

# MINORITIES RESOURCE AND RESEARCH CENTER NEWSLETTER

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Claude McKay (c. 1920). Photo courtesy of New York Public Library.

## CLAUDE MCKAY: THE KANSAS STATE COLLEGE INTERLUDE, 1912-1914

"CLAUDE MCKAY, POET, 1890-1948: Claude McKay is generally regarded as the herald of the Harlem Renaissance." Thus begins the biographical sketch of the poet Claude McKay in *The Negro Almanac: A Reference Work on the Afro American*.<sup>1</sup> Further reading reveals that a few years prior to McKay's residence in New York City, and before he had become a part of the Harlem literati, he had attended classes in agronomy at Kansas State College in Manhattan, Kansas. The only student from Jamaica and one of seven foreign students, he arrived in Manhattan in October 1912, having transferred from the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Registered as Festus Claudis McKay, a sub-freshman, from Crooked River, Jamaica, he listed Walter Jekyle, a "gentleman," as his guardian, the

Baptist church as his religious affiliation, and his birthdate as September 15, 1889<sup>2</sup> (various sources differ on the year). His ambition was to study agronomy and to return to Jamaica to teach agriculture.

In the early 1900's Jamaican agriculture consisted of large plantations owned by British citizens, which grew cash crops of tobacco, sugar cane, coffee and bananas, and small subsistence plots farmed by Jamaican islanders. Production methods were outmoded, and the livestock industry, although encouraged by the government and well-suited to the terrain, was a very minor and unsuccessful proportion of the total agriculture production at that time. Agricultural higher education was effectively nonexistent; the School of Agriculture opened its doors in 1910.

It was natural that McKay selected the all-black Tuskegee Institute in Alabama for his studies. At that time, Tuskegee could count among its faculty the two most prominent black educators in the United States: Booker T. Washington as its principal, and chemist George Washington Carver, who headed the Department of Research Experiment Station. It is certain that McKay was aware of the contributions of these two leading educators, but he had little experience with the racial climate in which they worked, and was hardly

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### IF WE MUST DIE

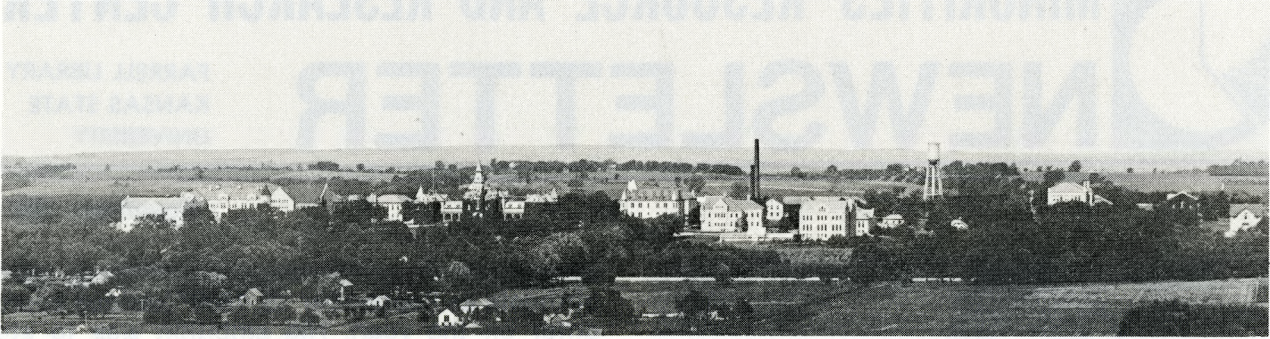
*If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!*

—Claude McKay

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Photograph of Kansas State College, circa 1912 (courtesy of Farrell Library Specialized Collections and University Archives).

prepared for the open hostility he met in Alabama. Dissatisfied with this environment, he apparently was advised to attend Kansas State College, a leading agricultural college, perhaps even by Mr. Washington himself, who had hired a KSC alumnus, George Washington Owens, in 1899 to head the Dairy Department. After six months at Tuskegee, McKay

transferred to the less oppressive surroundings of K-State College in Manhattan, Kansas, where he remained for two years. There he moved uneasily among a small midwestern black elite, who cautiously maintained their precarious status amid an intermittently hostile white majority.<sup>3</sup>

The following advertisement taken from *The Students' Herald* (the KSC student newspaper) suggests that the Manhattan community reflected a discriminative attitude toward blacks: "Wanted—Negro boy to wait tables. Apply XYZ Herald." (Nov. 12, 1912)<sup>4</sup>

Students at Tuskegee were, for the most part, from elite black Southern families and had been instilled with a deep respect and regard for the strict regimentarian program offered by Booker T. Washington. Kansas State College, on the other hand, was moving away from a staid, old-fashioned academy setting and was embracing the national trend toward freer classrooms and greater student choice of coursework. President Henry Jackson Waters had just reorganized the college into five divisions: Agriculture, English, Home Economics, General Science, and College Extension, and in the spring of 1913 he announced that there would no longer be a subfreshman class. Former goals and methods were being revised, resulting in the emergence of a new student body and a new campus culture.

In this pre-flapper era, students were learning as much or more from their peers as from their professors. Fraternities and sororities were fast becoming the main influence in shaping the post-adolescent character. It was a time when extracurricular and social activities were gaining as much importance as studying. At KSC for example, to use *The Students' Herald* as a barometer

of the times, in October 1912 football was of primary interest. The Aggies (later the Wildcats) had played and lost to Nebraska in Lincoln. The big game of the season was the KSC-Kansas University game in Lawrence. Much hullabaloo heralded the approach of the match between the two rivals. A special train was scheduled to take fans to Lawrence for \$3.20 per ticket. Some students were making plans to drive to the game. Rowdy behavior was reported to have taken place in downtown Manhattan following a pep rally for the KU game; apparently several overzealous fans had attempted to enter the Wareham Theatre without purchasing tickets. When that failed, they crashed a carnival, causing minor damage and bad feelings. This was the environment into which the young black Jamaican poet appeared in the fall of 1912.

Local issues affecting student life during McKay's tenure in Manhattan involved whether there would be a senior dance (the dancers lost); whether freshman caps should be worn (the freshmen lost); and whether the local physicians should provide free services to the students (the students won, but would have to pay prescription costs). President Waters was disappointed when the individual institutions' regents boards were abolished and only one regents board made up of three men was created to oversee the "State University" (KU), the "Agricultural College" (KSC) and the "State Normal School" (Emporia State) campuses, as well as two schools for the physically handicapped. There was also speculation that President Waters would leave KSC to become the Secretary of Agriculture for newly-elected President Woodrow Wilson.

It would seem that young McKay's first view of Manhattan in 1912 was of the October prairie ablaze with color: red sumac, yellow cottonwood and pawpaw trees, and bronze hills of buffalo grass. Photographs of the University (circa 1912) show a small number of limestone buildings spread across the campus. Buildings such as Fairchild Hall (housing the Library), Nichols Gymnasium, Anderson, Calvin, and Waters Halls are impressive in their massive solitude. The few trees visible around the buildings suggest the enormity



of the Flint Hills and the dominance of the Kansas sky.

McKay's first Kansas winter was a cold one, made colder because at times there was only enough coal to barely keep the fires going in the classrooms and to keep the greenhouses warm. In January 1913, there were several days when classes were cancelled due to lack of fuel. In the spring, an added burden appeared in the form of a measles epidemic.

Of the 1,680 students enrolled in 1912 at KSC, only a handful were black. At Tuskegee there had been 20 Jamaican students during McKay's stay, while at Kansas State College there was only McKay. Although no record can be found of McKay's Manhattan address, it was usual for black students to take rooms on the south side, where the black community lived. Sometimes a student would be able to find rooms closer to campus with a devoutly religious family interested in missionary work.

In the two years from 1912 to 1914, as McKay pursued his studies in agronomy and struggled with botany, chemistry, livestock courses, and an alien culture, he must have known he was not interested in agriculture as a lifetime career; the only grade of excellence he received was in an advanced grammar course. As a student of the folklore and local color of Jamaica, it would seem that McKay would have found the classroom dull by comparison. Perhaps in 1914 when he received a windfall of money from an admirer of his poetry, that was all the incentive he needed to take him from Kansas to New York City.

After a brief marriage, and failure in the res-

taurant business, McKay turned to Harlem for refuge. During those first years in New York, he kept himself fed with odd jobs and began to write poetry once again. However, unlike his folkloric writings dealing with Jamaica, his new poetry conveyed rebellion and anger against a repressive and racist United States. In the poem "If We Must Die," published in *The Liberator* in 1919, he was able to express the rebellious spirit of the Harlem Renaissance with such vigor that the poem is often regarded as the symbol of the entire movement. A prolific writer, his work includes several novels and volumes of poetry. Critics applaud the richness of the life sketches of Jamaica and Harlem found in the novels. Nonetheless, they feel that the power and depth of his work culminate in his poetry.

During his lifetime he was to travel to many places, including England, Europe, Russia and North Africa. McKay rubbed elbows with the important political thinkers of his time: Marcus Garvey, John Reed, Max Eastman, Leon Trotsky and Bernard Sheil. He believed in black independence. In his own domain, literature, he rejected the position that black writers must depend upon white patronage. In Chicago in 1948, after a long bout with various illnesses, he died of heart failure.

A careful study of his works suggests that his KSC experience was not the stuff of which poems are made. In an autobiographical essay he writes I came to America in 1912 to study agriculture, went to Tuskegee, but not liking the semi-military, machinelike existence there, I left for the Kansas State College where I stayed two years.<sup>5</sup>

Full Name <i>McKay, Festus Claudis</i>				SUBFRESHMAN.					
Course	13	13	Mid-term	Final	Course	13	13	Mid-term	Final
<i>Appl. I</i>	2	13	2		<i>Food II Lab</i>	13	3		
<i>Low</i>	4	12-13	1	<i>P</i>	<i>Line Stock II</i>	13	3		<i>P</i>
Advanced Grammar,	4	12-13	1	<i>P</i>	<i>Sonno of Add</i>				<i>P</i>
Algebra I,	4			<i>P</i>	Plane Geometry II,	4			
Ancient History,	3			<i>P</i>	The American Nation,	3			
Elemen. Botany I,	2			<i>P</i>	Physics II,	2			
Laboratory,	2			<i>P</i>	Laboratory,	2			
Sewing I,	1			<i>P</i>	Geometrical Drawing,	2			
Laboratory, or	6			<i>P</i>	Cookery II, or	6			
Woodwork I,	4	12-13	1	<i>P</i>	Blacksmithing II,	4			
Stock Judging I,	4			<i>P</i>	Poultry Judging,	2			
English Readings,	4			<i>P</i>	Elementary Rhetoric,	4			
Algebra II,	4			<i>P</i>	Solid Geometry,	4			
Medieval History,	3			<i>P</i>	Physics III,	2			
Elemen. Botany II,	2	13	2	<i>P</i>	Laboratory,	2			
Laboratory,	2			<i>P</i>	Object Drawing I,	4			
Sewing II,	1			<i>P</i>	<i>music</i>				<i>P</i>
Laboratory, or	6			<i>P</i>	Cookery III,	2			<i>P</i>
Woodwork II,	4			<i>P</i>	Laboratory, or	4			<i>P</i>
				<i>P</i>	Blacksmithing,	3			<i>P</i>
				<i>P</i>	Bockkeeping,	4			<i>P</i>
				<i>P</i>	<i>Live Stock III</i>	13	14	3	<i>P</i>
				<i>P</i>	<i>Eng. Lit</i>	13	3		<i>P</i>
				<i>P</i>	<i>Chem I Lab</i>	13-14	5		<i>P</i>
				<i>P</i>					<i>P</i>

Transcript of Claude McKay's work at Kansas State College (courtesy of KSU Registrar).



However dismissive he may seem, it can be assumed that his two years in Manhattan enabled him to consider possibilities beyond Jamaican agriculture and the classroom. Having moved from a paternalistic society in Jamaica to a repressive regimental attitude at Tuskegee, McKay's stay at Kansas State College must have allowed him the isolation to internalize and crystallize his divergent experiences. He was 22 when he came to Manhattan with plans of becoming a teacher of farming. At 24 he had rejected those plans and had set out to New York as so many do, to make his mark on the world. There he faced the daily ordeal of survival; nonetheless he found great excitement in the literary and political climate of the city, and as history records, he went on to become a vital voice of the Harlem Renaissance and of black America.

By Susan Miller and Antonia Quintana Pigno

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#### SELECTED BOOKS BY MCKAY:

*A Long Way From Home*  
*Banana Bottom*  
*Banjo*  
*Constab Ballads*  
*Gingertown*  
*Harlem: Negro Metropolis*  
*Home From Harlem*  
*Selected Poems of Claude McKay*  
*Songs of Jamaica*

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  - <sup>3</sup> Cooper, Wayne F., *The Passion of Claude McKay; Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912-1948*, Schocken Books, New York, 1973, p. 7.
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