**Abstract**

This article examines two of Claude McKay’s novels, *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929) with relation to their characters’ complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory attitude to food cultures. McKay’s characters demonstrate an awareness that their food choices are political, whether that be in terms of how much they eat—the stigma associated with a certain stereotype of the gluttonous black subject—or what they eat—any food coded black, indigenous, or from the global South carries negative associations—and they make their choices accordingly. The lead characters in each novel, however, claim a radical and subversive pleasure in eating in the face of the imperative from respectability politics to exercise restraint. In his portrayal of a happy and healthy licentious black consumer, then, McKay is reclaiming a politics of pleasure from the terrain of black abjection.

**Comfort Food and Respectability Politics in Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot***

Claude McKay’s novels, particularly *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929), present food and eating in ways that are deliberately provocative both to stereotypes of African-American food cultures and to early twentieth-century discourse about health, restraint, and civic duty. His characters often eat to excess and drink to excess. They eat racially-coded Southern foods such as fried chicken and corn pone but they also sample and are connoisseurs of international flavours. They eat and drink because they get sensual enjoyment from eating and drinking and they do not especially trouble about nutrition or health. They are, anyway, very healthy. Hedonism is comforting for them; comfort food is wholesome. This article will examine three ways in which McKay presents his characters’ relationships with food and food cultures in these two novels: through what they eat, how much they eat, and why they eat. The “what” constitutes a complex negotiation with food cultures, stereotypes and respectability. His characters are more often than not aware that some foods are perceived as more refined (read white European) than others (read global South, indigenous or black), and that awareness affects their choices. The “how much” relates to frugality and excess, particularly in terms of prevailing late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century discourse about morality, abstinence and virtue. The third relates to motivation for eating. The healthier of McKay’s characters eat for pleasure rather more than they eat for any high-scientific ideal of nourishment and wellbeing. These healthier characters (notably Jake in *Home to Harlem* and Banjo in *Banjo*) are happy-go-lucky gourmands whose all-embracing attitude to food, drink and pleasure is in itself radical.

This article builds on the recent renaissance of food studies in modernist criticism, particularly with regards to the importance of food and rituals of eating to the modern black subject. As Derek Gladwin notes in his introduction to *Gastro-Modernism*, “food production and consumption are both literally and metaphorically everywhere in modernist literature and culture, reflecting the relationship among colonialism, agriculturalism, and industrialism in the early twentieth-century;” the modern subject thus engages with foods and with eating “to express anxieties about modernity as much as to celebrate the excesses modern lifestyles produce.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Further, as Catherine Keyser puts it in her introduction to the recent “Modernist Food Studies” cluster: “The eating imperative connects us to other people and other creatures—to the social, economic, political, and ecological world. In this experience of enmeshed embodiment, modernism explores the eccentric, the aesthetic, the excessive, and the immersive—even the disgusting.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Claude McKay’s more sensuous characters, Jake in *Home to Harlem*, and Banjo in the novel of the same name, demonstrate through their food choices that they are connected, socially and politically, to other eaters in other regions and countries. They navigate their very modernity, in its excess, joy and disgust, through the foods that they eat. In this practice they are unlike the high modernists Alys Moody describes in her book *The Art of Hunger* who express “scorn for culinary art” and believe “art that is too readily consumed is unserious and unaesthetic.”[[3]](#footnote-3) McKay’s modernism is much messier and much more joyful than that; recent McKay criticism claims that his particular brand of primitive and vitalist modernism challenges precisely the notion that modernist art must be difficult, high-minded, serious and aesthetic. As Smita Das points out, the portrayal of working-class African-American “vitality” is in itself “a revolutionary stance against narratives of Black racial uplift and Western literary aesthetics that sought to construct a unified, homogeneous, and Western literary national form.”[[4]](#footnote-4) McKay countered these drives towards respectability in literary art, Das claims, through his development of a modernist “folk aesthetic”. Jennifer F. Wang also notes this attitude of McKay’s, and claims, further, that his very style aims to showcase and celebrate the “vital and life-affirming forces of black primitivist cultures” and warn against their becoming “fatally degraded by Western civilization.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

While recent work on McKay celebrates his “folk aesthetic” and his deliberate transgression of boundaries of high and low culture, social status, and respectability, the initial reception of McKay’s work was critical of precisely those transgressions: his first novel *Home to Harlem* notoriously received what can only be described as mixed reviews from the African American press. Alain Locke thought it was a remarkable novel and claims its publication as one of the three important literary “events” of 1928. He praises it for its “descriptive art and its reflection of the vital rhythms of Negro life” and he claims for the working-class characters “a clean folkiness of the soil” where there might instead have been “the decadent muck of the city-gutter.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Pan-Africanist and black nationalist Marcus Garvey, on the other hand, thought that the folksiness of the characters was anything but clean. He reviews the novel as “an insult to the race,” lamenting the book’s portrayal of Harlem and its people in terms of “looseness, laxity and immorality.” He calls for a boycott of this novel and others like it and exhorts black book-buyers to instead invest in authors who “make efforts to advance our race through healthy and decent literature.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Another very famous review of the novel by W. E. B. Du Bois advances on similar terms. Garvey and Du Bois did not often agree, but they both suspected that *Home to Harlem*, in its portrayal of the excesses of working-class black Harlem, had in mind a white audience in search of titillation. Du Bois says that:

it looks as though […] McKay has set out to cater for that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying—if enjoyment it can be called.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These white readers, Du Bois suspects, want to see the wilder side of Harlem life and want to be pleasantly shocked by the impropriety of its inhabitants. Du Bois laments McKay’s emphasis on “drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint” and goes as far as to claim that *Home to Harlem* “for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

McKay wrote a private letter to Du Bois after the publication of this review in which he accuses the writer of being completely removed from “‘real life’” and says that this distance from reality makes him unable to truly judge what is realism in literature and what propaganda. *Home to Harlem*, he implies, is meant as realism and if not portraying a complete cross-section of Harlem society (including its middle-class intelligentsia) is at least a “slice of life,” in the words of another contemporary review.[[10]](#footnote-10) As William J. Maxwell notes, one phrase of Du Bois’s review seems to have stuck in the author’s mind. McKay signs his letter “‘Yours for more utter absence of restraint.’”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Because Locke’s review is a retrospective, and written in 1929, it seems likely that his praise for the novel was in part a response to Garvey and Du Bois. But the phrases in each of these three reviews, including Locke’s positive review—“clean […] soil” versus “decadent muck”; “looseness, laxity and immorality” set up in opposition to the “healthy and decent” in Garvey; “utter licentiousness” and “utter absence of restraint” in Du Bois’s—set up a dichotomy between hygiene and self-control on the one hand and dirt and excess on the other hand. The target here is ostensibly the book’s attitude to violence, crime, and sex but it is also interesting to read the book’s approach to food cultures through these terms. The characters in *Home to Harlem* eat, and they enjoy eating, as much as they enjoy sex and dancing. They drink and enjoy drinking for the taste and the pleasure of drinking itself as much as if not more than for the sake of getting drunk. The distaste of both Garvey and Du Bois then, although possibly neither critic recognized it as such, is in part an unease about the image of the licentious black character as glutton.

There is a history to the policing of black appetite. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, in her book *Racial Indigestion*, highlights how in the nineteenth century, popular food reform movements in the US deliberately created a stereotype of the black licentious eater and used that stereotype as foil for a new model eater: white and abstemious. This dichotomy was not just about how much and what a subject ate, however. Intrinsic to nineteenth century diet reform “was the union of psychological and moral well-being with civic virtue.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Good citizens eat responsibly, and there is something suspect in eating for pleasure or eating to excess. As Helen Zoe Veit says, too, a common perception in white America in the early decades of the twentieth century was that “poor African Americans and immigrants were […] incapable of sustained self-denial.” Underlying this assumption was the implicit belief that “physical self-control was a central part of white adulthood and the inability to control bodily desires was a defining part of non-whiteness.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The citizen who eats too much, moreover, is marked with the stigma of that excess. In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings points out that “Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked fatness to ‘greedy’ Africans. And religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly.”[[14]](#footnote-14) On the other side of the coin, the fashion for slenderness in white society was seen by many “as a marker of moral, racial, and national superiority.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In Catherine Keyser’s analysis of these phenomena, we see how all-pervasive this messaging was:

The decades between the two world wars saw the efflorescence of racial pseudo-science and nativist manifestos alongside advertising and consumer culture as well as exercise regimes, vitamania, and diet fads. The visual and textual artifacts of these movements create narratives about the origins, authenticity, hierarchy, and evolution of racial categories, sometimes explicitly (eugenics) and other times implicitly (advertising).[[16]](#footnote-16)

It is easy to see, then, why Garvey and Du Bois might have been uneasy with McKay’s portrayal of a working class Harlem in which people eat a lot, and are vocal in their enjoyment of eating. The emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene in the reviews of *Home to Harlem* are also resonant in this context. Food hygiene did not only mean to eat fresh and uncontaminated foods but to “eat clean” in a modern sense. The black subject was construed as eating dirty and so therefore doubly contaminated, as Doris Witt suggests: “blackness is stigmatized as ‘filthy,’ ‘polluted,’ or ‘dangerous,’” which ontologies often “reside not in black bodies but instead in foods said to nourish those bodies.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The primal pleasure of eating is also not too far from the primal pleasure of sex, and the unproblematic celebration of either can mark a character as backward, uncivilized, unrestrained and savage. Eating, says Wazana Tompkins, was and is “a racializing practice that exists on a continuum with dissident and nonnormative forms of sensuality, a continuum that was constructed through the comparative anthropological fictions of primitive and savage life that underwrote the United States’ self-fashioning as the nonpareil of white civilization.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Claude McKay’s fiction, emphasizing as it does the happy black eater, posed a challenge to Du Boisian respectability politics and to the ongoing work of movements dedicated to racial uplift. While the portrayal of a “‘greedy’” black consumer might seem to Du Bois to play to race science’s civilisation/savagery dichotomy—and to create further conflict for the subject’s “double consciousness” of his blackness and how that blackness is perceived— I follow Wang in positing a “more politically generous” reading of Claude McKay’s novels. McKay works to dismantle the very rhetoric that forbids gustatory pleasure to the black subject.[[19]](#footnote-19)

McKay does not straightforwardly gift his characters with a carefree attitude to food and to eating, but instead builds the tension between greedy savagery and civilized restraint into his narrative. The very first page of *Home to Harlem* centres food and race as mutually signifying. The protagonist, Jake, is returning home from a post-War adventure in London, on a freighter on which he is stoker. He is the only black American in a “dirty Arab crew” of stokers, and his first observations are about the eating habits of these “Arabs,” who the cooks dislike and mistrust because they “did not eat pork,” and who eat chunks of meat from the communal pan “with their coal-powdered fingers, bit or tore off a piece, and tossed the chunk back into the pan.” They wash after eating rather than before and disgust even Jake with his “leather-lined stomach” until he can’t stand it anymore and bribes the chef to give him “his eats separately.” A white sailor, noting this, is prompted to praise Jake for his discernment here: “‘You’re the same like us chaps. You ain’t like them dirty jabbering coolies.’”[[20]](#footnote-20) Differences of diet, of eating rituals (and the hygiene associated with those rituals) mark the degree to which the eating subject is civilized or savage. But Jake here is betwixt and between: society marks him as too savage to join the sailors’ crew but too civilized to be able to stomach the stokers’ eating behaviours.

When Jake arrives home to Harlem, he is free to eat whatever he wants and to seek pleasure wherever he wants, and he takes advantage of this fact. Jake is very keen to repatriate himself after years away from his homeland and he is looking forward to the fun he will have when he lands. On the boat he fantasizes about the “chocolate-brown and walnut-brown” girls of Harlem and the “sweet kissing” he expects to get for a little money (all words which align the flesh of these girls with sweet foodstuffs).[[21]](#footnote-21) The first thing he does, though, is head to a bar for “three Martini cocktails with cherries in them” and then to “Bank’s” for a “Maryland fried-chicken feed—a big one with candied sweet potatoes.” Food and drink are the first priorities, and sex follows soon after. He finds a girl in a cabaret and orders a Scotch and soda, an affectation he has picked up in London—“‘English folks don’t take whiskey straight, as we do’”—he bargains with the girl for a night with her, goes back to her establishment, dances with her in a room of other couples and sleeps with her. In the morning she brings him “hot coffee and cream and doughnuts” for breakfast and when he leaves he finds that she has returned the money he paid her.[[22]](#footnote-22) He is elated and goes to a bar to celebrate with another Scotch and soda. He meets a friend there—Zeddy—and the two repair to “Aunt Hattie’s chitterling joint” where they eat “Fricassee chicken and rice. Green peas. Stewed corn” followed with a “cocoanut pie.” Aunt Hattie is presented as somewhat of an institution: “She cooked delicious food—home cooked food they called it. None of the boys loafing around that section of Fifth Avenue would dream of going to any other place for their ‘poke chops.’”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Less than ten pages into the novel and already Jake has eaten his fill of the foods he was missing while he was in Europe. He starts with the classic American cocktail—the martini—which Ernest Hemingway describes in *A Farewell to Arms* as “cool and clean;” a drink to make the drinker “feel civilized.”[[24]](#footnote-24) He follows this civilized beverage with a typical Southern fried chicken feast, then with an English-style further drink, the Englishness of which he is at pains to point out to anyone who will listen. There is also “beer and wine and plenty of hard liquor.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The morning doughnuts and coffee are coded as very New York if Harlem via Haarlem; the “chitterling joint” then Southernizes the two newly-met friends with its African-American soul food. The foods and drinks Jake consumes in his first homecoming excitement are remarkable for the cultural code-mixings they represent. The mixed-drinks and the European-New York doughnuts represent sophistication. The hearty Southern feasts stand for comfort and indulgence but are coded black-American: the food is homely and the pronunciation is colloquial. Again Jake is shown to have a foot in more than one camp. He is not a savage stoker, unable to eat pork and with poor hygiene, but he is also not the kind of man who will restrict himself to foods that are coded white. He will eat everything he think tastes good and he will enjoy it.

Jake is nonchalant and expansive in his food choices, but that is not true of all the characters. There are two chefs in *Home to Harlem*, both fat and described as physically disgusting, but both very good at making delicious comfort food for their customers and guests. First there is Susy, a matronly woman who briefly acts as sexual “ma-ma” to Jake’s friend Zeddy. She invites Zeddy and his friend Jake round for a feast:

For she belonged to the ancient aristocracy of black cooks, and knew that she was always sure of a good place, so long as the palates of rich Southerners retained their discriminating taste.

Cream tomato soup. Ragout of chicken giblets. Southern fried chicken. Candied sweet potatoes. Stewed corn. Rum-flavoured fruit salad waiting in the ice-box…. The stars rolling in Susy’s shining face showed how pleased she was with her art.

She may be fat and ugly as a turkey, thought Jake, but her eats am sure beautiful.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The food, again, is what we might call Southern or soul food. There is an emphasis on cheaper ingredients and on food influenced by African diaspora foodways. As the food historian Michael H. Twitty points out, the development of Southern cuisine is a material reflection of the “negotiations and conflict” of multiple African identities where “each group gets folded into those who were already here:” “European indentures, Africans and Native people” all bringing their own particular flavours, cooking methods and foodstuffs to the table.[[27]](#footnote-27) Soul food, a more recent coinage, implies that further hybridization of the cuisine has taken place since the mass migration of African Americans from the South up to Harlem.[[28]](#footnote-28) In this passage the cultural intermixings are apparent in the use of indigenous American ingredients such as sweet potatoes and corn, prepared in ways reminiscent of European food traditions (tomato soup and ragout) but with Caribbean and African accents (rum in the fruit salad and Southern fried chicken). The food, through Jake’s eyes, is just wonderful and he does not himself question its history or its associations. However, the complex cultural heritage of Southern or soul food, which Twitty describes as the black cook’s “Africanizing” of European food, makes it, elsewhere in *Home to Harlem*, a political hot potato. The second chef I want to look at here is also an “artist.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Unlike Susie, however, he has a complex and fraught relationship with the food he produces:

the chef had a violent distaste for all the stock things that “coons” are supposed to like to the point of stealing them. He would not eat watermelon, because white people called it “the n—’s ice-cream.” Pork chops he fancied not. Nor corn pone. And the idea of eating chicken gave him a spasm. Of the odds and ends of chicken gizzard, feet, head, rump, heart, wing points, and liver—the chef would make the most delicious stew for the crew, which he never touched himself.[[30]](#footnote-30)

For this dining-car chef, a man with ambition and an inflated ego, any food coded black is untouchable because coarsening. Because white prejudice associates offal, chicken, pork and watermelon with the black eating subject, he sees avoidance of these foodstuffs as a mark of respectability. This chef is also a terribly angry man, described as “a great black bundle of consciously suppressed desires.”[[31]](#footnote-31) He *desires* the foods he will not eat, and the suppression, or repression of those desires is shown to be damaging. He has, in fact, internalized precisely that racialized dichotomy propagated by the followers of eugenics (and euthenics) that white food is abstemious and black food is gluttonous; he eats only food that is lean, compact and bland. Where Jake, in *Home to Harlem*, enjoys cultural codeswitching: performing taste and sophistication in the ordering of martinis and Scotch and soda, but still enjoying his hearty soul food, the dining-car chef limits himself only to the foods that he imagines will signal his social aspirations to an imagined onlooker.

The descriptions of these two chefs are telling because of both the differences in their attitude to food cultures and their similarities. Susie is proud of her Southern cooking and she knows that her skill in producing delicious and traditional Southern food will also help her to a secure job if and when she needs or wants such. Her art has cultural capital and also brings pleasure. The dining-car chef, by contrast, is too worried about what his Southern cooking signifies to eat the food himself and when it is time for his own meal he will instead “grill a steak or mutton chop or fry a fish.”[[32]](#footnote-32) In both descriptions chicken, and particularly chicken offal, feature heavily. The presumed relationship between chicken and African-Americans and their food cultures was and still is inherently loaded with negative associations, in part, as Psyche Williams-Forson explains, because it was “a food that black people were considered to love and rumored to steal:”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Chicken was symbolic of multiple tensions within black communities during the early twentieth-century. During the periods following slavery, large numbers of black people migrated to cities, bringing their southern mores with them. In the North, these traditions heavily collided with black class assumptions. The central tenet of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs was racial uplift, embodied in the motto “Lifting as We Climb.” This credo called upon educated, upper-class black women to lead poorer black women in the “proper” expressions of morality, decorum, and social grace. Food was a by-product of these larger goals of progressive activism. What poorer black working-class women ate as well as how they obtained their food were often sources of angst for early black feminists.[[34]](#footnote-34)

We see, then, why the dining-car chef might decide to cook delicious chicken-offal stews for his crew but refuse to partake himself. Susie, however, is precisely the type of “poorer black working-class woman” whose racial uplift might be hindered by her continued and obstinate preparing and eating of fried chicken and chicken offal and yet she takes pride in her creation of these exemplary food stuffs and is described by the narrator, not as an ignorant poor black woman who refuses uplift in her ignorance but rather as a member of the “ancient aristocracy” of black Southern female cooks. She is also in this description very much the large, motherly and capacious “mammy” figure. As Williams-Forson points out, “black women’s cooking abilities have always been connected to mammy imagery.” But the continued preparation and eating of chicken in the face of, on the one hand, proponents of racial uplift discouraging its consumption and, on the other, ignorant stereotyping of the black woman chicken-cook, presented an opportunity for reclamation: “Chicken therefore becomes interesting for what it represents in the realm of social freedom, manners, morals, culture, refinement, and self-expression.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Susie expresses herself through her cooking, and in this way has greater autonomy and great self-power than the dining-car chef who feels he must reject foods too laden with prejudicial connotations.

There is also an interesting tension, in the descriptions of both characters, between the beauty and art of the food the two cooks produce, and the “ugly” fatness of the characters’ bodies. The dining-car chef is described as “repulsive,” with “elevated bulk,” “gross person” and “sloppy mouth;” Susie, in her guise as “mammy,” looks shiny and like a fat turkey.[[36]](#footnote-36) The stigmatizing of fat bodies here is problematic, not least because the food that has made the characters fat is praised so exuberantly as beautiful, delicious, and artistic. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, as Sabrina Strings points out, “fatness” was considered through a racial lens as “‘coarse,’ ‘immoral,’ ‘black,’ and ‘Other’” which discourse, she indicates, then “served as the driver for the creation of slenderness as the proper form of embodiment for elite white Christian women.”[[37]](#footnote-37) White women had been told, in the nineteenth century, that they were too thin and that their slenderness in pursuit of fashion was making them infertile and harming the race. In the early twentieth century the narrative shifted and new research into overweight and health concluded that most women should instead lose weight to ensure the health of the (white) body collective. Black bodies were less often considered:

The weight of middle- and upper-class white women had long been subject to intense scrutiny. But, in the medical field, the weight of racial Others was an entirely separate issue in the sense that racial/ethnic minorities were seldom included in medical analyses.[[38]](#footnote-38)

They were not included, Strings claims, in part because the dominant line of eugenics was that the “inferior” races would anyway soon die out and their long-term health was therefore not an important consideration.

It is difficult to reconcile McKay’s food-positive attitude with the fat-shaming in the descriptions of both Susie and the dining-car chef. Where he celebrates an “utter absence of restraint” in the representation of Jake’s eating habits, the two characters whose lack of restraint shows on their bodies are ridiculed and treated as objects of disgust. Susie’s fatness in particular signifies her culinary and sexual appetites and makes the men she socializes with uneasy. She is depicted as a rapacious and greedy monstrous woman, simultaneously “majestic” with a “general effect like a mountain” and a “repellent person” who seeks love, and sex, in the face of general ridicule.[[39]](#footnote-39) The dining-car chef, however, *does* exercise restraint. He denies himself the more delicious foods that he serves to his crew of waiters and kitchen staff due to a misplaced sense of respectability, similar to his refusal to join his co-workers in their evening trips to procure sex, and is still fat. This conscious abstinence is shown not to be a good thing as the chef misses out on the pure and primitive pleasure of good food (and sex) through a misguided and simplistic attempt to present a civilized front and his fatness then renders his abstinence more pathetic. The two cases appear to be very different. On the one hand we have the woman who doesn’t restrain herself, and who then finds herself stigmatized as she wears the resultant fat on her body. On the other hand we have the male chef who is very carefully restrained in most of his activities, but has clearly decided to restrain himself in the wrong activities. He should, by implication, be eating slightly less in terms of volume, but eating more in terms of variety. I posit that these two characters are condemned because they do not wholly follow their instincts. The dining-car chef overrides his instinct and applies external judgement to his food choices. Susie has lost touch with her sense of instinct in the consumption of food as with sex because of her frustrated desire for a steady lover. She carries “a hive of discontents in her majestic breast” and, it is implied, uses her gin-drinking and her cooking and feasting as a kind of surrogate passion.[[40]](#footnote-40) If the two chef characters could but be more in touch with their instinctual drives they would present as healthier and more balanced in body and soul, like Jake and like Banjo.

In McKay’s second novel *Banjo* these tensions between quantity and variety of food are explored again in more detail, as are the tensions between civilized and restrained eating and unrestrained and savage eating. *Banjo*, set as it is in a bustling metropolitan French port, and featuring an international and multi-racial cast of down-and-out characters—“white men, brown men, black men. Finns, Poles, Italians, Slavs, Maltese, Indians, Negroids, African Negroes, West Indian Negroes”—has even more diversity of food than *Home to Harlem*.[[41]](#footnote-41) The dock town is international by design and as function:

And, oh, the earthy mingled smells of the docks! Grain from Canada, rice from India, rubber from the Congo, tea from China, brown sugar from Cuba, bananas from Guinea, lumber from the Sudan, coffee from Brazil, skins from the Argentine, palm-oil from Nigeria, pimento from Jamaica, wool from Australia, oranges from Spain and oranges from Jerusalem. In piled-up boxes, bags, and barrels, some broken, dropping their stuff on the docks, reposing in the warm odor of their rich perfumes—the fine harvest of all the lands of the earth.[[42]](#footnote-42)

For Ray—who is McKay’s writer-character in both novels, and the closest in terms of outlook and opinion to the author himself—this is the “barbarous international romance” of Marseilles: a chaotic and exciting mixing of peoples and of foodstuffs.[[43]](#footnote-43) Ray’s first experience of Europe had been a negative one. He had visited museums and read books and not felt any closer to the spirit of place. In Marseilles, however, with its great international cacophony of people and harvest, he feels that he has found the real spirit of modern Europe; a modernity that is, ironically, a colonial and imperial present. In his description of the docks, as Keyser notes, “McKay draws upon the senses […] to generate an embodied experience of globalization rather than an abstract one.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The people and the goods all come together as “intermixture,” which leads “the dockworkers” (and the unemployed drifters alike) to “create a collective culture;” “In *Banjo*, immigrants, goods, languages, and wines flow through the Mediterranean in an ecstatic mélange.”[[45]](#footnote-45) For McKay and for the motley cast of characters in *Banjo*, the French experience is more international than just French. It becomes a space where culinary fantasies can be examined in lieu of racial or nationalist fantasies; quests for identity; the negotiation of poverty, starvation or physical wellbeing.

In *Banjo* food is irregular because the characters are poor and their schedules and circumstances are precarious. Breakfast is rarely mentioned but lunchtimes and evening meals (once the characters have begged some money from visitors or sailors on the docks) are prolonged and joyful. Afternoons are spent lounging on the docks “tapping” wine from barrels with rubber tubes; stealing wine that is en-route from one port to another. Evenings are for long drawn-out meals, much more wine (mostly house red, which is cheap) and music and dancing. The first meal in *Banjo* is a very French one. The title character Banjo has recently run out of money and he comes across a group of four beach bums, who live at the docks in Marseilles, “bumming a day’s work, a meal, a drink, existing from hand to mouth, anyhow any way, between box car, tramp ship, bistro, and bodel.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The four men “bummed” some money from Banjo the day before, when he still had means, and now that Banjo’s own money has run out they are happy to repay the favour. They all repair to the nearest bistro for“five plates of vegetable soup, a long loaf of bread, followed by braised beef and plenty of white beans.” All this washed down with, just to start, “five bottles of wine,” which amounts to one bottle each.[[47]](#footnote-47) They drink a lot more that night. This meal, as Jarrett H. Brown points out, is the “first moment of some alliance” between Banjo and his new friends: “As a self-revelatory act, eating – like music, singing, dancing, telling stories, bumming on the docks – helps the men, throughout the duration of the novel, to connect with each other as real people rather than as abstract subjects or sites of criminality.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The characters share “important socio-cultural details about their lives” and tell “where they are from.” Because they are all from different places, the shared experience of an adventure in French cuisine enhances their sense that although they are each on their own individual adventure, they are adventurers together. This sense of a meal as a shared experience, and the site for establishing friendship and kinship is important, too, to Jake in Harlem, who rarely eats alone. Other food eaten in Marseilles is not French, or even European, and the characters’ tastes are multi-cultural. They eat “chop suey” in their local Chinese and compare it with “back home” West-Indies cooking: “a pot of rice and peas seasoned with the lean of corned pork.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Banjo says that the latter dish, and indeed all rice dishes apart from chop suey, are “coolie grub” and he has no taste for them. Some of the beach bums criticize crusty French bread as “‘no good foh sandwich’” and “‘all crust and no guts to it,’” another likes it because “‘My teeth are good.’”[[50]](#footnote-50) They compare French bread with “corn pone” or, as the character Goosey insists, “cornbread,” as, he says, the name “corn pone is so n— ish.”[[51]](#footnote-51) In this discussion about the desirability of different carbohydrates, the characters show that they are aware of what Veit calls “the racialized hierarchy of grains:” “that placed wheat incontestably *above* all other cereals, followed by corn, oats, and finally rice.”[[52]](#footnote-52) They do not actually, however, privilege wheat, and the crusty baguettes made from wheat flour, above the Oriental or “coolie” rice and corn dishes they compare it to. They enjoy the process of sampling and comparing these different foodstuffs above all. They do the same with Italian food: “red wine, plenty of black and green olives, pickles, and tiny salt-fishes and *saucissons*, macaroni and tomato sauce, and veal á la Milanese.”[[53]](#footnote-53) They go from the Italian restaurant to the African Café, to play jazz and dance and drink. The internationalism of McKay’s fiction, here as in Jake’s first couple of days home in Harlem, is one very much centred on global food and drink cultures. His characters assert their right to decide for themselves what they eat and sometimes their preference is for good “Dixie” or “back home” cooking and sometimes it is for international flavours.[[54]](#footnote-54) The characters, in their analysis of the foodstuffs noted above, both display awareness of the racial connotations of African, Caribbean and African-American food, and work to negate any shame associated with those.

McKay would also have been aware of the diet reform movement’s insistence on plain and wholesome food as the ideal basis for the American diet. Diet reform movements in the US, as Wazana Tompkins suggests, tapped into “the political energy of republicanism as a discourse of self-improvement and civic belonging:” to restrain yourself makes you a better person and a better member of society.[[55]](#footnote-55) He may also have been aware that diet reform’s emphasis on plain food specifically cast suspicion on the “foreign commodities made available by the expanded sphere of consumerism” which, if consumed, would “have a subversive and perverting effect on the antebellum American body.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Plain and “unstimulating food” was good for the body and good, by extension, for the body politic; people who ate good plain fare worked to “mingle their own physical constitution with that of the nation’s, unpolluted by the richer foods of decadent monarchies or the exotic fare of the tropics.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Foreign food is not only frequently spicy and fatty, and so supposedly too stimulating for the white body’s natural or humoral balance, but its consumption makes the eating subject slightly foreign in themselves. A white subject, taking bites of chop suey, corn bread, or “veal á la Milanese” into their digestive system, not only consumes but is partly consumed by otherness. As Keyser notes, “the white body infused with tropical goods could be enlisted to bear out a narrative of racial degeneration” but frequently in early twentieth century fiction that narrative could be and was reversed so that “the flow of goods and chemicals disrupts the coherence of the individual body as a metonym for racial category.”[[58]](#footnote-58) For McKay’s multi-bodied international cast, then, such foreign mixing is not threatening but is instead desirable. Eating “back home” food is problematic, if still enjoyable and something to be relished, but eating international foods is part of the “barbarous international romance” of modern life.[[59]](#footnote-59) For these black drifter characters to casually lay claim to that international, excitingly cosmopolitan and technologically innovative romance of the port, via its diverse foodways, is to seize a kind of power. This is the power of choice, even amidst the conflict of knowing your choices speak to wider prejudices; the characters participate in the global market and become modern subjects.

The question of how much to eat is, as we saw with the two chefs in *Home to Harlem*, similarly loaded. Jake and Ray are not fat. Neither is Banjo, or any of his crew. Ray has worked as a manual labourer and as an artists’ model in Paris. Banjo, Ray perceives, lives “entirely on his strength.”[[60]](#footnote-60) He is also a manual labourer at times, and at others he bums money from sailors, traders and tourists on the dock. They are industrious sometimes and lazy at other times. It seems odd, given the lavish descriptions of feasts that pepper the novel, that Banjo and Ray do not get fat, but we must remember that the cycle of their precarity means that some days they do not have the money to feast as they would wish. In part, too, the health of these two characters, and of Jake in *Home to Harlem*, functions as a paean to McKay’s own particular ideas about vitalism, which Wang describes as “a particular *form* of black life and liveliness that resides somewhere in between, or perhaps outside, a reductive animality (associated with primitivist stereotypes of blackness) and civilized humanity (associated with bourgeois whiteness).”[[61]](#footnote-61) The very energy of their long evenings eating and drinking seems to be what keeps them healthy. The vitalist joy of playing music in the nightclubs of Marseilles lies in their apprehension of a vigorous and perfectly healthy crowd of bodies, dancing, drinking, and eating together: “Black flesh warm with the wine of life, the music of life, the love and deep meaning of life. Strong smell of healthy black bodies in a close atmosphere, generating sweat and waves of heat.”[[62]](#footnote-62) These scenes are animal, and primitive, but they are also expressive of a different kind of black civilized modernity. One afternoon, after Banjo has overindulged on wine, music and dancing, he wakes with an immense hunger:

In America, after such a prolonged, exquisite excess, he always experienced a particular craving for swine—pig’s tail, pig’s snout, pig’s ears, pig’s feet, and chittlings.

Banjo smacked his lips recalling and anticipating the delicious taste of pig stuff. He had a special fancy for *gras double* and *pieds paquet Marseillaise*. […]

The place was full. Banjo found an end seat not far from the window. A big slovenly woman brought him knife, fork, spoon, a half-pint of red wine, a length of bread, and a plate of soup. Following the soup he had a large plate of chittlings with a good mess of potatoes. Lastly a tiny triangular cut of Holland cheese. It was a remarkably good meal indeed for the price charged, and quite sufficient for an ordinary stomach. But Banjo’s stomach was not in an ordinary state. So he set his bit of cheese aside and asked for a second helping of chittlings and another pint bottle of red wine. […]

Banjo patted his belly and a contented, drowsy noise way down from it escaped from his mouth.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Chitterlings are of course the large intestines of a pig, so Banjo is eating here, in Doris Witt’s words, “the organ of a hog through which food becomes excrement.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Chitterlings are associated with corporeal waste and then inevitably with poverty and blackness, through a “slippage of ‘filth’ between race and class.”[[65]](#footnote-65) The stereotype of the black chitterling eater, as with the black chicken eater, is a pervasive and a potentially demeaning one, where the “structuralist, metonymic relationship leading from soul food to chitterlings to blackness to filth” equates the eater with the eaten.[[66]](#footnote-66) But Banjo is not merely thinking about eating “chittlings,” he has the options of “*gras double* and *pieds paquet Marseillaise*,” two regional and traditional French tripe dishes. The eating of an animal’s digestive system becomes less connected to blackness and to poverty, and more to an appreciation of the local food culture he finds himself in. Similarly there is no sense here in which Banjo’s appreciation of the food is sullied by any kind of anxiety that he is eating cheap or dirty cuts of meat or that in so doing he is playing into stereotypes of the undiscerning black eating subject. Banjo *delights* in his food, in memory and anticipation and then again in the satisfying moment of fullness immediately after finishing. He enjoys it much as he enjoys the “prolonged, exquisite excess” of the previous night’s drinking. He, and the other members of his crew, take enormous pleasure in both in their eating and their drinking, and specifically in drinking to excess. They deliberately drink French red wine because you can drink more of it before you are too drunk. They who “were used to rum in the West Indies, gin and corn liquor in the States, and whisky in England, took to the red wine of France like ducks to water. […] When they were drunk it was always a sweetly-soft good-natured wine drunk.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Red wine in France, they continually note, is delicious, cheap, and plentiful. The quantity as well as the quality is important. This is where food, joy, and contentment intersects with primitivism and with the kind of racial stereotype of the licentious black character that W.E.B. Du Bois objected to in *Home to Harlem*. Drinking too much and eating too much may be too often cast as primitive behaviours and they may be the kinds of behaviours unfavourably associated with black people and with lack of restraint, but they are *pleasurable* behaviours. McKay thus reclaims a politics of pleasure from the terrain of black abjection.

Banjo in particular indulges his appetites with very little thought as to what those appetites might signify to other people or what prejudices they might rouse. There is however, even for Banjo, a limit to this privileging of simple gratification. This can be seen in one scene where a ship has come in and the crew have consented to feed the drifters on the beach. The drifters have all gathered round in hungry anticipation:

When the officers and men had finished eating, Ginger’s old friend brought out what was left to the hungry group waiting on the deck. Good food and plenty of it in two pans. Thick, long slices of boiled beef, immense whole boiled potatoes, pork and beans, and lettuce.

All the men rushed the food like swine, each roughly elbowing and snapping at the other to get his hand in first. While they were stuffing themselves, smacking, grunting, and blowing with the disgusting noises of brutes, the food all over their faces, a mess boy brought out a large broad pan half filled with sweet porridge and set it down on the deck. Immediately the porridge was stormed. […]

Banjo was standing a little way off, watching the *mêlée* in anger and contempt. A lanky, prematurely wrinkle-faced officer passed by with a sneering glance at the beach fellows and went to the galley.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Banjo wants nothing to do with this kind of feasting: where food is eaten from the floor and porridge is smeared into faces. His friends don’t understand why he won’t join them in the scuffle, but Banjo tells them “‘You c’n stuff you’ guts tell youse all winded, but my belly kain’t accommodate none a that theah stuff, for that is too hard feeding for mine.’” He points out, too, that “‘I hear that officer call you all “a damned lot a disgusting n—s,” […] I take life easy like you-all, but I ain’t nevah gwine to lay mahself wide open to any insulting cracker of a white man.’”[[69]](#footnote-69) There is a difference for Banjo between this animalistic and messy “feeding” and the pure and primitive pleasure that comes from enjoying delicious food—even if plentiful and racially coded, as chitterlings are—eaten from a plate in a restaurant. Eating a lot of food in an appropriately human-civilized setting is not gluttony but is merely understandable enjoyment. Ray, who is more intellectual and less instinctive than Banjo, is rather more conflicted:

He hated civilization because its general attitude toward the colored man was such as to rob him of his warm human instincts and make him inhuman. Under it the thinking colored man could not function normally like his white brother, responsible and reacting spontaneously to the emotions of pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow, kindness or hardness, charity, anger, and forgiveness. […]

It was easy enough for Banjo, who in all matters acted instinctively. But it was not easy for a Negro with an intellect standing watch over his native instincts to take his own way in this white man’s civilization. But of one thing he was resolved: civilization would not take the love of color, joy, beauty, vitality, and nobility out of his life and make him like one of the poor mass of its pale creatures. […]

Educated Negroes ashamed of their race’s intuitive love of color, wrapping themselves up in respectable gray, ashamed of Congo-sounding laughter, ashamed of their complexion (bleaching out), ashamed of their strong appetites. No being ashamed for Ray. Rather than lose his soul, let intellect go to hell and live instinct![[70]](#footnote-70)

For Ray, as for McKay, there is a tension between education and instinct which is difficult to disentangle from a sense of the tension between the “white man’s civilization” and a more “native instinct” to enjoy the colorful, the beautiful and vital and to honour a strong appetite. The enjoyment of food and drink, without imposing any mental check on its consumption, is a part of this crucially important vitality. In *Banjo* dispositional or cultural-hegemonic divergences between races and cultures are set in sharp relief because of the continual intermingling of so many different people and this gives Ray material for judgement. He decides that the natural “colored man” is someone in touch with the rhythms of life, which rhythms are conceived of in terms of earth-connection and bodily-connection. Too much privileging of the intellect disconnects one from the corporeal and therefore from every physical, material and instinctive thing that brings pleasure. In this sense, Ray feels he has resolved, at least partially, the tension at the center of Du Boisian “double consciousness”.

Gary Edward Holcombe writes that *Banjo*’s central premise is to portray and to examine closely “the experience of the transnational black subject creating black modernity at the edges of the diaspora.” He says too that the novel’s “articulation of creolization demonstrates that the phenomenological condition of coming into being, or *coming out* beyond race, creates the potential for new emergences.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Holcombe here has in mind the “queer Marxism” of some of *Banjo*’s characters, and of McKay himself, but one of the new emergences, I argue, is the modern black subject who acknowledges and then puts away racial stigma around foodstuffs and around appetite. In the cultural melting-pot of Marseilles Banjo and even Ray can eat food that they know carries connotations of blackness and of filth, or they can eat foreign flavours that may be elsewhere demonized as too stimulating or exotic and therefore contaminating. They can enjoy all that they eat and they can eat to excess if their instinct tells them that is what is required.

**Conclusion**

McKay’s description of his own coming home to Harlem after a long stay in London, in his autobiography *A Long Way From Home*, is very similar to Jake’s experience in *Home to Harlem* on first landing back on US soil. First there is trepidation and then there is a sense of profound homecoming:

Yes, it was a rare sensation again to be just one black among many. It was good to be lost in the shadows of Harlem again. It was an adventure to loiter down Fifth and Lenox avenues and promenade along Seventh Avenue. Spareribs and corn pone, fried chicken and corn fritters and sweet potatoes were like honey to my palate.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Like Jake, the first thing McKay does when he returns to Harlem is to eat. He spends “ten days of purely voluptuous relaxation,” basking in the pleasures of his appetites, but soon: “I was uncomfortable. I began feeling intellectual again.”[[73]](#footnote-73) McKay’s sense of the irreconcilability of civilization and instinct or intellect and comfort is clear here. In *Home to Harlem* he paints a joyful picture of African-American men who do not much trouble about civilization or the intellect and so are able to give free rein to the pleasures of following instinct. In *Banjo* Ray’s character is much more prominent and McKay gives this writer-drifter some of his own ambivalences about the tension between the two concepts, while simultaneously showing Banjo and his more unintellectual friends to be happier than Ray in their expansive and carefree embrace of life, joy, food and drink. The choice that Ray makes in *Banjo* that if intellect means a loss of enjoyment then it can “go to hell and live instinct” is a choice McKay struggles with continually in his own life, at least as narrated in *A Long Way From Home*. Ray feels that the enjoyment of *life* will be lost to himself and to his race if he succumbs to the “civilizing” impulse to impose restraint on colors worn, laughter laughed out loud, and delicious food eaten with relish and to satiety. This then is where the tension lies between comfort food and respectability politics. For McKay the sense that enjoying food and drink is somehow not respectable is an ideal imposed on “the colored man” by “civilization.” Finding comfort in food, whatever kind of food you decide to eat and however much you decide you want to eat, is then a radical act.

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21. Ibid., 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 144-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), 260. The martini, of course, is international in its ingredients: often made with Italian or French vermouth. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Home to Harlem*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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28. For an account of the development of soul food in Harlem in the early twentieth century see Damian M. Mosley, “Cooking up Heritage in Harlem,” in *Gastropolis: Food & New York City*, ed. Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathan Deutsche (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 274-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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38. Ibid., 194-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Home to Harlem*, 165; 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2008), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Keyser, *Artificial Color*, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Banjo*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Jarrett H. Brown, “The Shadow of Intimacy: Male Bonding and Improvised Masculinity in Claude McKay’s *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot,*” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 21, nos. 1-2 (2012), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 63; 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Keyser, *Artificial Color*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Banjo*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Wang, “Anachronistic Life”, 790. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., p. 64-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Witt, *Black Hunger*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Banjo*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 44-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., 171-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Gary Edward Holcombe, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home: An Autobiography* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 95-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid., 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)