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Hybridity, Identity and Cultural Commerce in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*

[Paul Jay](#)

I

Near the beginning of *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, Robert J.C. Young notes that until recently the study of culture has paid "comparatively little attention . . . to the mechanics of the intricate processes of cultural contact, intrusion, fusion and disjunction" that characterize the development of culture wherever different social systems intermix (5). While "heterogeneity, cultural interchange and diversity have now become the self-conscious identity of modern society," he writes, "it is striking . . . how few models have been developed to analyze it" (4).¹ What the study of culture needs, he insists, are more ways to "develop accounts of the *commerce between cultures* that map and shadow the complexities of its generative and destructive processes" (5, my emphasis).² Paul Gilroy makes a similar point at the outset of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) when he complains that "modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (19). Gilroy's focus on "routes" rather than "roots" turns out to denote the kind of focus on "commerce" Young has in mind, for one of Gilroy's central purposes is to foreground the role of commercial institutions like the slave trade and the plantation in the project of modernity, and to stress the extent to which those institutions facilitated a relatively uncontrollable commerce between *cultures* as well as economies.³ Tracing identities through "roots," in Gilroy's view, leads to a narrow (and often unhistorical) kind of ethnic absolutism that attention to the "routes" out of which identities and cultures develop can avoid.

Like Young, Gilroy focuses on the vexing phenomenon of hybridity as a metaphor for

subjectivity, culture, and nation. Attention to roots, for Gilroy, leads to an "idea of cultural nationalism" based on "the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'black' and 'white' people," while, on the other hand, attention to the routes of cultural commerce leads to "another, more difficult option: the theorization of creolization, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity" (2). For Gilroy, modernity and **[End Page 176]** double consciousness are linked because they are shot-through with what he and Young call hybridity. "Striving to be both European and black," for example, "requires some specific forms of double consciousness . . . where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political subordination" (1).

In this essay I want to use the kind of focus on cultural commerce developed by critics like Young and Gilroy to direct my analysis of Claude McKay's quintessentially black Atlantic novel, *Banana Bottom* (1933). One of my aims is to show how McKay's loosely autobiographical novel ⁴ offers a critique of absolutist discourses grounded in race, nationalism and ethnicity, but often in terms that *reinforce* the ideology it seeks to displace. Indeed, the novel is less interesting for the critique of absolutist discourse it offers up than for the way in which it dramatizes how dominant ideologies infect the very language that seeks to undo them. The "cultural commerce" in *Banana Bottom* is a commerce in ideologies and discursive strategies, one in which the values of a dominant, colonialist ideology continually reappear in subtly disruptive ways in the liberal language of a counter-ideology. The novel takes place in turn-of-the-century Jamaica, where the black protagonist, Bitá Plant, has just returned from seven years abroad studying in England. Her English education has been financed by a British missionary couple, the Craigs, who take her in after she has sex with an older island man, Crazy Bow. ⁵ They conceive of their attempt to educate her as an experiment, and plan to arrange her marriage to a young black minister, Harold Newton Day, who they hope will take over their mission. The novel unfolds around Bitá's growing ambivalence about her Englishness. She becomes increasingly attracted to the village life of *Banana Bottom*, with its parties and dances, and more inclined toward the young men of the village than toward the Reverend Day. Her mentor over the course of the novel is a liberal Scotsman named Squire Gensir (modeled closely on McKay's friend and advisor, Walter Jekyll). ⁶ Gensir ridicules her English education, questioning its value and encouraging her to seriously explore the practices and products of her own culture. In effect, he carefully attempts to undo the cultural work the Craigs had seemed to achieve. In the end, Bitá spurns both the Craigs and Harold Newton Day, marries a man from the village, and returns to live in *Banana Bottom*.

The Craigs stand in McKay's novel as representative figures for British colonialism in the West Indies, while Squire Gensir seems to counter their racism and patronizing cultural elitism with a genuine appreciation of the island's blend of Africanist and "indigenous" cultural forms. The commerce *between* these two positions, and the complicated ideologies they represent, is one of McKay's main interests. The overt stress here seems to be on the absolute *difference* between the Craig's neo-colonialist position and Squire

Gensir's liberal one. However, I will be arguing that beneath these differences lies an essential sameness, one that inheres in Gensir's seemingly unconscious reliance on the discursive terms he sets out to critique. ⁷ The dominant ideology thus seems all the more insidious in the end because it infects the very language mobilized to critique it. Bitá's subjectivity, therefore, has to be seen as a product of the cultural commerce between the two positions represented by the Craigs and Squire **[End Page 177]** Gensir. McKay and his characters entertain the idea that she has a core identity somehow biologically grounded in a bundle of "native," Africanist, or "indigenous" predispositions, but this view is characterized in the novel as only one of a number of competing explanations of the complex social production of Bitá's identity. Neither "African," "English," or "Jamaican," her identity is constructed in what Gilroy calls the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation" (4). His black Atlantic constitutes a "space between," a hothouse world in which the discourses of hybridity, creolization, and cross-fertilization dominate. What is striking about the novel is not that the main characters take predictable and rigid positions toward what the 19th century often termed the "mongrelization" of individuals and cultures (either hysteria about the degradation of humanity that would ensue from mixed-race unions, or commitment to the idea that the amalgamation of races and cultures is a good thing), ⁸ but that each of their positions (Bitá's, Gensir's, the Craigs') seem to contain elements of the other two. As we will see in what follows, McKay sorts out these positions a little *too* schematically. The predictable resolution of the book's main drama belies some deeper fractures that are worth our pausing over.

II

There has always been a fundamental paradox at the very center of colonialism, one that tends to undermine its smooth operation: the necessity of cultural conversion led to the creation of indigenous subjects who, forced to absorb Western cultural practices and religious beliefs, subtly transformed them to accord with vestiges of their own. Colonizing forces, while seeking to wipe out indigenous or slave cultures, sometimes missed but often tolerated and even exploited this phenomenon, since it served to ease the transformation of both indigenous peoples and transported slaves into Western subjects. The result was a mixed one for both colonizer and colonized. For the colonizer, this kind of syncretism helped smooth the cultural conquest of indigenous and slave populations, but it at the same time gave some measure of control over that culture *to* these populations, a control which often transformed the colonizer's own culture. This kind of syncretism had mixed results for the colonized as well, who found their cultures virtually wiped out but were nevertheless able to incorporate vestiges of it into the one forced upon them. This was especially the case in the Americas, where the subjugation of native populations (if they were not obliterated outright by genocide or disease) involved radical forms of cultural transformation in which indigenous social and religious practices, along with whole systems of belief, were replaced with the practices and beliefs of the colonizer. There were similarities at the deep structural level, for example, between Catholicism and Aztec religious beliefs and practices that were exploited in Mexico by the Spanish to facilitate their conquest of what is now Mexico (a belief in sacrifice, the power of blood, and a significant link between Catholic mariolatry and the Aztec commitment to

fertility goddesses).⁹ These similarities, while they facilitated the cultural conquest of the Aztecs, led eventually to the development of a thoroughly original, Hispanic/ **[End Page 178]** native/mestizo form of Catholicism that was a hybrid of European Catholicism and Aztec religious beliefs and practices. The Spanish may have conquered the Aztecs, but the Aztecs also conquered Catholicism by transforming it.¹⁰

Such paradoxes are at the heart of the kind of cultural hybridity Gilroy alludes to in *The Black Atlantic*, and they constitute the historical backdrop for what he calls "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms" (3) that have evolved in the Americas.¹¹ McKay's novel is striking for the way in which it dramatizes the "stereophonic" nature of cultural forms in the black Atlantic, foregrounding what Gilroy calls the "fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation" (15) in the Americas. In doing this, McKay engages the question of "Englishness" in a way that both echoes and reverses Gilroy. Gilroy and McKay are both interested in foregrounding the constructed, syncretic, and hybrid nature of "Englishness," but while Gilroy wants to stress the Caribbean sources of "Englishness" as it developed in Britain (criticizing the nationalist and ethnocentric positions of British critics from Ruskin to Raymond Williams, who deny "imaginary, invented Englishness any external referents whatsoever" [14]), McKay foregrounds the English sources of Bitá's *Jamaican* identity, or rather, observes the attempt to graft Englishness onto a Jamaican descendent of African slaves.

"Graft" is the operative word here, for McKay couches the whole enterprise in language that suggests a hothouse experiment in hybrid cultivation. As Priscilla Craig puts it early in the novel, she "had conceived the idea of redeeming [Bitá] from her past by a long period of education without any contact with Banana Bottom, and at the finish she would be English trained and appearing in everything but the colour of her skin" (31). While "trained" here refers literally to Bitá Plant's education abroad, the secondary sense of *training a "plant"* in this passage is connected to a web of organic metaphors deployed in the novel to suggest both the nature of the Craigs' experiment and the hybrid character of Bitá's subjectivity. Worried that Bitá may be "blunted in the blood," Priscilla is struck with the "idea of taking Bitá to train as an exhibit" in order to "demonstrate what one such [wanton] girl might become by careful training" (17). Upon her return from England, the Craigs are "happy in a praise-Godly humble way over their *handiwork*. The *transplanted* African peasant girl that they had transformed from a brown *wilding* into a decorous *cultivated* young lady. Bitá was one precious *flowering* of a great work" (11, my emphasis), but that "great work" is less the work of missionaries than the work of hothouse gardeners. Their experiment, frankly presented as an attempt to cultivate a "wilding" plant, is an experiment in hybridization, an attempt to "transplant" a black Jamaican to British soil and there graft Englishness onto her. Indeed, the novel centers to a large degree around whether or not the grafting will take, whether the graft, or her "dark skin," will will out.

Priscilla Craig's worry throughout the novel is that Bitá might be "blunted in the blood" and thus biologically fated to remain "primitive." This worry exemplifies the novel's engagement with racial theories Young reminds us were at the very heart of colonialist ideology. Beginning the novel with Bitá's "rape" (14) by Crazy Bow, the mixed-race descendent of a Scotsman and an African slave, McKay foregrounds from the outset a

number of complex psychological, social, and political assumptions about **[End Page 179]** race, color, sexual desire and "mongrelization" that reinforce the novel's continual invocation of hybridity and cross-fertilization. In part, McKay uses Crazy Bow's mixed-race ancestry to sketch in the social history of the island, ¹² but he also uses it to foreground white attitudes toward both mixed marriages and black sexuality. Crazy Bow is a third-generation descendent of a Scotsman named Adair, who purchased the land that is now Banana Bottom, freed its slaves, and "married one of the blackest of them" (2). Adair's mulatto progeny came to number a score of families (3), comprising a village looked down upon by whites who "cling to the belief that the Act of Emancipation" and "the mixing of different human strains" were both "bad thing[s]" (3). Where Adair apparently saw his mixed race progeny as a positive example of the inevitable amalgamation of the races, whites on the island, according to the narrator, saw his descendents as "a picture of decadence and degeneracy" (4). ¹³

The whites' fear of mongrelization, of course, is grounded in their antipathy toward darkness, their conviction that the purity of both white identity and culture would always be undone by something inherent in black blood. McKay dramatizes this in Crazy Bow, a prodigy on both the violin and the piano who is driven crazy in his attempt to master these "western" instruments. Crazy Bow was "the first Adair to show signs of an intellectual bent," and with skin the "colour of a ripe banana" he might be assured "one of the little polite places that were always the plums of the lighter-skinned coloured people" (4). Initially a "brilliant student, amenable to work and discipline," and "full of music," he is reportedly "turned . . . right crazy at the school" by "a piano that he taught himself to play there" (5). The piano "knocked everything else out of his head. Composition and mathematics and the ambition to enter the Civil Service" (5). Distracted from his studies, Crazy Bow returns home, where there are no pianos. He takes up the fiddle instead, learning "all kinds of music: village tunes, hymns and anthems, jubilee songs and snatches of high music. The village accepted his harmless insanity and called him Crazy Bow" (6). At this point, his "degeneracy" is incorporated into the colonialist logic of the island's cultural politics (where the most insidious side of conventional racial theory argues that the crossbreeding or mongrelization that produced Crazy Bow leads inevitably to mental instability). Moreover, race and breeding determine the lines between high and folk culture. What is "crazy" about Crazy Bow is in part the hybrid concoction of his musical output -- village tunes, hymns and anthems, jubilee songs and "high music." "Ah," writes McKay, "Crazy Bow could play":

Every fiddler in and around Banana Bottom called him master. Those who had been to the city and heard a little high music said he was a virtuoso. The schoolmaster called him a coloured Paganini. And the Rev. Malcolm, who kept up the family tradition of appraising native accomplishments, said, when he heard Crazy Bow play, that he was a sinful, drinking lunatic but a great musician. The peasants took Crazy Bow as a fine fiddler for the hill country, but laughed at the idea of greatness in him. Greatness could not exist in the backwoods. Nor anywhere in the colony. To them and to all the islanders greatness was a foreign thing. (8) **[End Page 180]**

This passage, like those about Bitá's "training," is subtly inflected with the discourse of

hybridity. Moreover, the "degeneracy" of Crazy Bow's mixed blood prefigures the deranged nature of his engagement with music. His exposure to the piano (importantly, a European instrument not indigenous to the hill country of Banana Bottom or easily transportable) seems the key to his craziness. "He was an imitating wonder" (5), according to the narrator. "Once he heard a tune played he could pick it up and play it through . . . He could play any of the instruments found among the peasants in the hill country: fiddle, banjo, and guitar. But what turned him right crazy at the school was a piano" (5). It is hard to miss the symbolism here, partly because it is so schematic: Crazy Bow represents the dangers of both race *and* culture mixing. His "craziness" recalls racist fears about mongrelization that perpetuated the myth of white superiority. Furthermore, his inability to handle the piano suggests a hierarchical division between cultural forms, and between high and folk art. The piano turns him "right crazy" because it is a European instrument used to create "great" music. But "great music," everyone has learned, is a "foreign thing," not just a form of talent alien to Jamaica, but a *cultural category* the islanders of African and mulatto descent can never claim.

What undoes Crazy Bow is something like the kind of "atavism" Priscilla Craig worries will finally undermine her experiment with Bitá. Alarmed to hear that Bitá had attended a dance with local folk from Banana Bottom, Mrs. Craig fears that an insistent sexuality she associates with Bitá's African nature will overwhelm her learned Englishness. Perhaps, she thinks, "Bitá was *atavistic* as was her race," that "all the money she had spent would be wasted, all her planning and thinking and careful cultivation of this girl [would] come to naught. For evidently she lacked the character to stand" what Mrs. Craig takes to be sexual temptation (92, my emphasis). The terms "cultivation" and "atavistic," of course, are being used in a biological sense. Mrs. Craig worries that her careful attempt to create through grafting a hybrid organism will be undone by the insistent reappearance in Bitá of a trait intrinsic to her "primitive" blood (just as Crazy Bow's mongrel blood seems to foreordain his "craziness"). In her mind, "character" is not "something intrinsically individual" but something "essential" to a "people" or "nation" (92). "Suppose," Mrs. Craig muses, that "under that cultivated crust she was no way better than any of the herd of common black wenches who took religion as a plaything and were often converted in sin and went down to baptism with babies in their bellies" (93). Her anxiety derives from her belief that Bitá's identity is lodged in her blood, that like Crazy Bow, she will revert to some kind of fundamental "primitive" identity no matter how "cultured" she may become. In both cases, McKay foregrounds the complicated ways in which racial hybridity determines identity and constructs boundaries around cultures.

The ideological function of cultural boundaries is vividly dramatized later in the novel by Priscilla Craig's reaction to African "idols" and fetishes put on display by a missionary couple recently transferred from Africa to the West Indies. The couple present their "striking collection of savage craftsmanship" and "heathen idols" in conjunction with their lecture on "The Customs and Superstitions of the Primitive African" (197). The lecture and display are meant to reinforce Anglo assumptions about the degraded state of African culture and to demonstrate to the black population [End Page 181] of Banana Bottom that "their African cousins still lived in savagery and by fetishism" (197). Mrs. Craig has a particularly strong reaction to the display:

[T]hese objects took her to a Negro world that was disturbingly different from

that to which she was accustomed. For those small statues with important points exaggerated and others minimized the word that came to her lips was "grotesque." She could find no significance in them, so far were they removed from the classic Greek and Roman tradition with which she was familiar. These objects seemed mere caricatures of a poor and miserably fallen humanity abandoned by God. (198)

The response here is both aesthetic and moral. With "her sweet-and-severe standards of esthetics" (grounded in a classic Greek and Roman tradition) Mrs. Craig can only attribute the "grotesque" African figures to a "cult of Ugliness" (199). Aesthetic greatness here, as with Crazy Bow's musicianship, is "a foreign thing." However, her dismissive aesthetic response to these objects is complicated by the fact that as she "gazed fixedly at them they seemed to take on a forbidden actuality and potency," a "spirit" she associates with "the decadent practices of the Obi-worshippers of Jamaica" (198). Potent, decadent, and spiritual, "those objects were nothing if not immoral" and "unholy" (198). What troubles her here is less a perceived aesthetic backwardness or insignificance when measured by classical aesthetic standards, something which can of course sanction her judgment about the superiority of her own race and culture. Rather, it is the fact that these African figures "possessed some elemental force representing more than mere idle idol-making. She was troubled to think that they might have their origin in some *genuine belief*, troubled to think that such a belief should have prompted magic-workers to celebrate and preserve its potency. That the night-wrapped creatures of Africa might also have had there in the dim jungles *their own vision of life*" (198, my emphasis). It is not so much what she takes to be the aesthetic grotesqueness of these objects that bothers her as it is the idea that they might spring from a genuine vision of life different from her own. However, she quickly dismisses the power in these objects as "satanic" (199). "Priscilla Craig," writes McKay, "was able to reduce and reconcile the unfamiliar" with her belief that God "fashioned the world to his liking . . . apportioning" to its "peoples . . . different degrees of belief so that the One True Religion should glow with greater effulgence and . . . filled with more pity for the heathen, scatter its Angels to all the regions of the earth to bear and uphold the Light"(199). Forced to acknowledge for a moment the cultural efficacy and power of these "primitive" works, their "origin in some genuine belief," Mrs. Craig quickly falls back on a racial hierarchy that renders them insignificant in comparison to her own.

As I noted earlier, Mrs. Craig's position on the relative merits of African and European forms of cultural expression and religious belief is strategically countered in *Banana Bottom* by Squire Gensir, a man Mrs. Craig herself admires because he is related to aristocracy, is a "rare intellectual," and a man who lived "aloof from sexual contact" (92). Where even the islanders of African descent have bought into the **[End Page 182]** European dismissal of African art as "primitive," and to the notion that greatness in the arts is a "foreign thing," Gensir rejects such forms of cultural chauvinism in favor of cultural relativism, arguing that cultural forms like art and religion are hybrid constructions of equal value. Gensir's role in the novel is ostensibly to take a position on both identity and culture that undoes the neat racial hierarchy people like the Craigs subscribe to. Where Mrs. Craig "cultivates" Jamaicans of African descent by introducing them to her own "superior" culture, Squire Gensir insists on the relative value of all forms of cultural

expression. Indeed, he doesn't just insist on the *value* of "indigenous" or hybrid cultural forms (and identities), he argues that *all* identities and cultural forms are mongrelizations. One example of his defense of the value of "indigenous" cultural forms is when he insists to Bitá that the African-inflected Obeah religion is as genuine and valuable as her own, adopted Christianity:

"Everybody borrows or steals and recreates in art. Next to enjoying it, the exciting thing is tracking down sources and resemblances and influences . . . I think some of our famous European fables have their origin in Africa. Even the mumbo-jumbo of the Obeahmen fascinates me."

"But Obeah is not the same," said Bitá, "it is an awful crime."

"Oh, it's just our civilization that makes it a crime. Obeah is only a form of primitive superstition. As Christianity is a form of civilized superstition . . . When you read in your studies about the Druids, the Greek and Roman gods and demi-gods, and the Nordic Odin, you felt tolerant about them. Didn't you? Then why should you be so intolerant about Obi and Obeahmen?"

"I don't know. It doesn't seem the same."

"But it is, though. You're intolerant because of your education. Obeah is a part of your folklore, like your Anancy tales and your digging jammás. And your folklore is the spiritual link between you and your ancestral origin. You ought to learn to appreciate it as I do mine." (124-25)

McKay has put Gensir, a Scotsman, in the peculiar position of arguing for the legitimacy of this Afrocentric cultural form to Bitá, who has so thoroughly assimilated the biases of Gensir's own culture that she cannot see the value of her "own" culture's religion. Here the relativist nature of his position is clearly articulated, and in valuing Obeah alongside Christianity Gensir's point of view diverges strikingly from the one we observed in Priscilla Craig's reaction to African sculpture. McKay's point, clearly, is that the kind of education Bitá has gotten from the Craigs structures her own intolerance toward things like Obeah, and that the identity they have forged for her is based on breaking "the spiritual link" she once had to her "ancestral origin." However, as I suggested earlier, Gensir tends to couch his progressivist position in language that reinforces the dominant ideology it criticizes. Obeah may be the "same" as Christianity, in his view, but as forms of superstition Obeah is "primitive" while Christianity is "civilized." Gensir levels the two practices, but structures into his discussion a familiar hierarchy that privileges Christianity over Obeah. If we look closely at Gensir's explanation, we can see in it a teleological framework. Obeah is **[End Page 183]** "primitive" in the sense that it is equated with early Western forms of worship--"Druids, Greek and Roman gods and demi-gods, Nordic Odin." Within this framework Christianity would be "civilized" because it has evolved beyond these earlier, pagan practices. Following his logic, Obeah will remain primitive, or evolve over time into something more civilized and modern, like Christianity. What is striking about this passage, then, is not that Gensir defends a relativist position that sees value in "other" cultural forms, but that he does so in language that reinscribes the ideological hierarchizing he is seeking to undermine.

Gensir's tendency to use liberal language that ends up undermining his own position is dramatized a few pages earlier in a discussion about Bitá's education. McKay gives Gensir a decidedly anti-modernist sensibility (he "detested . . . that social quality that has been ridden so hard by moderns and bohemians: middle-class gentility" [81]) which emerges forcefully in a denunciation of modern education: "I don't believe in the system of modern education. It grinds out certain fixed types on different grades to fit into a preconceived plan. I know what I am talking about, for I went through the machine" (122). This denunciation comes in response to Bitá's insistence that he is "a thousand times freer than" she and her people are because "you have your class and your colour--open sesames for you everywhere" (121):

"I don't think I am as free as the peasants here in their daily life--I'm not as naturally free as they are. So free that they don't have any idea of words like freedom and restraint."

"I don't agree," she said. "What freedom have they? Plodding and digging and digging all day . . . And you--you have had the run of the world. Even here, you can go anywhere from the governor's house to the lowest peasant's hut."

"But I never meant that kind of artificial educated freedom. The peasants' mind couldn't grasp that . . . when I speak of the freedom of your peasants, I mean that unconscious freedom in their common existence, their natural instincts. They don't know what repression is." (121)

Privileging the "natural," "instinctive" freedom of the peasants over the more abstract, artificial, educated freedom Bitá is referring to, Gensir introduces a set of idealizations that undermine his position. Moreover, the logic of his distinction here enforces something like the same hierarchical one Mrs. Craig makes between the "elemental," primitive "force" of "grotesque" African art and the more abstract, formal beauty of Western art. Gensir's position, as well intentioned as it is compared to Mrs. Craig's racist formulation, relies nevertheless on the same terminological distinction between "instinctive" and "educated" that structures hers. He doesn't get beyond the binary logic she invokes; he simply reverses its valuation. Moreover, the force of his position gets undermined when he insists that the more abstract notion of freedom Bitá invokes is one that "the peasant's mind couldn't grasp" anyway. Here the kind of freedom Bitá associates with Western philosophy (and the political systems it is supposed to underwrite) gets figured as more complex and sophisticated, and therefore more difficult for the peasant to grasp, than the kind of "instinctual" **[End Page 184]** freedom he is defending. There are a number of problems here. First of all, as I have just suggested, in the very effort to elevate the peasant's freedom over Bitá's, Gensir has subordinated the peasant's mind to her educated one, insisting that the Western concept of freedom is beyond the peasant's understanding, a form of condescension that seems to escape him. Secondly, Gensir invokes a frankly primitivist discourse, one that in romanticizing the "freedom" of natives as natural and instinctive relegates it to a pre-civilized and essentialized condition from which the native cannot escape, because to do so would be to fall into a supposedly more debased, modern, artificial freedom (here Gensir's anti-modernism fuses with his primitivism). "Primitive" freedom is valorized here, but the

valorization is based on an abstract essentializing that in Gensir's Jamaica would relegate the "Negroes" whose folk culture he values to perpetual second-class status. ¹⁴ Though he is clearly not conscious of it, there is a social strategy of containment built into the logic of his position. His concept of freedom, "humanist" as it strives to be, is drawn along racial lines and seems based on the same kind of "atavism" Priscilla Craig worries over. Where for her a certain form of sexuality is inherent in racial types, for Gensir certain forms of *freedom* are inherent in racial types (moreover, Gensir's remark that Jamaicans of African descent "don't know what repression is" suggests the stereotype of sexual promiscuity Priscilla Craig invokes).

Gensir's tendency to use examples that undermine or even reverse his position is also exemplified in a discussion with Bitá about local stories and music. Gensir is introduced earlier in the novel as a kind of amateur anthropologist. He likes to listen to "Anancy stories. He had made a collection of them. Now he was engaged in writing down their songs, jammás, shey-sheys and breakdowns . . . Any new turn of speech, any original manner of turning English to fit peasant ways of thinking and speaking, could make him happy as a child" (71). ¹⁵ Here he shares his discovery that a native dance tune seems to have its sources in Mozart:

The Squire showed Bitá a native tune that he had written down, music and words. It was a tune that had been known up there in the heart of the hill country for years and which was fiddled and sometimes sung to a dance called the minto, perhaps a native name for the minuet. But what had excited the squire was his discovery that with a little variation of measure the melody was original Mozart. (124)

As he did in the earlier scenes I have been discussing, Gensir is attempting in this scene to get Bitá to appreciate and value the cultural forms of her own people. Gensir insists that the minto, like Obeah, is worth Bitá's serious attention. However, its worth isn't intrinsic; it is grounded in the qualities of the Mozart minuet it mimics. The beauty and value of the hybrid minto is, in effect, grafted onto it from a preexisting and privileged European form. It is the *Mozart* in the minto that makes the folktune interesting (as in the case of Crazy Bow and the question of his virtuosity, greatness turns out to be a "foreign thing"). The way in which this formulation destabilizes the progressivist or relativist ideology Gensir is articulating, and thus reinscribes the **[End Page 185]** oppressive structures it seeks to dismantle, becomes dramatically clear in Bitá's response to it:

They went to the piano to look at both versions together. There was no doubt about the resemblance. Bitá sat down and touched off both. As a little girl she had swayed and jigged to the lively measure and thought it just a lovely trifle, purely native. Identifying it now with Mozart made her romantic and filled her with a pretty fancy of a wistful slave mistress on one of the lonely plantations of that region conjuring that savage and tragic scene with the magic of Mozart, while a slave listening near by stole the performance to recreate it for the blacks gathered together in their barracks for singing and dancing after the day's work was done. (124)

Though it *is* telling that the minto is only a "lovely trifle" until Bitá becomes convinced it harbors Mozart, what is even more crucial in this passage is how Bitá is positioned as she plays it: she identifies not with her own African ancestry but with a *slave mistress* playing Mozart. The dominant position given European art in Gensir's example is replicated in Bitá's fable. The subtle coercion implicit in the Squire's hierarchy of cultural forms (in spite of his explicit attempt to argue against that hierarchy) is clear in Bitá's imaginative identification with the dominating rather than the dominated. Significantly, she imagines herself altogether outside the structure of domination. All that is "savage" and "tragic" in the scene of slavery is conjured away by the magic of Mozart, which Bitá plays in the guise of the slave mistress. The cultural division between Bitá and the slave is dramatic: in the guise of the slave mistress she possesses the magic that he must steal, a magic that then serves to entertain those in the slave cabin until it is time to work again.

What is being dramatized here and why is it important? As I noted earlier, on a superficial level, the scenes between Bitá and the Squire seem carefully calibrated to counter the position Priscilla Craig represents. Gensir is introduced as Bitá's new mentor, someone who can offset the influence Mrs. Craig has exercised in constructing Bitá's Englishness. He insists on the value of Bitá's Africanist heritage, and he does so by explicitly questioning the discourse and ideology of privilege that draws a clear distinction between great art and the "grotesque" products of primitive thinking. In his view, all cultural forms are *hybrid*. He ostensibly wants her to hear the Mozart in the minto in order to drive home this point, and her reverie at the piano seems to underscore it dramatically. However, I am arguing that there is something wrong with this reading, and that it is signaled by the disturbing fact that Gensir's lesson ends up positioning Bitá as a slave mistress. The *effect* of Gensir's lesson suggests that it contains what I earlier termed a counter-logic, one that ends up reinforcing the very structure of oppression it seeks to undermine. The logic of the oppressive system infects the very language of its critique, and without *its* being rooted out, that language continues to subject Bitá to the same (albeit more subtle) form of domination she experiences under the regime of Priscilla Craig. In part I am arguing that Gensir **[End Page 186]** does not have control over the discursive logic he is employing, and that Bitá's not being conscious of how it has positioned her is a sign of how insidious is its grip. ¹⁶ What the Mozart and mintos scene lacks is a critical perspective that catches this problem and begins to grapple with it.

There is a scene much later in the book where Bitá begins to develop the kind of critical perspective I have in mind. In this scene, instead of playing Mozart she is reading William Blake. She has just returned home from nearly being raped by a light-skinned mulatto named Marse Arthur ("he had his father's looks . . . the same round healthy pink face . . . the only signs of his Negro origin from his mother's side were the rough kinky texture of his hair and the heavy lips" [260-61]). Saved by the intervention of Jubban, the man she will later marry, Bitá thinks back stoically on Marse Arthur's dismissal of her as "only a nigger gal" (266):

She undressed and looked at her body in the long mirror of the old-fashioned wardrobe. She caressed her breasts . . . her skin firm and smooth like the sheath of a blossoming banana . . . she was proud of being a Negro girl. And

no sneer, no sarcasm, no banal ridicule of a ridiculous world could destroy her confidence and pride in herself and make her feel ashamed of that fine body that was the temple of her high spirit. For she knew that she was a worthy human being. She knew that she was beautiful. (266)

The near-rape by Marse Arthur, a man who has denied his own black blood and sneered at her as a "nigger gal," crystallizes Bitá's developing embrace of her own black identity over-against the English identity the Craigs have carefully constructed for her. Significantly, however, that identity is figured not as a cultural construct, but as something that inheres in the beauty of her body. While in the passage I just cited Bitá does not particularly emphasize her body's blackness, the extent to which she is grounding her identity in the color of her skin is underscored by the fact that she immediately begins to read William Blake's "The Little Black Boy" (given to her, of course, by Squire Gensir). Lest we miss the import of her reading, McKay quotes the entire poem (267). Blake's poem, of course, begins with the black boy musing that while he is "black," his "soul" is "white," and that "these black bodies and this sunburnt face/Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove/For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear, /The cloud will vanish" (267). The poem seems to end on a hopeful note:

And thus I say to little English boy,
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me. **[End Page 187]**

Bitá, musing on the poem, sees what any careful reader ought to note: that the reconciliation here reinscribes the privilege of white over black. There is an essential self shared by the black and the English boy, but that essential self is "white." When each is free from the "cloud" of skin color, the black boy tends to the needs of the white boy (shading him from heat, stroking his hair) until he, the black boy, is redeemed from servitude by becoming "like" the English boy. The black boy's reverie about freedom actually reinscribes his secondary status as a black boy, an effect not unlike the one we saw when Bitá positions herself as a slave mistress while playing the minto. Moreover, the poem's tendency to reinscribe the black boy's secondary status even though he's in heaven with the white boy mirrors the effect of Squire Gensir's progressive remarks about Obeah and education, for we saw that in both cases he uses language that contains the very ideological hierarchizing he seeks to critique. Each of these cases mirror what happens in Blake's poem, where a vision of reconciliation gets transcribed in a way that reveals within it a darker counter-logic.

The difference between these earlier scenes and this one is that Bitá is well aware of this irony; she glimpses the counter-logic at work in the poem and its implications for her own situation. As soon as she finishes reading the poem, she muses that while Blake's is "a splendid poem," it is "not one to be recommended to an impressionable black child. For it is murder of the spirit, she reasoned, to cultivate a black child to hanker after the physical

characteristics of the white. Rather, teach it to delight in its own created self upon the earth" (268). Of course, this is what she was doing previous to reading the poem, delighting on her own naked, black, "created" body as the core of her identity. Her point about Blake's poem is that it actually undermines such an effort.

At this point, however, she begins to back away from the implications of this reading:

But away from petty picking into little pieces a poem magnificent as a whole, to speculate about its great creator. What a marvelous universal mind was this William Blake's . . . Shakespearean in comprehension. How perfect of music and phrasing, and far-reaching the implication of that thought: When he from white and I from black cloud free. . . . It was like an uplifting outburst from Beethoven, a winged wonder . . . Oh, if only she could rest her spirit tranquilly there, upon thoughts where petty passions could not penetrate nor inconsequential intrude . . . even in a tragic moment the most irrelevant banalities sometimes will invade the domain of the highest thought. (268)

What has happened here? Having developed a shrewd critique of the poem's underlying ideology, Bitá dismisses it as inconsequential, irrelevant, and banal because it ostensibly obscures the poem's higher and more essential aesthetic greatness. She feels guilty because her reading picks the poem's ideology to pieces, sacrificing its "magnificence" in order to engage in a petty quibble with its creator's ideas. Blake's preeminence as an artist, she has been taught, resides in the "universal" quality of his mind and in his "Shakespearean comprehension," and this ought to take precedence **[End Page 188]** over the poem's ideas---even over the effect those ideas have on her. Indeed, she clearly wants to take refuge from the effects of the poem's ideology by "rest[ing] her spirit" in its "perfect . . . music and phrasing." ¹⁷ There is in this reversal of her first reading something of the logic we saw working in the Mozart and minto scene. There, the native minto gets its significance from the musical greatness of Mozart. Similarly, in this scene the problematic nature of the poem is cancelled out by Blake's poetic greatness. In the earlier scene, Bitá's potential identification with the slave listening outside is cancelled out by her identification with the slave *mistress*, while in this scene her insight into the persistence of racial hierarchizing in Blake's poem is displaced by her romanticized identification with the black boy who seems somehow freed from discrimination by the sheer aesthetic quality of the poem. The link in both of these scenes between *identity* and *identification* is crucial. Throughout the novel, Bitá's subjectivity develops in the contested space between the Craigs' "Englishness" and Squire Gensir's appeal to an "indigenous" set of cultural values. In the first scene, "Englishness" is represented by the cultural capital of Mozart ("Englishness," of course, is rooted here in a more general set of European signifiers) while Jamaican indigenous culture (with little if any capital) is represented by the slave who overhears the minuet. Bitá's unconscious identification with the slave mistress underscores the extent to which her subjectivity has been almost wholly made over by the dominant culture. ¹⁸ Likewise, in the scene where she is reading Blake, the tension between her black Jamaican perspective, which leads her to read the poem critically, and her "Englishness," which wants to value the poem for its magisterial aesthetic qualities, is resolved in favor of her identification with the poet and his greatness. ¹⁹

III

I began this essay with Robert Young's observation that what contemporary cultural studies needed was to pay more attention to the "*commerce between cultures* that map and shadow" the texts and institutions it studies. This involves, in his view, a focus on the intricate processes of "cultural contact," particularly the roles played by "intrusion," "fusion," and "disjunction" (5). McKay's novel, I have tried to show, is a particularly apt text for such an analysis, especially if we want to link Young's observations to Gilroy's particular contextualization of this kind of commerce to the space of the "black Atlantic," where identity is forged less in terms of "roots" than "routes." Indeed, Bitá's subjectivity is contested precisely in terms of her relative allegiance to roots and routes, that is, to her inherited, relatively Afrocentric, native "roots" on the one hand, and the culture of the West she picks up en route to and from Europe. I stressed at the outset of my essay the novel's reliance on the discourse of hybridity, but we can note here as well the extent to which Bitá becomes a product of cultural commerce, for she is a character whose identity is constructed by the *intrusion*, *infusion*, and *disjunction* marked by cultural contact. The roots vs. routes perspective Gilroy offers is particularly helpful here, because the idea that Bitá has any real choice between the one or the other is probably specious. One of Gilroy's [End Page 189] important points, of course, is that an analysis of identity in terms of roots (with its stress on idealized concepts of the natural, the absolute, and the indigenous) is always going to be faulty to the extent that it excludes the influences of other sources routed to the one you are studying through the processes of contact and colonization. Gilroy's analysis is not so much grounded in a firm distinction between roots and routes but in the insistence that "roots" has been sloppily naturalized into an idealized essentialism. There may be something like "roots" in the conventional sense of the term, but one's roots are always so highly mediated by the social and cultural discourses growing out of the routes one's experience takes that the whole notion of roots really turns out to be illusory. For Gilroy, there are no roots in the conventional sense of the term; subjectivity is always going to be marked by the *intrusion* of one culture into another, the infusion of elements of multiple cultures into others, and a consequent *disjunction* that is going to produce hybrid cultural forms and subjectivities.

Banana Bottom represents the drama of these processes in a particularly forceful way, and if it is read with care (the way Bitá herself first begins to read Blake) it leaves us with more questions than it answers. The novel clearly means to indict the neo-colonialism of the Craigs, and in so doing offers up a critique of the role of missionary work in the economic and cultural conquest of British colonies. It also represents with great clarity the role of odious racial theories in the ideological operations of colonization. Yet, when it turns to Squire Gensir, whose liberal predispositions seem to offer a reasonable counter to the Craigs', it betrays his unconscious complicity with their position. This complicates the nature and meaning of the alliance Bitá forms with Gensir, for, as we have seen, her incorporation of his point of view does not so much liberate her from the Englishness fashioned by the Craigs as much as it refines and liberalizes that point of view in ways that often end up obscuring its connection to the one the Craigs represent. The novel also ought to caution us against too schematic a reading, one in which Bitá's "indigenous" roots are simply and monolithically juxtaposed against the forces of

colonialism in a cultural war in which an idealized root identity wills out. The question ought not to be, "How will Bita get back to her African/Jamaican roots?" but rather, "How will she negotiate the space between the cultures in which she is enmeshed?" This means living with the kind of double-consciousness Gilroy invokes at the outset of *The Black Atlantic*. There, he refers to the challenge of being "both European and black," a challenge that requires "occupying the space between" the two, a space structured by what appear to be mutually exclusive identities marked by race, nationality, and ethnic absolutism. The Craigs in *Banana Bottom* tend to take the absolutist position in each case, and so Priscilla can't help but worry that no matter how much she tinkers with Bita the absolute nature of her race, ethnicity, and nationality will thwart her. Gensir, on the other hand, rejects these absolutes in favor of the idea that all identities and cultures are constructed through mongrelization and theft. However, we have seen that underneath Gensir's ethic is the Craigs' counter-logic. Bita's real struggle, it turns out, is not between two clearly demarcated and schematically drawn positions, the one reactionary and the other liberating. Rather, it is the more complex and complicated effort to construct a racial, national, and ethnic identity for herself that not only escapes the Craigs' grip, **[End Page 190]** but also the less clearly marked and therefore in some sense more insidious liberal ideology represented by Gensir. His position seems to offer her liberation, but a careful reading of the novel suggests that liberation is partial, and that it comes with a cost. An idealized reading of the novel would valorize Gensir's position, insist that by the end of the book Bita has gained her freedom because she's assimilated it, and celebrate the role of his liberal humanism in thwarting the Craigs' patronizing colonialism. However, I am arguing that a more careful reading of the text suggests the complicity of these two positions, and even more, that there is no position that stands outside them. Bita has no natural identity to reconnect with, no ethnically or racially absolute roots to tap into. Her modernity, to recall a term central to Gilroy's whole thesis, [20](#) can be defined precisely in terms of this predicament.

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Notes

1. Most of the "productive" paradigms for such study, he notes, have come from work on language (5). He cites, for example, Johannes Fabian's *Language and Colonial Power* (1986). Mary Louise Pratt, in developing the concept of "contact zones" in *Imperial Eyes*, notes as well that she takes her sense of "contact" from linguistics. See pp. 6-7. One might also turn to the study of globalization as articulated by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.
2. As examples Young cites Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, Fabian's *Time and the Work of Anthropology*, Hulme's *Colonial Encounters*, Reuter's *Race and Culture Contacts*, and Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Worlds* and *The Post-Colonial Critic*.
3. See in particular pp. 53-58 where Gilroy discusses the "expressive cultures developed in slavery" in the Americas (57) and how that culture produced an "ungenteel modernity,

decentered from the closed centers of metropolitan Europe" (58).

4. See Cooper (32-33) for a discussion of the autobiographical roots of *Banana Bottom*.

5. When Crazy Bow and Bitá have sex, he is 25 and she is "past 12" (9), but not by much. The act is referred to in the novel as a "rape." It takes place one afternoon when the two are "romping together . . . in fox-tail grass" (9). "As they romped," writes McKay, "Bitá got upon Crazy Bow's breast and began rubbing her head against his face. Crazy Bow suddenly drew himself up and rather roughly he pushed Bitá away and she rolled off a little down the slope" (9). At this point Crazy Bow begins to play his fiddle. "He played a sweet tea-meeting love song. And as he played Bitá went creeping upon her hands and feet up the slope to him and listened in the attitude of a bewitched being . . . she clambered upon him again and began kissing his face. Crazy Bow tried to push her off. But Bitá hugged and clung to him passionately. Crazy Bow was blinded by temptation and lost control of himself and the deed was done" (9-10).

6. See Cooper (22-30) for a detailed discussion of McKay's friendship with Walter Jekyll and the extent to which Squire Gensir is modeled on Jekyll.

7. That is, I will be arguing that the slippage between their positions, the ways in which Gensir's liberal position mirrors elements of the Craigs', is something that McKay himself does not seem to be aware of. All of the evidence both within and outside of the text, as we shall see, suggests that the book was meant to valorize the friend on whom this character is based, Walter Jekyll.

8. See in particular Young, Chapters 2 and 3.

9. For a detailed discussion of the *cultural* conquest of Mexico and the emergence of a composite culture that ensued, see Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico*, especially Chapter Four, "Colonial Idolatry."

10. Two other examples of this kind of syncretism would be Haitian Vodun and Cuban Santería, both of which are based on African spiritual practices, modified by experience in the Americas and melded with Catholicism. The result in both instances is a transformation in the root African religion but also in Catholicism. For an excellent overview of the history and political uses of the term "syncretism" in anthropology see Stewart and Shawl. In their discussion of the relationship between syncretism and cultural conquest they note the kind of irony I am referring to: "The appropriation of dominance and the subversion of that dominance may be enacted at the same time, in the same syncretic act. Subversion may even be an *unintended* consequence of a syncretic process in which actors intend to appropriate rather than subvert cultural dominance. These conundrums of agency and intentionality make syncretism very slippery, but it is precisely its capacity to contain paradox, contradiction and polyphony which makes syncretism such a powerful symbolic process" (21).

11. Western, indigenous, and African cultural forms, writes Gilroy, were "dispersed within structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering" throughout the black Atlantic, so that "the cultures of this group have been produced in a syncretic pattern in

which the styles and forms of the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa have been reworked and reinscribed in the novel context of modern Britain's own untidy ensemble of regional and class-oriented conflicts" (3).

12. It is worth noting that there was a significant wave of Scottish immigrants to Jamaica. Throughout the novel McKay pays particular attention to the social and cultural distinctions in Jamaica drawn around color and ethnicity. For example, McKay writes that "the island colony was divided into three main groups in a political and social way. The descendants of the slaves were about three-fourths of the population and classified as black or dark brown. The descendants of Europeans and slaves were about one-fifth of the population and classified as coloured or light brown. The rest were a few thousand East Indians and Chinese and perhaps the same number of Pure European descent" (4). See also pp. 29 and 101.

13. The difference between these two positions is quite close to the two historical positions on amalgamation Young discusses. The *positive* amalgamation thesis held that "all humans can interbreed prolifically and in an unlimited way" (18). Sometimes this thesis was "accompanied by the 'melting-pot' notion that the mixing of people produces a new mixed race, with merged but distinct new physical and moral characteristics" (18). The *negative* amalgamation thesis, according to Young, held that "miscegenation produces a mongrel group that makes up a 'raceless chaos', merely a corruption of the originals, degenerate and degraded, threatening to subvert the vigour and virtue of the pure races with which they come into contact" (18). These two positions are both clearly in play in McKay's Jamaica.

14. In a helpful discussion of McKay's "primitivism" Adam Lively insists on a distinction between "exotic" and "protest" primitivism, arguing that McKay used primitivism strategically to criticize white culture. "McKay's primitivism," he writes, "is not merely an aesthetic celebration, but a protest against, and well-defined critique of, the dominant white culture" (231). Lively argues that by the time he got to writing *Banana Bottom* McKay had "refined the presentation of his polemic" via primitivism (232), presenting primitivism less as negative "protest" against Eurocentric culture than as "a positive alternative" to it. What Lively misses, however, is the extent to which Gensir's primitivism in the novel is "protest primitivism," and how it protests *too much*, relegating the "primitive" to the premodern and pagan.

15. Gensir is, in this regard, patterned on McKay's Scots mentor in Jamaica, Walter Jekyll, who collected and published local Anancy stories and songs and was instrumental in directing McKay's early reading and his intellectual interests (McKay writes in an "Author's Note" appended to the novel that "all the characters . . . are imaginary, excepting perhaps Squire Gensir"). Near the end of the novel, when he has died and Bita has made the successful transition from "English" lady back to a peasant girl, McKay has Bita eulogize him in the following way: "How different his life had been from the life of the other whites. They had come to conquer and explore, govern, trade, preach and educate to their liking, exploit men and material. But this man was the first to enter into the simple life of the island Negroes and proclaim significance and beauty in their transplanted African folk tales and in the words and music of their native dialect. Before him it had been said the Negroes were inartistic. But he had found artistry where others saw

nothing . . ." (310).

[16](#). Many of McKay's critics have missed this twist in Gensir's characterization. Cooper, McKay's biographer, for example, writes that "with the help of a sympathetic . . . Squire Gensir" Bitá discovers that "her natural inclination is to embrace again the black folkways of her peasant childhood" (282). There is no hint in his reading of the novel that there are potential contradictions at the heart of Gensir's position. Michael North, surprisingly, locates something like the contradiction I have been analyzing in *Walter Jekyll*, but does not see it carrying over into the characterization of Squire Gensir. Discussing Jekyll's interest in dialect poetry and its influence on McKay, North observes that there is a "conservative bias" in "the very act of preservation"--and which is underscored by Jekyll's "antimodern romanticism" (101). He *does* note the similarity between Jekyll's position and Gensir's, noting the irony that for both McKay and Bitá "dialect, tea meetings, perhaps even obeah and sex, become beautiful only when touched by the wand of English approval" (102). However, he argues at the end of his essay that Gensir "demolishes" the "whole dichotomy between the primitive and the complex, nature and culture, the Afro-Caribbean and Europe . . . without so much as a blink of the eye" when he defends the "primitive simplicity" of Jamaican life as "something more complex than his visitor had imagined" (121). I have been arguing the opposite, of course: that what North calls the "conservative bias" of Jekyll inheres in the fictional character of Squire Gensir. I would agree that McKay intended to purge that bias in Gensir, but my analysis of the novel demonstrates that didn't happen.

[17](#). This passage does engage the "thought" of the poem, of course. But unlike her more comprehensive reading of the poem, Bitá here fixes on an isolated phrase, "When he from white and I from black cloud free," and romanticizes its meaning free of the context of the poem from which it comes.

[18](#). Indeed, there is a striking parallel between the aesthetic hierarchy Bitá invokes here and the one Priscilla Craig draws on in her reaction to the African idols we discussed earlier. Bitá's falling back from her horror at the poem's ideology, her taking recourse to the poem's beauty and universality when measured by Western aesthetic standards, repeats Priscilla Craig's privileging of classicism over primitivism.

[19](#). What critics like Terry Eagleton have called the "ideology of the aesthetic" is of course pronounced here. McKay's novel dramatizes in the scenes I've been discussing the role of aesthetic values in mystifying if not thwarting altogether the negative ideological force of a poem or other work of art. Aesthetic value, privileged in the West as something outside of, and indeed transcending ideology, is presented as disinterested. But we can see in these scenes how the aesthetic works subtly but forcefully in the interests of a dominant political and cultural ideology.

[20](#). The subtitle of Gilroy's book is "Modernity and Double Consciousness." One of the main points of the book is his insistence that the history and nature of modernity needs to be rethought through the incorporation, rather than the exclusion, of colonialism, racism, and the institutions of slavery and the plantation. The expressive culture produced by the diasporic populations of *this* modernity (he calls it *ungenteel*) must, in Gilroy's view, be folded back into a revised history of modernity. What I have been arguing is that Bitá's

double consciousness, produced and suffered in the cultural commerce of the black Atlantic, registers the experience of this revised modernity.

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