Derek Walcott’s Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967): a Play Bridging Cultures Together and a Precursor of Caribbean Créolité Poetics

Dereko Walcotto Sapnas ant Beždžionės kalno (1967): kultūras su jungianti pjesė ir Karibų kreolų poetikos pirmtakė

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Annotation

Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967) which is considered one of Derek Walcott’s theatrical masterpieces is the model par excellence defined as “mulatto style,” where different theatrical methods and experiences merge. The play was inspired by places and people known to the author since his childhood spent in the Caribbean. The influence of Nō and Kabuki theatre is also recognizable in the drama. There are also references to the history of the Gospel, to texts by Georg Büchner and August Strindberg, Miguel de Cervantes or the early theatre of Federico García Lorca, while the main character recalls Peer Gynt (1867) by Henrik Ibsen or The Emperor Jones (1920) by Eugene O’Neill. The article analyses to what extent Walcott’s play illuminated the publication of Éloge de la créolité (1989), a manifesto written almost 20 years later by three Martinican authors, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, and which greatly contributed to the international dissemination of the concept of Créole and creolization. The analysis allows to extend the idea of créolité to the Walcottian corpus.

Keywords: Derek Walcott, Creolization, Patrick Chamoiseau, Caribbean Theatre.

Santrauka

Sapnas ant Beždžionės kalno (1967), vienas iš Dereko Walcotto teatro šedevrų, yra modelis par excellence to, ką jis apiibrėžia kaip „mulatų stilius“, kuriamo susilieja skirtingi teatro metodai ir patirtys. Pjesę įkvėpė vietas ir žmonės, dramaturgui gerai pažįstami iš Karibuose praleistos vaikystės. Dramoje taip pat atpažiš-
During the past century, Caribbean art assumed an original specific form thanks to the work of authors, poets, playwrights, philosophers and essayists coming from diverse islands and linguistic areas. The article analyses the birth of an art form that expresses the Caribbean identity embodied in the plays by Derek Walcott (1930-), the most important contemporary English-speaking Caribbean poet, and theorized by philosophers and writers from the French Antilles. Specifically, the intent is to demonstrate to what extent Walcott’s most famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), influenced the publication of the *Éloge de la créolité* (1989), a manifesto written much later by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphäel Confiant. The *Éloge* greatly contributed to the international dissemination of the concept of *Créole* and *creolization* and its study allows us to extend the idea of *créolité* to the Walcottian corpus.

*Créolité*, the central element in the following pages, is a guiding concept, a term intended today as the new dimension of cultural creativity and coexistence associated with the Caribbean, a symbolic space where differences come together. (Pompeo, 2009, 197)

Walcott provides an ideal case study for enriching a comparative literature approach with the tools proper to intermedial studies. In particular, the choice has fallen upon Walcott’s theatre for the immediacy to which it exposes itself by engaging and reflecting the experiences of a multicultural local public. Also because Walcott’s unique twentieth century artistic experiment and his theatre, conceived as an act of cultural decolonization anticipated three Martinican authors’ rupture with the French overview which, according to them, still mentally and stylistically “colonizes” so many post-colonial Francophone writers.
An undisputed giant of the twentieth-century contemporary poetry, Nobel Prize winner in 1992, Walcott is internationally known for his powerful poetry and yet, it is in the theatre that his Créole poetics come to life. Touring the Caribbean together with the company he had founded in 1959, his pièces created an art project of collective value aimed at the identification and liberation of local creativity. As he affirmed in the essay “What the Twilight Says,” “We were convinced of creating not merely a play but a theatre, and not merely a theatre but its environment.” (Walcott, 1998, 6)

From the very beginning – and despite making no explicit reference to “Créole poetics” – Walcott’s aim was indeed to create and direct a national theatre company, equivalent to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin with its own “West Indian acting style” which he used to stage his works as well as those on the international scene. This theatre made an extensive use of St. Lucia dialect and its traditions but was also inspired by the Irish nationalist tragedies of John Millington Synge (1871-1909). A theatre, founded on the power of images, gestures and Caribbean dance, at the same time was a modern company headed by a director-playwright modelled on Bertold Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble, i.e. it was familiar both with avant-garde and the acting techniques of Actor’s Studio. It was the company of professionals who had no need to hide their Creole dialect and were equally able to deal with the verses of William Shakespeare and the Theatre of the Absurd.

Walcott’s dramaturgical activity was founded on the creative acceptance of his diverse cultural origins (since both of his grandmothers were black, while both of his grandfathers were white). This led him to define himself as a unique blend of opposing legacies, a union of opposites in which lies the mystery and the essence of his Caribbean identity. On the stage this approach results in a syncretic style that blends all different traditions – from African to Japanese to European – which have influenced him. In 1959, Walcott founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, the company he directed until 1975 and which was soon destined to become the most important company in the Caribbean area, the first to be hosted in Canada and the United States. Actors mostly came from the low and middle class and had other jobs, children to bring up, but saw in theatre a chance of social change and innovation. The group had no property, no public funding, but succeeded in what Walcott calls, “the prodigious ambition” of bringing theatre where there was really
nothing before. It was a passionate and dedicated company and some of the actors would drive 80 miles a day crossing the island of Trinidad not to miss rehearsals. They used to work at night and during weekends, while in their spare time contributing to stage settings and lighting. A few lines written by a former member of the company perfectly attest to the dedication and passion of the actors:

Derek had become obsessed with the idea of the all-singing, all-dancing, all-acting performer found everywhere in the American entertainment world; and yearned to have us conform. It was useless to point out to him that … [we] also had to run an office or a home, or bring up children, or work as a builder’s labourer to earn his or her daily bread. For instance, there is the case of Winston [Goddard], normally a construction worker down south in San Fernando. He was a faithful member of the Workshop, and during rehearsals, having no car, he would take a taxi to Port of Spain each evening (thirty-five/forty miles), make his way to the Little Carib, and join in the rehearsals till half past eleven. He would then have to beg a lift to Port of Spain and take a taxi back to San Fernando, reaching home about 1:30 a.m. He had to be at work by 7 a.m. and he would often do this every weekday when rehearsals were in full swing, and come up on Saturday or Sunday as well. Even when he had quite a small part, he seldom if ever missed a rehearsal. (Goldstraw, 1996, 292)

It can be said that Walcott’s entire dramaturgical activity – born in the 1950s in the Caribbean and for the Caribbean – consists of a long and continuous response to the incitement made by George Bernard Shaw to Antillean artists. In 1911, he observed, “If the national goal is to create an authentic independent local theatre do your own acting and write your own plays ... with all the ordinary travelling companies from England and America kept out.” (Martin, 1994, 147) From close analysis of Walcott’s work also emerges the confirmation of the faith he has in the theatrical medium – as demonstrated by the recent staging of Moon-Child that took place in Rome in 2011 and the transposition on stage of his epic poem Omeros at the Globe Theatre in London (2014), because, as he says, “theatre is the art form that is most successful in communicating between cultures.” (qtd. in King, 1995, 336)

_Dream on Monkey Mountain: The Birth of Caribbean Identity_  
This is particularly true of Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967) which is considered to be one of Walcott’s theatrical masterpieces and one of
his most renowned works, translated and staged in international settings. A turning point in the author’s artistic production and conceived in the name of hybridism as a blending encounter of different cultures, *Dream* is the work that allowed Walcott to concretely realize a national theatre which was also highly esteemed abroad, particularly in the United States, where a television version was also produced in 1970. Above all, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is the work in which Walcott staged the birth of Caribbean identity through the adventures of Makak, an old and poor charcoal burner who after travelling to Africa, rejects external definitions of the self – both of Western and African origin – and finds his true home back in the Caribbean\(^1\).

\(^1\) Summary of the play. **Prologue.** Makak (monkey), a poor, ugly, old charcoal burner, is in prison on “drunk and disorderly charges.” While being interrogated by Corporal Lestrade, the mulatto enforcer of white laws, he tries to tell his story to the military and his two fellow prisoners, Tigre (tiger) and Souris (rat). They will not listen, but the audience relives Makak’s dream. In his dream on Monkey Mountain, Makak experiences a visitation from a white Apparition. She declares that he is the son of African kings and as such he should return to Africa.

**Act I.** Empowered and acting like a prophet, Makak and his friend Moustique (mosquito) set forth for the village. The doubtful Moustique at first humours his friend, but when Makak cures a villager of fever, Moustique becomes his disciple and agent and, if the price is right, his impersonator, for Makak’s growing renown precedes him. Moustique’s impersonation of Makak is exposed by Basil, the carpenter and coffin maker (also Symbol of Death). This swindle costs Moustique his life at the hands of an angry mob.

**Act II.** Again, we see Makak in his cell, but he escapes after wounding Corporal Lestrade. Along with Souris and Tigre, he sets off for Africa to claim his kingship but is pursued by Lestrade into the forest at the foot of Monkey Mountain. There, the Corporal experiences a revelation that leads him to accept his blackness. With this transformation, he becomes the advocate for black law and condemns all that is white. Meanwhile, Makak rethinks his back-to-Africa decision and in a dream-within-a-dream, foresees the violence that will result from the frenzy for power and revenge. But how will he find his true identity and gain a measure of self-esteem? He then beheads the White Apparition and decides to go back home, to the mountain where he belongs.

Like the Prologue, the **Epilogue** is set in the prison, but this time the Corporal sets Makak free and the chorus sings – *I going home, I going home* – while the protagonist leaves and the curtain falls. To the accompaniment of music, dance and drums, the audience joins Makak in his struggle for freedom and manhood.
Dream on Monkey Mountain is the model par excellence of what Walcott defines as “mulatto style” (Olaniyan, 1995, 103) where different theatrical methods and experiences merge. Inspired by places and people known to him since his childhood days spent in Saint Lucia, the influence of Nō and Kabuki theatre are recognizable in the drama. There are also references to the history of the Gospel, to texts by Georg Büchner and August Strindberg, Miguel de Cervantes or the early theatre of Federico García Lorca, while the character Makak reminds of Peer Gynt (1867) by Henrik Ibsen or The Emperor Jones (1920) by Eugene O’Neill. As Walcott once said, “The more I grew up, and felt confident … the more I needed to become omnivorous of art and European literature to understand my own world” (Walcott, 1998, 63). These words are not intended as a mere erudite exercise in style, but rather a way to interpret his own reality in deference to the universal heritage, including Western culture. Also, they’re a hymn to the might of fantasy and imagination.

He also stated that

I am a kind of split writer: I have one tradition inside me going in one way, and another tradition going another. The mimetic, the Narrative, and dance element is strong on one side, and the literary, the classical tradition is strong on the other.

In Dream on Monkey Mountain, I tried to fuse them. … I think the pressure of those two conflicts is going to create a verbally rich literature, as well as a mimetic style. (Walcott, 1996, 48)

Through his Journey, Makak, the protagonist of the play, actually casts a bridge among cultures and in the end, finds himself and chooses his own home. What has Makak achieved? Walcott once said, “I say, he goes back to his mountain. When he goes back to his mountain, it’s his mountain. It belongs to him.” (qtd. in White, 1996, 166)

It is worth remembering that Walcott’s position at that time was partly a reaction against the upsurge of Black African consciousness in the Anglophone Caribbean in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which he saw as being too much of “political nostalgia” for a kind of Eden-like grandeur.” (Baugh, 2013, 94) Walcott imposed his distance from racial clashes and the import of American racist thought, adopted by some poets to reject anything that derived from the European tradition in art. Hence the necessity of Makak’s dream journey back to Africa to purge
himself of his illusions, just as he had to kill, psychologically speaking, the ghost of the White Goddess who had held him in thrall. As Walcott explained,

Makak ultimately rejects both insanities – the extremity of contempt for the black and the extremity of hatred for the white. At the end, having made a spiritual trip to Africa and survived the middle passage, he compares himself to a drifting tree that has put down roots in the new world. (William, 1996, 17)

By accepting his past and by conquering a new space for himself, Makak also becomes the spokesman of the West Indian collective consciousness. His last words are addressed to the public while he expresses his wish “to continue to live in the dream of his people.” In doing so, the character also becomes the spokesman of his own author who wishes to create an original art form for what he calls “the tribe.” Indeed, Walcott’s entire poetics is founded on the acceptance of the past through art and culture. “We know that we owe Europe either revenge or nothing, he once wrote, and it is better to have nothing than revenge. We owe the past revenge or nothing, and revenge is uncreative.” (57)

Walcott declares that he sees no other possibility of the country becoming unified and having its own strengths except through its art. Because there is no economic power, there is no political power. He says, “While Art is lasting and It will outlast these things.” (qtd. in Hirsch, 1977, 55)

Éloge de la créolité: Reaffirming the Hybridization

That is exactly one of the ideas and points of contact linking Walcott’s poetics to the Éloge de la créolité published in 1989. The manifesto represents a fundamental moment in the debate on the elaboration of Antillean culture and aims both at affirming the cultural value of hybridization as a distinctive character of global society as well as making an appeal for the recognition of the universal value of Creole literature. (Pompeo, 2009, 209) In the vision of the authors of the Éloge, créolité represents more than a language project and poetics and it primarily embodies a model of society based on exchange and métissage (hybridization) which significance goes beyond the borders of the Caribbean archipelago, foreshadowing a world of the future.
Walcott found a place in his dramatic texts (first of all in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*) to give a concrete form to the various proposals theorized by the three Martinican authors. He anticipated their artistic project which, in its complex, is oriented towards the spiritual rebirth of the Caribbean populations. So, as they affirm, it is necessary to nurture and reinforce the five criteria for the literary expression of Antillean identity defined by their maestro Edouard Glissant. It is worth saying that they all take shape in Walcott’s play. The five criteria they propose are: “rooting in the oral,” “authentic memory recovery,” “the topic of existence,” “irruption into modernity,” and “choice of our own Word.” The intent of the authors to reflect on the issue is still present in the Francophone Antilles, of creating a literature that “does not infringe any requirement of modern writing, but which is rooted in the traditional forms of oralité.” (Bernabé et al., 1993, 62-71) The criteria and the intent are perfectly outlined by Makak’s Journey towards his personal freedom. In fact in the play, Walcott brings oral traditions and local ordinary men back to life, while incorporating elements from Japanese and Brechtian theatre and demonstrating that he shares with the three Martinican authors the idea that the African legacy represents only part of the more complex Caribbean identity.

*Créolité*, three authors write, is a “tremendous mixture” of Caribbean, European, African, and Asian cultural elements which, by inter-acting together, create something new and authentic. (Bernabé et al., 1993, 48) It is a particularly complex process that first took place on plantations in the mid-seventeenth century and that still today, to be understood, needs particularly complex tools of analysis that only Art and Culture can offer. This is exactly what Walcott stated in his essay, “The Muse of History,” and tried to nurture and sustain by leading a theatre company for so long.

Moreover, both these writers and Walcott underline Guadeloupean poet, Saint-John Perse’s, value albeit him being white and privileged. In doing so they propose contrast and difference as real foundations of Creole culture. The Martinican authors define *créolité* as an “outcome of a constant wondering, a crossroads of cultures foreshadowing the future world,” a world which is “broken but recomposed,” bringing back to mind Walcott’s Nobel acceptance speech, where he defines Antillean art
as a "restoration of shattered histories, shards of vocabulary, archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent."²

Specifically, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant define Antillean identity as an entity that “lives in Relation and for the Relation” with the other, accepting continuous change. They call it “root stock identity,” a definition we can apply to Dream on Monkey Mountain’s last scene where Makak leaves the stage saying,

Makak lives there. Makak lives where he has always lived, in the dream of his people. Other men will come, other prophets will come, and they will be stoned, and mocked, and betrayed, but now this old hermit is going back home, back to the beginning, to the green beginning of this world.” (Bernabé et al., 1993, 326)

That is how Créolité, the source of contrasts and negotiations which because of its nature suits so well the stage, found an early expression in Walcott’s syncretic theatre before being theorized by Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant in 1989.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion we can say that on both sides, the recurring theme is the need for self-discovery, self-recognition and self-identification from which springs an awareness of living through art. It implies possession of the present and a glance at the future: it is a pulsation to outgrow the past, a forward thrust that brings them closer to that idea of créolité meant not as a fragmentation of culture but as “the creation and construction of a culture going beyond a disjointed, violent and incoherent past.” (Pompeo, 2009, 211)

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² “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.” (Walcott, Derek. “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic memory.” Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1992)
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