

Narratives of the Body: Coming-of-Age in Contemporary Caribbean Women's Writing in the Diaspora

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The Caribbean region is characterised by unique cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity which is directly linked to its colonial history, the encounter of indigenous, African, Asian and European cultures, as well as its high migration rate and diasporas. Since the second half of the 20th century large scale migration from the Caribbean to North America – especially Toronto, Montreal, New York and Miami as the main hubs of immigration from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Trinidad – has led to the formation of a transnational space and new contact zones. In this context, it is almost impossible to identify a single Caribbean identity and locate it within national boundaries. Thus, issues of multiple identities and geographic dispersal are recurrent themes in Caribbean writing which frequently adopts generic features of the *bildungsroman*.

The dissertation project discusses the contemporary diasporic coming-of-age novel by Caribbean-Canadian and Caribbean-U.S. American women writers. The genre of the *bildungsroman* and its focus on a single character and her or his “process of becoming” is particularly well suited to investigate how migration, cultural entanglements and growing up in (at least) two different locations impact on the individual. These texts narrate the maturation and socialization processes of the young protagonists from girl to womanhood both in their Caribbean homelands and away in the diaspora. Their journeys, at times involuntary, from their island homes to the metropolitan centres in North America are central to the plot structure.

The analysis' focus is placed, in particular, on these processes of socialisation and migration as well as on narrative representations of the woman's body and corporeality. Additionally, it will critically reflect on concepts of diaspora, ethnicity (and ethnic literatures), transculturation and transnationality in order to theorise the various aspects of socio-political, cultural and literary exchanges between the Caribbean, Canada and the U.S. The aim of this study is twofold: First, I investigate how Caribbean women writers have appropriated and modified the *bildungsroman* genre especially since the second half of the 20th century. Then I discuss the emergence and genre definitions of a specific Caribbean-diasporic coming-of-age novel of the 21st century.

Furthermore, the study explores theories of the body which consider the body as being constructed and inscribed by cultural, social and political structures. Assuming that adolescence is inevitably connected to physiological change and sexual awakening, both the woman's body and sexuality are made visible and highly significant in the narratives. How, then, are bodies and corporeal transformations represented and narrated in the novels? How do the protagonists perceive themselves, and how do “others” gaze upon their bodies? I will argue that due to migration – meaning shifting cultural and socio-political value systems – the self- and social perception of the body is subject to change, and so, too, are questions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and corporeality.