

AMPUTATED LIMBS AND THE POLITICS OF TOUCH IN CLAUDE MCKAY'S *ROMANCE IN MARSEILLE*

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Introduction: touching (on) difficulty

1. Although often classified as a modernist, Jamaican-born American author Claude McKay is something of a maverick figure within the modernist canon. In *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Gary Holcomb writes that “critics have still not navigated the dark, difficult waters of his [...] literature”.¹ He argues that McKay’s difficulty stems primarily from his multiplicity, since “even in his glory days [he] was something of a marginalized figure among various constituencies”.² His work fits only partially in the critical paradigms of both modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.³ On the one hand, his life of expatriation and the transnational concerns of his writings complicate his status as a Harlem author. On the other hand, although his intercultural nomadism makes him fit in the patterns of expatriation typical of American modernists, his poetics, particularly his predilection for the strict formal constraints of the sonnet rather than for free verse and fragmentation, made him an outcast from what Holcomb calls “the high modernist temple of Eliot et alia”.⁴ While McKay’s sonnets can nonetheless be fruitfully analyzed alongside those of other Harlem Renaissance practitioners of the sonnet form, his prose narratives are even more *sui generis*. Bearing the trace of his wanderings to France, Soviet Russia, and Muslim Morocco, his novels have more transnational concerns compared to those of other Harlem Renaissance authors, and they also pose different types of challenges compared to the linguistically experimental prose of expatriate modernist writers like James Joyce or Djuna Barnes. His first novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928), was a popular success but was perceived as scandalous by many black writers: for instance, W.E.B. Du Bois denounced its “filth”⁵ in the depiction of black life.

1 G. Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 5.

2 *Ibid.*, 1.

3 The discussion of the intersections and divergences between the two goes back to Houston Baker’s seminal *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

4 G. Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 1. Published in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of high modernism, McKay’s *Harlem Shadows* is a good case in point: none of the poems in this collection are “difficult”, in the sense that Eliot famously wrote that “modern poetry must be difficult”. Drawing on the conventions of the sonnet to forge a poetics of black radical protest, his poems have a sense of collective urgency and pathos hard to reconcile with the detached irony and impersonality associated with much modernist poetry.

5 W.E.B. Du Bois, “Review of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, and Melville Herskovits’ *The American Negro*”, 202.

McKay's later novels — in particular *Romance in Marseille* and *Amiable with Big Teeth*, both of which remained unpublished in his lifetime — are even more emblematic of the singular nature of his work. Unlike *Amiable with Big Teeth*,⁶ which was discovered among McKay's papers only recently, the manuscript of *Romance in Marseille* had been known to McKay scholars for a number of years before its eventual publication.⁷ Begun in Barcelona and written in Morocco around 1929-32, it was published posthumously as late as 2020. The novel's early readers, such as McKay's agent William Aspenwell Bradley, who also represented James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Ford Madox Ford, were particularly unsettled by "its seeming obscenity and genuinely undissembled treatment of gay and lesbian life".⁸

2. Part of the difficulty of *Romance in Marseille* lies in the fact that it seems to revolve around the idea of intersectionality *avant la lettre*, inviting critical approaches attuned to its complex intersections of race, Marxist politics, disability and queer sexuality. This pioneering reflection on intersectionality, which Jesse Schwartz calls a "dialectical 'Black Intersectional International'", is the key element behind the novel's critical timeliness today.⁹ Like McKay's earlier novel *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929), this narrative chronicles the lives of the communities of marginal figures living by the Marseille waterfront — hard-drinking sailors, drifters and sex workers. While one of the aspects of the novel that most scandalized McKay's contemporaries was its overt representation of same-sex desire. As Eric H. Newman argues in "A Queer Romance: Centering the Margins in Claude McKay's *Romance in Marseille*", the novel "offers one of the most sustained, nuanced representations of queer life in McKay's archive and in early twentieth-century LGBT literature more generally, one in which same-sex-oriented characters are rendered as normal, integral figures in urban life".¹⁰ Yet the novel seems hard to classify as — by contrast to other modernist celebrations of gay and lesbian sexuality like Richard Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926) or Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) — it embraces queer identity without putting it at the center of its plot. Its frank representations of queer love initially seem tangential to the story's central romance which is heterosexual — although it is a non-traditional one (between a disabled man and a prostitute) and, as I shall argue further on, also has a queer undercurrent.

6 *Amiable with Big Teeth*, subtitled *A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, also has a strong transnational theme: it takes place in 1936 and centers on the efforts by the Harlem intelligentsia to organize support for the liberation of Ethiopia in the wake of the African country's invasion by fascist Italy.

7 In his 1987 biography *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner of the Harlem Renaissance*, Wayne Cooper already dwells on the obstacles McKay encountered while trying to publish it.

8 G. Holcomb and W. Maxwell, "Introduction", *Romance in Marseille*, xxii. (henceforth abbreviated as *RM*)

9 J. Schwartz, "'Broken Bits of Color in the Dirt,'" 12. Without using the term "intersectionality", Holcomb makes a similar point in his analysis of McKay's "queer black Marxism", particularly when he argues that the shortcomings of much of the existing criticism on McKay stem from the failure to take into account "the difficulty of his multiplicity", and that what is needed instead is a flexible, interdisciplinary approach combining "transnational diaspora studies, radical recovery criticism, and queer studies". *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 5-6. Other productive readings of McKay's work through an intersectional viewpoint include Jarrett H. Brown's article "'Weh eye nuh see heart nuh leap': Claude McKay's Literary Drag Performance in *Banana Bottom*", in M. Michlin and J.-P. Rocchi (eds.), *Black Intersectionalities*, 98-113.

10 E. Newman, "A Queer Romance", 58.

3. When an early version of the novel was criticized by Bradley for being too similar to the plot-less structure of *Banjo*, McKay replied that he would “make a difficult thing out of it”.¹¹ And so he did indeed. Not only is the novel highly unconventional in that it places an “acutely disabled African” at the core of its plot, but its protagonist “has next to nothing in common with the traditional literary character marked by a physical disability, the angelic icon or spectacular alien confined to the book’s margins and obliged to draw pity and horror from its major players” (*RM* viii-ix). Based on the true story of Nelson Simeon Dede, a Nigerian seaman McKay had befriended in Marseille, the novel’s plot revolves around the transatlantic crossing of Lafala — an African-born black man stowing away on a ship travelling from Marseille to the United States. Halfway through the voyage, he is discovered and locked up in a freezing-cold latrine — a dehumanizing punishment causing him to lose his legs to frostbite, and have them amputated upon his arrival in New York. The traumatic fantasy of the black body trapped in a tight space and suffering inhuman treatment during a transatlantic crossing clearly revisits the memory of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, it charts some revealing intersections between McKay’s prose and his poetry, as it draws on the same imagery as the figuration of the sonnet itself as a “European cage”,¹² common in the poetry of black poets writing on both sides of the Atlantic, including McKay’s own sonnets. Thus, although based on real lives,¹³ the novel clearly has a collective, allegoric dimension, linking the hardships of disability to the dehumanizing treatment typical of black experience, and more broadly speaking to the legacy of colonialism and slavery. By focusing his novel on how Lafala’s life is transformed by the traumatic experience and the ensuing disability, McKay deliberately chose to put himself in a difficult position, to borrow the title of Lennard J. Davis’s book *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*.¹⁴ McKay’s position is difficult not so much because the bodily experiences of his protagonist are “remote from his own bodily history” (*RM* xxxi),¹⁵ but

11 C. McKay, letter to W. Bradley, Dec. 21, 1929 (*RM* xxiii).

12 As Timo Müller shows in his literary history of the African-American sonnet, this form is often conceived in spatial terms, as a tight space, and is also inherently transnational, being thus especially fitted to the transatlantic negotiations of writers associated with what Paul Gilroy calls *The Black Atlantic*. This imagery is also common in the work of contemporary black authors: the explicit depiction of the sonnet as a “European cage” appears in Patience Agbabi’s sonnet “From Africa Singing”; Terrance Hayes represents the sonnet in similar terms in his collection *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*.

13 McKay conflated Dede’s story with elements taken from press articles documenting the fate of another stowaway, Jonathan Gibson, a black Jamaican who also had his legs amputated after suffering dehumanizing treatment on a ship.

14 Davis argues that disability is an unstable and socially constructed category, which turns impairment into something negative. He proposes the concept of “dismodernism”, predicated on “a malleable view of the human body and identity”, which attempts to transcend the binary normal/impaired by arguing that all bodies are nonstandard: “Dismodernism argues for a commonality of bodies within the notion of difference”. *Bending Over Backwards*, 31. McKay’s use of disability as an over-arching trope to explore the intersections of various kinds of identity politics makes sense because, as Michael Bérubé stresses in his foreword, “disability simultaneously unsettles the categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality yet cannot be thought of without them, especially (but not exclusively) because disability is so intimately related to poverty, illness, and long-term unemployment”. M. Bérubé, *Bending Over Backwards*, xi.

15 Although McKay never experienced amputation, by the late 1920s he was struggling with the crippling effect of serious health conditions, including syphilis (an experience he explores in a 1923 series of poems titled “The Clinic”). Holcomb draws a parallel between Lafala’s loss and McKay’s “loss of skin and therefore casualty of surface identity”. *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 177.

because his narrative ostensibly seeks to thwart the sense of pathos triggered by Lafala's moving story of hardship, creating a disturbing sense of ironic ambivalence. In a letter to his editor, he stressed: "primarily I am not writing a sentimental story [...] [to make Lafala] extremely acceptable I should have to write a real sob-sister story and that I just cannot do".¹⁶ As Maren Tova Linett points out, in modernist fiction, disabled characters often become a means to break with the conventions of "its predecessor, Victorian realism, where disability was often saturated with pity and pathos"; by contrast, she argues, modernist literature is characterized by a "refusal of pathos" and an "understanding of disability not as a given, but as a question".¹⁷

4. This article suggests that in McKay's novel there is an exploration of touch as a specific sensorial modality of disability. Focusing on a far-reaching textual network of imagery, I seek to explore how the dimensions of haptics and affect are intertwined, probing the intricate connections between the sense of touch and what is touching. Adopting an intersectional approach to interpret this imagery, my analysis shows that the novel brings to the fore an ambivalent politics of touch that illuminates McKay's pioneering focus on disability and the way it intersects with his negotiation of transatlantic black identity and his Marxist ethos, as well as his commitment to representing queer desire. I argue that what makes the novel both so powerful and so disturbing is its refusal to directly draw on and thus exploit the easy sense of pathos triggered by Lafala's story, taking up a deliberately more difficult path instead. The narrative explores the complex and ambivalent ways in which disability transforms Lafala's identity and social status, challenging more conventional, negative visions of how impairment leads to helplessness and lack of social mobility, and turning it both into a form of social empowerment and into a condition giving access to more heightened sensorial perception. Drawing on Tim Armstrong's discussion of the distinctions between "negative" and "positive" prosthesis, the former "operat[ing] under the sign of compensation",¹⁸ covering a lack, while the latter is a more general form of extension of the human, I also examine the novel's ambivalent exploration of Lafala's prosthetic experience, from the bond he develops with his artificial limbs to the idea of prosthetic touch that emerges in the novel's singular romance. Following Armstrong's reflection that writing is also "in [a] sense prosthetic",¹⁹ the article also probes the complex relation between touch and writing, and how the narrative affects the reader. The frank representation of Lafala's visceral sensory experiences ultimately elicits an even stronger sense of empathic reading and identification, reminding us that, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, "[w]riting in its essence touches upon the body".²⁰ Likewise, I suggest that Sarah Jackson's meta-textual reading of the page as a

16 C. McKay, letter to W. Bradley, Dec. 21, 1929 (*RM* xxiv).

17 M. Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, 2. Due to its belated inclusion in the modernist canon, *Romance in Marseille* is missing from Linett's groundbreaking exploration of modernist disability.

18 T. Armstrong, "Prosthetic Modernism", 78.

19 *Ibid.*, 77.

20 J.-L. Nancy, *Corpus*, 11. On the idea of empathic reading, see P.-L. Patoine, *Corps / texte : pour une théorie de la lecture empathique*.

skin and Abbie Garrington's theorization of the pen as a form of positive prosthesis allowing "an extrapolation of the tactile capacities" resonate with McKay's haptic exploration of trauma which also becomes a scalpel-like tool for incisive social commentary.²¹

5. I will begin by focusing on the synesthetic memory of phantom touch that figures prominently in the opening section of the novel, in order to show how a symbolic link is forged between Lafala's legs and the ability to touch the "native soil" (*RM* 4), as well as the sensual activity of dancing, both of which are posited as intrinsic aspects of black identity. Thus, the dehumanizing experience Lafala undergoes during his transatlantic crossing and the subsequent amputation of his legs also suggest that the loss of the ability to touch the ground may be read as an allegory of the forced deracination of black people during the transatlantic slave trade. Then, I will examine how, as the plot unravels, disability and touch become imbricated within the novel's intersectional politics. By contrast to his sonnets, in this novel McKay resists the idea of a narrative focused exclusively on black politics and imbued with pathos. Instead, he presents the reader with a sardonic reflection on how this loss can become a form of empowerment, as the enormous financial compensation Lafala receives endows him with a new class status in the system of capitalist exchange. Finally, I will explore how the novel's central "romance" between Lafala and Aslima brings to the fore an eroticization of disability and a form of prosthetic touch that can become a source of healing and a way of transcending the racial, class and gender violence the two characters are confronted with, a quasi-utopian possibility ultimately rejected through the final plot twist of the novel's ending.

"Lafala's dancing legs": synesthetic memory, phantom touch, and black identity

6. The extreme shock Lafala experiences at the amputation of his limbs is reflected in the fact that the traumatic experience itself is elided at the incipit. The novel begins with a prolepsis, confronting the reader with a vision of Lafala already lying helpless in the hospital bed, and represented through the dehumanizing simile "like a sawed off-stump". This is followed by an analeptic collapse of his consciousness back into his childhood days in his native Africa:

In the main ward of the great hospital Lafala lay like a sawed-off stump and pondered the loss of his legs. Now more vividly than ever in his life he visualized the glory and the joy of having a handsome pair of legs.

Once again in the native compounds of the bush with naked black youth, he was baptized in a flood of

21 A. Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, 102. In a section titled "Cane/pen/penis/prosthesis", Garrington makes an interesting analogy between the cane, the pen and the penis, contending that "the penis is itself supplemental or additional, a sexual prosthesis" (102). Her claim proves particularly helpful in thinking about Lafala's ambivalent sexuality, in which the prostheses clearly displace the penis as a focal point of tactile experience.

emotion retasting the rare delight the members of his tribe felt always by the sight of fine bodies supported by strong gleaming legs. [...]

Lafala as a boy was proud of his legs, participating in all of childhood's leg play, running and climbing and jumping, and dancing in the moonlight in the village yard. He remembered lying down naked under the moon and stars while his playmates traced his image with pieces of crockery. [...] He remembered the fine shock of wading through the tall grass in the cool early morning after the hot night, the heavy dews bathing his naked skin... (RM 3)

The anaphoras and alliterations point to the emphatic effort of re-memorizing irrevocably lost sensations. In Lafala's delirious memory, the "members of his tribe" seem indelibly connected to their body members ("strong gleaming legs"), a verbal punning which conjures up a somewhat essentialized and stereotypical vision of black identity as able-bodied vitality and sensual, ecstatic dancing. As Holcomb and Maxwell explain, Lafala's obsession with "physical vitality — a vitality he feels he has lost forever — reflects a dominant theme of the Harlem Renaissance [...]. New Negro authors created portraits of black beauty and robustness [...] to combat racist myths of black ugliness and physical incapacity".²² Thus, for McKay it was a bold move to open his narrative by confronting the reader with such an acutely ambivalent image of black identity: on the one hand, Lafala's own vision of his identity seems inextricably bound with these stereotypical ideas of able-bodied vitality and sensual dancing; on the other, as early as the novel's opening sentence, this vision has become forever impossible, triggering a forced transformation. With Lafala thus coerced into radically rethinking his identity, the narrative embarks into a novel exploration of black disability.

7. Lafala's perceptions recall the medical condition phantom limb, also called phantom touch — the persisting sensory, and particularly tactile experiences in a missing limb that often occurs after undergoing amputation. As the use of oxymoron and hypallage in the phrase "the fine shock of wading through the tall grass" underscores, the shock of being transformed into a "sawed-off stump" triggers a visceral reaction which makes Lafala re-experience in an extremely acute and ambivalent manner the formerly pleasant tactile sensation of coming in contact with the luxuriant African vegetation, activating perceptions of hot, cold, and moisture ("wading through the tall grass in the cool early morning after the hot night, the heavy dews bathing his naked skin"). The delirious perception of phantom touch quickly becomes synesthetic, activating all the senses one after the other; the movement from "visualizing" to "retasting" to the climactic "shock" of touch triggers a profusion of auditory metaphors and similes, as well as a personification of music that has an unmistakable erotic undercurrent:

Legs like a quartette of players performing the passionate chamber music of life. Loud notes and soft, notes whispering like a warm breath, a long and noiseless kiss, flutes and harps joined in enchanting

22 G. Holcomb and W. Maxwell, "Explanatory Notes", *Romance in Marseille*, 143.

adventures, in ritual unison, trembling and climbing together in the high song of life and leaving unforgettable sensations in the blood, in the brain. (*RM 3-4*)

In this delirious vision, Lafala's legs emerge as a strong symbol of black identity in which rootedness and mobility are paradoxically intertwined. On the one hand, the term "stump", used repeatedly throughout the narrative to refer to Lafala's amputated body, suggests not only a human body but also a tree trunk. This points to the relevance of the metaphor of the tree, with the legs symbolically representing Lafala's African roots. Lafala's limbs — described as "[f]eet that were accustomed to dig themselves into the native soil, into lovely heaps of leaves, and affectionate tufts of grass" (*RM 4*) — seem to carry the memory of his belonging to his native Africa, a memory in which the haptic and the affective dimensions are inextricably intertwined. On the other hand, the legs are also posited as a symbol of diasporic identity and social mobility, allowing him not only to roam from one continent to another but also to resist the pressures of capitalist society:

Lafala's dancing legs had carried him from Africa to Europe, from Europe to America. [...]

Lafala had gone on wandering impressionably from change to change like a heedless young pilgrim with nothing but his staff in his hand and playing variations on the march of legs. Come trouble, come worry, blue days without a job, without food, without love... Dance away... [...] His dancing legs would carry him over all.

Suddenly they were jerked off and there he lay helpless. (*RM 3-4*)

Without his "dependable feet" (*RM 6*), Lafala is at once dehumanized and deracinated, immobilized and disoriented. The narrative begins at this nadir, placing the protagonist at a point of utter dispossession akin to a symbolic experience of death, as the anaphora "without" suggests: "In a strange land, without home, without friends, without resources, without his greatest asset — his faithful feet! Why had the doctors saved him? [...] He whinnied like a sick pony in a haddock and buried his face in the pillow, his stump of a body twitching under the long white nightshirt" (*RM 6*).

8. Switching from the markedly internal focalization of the opening memory of phantom touch to a more omniscient point of view, the narrative voice somewhat ambivalently contemplates the feeling of pity and empathy triggered by Lafala's moving story:

Sometimes the nurses asked him to say something in his tribal language and one day he sang a little song of his people that they all liked. [...] Then suddenly he remembered his legs and was sad and tears stole down his face. He was very agitated and shuddered thinking of the future. The nurse that always attended him patted him gently and Lafala kissed her hand and held it against his cheek... [...] The nurses, even his nurse that called him "my boy", could not grant him that essentially feminine word of encouragement that always works such miracle on the masculine mind. In their eyes, in their silence about his future, he saw only pity, that terrible dumb pity that can sweep the fibers of feeling for a fine man or beast that has fallen from self-sufficiency into a hopeless case. (*RM 7-9*)

The nurse's act of touching Lafala creates an affective bond that attempts to compensate for the inability to offer any verbal consolation, since, as the silence shows, his chances of survival in the society of the time as a disabled, working-class black man in a foreign country are close to null. Yet the use of polysyndeton ("and") communicates a naïve spontaneity which suggests that the narrative voice seeks to touch on the pathos triggered by Lafala's suffering while maintaining a certain distance from affect to avoid a collapse into mawkish sentimentality. Pathos is here clearly gendered feminine, and the trajectory charted by the alliterations ("fibers of feeling", "fine man", "fallen") suggests that succumbing to such feeling would lead to the protagonist's downfall.

9. The novel draws on the pathos conventionally associated with disability in realist narratives, but systematically deflates it by turning it into bathos. A moment emblematic of this narrative strategy is when Lafala's vision of being "envelop [ed]" (*RM* 7) and caressed by angelic wings is brutally interrupted and deflated by the bathetic apparition of a character somewhat mockingly nicknamed "Black Angel" — "a huge black face, yellow teeth in a badly-molded mouth, bending over him" (*RM* 7). Through the appearance of this fellow black hospital patient, the initial vision of blackness as tribal, able-bodied African vitality is quickly complicated by a resistance to the sense of belonging to a collective racial identity, a struggle conveyed by the alliteration in /b/. McKay's transatlantic negotiation of black identity introduces a tension between African and American blacks: "Black Angel", markedly described as an "American" (*RM* 8), provides a quasi-*deus ex machina* resolution to what initially seems a hopeless case by urging Lafala to sue the ship company, suggesting he can obtain a compensation: "'We got laws ovah heah can see about that better'n them in the woods you come out of, fellah,' the American said with a friendly grin" (*RM* 8). Unlike the sonnet "America", where McKay depicts the United States as a "cultured hell" that feeds the speaker "bread of bitterness",²³ this scene in *Romance in Marseille* toys with the vision of the United States as a land of opportunity and justice, an idea which is clearly ironic, since it is clear that this African-American man has internalized the racist prejudice of his compatriots towards African people. Although the novel's plot is seemingly set in motion by this unexpected bond with Black Angel, which could be construed as a form of nascent transatlantic black resistance against oppression, McKay is quick to resist its programmatic nature by ironically emphasizing the limits of black solidarity. Not only does Black Angel have a patronizing sense of superiority over Lafala, but he also insists that the amputated man should get a white lawyer, not a black one, because race "ain't nothing" in the "hoggish scramble" of American capitalism, "wif the black hogs jest that much worser because them is way, ways back behind" (*RM* 9). When it becomes clear that he is also seeking payment for having helped Lafala, the ironic vision of Black Angel as a bearer of

23 C. McKay, *Harlem Shadows*, 5. It is also perhaps relevant to mention that the sonnet's synesthetic poetics culminates in the volta with one of McKay's most memorable representations of touch, where, in a rewriting of Shelley's "Ozymandias", the speaker sees America's downfall "Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand".

“American” justice is completely deflated. Thus, this scene marks a temporary turn away from the focus on the sensory and affective modalities of touch to usher in a more cynical, sardonic understanding of the term in the sense of “to lay hands on” that shall be the object of the next section of the article, which explores how Lafala is objectified and how his disability ambivalently starts to function as a currency in the system of capitalist exchange. The notion of touch, in its strategically varying senses, is thus not only posited as pivotal to the novel’s exploration of black disability, but also becomes imbricated in the novel’s intersectional politics.

“A Pyrrhic victory”: the role of touch in McKay’s intersectional politics

10. As Schwartz puts it, “[t]he narrative of *Romance* in fact seems to unravel as it approaches various problematics of difference simultaneously, [...] engag[ing] these categories within an intersectional frame”.²⁴ The “ironical [...] intervention[s] of [...] the hands of fate” (*RM* 10) spin a yarn full of plot twists, eliciting shifting reflections on the intersections between race, class, disability, and later gender and sexuality. This first flicker of hope prompts a revival in which Lafala intuitively reestablishes his connection with his African identity through reactivating the sense of touch by transferring it from his legs to his hands: “A desire for activity seized him again and it found outlet in his nimble hands. He obtained some hemp and varicolored wool and began weaving girdles, the only clothing that his tribeswomen used to wear when he was a boy in the bush” (*RM* 13-14). As Holcomb points out, “though his legs are lost, Lafala’s ability to weave such articles represents his histological link with his past, the memory of his African culture that still lives in his hands”.²⁵ This shift of focus from legs to hands marks the beginning of the second stage of the narrative, which ushers in a more cynical point of view about how the sensational potential of Lafala’s story can be exploited, and about how money comes into play. This part of the narrative seems to revolve around the idea of touch not so much in the sense of physical contact or emotional affect, but rather, in the sense of the French verb *toucher* (to receive money), a meaning common in colloquial contexts, which would not have escaped McKay after the time he spent in Paris and Marseille. This more cynical understanding of the notion of touch is pivotal to McKay’s Marxist politics, and particularly its scathing critique of Western capitalism, in which anything can be transformed into an exchange currency.

11. When “Black Angel” finds Lafala a Jewish lawyer who promises to obtain an enormous compensation by the shipping company, the narrative clearly becomes driven by an ironic reflection on how the sensational potential of the story can be exploited for money: “‘You’re in *my* hands now.’”

24 J. Schwartz, “‘Broken Bits of Color in the Dirt’: The Afterlives of Slavery and the Futures Past of a Black Intersectional International in *Romance in Marseille*”, 16.

25 G. Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 186.

[...] It was straight heart stuff. [...] Then the lawyer said that before he touched the case Lafala would have to sign a paper giving him half of whatever he obtained as damages. Frankly he explained that he was not going to handle the case for sympathy only” (*RM* 11-12, emphasis original). This scheme leads to another form of dehumanization for Lafala, transforming him into an exchange currency in the arm-wrestling between the lawyer and the company, as underscored by the phrasing used when the lawyer rescues Lafala from the company’s attempts to kidnap him: “the lawyer instituted a search and finally found the helpless black on the company’s pier. He *snatched him up* and the game was won” (*RM* 15, my emphasis). The implicit punning on the different senses of touching introduces an ethical reflection on whether Black Angel and the lawyer are actually helping or exploiting Lafala. There is clearly something exaggerated and profit-seeking in the lawyer’s attitude, as suggested by the hyperbole used to describe their first handshake: “So warmly and heartily [the lawyer] shook Lafala’s hand that he pulled him right up off his butt of a self” (*RM* 11). While a more affective sense of touch is inherent in the hand-woven African-style girdle Lafala gives to the lawyer as a token of their “pretty friendship” (*RM* 11), the novel ironically points to the naïvety of Lafala’s desire to repay his lawyer with such handicraft which may be extremely valuable in African culture but is attributed very little value in a ruthless capitalist society. Furthermore, the lawyer’s hands are depicted as “cunning” (*RM* 28) and his description by Black angel as a “go-get-’im-skin-and-scalp-him” (*RM* 9) kind of lawyer underscores the violence his hands are guilty of.

12. It is hard to miss the anti-Semitic overtones in the portrayal of the money-loving lawyer — explicitly described as “Mr. Jew” (*RM* 21) and “dirty ambulance-chaser” (*RM* 22) — which chime in with the essentializing aspects of McKay’s earlier depictions of black identity or, later on, with the misogynistic overtones in his depictions of the sex workers Lafala meets in Marseille, which may suggest that McKay himself is not exempt from different kinds of prejudice, adding to the difficulty of interpreting the novel’s ambivalent story through an intersectional viewpoint. On the other hand, it is also clear that beyond the anti-Semitic overtones, what accounts for the negative portrayal of this figure is McKay’s contempt for capitalism, and the idea that anything can be exploited for money. Ultimately, McKay intertwines the novel’s race politics with his Marxist ethos, suggesting that Lafala’s plight is more closely related to his proletarian status than to his race, as the Martinican-born leftist activist Etienne St. Dominique — a “disguised mouthpiece” (*RM* xxiii) of McKay’s own political views — explicitly suggests later on: “Take this Lafala case, for example. There is little race to it besides his color. It’s a stinking proletarian case, from Marseille across the ocean to New York and back” (*RM* 103).

13. Touch thus becomes a figural means of probing various tensions — particularly between race

and class, between the ruthlessness of capitalism and McKay's Marxist ethos, and between affect and cynicism. As Lafala prepares to return to Marseille, the narrative becomes driven by an ambivalent reflection on how disability transforms his identity and social status in complex and somewhat unexpected ways.²⁶ The colossal compensation he receives endows him with a new class status, a spectacular upward social mobility causing an awed desire to "touch" the man who has managed to obtain so much money. Thus, ironically, the amputated stumps are transformed not only into a means of achieving mobility but also into a new focal point of sensory and even erotic experiences: as Black Angel organizes a party at his house, with music and prostitutes, to help Lafala forget his traumas, "his stumps of legs [are] fondled and caressed as if they were honeysticks" (RM 17). At this point though, the narrative voice still makes it clear that the driving force behind this eroticization of disability is the fact that Lafala is now rich. The imagery here underscores not so much the sense of eroticism as the fetishization of capital.²⁷ The use of the passive voice pinpoints the fact that Lafala is objectified: his amputated stumps are fondled because they are perceived as an embodiment of his money.

14. The narrator invites the reader to consider the complexity of Lafala's new identity brought forth by this forced transformation from being a penniless but attractive able-bodied black man full of vitality to a disabled but affluent one (of whose affluence others are constantly trying to take advantage) through the lens of the idea of a "Pyrrhic victory" (RM 28) — a victory having such disastrous consequences to the victor that it ultimately becomes equivalent to a defeat. While the protagonist himself seems at least partially aware that money itself cannot fully compensate for his loss, he is left pondering whether his new prosthetic legs can make him whole again:

He accepted the godsend with a primitive dignity that appeared like indifference. His real excitement was reserved for the cork legs that he was to get at the company's expense. He was eager to find himself out in them. [...] He might learn to dance with them and do the things that whole-legged people did. [...] Lafala sat on his cot, curiously caressing his corks. (RM 18, 23)

Although, as the alliteration underscores, Lafala quickly develops a haptic and affective bond with the prosthetic feet themselves, they are unable to compensate for and heal the emotional scarring of his trauma. While his prostheses purchased at the company's expense allow Lafala to walk again, making those unaware of his disability believe that his impairment is nothing more than a sprained

26 As Christopher Bell underscores in his introduction to *Blackness and Disability*, while "[d]isability Studies views disability as socially constructed much in the same way that other identities are", it is "arguably the only identity that one can acquire in the course of an instant" (1). Michael Davidson stresses that "[d]isability studies has reached an intersectional moment", a common pattern being what he calls "negative intersectionality": "when one component of complex embodiment is used to define and disempower another", as in the conflation of Jewish or black identity with disease. *Invalid Modernism*, 21, 19.

27 Tim Armstrong offers an illuminating analysis of the complex connections between capitalism and what he calls "negative prosthesis" ("which deals with a body defined by absences, by hurt"), underscoring the "tightly knit relationship between a loss and a phantasmal reconstitution" offered both by prosthesis and by capitalist commodities. "Prosthetic Modernism", 79, 90.

ankle, this transformation is initially only posited as visual and superficial, as it becomes clear when Lafala crosses the ocean to return to Marseille, and the inability to feel his legs and touch the ground triggers a visceral reaction of seasickness, a radically new experience for a seasoned sailor like him:

He closed his eyes to shut the ocean outside, but it washed him clean and green inside. The waves roared up and the waves roared down and inside of Lafala [...] The waves roared up and the waves roared down and Lafala, harassed, agitated, turned upside-down again and again, found final refuge in the WC. (RM 27)

This literally gut-wrenching experience, which is clearly a reenactment of the first traumatic crossing, makes him so sick that he paradoxically ends up seeking “refuge” by locking himself up in the water-closet — the very space of his initial trauma. Here, the loss of his legs, which is, as discussed earlier, depicted as the loss of the roots anchoring the tree in the soil, causes another experience of phantom touch: like a hollow stump, Lafala can feel the waves “wash[ing] him clean and green inside”. This new seasickness is explicitly connected not only to the scars of trauma and to Lafala’s disability, but also to his too-quick upward class mobility, a contact with luxury which comes as a shock to his body: “But now Lafala was a passenger himself, at the company’s expense, first class [...] and his bowels roared resentment against too much first-class food” (RM 27).²⁸

15. This ordeal for Lafala’s senses prepares the reader for the return to Marseille, “the dream port of his fortune and misfortune” (RM 28), described as a place of synesthetic, “savage”²⁹ sensuality:

Wide open in the shape of an enormous fan splashed with violent colors, Marseille lay bare to the glory of the meridian sun, like a fever consuming the senses, alluring and repelling [...] Port of the fascinating, forbidding and tumultuous Quayside against which the thick scum of life foams and bubbles and breaks in a syrup of passion and desire. (RM 29)

The implicit analogy between the representation of city and female sensuality is metonymically embodied by the two prostitutes reigning over Quayside — Aslima, nicknamed The Tigress, and La Fleur Noire. Yet this description of the city as a sensual woman which belongs to the realm of stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy quickly gives way to a vision of female desire that has decidedly queer overtones and once again charts intersections between sexuality and class, underscoring the financial transactions at the heart of prostitution. Although clearly posited as foils to one another, both Aslima and La Fleur are both women of color whose gender and class status forces them to make a living as sex workers. The initially somewhat misogynistic, stereotypical portrayal of their rivalry gives way to a radically different vision of each character which revolves — in different ways — around queer sexuality. In both cases, the sensory experience of touch, and the visceral

28 For an insightful analysis of the politics of food in McKay’s work in relation to both race and class, see R. Bowler’s “Comfort Food and Respectability Politics in Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*”.

29 One of the novel’s working titles was *Savage Loving*.

reaction it elicits in the two characters, plays a crucial role in McKay's exploration of queer desire, and more generally in his intersectional politics.

16. In the case of *La Fleur*, McKay undertakes a representation of black working-class lesbian identity that was groundbreaking for the time, especially coming from a writer of the opposite sex. Although *La Fleur* engages in heterosexual intercourse due to her trade, the narrative quickly makes it clear that her real affections are reserved for her female lover, a Greek girl whose Hellenic origin alludes to lesbian identity as metonymically bound to the Isle of Lesbos. The narrative positions *La Fleur* as central to the novel's exploration of touch from an intersectional viewpoint in a scene that brings to a crisis the tension between her queer desire and the financial necessity to work as a prostitute, which inevitably elicits a sense of revulsion. While the reader is told that "[I]a Fleur could always intoxicate herself up to the point of easy pleasantness in the love trade for any person", an emphasis on intoxication quite common to counter the sense of disgust triggered by physical contact when representing prostitution in general, the depiction of touch in this scene has a markedly queer undercurrent:

But the rubicund gentleman did not please *La Fleur*. He was afflicted with an enormous paunch, which dominated the banquet. When he stood up it ballooned ungracefully against the neighbors in its vicinity. And when he sat down it surmounted the table, a huge bag that any accidental prick it seemed might cause to burst disagreeably. Some of the girls pressed their little elbows mischievously into it and fondled the rubicund's face.

But *La Fleur* was not so merry contemplating contact. And when after the feasting was finished [...] and the personage took her dancing, pushing her round and round the room with that panting paunch, she felt that that was as far as she could go with it. (*RM* 30)

The scene has a Rabelaisian, carnivalesque tonality, blurring male and female elements and even reversing gender roles through the sexual innuendo ("prick") conflated with allusions to pregnancy ("paunch"), digestion and perhaps even farting ("burst disagreeably"). While the use of the term "fondled" unmistakably recalls the scene when *Lafala*'s stumps are fondled by the prostitutes at *Black Angel*'s party, thereby pointing to the eroticization of power and capital, it becomes clear that *La Fleur* cannot play her habitual part as touching the man's flesh triggers an irrepressible sense of disgust in her. This crisis triggered by touch anticipates later theories of gender and sexuality as a performance, underscoring the fact that in her case, performing conventional femininity and heterosexual desire is achieved only at the price of chronic intoxication, and conceals a thorough-going misandry and revulsion caused by her sexual exploitation by a patriarchal order.

Overcoming disability through healing touch

17. Aslima — Lafala's paramour and thus the female lead of McKay's "romance" — provides a different but equally complex vision of femininity and sexuality. Although positioned as a foil to La Fleur, she initially shares her defining character traits of being money-loving and man-hating, as she is sexually and financially exploited by her white pimp Titin. It is important to bear in mind that Aslima is in fact the one indirectly responsible for Lafala's accident, as she stole all his money after spending the night with him, forcing him to stow away on the ship in order to avoid facing the shame of being penniless and humiliated by her trick. Thus, Aslima is initially depicted as being as cold and calculating as La Fleur, and the narrative makes it clear that although Lafala is quite an attractive man, at first she treats him as just another client to be swindled of his money. The final section of this article will explore how Aslima's encounter with Lafala's impairment (a result of her own mischief) triggers a profound transformation in both characters — a transformation that goes against the grain of racial and class violence, and becomes the catalyst of a new, more heightened haptic experience in which physical touch also functions as an affective metaphor, arousing a profound emotional attachment of a different order.

18. It is Lafala's amputated limbs, which Holcomb sees as a figurative castration, that paradoxically make him desirable for Aslima: "The connection between loss of legs and modernist castration is unmistakable".³⁰ Thus, it may be argued that the novel's central romance revolves around another form of queer, or at least non-normative, desire catalyzed by "a modern male body shorn of vital parts" (*RM* xxxvi). Although the novel works through the fantasy of emasculation, Lafala ostensibly embodies a more complex and ambivalent vision of masculinity and sexual potency. His sudden attractiveness for Aslima seems to hinge on the particular form of masculinity that he represents — one that is markedly different from Titin's. Being herself subjected to racial, gender, class, and violence,³¹ Aslima is particularly sensitive to Lafala's plight, since he has suffered similar forms of violence yet has somehow managed to reemerge empowered from his traumas:

Aslima remembered what a dancing dog Lafala used to be, how infectious and tantalizing the jiggling of his feet. His long legs then, uniquely handsome though they were, had been just like any other pair of legs to her. But as she looked at Lafala on the bed, the shrunken stumps tapering to the knobs where once were lovely feet, she was moved to a great pity and a great shame.

And she knelt down caressing and kissing his knobs: "Poor man, poor man, and so young, so young. What a pity!"

"That's a present from you", said Lafala maliciously. [...]

"But I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry, oh my God! Poor half of legs". She began to sob.

30 G. Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 190.

31 "[B]orn a slave" (*RM* 44) in Marrakesh, Aslima was kidnapped by slavers as a child and sold to the "hetairai" (courtesans) in Fez. Later sold to a soldier who takes her virginity, she drifts from man to man after he abandons her, until she is taken to Marseille by Titin. In an earlier draft, Aslima is described as "a former child prostitute" (*RM* xxxiii).

“Don’t cry”, Lafala laughed. “I can’t stand tears. I got something that must be better than sound feet, alright, for now all the chippies at Quayside are making eyes at me”.

“But how you could dance, darling, all sorts of movements. Oh là-là! Tonight I’m going to be better than I ever was to you the first time you were here. I’m going to be a sweet pig to you”. (RM 33-34)

The fact that she is herself to blame for Lafala’s sufferings triggers a powerful sense of empathy which becomes the catalyst of a strong bond forged between the two characters. Thus, the moment when, upon his return to Marseille, Aslima refuses to take money from Lafala for spending the night with him introduces a suspension of capitalist logic and the possibility of a true romance.

19. The narrative strategically raises — and then dismisses — the question of whether Lafala’s amputation has affected his potency:

“I can’t be as piggish as in my able-bodied days”, said Lafala.

“Pigskin!” Aslima exclaimed. “Forget about your feet now and thank God it wasn’t something worse that was cut off”.

“Alright, piggy”.

“I’ve been a pig all my life”, said Aslima. “But with you I don’t feel that it’s just a mud bath. I feel like we’re clean pigs”. (RM 41)

Lafala’s impairment is seen not as a loss but as a gain: his stumps are not only eroticized but also depicted as giving access to a heightened, purified form of lovemaking. Apart from adding a touch of color to Aslima’s lines, the exclamation “Pigskin!”³² underscores the strong emphasis on haptic imagery in the depiction of the novel’s central romance, conveying an animality which is markedly different from more traditional tropings of touch in romance plots. In this final stage, the initial emphasis on legs and then on hands gives way to an emphasis on the skin of the whole body as a source of haptic pleasure which makes everything else recede into the distance and triggers a Deleuzian becoming-animal — a becoming-intense which is also a becoming-touch triggered by “the process of desire”: “Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings. *Sexuality proceeds by way of the becoming-woman of the man and the becoming-animal of the human*”.³³ The queer potentiality of Lafala’s amputated body is matched by the becoming-pig initiated by Aslima, which breaks with conventional representations of heterosexual desire in favor of a more gender-neutral and strongly haptic vision: “I’m just a chummy pig. Scratch me and see how I’ll lie down at your feet. [...] let’s go where we can be scratching pigs” (RM 57). Lafala likewise envisions his nascent love for Aslima in haptic terms — as a “strangely different body captivating and clinging, haunting and tormenting” (RM 33-34). But it is in Aslima herself that

32 McKay’s idiosyncratic use of this term is perhaps derived from a translation of the French *couenne*, whose primary meaning is “pork rind” but may in slang usage designate human skin or be used as an insult meaning “idiot”, “imbecile”.

33 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...”, 272; 278-279, emphasis original.

the process of becoming-other triggered by ecstatic touch is most visible:

If you have ever seen a pig dancing before rain, Aslima's movement was an exact imitation. She struck an attitude as if she were on all fours and tossing her head from side to side and shaking her hips, like an excited pig flicking and trying to bite its own tail, she danced round and round the little circle of the café. [...] When she passed Lafala she *clutched* his hair savagely and said "Going to rain tonight..." (*RM* 39, my emphasis)

Her increasingly intense, mock-ritual dancing revisits not only Lafala's ecstatic memory of dancing in the novel's opening chapters, but also the myth of Danaë. In Aslima's posture "as if she were on all fours", animality and disability seem to be conflated, while the description of her "savage" grip on Lafala alludes to "Savage Loving" — the working title of the manuscript — showing McKay's strong desire to appropriate this historically derogatory term and reinvest it with new meanings, making it designate a form of animality that is not dehumanizing but emancipatory.

20. In this process of ecstatic haptic fusion between the two bodies, Aslima is gradually transformed into a living prosthesis for Lafala, most explicitly in two different scenes. In the first one, in Chapter Thirteen, as his prostheses are "not any good climbing" (*RM* 70), she carries him up the hill to a terrace overlooking the whole bay, to the place where she had a prophetic and ecstatic dream of returning to Africa. Thus, in this scene, the two characters achieve another form of mobility, this time a transcendent one, in which vertical and horizontal movements are combined to signify a form of emancipation that is clearly contrasted with the more ironic vision of the spectacular social mobility that transforms Lafala into a rich man overnight. In the second instance, at the party given to celebrate his release from prison after being kidnapped by the company officials, and as they prepare to sail to Africa together, Lafala manages to dance again, using Aslima's body like a prosthesis:

Aslima also felt the beguine for Lafala and was swaying and swaying her arm around his shoulder, both of them swaying warmly together. Lafala wanted to dance. He had never felt the desire so strongly since his accident. The beguine rhythm caught him by the middle, drop to drop. The music swelled up and down with a sweep and rushed him off his feet.

"I feel like dancing", he said to Aslima.

"We can try", she said.

And Lafala stood up leaning on Aslima and did the beguine. He started in timidly, then found it was not so difficult after all with Aslima carrying him along.

"It wasn't so hard to dance again", he said.

"No, you're doing fine", she said. And she stiffened her breast to bear him up. (*RM* 108)

This scene poignantly captures the idea of a healing, prosthetic touch predicated on mutual trust. Aslima is clearly the leading partner, employing physical strength to "carry" Lafala and "bear him

up". Her body is endowed with a robustness and strength traditionally gendered masculine, thus developing the queer subtext that runs through the whole narrative. This scene clearly provides the climax of the novel, reconnecting with the imagery of the opening chapter: "Lafala is completed, actualized by dancing with Aslima, as the circle around them formally favors their contingent, transitory fusion".³⁴ This conjoining of Lafala's amputated body with Aslima's, which is full of vitality, also figuratively enacts the collectivity of African diaspora, harking back to the beginning, where the narrative puns on the different senses of "members" and the dancing legs provide a metonymical vision of both the rootedness in the African soil and the body politic of the tribe. The novel's climax then reads as a strong statement on the reparative potential of touch.

Yet due to a final intervention of the cunning "hands of fate" (*RM* 10), this climactic scene is followed by a tragic ending: although "[t]he touch of [Aslima] burn[s] into him like a sweet fever consuming his body" (*RM* 123), Lafala secretly sails to Africa on his own, leaving her behind. This last-minute change of mind, caused by misgivings about her sincerity, may be seen as Lafala's reenactment of — and revenge for — Aslima's initial act of betrayal. Lafala ultimately rejects the quasi-utopian dream of their final vows to become "[p]igs for life [...] Two loving pigs going away together to hide in a jungle" (*RM* 123), causing the disconsolate Aslima to let herself be killed by Titin, an act which almost amounts to committing suicide. The tragic ending suggests that the emotional scarring of trauma is in a certain sense more durable than physical impairment, and makes Lafala wary and forever unable to truly experience trust. The final plot twist therefore underscores that, for the black subject in particular, "the upsurges of desire, though emancipatory and empowering, can also be fraught with danger — loss and deflation, self-alienation and/or rejection by the loved one or by the black community the subject longs to be joined with, tragedy and destruction".³⁵ The final ellipsis and shift of point of view from Lafala to Aslima between the penultimate and the final chapter leaves the reader with a blank spot, as though underscoring the fact that the narrative voice is unable to reach the core of the protagonist's trauma. The ending thus seems to leave the reader with a more ambivalent message concerning the therapeutic potential of touch, making them instead reflect on how the literary narrative itself functions as a sort of prosthesis, allowing an extended form of perception of and contact with the bodily experiences and the emotional scarring of the characters.

21. By exploring the poetics and politics of touch in McKay's novel, this article has sought to demonstrate that the narrative posits strong connections between Lafala's black identity and his "dancing legs" — which represent both black vitality and the ability to touch the African soil. As these connections are irrevocably severed by the traumatic experience of amputation the novel

34 G. Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, 208.

35 M. Michlin and J.-P. Rocchi, *Black Intersectionalities*, 14.

opens with, the narrative voice confronts the reader with a reflection on how disability intersects with and transforms Lafala's racial identity and class status in unexpected and paradoxically empowering ways, becoming the catalyst of new, more heightened haptic and affective experiences. McKay's narrative can also be approached through the lens of meta-textual readings of the literary text itself as a form of narrative prosthesis. It is arguably emblematic of how, as Linett points out, quoting David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's study *Narrative Prosthesis*, "literary narratives use disability as a crutch to strengthen their 'representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight'".³⁶ Rejecting the path of an easy sense of pathos and sentimentality often associated with disability, the narrative seeks to maintain an ironic critical distance, questioning the authenticity of affect, and adopts an intersectional approach in which "palpating" Lafala's complex traumas also becomes a means to diagnose the afflictions of the society he lives in — such as ruthless class struggle, racism and gender exploitation.

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- 36 M. Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, 5. See also Peter Boxall's highly illuminating *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life*.

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