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**Gary Holcomb**

*Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*  
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007, 288 pp.

**Javier Reyes**

### Triple Threat—Holcomb’s Prolegomenon to Any Future Black Queer Marxism

Literary archaeology has always been one of the cornerstones of cultural studies. The scholastic enterprise of exhuming and re-interpreting texts from the diaspora continues to reveal cultural and political truths once suppressed by the ruling hegemonies of colonization. Gary Holcomb’s *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* is one of the latest in an academic enterprise to salvage diasporic writers whose lives and works continue to enrich fringe discourses. The subject here is Claude McKay, whose bewildering multi-positionality provided a fecund field of intersectional discourses awaiting harvest for over 70 years. In his exhaustive research, Holcomb attempts the consummate black, queer, Marxist prolegomenon to celebrate finally the Jamaican-born nomad for the true trailblazer he was. The project carves out yet another niche in an already vastly mined terrain of postcolonial studies. Criticism after Holcomb may be superfluous.

At the turn of the 20th century, many African Americans, ever disillusioned with the slow progress of social justice in the post-bellum years, took to Marxist radicalism and communism as a way to seek solidarity for their own cause. How feasible or fruitful such marriages were remains a point of contention. Holcomb explores this in great detail in his documentation of McKay’s attempts to consolidate all forms of marginalities for a stronger front against anti-Black racism, poverty and continued injustice. Not surprisingly, there was a symbiotic relationship between African American activists and communist revolutionaries, even at the cost the epithet “communist” carried in the 1920s. Holcomb, however, wants to show how queerness problematized and enlightened this relationship. As he convincingly states in his introduction, “Queer resistance authorizes the act of uncovering the intimate relationship between sex radicalism, race resistance and leftist anarchism, as the queer ... must inhale and exhale anarchy, or permanent revolution” (14). Holcomb analyzes McKay’s struggle to reconcile his divergent identities. How does the black fuse with the queer and how do these work productively with the Marxist revolutionary? Of these marginal identities, the queer serves as a form of litmus test viability. Revolutionary actions can be effective only if the queer is allowed a legitimate voice within the struggle. McKay seems the prime subject to study this thesis. Born in Jamaica, immigrant to Harlem, socialist sojourner through Moscow, Morocco and Marseilles, McKay was the veritable diasporic nomad, always in the flux of becoming, never arriving. His multi-spatiality offers plenitude for interpretation. Holcomb elicits prodigiously from these multiple agencies McKay embodied.

Opening with FBI letters investigating the enigmatic identity of Sasha (communist code name appropriated by Claude McKay during his pilgrimage to the Soviet Union during 1922-1923), Holcomb embarks on an intensive investigation of McKay's three major works, "a cluster of three little black bombs to be hurled into the discourses of state nationalism, racism, capitalism and imperialism" (19). Holcomb's goal is to elicit those "shadowy imprints," representations of radical queerness within his prose. In this opening chapter, Holcomb charts the origins of McKay's contacts with subversive worlds and the ensuing surveillance under the already well-established U.S. Bureau of Investigation, the Federal agency responsible for scrutinizing political dissidents. Representing "the prototype for the unholy union of Red, black and queer," McKay is perilously situated, yet in a position rife with possibilities for political performance (25). Assuming the code name Sasha, his identity becomes lost in translation, thereby, a fitting trope that mirrors Holcomb's exploration of McKay's uncanny traversing of worlds and transgression of boundaries. Humoring the FBI's ineptitude to decipher between Sayesh, Sascha or Sasha, Holcomb nods to McKay's mercurial fluidity in political performances. Indeed, we are left to ponder McKay's irony when he refers to "my real name" in *A Long Way from Home*. For indeed, Sasha is a mere sobriquet in a series of personae McKay appropriates in his journeys throughout Russia, Europe and the black Atlantic. If the FBI is clueless what to do with Sasha, intellectual and literary worlds will be even harder pressed to figure out this "Communist Caliban" as Holcomb endearingly calls him.

In McKay's negotiation of the communist power shifts from Lenin to Trotsky to Stalin, he comes to see solidarity with Soviet radicals who regard black laboring classes in the United States as an "oppressed nation," a group whose plight the CPUSA was negligent in addressing. But despite his prognosis that communism would be the liberationist platform for African Americans, McKay remains a "free agent." At points, Holcomb has a difficult time proving if and to what degree the intersection of the black queer and the communist truly generates significant cultural production.

Examining McKay's sojourn in Morocco, Holcomb elicits McKay's border politics and his refusal to engage in the totalizing discourses of color-consciousness. Straddling the geographies of Europe, the Middle East and black Africa, Morocco is the hybridized middle ground refuge for the diasporic free agent with disparate ports of call. Holcomb ably portrays McKay as the ideal Black Atlantic citizen and further explores the thorny relationship he had with the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that avowed a racial authenticity that McKay eschewed. In fact, McKay's aversion for the standard bearers, especially Dubois, bespeaks the former's preference for routes, not roots. Holcomb expounds on the troubling alterity that sex(uality) represents among struggles for racial, economic and gender equity. Dubois' revulsion towards McKay's oversexed oeuvre points to the way many leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance considered queers as the bastard, bohemian stepchildren among the more noble and serious black intelligentsia. McKay, in turn, grew impatient with these stiff-collar dons who were

years behind Trotskyites in the front-line struggle. He eventually detached himself from this eminent movement.

Holcomb's excavations of McKay's key works offer moments of inspired literary interpretation. One of the more rewarding of such moments is his imbrication of Hemingway's modernist master narrative, *The Sun Also Rises*, with McKay's *Home to Harlem*. Holcomb asserts that this clever act of signifying reveals a sort of minstrelsy on the part of the great modernist Hemingway. The revelation corroborates a long suppressed notion that white America, in its ambivalent love-hate relationship with its black citizens, has always pilfered black cultural production. Such deconstructive moves enrich Holcomb's project.

The more formidable challenge Holcomb confronts in his analysis is to elicit how queer representations interface with and enrich the black and the Marxist. The premise demands elucidation of sexual personae and performance in McKay's works. Frequent, however, are the cases in which Holcomb leads us down a path of sexual representation in the work, only to show how McKay's characters opt for non-participation in the sexual experience. But whereby Holcomb's attempts at such extrications are remarkable, it is McKay's works that remain nebulous and noncommittal in their queer representations. One struggles to find the subversive erotomania Holcomb claims for these texts. Such subterfuge and camouflage were, understandably, necessary armor for any dissident in that perilous age. Consequently, these characters, including McKay himself, seem invested with as much sexual animus as exuded by J. Alfred Prufrock. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay scoffs at the thought of prostitution. Holcomb plucks at vestiges of homosociality in *Banjo* and at minutiae in *Home to Harlem*. Whereby the Haitian character, Ray, is sufficiently illuminated as an autonomous identity who refuses the totalities of race and nation, his sexuality remains muddled and sublimated in dreams of Orientalist exotica and hummingbirds piercing flowers. In a gorgeously nuanced psychoanalytic reading, Holcomb elegantly asserts how the color blue represents dissident sexuality. Such insightful readings, however, don't convincingly translate into "sex radicalism" (19) or "an emancipating queer orgy" (96). Too often, Holcomb ekes out queer representation *ex nihilo*.

However, Holcomb is on much firmer ground in showing how *Home to Harlem* and *Romance in Marseille* function as modernist texts, which incite revolution with their primitivist pulse. He builds this momentum on black Marxist agency in his analysis of *Banjo*, a work that posits the black proletariat as the ideal counter hegemonic insurgent, for it is, indeed, "the black subject [who] is constantly reminded of his or her subclass position in the exclusionist hegemony" (152). The point is a solid one that is at the core of minority discourse and Foucauldian historical revisionism. The periphery is always the location of culture and what enriches the center; history is not made exclusively by the masters and conquerors but also by the deleted slaves on whose backs civilizations were built. I have always encouraged my students to seek to understand the truths of how society functions, not from the perspective of white-collar power brokers, but from that of the laborers who are cogs in the wheels of economies and

civilizations. Holcomb sufficiently elucidates this point that is fundamental to *Banjo*, a text that represents “the epistemological commonwealth,” peopled by “rude” black anarchists who redefine nationality and nationalist politics (169). All three of these novels, as Holcomb articulates, provide ample representations of black subjects who embody the intersections of political, sexual and national dissidence. The transformative knowledge derived from these intersections, however, varies in its efficacy.

Holcomb’s investigation is clearly an encomium to a Diaspora traveler whose many mantles situate him amply as a triply conscious seer. Too often, however, Holcomb seems to work overtime to plumb the metaphoric limits of McKay’s characters and their stubborn ambivalence. Deploying a hermetically private idiom, Holcomb presents a theoretical analysis of the legs of Lafala, a character in *Romance in Marseille*. The primordial “Lafala’s immigrant body text tentatively occupies Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’” (181). Sentences like these are simply unedifying. In various other instances, Holcomb becomes tangled in a thicket of theoretical obscurantism in the requisite nods to Bhabha, Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and their accompanying sound bites. Holcomb’s research speaks for itself; his interpretations of sexual representations are self-evident and do not need to be corroborated by Butler. I ache for criticism that relies minimally on the academic coterie of theorists who make an industry of fringe discourses as they spin the lives of the marginal into esoterica. Such recondite knowledges ultimately seem so far removed from the black, dissident bodies that may be the source of theory.

Perhaps Holcomb delivers his most salient point in his conclusion; it is one that resonates with the pulse of McKay’s dissidence while it re-situates this prescient, ever relevant revolutionary. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., a censorial pall has befallen public and academic discourse, especially any dialogue that dares to interrogate nationalist hegemonies such as Homeland Security and the Patriot Act. Holcomb sharply parallels this present state of anxiety and the muzzling of free speech with “the Little Red Scare of the interwar period [and] the McCarthyism of the postwar phase” (229). Perhaps now, more than ever, the literary excavations and revivals of authors who challenged racist, big brother nationalism prove necessary. Sasha, the transgressive agent who troubled the state officials in the 1920’s, resonates for today’s activists who must hold the administration’s feet to the fire on the issues of war, excessive use of power, and ongoing social injustice.

Significantly, long before the boom in postcolonial studies and identity discourses, McKay already was calling for a new cartography of black political performance that refused cultural nationalism rooted in claims of authenticity and sought routes towards a form of egalitarianism where all peoples oppressed on all fronts—race, economics, sexuality, nationality—could struggle towards one another’s liberation.