(RE)EXAMINING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN BRET EASTON ELLIS' AMERICAN PSYCHO AND JEANINE CUMMINS' AMERICAN DIRT

*Ismet **Dilaver**, 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia,*
ismet.dilaver9@gmail.com

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Abstract: The American Dream has been affecting the writing manner of numerous (trans)American authors ever since the time of colonization. This paper consults multiple definitions of the American Dream and/or the American Nightmare, the notions often intertwined with each other. Further, the paper consults with transnational American literature to represent the American Dream of U.S. (im/trans)migrant authors. The main purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the American Dream in Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* and Jeanine Cummins' (trans)novel *American Dirt*, and to discuss the ways in which the American Dream is being reversed – transformed into its antithetical (American) Nightmare.

Keywords: The American Dream, The American Nightmare, Transnational Literature, American Dirt, American Psycho

1. Introduction

Ever since it was coined, the American Dream has been one of the most disputed ideologies in American culture. In the context of literature, it is closely linked with literary skepticism, as numerous authors have questioned the feasibility and moral aspects of the American Dream, frequently binding it to its unfavorable opposite, the American Nightmare. While focusing on Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* and Jeanine Cummings' transnational novel *American Dirt*, this paper aims to scrutinize and juxtapose the representation of the American Dream in the two works, and especially to investigate the impact of the transnational movement on contemporary works such as *American Dirt*.

For a long time, the American Dream existed only as a myth (Su 2015) or a symbol of Americanness, while the first official definition

appeared in James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931), where he defined it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" [1] (404). His clarification of the American Dream came forthwith after the end of the Jazz Age[2] marked with the Dream of gaining wealth in the context of literature. One of the best exemplifications is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as the novel implies that wealth does not guarantee happiness, portraying the American Dream as disillusionment (Cain 2020). Hence, Adams underlines that the American Dream should not be misconstrued as a tool for attaining affluence:

> it is not a dream of and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by other by what they are, regardless of their fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (1931: 404).

Among the numerous definitions of the American Dream, Martin Luther King Junior slightly (re)shapes this inaugural definition in his speech *The American Dream* (1964), where he brings up the issue of social injustice and discrimination directed against African Americans. His understanding of the American Dream implies equality, where no race or religion should determine whether one should pursue his/her American Dream:

> It does not say some men, it says all men. It does not say all white men, but it says all men which includes black men. It doesn't say all Protestants, but it says all men which includes Catholics. It doesn't say all Gentiles, it says all men which includes Jews. And that is something else at the center of the American Dream which is one of the distinguishing points, one of the things that distinguishes it from other forms of government, particularly totalitarian systems. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither derived from nor conferred by the state. They are gifts from the hands of the Almighty God (1).

[1] This American Dream is rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which says that all people should have the rights to life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

[2] Or the Roaring Twenties.

Luther King, with his explication and (re)interpretation of the American Dream, implies that the problem of inequality exists, despite all the attempts to portray the United States of America as a place where everyone is equal and with the same opportunities. The history of the U.S. demonstrates otherwise, especially when considering slavery, which was race-biased, as slaves were mainly black people imported from Africa (Klein 2010). Besides that, Manifest Destiny implied that white Americans were superior[3] in relation to indigenous people (Horsman 1981). Although slavery was long abolished at the time of Martin Luther King Junior, the separation of Afro-Americans from white Americans was widespread, such as Harlem – the neighborhood in New York where black people lived (Edis & Bilem 2019). Hence, although the American Dream promotes equality, not all people living in the U.S. are genuinely equal and with the same opportunities. Indeed, many factors such as identity, race, skin color, religion and so on and so forth, became embroidered in the debate about the American Dream. Lawrence R. Samuel speaks about the relation between the American Dream and the Reversed American Dream/the American Nightmare, where he infers that the margin between the two is very delicate. In his words, the American Dream has

> a dark side just as powerful as its positive side. For each and every American Dream, there is an American nightmare, this evil twin always lurking in the shadows when the country is going through interesting times, as the Chinese curse goes. In fact, the potential of an American nightmare was frequently conjured up since the very beginning of the Dream, not too surprising given that the phrase was conceived in the darkest days of Depression (2012: 9).

The antipodal dimension of the American Dream – the American Nightmare, is as real as the American Dream itself. While the American Dream promises equal chances for success to everyone, the American Nightmare, conversely

[3] When we reflect on the period of colonization of the U.S., we can see that the first colonizers, especially Puritans, were described as self-centered with "race consciousness and sense of superiority" (Adams 1931: 35). Moreover, Manifest Destiny was not believed to be the work of men, but for Americans of the time "it was the hand of God that slew Indians for them" (Ibid).

represents a threat to all Americans. In fact, both books I proposed for analysis in this paper demonstrate how the American Dream transforms into its "evil twin" – the American Nightmare. In *American Psycho*, the American Dream, guided by desires, reverses the American Dream, while *American Dirt* depicts the struggle of migrants in their attempt to reach the U.S. in order to live the American Dream.

Contemporary approaches to the American Dream do not differ significantly to its original definition(s). However, Jim Cullen explains that there is no single understanding of the American Dream, even though it "might be summarized as a belief that anything is possible in some form if one wants it badly enough, the historical reality is one of a series of discrete, and sometimes competing, Dreams: The Dream of upward mobility, the Dream of home ownership, the Dream of racial justice, and so on" (2011: 19). For him, it is not a Dream, but a series of Dreams where each individual creates his own reality. Such a dream is not perfect as it is profoundly individual. In Cullen's words, "there have been as many American Dreams as there have been Americans, and, thanks to immigration, American identity has been something as much imagined and acquired as it has been inherited, reborn with every new citizen" (2011: 20). On the other hand, Jeremy Rifkin scrutinizes the American Dream by comparing it to the European Dream:

> The American Dream is far too centered on personal material advancement and too little concerned with the broader human welfare to be relevant in a world of increasing risk, diversity, and interdependence. It is an old dream, immersed in a frontier mentality that has long since become passé. While the American Dream is tiring and languishing in the past, a new European Dream is being born. It is a dream far better suited for the next stage in the human journey – one that promises to bring humanity to a global consciousness befitting an increasingly interconnected and globalizing society (2004: 3).

The American Dream does speak about equality, but that equality promises to everyone that they have a chance to live the Dream. The European Dream,[4] on the contrary, speaks of

[4] Rifkin's European Dream is the opposite of the American Dream, while he adds that The European Dream emphasizes community relationships over individual

a place where everybody is taken care of, from healthcare to high living standards. It is not a dream that is personal or individual, but collective. Thus, Rifkin illustrates that the American Dream is selfish, and that is actually demonstrated in Beret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Yet, before delving into the scrutiny of the American Dream in the two selected works, it is necessary to reflect on the objective of transnational literature, as one of the books that we focus on, Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* narrates about the American Dream in a transnational context.

2. The American Dream in Transnational (Con)Text

The American Dream is interlinked with identity, especially as there is often debate about who is American and who is not. According to Carren Irr's book *Towards the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), U.S. fiction is not defined by biographical markers such as citizenship, birthplace, workplace, etc., but the most important part "is an explicit effort to address a North American audience" (11). Selma Raljević establishes a classification or systematization of transnational American authors, where she sorts them into four categories, while all of them remain equally (transnational) American:

> 1. the writers who are not born in the U.S. but who eventually became the U.S. citizens, so their civic identity is, therefore, dual or multiple; 2. The writers who are 'natural born citizens' of the U.S. but who are the descendants of immigrants, or, more generally, the U.S.-born writers whose visionary or creative perception is, in any way, driven by a trans-American sense of identity, affiliation, and equality; 3. the Native American writers who are of mixed Native American and non-Native-American origin, and/or whose visionary and creative perception is in relation to trans-national aesthetics, poetics, and realities in that that their narratives articulate, juxtapose, and/or theorize the various and multidirectional practices as well as sense of the trans-internal (among the Native American nations themselves) and

autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation, quality of life over the accumulation of wealth, sustainable development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelating toil, universal human rights and the rights of nature over property rights, and global cooperation over the unilateral exercise of power (2004: 3).

> the trans-external (between the Native American nations, or a certain Native American nation, and the non-Native American nation/nations) motion by migration, trade, and encounter while also keeping their Native American identity, affiliation, and culture strong; 4. the non-U.S. writers (in the matter of citizenship) who address a U.S. audience and write comparatively or solely about the U.S. (2020: 15).

Jeanine Cummins, well known for her works *A Rip in Heaven* (2004), *The Outside Boy* (2010), and *The Crooked Boy* (2013), falls into the second category [5] of transnational American authors because she is the descendent of an immigrant on account of her grandmother from Puerto Rico. Another element specific for transnational works, also present in Cummins' *American Dirt*, is the use of code-switching.[6] Rita Wilson describes bilingual authors of immigrant origin, who often use code-switching in their literary creation, as transcultural and translingual, since they are "adopting the special rhetoric of 'in-betweenness' as a discursive strategy" (Wilson 2018,55). Jeanine Cummins uses Spanish words and phrases throughout the English version of the book, such as "Mijo, ven" (1), "abuela's" (2), "mira" (2), "a balón de fútbol" (2), "la reina de mi alma" (37), "Oye, ¿adónde van, amigos?" (158), "Amigos, huy es tu día de suerte" (222), etc. With this, Jeanine Cummins projects Mexican, or rather, Latino American identity into the book by sympathizing with all Spanish-speaking readers, but she also reflects the (Latino American/Spanish speaking) identity inherited from her family. Moreover, the bilingual approach highlights the transnational nature of the novel, and the author's state of being "in-between" the two places, cultures, and languages.

The transnational turn in the 21st century generally has a strong impact on America and American literature due to numerous

[5] Jeanine Cummins belongs to the group of transnational American authors, transnational Puerto Rican authors (due to her origin), but also transnational Mexican authors, as she addresses both the U.S. and Mexican audiences in her (trans)novel *American Dirt*. The book itself has a twofold identity; it was originally published in English by Flatiron Books, and then it was translated into Spanish by Laura Paz Abasolo as *Tierra Americana* (2020) and republished by Ediciones B. The book has both U.S. and Mexican identities as it describes events in both countries, and also, it addresses both audiences in their respective languages.

[6] Janet Holmes speaks about various reasons for the use of code-switching. One of them is to express one's identity and to show identification/empathy with speakers (Holmes 2013).

(im/trans)migrants. Hence, the U.S. is often referred to as a Melting Pot, or a Salad Bowl,[7] where migrants from different countries subsist while trying to pursue their American Dream(s). The number of Mexicans in U.S. is very high, and Mexican-American literature was at its peak in the last third of the 19th century, as the end of the Mexican War converted more than 80,000 Mexicans into U.S. citizens (Raymund 1993). Raymund A. Parades describes Mexican-American literature not as twofold, but hybrid, with elements of Mexican, Spanish, Indian, and Anglo, intertwined with each other (Ibid: 31). Whether it be Mexican-American (transnational) migrants,[8] or any other (im/trans)migrants such as Asian, African, European, and so on and so forth, the process of acculturation to the U.S. represents an inevitable endeavor. According to Wendi Wen Li, acculturation appears in forms of integration, assimilation, marginalization, and separation (2013: 33). Integration or "home-making" (Li 2013: 155),[9] the most common variety of acculturation, construes a new identity which is the combination of previous self – acquired at the country of (trans)migrant's origin, and the new self – acquired at the new place, or the U.S. in this case (33). This is also the kind of acculturation interlinked with Jeanine Cummins' identity, containing both the U.S. and Latino American segments.

3. The Portrayal of The American Dream in Jeanine Cummins' novel *American Dirt*

American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins is a story about trauma, pain, fear, betrayal, crime, injustice, rape, violence, death, loss, exile, escape, migration, and so forth, but it is also a story about a new beginning. Mohamed Salah Mohamed Rabia observes *American Dirt* as a feminist dystopia, and Mexico as a possible dystopic site, but implies that the novel emphasizes "the importance of feminist struggle" (198). Comprised of thirty-six chapters, the novel narrates about Lydia and her

[7] Melting pot and Salad bowl are two theories of acculturation, often linked to the U.S. The melting pot refers to a type of acculturation where migrants blend with the rest of the population in the U.S., emphasizing Americanization (Hirschman 1983). The Salad bowl, in contrast, celebrates the diversity of identities that migrants come with to the U.S., or the identities "that would otherwise be lost to assimilation" (Berray 2019: 143).

[8] And, therefore, transnational Mexican-American literature.

[9] Assimilation applies to migrants who suppress their original self; they fully blend in with the local community and/or dominant culture. Marginalization and separation, on the other hand, speak about migrants who never fully acculturate, but they isolate themselves by living on the principles and beliefs prominent in their home country (Li 2013).

eight-year-old son Luca, who run away from their home in Acapulco, after their family gets murdered by the local cartel owner. Mexico is represented as a dark and gloomy place where criminals can get away with everything, and even police officers follow instructions provided by the cartel leader. Following the extermination of her family, while still in shock, Lydia realizes that she must flee with her son. Otherwise, they would have the same destiny as the rest of the family, including Lydia's husband and Luca's father, Sebastián. Although initially clueless about where to go, they kept moving, as it was the only way to survive.

> 'Where will we go, Mami?'
>
> Lydia gives him a sideways glance. Eight years old. She must reach past this obliteration and find the strength to salvage what she can. She kisses the top of his head and they begin to walk, away from the reporters, away from the orange car, Abuela's house, their annihilated life.
>
> 'I don't know *mijo*,' she says. 'we'll see. We'll have an adventure' (Cummins 2020: 22).

The novel does not immediately reveal their desired destination. The readers only know that Lydia runs away as far as possible. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Lydia and her son will go to the U.S.,[10] as her uncle lives there. So, for them, the choice to move to the U.S. is not merely an attempt for a fresh start where they would be safe from the cartel, but they would also be near to the closest thing to the family they have:

> 'We should go to *el norte,'* he says, because he suspects that's her plan anyway, and he wants to confirm that it's a good one, the only one, to get to a planet where no one can reach them.
>
> 'Yes.' Mami stands beside the bed in her jeans and robe. She seems to have lost track of what she was doing halfway through getting dressed. She seems both hurried and unable to move. 'We'll go to Denver,' she says after a moment (Cummins 2020: 52).

The United States of America, here referred to as *el norte*, or "the North", represents a haven, a place where Luca and Lydia can live without fear. The title *American Dirt*, or *Tierra Americana*, speaks of

[10] Although initially planned to go to Denver, after (re)thinking, Lydia changes the final destination to Colorado (61). However, the epilogue of the book suggests that Luca and Lydia end up in Maryland.

(American) "dirt" or rather earth/soil/ground/land.[11] This is further confirmed in the book when Lydia, accompanied by other migrants, reaches the U.S. border, separated from Mexico by a tall fence; "she sticks her hand through fence and wiggles her fingers on the other side. Her fingers are in *el norte*. She spits through the fence. Only to leave a piece of herself there on American dirt" (360). Whereas the (con)text of the novel implies that it is a place of security and protection, outside the reach of Mexican cartels. That is further carried over into the portrayal of The American Dream in the book; it is not the Dream of obtaining wealth or immense success the American Dream is traditionally associated with, but a Dream of viability and hope. It is an unconventional Dream, unique for the (transnational) identity of *American Dirt*, but also shared with numerous Latino migrants forced to flee their homes.

The Dream, told from the perspective of an unwanted migrant,[12] is distant and difficult to reach, especially as there are no many options to enter the U.S. from Mexico. The only option Lydia and Luca are left with is *La Bestia* (the Beast), described as the train of death; "that journey is a mission of terror in every imaginable way. Violence and kidnapping are

[11] Simply said, it refers to the geographical location of the United States of America, although in all probability, the author chose the word "dirt" because it is ambiguous and open for interpretation(s).

[12] In the novel, Lydia comments on the destiny of migrants, where she describes them as unwanted by the country of destination, or the U.S. in the case of the novel's narrative. She feels unwanted as well, as she is now a migrant herself:

> She and Luca are actual migrants. That is what they are. And that simple fact, among all the other severe new realities of her life, knocks the breath clean out of her lungs. All her life she's pitied those poor people. She's donated money. She's wondered with the sort of detached fascination of the comfortable elite how dire the conditions of their lives must be wherever they come from, that this is the better option. That these people would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn't even want them (113-114).

However, the narrative implies that she feels unalike other Mexicans as well (Sánchez Prado 2021). She owns a bookstore in Acapulco, but her clients are mostly tourists. Without them her work would not survive: "Tourism had always been the life blood in Acapulco, and the violence had scared most of those tourists away. She didn't know how long she'd be able to keep the shop afloat if they didn't return" (42).

endemic along the tracks, and apart from the criminal dangers, migrants are also maimed or killed every day when they fall from the tops of the trains" (93). Such a trip is dangerous, especially for women, which is exemplified by Soledad and Rebeca, the two migrant girls that befriended Lydia and Luca on the way to the U.S. Fifteen-year-old Soledad, with child (conceived as a result of rape) at the time Lydia meets her, also miscarries during that dangerous and long trip. There are other dangers and/or obstacles to achieving the American Dream in the (con)text of the novel, such as *la migra* (the border police) that prevents migrants from entering the U.S., local cartels, or the fear that coyote (a smuggler)[13] will take their money without helping them to cross the border. However, Lydia and the two girls, by the end of the novel, become almost like family – reunited by the fear all of them are running from, and Lydia's expectation of America evolves as the migrant experience renders her new self – a (trans)migrant self. At this point, she offers a (re)modeled idea of her American Dream:

> Before sleep, Lydia closes the ugliest box in her mind, and instead allows her to think forward, to Estados Unidos. Instead of Denver she thinks of a little white house in the desert with thick adobe walls. She's seen pictures of Arizona: cactuses and lizards, the ruddy red landscape and hot blue sky. She pictures Luca with a clean backpack and a haircut, getting on a big yellow school bus and waving at her from the window. And she conjures a third bedroom in that house for the sisters. Soledad's new baby, perhaps a girl. The smell of diapers. A bath in the kitchen sink (249-250).

The entire novel centers around a strenuous journey starting in their hometown Acapulco, which leads them through Chilpancingo, Mexico City, Huehuetoca, Nogales, before finally reaching the United States of America. Only in the epilogue does the author reveal what Lydia's life in the U.S. looks like. Lydia does not have a well-paid job as she works cleaning houses, even though she is a well-educated woman with a degree in English literature. Yet she is satisfied. Her son Luca and her are safe, living with the two sisters and their cousin – or rather, their newly constructed migrant family.

> It is not the little adobe house in the desert Lydia imagined. But there is the yellow school bus, and Luca does

[13] Although El Chacal, the smuggler Lydia finds with the help of Rebeca and Soledad is an honest man, represented as "a minor hero, a guide with the power to lead people to the promised land" (415).

> board it every morning with a clean backpack and a new pair of sneakers. He doesn't wear Papi's hat anymore because it's too special. It's taken a museum quality. It stays on top of his blue dresser along with other treasures: Abuela's rosary and an eraser shaped like a dragon that Rebeca got him. Luca's hair is neatly cut and shampooed to smell like Papi's now, with a trace of mint. The bus comes to the end of their three-lined block, and when Luca gets on it, he does so with two Honduran children, an Ecuadorian girl, a Somali boy, and three *estadounidenses*. Lydia slips her finger inside Sebastian7s ring every morning when that bus pulls away. *Today will not be the last day I ever see our child* (450).

The American Dream Lydia and Luca live in the United States of America becomes reality at the end of the novel. Still, it is probably not the Dream they would imagine if they moved to the U.S. prior to the death of all their closest family members – when they still lived a quite decent life in Acapulco. This Dream was construed in velocity while running away for their lives. The new beginning is also marked by nostalgia and memory of their previous life in Mexico. They treasure the belongings of their loved ones, making it difficult to simply move on with their newly constructed lives. Nevertheless, the novel ends with a dose of doubt and uncertainty; is their Dream temporary, and will it transform into another nightmare? Will Lydia be allowed to have a decent life in Maryland, or will she be deported back to Mexico, just like some of the migrants she encountered on the way to the U.S.?

> They live in the United States, *güey*. Like forever. Like, for ten years maybe. Since they were babies, maybe. And they're on their way to work one morning, or coming back from school one day, or playing *fútebol* in the park, or shopping at the mall for some fresh new kicks, and then *bam*! They get deported with whatever they happen to be carrying when they're picked up (321).

Hence, *American Dirt* does not speak of the American Dream as a constant, but as a possibility to start a life from scratch. It illustrates the Dream of (im)migrants who are haunted by someone or something in their home country, and their new beginning may alter into an American Nightmare at any point. The theme of migration is constant throughout the narrative. Even the covers contain the illustration of a hummingbird which is often associated with migration, overcoming obstacles in migration, rebirth, and the connection between life and death (Sault

2016). American Dirt also confirms Jim Cullen's argument that the American Dream gets a new meaning with every new citizen (2020). But each (American) Dream may be personal or shared, and even both at the same time,[14] depending on the circumstances concerned. The novel itself has received a lot of bad criticism, mainly for representing Mexico in a very negative way. Anna Marta Marini reflects and (de)constructs Jeanine Cummins' auto-reflective note where she says "I wished that someone slightly browner than me would write [this novel]" (2020: 2 [*American Dirt*, author's note]). Marini raises the issue of discrimination that this quote implies (Ibid), but also questions the relationship that Cummins' has with her Latinax toots, as it seems that Cummins distanced herself from her ancestors by identifying as "lighter" than them. However, this and similar attempts to criticize *American Dirt*'s Mexican segment of identity, do not nullify the transnational identity of the novel as, according to the theories of transnationalism mentioned earlier, Cummins has equal rights to write about Mexico as everyone else. Moreover, Jeanine Cummins provides an autopoetic reflection to her novel American Dirt in an interview with Rachel Martin, unveiling the reason for writing her Transnational Mexican-American novel: "I wrote a book that I believe in. I wrote a book that I hoped would remind readers that any one of us could be migrants" (Cummins 2020).

4. Reversing the (American) Dream in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

Bret Easton Ellis is known as a satirist whose literary creation incorporates intense action. Some of his prominent works include *Less Than Zero* (1985), *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), and *The Informers* (1994), while his *American Psycho*, originally published in 1991, remains his most famous work. *American Psycho* provides a ruthless indictment of the American Dream set in the 1990s and highly affected by over-consumerism, lack of morality, and chase for high social status, which ultimately revokes such a Dream and modifies it into an American Nightmare. Moreover, the author provides an insight into a society preoccupied with demeanor and/or appearance. The narrative of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, told in 60 chapters,[15] closely follows the life of the novel's main character, Patrick Bateman, who lives the

[14] Lydia's Dream stands for hope, and it is shared with numerous migrants both in the novel, and in real life.

[15] Or rather fragments, as each of these chapters describes a different event in Bateman's life, reflecting his fragmented state of mind.

American Dream. However, his Dream is quite materialistic;[16] centered around promiscuity, gaining wealth and power, wearing expensive clothes, eating in luxury restaurants on a daily basis, and so on. It is a life that many people dream of, but in the case of this novel, it is represented as monotonous and/or boring. The conversation with his "high class" friends, early in the novel, portrays them as avaricious, competing about who graduated from a more esteemed college in an almost toxic fashion:

> "Where did you go?" Vanden sighs after it finally becomes clear to her that no one is interested in Camden.
> "Well, I went to Le Rosay," Evelyn starts, "And then then to business school in Switzerland."
> "I also survived business school in Switzerland," Courtney says. "But I was in Geneva. Evelyn was in Lausanne" (Easton Ellis 2022 :13).

From this quote we can easily see that Bateman belongs to a class with a perturbed system of values. It is a group of people who do not seem to care about the well-being of each other, but all of them are superficially united by prestige and high social status. Bateman's American Dream starts reversing when he indulges in his unscrupulous desires and immoral conduct.[17] What starts as fantasizing about torture,

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[16] This materialism is demonstrated in the following excerpt, where Bateman describes his luxurious apartment in the stream of consciousness modus operandi:

> In the early light of a May dawn this is what the living room of my apartment looks like: Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It's a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise longue watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman's yellow head, and the whole things is framed in black aluminum steel… (Easton Ellis 2022: 23-24).

[17] Which can already be seen in the section where he fantasizes and fetishizes the murder of a woman in one of the movies he watches, as the following quote shows:

> …but I rerent *Body Double* because I want to watch it again tonight even though I know I won't have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill since I have a date with Courtney at seven-thirty at Café Luxembourg (67).

rape, and murder – almost certainly under the influence of alcohol and drugs, transforms into reality as Bateman is disclosed to be a serial killer. The narrative leads us through multiple instances of rape and murder of women, then the murder of a homeless man, etc. Bateman also expresses his negative attitude towards the homeless man (before stabbing him in his eye), telling him to get a job: "If you're so hungry, why don't you get a job" (124). Such a cynical perspective towards the homeless is present throughout the novel, as Bateman perceives them as unworthy. Yet, the most notable murder is the one where he kills his colleague Paul Owen, whom Bateman detested for a long time. It was in detail planned murder, where Bateman first got him drunk, then accompanied him back to his apartment, and murdered him with an axe:

> The axe hit him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up. Paul's eyes look up at me, then voluntarily roll back into his head, then back at me, and suddenly his hands are trying to grab at the handle, but the shock of the blow has sapped his strength… (208).

In the above-mentioned quote from the novel, Bateman describes horrifying murder of Paul Owen, while showing no penitence or guilt. Even more, such bloody scenes have become an everyday occurrence in his life, as he is, at this point, addicted to murdering other people. Moreover, murder becomes an inevitable part of his newly construed (psychopathic) identity. This double identity resembles the twofold identity in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where the main character construes two selves: a good one, and an evil one (Tupan 2004). Similarly, Bateman builds two separate identities – his original identity marked with power, luxury, high standards of living, or simply the identity of his American Dream. His other identity reflects his American Nightmare; it is gloomy and dark, reflecting his psychopathic and/or sociopathic self. As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that Bateman deals with an identity crisis, and is unable to separate real from imagined, under the influence of constant hallucinations. Thus, the following excerpt from the book demonstrates his inner conflict with himself, where he portrays himself as dehumanized of his human characteristics (except physical and/or bodily):

> There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin hair – but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that

> the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning (271).

Bateman seems to have an inner identity crisis, to such a measure that he can no longer recognize himself. Killing, crime, and rape became a new routine in his life, as his sociopathic/psychopathic self takes over his identity. On the other hand, his original self seems to be diminishing, ultimately leading to its mortification.[18]

After reading the novel, it remains unclear whether all the events described actually happened, or if they were just a product of imagination under the influence of hallucinations. However, it is obvious that such a life does not resemble anything described in the American Dream by James Truslow Adams, nor any other theorist of the American Dream; but it resembles the American Nightmare, which is characterized by dissatisfaction. Jefferson de Moura Saraiva speaks of *American Psycho* as criticism of consumerism – prominent in 1980s, as the novel "seems to be abundant in attire descriptions, affectless relationships and absurd hallucinations" (2018: 111-112). In addition, Bret Easton Ellis confirms this by providing his authorial voice[19] regarding *American Psycho*, and also the context in which the work was created:

> A lot of it had to do with my frustration with having to become an adult and what it meant to be an adult male in American society. I didn't want to be one, because all it was about was status. Consumerist success was really the embodiment of what it meant to be a cool guy—money, trophy girlfriends, nice clothes, and cool cars. It all seemed extremely shallow to me. Yet at the same time you have an urge to conform (Easton Ellis 2011).

Such a historical context produced the materialistic American Dream, which easily converts into the American Nightmare, as this analysis demonstrates.

5. Conclusion

[18] The mortification of the self is a term used to describe identity that is lost (Capps 2016).

[19] In an interview with Annie Coreno.

Both the American Dream and American Nightmare/Reversed American Dream come in different shapes and forms, and this analysis shows it on the example of Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. It is about two American Dreams, and two American Nightmares. Jeanine Cummins depicts the Dream of a (im/trans)migrant, who has to undergo many struggles only to enter the United States of America. She talks about the dream of hope and safety, where the novel's characters live fearless from the danger that forced them to flee their home country – Mexico. However, the American Nightmare is present in the form of uncertainty; such an American Dream is not long-lasting as there is still a well-grounded fear of deportation. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, on the other hand, portrays the life of Patrick Bateman, who already lives the American Dream (at least when it comes to the materialistic aspect of the American Dream), but his Dream gets reversed as he submits himself to his desires and (forbidden) fantasies: crime, rape, torture, and ultimately murder. His American Nightmare reflects in his identity crisis, as he hallucinates – unable to sunder real from imagined. The (materialistic) American Dream in *American Psycho* is ultimately satirized and represented as a fraud, where the novel's main character[20] does not feel fulfillment, but he expects more and more; more than the American Dream itself can offer.

The American Dream in this paper is explored in two distinct historical (con)texts. Bret Easton Ellis displays the Dream in the last part of the twentieth century, criticizing consumerism popular at the time. While Jeanine Cummins explores it in a contemporary setting, under the influence of global migrations, providing a voice of migrant women. Moreover, this paper serves as an impetus for researchers who intend to further scrutinize the American Dream in a transnational (American) context.

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[20] Patrick Bateman may be viewed both as the protagonist and antagonist of the novel.

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(PRE)ISPITIVANJE AMERIČKOG SNA U ROMANIMA *AMERIČKI PSIHO* BRET EASTON ELLISA I *AMERIČKA PRAŠINA* JEANINE CUMMINS

Američki san je (pre)oblikovao način pisanja brojnih (trans)američkih autora još od vremena kolonizacije. Ovaj rad revidira nekoliko definicija američkog sna i/ili američke noćne more, pojmova međusobno isprepletenih. Nadalje, ovaj rad se oslanja na transnacionalnu američku književnost kako bi predstavio američki san američkih autora (i/trans)migranata. Glavni zadatak ovog rada je da analizira američki san u romanu *Američki psiho* Bret Easton Ellisa I (trans)romanu *Američka prašina* Jeanine Cummins, te da razjasni načine poništavanja američkog sna, odnosno njegove transformacije u svoju suštu suprotnost, američku noćnu moru.

Ključne riječi: američki san, američka noćna mora, transnacionalna književnost, *Američka prašina*, *Američki psiho*