

The Particularity of Place in Derek Walcott's Bush

Ben Jefferson

For imagination and body to move with original instinct, we must begin again from the bush. That return journey, with all its horror of rediscovery, means that annihilation is what is known.

-Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Says"

This paper examines depictions of the bush in the Saint Lucian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott's "early" poetry. I read Walcott's bush with the issue of place and space in mind, and argue that, despite the way it has been imagined as space, for Walcott, the bush is first and foremost place or places. I show how Walcott deals with narratives and ideologies that construct the bush as space in different ways. European colonisers of the Americas often viewed the bush as space. It was a space that "needed" to be appropriated, surveyed, demarked, named and transformed into plantation. Additionally, as George Lamming has noted, in the European imagination, the bush is the site of fears and anxieties surrounding "savagery" and "primitive" violence (33). In addition to arguing that Walcott's bush is intrinsically place, I show how he teases out and invests the bush with meaning; that is, I ask what does the bush represent to Walcott (and in the Caribbean in general) and why? In his early career, Walcott associates the bush with Amerindian peoples (extant or extinct) and their legacy; specifically, through the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris' understanding of Walcott's poems, I deal with the legacy of Amerindian philosophies in terms of ways of knowing and ways of knowing place.

In this paper, the term "bush" denotes both a literary/ideological and geographical topos. In this sense, "the bush" is simultaneously a type of place or space, *and* the way in which such places have been imagined.¹ For many Caribbeans, the bush symbolises indigenous resistance. In Guyana, the vast expanse of rainforest and savanna is now designated reservation ground for the country's extant indigenous tribes. The bush is also associated with black freedom, and such is the strength of this association that in Guyanese vernacular, "to bush it" means to run quickly, like a slave escaping (Allsop 122). In Dominica, which incorporates a Carib Territory, the island's bushy hills enabled the Carib's survival from the threat of conquering forces. Similarly, Maroons (communities of escaped slaves and their descendants) across the region were able to survive their would-be captors by hiding, and sometimes settling, in interior bushlands. While the bush may have been a site of particular colonial anxieties and fears, for the colonised, it often represented a place of safety or escape.

In 1968, while touring with his theatre company, Walcott visited Guyana. The country's vast, non-urban areas inspired a poem that he originally called 'The Surveyor'. From its original publication in *London Magazine*, Walcott redrafted and extended the piece into a six-sequence poem called "Guyana," which was included in his 1969 poetry collection *The Gulf*. In dropping the title 'The Surveyor' from the first section, Walcott indicates a shift in emphasis from a solitary figure to the country/nation. Before its independence in 1966, Guyana was known as British Guiana. Importantly, in a poem that could be set at any time during the last two centuries, Walcott's spelling indicates that the poem's subject is the independent nation, not the British colony. In the poem's first section, a lone surveyor struggles through Guyana's interior. As the impossible nature of his task dawns on him, and the section comes to an end, a moving and unidentified

“shape” begins to come into the surveyor’s field of view. Walcott does not indicate whether the “shape” is predatory or “benign,” and the poet never reveals the surveyor’s fate. The second section, “The Bush,” describes a poet’s journey through Guyana’s bush. In the poem’s subsequent sections, Walcott explores different sites in Guyana (waterfalls, a town and Guyana’s capital, Georgetown). When read together, the sequence may be seen as a meditation on the nature of the emerging postcolonial nation. The urban areas in the poems are dirty and oppressive, while critics have generally read the “untouched” bush areas as offering a new beginning. As I read it, “Guyana” is not *solely* a poem about nation, or even this particular nation, but it *also* forms a meditation on place (and of course the relationship between place and nation). More specifically, each segment deals with different approaches to, or ways of experiencing, different places.

The shift from Guiana to Guyana that Walcott deals with in the poem obliquely gestures towards one of the major “problems” faced by nations emerging from colonial rule. In an essay on colonial landscapes in the Caribbean, Helen Tiffin argues that:

[F]or colonized peoples who are also ancestrally migrant, coming to terms with the “new” landscape frequently involves a journey back through the depictions of that land by the imperium whose perceptions and representations of it exert a powerful hegemonic influence on the colonized.
(199)

When a nation has been created and defined *as* a colony, the transition to independence often requires a certain strategic unmaking of colonial ideas. In other words, before European “discovery” and settlement there was no such country as Guyana/Guiana.² As Wilson Harris puts it in *The Guyana Quartet*, “[t]he map of the savannahs was a dream. The names Brazil and Guyana were colonial conventions” (24). For Afro-Caribbeans, whose presence in the Americas arose from the slave trade, the relationship to the country has a specific set of issues that other colonised nations do not necessarily face. If an ‘ancestrally migrant’ person unmakes colonial presences and agencies within and on a landscape, or favours a pre-colonial state, they privilege a landscape in which they have no presence. This “issue” affects postcolonial projects of psychological decolonisation (Oliver 47-60) in which the decolonisation of political institutions is accompanied by ideological decolonisation of the mind. In “Guyana,” Walcott takes a different approach to “journey[ing] back” through the country’s history: instead of taking the steps of decolonising the land, he presents his reader with a landscape that has never been colonised. Walcott’s circumnavigation of the issues of colonisation and decolonisation relates to one of the important applications or implications of his view of place and space: by removing the bush from discourses of colony (colonial space) and postcolonialism (narratives of nation space as “a meaningful whole” [Agnew 3]) Walcott suggests that place exists before the creation of nation.

The majority of Guyana’s population live in a proportionally small³ coastal area. The vast majority of the country is bush (forest, rainforest) and savanna. This area is divided into reservation grounds for Guyana’s extant indigenous tribes. The country’s borders by Suriname, Brazil and especially Venezuela have been subject to numerous disputes between colonial powers. The post-independence governments made attempts to ultimately settle the borders. However, these were short lived, and the agreements made between the countries in the area remain unstable. In this respect, the interior itself complicates any perceived relationship between nation and place; that is, the

boundaries of Guyana and its surrounding countries as a possessed and politically controlled space have been subject to continued flux and change without, necessarily, having any effect on either the contested areas or the people who inhabit them. In order to claim dominion over the land and consolidate its borders, European metropolitan governments funded numerous cartographical expeditions into these countries' interiors; this project, as Walcott will show, continued beyond the days of European control and became a part of postcolonial governments' strategies for nation-making. The complex and fascinating history of surveying in Guyana/Guiana is fully explored in D. Graham Burnett's *Masters of All They Surveyed* (2000). In his book, Burnett uncovers the discrepancies between the intentions and interests of the metropolitan institutions and the experiences of the individual surveyors. In Lefebvrian terms, while the surveyors may have travelled with the intention of knowing the land as a way of possessing it (as *savoir*), their experiences forced them to know the land through the familiarity of living within it (as *connaissance*). Here quoting William Boelhower, Burnett argues that:

the act of mapping demands "the *concealment of place* and image." The landmark might anchor the surveyor's fixed points, but only by sublating local space within the global context of the cartographic field could the map achieve its authority, becoming an *overview* instead of merely a *view*.
(167)

In other words, mapping transforms place into space. However, the transformation is hidden and space is assumed to be the starting point. As J.B. Harley has argued, the map "hides and denies its social conventions at the same time as it legitimates" (282). Seemingly, colonial cartographers in the Americas took part in place-making exercises: boundaries were drawn, landmarks were "discovered" and names were given. For the colonists, until surveyed and mapped, the bush was terra incognita. Space, as an unknown place, was both symbolically and actually dangerous. Mapping was an exercise in "making safe." Of course, the phrase "terra incognita" carries culture-bound assumptions: just because the land was unknown to Europeans, it did not mean that the land was unknown to everyone. To map the Americas, therefore, demanded that the Amerindians' places be transformed into space; this "space" was then seen as the starting point for a transformation into colonial "places." During the "heights" of European colonial rule, and the beginnings of serious boundary disputes in the Americas, surveying began to legitimate itself as a "neutral" science (Burnett 116-7) Walcott's surveyor, and other characters in "Guyana," also pose as men of science.

The poem's opening line: "The surveyor straightens from his theodolite" (l.1) immediately situates the surveyor's body within place. The theodolite signifies a scientific approach to place: one uses a theodolite to measure a place as a set of vertical and horizontal angles. Here, the bush's topography is reduced to its structure rather than its meaning. If, as one critic notes, "modern Western cultures have tended to make scientific knowledge synonymous with rationality," (Entrikin 30) the theodolite becomes symbolic of larger "Western" discourses that disavow "unscientific" ways of knowing as "irrational." As soon as Walcott establishes the surveyor as a man of scientific means, he begins to unmake the binary opposition between science and unscientific belief systems. As the surveyor looks away from his theodolite, the "cyphers" down its side transform into "soldier ants [...] in the shadow of a new god arriving over Aztec anthills" (ll.4-5). Although the landscape may appear empty of other human inhabitants than the

surveyor, Walcott reads it in order to uncover the memories of pre-Columbian peoples and civilizations. In association with the surveyor's scientific approach to the landscape, echoing a moment of colonial encounter, Walcott also depicts him as an intrusive figure. In this sense, the surveyor's ideological approach is further identified as both belonging to a European tradition, and as being inappropriate to the Guyanese interior. Because of his attitude towards the bush, or the unknown, the "modern" surveyor, in the manner of "an archaic photographer" seems to reenact a centuries-old moment. By placing figures from different time periods next to each other, Walcott uses the image of the surveyor, the simile of the archaic photographer, and the memory of Aztec presences to form something like a hall of mirrors that places the first colonial encounters into "the abyss." In other words, within the place of the bush, Walcott creates inter-reflective associations between figures from different time periods: the Aztecs from the moment of colonial encounter, the "archaic" European ethnographic photographer from nineteenth century colonial rule, and the surveyor from the modern-day Guyana. Here, the palimpsestic bush seems to reject Western-based concepts of linear/progressive history.

In the next stanza, Walcott develops this connection between the surveyor and the bush's hidden past. Under the heat of the sun the surveyor's "vision whirls with dervishes" (l.7). Sufi whirling, which has caught the "Western" Orientalist imagination (Sharafuddin 226), is a religious act. The dance is designed to release the participant of their *nafs-i-ammara* (destructive ego).⁴ The surveyor begins to lose his visually centred approach to place (inherent in the theodolite). He does not whirl like a dervish, but "with" dervishes, suggesting the release of the visual bias. As one critic has suggested, "it is the imperial privileging of visual power, as opposed to other modes of sensory perception, which may ultimately consign [...] visible cartographies to failure" (Döring 108). In other words, sight is associated with power; in the dominant ideology, to see is to know and to know is to possess. The sun here has all but blinded the surveyor, forcing him to release his ego. In *Caliban's Reason*, a study into Afro-Caribbean philosophy that includes a section on Wilson Harris as a philosopher, Paget Henry discusses the idea of ego in African and Afro-Caribbean thinking. For Henry, "Transcending" the ego is crucial to African spirituality. Importantly, it is also a vital aspect of Amerindian shamanistic practices. In Henry's reading of Harris' philosophy, this transcendence of the ego is necessary to post-colonial reconstruction (110). Instead of turning, or attempting to turn, the land itself into a *tabula rasa*, Walcott instead wipes clean the surveyor's mind.

Walcott describes the "archaic photographer [as] hooded in shade [...] screwing a continent to his eye" (ll.8-9). The "archaic photographer" in the "jungle" recalls nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnography.⁵ Arguably, ethnography from this period relied on and produced a Self/Other dichotomy. The ethnographer posed as a neutral or disinterested party and the "science" of ethnography tried to place itself outside/away from its subject. Similarly, although Walcott places the surveyor firmly within the landscape, the surveyor himself tries to put himself outside of the place. One aspect of landscape, or way of defining it, is that viewers perceive themselves as separate from it; once one enters into a landscape it becomes something else. As one critic has put it, "we do not live in landscapes—we look at them" (Cresswell 11). By trying to turn place into landscape, the surveyor, as an "archaic photographer" places himself in "shade" or darkness. In addition to the sinister connotations of the word "hooded," Walcott suggests that the photographer/surveyor's stance "outside" of the

landscape puts them in “the dark.” Modernity, as understood from a Eurocentric perspective, is often associated with Enlightenment science and rationality. Ironically, the surveyor’s science makes him unenlightened. Although the surveyor tries to document a landscape without him in it, Walcott’s own landscape contains the surveyor; he becomes the focus of our attention. In this way, Walcott interrogates the stance of the modern-day surveyor and the “archaic photographer.”

“[S]crewing a continent to [one’s] eye” suggests a variety of things. The photographer’s vision is too myopic to fully take in the vastness of the landscape; instead of admitting this, he diminishes the landscape so that it can enter into his vision. The alien, or new, landscape is altered so that it agrees with pre-conceived ideas. Through trying to *understand* a “world” through observation instead of participation, the photographer/surveyor ends up *altering* that world. “[S]crewing” may also suggest “fucking;” “screwing a continent” becomes an aggressive and destructive action.

In the second sequence of “Guyana,” “The Bush,” Walcott offers an alternative way of experiencing the forest. In this section, two silent figures walk through the bush. As they progress, the poem shifts its attention to a flock of indigenous birds’ ascent to the sky. The closing lines refocus on one of the figures:

Thoughts fell from him like leaves.

He followed, that was all,
his mind, one step behind,
pacing the poem, going where it was going. (ll.8-11)

The figure here is a counterpart to the surveyor. As with the surveyor, Walcott does not give this figure any name or biographical detail. Like the surveyor, this figure is also travelling through Guyana’s bush. The character, who, inspired by Paget Henry’s distinction between Caribbean “historicists” and “poeticists” (93), I call “the poet,” has an entirely different experience and understanding of the bush than the surveyor. While the surveyor’s intention was to make, measure, or even possess the bush, the poet’s role here is almost entirely passive. There are two ways of reading these lines, neither of which excludes the other. The poet’s journey through the bush inspires him to compose a poem. As he walks along, he introspectively composes lines. However, Walcott’s wording suggests that the poem is not separate from the bush: the poem is the bush itself. While the surveyor’s approach left him vulnerable and confused, the poet seems more attuned to the place, a figure who is aware of the landscape’s “resonance[s]” and sees it as an “alphabet” or text. In other words, the poet seems to listen to the bush, and through this, he can interpret the bush’s language. Here we encounter a different form of knowledge than the surveyor’s. Both Paget Henry (in *Caliban’s Reason*) and Walter D. Mignolo (especially in his 2000 study *Local Histories/ Global Designs*) discuss Othered philosophies (African and African diasporic, Amerindian) as intrinsically counter-hegemonic or rebellious ways of thinking. Henry also charts these philosophies through religious discourse, and, in this sense, experiencing place in a “spiritual” way is also a rebellious act. In its simplest sense, Walcott’s “poet” passively, and silently, resists the dominant, or privileged, way of knowing in favour of local knowledge. As Mignolo argues, building on the ideas of Anibal Quijano, in colonial hegemony:

the entire planet, including its continental division (Africa, America, Europe),
becomes articulated in such [self-supporting] production[s] of knowledge and

classificatory apparatus. Eurocentricism becomes, therefore, a metaphor to describe the coloniality of power from the perspective of subalternity. From the epistemological perspective, European local knowledge and histories have been projected to global designs, from the dream of an *Orbis Universalis Christianus* to Hegel's belief in a universal history that could be narrated from a European (and therefore Hegemonic perspective). (17)

Not only did the "victors" write history, but also geography, philosophy and other fields of enquiry and authority. The "coloniality of power" suggests that power, in a postcolonial state, is the inheritance of colonialism. In other words, even when power is not colonial, it has an element of "coloniality" embedded within it. One of Mignolo's strategies against this Eurocentric hegemony is to foster and privilege "border thinking" in which "the goal is to erase the distinction between the knower and the known [...] to overcome the distinction between subject and object" (18). Here, "border thinking" stands as an inherently deconstructualising activity; that is, it posits borderlines as an ideologically constructed binary, and seeks to find a place that both straddles and in turn dismantles these constructed borders (Mignolo acknowledges geographical, linguistic, ethnic, and especially philosophical borders as places for "border thinking"). Walcott's poet achieves the dissolution of this distinction. Through the medium of the poem, the "knower" and the "known" are unified.

The poem "Air" immediately precedes the "Guyana" sequence in *The Gulf*. Although Walcott does not name the "rain forest" described in the poem, Patricia Ismond locates it in Guyana (61). "Air" deals with the forest in terms of an ahistorical "space." The poem begins with an epigraph from J.A. Froude's *The English in The West Indies* (1888):

There has been romance, but it has been the romance of pirates and outlaws.
The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions.
There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own.

Froude's work is an account of his travels to the West Indies, specifically to assess the "worth" of England's colonies and the effects of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. To the modern reader, Froude's text is unpalatably jingoistic and racist. The ideas expressed here were not particular to Froude. Froude's ideology makes assumptions regarding civilization, settlement and culture and the interrelation between these three things. Arguably, the Caribbean people were not viewed as a "true" people because the Caribbean was not seen as a true place. This idea has been internalised by many Caribbean people, for example in another (in)famous quotation by the Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul:

The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies. (20)

Walcott examines this "nothing[ness]" and apparently ineffable history from a different perspective. In "Air," Walcott's bush is a place of "no visible history, because the fierce tropical climate has dissolved all trace of past events" (Breslin 17). The poem begins with a description of the "rain forest" as an "omnivorous," indifferent and insatiable beast (ll.1-7). The bush is seen as responsible for the destruction of "two minor yellow races and/ half of a black [race]" (ll.12-3). As the poem progresses, Walcott identifies these

“minor [...] races” as Carib (l.27) and “the Arawak/ who leaves not the lightest fern-trace” (ll.29-30). He closes the poem with a perplexing and epitaphic line: “There is too much nothing here.” Seemingly, Walcott agrees with Naipaul and Froude: there is no evidence of culture or creation in the Caribbean landscape and in the poem there are certainly “no people.” The poem is about destruction or “negation,” (Ismond 61-6) as opposed to creation. However, the language that Walcott uses to depict his “empty” landscape reveals a different perspective to that of Naipaul or Froude. Phrases like “minor yellow races and/ half of a black” would not look out of place in colonial European writings on the Americas. Many of Walcott’s descriptive terms for the bush are also borrowed or reported: the description of the forest as “unconverted” (l.17) suggests both conversion of bush-land into plantation and religious conversion by European missionaries; the bush is described as “cannibal” (l.25) and the description of the Caribs as “god-refusing” (l.27) alludes to missionary activities in the American Tropics. Walcott only seems able to discuss an “empty” landscape in the language of colonisation. If there truly is “nothing” there, the poet knows where to assign the blame.

For many Caribbeans, the region’s indigenous peoples have become a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression (Wilson 211). Walcott’s depictions of the rainforest have led some critics to assert that he was ignorant of Amerindian survival in the Caribbean region. However, Walcott’s allusions to Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), which centres on a quest to find a group of Amerindian people, make this unlikely. Amerindians were not counted in Guyanese national censuses (Harris, “The Amerindian Legacy” 167), and Amerindian groups have been consistently marginalised within the region. Because of this, and until indigenous groups grew more vociferous in the late 1970s, many people on the Caribbean islands were unaware of the survival of Amerindian peoples and customs. If an indigenous presence represents resistance, but they are extinct, then the idea of resistance becomes problematic.⁶ That is, to celebrate a “failed” rebellion is to associate the very act of rebellion with failure. In “Air” Walcott begins to reject this line of thought by making the bush the place of indigenous memory. In the penultimate stanza, a “rainbird” is “like a hoarse/ warrior summoning his race/ from vaporous air” (ll. 34-6). Frantz Fanon famously described the colonial world as “a world of statues” (40). In other words, colonialism transforms and monumentalises a landscape. The statues display a particular version of history: conquistadors and faraway monarchs are considered worthy of memory; nameless slaves, “coolies,” indigenous people and even subaltern⁷ European travellers are not given the same privilege.⁸ In the bush, which does not contain such statues, Walcott constructs a different kind of monument. In “Air,” other, more subversive histories are ingrained within the landscape; these histories are perceptible via senses other than the highly privileged sense of sight. Walcott makes the bush the place of the Caribs and Arawaks, as such it defies colonial history and allows the Caribbean poet to experience a landscape that has been rid of associations of slavery or indenture.

In “Koenig of the River,” the penultimate poem in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1977), Walcott returns to the bush and again raises the same issues contained within his Guyana poems. In the poem, Koenig is the sole survivor of a shipwrecked group of missionaries. As Koenig travels upriver, he muses upon his fate and the fate of the British Empire; the suggestion is that they are the same. After an encounter with a spectral

“native,” Koenig’s boat seems to disappear into blankness. Bruce King has suggested that the poem is “about a Conradian explorer at the age of Empire who has lost any sense of mission or purpose and who will soon vanish from the pages of history” (355). An allusion to the Amerindian genocide (l.85) situates the river somewhere in the Americas, as opposed to Conrad’s African jungle. Koenig is also a missionary (ll.26-33), not an explorer; and it is vital to make the distinction between the two types of figure (missionary or explorer), and especially to differentiate their purpose for travel, in order to read the poem accurately. “Koenig of the River” bears many similarities with the surveyor section of “Guyana.” A lone traveller is lost in the bush; their purpose within the bush is tied to imperial designs of control and dominion; while there, they find themselves unable to alter the place; both of their fates are left unwritten. Most importantly, both pieces are about the relationship between a person and an alien place.

Koenig’s relationship with the river and its forested banks is complicated. Koenig vacillates between the extremes of arrogant contempt for the bush and deep respect for the place he is in. As a missionary, Koenig’s explicit intent is to alter the way of life and beliefs of the people living in the bush. While the surveyor’s activities of space-making and possession appear, to the surveyor at least, to be a “neutral” exercise, Koenig’s will-to-power over the tropical land is explicitly acknowledged within the poem by both Walcott and his character. Playing upon the meaning of his name (German for “King”), Koenig thinks of himself as the “king of rivers” (l.45). In the poem, Walcott links Koenig’s desire to dominate the place with his desire to dominate the people of that place. He describes the missionaries’ ambition “to expiate/ the sins of savages, to tame them as he would tame this river/ subtly, as it flowed, accepting its bends” (ll.27-9); the inference is that one cannot control people without controlling the place they live in. Christian missions posed as benevolent projects; however, alone on the river, Koenig discards this guise. Koenig views the other missionaries’ fatal ends as the direct result of “treating savages as if they were men” (l.33) and his contempt for the river is part of a larger belief system that disavows the human rights of tribal people.

Like the surveyor, Koenig finds that a priori intent and actual experience differ. Koenig forgets his original “civilising” “purpose” in the bush and is only able to remember that “it was noble” (l.36). Away from the other missionaries, and trapped in “terra incognita,” Koenig begins to develop a more complex relationship with the river. Koenig sings “to” the river (ll.23-4) and finds himself talking to the river, at one point he even asks the river its name (ll.67-8). One aspect of colonising, as a place-making exercise, was to name places. However, naming places was often an exercise in renaming; either through ignorance or arrogance, “native” names were often completely disavowed. When Koenig asks the river its name, he is more like Guyana’s poet than the surveyor. Talking to a river, and more importantly expecting it to answer, is an animistic practice. As such, through loneliness and the need to survive within the bush, Koenig begins to display the kind of thought processes that, as a missionary, he should be eradicating. For Walcott, therefore, the intrusive traveller *can* develop a respectful bond with the place he or she is in.⁹ Contrasting Amerindian belief systems that “celebrate” the earth by “blending *into* the earth and air” with the colonisers who proclaim “I own this earth,” Walcott has argued that “the emphasis on the capital ‘I’ in Western religion has caused a lot of damage- though Christ didn’t preach the aggression of an ‘I’” (qtd. in Burnett 110). For Walcott, it is a European understanding of Christianity, and the

Christian mission, that creates figures such as Koenig. This conception of Christianity is, for Walcott, not inherent in the religion itself; much of Koenig's crisis in the bush comes from the dissolution of his "aggressive 'I'" as it is subjected to the "earth and air." The discrepancy between Koenig's intentions and his experience again reflects the difference between a priori and a posteriori (local) knowledge. Like the surveyor's encounter with "Aztec anthills," Koenig also experiences the landscape's revenants. In a vision, which Koenig identifies as a "mirage," the missionary sees:

a schooner, foundered on black river mud,
[...] rising slowly up from the riverbed,
and a top-hatted native reading an inverted
newspaper. (ll.76-9)

In these lines, Walcott creates a set of different, but related ideas concerning place and, more specifically, ways of experiencing place. The "native," whom Koenig also identifies as a "nigger," seems to come equally from Koenig's imagination and from a place *beneath* the landscape's visible surface. The "native" is dressed in a "carnavalesque" costume and is reading the newspaper the "wrong way." However, the fact that the "native" is "reading" the newspaper, instead of merely looking at it, suggests that he is scanning and comprehending the information. The newspaper is therefore the right way up to the native figure, and is only "inverted" from Koenig's perspective. Through this inversion, Walcott indicates the presence of different, alternative ways of viewing. Additionally, the top-hat and the newspaper are items appropriated from the coloniser.¹⁰ Here, the "foreign" item has been creolised; while Koenig is out of place, the "nigger" has adapted to the place and naturalised "exotic" articles. The element of parody suggested by the "carnavalesque" costume runs throughout the whole poem: arguably, through Koenig, Walcott parodies the countless missionaries and colonialists who travelled to the American Tropics. To a Caribbean reader, the "top-hatted" black spirit creates associations with Baron Samedi, a famous Voodoo loa (spirit or minor deity). Baron Samedi is the loa of death, who meets dead souls at the crossroads and guides them to the afterlife. What, to Koenig, is a bizarre vision from his imagination is, to the Caribbean reader, a figure from an Afro-Caribbean tradition. From a "rational" perspective, Koenig is hallucinating. However, his inability to name, or recognise, an archetypal figure suggests otherwise. That is, if the missionary has no knowledge of Baron Samedi, it would be impossible for his unconscious to invent the loa. Through the medium of gaze, the ghost or god exercises power over Koenig. As the spectral image stares at Koenig, he feels himself "being read/ like the newspaper" (ll.81-2). The Voodoo loa/ ghostly slave, manifested from the landscape, gazes upon Koenig without mercy. As the "nigger" disappears, the mangroves on the riverbank metamorphose into "the ghosts of slaughtered Indians" (l. 85). In Voodoo ceremonies, a participant should invoke Baron Samedi in order to contact their ancestors. The loa-like figure appears before the Amerindian spirits, bridging the gateway between Koenig's time and theirs. Here, Walcott starts to fuse African and Amerindian presences into the same spot. However, the "nigger" disappears *before* the Amerindians appear. The suggestion is that Koenig is moving backwards through the bush's colonial history. However, this move "backwards" is problematised by the presence of Koenig himself: that is, Koenig's ability to converse with figures from different points in a linear version of history suggests that a non-linear history is at work within the poem. In the poem, the Amerindians do not simply emerge

from a hidden part of the bush; Koenig imagines that the trees and the Amerindians are one and the same thing. In this respect, by ingraining the Amerindian presence into the natural world, Walcott suggests that it is a permanent feature of the bush. Here, Walcott's tactics for dealing with place and memory are themselves problematic. By using the natural world as a signifier of Amerindian presences, Walcott utilises the trope of Amerindians as more "close to the earth" than Europeans. In conjunction with this distinction between Amerindian people as part of the landscape and non-Amerindians as alien figures, Walcott connects the Amerindians to "hummingbirds" (l.87), which are indigenous to the American Tropics. Although the African figure is part of the bush landscape, his associations with water and travel (the schooner) make him seem rootless and emphasises his origins from elsewhere; the Amerindians' association with trees and indigenous life forms asserts them as deeply "rooted" and, unwittingly, "claims" the bush as the Amerindians' place. Here, because of the bush's deep association with the Caribbean (that is as of a constant place in the Caribbean landscape), Walcott seems dangerously close to going against his own emphasis on Caribbeanness, rather than ancestral identities.

At the poem's close, Koenig rebels against or attempts to repel these spirits by singing a song that valorises European colonialism (ll.91-101) and by spitting into the river. The song, which takes pride in colonial rule over Asia, Africa and the Americas, lists some of the different parts of the world that had been colonised; his sense of superiority is drawn from the vastness of the empire. In contrast to this idea of greatness, a globule of saliva spat into a wide river has no impact: the act of spitting into the river shows how ineffectual and insignificant he is in this place. As if in response to Koenig's derision, "a mist/ rises from the river and the page goes white" (ll.108-9). Here, Walcott erases Koenig from both page and landscape. Seemingly, there is no room for someone like Koenig in either.

Notes

¹ Although to some readers the term 'bush' may have connotations of British colonialism, in Guyana and the rest of the West Indies, the term is both vernacular and politically neutral.

² The name Guyana is derived from an Arawak word meaning land of many waters. However, the area divided into British, French and Dutch Guiana (now Suriname) was home to different tribes (nations). The division of American land between European languages means that the area called Guyana is a European construct.

³ I.e. small compared to the size of Guyana proper

⁴ To many people outside of Islamic countries, this religious rite has become a misunderstood spectacle: one knows that a dervish whirls without knowing why. Here, the spectacle is the colonial subject while the gaze belongs to the European.

⁵ "Ethnography" literally means writing about people. Much ethnographic writing was accompanied by visual images.

⁶ This is a very important idea in *Palace of the Peacock*: in the novel, a multiracial group journey through the Savannas and Bush to find a group of Arawaks. The leader's intention is to exploit the Amerindians' labour on his plantation. However, at the novel's climax, when the characters plunge down a waterfall, Donne, the leader, realises the wrongfulness of his

actions. The characters are resurrected from the waterfall, and united with the Arawak people.

⁷ I use this term in its military sense.

⁸ In Castries, Saint Lucia, the French Place D'Armes was renamed "Columbus Square" by the British in 1893. One hundred years later, it was rechristened Derek Walcott square.

⁹ In a later play of Walcott's, *The Ghost Dance* (2002), the white character Catherine Weldon questions "[w]hy for that matter, couldn't we become Indians? / Why do the Indians have to turn into us?" (p.150)

¹⁰ Of note, a 1949 review of *Epitaph for the Young* by Keith Alleyne, noting Walcott's indebtedness to European poetry, accused Walcott of wearing "the top hat in the tropics" (Thieme 29).

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