



Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans  
History Month

Every February since 2005

**Claude McKay (September 15, 1889 – May 22, 1948)** was a Jamaican writer and humanist. He was part of the Harlem Renaissance and wrote three novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928), a best-seller which won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature, *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933). McKay also authored a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932), and two autobiographical books, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922) was among the first books published during the Harlem Renaissance. His book of collected poems, *Selected Poems* (1953), was published posthumously.

He was an extensive traveller visiting and living in New York and Kansas in North America and London in the UK where he knew and worked with Sylvia Pankhurst. It is claimed that he was the first Black journalist in Britain working in the Workers' Dreadnought. He also travelled several times to the Soviet Union and visited Africa and Europe. He was a restless nomadic character who found some solace in living in Morocco.

He is a sensuous writer who revels in describing the reality of working class life. His resistance to racism was profound and pioneering. His first book of poems was published in Jamaican dialect or patois, *Songs of Jamaica*, in 1912. He funded himself like many working class people throughout his life by doing a diversity of jobs including as a policeman, a waiter on the railways, an artist's model and a carpenter.

For most of his life he was a communist. In his later years he rejected that and became a Roman Catholic. He was married for a very short time and had a child whom he never met. It is in his writing we see his bisexuality. Given that homosexuality is illegal in Jamaica we do not see in biographies any recognition of this, however we do hear in this BBC radio programme *Great Lives* both Yvonne Brewster and Pat Cumper making it very clear. They see him as bisexual because of the profound sensuality of his writing. Matthew Paris 'He was black he was gay he was a communist and a writer so the place he could survive was Harlem'.

His most famous poem, *If We Must Die* was famously quoted by Winston Churchill:

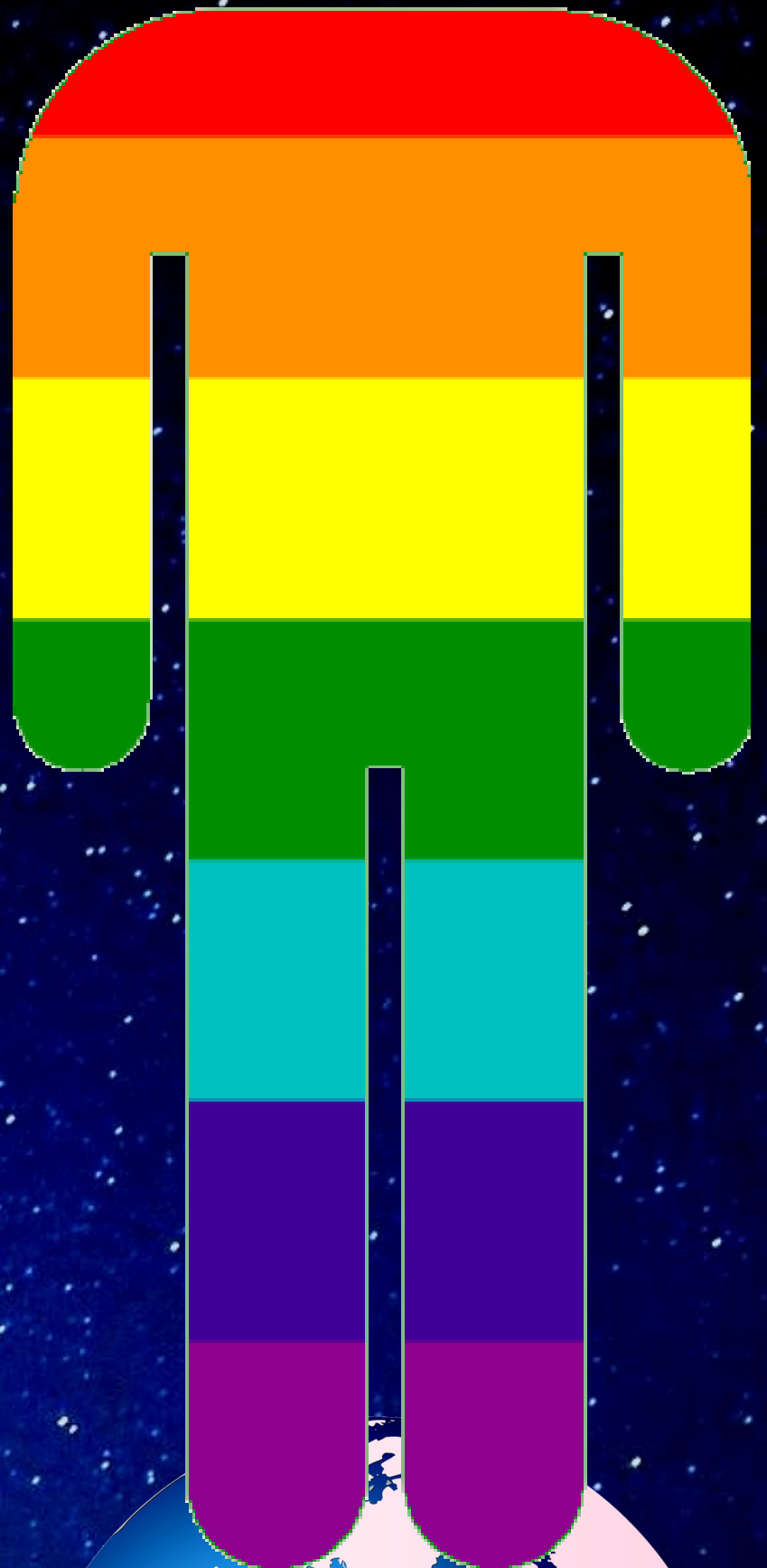
*If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.*

This poem of resistance could as easily refer to homophobia as it does to racism. William Maxwell says in *New Negro, Old Left* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). From the moment "If We Must Die" was reprinted in the journal, McKay was stamped as a Crusader poet of choice, a fluent historian of the magazine's post-war code of radical remasculinization. With steely propriety, the poem put forth the creed of a New Negro whose modernity rested on self-defence as much as on Marxism and the metropolis.

mapping our world

2018

Geography



Claude McKay