

Claude McKay and the "Yellow Peril"

by Fabian Tompsett

Introduction This was written for the 'Belonging in Europe' conference hosted by the Equiano Centre, UCL, and Museum in Docklands, November 8-9 2007. It brings together thoughts stimulated by *On the Founding of the KAPD* by the Communist Workers Organisation¹ and Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, particularly Volume II.² Of course it is inadequate in the way it deals with the subject, but it is put here to stimulate debate to help guide a deeper analysis of the issues arising here.)

I have put the original article at the top, followed by some ruminations . . .

"The Yellow Peril and the Dockers"

The Workers' Dreadnought, 16th October 1920

by Leon Lopez (Claude McKay)

A fortnight ago three friends and I went down to the West India docks to visit a ship that had just arrived from the Argentine. It was not an unpleasant morning, the air was crisp, there was a slight wind and the bus ride was quiet pleasant. But when we reached the docks, there was no feeling of happiness prevailing there. There were hundreds of dockers loitering along the wharves waiting for a chance to work. There were scores upon scores of seamen, white, brown and black, waiting wistfully for an undermanned ship. Despair was written in great large letters all over their faces: still they waited, hope against hope. We almost forgot our own pressing troubles as we made our way through the pitiful body of strong men, willing, eager to sell themselves to the merciless and entrenched employers for bread: yet refused a chance to toil on the docks that are stored with fine cloth and good food, while their wives and children are in rags and starving.

We were met at the gate by an old pal who took us down to the hold of his ship, where we had breakfast à la creole, rice and corn meal and flour dumplings, swimming in coconut oil and thick coarse unadulterated cocoa made in native style with fat floating on the top. It was a great meal and for years I had not tasted one like it; but it turned bitter in my mouth when I thought of the despairing crowd of men outside. Even the wretched life of my swarthy friends in the ships' bottoms was better than gnawing starvation ashore.

My friend, Pedro, did not hear any news of of his people in Brazil and he too was in a state of despair as he could not secure a berth to work his way back home. I came back west wondering what steps would be taken to relieve the awful distress in docklands. I did not wonder for long. A few evenings after, a Harmsworth-Northcliffe news-sheet blazoned the remedy from its posters all over London:

1 *On the Founding of the KAPD* was written by the written by the Communist Workers Organisation in 1998-2000. It is available on line at <http://libcom.org/library/on-founding-kapd-germany-cwo> accessed 1 May 2019

2 *Male Fantasies Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* by Klaus Theweleit (1989), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press available at https://monoskop.org/images/4/4d/Theweleit_Klaus_Male_Fantasies_Vol_2_Male_Bodies_Psychoanalyzing_the_White_Terror.pdf accessed 1 May 2019

CHINATOWN SCANDAL
WHITE GIRLS AND YELLOW MEN
POPLAR COUNCIL APPEAL TO HOME OFFICE

There was some excitement in the West India Dock Road. Mr Cairns and the Evening News had turned the trick. For the first time in many hopeless weeks, the jobless dockers and seamen would forget their hunger to vent their wrath on the Chinamen and the other coloured elements in Poplar. The next evening I visited the West India Dock Road to see what was happening. And business was going on as usual in one of the large Chinese restaurants, there was the usual number of white girl waitresses – quite pretty some of them. In light banter, I put the question to them that I have often asked before: "Why do you work here?" the answer is: "The pay is better than what we can get in the West End, the tips are large and our petty Chinese masters are kinder than our big ghoulish bosses." In some restaurants, the white mothers sit with their quaint half-caste babies. The kept Press, with an air of mock innocence, asks: "What fascination do our English girls find in these coloured foreigners?" The kept Press ought to know, when its position is the same as the girls', with the sole difference that its wages is higher and the prostitutes are men. The great food firm of Lyons', with its long chain of restaurants scattered all through London, is determined to drive hundreds of its striking girls to a worse life than that of Chinatown, because they tried to organise themselves into a Union. And Lyons pay the Press to do their dirty work.

I tried my luck on a Chinese lottery and lost my 2/-, but it was harmless; I felt much safer than I could in a West End gambling den. If one is partial to the pipe and can present credentials, one may rest at ease on a mat and smoke in peace and at leisure in some back room in Chinatown. There is an exotic flavour in Dockland, and existence would not be intolerable there were it not for the hideous spectre of unemployment which haunts the wharves and which must be laid at the door of English Capitalism.

A few months ago the dockers got a rise in wages, and English ships soon vanished from English ports. In Liverpool, Hull, Bristol and Cardiff, conditions are just as bad. The British ships are being diverted to continental ports where labour is cheaper. This affects skilled labour of all trades. As well as the great mass of unskilled workers.

The whole plot is so obvious and yet the nicely fed and clothed labour officials play the capitalist game to perfection, by stirring up the passions of the workers against aliens (need I add Jews?) At Portsmouth, last month, the Ships Stewards and Cooks Union put through a resolution "protesting against the employment of all Chinese and Asiatic labour, requesting the Government to repatriate all Chinese not of British nationality, and asking that in future no Chinese be engaged on board British ships west of the Suez Canal." Since the beginning of last year, the Government has gone far towards meeting these demands and standardising the rate of pay; but the seamen officials do not believe in a standard wage for all ship workers. One of them informed me recently, that the black men had been organised, and the Indians were being brought into line, but the Chinese were hopeless! They will not live and work up to the general standard of British seamen and if the standard of wages were ever so high, the ship-owners would use the Chinese as their tools and potential scabs against the white. Therefore only one course is open: Chinese must not be employed on British ships, nor allowed to reside in English ports. As I have seen Chinese working and living just like other people in different parts of the world, I know that the premise is false.

The dockers, instead of being unduly concerned about the presence of their coloured fellow men, who like themselves are the victims of capitalism and civilisation, should turn their attention to the huge stores of wealth along the water front. The country's riches are not in the West End, in the palatial houses of the suburbs; they are stored in the East End, and the jobless should lead the attack on the bastilles, the bonded warehouses along the docks to solve the question of unemployment.

On reading the call for papers for the *Belonging in Europe* conference I immediately thought of Claude McKay and his 1920 article *Yellow Peril* and the *Dockers* not merely for its historic importance in the trial of Sylvia Pankhurst, but because it could have even been written specifically for this conference. In fact it was written following a request from Pankhurst for something fresh about the docks reflecting the point of view of the "coloured" as well as the white seamen. But before focusing on this text it would be useful to look at McKay's development as a writer before he found himself as journalist with the left-communist paper *Workers' Dreadnought*.

McKay's Background

McKay was born in Jamaica in 1889 to a African Caribbean peasant family living in Clarendon. In 1912 he produced two volumes of poetry in Jamaica. *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* were pioneering works in the development of Patois literature. His use of peasant idioms was accompanied by a frequent discussion of the world of work, of the cutlass and the hoe of the agricultural labourer in such poems as "Quashie to Buccra", "*Hard Times*" and "A Labourer's Life" *Give Me*. Winston James has discussed the impact of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer on his writing, referring to the German pessimists depiction of life as "work, worry, toil and trouble".³ McKay was under the influence of his White patron, Walter Jekyll, and James depicts him politically as a Fabian socialist, sympathetic to Sydney Olivier, the governor of Jamaica 1907-1912.

In 1912 McKay left Jamaica for the USA to attend Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. He soon left and it wasn't long before he was in New York finding what work he could get to pay for his daily needs. After several different jobs he was employed as a dining car waiter on the Pennsylvania Railways. Whilst continuing in this day job, he was busy writing, trying to find magazines to publish his poetry. His experience of American racism and the hollowness shown by European civilisation as it became swept up in the First World War led McKay to more radical political views. He became friends with Hubert Harrison, one of the outstanding black socialists in New York and editor of Garvey's *Negro World*. He also came to the attention of Crystal Eastman, co-editor with her brother Max, of the magazine *The Liberator*. This magazine was essentially a relaunch of *The Masses*, which had been banned for its radical anti-war stance in 1918. By 1919 it was publishing McKay's poetry – the most famous of which was "If We Must Die". Written during the height of the race riots which spread through the USA and Great Britain in 1919, it gave voice to the resilience of African-Americans during this traumatic period. However just as the possibility of developing a career as a writer emerged for McKay in New York, the financial support of two old friends of Walter Jekyll gave McKay the opportunity to travel to London, which he promptly took up.

"Black Horror on the Rhine"

From his political links with the nascent Communist movement, McKay was soon plugged in to a social network centred on the International Socialist Club in Shoreditch. McKay was its first black member, but soon he was bringing other West Indian and African friends who he had met at the

³ *A Fierce Hatred of injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and his Poetry of Rebellion*, by Winston James, Verso, London and New York, 2000 p65.

black servicemen's club in Drury Lane. The *Workers' Dreadnought* had already published some of the poems previously published in *The Liberator*. He soon met activists from the Workers Socialist Federation – the organisation which published *Workers' Dreadnought*, although he did not meet Sylvia Pankhurst until after he responded to a racist response to the deployment of African soldiers in Darmstadt, Hanau, Homburg and Frankfurt by the French in April 1920.⁴ McKay originally wrote to the *Daily Herald*, a socialist paper produced by George Lansbury. They had published an article by the Labour Party politician Edmund Morel – 'Black Scourge on Rhine: Sexual Horror Let Loose by France on Rhine' – which had introduced a specifically sexual element into a debate about the use of African soldiers by the French in their occupation of the Rhineland. Morel was a prominent politician in the Independent Labour Party and was entertain hopes of becoming Foreign Secretary in Ramsay MacDonald's 1924 government. He had gained a reputation as an activist through his exposure of Belgian atrocities in the Congo before the First World War. Morel was active as an anti-war activist during the First World War, being imprisoned for his involvement in the Union of Democratic Control. By 1920 he had become a critic of the Treaty of Versailles and his intervention marked a sexualisation of the racist arguments already put forward by Herman Muller, the "champagne socialist" German Chancellor,⁵ and the President Frederick Ebert.

From the Red Ruhr to the "Yellow Peril"

It would be good to consider the singular circumstances that gave rise to the French deployment of troops in the Rhineland as this was an act significant political importance. German industry had just been shut down by a mass strike to foil a coup by Freikorps veterans of the West Russian Volunteer Army forced to return from the Baltic by British diplomacy. However in the Ruhr – which did not suffer the level of repression meted out in Berlin following the Spartakist Uprising – workers formed soviets and disarmed units of the German military, distributing arms amongst themselves. The organ for this distribution was a Red Army which was brutally repressed by the German Army. Following the Bielefeld Agreement, German Social Democracy used some of the very Freikorps involved in the coup attempt to destroy the workers military power. The Red Army suffered 1,000 casualties compared to 250 Frei Korps fatalities. Many of the Red Army casualties were shot in summary executions.

Morel took up the racist complaints of Muller and Ebert – giving them a sexual twist at precisely the moment following German Social Democracies second use of proto-fascists to put down working class insubordination. This is a psychological process of displacement – often called scape-goating – drawing on unconscious reserves of emotive energy which had accumulated through sexual repression.

Sexual politics of the "White Terror"

McKay's Yellow Peril article reflects a keen understanding of how this psycho- dynamic works. First he establishes his viewpoint – describing the traditional West Indian meal he shared with some friends on board a ship in the West India docks. Then he quotes a newspaper headline Chinatown Scandal: White Girls and Yellow Men. He responds to this first by comparing the working conditions of waitresses working for West End restaurants unfavourably with their counterparts working in Chinese restaurants in Chinatown then confirming the reality of inter-racial sex by remarking on its progeny being bounced upon the knees of the young white mothers to be found in some of these restaurants. However, at this point he does not struggle to find a bourgeois sense of

⁴ *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* by Tina Campt, University of Michigan Press 2004

⁵ Herman Müller was the son of sparkling wine manufacturer. See: http://www.berlin.friedparks.de/such/gedenkstaette.php?gdst_id=3550 accessed 1 May 2019

respectability but quite frankly points to the hypocrisy of kept Press suggesting that the sole difference between them and the working girls is that their wages are higher and the prostitutes are men. He returns to the class struggle – focussing on the strike by Lyons Corner House waitresses before describing the inside of an opium den. Then he moves onto an issue which arose at the TUC Congress, which he had attended in Portsmouth that September. Here he discusses a racist proposal made by the Ships stewards and Cooks Union to repatriate all Chinese not of British nationality. After rejecting this perspective his final paragraph falls little short of an open call for insurrection:

The dockers, instead of being unduly concerned about the presence of their coloured fellow men, who like themselves are the victims of capitalism and civilisation, should turn their attention to the huge stores of wealth along the water front. The country's riches are not in the West End, in the palatial houses of the suburbs; they are stored in the East End, and the jobless should lead the attack on the bastilles, the bonded warehouses along the docks to solve the question of unemployment.

Perhaps eighty years of somewhat empty revolutionary rhetoric has dulled our brains to how people lived through quite a brief period of time when it was reasonable to think of international proletarian revolution as a possibility. This article was used in the court case designed to silence Sylvia Pankhurst by putting her in prison for six months. McKay had developed a close working relationship with Erkki Veltheim, the Finnish communist who served as a courier between Lenin and various communists in Britain and Ireland, most notably Pankhurst herself. Veltheim was arrested a week after Pankhurst, charged with failing to register as an alien and given a six month sentence and deported.

Faced with this repression, and a wave of paranoia which spread through the British Communist milieu – as comrade started to suspect comrade of being a police spy – McKay left London to return to New York in early 1921.

Obviously others have looked more deeply into these psycho-sexual dynamics – here Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* is very useful. However I would like to mention one or two other elements which would help us situate McKay's sexual politics in the broader context of his time:

1. His time as journalist/political organiser for the Workers Socialist Federation, meant that he was working for an explicitly communist organisation which was predominately organised by women at all levels of the organisation. This stood in stark contrast to other communist formations which rested on a very male conception of “the proletarian” or “the worker” and in which women played a more marginal role.
2. On his return to the USA, McKay was to play a key role in the development of the African Blood Brotherhood – an organisation which admitted women despite its name³. This organisation was involved in the self-defence of the African-American community of Tulsa when faced with the race riots in 1921. These riots followed an announcement in the Tulsa Tribune that a lynch mob was being assembled to hang Dick Rowland, a nineteen year old African American youth accused of assaulting a seventeen year old European American. The gender implications are clear.⁶
3. Finally, several years later, when McKay published his novel *Home from Harlem*. The book follows the life of Jake who tires of life as a London docker to return to Harlem. This received a very harsh review from Marcus Garvey, reproducing a scandalised review from a

⁶ Winston James discusses the role of Grace Campbell, the only women founder of the group in his *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in the Early Twentieth Century*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, pp 174-177

white paper and suggesting that McKay's disregard for respectability was arose because McKay was a "literary prostitute", and which called for black authors to emulate H.G.Wells, who is held up as fighting "the cause of the Anglo-Saxon group".

I hope this brief discussion touches on the nexus of sex, race, and class present in this short article.

(Note: This edition, 1st May 2019, reformatted with revised footnotes)

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