

14. Worldly Vernaculars in the Anglophone Caribbean

Bo G. Ekelund

English, Stockholm University

Writers of the extended Caribbean have been caught in a particularly awkward bind determined by the spatial distribution of linguistic, economic, and cultural resources: in the absence of a developed local publishing industry, many moved to metropolitan locations in order to make themselves authors; in the absence of indigenous non-colonial official languages, they have had the choice of celebrating creole vernaculars or submitting to the literary forms of imperial English (British or US), French, Spanish or Dutch; in the absence of a large enough Caribbean audience, they have had to play the games of either “strategic exoticism” or of differently conceived forms of authenticity.

Various artistic and critical discourses of empowerment have emerged from this bind: *négritude*, *creolité*, *antillanité*, nation language and tidalectics, as forms of resistance to colonial and imperial structures and affirmation of independence. Thus, Caribbean writing has defined itself by opposites such as the archipelagic and the continental, the creolised and the spuriously “pure”, interculturalisation and acculturation. Operating under these and other labels we see the boundary-work by which writers seek to “reshape the boundaries of their cultural universe”, to borrow

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Sheldon Pollock's phrase.¹ However, rather than "renouncing the larger world for the smaller place", like the writers of Pollock's first wave of vernacular literary cultures, Caribbean authors have drawn on cosmopolitan and vernacular forms as the means of a double or ambivalent affiliation.² I will suggest in the following that we need to study the two modes – the cosmopolitan and the vernacular – as informing (and being informed by) the necessary strategies to claim place by means of literary language: place as one of the particularities that literature cannot but render readable.

Such particularities of place are tied to, but not reducible to the *positions* – in literary space – claimed by or attributed to writers; while these positions are located in social space, they are invariably also expressed as places. Different strategies of cosmopolitanisation and vernacularisation are then inevitably associated with definite forms of claiming place, and vice versa. What is clearly called for, to my mind, is a rigorous analysis of the particulars of such affiliations with and disavowals of place. In this exploratory essay, I will offer one example to suggest what such an analysis might entail.

There are few exhibits of rivalling literary approaches to the Caribbean more famous than the opposition between Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott.³ Patricia Ismond's tersely titled "Walcott vs. Brathwaite" summed up some of the "stock attitudes" that had already thickened around the two poets at that time, 1971: "the poet of the people", on the one hand, the

¹ Sheldon Pollock, "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History", in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 16.

² Pollock, "Cosmopolitan", 16.

³ There is a large number of scholarly works that take this pair as their focus. Apart from the articles by Patricia Ismond and Bill Ashcroft, which I will deal with in more detail, see especially Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004) and Lorna Burns, "Prophetic Visions of the Past", in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Writing*, ed. Alison Donnell and Michael A. Bucknor (London: Routledge, 2011), 181–90.

Eurocentric “poet’s poet”, on the other.⁴ Brathwaite’s reconstruction of a historical experience that is collective is pitted against Walcott’s scrutiny of an individual experience that is historical, and even as Ismond finds their projects “complementary”, their attitudes towards the concrete places that figure in their poems are finally determined by an unbridgeable distance between cultural abstractions: orientations towards a “West” or an “Africa” that are made of imagination, mythology, religion, experience, metaphysics, and tradition rather than land, territories, borders, roads, infrastructure. The nature of such abstractions from the particularity of place was no doubt partly an effect of the terms that the political moment supplied, but it is also symptomatic of a generalised neglect of toponymical particulars on the part of critics and scholars.⁵

It is instructive – and germane to my argument – to see how that same level of abstraction along with the same neglect recurs in a recent piece by Bill Ashcroft. He sees no conflict represented by the two poets, Brathwaite and Walcott, but instead holds them up as joint figures of an archipelagic utopia. The opposition that Ismond took for granted in 1971, irreconcilably pitched between folk and humanist, nation and cosmopolitan, is transmuted by Ashcroft into a single if archipelagic dream, into one impulse

⁴ Patricia Ismond, “Walcott vs. Brathwaite”, *Caribbean Quarterly* 17, no. 3–4 (1971): 54.

⁵ It should be noted that Ismond has paid substantial and rewarding attention to the concrete details of Walcott’s poetic use of place in a later book, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott’s Poetry* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001). To fully substantiate my claim about a neglect of toponymical particulars would require more space than I have here. However, one interesting and influential exhibit I can offer is Sarah Upstone’s *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), which investigates “spatial locales” but does so in order to loosen them from particular geographies, so as to avoid the “colonial myth of spatial order” (19). “For literary post-space”, as Upstone would have it, “it is ultimately the text itself that becomes the most suggestive space” (182). In a book dealing to a large extent with Guyanese writer Wilson Harris and including a chapter on “Postcolonial Cities” there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no mention of Georgetown or Albouystown.

towards transformation, mediated by utopia as “archipelagic thinking”.⁶ No question of different audiences is broached here, nor of any ambivalence concerning the sources of the poetic strategies: the eccentric use that Ashcroft makes of Ernst Bloch’s utopian dialectics removes all historical and material resistance from the places and poets he enlists for his vision of the Caribbean as a “utopian ‘Front’ space”.⁷ On the few occasions when the actualities of the region’s place in a global space-time come into the open, they are swiftly put back in the bottle by the genie of utopian wishes, with “archipelagic thought” as the stopper. For example, Ashcroft acknowledges that these islands were essential for capitalist production, but then assures us that “islands resist their function as nodes for territorialising global capital because they are open in ways that the continent cannot be”.⁸ In a way that I take to be perfectly consonant with this easy gesture dispensing with capital, history, and territory, Ashcroft’s reading of Walcott’s “The Schooner *Flight*” omits every single verse that lays claim to territory on its own, unmediated terms, finding in it only the flight towards utopia as “the third space between the African past with its tragic legacy of the Middle Passage, and the call of the imperial home”.⁹ If the Caribbean is immediately and fully translated into utopia, as it is here, it has only a symbolic function, in contrast to the historical particularity which is given to Africa and the metropolis, abstractions though they may be.

I do not hold up these two articles as charting some larger trajectory in the scholarship on Caribbean poetry. My point is rather that whether the two modes of orienting oneself in the world that we started with are present in some discernible, euphemised form (Ismond) or dissolved as having no longer any theoretical relevance (Ashcroft), the reckoning of the two poetic projects is conducted with little concern for actual places, either of origin, production or residence. The African past or the imperial home,

⁶ Bill Ashcroft, “Archipelago of Dreams: Utopianism in Caribbean Literature”, *Textual Practice* 30, no. 1 (2016): 93.

⁷ Ashcroft, “Archipelagic”, 105.

⁸ Ashcroft, “Archipelagic”, 92.

⁹ Ashcroft, “Archipelagic”, 97.

the western or African traditions, can be mobilised not as class or geographical signifiers so much as moral or political abstractions.

The geographic particularity that slips away from those abstract terms is one that needs to be reinstated. The critical point I raise is simple: something is missing from any article on Brathwaite and Walcott that does not mention Barbados and St Lucia, and from any reading of “The Schooner *Flight*” that doesn’t mention Carenage or Laventille, Wrightson Road or Frederick Street.¹⁰ The neglect of place is an omission from any literary analysis, but especially one concerned with the cosmopolitan and the vernacular, since the two terms cannot be divorced from habitation and mobility, location and orientation.

Placing Brathwaite and Walcott within the framework of the cosmopolitan and the vernacular as strategies for claiming place implies more than noting place names in their work. First of all, it entails a reconsideration of the terms themselves as indicating different types of relationship between location and orientation, while recognising that these relationships can be expressed in a variety of linguistic forms and stylistic levels. The “larger world” and “the smaller place” figure both as locations and possible orientations, while the renunciation of one or the other may use strategies that derive from the pole that is renounced.

To take a rather obvious example, it is plausible to identify the thrust of Brathwaite’s first trilogy, *The Arrivants*, as “speaking in towards [society]” in Brathwaite’s own words, distinguishing that attitude from that of the “humanist poet” who is “often speaking away from that society”.¹¹ As a poetic work that sought the core of Caribbean culture in its African roots, its main concern was the African Caribbean. Developing a lyrical language in ways consonant with his own analysis of creolisation and nation language, Brathwaite “speaks in towards” the Caribbean with a language derived from the community of speakers rather than from

¹⁰ Derek Walcott, “The Schooner *Flight*”, *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 345–61.

¹¹ Brathwaite quoted in Mervyn Morris, “Walcott and the Audience for Poetry”, in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Boulder: Rienner, 1997), 178.

an established canon of writing.¹² On the face of it, this would all appear to place that work on the vernacular side of the spectrum. However, if *The Arrivants* turns towards the smaller place, it does so carrying a larger world on its shoulders. It is to “New York London” Uncle Tom rambles.¹³ Is the “nigger’s home”, the poem asks, found in “Paris Brixton Kingston / Rome?”¹⁴ A veteran coming to church “knows Burma Malaya and has been / to Singapore”, while trumpets and saxophones build bridges between Nairobi, Harlem and Havanna.¹⁵ But the real opening onto a larger world comes in the “Masks” part of the trilogy, with its trek across the African continent from Axum in the east to Elmina on Ghana’s coast, evoked in an abundance of place names. All of these places, as contrasted with New York, Brixton and Havanna, are identified and located in the Glossary of the Oxford one-volume edition of the trilogy. The use of a glossary, of course, is a tell-tale sign in literatures whose audience is split.¹⁶ In this case, however, a Caribbean audience would be equally helped by having Akropong placed on the map, as a European or North American one. While Ashcroft would have us read Brathwaite’s poetry as leaving all origins behind, insisting on arrivals only, a reader of *The Arrivants* will remember the hypnotic intensity of that movement from one city to another, feet marking the ground of the “seven kingdoms”. Whether these place claims manage to turn “every periphery into a center” or whether they take place within a larger world structured in spatial dominance is a larger question and must be left for later.¹⁷ A consideration of Brathwaite’s poetry within the

¹² See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Nation Language”, in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Lucy Burke et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 310–16.

¹³ Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 22.

¹⁴ Brathwaite, *Arrivants*, 77.

¹⁵ Brathwaite, *Arrivants*, 162, 174

¹⁶ See Isidore Okpewho’s discussion of Achebe and Ngugi: “On the Concept: ‘Commonwealth Literature’”, in *Meditations on African Literature*, ed. Dubem Okafor (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 38.

¹⁷ The quoted phrase is from Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 29.

cosmopolitan/vernacular problematic, however, will have to register those claims, and reflect on their effect. The “small place” of the Caribbean is not a foregrounded location that determines an overall orientation, but its various instantiations are added with no particular emphasis to the catalogue of place names mapping out a pan-African and diasporic world.

The case of Walcott, for all its differences, demonstrates the same need for attention to the complex mediation of location and orientation. As a structural parallel to *The Arrivants*, at a later point in Walcott’s oeuvre, *Omeros* features a middle section that stages a visionary return to Africa, but unlike Brathwaite, Walcott’s evocation does almost entirely without place names.¹⁸ No doubt the authority of first-hand experience, of travel and habitation, plays some part in Brathwaite’s confident use of African place names, an assertiveness displayed in *Omeros* instead in references to Boston, Lisbon, Toronto, or Genoa. These eccentric references serve to accentuate the central claim to place in *Omeros*, which is the reversible equation of the Caribbean with the Mediterranean, the sands of St Lucia’s beaches and the shores of Ilium. This relation between the places of the “larger world” and the sites which make up the supposedly restricted local environment also stand as exemplary for a renegotiation of spatial terms. As locations, the cities of the global north support an orientation towards the island “periphery” – now the centre, but only by means of a carefully orchestrated constellation of spatial references and with the reader’s necessary complicity.

How is that complicity elicited? This question is central to a larger argument about place claims. A full answer would entail an account of a totality of spatial claims, subtended by a world of places, or, more correctly, by a world of “site effects”.¹⁹ Knowing that we must defer such an account, it is still imperative that

¹⁸ The exception is one mention of the Congo river, and the phrase “the Bight of Benin, [...] the margin of Guinea”, repeated once: Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, 1990), 149. The parallel is discussed by Jahan Ramazani in his chapter on *Omeros* in *The Hybrid Muse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 51.

¹⁹ The term is Pierre Bourdieu’s, “*effets de lieu*”: “Site Effects”, in *The Weight of the World* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 123–29.

claims to place be analysed with an awareness of that complex and reversible dynamic of location and orientation, always articulated with the choices of the more or less cosmopolitan, the more or less vernacular. These choices concern distances that are social and geographical at the same time. The complicity of the reader who is distant to the places claimed is differently engaged than that of the proximate reader. Literary toponymy has that crude dimension; a place name implies two reactions – this place is theirs; or, this place is mine – followed by one of two versions of the same question: How is it made available to me? How is it made foreign to me? The cosmopolitan and the vernacular, the larger world and the smaller place help determine the responses.

One of Walcott's early poems, "A Sea-Chantey", will illustrate how the larger world and the smaller place dialectically contain one another in its place claims, even when the toponyms all belong to the latter.²⁰ Its first lines form just the beginning of a long art sentence that develops a single image of masts, but for my purposes the first part will suffice:

Anguilla, Adina
 Antigua, Cannelles
 Andreuille, all the l's
 Voyelles of the liquid Antilles,
 The names tremble like needles
 Of anchored frigates²¹

For both John Thieme and Patricia Ismond, Walcott can here be seen to conjure up a local scene by means of onomatopoeia, the "liquid sounds of water" (Ismond) scooped up from the verbal resources of local names.²² As Edward Baugh has pointed out, the incantation of names alternate between places and women: "the l's are also *elles*".²³ However, the female names are also distinctly

²⁰ Walcott, "A Sea-Chantey", *Collected*, 44–46.

²¹ Walcott, "Sea-Chantey", 44.

²² John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 35; Ismond, *Abandoning*, 34.

²³ Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42.

local to the Caribbean: Andreuille will return as Walcott's muse and early love in *Another Life*²⁴ and Adina is the female figure invoked by Trinidadian poet Harold Telemaque as the symbolic reference for all island life that is hidden from the tourist gaze.²⁵ Onomastics and toponymy converge: these are our names; these are their names. The liquid Antilles are called upon to build up the extended metaphor from the phonetic depths to the spires of masts and bell towers. But that exchangeability of sounds and visual perceptions is presided over by the allusion to Rimbaud's canonical meditation on synaesthesia, the sonnet "Voyelles". Moreover, the reader happens upon the first lines only after an epigraph from Baudelaire, in French. And before we will reach the final toponymical reassertion of "Anguilla, Antigua, / Virgin of Guadeloupe, / and stone-white Grenada", we will have been routed via Ezra Pound's "Pisan Cantos" by means of a quoted phrase that in itself embeds an allusion to François Villon.²⁶ In short, the "small world" is affirmed by means of the "cosmopolitan" allusions; that is, "their" place is made available to the distant reader by means of his or her access to familiar literary conventions. As for the Antillean reader, such a subject position is being constructed by poems such as these: to say that Anguilla, Antigua, Guadeloupe, Grenada refer to "my place" is to affirm the boundary-work that makes all of the Caribbean available to that composite complicity.

Walcott's allusions to canonical authors from a selective European tradition and Brathwaite's use of a glossary constitute different ways of making their writerly place claims readable within particular existing horizons of expectation. The readability of any content depends on the double coding of all

²⁴ Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 72–73.

²⁵ Harold Telemaque, "Adina", in *The Poetry of the Negro 1746–1949* ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (Garden City: Doubleday, 1951), 350–51.

²⁶ The line is "*Repos donnez à cils*". See the editor Richard Sieburth's note to Ezra Pound's "Pisan Cantos" in *New Selected Poems and Translations* (New York: New Directions, 2010), 335.

literary claims: that the thing claimed be recognised as worthy of literary form and that the form of the claim be recognised as literary. That is why the formula dividing poetry into speaking in towards society or speaking away from society falters, especially when applied to locations. To bring a place into literary existence, to have it recognised, involves, for the Caribbean poet, multiple sites of recognition. Taking one of them to be the “small place” of our initial pair, both Brathwaite and Walcott engage in constructing a pan-African or a pan-Caribbean, Antillean reader rather than “speaking in towards” any single location. With regard to the “larger world”, both poets count, as Charles Pollard has persuasively argued, on the recognition of modernist conventions.²⁷

In conclusion, my brief consideration of the notorious case of “Brathwaite vs Walcott” has insisted on the rather simple point that an analysis of their positions in literary space must also reckon with the particularities of place with which their position-takings were bound up. Their literary place claims attain a distinct significance when we consider linguistic, stylistic and other literary choices within the polarity of the cosmopolitan and the vernacular. Taking the heuristic pair of the smaller place and larger world as my starting point, I found it necessary to pry them loose from the conceptual pair cosmopolitan/vernacular, in order to show how particular locations in the Caribbean enter Brathwaite’s and Walcott’s poetry in a variety of ways. They may be oriented toward a larger world or articulated as already part of that larger world, as in *The Arrivants*. They may constitute a centre towards which the particular places that mark the larger world are oriented, as in *Omeros*. Finally, they may be toponymically autonomous, placed in no external relationship to the places of the larger world, standing, apparently, as self-oriented locations. As the example of “A Sea-Chantey” showed, the latter place claim may be made by means of cosmopolitan formal features, which means that our two pairs in fact form a full matrix rather than synonymous couples: the smaller place may be claimed with

²⁷ Pollard, *New World*.

cosmopolitan means or in the vernacular; the larger world may be invested with cosmopolitan expressivity or with vernacular forms.

The worldly vernaculars of the Caribbean turn their toponyms into literary places. Our inclination, as literary scholars, to recognise the results of the transformation is never in doubt. With some conceptual effort, we may be able to register the particulars of the world that is thus transformed.

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