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CARIBBEAN LITERATURE, NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Authors from most regions of the Caribbean have narrated migration to the United States and Canada in terms of North America's history of political and economic imperialism in the Caribbean and the rhetorical trope of the American dream. But the literary criticism that has shaped the field of Caribbean literary studies has not provided a framework for the centrality of North America and American dream rhetoric in Caribbean literature. Since its establishment in the 1970s, Anglophone Caribbean literary studies has considered the male writers of the 1950s who migrated to England the founding fathers of the tradition (Gikandi 26; Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* 38-39; Ramchand 4). Their writing on migration and exile, such as George Lamming's *The Emigrants* and Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, has served as the model of Caribbean migration and exile.

But England was not the sole destination nor the British Empire the only colonial force that Caribbean authors confronted in the twentieth century. Some authors of migration narratives to the United States and Canada have received substantial literary critical attention, including the Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat in the United States and the Barbadian-born Austin Clarke in Canada. Many more female and male Caribbean authors have migrated to the United States and Canada throughout the twentieth century. Caribbean writers' employment of American dream rhetoric in narratives of North American migration challenges the foundational framework for understanding Caribbean literature: it shifts the focus from Caribbean literature's traditionally male, British colonial context to a more explicitly female, North American imperial context.

Even the foundational authors of West Indian literature use American dream rhetoric in their writing on the United States and Canada. C.L. Chua discusses the ways in which the Nobel Prize winning Indo-Trinidadian author and historian V.S. Naipaul writes on Indo-

Caribbean American and Canadian migration, exile, and rootlessness in terms of the American dream, especially in the short story “One Out of Many,” novel *The Enigma of Arrival*, and nonfiction travel narrative, *A Turn in the South* (51-54). In an introduction to *In the Castle of My Skin*, the Barbadian-born author and literary critic Lamming also describes his and other Caribbeans’ perspective of America in terms of an American dream of economic success.

American material success stories shape Lamming’s portrayal of Caribbean economic migration in the novel:

It is interesting for me to reflect on the role which America was to play in shaping the essential features of the novel. If England dominated our minds as the original idea of ultimate human achievement, the United States existed for us as a dream, a kingdom of material possibilities accessible to all. I had never visited the United States before writing *In the Castle of My Skin*; but America often touched our lives with gifts that seemed spectacular at the time, and reminded us that this dream of unique luxury beyond our shores was true. The image of America has not changed. Almost everyone had some distant relation there who had done well. I had never heard of anyone being a failure in the United States. And Christmas was evidence of this when postal orders arrived with money and gifts of exotic clothes. (xl-xlii)

Lamming represents his belief in an American “dream of unique luxury” as commonplace and widespread in the twentieth century, from the postcolonial eighties when he writes this introduction to the novel’s colonial setting in the thirties and forties, when the American historian James Truslow Adams coins and popularizes the American dream in *The Epic of America* (Carpenter 5; Hulme 4).

In the novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, a young Afro-Barbadian male migrates to the United States in pursuit of economic success, primarily because people “say things are good there” (Lamming 168). After migrating, however, Trumper learned that “things” were significantly better in the United States for whites than blacks (Lamming 295). Lamming returns to the role of racial discrimination in the Afro-Caribbean experience of American exile in *The Pleasures of Exile*, where he emphasizes the ways in which racism had awoken him from his own dream of America as “a place where everything was possible, a kingdom next door to the sky” (188). Indeed, migrants from the Anglophone, Hispanophone, and Francophone Caribbean often emphasize the ways in which racism frustrates Caribbean migrants’ pursuit of economic success, freedom, and equality in North America.

Foundational and emerging Caribbean-born authors of American migration narratives write Caribbean migrants into the most popular American dream narratives of the successful self-made man, generally writing in terms of and against populist American dream rhetoric.

In the Guyanese-born Cyril Dabydeen's short story "Drive Me until I Sweat," an Afro-Barbadian migrant temporarily leaves his wife in Barbados in order to rise "from rags to riches" and make "the holy million" as a taxi driver in New York City (130). The "rags to riches" rhetoric alludes to Horatio Alger's late-nineteenth-century popular literature, which narrates the rise to wealth of those "commonly assumed to be" and "depicted as, white males" (Pulera 201), who achieve material success with hard work, intelligence, and virtuous living (Hearn 68). In Dabydeen's story, however, the taxi driver's wife questions the morality of her husband's economic pursuits in the United States. She calls New York City "the same Big Bad Apple of the world, the very one that Eve gave to Adam" (138). Dabydeen's dual representation of the United States as a material promised land and moral wasteland reappears in other narratives of Caribbean American migration.

A closer examination of Caribbean American migration narratives reveals that Caribbean authors' appropriation, alteration, and subversion of American dream rhetoric correlates with the emerging and changing conceptualization of the American dream, from its socially critical roots in Adams' *The Epic of America* and dismantling following the assassination of the African-American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Adams and King are two of the most important rhetoricians of the American dream. In *The Epic of America*, the European American, Yale-educated philosopher, and Pulitzer Prize winning historian Adams reconsiders centuries of American history in terms of Americans' theorization and realization of the American dream.

Adams identifies the American dream as the defining factor of American history: "If America has stood for anything unique in the history of the world, it has been for the American dream, the belief in the common man and the insistence upon having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one" (123). The earliest authors of voluntary Caribbean American migration literature, such as the British Guyanese-born Eric Walrond and the Jamaican-born Claude McKay, published literature on the West Indians' pursuit of economic advancement in the United States and the American-controlled Panama Canal Zone. In his earliest poetry and later work, including autobiographies and novels, McKay narrates his estrangement from aristocratic English cultural traditions and his increasing engagement with American industry in terms of migrants' pursuit of economic success in the United States and the United States' political and economic imperialism in the Caribbean, two key elements of Adams' American dream narrative.

In *The Epic of America*, Adams uses the utopist rhetorical elements of the jeremiad, which generally includes a promise, declension, and prophesy (Schlueter xiii), to rewrite American history in terms of the American dream: he represents an equitable social order as the promise of the American dream, criticizes American citizens and immigrants for jeopardizing this equitable social order through rampant anti-intellectualism, self-reliance, and materialism, and prophesies on the ways in which Americans should return to the fundamental American principle of an equitable social order (379-380). Adams represents education, a “communal spirit,” and economic equitability as the best means to restore American citizens and immigrants’ unsurpassed access “to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (374). In conclusion, Adams represents the Library of Congress as the institutional emblem of the American dream, and the laissez-faire capitalist logic, which the United States Steel Company’s Andrew Carnegie explicitly endorsed as “the concentration of business . . . in the hands of the few” corporate magnates (Carnegie qtd. in Wallman 109), as “perhaps, as inimical as anything could be to the American dream” (383).

Adams’ conceptualization of the American dream in *The Epic of America* starkly contrasts popular, critically acclaimed, and proletarian depression era authors’ representation of the American dream. In popular escapist literature, such as westerns and self-help books, authors generally limit American citizens and migrants’ achievement of the American dream to white men’s independent achievement of economic success (Hearn 20-21, 25, 29; Wallman 19; Hart 257-263 qtd. in Hearn 77; Cullen 64; Pulera 201). Critically acclaimed depression era literature, such as John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, emphasizes workers’ failed economic dreams. “The recurring tragedy,” according to Charles R. Hearn, is “the physical, as well as the spiritual suffering, the destitution and despair, of those who taught to dream of wonders, but find themselves trapped in a struggle merely to survive” (106).

In 1930s American and Caribbean proletarian literature, poets also focus on the unethical, unjust, and extremely violent consequences of rampant individualism, materialism, and the growing gulf separating the nation’s rich factory owners and shareholders and the nation’s poor, hungry, homeless, and sick in rural fields and mines and urban factories and streets. In “Let America be America Again,” the African-American Langston Hughes uses American dream rhetoric in order to revive “the dream that’s almost dead today,” the idealized American dream of freedom and equality for everyone “[w]ho made America” (qtd. in Nelson 516). In literary and autobiographical

writing, McKay and other Afro-Caribbean American migrants employ the American dream's originally socially critical function in order to emphasize African-American citizens and Afro-Caribbean migrants' discriminatory exclusion from the American dream of equality, freedom, and socioeconomic advancement.

Adams' reliance on the concept of equality of opportunity for each American initially seems more progressive than the racist theories circulating in early twentieth-century scientific communities on Caucasians' inherent physical, intellectual, moral, and cultural supremacy and sexist opinions circulating in early twentieth-century popular American culture on men's inherent physical and intellectual supremacy (O'Kane 1). In practice, however, Adams narrates Americans' past theorization and realization of the American dream in the racially and sexually exclusive terms of well-educated European American men's expression of the American dream and working class white men's pursuit of the American dream, perhaps explaining why Adams basically has fallen out of American popular culture and only has appeared intermittently in literary criticism as the historian who coined the American dream phrase.

In addition, Adams interprets the perceived occupation or exhaustion of the American Frontier as the impetus for a disturbing development in American history: America's extension of manifest destiny politics to neighboring nations, including Puerto Rico, which the United States acquired from Spain in 1899; Cuba, which the United States military occupied for at the turn of the century from 1899 until 1902 and 1906 until 1909; and Panama (Sheller 205). On Franklin Delano Roosevelt's negotiation of the Panama Canal, Adams states, "the rawness of such imperialistic methods beat almost anything Europe had been guilty of" (Adams 329-330). Indeed, Adams compares American political and economic imperialism in the Caribbean to European political and economic imperialism in the world.

United States service people enter the Caribbean at least twenty times from 1898 until 1920, and the United States political involvement in the Caribbean increases after World War I (Bolland 5, 125, 442-43). The United States military occupies the Dominican Republic for almost one decade, from 1916 until 1924, and Haiti for almost two decades, from 1915 until 1934, establishing military bases throughout the British West Indies in 1941 (Sheller 205-206). As the influential Martinique-born literary critic Edouard Glissant insightfully notes, "The United States of America is determined to show its military strength in the [Caribbean] region to head off 'destabilization'" (118), that is, the proliferation of socialist and communist leaders and regimes.

Throughout the twentieth century, Caribbean authors address the United States's political, economic, and cultural imperialism in the Anglophone, Franchophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean, often focusing on the American-controlled Panama Canal Zone, socialist Cuba, and Haiti, the first Caribbean nation to achieve independence from European colonial rule. In *Home to Harlem*, McKay's best-selling novel on Caribbean American migration (Cooper ix), McKay strategically employs a Haitian exile in order to critique the United States government's political imperialism in Haiti at the turn of the twentieth century (Lowney 413).

In the mid-twentieth century, American and Caribbean novelists significantly alter the stock plot of the hardworking or personable man of depression era success stories, focusing on educated workers' advancement in an increasingly corporatized professional climate (Long 64). In *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*, Elizabeth Long notes that from the mid-forties to the mid-fifties popular American novelists generally focus on intellectually gifted men who achieve the American dream of upward mobility through formal education and traditionally masculine income-earning professions, such as law and medicine; women generally suffer if they ventured into the income-earning public sphere through a conventionally masculine profession, and only periodically succeed if they professionalized conventionally feminine minor vices as actresses, authors, and courtesans (63, 72, 76-77).

But in Clarke's critically acclaimed Toronto trilogy and other narratives of Caribbean American migration published since the mid-twentieth century, such as Paule Marshall's novel of Afro-Barbadian American migration, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the men generally suffer if they venture into the income-earning public sphere through conventionally European American masculine professions. They only periodically succeed if they assimilate to European American culture. In the Toronto trilogy, for example, the Afro-Barbadian economic migrant, Boysie, migrates to Canada under the sponsorship of his wife, who migrates independently under the auspices of the West Indian Domestic Scheme (Kaup). Boysie eventually emulates his boss, Mr. Macintosh, at Macintosh and Company, Stock Brokers, in order to go "up in the world"; he sells his janitorial services to Mr. Macintosh as part of his own cleaning corporation (*Storm of Fortune* 257, 286). But by the end of the trilogy, Boysie leaves his wife and the majority of his assets in Canada to drive to the United States to pursue more "[f]reedom" (*The Bigger Light* 236). Contemporary critically-acclaimed and emerging authors of Caribbean American migration narratives emphasize the ways in which sexist immigration policies and racist

labor policies privilege Caribbean women over men, resulting in Caribbean women's economic support of their family and Caribbean men's psychological trauma.

Contemporary Caribbean authors also interpret the experience of arrival in Canada and the United States in terms of the civil rights and black power movements, a critical turning point in people's belief in the American dream. In public addresses and sermons in the 1950s and 1960s, King restores the originally socially critical function of American dream rhetoric. In a 1961 commencement address, which has since been printed as "The American Dream," King states,

For in a real sense, America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and of all creeds can live together as brothers. The substance of the dream is expressed in these sublime words, words lifted to cosmic proportions: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This is the dream. (qtd. in Washington 208)

King defines the American dream in terms of the Founding Fathers' writing on all men's "unalienable rights" in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence (Schleuter xiii), which has been referred to as the "source-code" or "charter of the American Dream" (Cullen 36, 59).

In subsequent addresses, such as "Where Do We Go from Here?," King emphasizes the importance of actualizing the American dream: "This is no time for romantic illusions and empty philosophical debates about freedom. This is a time for action. What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program that will bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible" (249). King mentions the ways in which his American dream had turned into a "nightmare" (257), including the bombings, beatings, killings and arrests accompanying civil rights victories, in order to inspire people to "continue our triumph and march to the realization of the American dream" (229). Clarke also writes civil rights events into the Toronto trilogy in order to encourage Afro-Caribbean economic migrants living in Canada to join forces with African-Americans in the United States. Contemporary authors of Caribbean American migration narratives often trace migrants' expanding field of identifications in Canada and the United States, especially from originally nationalist Caribbean identifications to more transnationalist Pan-African identifications.

The Toronto trilogy's first novel, *The Meeting Point*, which was published in 1967, includes television coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march on Washington, D.C. in the opening chapter on black Barbadian economic migrants' experience of arrival in Canada

during the 1950s and 1960s (Clarke 13). The novel's last part, "The Triangle is Smashed," includes a civil rights march in Toronto. The domestic protagonist, Bernice, and her half-sister, Estelle, see people, including their friend Henry (Clarke 288), marching on College Street with "placards saying: CANADA IS NOT ALABAMA and END RACE PREJUDICE NOW and BLACK EQUALS WHITE and NEGROES ARE PEOPLE" (Clarke 283). By the novel's conclusion, participation in the civil rights movement emerges as a necessary and ideal yet tragically overlooked meeting point.

Since King's assassination in 1968, American and Caribbean authors generally treat the American dream as a fraudulent and harmful myth or as a passé cliché, focusing on the social forces threatening Americans' realization and estrangement from the idealized American dream of everyone's equal access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Cullen 191; Madden xvi). Shortly after African American men and women earned key legal rights through the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, King's assassination symbolically brought "down the curtain on the American dream" (Harris qtd. in Cullen 129), to quote a passage from the African-American novelist James Baldwin's 1963 novel, *The Fire Next Time*.

The metaphors of an American dream of economic prosperity, freedom, and equality give way to metaphors of an American nightmare of poverty as well as race- and gender-based discrimination. Long identifies 1969 as the year when best-selling American novelists stop narrating the successful economic rise of white men in a moral, ordered universe (120). Kathryn Hulme interprets authors' rhetorical shift from an American dream to an American nightmare as a sign of the "the estranging aspects of immigration, on the slippage between America's promise—equality, justices, prosperity—and the culture they enter" (10), and she notes that "[s]ince the early 1960s, we have had the Generation of the Lost Dream" (8). In addition, Hulme importantly interprets the rhetorical shift as a symptom of Americans' loss of innocence "as not doing harm" when pursuing the American dream (41-42).

The increase in Caribbean migration to North America after World War II, when voluntary outbound migration to North American and European metropolises first exceeded migration within the Caribbean (Puri 2), paired with the increase in American and Caribbean authors fictionalization of voluntary Caribbean migration conceivably contributes to Canadians' and Americans' awareness of the harm resulting from the American dream myth. In the 1985 novel *Continental Drift*, which the American-born novelist Russell Banks published after briefly living in Jamaica, Banks emphasizes the ways in which

working-class white Americans' illegal pursuit of economic success in the United States actually jeopardizes illegal Haitian American migrants' survival.

In the Trinidadian-born Neil Bissoondath's collection of short stories on Caribbean Canadian migration, *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*, a middle-aged Caribbean Canadian man expresses his abandonment of the American dream of economic success:

Is a good fifteen years I in Canada now, and I's livin' proof that not every immigrant is a multicultural success story. Maybe is a question of too much dreamin' and not enough doin'; maybe is a question of dreamin' the wrong dreams or doin' the wrong things. But before I arrive here, nobody—especially nobody in the Canadian High Commission back home—really tell me much 'bout this country I was goin' to. It was all dream and gossip, what people say. They say, in Canada is: You want a job? Here's a job. You want money? Here's money. But I find out quick-quick that to get a job, you have to have the trainin'; to get money, you have to have money. And even then, it damn hard to hold on to the little you does manage to save. (150-151)

An Indo-Caribbean woman similarly expresses why she lost her faith in the American dream after immigrating to Canada in the Trinidad-Canadian Shani Mootoo's collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street*: "I used to think, if only I lived in North America! But here I am, in this place where these things are supposed to happen, in the midst of so much possibility, and for some reason my dreams seem even further away, just out of reach. It's just not quite as simple as being here" (20). In the Puerto Rican-born Esmeralda Santiago's first novel, *América's Dream*, the Puerto Rican-born protagonist, América Gonzalez, does not even desire to pursue economic success in the United States due to the United States' political imperialism in Puerto Rico, especially the navy's bombing practice on the Puerto Rican island municipality of Vieques. The United States government has maintained a military presence in the Caribbean in the latter half of the twentieth century, invading the Dominican Republic in 1965 to 1966 and Grenada in 1983 (Sheller 206).

In contemporary narratives of Caribbean migration, male and female authors more thoroughly ground the protagonists' economic migration in the history of North American political and economic relations with the Caribbean, especially on the islands of Hispaniola and Cuba. In Edwidge Danticat's 1994 novel on Haitian American migration, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the Haitian migrants debate the United States' economic and industrial involvement in early-twentieth-century Haiti, both criticizing Americans' treatment of Haitian cane cutters in the 1920s and applauding Americans' construction of Haitian roads. Danticat more fully addresses American economic imperialism on the

island of Hispaniola in her 1998 interregional Caribbean migration novel, *The Farming of Bones*, on the mass exodus of Haitians from the Dominican Republic during the Dominican General Rafael Trujillo's massacre of Haitians in the thirties (Krohn-Hansen 53).

During the Cuba Missile Crisis in the sixties, the United States government establishes a navy blockade near Cuba and a trade embargo against Cuba. In *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*, the second generation Cuban American Cristina García explores Cubans and Cuban American immigrants' diverging perspectives on the capitalist United States and socialist Cuba, alternating between rural Cuba and urban New York and Miami, the first and second most popular destinations for West Indians in the United States (Foner 83). Caribbean-born authors from most regions of the Caribbean importantly have written within and against the rhetorical trope of the American dream to critically engage the Caribbean's fraught relationship with North American political and economic imperialism.

Indeed, Canadian and American investors and tourists have played a significant role in the expansion of the Caribbean tourism industry (Cabezas 95; Jiménez 29; Sheller 33). The Dominican-born Alan Cambeira's Azúcar trilogy on Dominican Canadian migration critically examines the Dominican Republic's trade and political relations with Canada and the United States, focusing on the Dominican nation's shift from an export sugar economy to a service tourist economy. The trilogy exposes the connections among Canada and the United States' material prosperity and cheap Caribbean labor. The trilogy's second novel, *Azúcar's Sweet Hope. . .: Her Story Continues*, both challenges North American tourists' dream of the Caribbean as an island paradise and also encourages Dominican exiles to return home and restructure Dominican society through breaking the nation's ties to global capital, especially to Canadian and American corporations and governments. In effect, the novel rejects the American dream and its capitalist apparatus as serious threats to Caribbean workers and nations. A significant number of Caribbean authors represent uneven transnational relations in a starkly negative light.

Even a brief sketch of the flows of migrants, military forces, and trade across Caribbean-American borders clarifies why Caribbean-born writers mention North America in textual documents ranging from autobiographies to novels and poetry. Therefore, Sean X. Goudie recently posits "the value of a Caribbean American regionalist perspective in regionalist study of the Americas, one neither supplementary to nor corrective of U.S. regionalism but a complementary, mutually revealing site of critical inquiry that resituates regionalism in the context of hemispheric American studies" (318). Indeed, authors

of Caribbean American migration narratives critically engage with North American political and economic imperialism in the Caribbean in similar imperial terms as foundational Caribbean authors engage with the Caribbean's fraught relationship with Europe.

In conclusion, Caribbean authors migrate voluntarily to North America throughout the twentieth century, and their literature reflects the emergence and evolution of the rhetorical trope of the American dream. North America and the American dream play a crucial role in Caribbean literature, especially in narratives of migration to the United States and Canada. But major literary critical studies of Caribbean literature fail to account for the ways in which Caribbean-born authors of migration narratives write within and against North America and the rhetorical trope of the American dream, because they primarily focus on the relationship between the Caribbean and European metropolises. More research should examine the ways in which Caribbean authors adopt, revise, and subvert the rhetorical trope of the American dream in poetry, fiction, and autobiographies.

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