

DEREK WALCOTT: A SAINT LUCIAN POET, 'between the country and the town.'

By Dr Morgan Dalphinis and Robert Lee 20.9.2012



1:0 Introduction

The paper locates Derek Walcott's poetry within Saint Lucia through a review of the poet in a chronology focused on location and events; the contexts of class and colour; land and people.

It locates selected poems and Walcott's use of language within these contexts.

The paper is supported by a number of photographs both of the context and related to Walcott, provided by Robert Lee.

The paper also gives a brief assessment of Walcott's impact on, and his legacy to, his Saint Lucian context.

The paper is jointly produced by two Saint Lucian writers: Morgan Dalphinis and John Robert Lee.

Previous versions of the paper were presented at the Folk Research Centre, Saint Lucia and on Saint Lucian National Television in January 2011.

1:1 Chronology by Location and Events

The events below locate the poet in both time and geography (King, B 2000: Oxford)

DATES	LOCATION	OUTLINE OF EVENT(S)
1930-1950	Saint Lucia	Born 1930, twin of Roderick , to Warwick and Alix Walcott in Castries 1931 Father dies General: 25 Poems (1948) and starts St Lucian Arts Guild (1950)
1950-1959	Jamaica, Grenada, Greenwich Village	1950, attends UWI, BA General Arts 1954-57 First Marriage to Faye Moyston General: Teacher and Theatre
1959-1970	Trinidad	1960 2 nd Marriage General: Poems and Plays eg. <u>In a Green Night</u> ; <u>The Castaway</u> ; <u>Dream on Monkey Mountain</u> and other plays.

1971-1976	Trinidad	General:Poems and Theatre eg. <u>Ti-Jean</u> ; <u>Another Life</u> ;Sea Grapes
1977-1981	Tobago, St Croix, St Thomas, New York	Theatre
1981-1992	Boston	1982: Third Marriage General : Theatre, Poems eg. <u>Omeros</u> and Nobel Prize 1992
1993-2000	Saint Lucia, New York and London	Poems, Theatre, Essays, Painting
2001-2012	Saint Lucia, Europe,	The Haitian Trilogy (plays); Selected poems; The Prodigal, The White Egrets (T.S. Eliot Prize)

1:2 Chronology and Themes

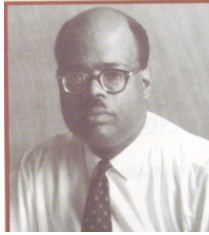
Within the location of time and geography, a number of themes, related to migration for employment in the Caribbean and elsewhere, are evident:

- i) individuals as exports from an island which cannot sustain us, is a Caribbean experience in movement to European and American metropolises as well as an added Saint Lucian experience of internal migration in the Caribbean for employment in Guyana, Trinidad, Barbados and other Caribbean territories. For the Caribbean creative artist, this matter of migration to sustain one's art, is particularly acute, since it is the home landscape and society that provides the inspiration for Walcott's work;
- ii) how a creative nationalist is forced out of his homeland by economic and employment opportunities; and
- iii) in reflecting on the classical exiles that reverberate in Walcott's work; Odysseus exiled from Ithaca, trying to return and only returning when more able as a man, more mature, more wily; the road from Icarus the impetuous youth to Dedalus the wise old man; Crusoe the knowing and Man Friday the unknowing marooned on an island; these also are as much the trials of Walcott as they are of the Saint Lucian 'everyman'.
- iv) the growth of a Caribbean artist witnessing a colonial setting transitioning to an independent political culture and coming to maturity as the post-colonial writer.

2:0 Walcott within Saint Lucian Class hierarchies

The indices of Saint Lucian class were and still generally remain: land, money, education, rural/urban, colour, gender, age and politics. Land was initially acquired in the 1600s and 1700s mainly through poorer whites leaving Martinique and acquiring land in a less urban St Lucia. The French and English rewarded the Africans who supported them in Saint Lucia during the 19th century wars, with land. Money was developed by various St Lucian Free Coloureds in Castries and Soufriere from the 1800s to the present day.

Social elevation in post-colonial Saint Lucia was mainly through education, and exemplified by two Nobel prize winners, namely Walcott and Sir Arthur Lewis.



Sir Arthur Lewis



The young Derek Walcott

Rural life dominates the mainly agricultural island. However, power has been focussed in 'urban' Castries and, largely remains so. Colour indicators of degrees of European genes eg. light skinned; 'good hair' etc. are largely still in favour of relatedness to Europeans as indicators of power and relatedness to Africans eg. dark skinned and 'grainy' hair as markers of lack of power. Although gender generally implies the greater power of men in Saint Lucia, women, as illustrated in Walcott's poems also wield a lot of power and influence. Although age, in the past was a guarantee of being respected, in modern St Lucia it is a marker of vulnerability, with little guarantee of respect. There are 2 political parties, Labour and UWP, representing, very broadly, the Labour and Conservative perspectives.

2:1 Land

Walcott is not a landowning name in Saint Lucia eg. like Valmont. Walcott is not a money owning name in Saint Lucia. He was born in the capital Castries in 1930. He was educated at Saint Mary's College, Castries, Saint Lucia 1941-47. He is light skinned (indicating European ancestors). He is of the older generation (now at the great age of 80+). His politics are unknown and he has occupied a status above politics in Saint Lucia.



Roderick (d. 2000), Pam (d. 2010), Derek Walcott

Saint Lucians generally owned more land per head of population at the end of slavery due to meteyage/share cropping, selling their military/political alliance to the competing French and English (cf St Kitts where all the land, in the same period was owned by approximately 6 White families).

Land was also related to money and the right to be part of the legislature, leaving, for example, Free Coloureds owning one sixth of all slaves in Saint Lucia, over half the rental of Castries and half of all registered shipping in 1831 (Jeremie, J 1831: 50-51; Gasper, B 1979:8; Dalphinis, M 1980:pt. 3, ch.1). The Free Coloureds were mainly located in Castries and Soufriere .

In education Walcott is part of the Saint Lucian educational elite, having firstly had a secondary education, in a period when such education was only available to those who won scholarships and those who could pay.



(l-r) Derek Walcott, Michael Chastenet, Roderick Walcott, George Odum

In being male, particularly from the earlier generation, there was a perspective that men should be fully men, both sexually and in mental spirit. In politics the poet's stance remains fiercely independent. He cursed off the politicians who wrecked the dream of Federation. He has created his art in the Caribbean ie. within the physical and political constraints of 'developing' countries. I have

not known of any intransitory adhesion to a political party. He has worked with all Saint Lucian parties in power.

3:0 Saint Lucia Hote ek Vil (Uplands and Town)



Lawoz and Magwit Festivals in Vil (and Hote)

Hote- the majority of the island has traditionally been viewed as a place of ignorance ie. 'country bouki' or of those opposed to European rule ie neg mawon

Vil-the minority town of Castries. Centre of power and viewed traditionally as the centre for the elite



A view of Castries (Vil)

Walcott, although born in vil embraces hote. The poems are generally mainly on the landscape of hote, and in vil, his heroes/heroines are mainly from hote eg fishermen eg. Hector.

Although some focus is made on the characters of Vil in Another Life, for example, Weeks the Barbadian Garveyite, Vaughn the drunkard, "Midas, Monsieur August Manoir pillar of business and the church" (2004:20) and "Ligier reprieved murderer", the overall sketch of characters (2004: 16-

22) is an introduction also to many of the characters he will develop more fully in *Omeros*, for example, Helen, who is the essence of Hote.

Indeed, the characters of *Vil* are only a step from Hote, due to the very nature of Saint Lucia:

“One step beyond the city was the bush” (2004:25)

In *Sea Grapes* (1976: 47), the identification of Hote and a beautiful woman is made, “gens betassion, belle ti fille betassion” (country people, beautiful country girl).

In *Sea Grapes* (1976: 55), Walcott takes on the consistent theme of his friend Saint Omer, of painting God and religion through the faces of Saint Lucian peasants, from Hote “.....looking in at the windows the real faces of angels”. Walcott (2004:152) embraces this mission in words instead of paint, and as a blessing:

“We are blest with a virginal,

unpainted world

with Adam’s task of

giving things their names”...

Hote and its characters, through this process of naming, identification and ownership, enjoy a deification not felt by the characters of *Vil* and its religion, who are, instead, ironically critiqued, for example, “Joumard the foul thief with his cockerel’s strut” (2004:19);

“One step beyond the church door stood the devil”

4:0 Walcott and the Land

Like many others before him, Walcott inherits an African identification between himself and the land. The land and Walcott are one. Many of his poems are either located in Saint Lucia or refer to Saint Lucia eg. The Castaway begins with the personae identifying with all Saint Lucians living on land and defecating:

“Morning: contemplative evacuation, considering...

We end in earth, from earth began.

In our own entrails, genesis”

In Omeros, the trees know of the murderous intent of the tree cutters:

“Once wind bring the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, *their* leaves start shaking

the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,

because they could see the axes in our own eyes”.

While some may see this trait as partly the trait of a 'nature poet, identifying with nature', the identity with Saint Lucia has remained life-long and probably beyond his allocated mortal span of years.

It is one that takes in the sea, which is in every nook and cranny of the island:

"To let a salt sun scour

The brain as harsh as coral" (Crusoe's Island)

Our island home's totality of green pulses through whole volumes of poetry eg.:

"In a Green Night"

Most African perceptions of land are about a chain of being linking the gods, ancestors and people to the living eg. in the recounting of the views of Saint Lucian slaves about to be hung but who believe that Saint Lucian Tchenbwa would save them (Breen, H.H 1884) and in the Saint Lucian Kele ceremony: An di yo.. , where the Africans spoke to their ancestors in Africa in Saint Lucia and continued in recent times .

Walcott's (2004: 52) identification of the land, is however, partly as a committed translator of its beauty and its Creole language ("brackish dialect"):

"But drunkenly, or secretly, we sung.....

That we would never leave

the island

until we had put down, in paint,

in words,

as palmists learn the network of

a hand,

all of sunken deep-choked

ravines,

every neglected, self-pitying

inlet

muttering in brackish dialect"

5:0 Walcott and the People

Walcott is both personally involved in the people as well as being an observer of them. He is a participant in turning the trees into canoes:

“I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands
to wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,
but I fire one more white rum.” (Omeros, 1990, p. 3)



St Lucian boats

He is genetically placed in Saint Lucian society:

“O so you is Walcott?
you is Roddy brother?

Teacher Alix son?” (In Sea Grapes, 1976)

As a true Saint Lucian (tet ek pye), he is not defined only by his status as famous poet, but in terms of his relatives

He identifies with the people mainly through female personae eg. Ma Kilman:

“Ma Kilman, Bon Dieu punir’ous,

Pour qui raison parce qui’ous entrer trop religion” (In Sea Grapes, 1976)

And Helen in Omeros:

...”What the white manager mean

to say she was too rude, ‘cause she dint take no shit

From white people and some of them tourist”...

And Saint Lucian women’s disciplined labour as a key reference point to his own poetic labour:

“...each spine as straight as a pole
and with a strength that never altered its rhythm...
Look they climb, and no one knows them;..
as a child wounded by their power and beauty
is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice”

Given the African genetics of females in contrast to the European genetics of males in common with many conquered societies (cf Celtic female genes in contrast with Viking male genes in North East England), Walcott’s sense of female belonging to the island is understandable.

Indeed Walcott pays direct homage in his poems (Homecomings) to the late Sesenne, a great Saint Lucian female singer (griot) whose songs kept oral our traditions alive.



Ma Sesenne Saint Lucian Chantwelle (Singer)

His male reference points are, however, more in the minority. They are firstly Methodist/Anglican, in a predominantly Catholic Saint Lucia. They are also English in a mainly French referenced Saint Lucia:

“even on Grass Street with our Methodist chapel” (Omeros)

“where my bastard father christened me for his shire:

Warwick. The bard’s county....

‘What was Warwick doing, transplanting Warwickshire?’ ” (Omeros)

While embracing the Creole, Walcott wants it spelled using the French orthography eg. Bon dieu, not Bondye. He wants to give it a legitimacy through French and Latin, not one inherent in the language itself and not one inherent in its African origins and influences. While using the orature of Creole eg. Man Kilman...was a conte(oral genre) heard on the back of a truck, that African element is not a celebrated part of Walcott’s stylistics. It is its Latinate écriture that matters to Walcott, ..punir, not

pini (to punish). He has at times introduced French items, not in Creole, to represent Creole, for example “pas sait guerir” (2004:27), cf. pa sav jewi, meaning ‘do not know how to cure’ and “Alors, mes amis, I mean you flush” (2004:184), cf kompemwen.....He gives an accurate picture of St Lucian creole relexified using English, eg. “when rain bar us” (1972: 183), cf le lapli bawe nou, meaning ‘when rain blocked us’; and “That lighing would make devil sweat cold” (1972: 187) as well as creole words, loaned into English, “That it can make some sinners deparler” (‘speak a lot’ 1972: 180)and the use of creole in French orthography, as in “Tigre, tigre choux brule” (1972:202), cf Tig, tig, tchu bwile-meaning ‘Tiger, Tiger, bottom burned’, of Saint Lucian Creole folktales.

6:0 Assessing Impact and Legacy

Walcott is a crafted poet. His poems are the results of working and re-working his poetic material. He has the Protestant notion of using his God given gifts to the full. He has a scale of vision that takes on the world. He is an independent spirit that sees the Caribbean as a zone for creation, not a colony wanting only to consume or mimic. His challenge to all Saint Lucians is to create from the axis of what we have, a world class product which is our own and only our own. His challenge is to also find out what we are like and to explore that with hard work and discipline (be it poetry or painting).

He accepts himself and lives. He challenges us to do the same.



Saint Lucian Musicians

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