), pursues what appears to be the only other alternative, entry into the Civil Service. As with Crazy

Bow, the Civil Service is thus presented as “the place where all the intelligent light-coloured young men went” (9) and the most sensible route out of the peasantry. Raised by Bita’s father and the son of the same aunt who raised Bita, Bab is yet another of Bita’s male alter egos: he is even the first to develop a relationship with Squire Gensir, who is described as Bab’s “mentor” and opens his library to Bab just as he will later to Bita (and while critics frequently think of Bita as McKay’s fictional alter ego, Bab seems in many ways more similar to the author). *Banana Bottom* targets this Civil Service as much as the church as a pursuit at best empty and at worst opportunistic and corrupt. Bab himself becomes disillusioned with this career—especially when learning how little chance for advancement he will have as a black man—and leaves the novel after he “emigrated to the United States” (234).

Bita learns another brief but important lesson about this profession when she visits the home of the “native gentleman [who] held a handsome post in one of the Civil Service departments” (214). Mrs. Craig brings Bita to his house just as she is getting involved with Hopping Dick—the implication is that the patron wants to match Bita with the younger brother “who had just graduated from a local college and who also expected to enter the Civil Service” (214)—but Bita is horrified when she realizes that while the man “possessed a fine library where he always entertained,” he uses the books only for show: “she pulled out one volume after the other and all were uncut,” and the Civil Servant admits “I don’t read much besides the newspapers [...] But it’s nice to furnish a room like this with fine books and bookcases. It is the fashion and gives distinction” (214-215). In owning and displaying these books only for the status that they give him, this character shows the professional class’ interest in utility as incompatible with a real appreciation of the literary.

This critique of the colonial middle class and of the practical should not be mistaken for a wholesale condemnation of expertise. On other occasions, for example in terms of knowledge of the land or agricultural techniques, the novel suggests the need for someone sensitive enough to understand the special knowledge the folk possesses, but who can also maintain the distance that allows that knowledge to be translated, understood and even taught. Imported agricultural schemes are depicted as bound to failure because of a lack of attention to local conditions; similarly, the novel describes the “agricultural instructor visiting the village” and badly advising the peasants to plow rather than burn the bush. Bita’s father, Jordan, ignores the advice, and “the result was his reaping the finest crops while his neighbors, who had followed academic advice, failed” (274). The theories of the professional, technocratic class fail in this example, leading to the conclusion that “sometimes even trained instructors had to learn from the ignorant instinctive man” (275). But the word “sometimes” is key here: in this same passage, the point is emphasized that many of the peasants aren’t as attuned to the needs of the land as Jordan Plant, and



just a paragraph later, the novel notes that “nevertheless the Agricultural Society, since its inception, had by lectures and demonstrations rendered invaluable service to the peasantry” (275), teaching techniques such as rotation and diversification of their crops. This passage demonstrates the tension between a valuing of local, rooted knowledge on the one hand and the desire for a pedagogical project that uses the expertise of those like Jordan who are more sensitive interpreters and better able to sort out the positive or useful parts of that knowledge. This tension—between an investment in folk knowledge and a desire for a rationalization of that knowledge—crystallizes the novel’s ambivalence towards folk practices like gossip and obeh as well as intellectual desires for representational and pedagogical projects.

In the context of this ambivalence, *Banana Bottom* posits the literary intellectual, sympathetic to the people in a way that the professional class cannot be, as the representative of these people in the public sphere. Even while this sensitivity attunes the literary intellectual to the folk, the act of representation requires a distancing from that subaltern status, which is why Bitá may marry the folk, but she will not be the folk herself. This becomes clear in the scene that seems at first to suggest that Bitá has finally cast off the high culture she had been initiated into: just after symbolically destroying her assimilationist past by tearing up the photo of her British school, Bitá goes to a revival meeting and is overtaken by the power of the drums. Despite her earlier reserve, in this scene the drums overpower her and she joins the dancers, becoming “mesmerized by the common fetish spirit [...] filled with an ancient nearly-forgotten spirit, something ancestral recaptured in the emotional fervour” (McKay 250). Ramchand cites this scene as evidence of Bitá’s “return to the folk” (272) as the narrative describes dancers losing their individuality and becoming “curious whirling shapes” and “bodies” (McKay 250). But in precisely this moment when Bitá becomes closest to oneness with those around her, Jubban grabs her and rescues her from the scene (a parallel to Jubban rescuing her a few pages later from potential rape by the son of a local white planter). The novel explains why she needs to be saved: the threat is that she “would pitch down like dead and be supple-jacked by the older initiates until they were all one united circle” (252). In other words, the fear is precisely that Bitá will lose her individuality and become one with the “united circle”, which while desirable on some level is ultimately something from which the novel has to save her. Bitá needs to maintain the distance that she ultimately recovers in the last pages of the novel through reading Blake and Pascal, or she will end up like the narrator of the Martin Carter poem “Groaning in the Wilderness,” who listens to a suffering man turned into a dog and then can literally do nothing but bark; if the poet actually becomes the dog, too, then he can’t produce a critique of the conditions that turn a man into a dog.

In Carter’s poetry, there is a need for some distance to translate that suffering into a form of knowledge that can be used in the decolonization process.

This distancing is different from the professionalism the novel critiques, that is defined by an instrumentality to which the literary can provide an antidote. Bitá consistently finds herself learning to value sensitivity and feeling, such as “the pure joy Bitá felt in the simple life” of the peasantry, a joy that the novel describes as “childlike,” “unconscious” and that she “could not reason and theorize” (41). Similarly, in her romantic choices, Bitá must learn to be sensitive to her desires and value feelings that go beyond the rational: while she is relieved to not have to marry Herald Newton Day because “her physical self recoiled from” him (McKay 110), she realizes that if he hadn’t left she would have gone through with the wedding “even though her spirit and her body were resistant” (180).

James Giles, in a chapter called “The Novels: Instinct versus Intellect,” makes a case for this as the central pivot in McKay’s fiction and sees Bitá as the “ideal wedding of instinct and intellect” (20); Carolyn Cooper calls this the “body/mind split” (42) in *Banana Bottom*, and sees marriage to Jubban as resolution of that split in favor of the body. But ending the novel with Bitá reading Pascal, where she decides that “the most beautiful of all things” is “the pure flight of the mind into the upper realms of thought” (McKay 314), makes clear that despite the novel’s celebration of spontaneity or sensitivity, it is not rejecting the life of the mind. This final celebration of unfettered creativity—what we might call “thought for thought’s sake”—reminds us that even her desire for Jubban, the folk, or the irrational has an intellectual component: just as other writers from the 1930s and 40s like Aimé Césaire or Alejo Carpentier were drawn to irrationalism via surrealism, McKay turns towards a value-system opposed to capitalism’s instrumental reason in order to valorize the literary intellectual over the professional or technocratic elite.

McKay expresses his own idea of his literary inclination as early as the preface to *Constab Ballads*, his second poetry collection published in 1912. McKay describes how he “had not in me the stuff that goes to the making of a good constable; for I am so constituted that imagination outruns discretion.” McKay imagines that his tendency towards creativity makes him unfit for civil service, but it gives him advantages in other potential endeavors: he possesses “a peculiar sensitiveness which made certain forms of discipline irksome, and a fierce hatred of injustice [...] to relieve my feelings, I wrote poems” (qtd. in Winston James 55). These qualities—unbounded creativity, a poetic sensitivity, empathy for others—McKay here identifies as what make him a poet, and would be precisely those qualities that anticolonial intellectuals from José Martí to C.L.R. James to Jacques Roumain would emphasize as making the literary intellectual particularly well-suited to speaking for and leading the excluded masses.

Alison Donnell points to how literary histories that have emphasized writers like Martí, James, Roumain or McKay because of their politics have also failed to account for major figures like J.E.C. McFarlane and their adherence to an ideology of aestheticism seemingly at odds with anticolonial commitment. Yet the

notion of the literary which Donnell describes—the idea that McFarlane and others “deemed it their obligation as poets to occupy the aesthetic and spiritual high ground” (15)—is a crucial component within the work of writers identified with anticolonial politics like McKay.

As different as McKay’s ideas may have been from those of someone like McFarlane in regards to religion or the British empire, both men display a similar reverence for the literary as opposed to the practical. When Bitá reads Blake and finds it “holding the spirit up, up, aloft, proving poetry the purest sustenance of life, scaling by magic and all the colours of passion the misted heights where science cannot rise and religion fails and even love is powerless” (McKay 268), she sounds similar to McFarlane’s observation, in a 1935 lecture titled “The Challenge of Our Times,” that “it is thought, and thought alone, that exercises sovereign sway” (McFarlane 28); and while McFarlane’s politics may not seem recognizably nationalist, the idea he expresses later in the same address that “the greatest bane of our present existence is to be found in the over-emphasis which has been laid upon material things” (McFarlane 33) certainly echoes what I have been describing as McKay’s opposition to capitalist instrumentality. As Donnell shows through noting how McFarlane operated in many of the same literary institutions as writers more easily identifiable as anticolonialists like Roger Mais, McFarlane’s overlaps with McKay demonstrate how these writers are staking out different but clearly related territory within a public sphere in which distinguishing the literary intellectual from the professional class is as urgent a political project as a critique of Europe.

Literary historians from the nationalist moment forward have noticed how the anticolonial writing project depends on the ability of the writer to confidently imagine alliance with the working class and peasantry; in this essay, my goal has been to call attention to how that process is simultaneously coupled with the literary intellectual distinguishing himself or herself from the professional middle class as part of a rivalry within that class for leadership of the nation. McKay’s novel is part of the general case made by writers from throughout the region during the modern colonial era for the literary intellectual as leaders of Caribbean anticolonialism as opposed to the technocratic elite of the island, whether in José Martí’s critique of the “artificial intelligentsia” (290) in “Nuestra América,” Aimé Césaire’s advocacy for “the revenge of Dionysus over Apollo” (135-6) in “Poetry and Knowledge,” or even George Lamming’s dismissal of John Hearne as a “first-class technician” in *The Pleasures of Exile*. Bitá’s marriage to Jubban is only part of the story of how *Banana Bottom* invests its hopes in a literary intellectual class married to the physical power of the peasantry as the future for the nation; at least as much of the story is about why Herald Newton Day or the unnamed Civil Servant who doesn’t appreciate books present a sterile, unhealthy future for Jamaica. Identifying this conflict within the Caribbean middle class can help the analysis of the triumphs and failures of the anticolonial movement as well as the postcolonial governments that would succeed it.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rosenberg gives an excellent description of this twin project in her discussion of the Beacon writers in Trinidad during the 1930s. See the chapter "The Realpolitik of Yard Fiction" from *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> Donnell points particularly to how contemporary canons and histories are refracted through the needs and desires of what she calls "the immediate postcolonial period" (7). As a result of their location within "the critical moment of cultural nationalism" (7), these versions of literary history overemphasize opposition or resistance. The reality, according to Donnell, is a much more complicated literary past in which many of the writers considered most prolific or celebrated during the first half of the twentieth century were dismissed by critics of the 1970s such as Kenneth Ramchand or Kamau Brathwaite as too imitative of European literary norms or not sufficiently connected to anticolonial movements. *Banana Bottom* is one of the few novels from before 1950 to make it into this canon, because of how it can be read through this nationalist prism. In emphasizing the novel's investment in the literary, I want to follow Donnell in examining the aspects of this earlier moment that go against the grain of the readings from the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Maureen Lewis and Rupert Lewis pay significant attention to *Banana Bottom's* depiction of the Jamaican middle class. They argue that "one of McKay's principle aims in *Banana Bottom* is to depict the conquest of these social attitudes of snobbery, self-contempt, and middle class estrangement from the peasantry by creating of Bita a foil to types like Herald Day, the 'sintiminius' Lamberts and to the Black Member of Parliament" (45). While other readers make note of the novel's critique of what Lewis and Lewis call these *assimilés*, their essay anticipates my own in seeing how the critique of the middle class is not total, and is connected to a broader "dichotomy between the rational empiricism and technological slant of the Caucasian world, as against the spontaneity, vitality, and visceral quality of black culture" (47). For Lewis and Lewis, though, this critique is a sign of McKay's romantic naïveté, that he "never outgrew Jekyll's influence" (47) and that he "read very little of Marx and apparently none of Lenin" (48). His "ambivalence" (50) thus places him into the "pre-nationalist phase of our historical and cultural development" (51). While I agree very much with the ambivalence Lewis and Lewis detect in *Banana Bottom*, the way the novel embraces and explores these contradictions seems to enable McKay's anticolonial political project rather than to make it a failure; in my conclusion, I return to the issue of how anticolonial writing in general depends on the literary intellectual's ability to produce an (imagined) alliance with the working class and peasantry simultaneously with a rivalry with the professional middle class.

<sup>4</sup> Winston James describes how in "Quashie to Buccra" as well as "Hard Times," "the troubles of the

peasants are [...] given voice" (60-61) and how McKay in "Passive Resistance" "makes himself a member of the collective 'we' in whose voice the poem is enunciated" (88).

<sup>5</sup> A number of critics have addressed the issue of Bitá's rape, and how the novel downplays it as something natural viewed as illegal or immoral only because of European ideas about respectability. Carolyn Cooper refers to Mrs. Craig's "straightforward" (45), "contemporary reading of rape" as "quaintly racist" for its failure to "take into account the specific racial and cultural overtones of Bitá's predicament" (43). Rhonda Cobham disagrees, insisting

that "in relation to Crazy Bow, [Bitá] remains ultimately a victim of abuse" (136). Leah Rosenberg, meanwhile, places this naturalizing of the rape into the larger picture of "McKay's conception that black folk sexuality is fundamentally natural and healthy in contrast to the neurotic sexuality of civilized white people" (117).

<sup>7</sup> The association of folk culture with women accomplished via the gendering of gossip in *Banana Bottom* is part of a general tendency towards the feminization of the folk in writing of the modern colonial period that many critics have discussed. Belinda Edmondson notes how in equating the female body with the land, these male writers set up the anticolonial struggle as a battle between men, most obviously embodied by the Prospero/Caliban dialectic (60-61). Patricia Saunders and Leah Rosenberg both discuss how the *Beacon* writers from 1930s Trinidad use female characters in stories such as "Triumph" by C.L.R. James as both sites of alternative knowledge that can challenge European colonial economic and cultural structures but also unruly bodies that the nation must control in order to enter modernity. *Banana Bottom* exhibits precisely this tension through some of the same tropes and figures.

<sup>8</sup> C.L.R. James, speaking of why he chose to leave Trinidad to pursue his career as a writer, describes how if he had stayed, the only possibility open to him as a talented black man would have been "to be a civil servant and hand papers, take them from the men downstairs and hand them to the man upstairs" (qtd. in Sander 29). James thus echoes McKay's critique of the complete lack of creativity available in this profession.

<sup>9</sup> Aside from biographical similarities—the friendship with a well-read Englishman and voracious reading in his library, the move to the city and attempts to work for the colonial state, followed by disillusion and emigration to the U.S.—McKay attributes at least one of his own stories to Bitá's cousin: Bab hears Squire Gensir complain about interacting with English people who are not of his class and then asks the Squire "how then he was able to tolerate the manners of the peasantry" (82); in his autobiography, McKay recounts Walter Jekyll's railing about "middle-class upstart[s]" and asking his mentor "But Mr. Jekyll, how can you tolerate me? I am merely the son of a peasant" (qtd. in Cobham 127).

<sup>10</sup> In the essay "Authority and the Occasion for Speaking in the Caribbean Literary Field: George Lamming and Martin Carter," I give a more detailed reading of this poem as part of an analysis of Lamming's and Carter's engagement with the relationship of the intellectual to the people they seek to represent.

<sup>11</sup> The introduction to *Refusal of the Shadow* places Césaire's writing into the context of surrealism during the 1940s, explaining how he posits poetry "in pure surrealist terms: as an activity of the spirit that acts upon the world and transforms life" (14). James Arnold also helpfully discusses how Césaire's writing "involved an increasing reliance on various approaches to myth and a concomitant refusal of the claims of rationalist and empiricist historical writing" (50) significantly influenced by Césaire's engagement with European philosophers such as Spengler, Nietzsche and Frobenius. McKay, too, was certainly influenced by this intellectual tradition; both Cobham and Winston James note that his mentor, Walter Jekyll was "an ardent disciple of Schopenhauer," and thus "deplored the enervation of modern Western civilization" (Cobham 125).

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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