

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the nature, scope, and function of the image of Africa in West Indian literature from Claude McKay to Edward Kamau Brathwaite. It attempts to relate the West Indian conceptualization of Africa to the political, social, economic, and cultural climates of both Africa and the West Indies. It highlights the nature of the tensions generated in the Afro-West Indian as he attempts to evolve an independent image of Africa against the background of the negative notions about Africa which he inherits from Europe and America. It also examines his uncertainties and handicaps as he approaches the African heritage which is historically his, but of which he lacks a lived and internalized experience.

Though the focus of the thesis is the Anglophone West Indies, the literature of that part of the West Indies is compared in places with that of the Francophone West Indies and Africa. References are made to the Negritude writers of the Francophone West Indies, because the literary waves which they generated reached the Anglophone shores and influenced the nature and scope of the image of Africa there. In order to demonstrate the similarities and contrasts between the African views about Africa and the West Indian views of Africa, comparative analyses of African literature and West Indian literature are attempted where it is necessary.

The Africa of the title of this thesis and its derivatives refer to the continent of Africa; all other Africans are referred to in more restrictive terms as Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean/Afro-West Indian, and New World Africans in order to avoid confusion.

Because of the many centuries of European control of both Africa and the West Indies, the most basic concepts about Africa in the West Indies have as of necessity, tended to be based on reactions to the European image of Africa. The Introduction to this thesis is, therefore, devoted to an examination of the European image of Africa as a necessary background to the discussion of the image of Africa in West Indian literature.

Chapter One looks at the theme of Africa in the work of Claude McKay (1889-1948). The choice of Claude McKay as a beginning is deliberate: Claude McKay may be said to be the first West Indian writer to seriously address himself to the theme of Africa. His sojourn in the United States of America at the beginning of the twentieth century and his travels in Europe made him a participant in, and/or witness to, most of the earliest international expressions of black consciousness, such as the Harlem Renaissance, Garvey's Back to Africa Movement, and Pan-Africanism. Though this chapter is informed by the personal and pioneering vision of a single artist, there is a sense in which Claude McKay's one man's way of seeing is representative of his age and its attempt to re-define the African. Claude McKay's attempts may thus be seen as precursory to later day West Indian concern for Africa.

With the pioneering efforts of Claude McKay having been put in perspective, the subsequent five chapters discuss the image of Africa in West Indian literature under broad thematic sub-divisions. The purpose of this is to show how the various aspects of Africa are re-created by West Indian writers and the functions of these re-creations in their writing.

Chapter Two examines the scope and roles of the major African characters in West Indian literature. These characters are examined against

the background of whether they are main protagonists through whom the moral vision of the work is revealed; background characters who merely form the backdrop of the societies in which the protagonists function; or characters who do not possess enough scope, depth, and complexity of character to pass as main protagonists, but who, despite their relative changelessness and function as foil to the protagonists, cannot be regarded as mere background characters. In order to ascertain the Africanness of these characters, they are compared with the nature and scope of a sample of African characters created by African writers.

Chapter Three looks at the African setting in which the West Indian creators of African characters situate these characters. It examines the accuracy, realism, symbolic implications, and appropriateness of this setting, making comparisons, where it seems useful, with the African setting in works written by African authors.

Chapters Four and Five take the discussion beyond the West Indian's re-creation of physical and tangible Africa (person and setting) to the intangible but equally vital realm of religion and archaic memories/heritage.

Religion is the one area where African cultural survivals in the New World have been most evident. Consequently, Africa is often manifested through the religious rites and the cult practices that recall Africa. From the worship of the orisa (African deities) to the evolution of the Rastafarian cult, Africa or particular concepts about Africa have played important roles. Even when the New World African adopts the religion of his white enslaver, he has been known to syncretize his African deities into the new religion. Chapter Four examines the literary expression of the Africa that is implied by the beliefs and practices of the religious

sects formed by the descendants of Africans in the West Indies.

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Chapter Five looks at/literary expressions of the subconscious presence of Africa.

Chapter Six, the last of the chapters that discuss the image of Africa under general thematic sub-divisions, concentrates on the image of contemporary Africa in West Indian literature. While the image of Africa that informs Chapters Two to Five is influenced mainly by historical exigencies dating back to slavery, the image of Africa treated in Chapter Six is influenced by such contemporary events as the struggle for independence from the colonial powers, the attainment of independence in most African countries, and the post-independence struggle for self-assertion.

Chapter Seven, like Chapter One, presents another one man's vision of Africa. This chapter takes Africa beyond dreams, beyond conjectures, and beyond Negritude's glorification of Africa and blackness, to a confrontation with and a re-assessment of Africa by an Afro-West Indian writer - Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1930-) - who lived in Africa for eight years and has carried out extensive research into the historical evolution of the Black man. - Confrontation and re-assessment often remove large scale generalizations, lazy nostalgia, romanticism, and blind adulation or unquestioning rejection. What emerges is a hard-headed scrutiny of the realities of the situation in an attempt to discern its contradictions and possibilities. The decision to conclude this examination with a consideration of the theme of Africa in the poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite is dictated by the fact that he is probably the most important contemporary West Indian writer who has been consistently

concerned about the image of Africa in the West Indies. The potency with which he has endowed Africa in his poetry is likely to be central to the future projection of Africa in West Indian literature.

Most of the writers who are considered in this thesis seem to be agreed on the fact, that ^{it} is only by broaching the realities of the African condition and the historical connections between Africa and the New World, that the descendants of Africans will begin to fully understand and appreciate the import of their New World "ghetto beginnings." The obvious conclusion to which this leads, is that the West Indians' concern with Africa is hardly an end in itself. Rather, it is a means by which they may comprehend the Black/West Indian condition. The literary concern with Africa in the West Indies also leads to the conclusion that, whatever the nature of the Africa portrayed in the literature, such a concern is, in itself, an affirmation that Africa has not been forgotten in the West Indies despite claims to the contrary.