

Editorial Note and Acknowledgments

Dossier: *New Approaches, Methods and Theories on the Caribbean Migration Experience in the United States*

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The purpose of this issue of *Memorias* is to gather a sample of new research on the subject of Caribbean migration to the United States (US). This selection takes into account the different academic disciplines, which in turn attempt to provide a new paradigm and thematic variations as formulated by scholars living in the US. Equally important was to ensure the intellectual and research quality of the articles. The combination of investigative articles with literary pieces, photographs, and paintings is an innovative component in this dossier.

My generous invitation from Dr. Antonino Vidal, Chief Editor of *Memorias* to create the dossier to the conceptualization and assessment of different thematic proposals required the exchange of many emails. This dossier would not have been possible if it were not for the work, patience, and kindness of Dr. Vidal and David J. Luquetta, associate editor. I thank both of them for their comments. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the members of the Editorial Board of *Memorias* for their support of this project. I hope that this collaboration is the first of many.

Caribbean migration is a phenomenon that has been taking place in the region for thousands of years. Whether indigenous groups were motivated to find settlements or to explore the region, they saw the need to sail the seas until they settled in the islands and on the mainland. This human movement may be considered as a regional pattern.

Scholars have added that the migration process has also been influenced by imperialism, colonialism, slavery, wars of independence, the abolition of slavery, “post-colonialism” and, more recently, globalization. Furthermore, each of the different individuals or groups

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of these historical periods has moved around from one island to another, from one continent to another; therefore, becoming diasporic agents.²

For people from “post-colonial” Caribbean societies and others with an older history of independence, the United States (US) has become “the North” or new frontier. There, communities of European and Latin American immigrants have claimed a space along with African Americans and Native Americans who paved the way for Caribbean immigrants.

Although the presence of Caribbean immigrants in the US can be traced back to the eighteenth century, their arrival did not become noticeable until the twentieth century. It could be said that Puerto Ricans are one group that has a more evident presence, as their political relationship with the US allowed them to establish their communities in different cities of the northeast coast of the US, particularly in New York City. Furthermore, it could be argued that in the same time period, Caribbean immigrant groups from former British colonies (also known as Afro-Caribbeans) settled in the city. Due to the degree of cultural similarities with the African Americans, the presence of Afro-Caribbeans has been somewhat overlooked, and their trajectory as a distinctive community only drew scholarly attention between the 1920s and 1950s.³

The process of settlement, the establishment of institutions, and the expectations of assimilation, along with racial discrimination and conflicts of class and gender will become the central themes of the social sciences. These are going to establish a paradigm that primarily evaluates the experience of these new communities based on the above criteria. A constant element in sociological studies is what is known as “the social problem,” a diagnosis with which erroneously Caribbean people will be associated. In her thoughtful piece entitled “A Long Journey”, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa explains how, as a result of her cultural and racial background, for many years she felt excluded and isolated. Despite the

² See Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean. The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*. 3rd Edition. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 1-2; Stephen J. Randall and Graeme S. Mount. *The Caribbean Basin. An International History*. (London: Routledge, 1998), chapter 1.

³ Kevin A.J. Thomas. “A Demographic Profile of Black Caribbean Immigrants in the United States”, (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012), pp. 2-5. Accessed from internet: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/cbi-caribbeanmigration.pdf>

years of social isolation and silencing, these became her best resource and inspiration to write her first novel and develop subsequent literary projects.

The reasons why people leave their homeland are very diverse. However, some experts emphasize that the migration process may benefit more than others, depending on whether or not these migrants have legal protection to ensure fair treatment, particularly in the labor market. In this context, in the case of Puerto Ricans, it is assumed that because of their US citizenship, they are advantaged over other immigrants. However, as historian Harry Franqui-Rivera shows in his article “National Mythologies: U.S. Citizenship for the People of Puerto Rico and Military Service”, the granting of US citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 was more of a geopolitical move used to recruit soldiers and promote a national myth. According to Franqui-Rivera’s study, the US Congress, as partisan political leaders on the island, created a patriotic discourse that resulted in the mobilization of soldiers not only to participate in the First World War, but also that American citizenship triggered the mass emigration of thousands of Puerto Ricans to the US.

Factors involving labor/economic, security, and politics, the latter being very exceptional, as is the case of Cubans, constitute one of the major characteristics by which people migrate to the US. The socioeconomic profile between immigrant groups and of how this can influence the process of settlement, adaptation, and most importantly the development of a community with its own identity should not be overlooked. In his study entitled “The Challenges to creating a separate identity within the Caribbean immigrant community in New York City: The case of Haitian immigrants”, sociologist François Pierre -Louis demonstrates this consistently. For Pierre-Louis, Haitian community organizations that emerged during the 1990s demonstrate the challenges that Haitians confronted by having to recreate an “imagined community” in what the author calls “the larger Caribbean community.” During this process, Haitians in New York City used their social and political profile as a resource to allow them to evolve steadily.

The Spanish-speaking Caribbean community in the US is well represented, especially in the northeast coast. These immigrants are labeled not only for their geographical origin, but they are also considered Latinos. Dominicans embody the second most numerous group of Spanish speaking Caribbean immigrants in New York City. As a community, they began to

settle in the late 1970s. The emphasis in documenting this community is more or less the same evaluative criteria as with other groups. However, the transnational element that characterizes these people with a dual national identity among other characteristics has been emphasized. On this basis, it could be argued that the national duality as a privilege and social skill can be transferred to other scenarios. Taking advantage of the various codes of male behavior, sociologist Carlos Decena in his article entitled “Violence and the Quotidian Scenes of Becoming a Man,” used the symbols representative of masculinity and manhood as perceived by the Dominican community as a parameter to assess how self-identified gay men negotiate day to day with the social pressure to demonstrate their “maleness.” The study of the gay is an original contribution. In addition, Decena introduces linguistics as a tool to analyze the body.

A trend highlighted in studies of Caribbean immigrants is precisely the relationship that people develop with their new country, in this case, the US. As time passes, the theme of assimilation dissipates and gives way to assess how these groups negotiate with their transnational and diasporic identities. The ethnic and racial dimension serves as criteria to establish how these communities and individuals are perceived in relation to their new environment. For example, historian Milagros Denis-Rosario in her article, “Siguiendo sus pasos: Explorando el activismo sociopolítico de los puertorriqueños en Nueva York desde una perspectiva Afrocentrica,” analyses the case of Arturo Schomburg who emigrated from Puerto Rico to New York City in the late nineteenth century. Schomburg, who was black, while devoted to quest of his “Afro” identity, contributed to the establishment of the African diaspora studies. Through the examples presented in this article, it was shown that many black Puerto Ricans used the Afrocentric rhetoric as an alternative to the constant dilemma associated with marginalization and racial ambivalence among Puerto Ricans themselves.

The issue of Caribbean migration to the US is linked inextricably to the political, economic, and global nature affecting the world and this part of the hemisphere. As long as human dynamics exist as a result of these changes, there will always be the need to document and try to articulate those migratory experiences intellectually. This aspect not only adheres to rigorous research, but it can also be the focus in a plastic medium like in painting. In the

series, “The Emigrants” (cover of this issue), the artist Ramón Bulerín uses his brush and stylistic technique to contribute to the discussion. As the two art pieces included in this dossier rightly suggest, the migration process involves a movement of people either up or down; and in that process, some lose their balance and fall, while others who have more experience help newcomers or just let them fall. One could use the characters portrayed in these scenes and compare them with the members of the Caribbean communities that we try to document in this special issue of *Memorias*.

It is unquestionable that the Caribbean diaspora in the US with all its cultural variations of gender, race, and class remain a very influential community in the economic, cultural, and intellectual production and political life of American society. New York City is the quintessential scenario. Certainly, the members of these not so quite imagined communities do not only intersect in their shared city. Despite all this, these communities manage to bring out their uniqueness.

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