

Tout Moun

Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

*I Dream to Change the World
Literature and Social Transformation*

Vol 4: No. 1 ▪ May 2018

<http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/epubs/toutmoun/index1.htm>

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I Dream to Change the World: Literature and Social Transformation

INTRODUCTION

I have learnt
from books dear friend
of men dreaming and living
and hungering in a room without a light
who could not die since death was far too poor
who did not sleep to dream, but dreamed to change
the world.

Martin Carter "Something Read"

The crucible which has produced modern Caribbean societies has made social transformation an urgent imperative. Thus far the project of social change has largely been fueled by the creative imagination. The confidence of Caribbean peoples to step into a measured autonomy and independence has been crafted through the creative word; and every failure thereafter to craft effective social agencies and political engines of change, has generated renewed ferments of creative expression. The latter comprises lament, mixed with stubborn hope and muted celebration of the powerful potentialities of Caribbean peoples. Arguably a most persistent quality of the region's peoples and its creative expressions is its capacity to "dream to change the world."

An enduring dream of social transformation and the capacity of literature and cultural expression to be yoked to this ideological objective is the theme of this volume of *Tout Moun: Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies*. The contributions illustrate George Lamming's contention that the work of the Artist is to "return the society to itself" "to its past" and to the "visions of the future" on which the present is constituted. The essays, creative writing and visual representations in this volume span broad temporal and spatial parameters.

Erna Brodber's essay "I Dream to Change the World: Literature and Social Transformation" speaks to the high hopes for social transformation which were engrained into the Jamaican people at the birthing of the nation state. This impels her personal journey to realize herself as an agent with the power to effect mass change. Dissatisfied with the capacity of her chosen disciplines of sociology and social work to grapple with complex societal conundrums, Brodber arrives at fiction as an avenue to illuminate personhood and way of life, and to "lead people into a beautiful garden". She outlines the process by which she eventually cuts free of didactic and more formally

complex fictional expression crafted out of an imperative towards social transformation. Referencing a video which exemplifies mass engagement with emancipation reenactments in Blackspace Woodside, Jamaica, Brodber concludes: “This kind of theatre, requiring no literacy, transmits the history and sociology of Jamaica and opens the discussion about slavery and emancipation more effectively and of course to a wider cross section, I think, than the printed page does. I dream to continue to use this form effectively in my continued effort to change the world and more subtly than my attempts in my first four novels.”

Interrogating violations which lie at the root of the social order, Hannah Lutchmansingh’s “Haunted Histories: Spectres of the Middle Passage in Caribbean Literature,” engages confrontation with imperialism’s genocidal impulse and its systemic erasure or misrepresentation of the people groups it oppresses. The essay explores the manner in which haunting spirit presences of drowned African souls intrude repeatedly within Caribbean discourse. The traumatic history of contemporary Caribbean societies has created legacies of societal disease, eruptive violence, rage and hurt that call for therapeutic interventions to counteract their intergenerational continuity. Lutchmansingh’s exploration of NourbeSe Philip’s, *Zong!* and Grace Nichols’, *I is a Long-Memoried Woman* interrogate how uncanny traumas of a colonial past and, specifically, the site of the Middle Passage persist and leak into the present and the future.

Also probing the nebulous and numinous space / interface between the living and the dead, Michelene Adams in “The Ghost in Caribbean Literature: Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* and Kamau Brathwaite’s “Namsetoura & the Companion Stranger” raises issues about the persistence of ghost presences in Caribbean literature and their symbolic correlative with the brutal past which haunts the region. Her essay point to interventions which take regard of the bedrock spirituality of descendants of Africans in the Caribbean. In this regard, she argues for the effectiveness of Brodber’s and Brathwaite’s deployment of the spider Anansi as change agent:

Anansi is a facilitator-- he might use any medium to bring about exchange: tales, song, a tape recorder, or a camera. The liminal point in both texts is between the world of humans and the world of the spirits, and there is Anancy, squatting at the crossroads, waiting to facilitate confluence.

The following three essays focus on Caribbean women writers grappling with female participation in the nationalistic project and appropriate gender prescriptions for female citizenry. The stringent prescriptions of socially acceptable behaviors for girls emerging into women elicits the adolescent rebellion of Annie John according to Candace Pitts in “Challenges to Nationhood in Kincaid’s *Annie John*: Marginalization, “Strangeness,” and Creation of Alternative Realities”. This reading draws on theorization of the marvelous real as well as historical and literary representations of animal magic and camouflage as instances of marronage to conceptualize strangeness which the adolescent embraces in rebellion against the stringencies which her mother and hegemonic social order would impose on her. Pitt argues that “Annie’s act of negotiating her space of subjugation through secrecy, deception, and trickery to subvert and

erode patriarchal and colonial conceptions of womanhood and nationhood—in other words, accomplishing the *extraordinary*—indeed instantiates the marvelous real.” In the process, the adolescent protagonist becomes metonymic of Antiguan women who have been “culturally, socially, or politically marginalized.”

Oppressive mores in relation to sexual preferences and orientations are the major concern of Fay White’s “The Rod of Correction”: Female Homosexuality and Corrective Rape in Staceyann Chin’s *The Other Side of Paradise: A Memoir*. Foregrounding the perpetration of violence and the open hostility to homosexuals in Jamaica, White explores corrective rape, a category of homophobic violence which targets female homosexuals by wielding the penis as a rod of correction in gang rape intended to correct lesbian practices. White argues that based on her reading of the text: “Hegemonic systems, structures and ideology in the autobiographical text are inextricably interconnected with homophobia and homophobic violence.”

Yet another form of dreaming is explored in the collection. In “*Changing Caribbean Worlds: One Romance at a Time*”, Karen Sanderson Cole explores Caribbean versions of *the* escapist dream world which is particularly associated with female readership. She addresses the question: “But what do notions of romance with its twin children – beauty and respectability – have to do with the struggle to articulate a national identity and more specifically a voice for the black woman in a post-colonial society?” The essay explores code choice, setting, point of view and ideological shifts in discourse as indicative of the potential of popular romance as a tool for investigating a society’s standards, but also as a tool for conveying transformational change. The essay deals with disjuncture between the stringent and terrible school of Caribbean gender and ethnic relations, and the generic prescriptions of formulaic romances.

The final essay also grapples with popular culture, this time in the form of dancehall. In “Cultural Forms of Expressions: Constructing Satisfaction from the Elements of Dancehall Entertainment”, Letroy Cummings and Kerdis Clarke explore the manner in which dancehall brings satisfaction to its participants. The transgressive acts of the entertainment space and practice are designed, these writers argue, to challenge the imagination of fellow practitioners as well as the social and moral prescriptions of mainstream society.

The power to dream emerges as a major facet of the creative energy which fueled the progress of the oppressed Caribbean folk on their tumultuous journey from Emancipation to Independence. This is what inspired Opal Palmer Adisa in the poem of the same name in this volume to indicate:

getting from there to here
was more than sweat

night and day our brains knotted tight
eyes refusing what’s

before us
perspiration
blinding our sight

...we didn't know
what tomorrow's face
would look like

...all our thoughts went into
fashioning a face that would smile
upon you our progeny."

The impetus which led the peoples of the Caribbean to journey to the present required envisioning a potentiality which was out of step with manifest reality. And this new vision of a new future had to be perceived and laid hold of, notwithstanding the sheer hard work generating the blinding sting of perspiration in the eye. Similarly, it is the dream of a better future for Palmer Adisa's fictionalized character in "Yveline – I Love Sewing". This hardy survivor of the devastating 2010 Haitian earthquake keeps hope alive by clinging to her sewing machine and the prospect of a better future for her granddaughter.

Dreaming is figured in the collection as both an individual and a collective process. And it is also a cyclic, intergenerational process. The passage of time since the formation of the modern Caribbean nation states until today has brought the grim realization that notwithstanding battles won and victories secured, old oppressions have the power to resurrect themselves in remarkably similar manifestations and discourses generations later. Barbara Jenkins's "Waterloo" charts the limbo space occupied by early migrants to the UK, inhabiting grimy living quarters available for the "coloured"; performing strange rituals of speech and tea drinking; and most devastating of all, mapping lost relationships. The terrible cost of migration enacted in interpersonal relationships is reflected in the narrative of the artist who migrates to meet his lover who unbeknownst to him is now connected to another. He enacts his violent response to his bitter disappointment and flouted aspiration by destroying his portraits of her: "...he continues to rip with slow deliberate care. She felt the tearing of the paper, the ripping of her vagina, the slicing of her womb, the separation of her ovaries in her body. He tore through her belly, her navel, parting her breast and with one swift, final tug, he severed her head". This metonymic, eroticized violation and dismemberment culminates in actual rape, which the unnamed persona accepts as recompense for not telling him she had found another. It is also female acceptance of sacralized violation as the price she pays to give him access to the dream of a better life: "build a bridge for him, from the old to the new." A salient question remains. In response to the post-world war recruitment of unskilled labour in the colonies, thousands of Caribbean people boarded the *MV Empire Windrush* to England and new lives from 1948 to 1971. Could these proud Caribbean dreamers and culture bearers who struggled valiantly for a place in the oppressive social order of

the mother country ever imagine that in 2018, they and their descendants would once again be termed the Windrush Generation and face threats of expulsion from the UK?

Even as current global waves of xenophobia and racism curtail prospects of migration which have been traditional escape hatches for Caribbean peoples, life prospects within the island archipelago continue to pose challenges. Geoffrey Dunn's "Sparrow's Return (with apologies to Derek Walcott)" which signifies on Derek Walcott's the "Spoiler's Return" speaks to recurrent and evolving manifestations of the social ills within Trinidad using Walcott's slate of dominant images:

Yes, the shark still racing the shadow of the shark,
 But no more clear coral rocks do make dem dark;
 Crab nah climbing crab-back, in a crab-quarrel,
 That's just some academic bamboozle.
 Was that truly a premonition of the scene?
 Or simply the reality of the Caribbean?
 Oh, yeah, Spoils boy, tings bad—
 The Dark Ages are now spread way beyond Trinidad.
 The jagabats of Woodbrook worn
 Have been replaced by cyber porn

This dark underbelly of Trinidadian society is the theme of Jennifer Rahim's *Curfew Chronicles* which is reviewed by Sylvia Rose-Ann Walker. This novel which copped the 2018 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature is brutally frank in its evocation of the nation's oppressive state strategies and the citizenry's resistance and enduring hope. On the flip side, the photo essay T&T Dreamscapes features the work and artistic processes of Johann Bennett which celebrates the beauty of the landscape and the strength and achievement of cultural icons.

The theme of this collection "I Dream to Change the World" points to the power of the creative imagination to transcend immediate constraints, limitations and hardships, and to conceive more positive imagined futures. While some of its essays focus on malignant, haunting duppies of history which resist propitiation, other contributions turn attention to the myriad outcomes of the Independence projects. These essays engage new homegrown sites and agents of oppression or negative social conditioning generated from within and beyond their borders. They grapple with representations of the challenges arising from political culture, economic adversity, gender politics and family life, marginalised groups, migrations, youth culture and entertainment industries, crime and violence.

Despite frank dealings with diverse social challenges, the collection is not bleak. Rather, the prevailing notion is the potentiality to latch on to new horizons and possibilities and then by dint of hard work, endurance and persistence keep walking towards the dream. The essays point to the unique contributions the region's literature and cultural life have to offer. As survivors of historical violations and their legacies as manifested in myriad contemporary societal challenges,

Caribbean writers have long been engaged in theorizing identity and culture beyond monolithic paradigms that are mired in race and ethnic prejudices and so have generated a rich resource for ideological and social change that has relevance to the world. These offer fertile methodologies for (re)reading cultures and literatures that have traditionally misread and misrepresented the region.

Indeed, debates about the function of literature, from which the practice of criticism can hardly be excluded, are as old as the medium itself. Issues have ranged from literature's necessary independence from politics of activism and its role in the work of social protest and change. The inescapable politics of textuality remains as pertinent an issue as the concern with the reduction of literature to politics. For the developing world the stakes are even higher; and in a Caribbean where the "culture of reading" remains the practice of the few, Lamming's longstanding concern with finding more innovative ways to mediate the world of text to larger sections of the population is yet to be effectively addressed. Erna Broder's participatory ritual reenactments of troubled historical moments is one such innovation.

Paula Morgan
UWI 2018