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Tracing Alternative Psycho-Social Sites of the Harlem Renaissance: Representations
of the New New Negro in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*

Christopher Allen Varlack

Department of English | University of Maryland, Baltimore County

1000 Hilltop Circle

Baltimore, Maryland 21250

E-mail: cvarlack@umbc.edu

Essentially concerned with the cultivation of black culture and race pride in light of rising intra-racial color prejudice and the perception of black inferiority, the *négritude* movement sparked in the 1930s sought to embrace black cultural values and history worldwide. Among the Negro intelligentsia, however, both abroad and in the United States, Claude McKay perceived an overwhelming neglect for the Negro masses. As he asserts in his 1937 autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, this problem is based in the growing number of “educated Negroes who believe that the color line will be dissolved eventually by the light-skinned Negroids ‘passing white,’ by miscegenation and final assimilation by the white group” (351).

To McKay, such perspectives led to a troubling socio-cultural dilemma in which people of color from Harlem to Banana Bottom “approximated to the social standards and attitudes of the white planters [and leaders] with little sympathy for the freed blacks and their problems, their struggles for social adjustment” (*Banana Bottom* 297). Therefore, his novels in large part are concerned with the life and the plight of the masses—characters like Jake from *Home to Harlem* or Banjo from *Banjo*, who are drawn by the tum-tum of jazz blaring from the local cabarets.

For McKay, these characters are thus at the heart of the *négritude* debate, representing the real New Negro that emerged in a post-Reconstruction age. Dislocated in American society, their lives become a purposeful investigation into the new social and psychological spaces (apart from assimilation) that African-Americans of the Harlem Renaissance era were beginning to adopt. This paper will introduce the intellectual project that McKay attempted in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, tracing his engagement of this new frontier along with his representations of the Negro at home and abroad to gain a better understanding of how Harlem Renaissance authors like McKay critiqued existing American frontiers and suggested new possibilities.