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"Jus' hol' yuh breath an' kick":
Queer Self-Made Womanhood in Nicole Dennis-Benn's "Swimmer"

Keywords: myth, self-made man, American dream, displacement, migrant, LGBTQ+

Abstract: This article performs a close reading of the essay "Swimmer," written by the Jamaican American novelist Nicole Dennis-Benn and published in the anthology *The Good Immigrant USA: 26 Writers Reflect on America* (2019). On the one hand, "Swimmer" endorses the myths of the self-made man and the American dream by describing the remarkable achievements of its author, regardless of all the obstacles in her way. On the other hand, though, it questions the American success mythology by shedding light on the hardships faced by migrants. As a result, this article considers the following research questions: "Does Nicole Dennis-Benn's 'Swimmer' both legitimize and challenge the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream?" and, if so, "In which way are the myths of the self-made man and of the American dream simultaneously celebrated and questioned in 'Swimmer'?". To do so, this analysis adopts an approach located within the field of cultural studies, embracing its interdisciplinary nature and combining literary studies with American and Jamaican history and culture, while departing from Heike Paul's problematization of American myths in *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014).

Following the publication of the award-winning *The Good Immigrant* (2016), an anthology of essays edited by Nikesh Shukla and written by Black, Asian, and minority ethnic writers that explore the experience of living as a migrant in the United Kingdom, *The Good Immigrant USA: 26 Writers Reflect on America* (2019) was published. The book, edited once again by Shukla alongside Chimene Suleyman (a contributor to the original volume), is a well-curated selection of tales from artists and writers sharing their own personal stories about living in America during the first presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021) as first- or second-generation immigrants.[1] These

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autobiographical accounts chronicle the precariousness of coming from an immigrant background in a country that, at the time that the authors were writing, was witnessing the reemergence of far right and white supremacist rhetoric. This timely collection also alludes to some of America's core narratives of national beginnings in an ambivalent manner, specifically the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream.[2]

While the myth of the American dream, which can be traced back to James Truslow Adams (1878-1949) and his book *The Epic of America* (1931), has been described by Heike Paul, in her work *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014), as "a kind of 'umbrella myth' that encompasses all others" (16), the myth of the self-made man relates to popular expressions such as "rags-to-riches." First coined by Henry Clay (1777-1852) in 1832, the success myth is deeply connected not only to Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) or Horatio Alger (1832-1899), but also to the belief that, through sheer hard work and talent, anyone can successfully climb the social ladder in the United States.

However, and as the phrasing of the expression suggests, the myth of the self-made man historically applies to white (and largely heterosexual) males (Paul 390-91), excluding women, ethnic minorities, and those identifying as anything other than heterosexual. By doing so, and because it is a myth of national origins, the myth of the self-made man suggests that white heterosexual men alone were essential and necessary in the founding of the American nation. This argument is further supported by the fact that Franklin, the prototypical self-made man, additionally described as "the *homo americanus* par excellence" (Paul 370-71), is a central figure of the myth of the Founding Fathers.

Traditional versions of the success narrative have not gone unchallenged and have been persistently appropriated by marginalized groups such as migrants, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Among these is Jamaican-born Nicole Dennis-Benn, the celebrated author of the highly praised novels *Here Comes the Sun* (2016) and *Patsy* (2019), and the writer of "Swimmer," an autobiographical short story about her first years in America as a lesbian, Black immigrant woman, included in *The Good Immigrant*. Throughout her account, the Jamaican American novelist endorses, on the one hand, the myth of the self-made man, and, alongside it, the myth of the American dream, describing her own remarkable achievements, regardless of all the obstacles in her way. On the other hand, though, the writer of "Swimmer" calls into question the American success mythology by depicting the hardships faced by migrants such as herself. As

a result, this article considers the following research questions: "Does Nicole Dennis-Benn's 'Swimmer' both legitimize and challenge the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream?" and, if so, "In which way are the myths of the self-made man and of the American dream simultaneously celebrated and questioned in 'Swimmer'?". To do so, this analysis performs a close reading of the tale mentioned above, adopting an approach located within the field of cultural studies and embracing its interdisciplinary nature to combine literary studies with American and Jamaican history and culture.

Experiencing the crushing effects of her nation's classism, complexionism, and homophobia,[3] Dennis-Benn, a dark-skinned homosexual girl from a working-class family, starts her narrative by explaining why she decided to move to the United States ("Swimmer" 17) in 1999, at the age of seventeen (Roney). Establishing a parallel between herself and her father, who had arrived undocumented in America years earlier (Dennis-Benn, "My First Visit") and who fixed "rich people's pools in Long Island when he wasn't driving his taxi" (Dennis-Benn, "Swimmer" 16), the author states that she "had left home for more or less the same reasons he did – the ability to thrive, the desire for upward mobility" ("Swimmer" 17).

The idea of rising above one's socioeconomic status, central to the myth of the self-made man and mentioned by the writer herself through the key expression "upward mobility" permeates the passage presented above, connecting the novelist's experiences and desires with those of her father's and with many immigrant narratives of self-making. It also clearly evokes optimistic stories of self-made manhood, such as the ones written by Alger, populated by "impoverished boys who through hard work and virtue achieve great wealth and respect" (qtd. in Paul 373). However, and unlike her father or Alger's boys, the narrator also sought sexual liberation, adding "and though unlike him [her father] I didn't have children to support, I knew deep down that I'd want them with a woman" ("Swimmer" 17). As a result, Dennis-Benn's displacement[4] is a means of escape, not only from a precarious socioeconomic situation, but also from a country where she would not be able to safely embrace her sexual orientation in an open way.

After arriving in the United States, Dennis-Benn joined a community college in Long Island, and what might at first have seemed a hopeful take on the myth of the self-made man begins to unravel. Indeed, the author describes how she would sit in classes with other immigrants who were "pursuing dreams of careers in nursing, physical therapy, radiology, teaching . . . sensible jobs that could allow them to send money back home or help them to afford rent in homes where

they lived with other family members" ("Swimmer" 18). Whatever passions these students might have had had to be pushed aside, so that they could not only provide for themselves, but also for those with whom they lived or who they left behind, in their home countries. In many cases, they were already doing so, working two or more jobs while studying, as the writer describes, striving to complete a two-year degree that would likely take them four years to finish, given the heavy workload that they were juggling. As the novelist explains, migrants living in the United States, such as herself and her classmates, did not have the luxury of choosing what they wanted, having instead to settle for what was necessary, which, in this case, was a college education that would allow them to access a down-to-earth profession in a relatively short amount of time.

The narrator's depiction of her first experience in higher education is in sharp contrast to Franklin's idealized thoughts on self-perfectibility, described at length in his *Autobiography* (1791), a sort of success manual where he explains how he rose from "Obscurity" to "some Degree of Reputation in the World" (qtd. in Paul 371). The embodiment of the self-made man in American culture (Paul 370), Franklin characterizes himself as an autodidact who went from being a printer's apprentice with little formal education to a well-respected statesman thanks to his "industry" and "frugality" (qtd. in Paul 371). In the second part of Franklin's *Autobiography*, he even sketches out the self-improvement scheme that he supposedly followed on a daily basis, which was then referenced by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) in *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

With self-perfectibility looming large in his text as a means of achieving upward social mobility (Paul 372), Franklin celebrates individualism and free will, while also suggesting "that everyone is responsible for their own fate and success in life" (Paul 372). However, and despite the amount of industry and frugality displayed by Dennis-Benn's Long Island classmates, alongside their determination to acquire an education and to make it in America, the odds were against them and they simply "couldn't afford for their ambitions to be bigger than their pockets unless their ambitions would prove to be lucrative" ("Swimmer" 18).

It was the inability to follow her own passion, combined with the need to find a practical job, that led the author to choose medicine, eventually applying for an Ivy League university, to escape her father's Long Island apartment, following her Jamaican and homophobic stepmother's discovery of her romantic feelings towards women and the hostile climate that ensued. As soon as she got her acceptance letter, after working "extra hard" ("Swimmer" 19), a classic trope of narratives of self-made manhood, she was "whisked . . . off to campus" ("Swimmer" 20), where

she was dropped off "like a sack of clothes at Goodwill" ("Swimmer" 20), holding a single suitcase. While the parents of her soon-to-be classmates could be seen "carrying heavy boxes, bean-bag chairs, shelves" ("Swimmer" 17) and cradling "special lamps, pillows, fleece comforters, and bags of snacks" ("Swimmer" 17), she was left by herself. With a hundred dollars in her pocket and without any basic items, such as sheets, pillows, comforters, toiletries, or other things that she would surely need for her "quiet, empty room" ("Swimmer" 17), she quickly found herself spending the financial aid money for books on the essential things that her classmates already had ("Swimmer" 18). This dismantles the fallacious assumption that there is equality of opportunity in America, on which the myth of the self-made man is based, illustrating the fact that "not all start out even or compete on an equal footing" (Paul 368) and putting the novelist at a clear disadvantage when compared to the other students.

The misleading belief in "competitive equality" (Paul 368) intersects with the utopian vision of the United States as a classless society, or, at the very least, "as a society that allows considerable social mobility" (Paul 368), another typical trait of American success narratives. This vision is also called into question by "Swimmer," specifically when the narrator's father, whose work van "stood out on campus next to the Volvos, Lexus, and BMWs" (16) of the other parents, drops her off and leaves her with the advice "Know yuh place, keep quiet, an' work hard" ("Swimmer" 16), before departing abruptly. By recommending that his daughter should accept her position in society and keep her head down, he signals that he does not fail to perceive America's highly stratified nature.

Dennis-Benn depicts her own distressing feelings as a product of the alienation that accompanied her efforts to adapt to her new surroundings, highlighting the fact that migrants striving to succeed in America need more than just hard work and talent, as the success narrative of the self-made man suggests. Without the emotional and financial support network that her classmates benefited from, Dennis-Benn was overwhelmed by feelings of dread and the taste of seawater. These sensations began to set in shortly after she was left to fend for herself, as memories of her father's swimming lessons when she was only three years old resurfaced. His advice, "Jus' hol' yuh breath an' kick" ("Swimmer" 17), which clearly evokes the hard work ethic of the self-made man myth, came back to her, impelling her to push through the unsettling emotions related to her displacement. Like Dennis-Benn, migrants must also confront the crushing emotional

distress of being separated from their homes, families, friends, or even the small community colleges where they may have begun their journeys ("Swimmer" 18).

Yet, the novelist could not bring herself to share these disconcerting feelings with anyone, "[f]or how could one be sad in America? How could one complain about an opportunity to go away to college knowing they'd come out with a degree from an Ivy League, which would forever establish them in their new country?" ("Swimmer" 18). Scribbling poems about home inside her biology textbooks and reading books to cope with her new country, the narrator was only saved from the depths of her "homesickness and loneliness" ("Swimmer" 20) when a literature professor, with whom she was spending her first Thanksgiving away, told her that she had never truly left home, for home had always been with her in her memories ("Swimmer" 20). Dennis-Benn's experience, nevertheless, still stresses the downside of displacement, which at this point in the author's narrative stops being a positive force that can lead to upward mobility and sexual liberation, becoming instead the catalyst for the writer's debilitating emotional pain.

The issue of privilege is approached in connection with other related issues, such as choice, talent and hard work. Now enrolled at an Ivy League university that most immigrants could only dream of attending, the novelist realized that, despite her desire to improve her social standing, she did not wish to become a doctor. Instead, she wished she "could desire something simply because [she] was told to desire it" ("Swimmer" 21). She began considering a change to a major with a creative writing minor, and after sharing this with her new pre-med friends, who were also of immigrant background, they asked her "If you want English, then what are you doing here?" ("Swimmer" 21). The question not only served as a reminder that she seemed to be taking the privilege of studying pre-med at an Ivy League university for granted, but also highlighted that other first-generation immigrants would "kill" ("Swimmer" 21) to be in her place. For them, it was a matter of "life or death" ("Swimmer" 21), given that many, if not all, were carrying the weight of their families on their backs. As the author's friends understood, success did not depend solely on being talented and working hard, as the myth of the self-made man suggests, but also on choosing the right major and getting into the right university. By opting for something within the Humanities which she found fulfilling, she appeared to be throwing away her chances of future prosperity, apparently insensitive to the fact that many would gladly take her spot.

The word choice employed by the narrator, who uses the verb "kill" and the expression "life or death," as shown above, is especially significant if one considers the "often

unacknowledged social Darwinist underpinnings" (Paul 388) of the myth of the self-made man. Developed by British sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), among others, social Darwinism departs from the belief that societies are organisms that develop according to the process of natural selection and to the principle of "survival of the fittest," coined by Spencer himself, which results in the ineptest dying out and the fittest surviving. This theory is often employed to justify and naturalize class stratification, claiming that there are natural inequalities among individuals, with those who display supposedly "superior and inherent moral attributes such as industriousness, temperance, and frugality" (The Editors), which Franklin uses to describe himself and which Alger associates with his hardworking boys, being able to acquire personal property.

According to this view, the poor are simply unfit to become successful and they should not be aided through any sort of state intervention or other types of means, for doing so would interfere with natural processes akin to biological selection that should not be meddled with (The Editors). Social Darwinism is also connected to the illusion of equality, addressed above, which, as was stated previously, disregards the fact that not everyone starts on a level playing field, as is the case of Dennis-Benn, of the classmates she met in both Long Island and her Ivy League university, and of most of the first- and second-generation immigrants that "would kill to take [her] spot" ("Swimmer" 21). In the case of migrants such as this, it is not simply success or self-made manhood that is on the line, however, but "sheer survival" (Paul 388), as the novelist makes clear when she states that attending a top university is no laughing matter, symbolizing instead "life or death" ("Swimmer" 21).

Coping with displacement and ensuing feelings is also framed as part of the wider issue of sexual expression. Dennis-Benn's hopes of sexual liberation soon came to partial fruition, though, after she moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for graduate school, where she dated a Jamaican woman who initially seemed like a miracle, simply because she was Jamaican and loved other women ("Swimmer" 22). However, this woman clearly was a closeted lesbian who perhaps was also grappling with internalized homophobia. Regardless of this, and despite later being forced to come out to her homophobic mother after one of her multiple breakups with this Jamaican woman, which led to her no longer being welcomed at home, the writer threw herself deeper into the relationship as a way to cope with the feelings that she was experiencing, a consequence of her displacement. As the novelist states, "she was the only thing I had left of home. There weren't many women I could share histories with – a culture, a whole country. She probably chose me for the same reason"

("Swimmer" 22). While they were still together, the Jamaican woman she was seeing, who was also studying to be a doctor, would tell her that they couldn't afford to be the way they were ("Swimmer" 22), meaning they were not able to be both Black and lesbians and still be successful, thereby acknowledging the profound shortcomings of the myth of self-made manhood. Although the narrator felt like telling her that in America they were free to be whoever they wanted to be, she confides to the reader that she, too, had considered passing as straight to achieve success, which stresses the added difficulties faced by migrants who are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

As Dennis-Benn argues, both she and her girlfriend were expected to be "good immigrants," the phrase that gives the anthology in which the essay under analysis is featured its title. The Jamaican woman she was dating certainly tried to live up to those expectations, wishing to return home and make a difference, feeling it was her responsibility to do so. However, the notion of "good immigrants" ("Swimmer" 23) clearly comments on the widely disseminated belief that migrants are intrinsically bad. As Shukla and Suleyman describe in their "Editor's Note," immigrants are commonly perceived as "job stealers, benefit scroungers, girlfriend thieves, and criminals" (xi). The editors further state that immigrants are only deemed good "when they win an Olympic medal, treat you at your local hospital, or rescue a child from the side of a building" (xi), or, as the author suggests, when they surpass every expectation and become the shining example of a self-made Jamaican woman who was able to make it in America.

However, the writer's tone displays a weary and cynical dimension, signaling her disillusionment not only with such unreasonable expectations of success, but also with their connection to far-right and white-supremacist rhetoric, indissociable from Trump and his vertiginous ascendancy to power, which culminated in his election as president of the United States in 2016. By that time, Trump was lamenting the presence of "criminal aliens" (Dennis-Benn, "My First Visit") in America, despite the fact that it was those same aliens that "got up to scrub floors, mother other people's children, clean toilets, lay bricks without helmets or health insurance . . . deliver food on bicycles through pouring rain and blizzards, drive taxis, and sweep train stations" (Dennis-Benn, "My First Visit") while the country still slept.

It was also thanks to "criminal aliens" such as the narrator's own father, who worked two jobs on just two-hours of sleep and who had the courage to move to the United States "to start over for the sake of his family" (Dennis-Benn, "My First Visit"), that Dennis-Benn became an American

citizen with two Master's degrees from some of the world's most prestigious universities, later acquiring the status of an award-winning novelist. Trump's xenophobic and outright racist rhetoric, however, has only become more extremist as the years have gone by. He even remarked, at a political rally while running for Republican candidate for the 2024 presidential election, that undocumented immigrants like the narrator's father were poisoning the blood of America (Helmore), which clearly echoes Nazi rhetoric, despite how many times Trump repeats he has never read *Mein Kampf* (Ibssa et al.).

Seventeen years after arriving in the United States, Dennis-Benn published her first book to much critical acclaim, following her marriage to her wife, whom she met when she moved to New York and who impelled her to write. By all accounts, she had made it in America, as her Ivy League friends insisted (Dennis-Benn, "Swimmer" 25-26) and as she herself admitted in an interview to *The Florida Review*. In it, she additionally declared that in Jamaica "a lot of people fantasize about heading up North, like heading to the United States" (qtd. in Roney), while also declaring that "for a lot of us, it's freedom, freedom to be ourselves" (qtd. in Roney). Dennis-Benn was able to find that freedom, not only to become a writer, but also to marry her wife, fulfilling her desire for upward mobility and for sharing her life with another woman, thus achieving her own version of queer self-made womanhood and, in addition, of the American dream. Swimming "out of the current, parallel to shore, and trust[ing] that the waves would carry [her]" ("Swimmer" 27), an ability that Dennis-Benn looks at as the true measure of her success, she stayed true to one of her father's earliest pieces of advice, namely, "[j]us' hol' yuh breath an' kick" ("Swimmer" 27), working hard while dealing with the painful emotions associated with displacement that had made her feel like she had been "treading in the deep end of the ocean all along" ("Swimmer" 27).

As this article demonstrated, and in answer to the research questions presented at the beginning, Dennis-Benn does both celebrate and criticize the myth of the self-made man and, by extension, the myth of the American dream. On the one hand, "Swimmer" presents the success narrative of a prizewinning writer, who, despite coming from a working-class context, being the subject of complexionism in Jamaica, and facing her own family's homophobia, embraces displacement as a means of acquiring financial and sexual freedom and gets into some of the most prestigious universities from the United States, later publishing her own novels thanks to her hard work and talent. On the other hand, though, the short story draws attention to the distressing

emotions that go hand in hand with displacement and highlights the grim reality of first-generation immigrants trying to make it in America while financially supporting their own families.

In addition to this, "Swimmer" emphasizes the inequality and social stratification that separate newly arrived migrants from those whose parents were already born in America, and the hard choices that LGBTQ+ immigrants are forced to make to become successful, especially if they are also female and Black. However, the tale's biggest challenge to the myths of the self-made man and of the American dream, typically connected to narratives centered around white heterosexual males such as Franklin and Alger's boys, comes from the fact that it symbolically rejects a white heteropatriarchal worldview by giving voice to a Black homosexual woman, with whom many of those who have ever felt oppressed because of who they are, be it in regards to their skin color, socioeconomic status, gender, or sexual preferences, can deeply relate to.

[1] While a first-generation immigrant can be described as "a person born in a country other than her/his country of residence and whose residence period in the host country is, or is expected to be, at least 12 months" ("Archive"), a second-generation immigrant is "[a] person who was born in and is residing in a country that at least one of their parents previously entered as a migrant" ("second-generation migrant").

[2] According to Richard Slotkin, myths, or the mythic expression of ideology, are "stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 5). The author then adds that, over a period of time and through "frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, 'icons,' 'keywords' or historical cliches" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 5). See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 5-8 and Slotkin, "Mythogenesis," *passim*.

[3] In an interview to *The Florida Review*, Dennis-Benn explained that in Jamaica people are often discriminated against because of having a darker complexion, connected to complexionism, of belonging to the working class, associated with classism, and of being part of the LGBTQI+ community, indissociable from homophobia (Roney). In particular, prejudice against homosexual and transgender people in Jamaica has been extensively examined by the United Nations Development Programme in their 2023 report *Being LGBT in Jamaica: National Survey for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons in Jamaica*.

[4] In *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* (2015), Pramod K. Nayar explains that displacement, usually employed in conjunction with dislocation, can refer to different types of physical movement, such as when Europeans moved to the colonies or when Africans were trafficked as slaves to the Caribbean, for example. This type of dislocation is, as Nayar points out, at the very heart of the imperial project. However, within postcolonial literature, displacement often addresses "the sense of cultural and social alienation experienced by the migrant when seeking to adapt to a new society/country" (52). When diasporic individuals leave their home countries, they remain connected to them, as do their own personal identities, even when they have already successfully settled in a new place. In some cases, displacement can be a positive force, representing "freedom to be oneself" (52), specifically when the home country is oppressive and intolerant, persecuting those who, like Dennis-Benn, exhibit a sexual orientation that goes against heteronormativity.

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