

Derek Walcott's *The Sea is History: An Archive*

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Abstract

History is an ideological construct of colonialism. An archive is a storehouse of historical documents or records. The present paper is an attempt to explore an alternative history created by Derek Walcott, the West Indian poet and playwright whose works explore the Caribbean culture. He presents the history through the art of poetry while answering the questions - *Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? Where is your tribal memory? Where is your Renaissance?* Asked in the poem *The Sea is History*. Walcott shows the history of slavery, genocide and miscegenation with allusions. His poetry resonates Fanon's remark, "The settler makes history: his life is an epoch, an Odyssey."

Renaissance, closely associated with trade, commerce and conquer had hugely depended on cartography. Walcott has created the maps of undocumented past with the help of his art of cartography, his poetry. Neither history, nor Renaissance was possible without the sea. The paper tries to examine how the sea becomes an archive in Walcott's poem.

Keywords: Archive, Alternate History, Renaissance, Cartography, Harlem Renaissance

Answering the question – what do you know about culture and civilization, a Negro sings,

I've known rivers:

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (Hughes)

The Negro Speaks of Rivers is considered the most profound of the poems of heritage and strength. Composed when Hughes was a mere 17 years old, and dedicated to W. E. B. DuBois, it is an assertion of racial identity. The rivers symbolise the continuity of the black. They are closely associated with black history. Hughes neither speaks of faith/ religion, nor documented History. He sings about lived history .A very young black poet of Harlem Renaissance (1920s) responds in all humility ,sensing much space in the rivers.

When questions are raised about the authenticity of black culture and history, Walcott finds the answers in the sea, for him *The Sea is History*.

Derek Walcott, born in 1930 on the island of St. Lucia, the posthumous child of a civil servant and a school teacher, and a descendent of two white grandfathers and two black grandmothers situates himself and expresses his hybrid identity in *A Far Cry from Africa*. (Having an Englishman as paternal grandfather, and a Dutchman as maternal grandfather, while the women in his ancestry were predominantly of African origin)

I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and live? (Walcott)

The poet is far away from Africa. His dilemma is how to protest and support Mau-Mau agitation in Africa. Identity is the product of history; on the personal level of memory. Identity is one of the major concerns of Walcott's writing. The challenge of coming to terms with West Indian history is of great concern for West Indian writers of Walcott's generation. In his *The English in the West Indies; or The Bow of Ulysses* (1887), the British historian Froude did provide assessment of the West Indies. V. S. Naipaul in his *Middle Passage* (1962) reworked on Froude's presentation thus, 'History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.' Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, George Lamming have reflected on this charge of nothingness. 'Nothing' has been a central theme in Walcott. He has sought to transform it imaginatively from a stigma of non-achievement and hopelessness to an inviting challenge and opportunity, a blank page on which there is everything to be written. This 'blank page' image occurs in *The Sea is History*.

Walcott espouses the 'truly tough aesthetic' of the New World. When it comes to presenting times, Walcott forges a new present and future out of many pasts.

According to Patricia Ismond 'Naming' and 'Homecoming' are essential aspects of Walcott's sense of a New World identity. The integral relationship between homecoming and discovery carries over in his works *Sea Grapes* (1976) and *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979). *The Sea History* has historico-cultural context. Through allusions Walcott draws parallels between the established myths of Exodus and the Caribbean historical experiences. There are trials and tribulations for the Jews and the Blacks. He relates the history of the Jews along with the Blacks.

The persona in the poem interrogates in the beginning:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that grey vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History.

The sea is the answer. The sea is the archive. The sea is the witness to all that happened to the tribes in the pre-colonial and the colonial period. Without the sea not much could have happened to the Jews, the Blacks, the Indians. Their past is in the safe of the sea. Answering the questions the colonised refers to the undocumented past of the homeless people.

In his Nobel Lecture of December 7, 1992, Walcott observes,

Memory that yearns to join the centre, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed, like those bamboo thighs of the god. In other words, the way that the Caribbean is still looked at, illegitimate, rootless, mongrelized. 'No people there', to quote Froude, 'in the true sense of the word'. No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken.

Walcott wishes to replace this rootlessness and brokenness with memories. He consistently and continuously recalls images of the past.

In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Judith Butler writes,

And perhaps most difficult, the loss of loss itself: somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a special agency, one for whom a full 'recovery' is impossible.(Butler)

Butler emphasizes the feature of permanence in loss, "a fractured horizon," that "no memory can retrieve," and Walcott conveys this sense of brokenness in his poetry. It is irrecoverable loss.

Memory enables one to reconstruct an event in one's mind and Walcott reconstructs gaps in his own history, culture, and identity through memories of tragedy. Walcott constantly returns to the sea in order to unlock stories from the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras and thus performs a poetic reconstruction of historical events. He becomes the cartographer of past events.

In order to explain the present conditions of the modern Caribbean, he cannot avoid recounting the tragic phases of its colonial past. *The Sea is History* connects Walcott's present environment to its initial condition by situating the Caribbean's genesis in the Middle Passage, describing the creation of the New World as imagined by European colonists, and chronicling the islands' fight for independence. He mentions Exodus thereby speaks of departure in great number of the Israelites from Egypt-retold in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus.

As he compares slavery to "Babylonian bondage" and describes the deaths of men and women aboard slave ships in language that is reminiscent of the Holocaust ("as the white cowries clustered like manacles / on the drowned women" and "the men with eyes heavy as anchors / who sank without tombs"), he explains that these tragedies only caused the ocean to "turn blank pages / looking for History". Manacles referred in the poem present the image of slavery.

History didn't record these chaoses, the slave ships from Africa to the Americas. These horrific events that are "locked in the sea" are the antithesis of the great monuments and triumphant battles described in the introduction to the poem. It is not a history to be ashamed of, but rather, to mourn.

Answering the question 'but where is your Renaissance?' the poet replies,

‘Sir, it is locked in them sea-sands’. It is in the archive. Now the poet moves from legendary/biblical history to recorded history.

For Fanon ‘the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass... what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world’.

The word ‘compass’ could be linked with cartography and when a poet presents imagined, heard, undocumented history, he plays the role of a cartographer.

Renaissance reminds of Columbus’s sea voyage and discovery. He wasn’t the first European to arrive in the Americas-the Vikings went there earlier. The indigenous people already knew about Turtle island-they had been there at least since 30,000 BC. Columbus couldn’t find what he was sent for-a new route to Asia, displacing the Portuguese, whose recent voyages round the southern trip to Africa and across; the India Ocean had already shown the way to get silks and spices in Europe. Till his death Columbus insisted that the ‘new’ continent was India, a belief still commemorated in the name of the West Indies-original home of Caribs and Arawaks. As Naipaul-the grandson of indentured labourers brought from India to replace freed African slaves on the sugar plantations in Trinidad reminds readers of *The Loss of EIDorado*, Columbus dreamt also of gold. He believed that he had found the mines of Solomon, the source of all gold in the world.

One in three of the indigenous population of His panoila were dead within two years of Columbus’s arrival. They had all been wiped out in thirty years then. What torture, disease and imprisonment did not achieve mass suicide completed? Gaps in the local labour force were soon filled by slave labour from Africa; thereby initiating one of the worst aspects of European domination-the Atlantic slave trade. And the colonised is asked to show where his Renaissance is. What irony! And still an answer could be found in the Renaissance by the Blacks in America.

The Harlem Renaissance could be a better answer to the question asked by the coloniser. It was (or the New Negro Movement) the most important event in twentieth-century African American intellectual and cultural life. While best known for its literature, it touched every aspect of Africo- American literary and artistic creativity from the end of World War I through the Great Depression. Literature, critical writing, music, theater, musical theatre, and the visual arts were transformed by this movement; it also impacted politics, social development, and almost every aspect of the African American experience from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s.

Walcott continues his pattern of offering examples of Caribbean history, then identifying *that was just Lamentations, / it was not History, / that was only faith*” The undocumented history is narrated with the help of memory and imagination making use of ‘Then came...and ...that was’. Simultaneously the poet relates his mapping of history with the coloniser’s concept of History, saying ‘that was not History’. Providing allusions about the Genesis, the Exile, the Home land/New World, the poem ends with an auditory image:

*and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo
of History, really beginning.*

The end mentions the sound without echo-one can’t listen to it again. It is lost. The sea is the archive. What a mourning history that was! What a mapping through memory! The poet has narrated an alternate history that mourns of the erased people. Walter Benjamin remarks, “The documents of civilization are also documents of barbarism.”

There is deeply profound quality of the poet's commitment to those who came to the archipelago before him on slave-ships.

Walcott takes revolutionary position: 'In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.'

If history is a story also, the poet is narrating his history in poetry. It is an art to tell such horrid happenings in the past in a creative manner. As the sea forms the setting of the narrative, it becomes an indispensable part. The poet has reconstructed the undocumented past with the help of cartography. He has tried to map and navigate history in and around the sea. He doesn't present only the colonised history. He finds parallels in the Old Testament and refers to the New Testament as well drawing similarities (and mapping thus) of pain and suffering, exile and dream/hope for the New world and loss of culture. When he says "stop on the goggles" he takes the role of a guide reverberating the statement of Fanon. *The settler makes history (not the natives)*

The sea is thus the archive of pre-colonial prosperity, the slave trade, exile, miscegenation, genocide, the Bible, the unrecorded stories of the Renaissance. Whether one is a coloniser (once) or colonised (once), it needs compassion and humility to compose and listen to the history of people without any recognition. When the grey vault is opened and memory and legends are used (artistically), a post-colonial Caribbean poet could present an alternative history. The poet as a recorder or documenter is so sensitive that he can listen to the lamentations of people who were subjected to untold suffering. He could provide an alternative history as documented by him with the setting of the sea.

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