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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/10159>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.10159
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2006
Number of pages: 7-11
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Bruce King, "Contextualizing Walcott", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 28.2 | 2006, Online since 15 January 2022, connection on 27 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/10159> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.10159>



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Contextualizing Walcott

Walcott was born in 1930, a year which is a cultural marker of those who became major writers of the new nations which followed the end of the European empires. Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa’Thiongo, V. S. Naipaul, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, were born in 1930 or a few years to either side of it. Such writers inherited the language, culture, and literature of the British which conflicted with the cultural assertion that was part of the anticolonial politics of the time. Their work can be located at a specific point in history. As the result of the collapse of Europe after World War 2, the long struggle against European empires had been largely won or was being won, and many new nations were in the process of formation. Much of the work of these writers is concerned with the problems of cultural and political formation in the late colonial and early independence period. As part of anticolonial cultural assertion, they make use of local forms of speech and local mythology, and introduce peasants in their work as examples of the folk. They were concerned with revising history so that it had a local rather than imperial focus. While critical of colonial rule, the writers born around 1930 had already witnessed the new political leaders and political parties of the late colonial period. They would be critical of the corruption and politics of the new elites who inherited power from the Europeans. As the new nations were dragged into the Cold War between the West and Communists, the writers and intellectuals chose sides.

Raised during the Great Depression and during a time when Marxism was intellectually fashionable, the writers would identify with socialism in some way, although this could range from the pro-Russian stance of Ngugi to the vague African socialism of Soyinka. Even Naipaul in the early phase of his career spoke of himself as a kind of Socialist, a kind he did not define. In general the writers were not part of what might be described as the postcolonial phase of liberation which followed; the rights of gays, women, transsexuals, animals, and the environment have not figured predominantly in their work. That many of the writers now teach at American universities shows how the United States with its free market liberalism replaced the closed market economies of European imperialism as the dominant power in the World during the second half of the past century.

The writers were part of a generation being prepared to inherit the colonies of the European empire. They were educated at elite British style private schools, attended the new universities being formed locally, or went to England

on scholarships. Many would teach at the new universities. Some of the writers, such as Soyinka, were from local elite families; Walcott and Naipaul are from poorer branches of such families. At school and university, they met and knew those who would form the new governing elites. While they would criticize the new political leadership, the writers were themselves close enough to power that their opposition made them both dangerous and allowed them to survive.

Because of the period in which they were raised, these writers have shared themes and obsessions. There is the basic conflict between Europe and the local in regard to politics and culture, especially noticeable in the treatment of history, language, society, landscape, mythology, religion, and sometimes literary form. Another central topic is race, the rejection of the white supremacist justification for ruling other peoples, and the centrality, for black people in the Americas, of the history of displacement from Africa, enslavement, transportation to the new world, the brutality of plantation life, and the poverty and humiliations which followed emancipation. There are different versions of this according to region of the empires and races involved, but the stories are largely similar as seen from the Asian Indians who as indentured labourers replaced Africans after emancipation. The often antagonistic relationships between various tribes, ethnicities, religions, and races form a part of the new literatures of Africa, the Caribbean, and Pacific.

Education and contemporary tastes meant that the writers shared familiarity with the Greek and Roman classics and British literature. The modernist literature of W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce carried prestige at the time and remained challenging. That almost all the artists of this generation either at first imitated or later developed from modernism marks a boundary between their work and the earlier amateur out of date belles lettres and social realism of the colonial period.

The Irish Renaissance was an example of how the new nationalist cultural assertion with its revival of folk traditions could be housed within modernism. American literature was more immediate, more part of modernism, and more likely to treat of problems of identity and the existential than recent British literature which remained concerned with social issues and manners. Some recent European, especially French, writers were also influential. Walcott, Naipaul, Soyinka refer to existentialist themes in their work. Such influences, ranging from the European classics and Existentialism to local speech and folk customs, came together in the new literatures and gave them part of their character as they began to celebrate, discuss, or criticize local society, politics, and culture.

The intellectual circles in which the writers moved had a sense of being part of a cultural and political change. Walcott read in French or in translation such French Caribbean writers as Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon; he knew the writers who had already started to be published such as Edgar Mittelholzer,

George Lamming, and most important, Frank Colleymore who edited the influential *Bim* from Barbados, in which Walcott published poetry and in which his early self-published works were reviewed. Later Walcott in West Indian newspapers wrote book reviews of Naipaul, Wilson Harris, and others; he was invited to various Commonwealth and black literature conferences and often wrote newspaper articles about them. His early work in turn was reviewed by other Caribbean writers.

There was a similar excitement in the other arts. As modern dancers turned away from classical ballet they looked for sources in folk dancing, African dance, and the African-influenced dances of the Caribbean. Painters and sculptors brought modernist techniques to African and Caribbean subject matter. A modern African and West Indian theatre began from such sources as the revival of the verse play, the example of John M. Synge, Yeats and other dramatists of the Irish Renaissance, and the Little Theatre Movement. Soyinka and J. P. Clark in Nigeria, and Walcott in the Caribbean had major roles in developing this new regional theatre. The Rockefeller Foundation, recognizing the importance of the new nations during the Cold War, extended to Africa and the Caribbean the assistance it was already giving to the Little Theatre Movement in the USA and Canada.

That the new literatures developed alongside other regional modern arts meant that a small number of people often did many tasks that elsewhere would be in the hands of specialists. Walcott, for example, is a poet, playwright, theatre director, scenic designer, painter, and has had troupes of dancers in his theatre company. Besides being writers, Soyinka and Clark are also theatre directors who use dance in their plays.

One consequence of needing to be an all-rounder is that the many arts, genres, and kinds in which Walcott works influence and bleed into each other. Walcott the painter influences Walcott the poet, dramatist, set designer and theatre director. Examples vary from landscapes and still lifes in verse to poems about a painter and painting, such as *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), about Camille Pissarro, which is published with reproductions of Walcott's paintings. Such influences from one art form to another work both ways. While Walcott's painterly vision shapes his plays, his being a poet means he often writes plays with beautiful verse and weak plots; his experience working with actors in the theatre contributes to the pauses and pitches in the poems.

As the new literatures became part of contemporary culture, they went through many of the same fashions as art elsewhere, but often with different subject matter and themes. The writers were not only writing back to Europe in its own artistic genres and kinds, they were also reshaping the European tradition for their own purposes.

I want next to mention less general, more specific contexts such as Walcott's family and St Lucia. He often refers to his four grandparents and to

the fact that two were white and two descended from slaves. His origins include two important families in the West Indies, as well as women descended from slaves. This makes his social position complicated. Many of his works concern the position of the mulatto in revolutionary black societies.

His mother and father were part of a small minority of cultured English speakers in an otherwise black, French and Creole speaking island dominated by a Roman Catholic church although a British colony. Walcott was brought up hearing Shakespeare's iambic pentameter and also the imagery and rhythms of the Bible and Methodist hymns alongside the spoken French creole of the streets. During the 1930s and '40s intellectuals were interested in folk cultures: Walcott and his friends wanted to preserve local customs and creole speech. In St Lucia the Catholic church regarded the Methodists as heretics encouraging deviations from Catholic practice as well as the use of English. Walcott knew he would need to seek his livelihood abroad. He could not support himself in St Lucia as a painter, nor would be given a permanent position at the one, Catholic-ruled college. He became James Joyce's artist in exile.

Walcott was in the first Arts intake at the newly formed University of West Indies in Jamaica. They were a small, specially selected group of students who would soon become political and cultural leaders of the region. He was already famous as a poet and dramatist because of his early publications and regarded by many as a genius. It was felt that the formation of West Indian theatre groups would somehow culturally and socially create links between the many peoples, religions, and societies of the proposed West Indian Federation, and Walcott soon became central to such plans. He followed his friends and classmates to Trinidad where from 1958-62 the new West Indian Federation had its capital and where he hoped to create a world class theatre company. Trinidad became his second home, and he lived there for over twenty years. This was the period of attempted black power and Marxist revolutions, and of local tyrants wanting to prove they were blacker than black which, as can be seen from 'The Schooner *Flight*' contributed to Walcott's leaving for the USA, where since 1980 he has been a university professor. Although the Federation lasted only four years, it influenced his sense of the region as a nation with a spectrum of cultures and races.

His American context is New York, or the New York Boston connection, a connection built around publishing houses, major universities, overlapping literary and intellectual circles and such publications as the *New Yorker*, *Partisan Review* and the *New York Review of Books* and non-profit organizations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation. The New York Jewish Boston Brahmin connection came about during the Cold War when many American intellectuals broke with Communism. Walcott moved in a circle of other poets and intellectuals, including Joseph Brodsky, Susan Sontag, and Mark Strand. It made him an international writer with a wider range of interests, as can be

seen in 'Forest of Europe'. His publisher, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, was the most important publishing house for poetry in the USA and a major influence on American intellectual life, especially as it had a talent for spotting European and other writers who would become famous. It is said to have published more winners of the Nobel Prize in literature than any other publisher in the world. Living in the USA, Walcott became more conscious of its legacy of racism towards American Indians as well as African-Americans. Whereas in the Caribbean Walcott would be regarded as mulatto, in the USA he is thought black.

Starting in 1983, he began returning regularly to St Lucia, which once more became subject matter for his poetry. His style was now more varied in registers, dictions, metaphor, allusion, and rhythm. He built metaphor on metaphor on metaphor in a unique manner. It is as if by leaving the West Indies Walcott found his own distinctive voice heard in such poems as 'Cul de Sac Valley' with its St Lucian names of trees, the powerful blending of European and Calypsonian satire in 'Spoiler's Return', or the vision of divine love in 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace.' Many of the poems are concerned with his divorce, children, loves, exile, and nostalgia for a receding past as he became aware of aging.

Walcott's central story is about himself as a mixed-race prodigy who early on swears to devote himself as painter or poet to giving classical stature to St Lucia, but his talent misleads him abroad and to another life and fame; eventually he will return to his island paradise but he is fallen, perhaps alienated, sees filth and slums where he once saw beauty, recalls friends now dead, recognizes that he also will die and that his other home is heaven.

The man who leaves home, becomes a wanderer, who remembers and wants to return to his first love but in the process is himself changed by needing to survive in the world, is both a version of Ulysses and a secularization of the Christian notion of a fall from paradise in which life is a journey through temptations towards restoration. There are many allusions in Walcott's writing and interviews to the notion of life as a process of fallen mankind working for salvation. It is a mistake to see Walcott only in terms of decolonization, the Caribbean, or his being a wanderer. Another context is survival, success and the guilt that follows.

Bruce KING