

The Politics of Derek Walcott's Poetic Drama

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Abstract

This essay focuses on Derek Walcott's *The Haitian Earth*, a chronicle of Haiti's violent revolution led by Toussaint l'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe. Far from painting a romantic idealization of those legendary heroes, Walcott gives a fairly unsavoury realistic picture of what power does to men in a postcolonial context, and of how violent models can be appropriated and made worse. The use of language, dialect, of different registers of creole and standard English plays a major role in drawing the dividing-line between morality and unethical, bestial behaviour. The essay also focus on an unpublished musical comedy, *Marie Laveau*, which was however staged and recorded in Trinidad, in which dialogism develops between several forms of language, including that of songs, and also between two separate worlds. In *Haitian Earth*, Walcott seems to have opted for a realistic pessimism, while in the musical comedy *Marie Laveau*, he has chosen an unrealistic, somewhat romantic faith in man's ability to reform himself and in human redemption at large.

Keywords: Derek Walcott, carnival, historical drama

Derek Walcott's early drama examines a nationalist form of politics in colonized Antillean islands, such as Jamaica or Haiti, with the *Haitian Trilogy*¹ reclaiming the hero of the revolution, Henry Christophe, and illustrating how political power destroys those who acquire it. *Drums and Colors*, narrating the history of the Caribbean Islands, was commissioned by the initiators of the prospective Federation of the West Indies. The historical play *Marie Laveau* (1979), much re-written, is the best of Walcott's unpublished plays.² The plot takes place in New Orleans in 1825, by which time Louisiana had become an American state, with a large French-speaking population having arrived from Santo Domingo

¹ Walcott's *Haitian Trilogy* (2002) includes three historical plays, *Henri Christophe: A Chronicle in Seven Scenes* (1950), *Drums and Colors*, commissioned in 1958 to celebrate the first Parliament in Trinidad, *The Haitian Earth*, a chronicle of Haiti's violent revolution led by Toussaint l'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe. Furthermore, his play *Cry for A Leader* brushes the history of Jamaica through a historical character who worked in the West India Sugar Company and led a rebellion until he became Prime Minister. Walcott founded the *Trinidad Theatre Workshop* with his brother in 1959 as a politically committed enterprise. In their majority, his plays address the West Indies in the postcolonial period: *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958), *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), *Pantomime* (1978), and, of course, *The Haitian Trilogy*.

² Walcott produced this musical comedy with the Trinidad Theatre Workshop (1980). However, only excerpts were published. I am indebted to Kerry-Jane Wallart for her transcription of one of several versions preserved in the archives of the West Indies University in Trinidad. When I asked Derek Walcott for permission to stage his play at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, in a French translation which I directed, and as a musical comedy which I produced in 2009 in Bordeaux, he asked to check the version used. It is this approved version, with no page numbers, from which I quote here. The italics designate either the stage-directions, or the sung parts.

and thousands of slaves still working on the plantations.³ The characters on stage embody the pervasive social and racial fracture;⁴ among them are historical figures like Marie Laveau, a famous voodoo priestess, “part Cajun, part African,” and General Lafayette. The widow Marie has a friend and rival, the black sorcerer Papa Sam, himself confronted by a white exorcist, an enemy of their gods. The cast also includes three directors of the Cotton Exchange and their colored mistresses; an assistant accountant and his fiancée, a mulatto girl. The narrator, Charlie, who opens and closes the play, acts as chorus-leader (coryphaeus) and as grave-digger; the characters being by now just names engraved on tombstones in the cemetery. Marie’s struggle for power and emancipation crystallizes in her demanding the white house of a rich French Creole man who dies opportunely, probably poisoned by her.

In this complex postcolonial, antebellum context, in such a mixed society, plot and intrigue (the French word signifies either one) are superimposed. How is politics staged when racial, class, economic, and sexual paradigms are interwoven, when power is linked to the history of colonisation, of slavery and miscegenation? Focusing upon the highly ambiguous figure of Creole Mary Laveau, whose manipulation and corruption seem to reflect “imperialism’s contamination,” to borrow Frantz Fanon’s words, we may explore how the politics of war, the politics of business, and the politics of sex intersect with gender, and race in a unique way: if men wage wars, their widows negotiate their medals against other advantages; sex may become a business just as other capitalistic trades, and women may wage sexual battles and be both dominated and dominating, according to the color of their skin and their scope of influence and power. The politics of religion/s and of witchcraft may pit not only white against black, African tradition against Eurocentric colonial religion, but also two rivaling sorcerers one against the other. The manichean notions of good and evil may be qualified in a redeeming end which does not condemn empire irrevocably but, through a resurrection, proposes a reconciliation and a celebration, materialized through a politics of language, by which standard English, enmeshed with languages of resistance, such as French creole, is intertwined with the repressed African language, now triumphantly expressed through a subversive syncretism, and the mystery of miracles performed on the stage.

Even if the play does not specifically bear on the Caribbean islands, it uses the recent wars of occupation as a backdrop. For instance, Marie Laveau’s second husband, a free man of color from Santo Domingo, had joined Lafayette’s army as a volunteer to fight the English out of Savannah in 1779.⁵ Killed in battle, his body was thrown into “a hole / like winter kindling,” his widow complains, demanding a monument as a more honourable burial place. When Lafayette visits Marie, he presents her with a medal “for valour in the field to Captain

³ A wave of immigration from Santo Domingo arrived in 1809, and rich Creole sugar planters from Haiti in 1803. In 1812, Louisiana became the 18th American state. The linguistic majority was Spanish and French—English was not officially established as the language of the state until 1864.

⁴ In our production by the research workshop “Passages” I direct at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, we visually drew a line between the world of the blacks and that of the whites. Stephanie Benson imagined for the latter to appear mostly on a screen in black and white, addressing the audience and the colored live actors and actresses on the stage. In this motley world, the [mulattoes and] mulattresses could be in either place. The fracture also exists between free people, slaves, and free-colored men or girls.

⁵ He belonged to the five hundred *Chasseurs volontaires de Saint Domingue* to fight the English out of Savannah in 1779, a most bloody battle, which failed to break the British siege, and is much remembered in Haitian history. Those soldiers later served the officer class of the rebel armies in the Haitian Revolution.

Dominique.” But Marie negotiates her husband’s valour to save her friend and rival Papa Sam Davis from being hanged.⁶ Marie acts as a politician when she uses her occult powers to command General Lafayette, in a sense undermining a symbol of European colonialism. Yet, this is not Marie’s sole request as she openly claims the white house on 1900 Rampart Street (the original title of the play and the metonymy of America) as space for her hair-dressing salon. However, the Cotton Exchange directors attempt to force Marie into a compromise by offering her to manage the private place where they entertain their colored mistresses, whom they call “Nieces” — “Nieces? Very nice,” Marie exclaims ironically! — and they ask Marie to play brothel-keeper. Blondin prefers to mask their affairs under the guise of some charitable act of emancipation:

A sporting house?

Rather, a school of etiquette for our young ladies.

Flattering Marie with his obsequious manners, he attempts to make her feel content with a second-choice, advocating the complexity of the law:

BLONDIN. Your race cannot own property, but you requested premises where you would also manage a hair-dressing salon for young white ladies. [...] we’ve come up with something to please you: a well-furnished house in the free-colored Quarter, situated, Madame, on Louisiana Avenue.

Within the context of an essentially racial urban geography—“the free-colored Quarter”—Marie rejects Blondin’s offer of a second-rate location, sarcastically positioning herself as “empress,” “President”:

MARIE. On Louisiana Avenue. I am empress of the Night, I am now as strong as your President, and you offer me a matchbox?

Marie resorts to a device that Aristophanes’ Ἐκκλησιάζουσαι had made popular many centuries before. She asks her girls to refuse sex to their beaux until she obtains the coveted house. She makes them “repeat the catechism of their chastity,” singing and dancing. Against Marie’s flair of a crook and her absence of scruples, the men become sexually frustrated, complaining they are reduced to making love to their wives and arguing that they did not pay to have their mistresses cross their legs.

Victorin clearly sees the manipulation and warns Clauzel in both racial and political terms: “That black witch is trying to bring down French Creole supremacy.” To which he replies: “She’s brought it down alright.” Having more tricks than one, Marie also uses her magic with the ironically named Philippe Betenoir (literally, back beast), the white assistant accountant of the Cotton Exchange.⁷ Marie tells his fiancée, Didi, who would like him to be more forward and passionate, to give him a potion, called “Man-You-Must,” which will endow him with stunning sexual potency, “let him get a whiff off this vial, and it’s violation,

⁶ Papa Sam might recall Papa Bois, the bogeyman of the St Lucian forest in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958), which dramatizes a Saint-Lucian folk tale: like him, he is both innocent and a trickster.

⁷ This character was represented in the Trinidad performance by a ridiculous man with a moustache and a preposterous French accent, clothed in a suit of gaudy checked fabric, rather unsuitable in the Louisiana climate.

mornin', noon and night." With his magically acquired energy, he will muster the courage to demand the compromising ledgers from the Directors. Didi will bring them to Marie, providing her with the weapon to expose the financial fraud they indulge in "to make some on the side," for "mistresses are damned expensive things." Victorin and Clauzel know they cannot step up the social ladder honestly, and they sing a hymn to swindling on the tune of a nursery rhyme, drawing a picture of the colonizer as infantilized:

VICTORIN & CLAUZEL. *Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle,
that's how it's done
if you want that white house up in Washington!
Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle,
fiddle, fiddle, dee-dee
fiddling is the base of our economy!*

Marie's own ambition for greatness sounds prophetic for the time, almost visionary. When Marie Laveau describes the rich colonial house, Louisiana style, in the French Quarter she has set her eye on, she becomes lyrical, a quality enhanced by music, with the recurring word "white" underlining the existence of an uncontested racial hegemony:

*On 1900 Rampart Street there's a white house
With gingerbread arches and a long balcony
With white arching steps leading up to white windows
That open onto an astonishing sea
You see, as you stroll down its mile-long verandah
Its garden-walls foaming with white Queen Anne's lace
Lemon trees, jasmine and blue jacaranda*

Soon enough, the Cotton Exchange Directors become Marie's enemies, and taking the full measure of her ambition, Clauzel repeats: "She'll be the first black woman President!" For she has taken advantage of her hair-dressing salon to gather intimate secrets and terrify the white bourgeois—"ain't no woman can get her hair done with her mouth shut." They see her first and foremost as black; and as a venomous spider, rendered as such by her tight black dress in the Trinidad performance—, and with the power to castrate white politicians:

Now she waits, black and venomous at the centre
Of a network of streets, mortgages, spirits!
She's making the body politic impotent.

Taken both metaphorically and literally, impotence threatens to disrupt white politics and masculinity:⁸

⁸ The "body politic," embodied by the directors of the Cotton Exchange, is pictured in a farcical, grotesque exchange, in a carnivalized mode, literally reduced to a lascivious but impotent male body. Gilbert and Tomkins show how the Carnival is "suitable as a model for post-colonial representations of the body politic that seek to dismantle the hierarchized corpus of imperial culture" (2002:83), underlining how Harris and Bakhtin "stress that carnival is a medium of multi-voiced or polyphonic spirit which effectively opposes monologic orders such as colonialism" (83).

CLAUZEL & MARIE'S VOICE. *Monsieur Pierre the town planner has a wide French card selection
but of late is having trouble with every new erection,
and what is it gentlemen, that can keep Marie discreet?
The promise of your premises on North Rampart Street.*

White Clauzel and mulatto Marie join in singing, using *double entendre* with the play on word “erection,” a technique Gilbert and Tomkins underline as part of the political veiled allusions of reggae or calypso (2002: 197). As for the white house, it also represents for Marie a child’s dream, a revenge her mother could not have imagined—“‘*stop dreamin’ Honey, it can’t happen ever*’”—and therefore something both innocent and political is at stake.

If not a future President of the United States, Marie Laveau is represented as Cleopatra sailing on a barge on the river Nile, a heroine dear to Walcott:⁹

*Each sunset its windows would blaze to the night skies
Like a paddle-boat floating on a river of green
And high on the tide of the on-rushing sunrise
It rode on the light like the barge of a queen*¹⁰

When Marie’s rival, the sorcerer Sam Davis sees her enter his prison with a basket of food, he, too, rather mockingly, exclaims: “Well now, if it ain’t the Queen of the Nile!” Marie envisions herself as Cleopatra when she flatters Lafayette on his resemblance to the Roman Emperor Caesar:

Sir, you march like Caesar down roaring avenues,
the throat of this city is hoarse from (shouting) your name [.]

She reminds the French General what her real status ought to be—passing from Empress, to President, to Queen, or from Empire, to Republic, to Monarchy: “They call me a Queen. You see where a queen lives.” Yet, the comparison to Caesar turns into an association with Nero, for when Marie evokes his admirers, “slaves hang from trees to watch your carriage trotting,” again in a *double entendre* that bears a deadly resonance, we are invited to take the verb *hang* literally. In Charlie’s inaugural song in the cemetery, “*When the evenin’ sighs in the cottonwood trees*,” “souls seem to haunt those trees, which served as gallows for disobeying slaves, and connote all kind of ghosts, magical phenomena taking place after violent deaths”

⁹ Cleopatra surges up in another play, *A Branch of the Blue Nile*, where one troupe of Trinidadian actors rehearse Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*: it is found again in “Mass Man”, a poem dedicated to the Carnival “barges / like Cleopatra down her river, making style” as Kerry-Jane Wallart remarked in her doctoral dissertation, *La Poétique du trickster dans le théâtre de Derek Walcott : la référence en jeu*, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne, 21 oct. 2005, 108.

¹⁰ The simile of the house as boat, as well as the allusion to the blazing rising sun, replicate Shakespeare’s description of Cleopatra by Enobarbus in *Anthony and Cleopatra*: “The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne / Burn’d on the water” (II, 2). This needs to be perceived in the light of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), where Shakespeare is tried and hanged, in a form of counter-discourse to the canon.

(my translation, Wallart 265). Papa Sam will resume the idea before his execution when he sings, calling forth Billie Holiday, and crossing references anachronistically:¹¹

PAPA SAM. *There's a tree, tomorrow mornin', gonna bear strange fruit
say there's a tree tomorrow mornin', gonna bear strange fruit
got a rope for its branches but it ain't got no roots.*

Marie's power is not only symbolical or spiritual, but more tangible as she is accused of a political conspiracy, of manipulating black cotton-pickers to leave the crops to rot in the fields, and making the bankers and Directors tremble in fear. Marie initiates strikes as an act of rebellion and a cause of political unrest seriously disrupting white economy:

AUCTIONEER. Crop's coming in slower than I seen it, 'cause the niggers been told there's a curse, and they shyin' from touchin' it like the plague. Nothin' can get 'em to move faster, and the price going drop. I'm tellin' you, something better change, or ain't gone be no more Cotton to Exchange. And you can thank Madame LaVeau, she tellin' her niggers what to do.

Marie exerts a form of counter-power in the context of the Carnival where it is only fitting that the blacks should be kings and the Directors at their mercy. In this mixed colonial society, Marie embodies a number of contradictions: she is not a slave, but she does belong to their racial group;¹² she is a mulatto, but she still holds economic and social power over free-colored mulattoes, thus failing to share entirely their experiences and race and gender consciousness. For what is the situation among the mulatto girls who work for Marie? As the slightest shade of the skin means a different social rung of the ladder, Didi, a "cream-colored" "mulatto," longs to be assimilated with the whites through marriage, and as those "high French Creoles [...] feel they were personally sliced from the thigh of Jupiter," she resents the unjust discrimination she undergoes:

DIDI. I'm 'bout ninety percent French, but they keep saying Philippe Betenoir ain't ever goin' marry me cause I got a drop of Congo water in my Mississippi. Do I look that colored, girls.

She reproaches her white fiancé for being "ashamed of me 'cos I'm colored," while she haughtily describes a black crowd in Congo Square as a disgrace, "the heart of the jungle, 'stead of the finest flower of cities in the South."

Ironically enough, Marie pleads for the emancipation of the blacks, whereas, at the same time, she exploits, virtually enslaves her girls, who repeatedly regret their condition. Clauzel joins in the condemnation of Marie's opportunism and hypocrisy who behaves as a pimp, as a slave-owner, against her professed principles:

¹¹ They rest on jazz music, with a song deemed to have initiated protest singing in 1939 in Greenwich Village, New York, in the Cafe Society where a black and white audience listened, as the House Un-American Activities Committee came to check whether the communist party might have sponsored the author of a song which was to go down the decades, painfully so.

¹² According to Ethel Klein, "group consciousness is a critical precondition to political action," and apart from economics, "attributes of society, such as race, ethnicity, sex, and religion, can serve as bases for group action" (3). She stresses the importance of group, adding that "political consciousness [...] begins with affiliation, a recognition of group-membership and shared interests. [...] Women's primary affiliations have been familial, ethnic, or religious, but not gender-based" (3).

CLAUZEL. A hypocrite! To concern herself on one hand with the freedom of slaves then to profit from the moral captivity of the free-colored.

Marie is indeed no emancipating feminist, and Felice, one of her girls, openly rebels against her, condemning her for this sexual exploitation:

FELICE. You know, we called free-colored women, but we ain't no different from the black slaves, and we in chains too, we who should be doing something for everybody's freedom, we been bought and sold to her for the color of our flesh. [...] she got us under her thumb and she's squeezin' us for all she can get.

Felice's rebellion, materialized by her theft of the box that gives Marie her magic power, drives the widow into such a fury that her curse strikes Felice, who is brought back from the River, drowned, an event which drives her two lovers, white Blondin and black Luke, to despair. Marie's cynicism knows no limits, she is determined to outcorrupt the already corrupt Empire.

In the play, the politics of race, sex and money, merge with religion in that they can all be primary forms of exploitation and antagonism:

The Catholic pantheon adapted easily to African pantheism. Catholic mystery adapted easily to African magic. Not all accepted the white man's God. As prologue to the Haitian revolution, Boukman was invoking Damballa in the Bois Cayman [...] what is finally important is that the race or the tribes were converted, they became Christian. [...] The slave converted himself, he changed weapons, spiritual weapons, [...]. (« The Muse of History », Walcott 1998: 48)

Reverend Bythunder, a caricature of the perverse evangelist, hired as an exorcist to "smite the harlot, Marie," claims to have "mounted the pale, stone-colored and winged horse of the Apocalypse and flew." He calls black people "the cursed children of Ham" and asks for his money even before he begins the ritual of exorcism. He represents a perverted white form of religion: "Then, by thunder, testify there... Luke!" At the same time, Charlie and the chorus exhort all sinners to "*Wash your sins as white as snow*," underlining the dominant racial ideology that associates white to good and black to evil.

Reverend Bythunder asks Papa Sam, who is to him "the son of Satan," to renounce his god. Yet, as soon as Papa Sam starts uttering the performative words of renunciation, the names of the voodoo gods emerge from his mouth like irrepressible mantras in a language of resistance: "*Obe Obe Legba Obe Legba*," "*Obe Legba Vodun...*" Papa Sam does pray, but only to ask: "*don't let them make / our own Gods die.*" The voodoo being a syncretism of religions drawing upon the pagan and the Christian gods, Papa Sam creates a bridge between the African and the Western culture, which the colonial white Evangelist refuses.¹³

A rather farcical end to the exorcism is effected when sudden darkness spreads like a plague of Egypt in the shape of a bagful of frogs emptied by Marie's assistant Aborzor, a black soldier who already belongs to the world of the dead. A fight between the evangelist

¹³ "Religion is the weapon of planters and guarantees social injustice," says Kerry-Jane Wallart, who adds that "syncretism is forbidden by authorities in power" (270). Not only do two types of religion come to clash, the white and the black, but after a crisis of faith when Papa Sam is left in doubt, resolution cannot be achieved without the reconciliation of the two spiritual figures.

preacher and the sorcerer ensues with the preacher calling him “black sheep” and a “thief,” and an infuriated Sam killing Bythunder with the bottle of bad whisky the man had tried to bribe him with: a quiet, almost accidental and rather unconvincing murder, which the exorcist provoked, if not conjured up, picturing himself in a grotesque parody, as Christ crucified between the two thieves.¹⁴

When Papa Sam is thrown in jail and sentenced to death, Marie's antagonism yields to sympathy and a sense of solidarity encompass two black individuals who stand against white colonial power.¹⁵ Marie sees his imprisonment as a political injustice. Just as she ought to be a Queen, he ought to be a King, and a priest: she praises his glory and persuades Lafayette to plead with the Governor for a reprieve. Lafayette claims political impotence before an awe-inspiring legal power in cases of murder, declaring that he “cannot interfere in the courts of this state.” “The law is the god of this country, Madame.” Yet, Marie advocates the delicate issue of a racial crime, with modern accents that echo the civil rights movement, or the riots that inevitably follow white injustice. She warns Lafayette:

you think that History will escape its crimes? You can't separate the meaning of this country from the fate of one nigger.

She adds: “Papa Sam may have killed a priest. But they killed his gods.” The religious conflict is also political. Marie wins the battle, for word from the French General will be delivered just in time to remove the rope from around the black man's neck: slaves applaud the miracle and Marie's magic.¹⁶

During the initial contest between the two sorcerers, they had prayed the voodoo gods, and “*the vever of the snake god, Damballa / Was drawn on new American ground.*” In the last scene, the religion which visually prevails on the stage is voodoo, allowing for a perfect syncretism when Felice is brought back to life, ending the play:

(the shapes of African gods, huge on stilts, emerge, then the huge statues of Christian saints, then figures with both African and Christian elements, a black St. George in armour, a black Virgin and we are at the moment when the faiths cross

This marks the tangible victory of the colonized over the colonizers, and the slaves over the masters, as is fitting for the subversive potential of the Carnival ritual: “theatricalized cultural practices such as ritual and carnival [...] subvert imposed canonical traditions” (Gilbert and

¹⁴ Blackthunder had earlier been described by Philippe Bettenoir as “a grave, tomb-stone complexioned gentleman looking like a penitential buzzard hovering outside.” He was embodied in the Trinidad performance. His death is all the more unreal in the Trinidad filmed version as the actor reappears in the next scene playing the part of Lafayette — another kind of carnivalisation of the European model. In the Trinidad performance, he was embodied by a spectral-looking actor, who caricatured the dark side of Puritanism.

¹⁵ Earlier in the play, Papa Sam is bitten in the leg by Marie's snake. He accuses her of having “fixed [this snake] with money” — indeed in the Trinidadian performance, an elf-looking actor, his body sheathed in a green leotard, played Damballa while “*the voodoo drum / Beat[s] dominus vobiscum*», an incongruity underlined by the chorus.

¹⁶ In order to bring Felice back to life, Marie puts their personal rivalry aside and prays to the voodoo gods along with Papa Sam. She federates all gods and prayers, even Blondin exclaims: “Oh, dear God, how I want to believe in the miracle of her resurrection!” The prayer is literally performative since the miracle follows, but is it really a miracle, or the desire to believe it?

Tompkins 12). Here, the voodoo rituals are performed on the proscenium, yet this sense of victory sounds like a reconciliation, a kind of mutual recognition, of redemption. For instance, Blondin is somehow redeemed through his capacity for repentance. When he enters the Cathedral of St Louis to pray the “Blessed Virgin,” he realizes the sharp contrast between the vanity of its excessive splendour, “how rich the church is,” and his “poor faith.”¹⁷ At that moment, he grows morally, preferring to sacrifice his selfish love and let his mistress marry her black lover, slave Luke, whose freedom he vows to purchase, if only she comes back to life.

On the other hand, Marie, whose curse, or snake, threw Felice into a state of apparent death, remains cynical and self-serving, blackmailing Blondin to procure her the white house in exchange for Felice’s resurrection.

MARIE. The law prevents me to acquire property. It’s a law you know, called the Black Code, the law don’t stop your partners, or you. Cancel the old mortgage, manipulate a transfer of 1900 Rampart Street to me, that house passed to the Exchange when Devaux died, Then, I’ll see if my gods can do you justice, I’ll sort my ferns out, and I’ll find Felice

In one version of the play, Lafayette had explained the impossibility of Marie owning the white house by saying that “It would make *history*,” to which Marie had retorted: “I’m here to *make* history.”¹⁸ In the end, the key of the house is finally handed to Marie, who never actually inhabits the house, but opens it to the people who come to her door “with their hopes and their fears” and “their schemes / for their freedom.” When the chorus-leader closes the play, she has become a spirit, whose presence is still felt.¹⁹

Derek Walcott has forcefully intersected gender and race in this play. Not only did he choose a colored woman as the focal hero/ine, he did so in a society where slavery still existed, in a number of forms and states—free, free-colored, slave, servant.²⁰ In the midst of varying hierarchies, Marie emerges as a dominant figure prevailing over Papa Sam and black and colored men and women, whatever their shades of color. Thanks to her art, she has the

¹⁷ In the play, money is defined as a temptation that cannot be easily resisted. Fidèle (faithful to whom?), one of Marie’s girls, in her preamble for the power of money, mentions an Empress who was a “békée” in Martinique, and whose second husband Napoleon Bonaparte re-established the principle of slavery in 1802 in some French territories, after it had been abolished on all of them eight years earlier (in 1794), probably a reason why her statue in Fort de France was decapitated and the neck painted in red. However, historians doubt she might have weighed on Napoleon’s decision, most probably influenced by the English who, after the French revolutionaries’ abolition of slavery, had indeed re-established it in 1796, in Saint-Lucia for example, Walcott’s native island. Fidèle seems to associate Josephine de Beauharnais only with affluence and an easy life, as if she were one of those cynical dictators’ wives collecting jewels and luxury shoes: “When I think of money honey, a great golden light comes on in my head like the Empress Josephine of Martinique.”

¹⁸ This re-appropriation of the historical discourse is a radical step from the poet Shabine’s regret that: “I met history once, but he ain’t recognize me,” (“The Schooner Flight”, CP 350).

¹⁹ While the god-snake has joined the River, flowing as a symbol of liberation and eternity, we are reminded of Beloved’s rebirth out of the real world, in another mythical realm, that of Mammy-Watta, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

²⁰ An infinite variety of colors of skin (black, high yellow, cream-colored, etc.) and ranks (black, mulatto, Shabine...); of social classes (Directors, assistant accountant, and even General); of religious statuses (priestess, conjure-man, itinerant preacher), of languages (English, French, Creole, patois).

General at her mercy, as well as love-smitten Blondin, and although she does not become President, she does own the white house.²¹

According to Wallart, "as with Genet, unlike traditional comedy, we have a ritualistic comedy ill-masking a great intensity" (259); drama is a business of undertakers, hence the trickster's double role of grave-digger, burying the characters in the play.²² The chorus devised by Walcott makes the link between anonymous groups (such as the slaves) and the audience, explaining, "denouncing the ambiguity of appearances," as Barthes remarked, as in antique tragedy.²³ Walcott's theatre allows us to literally witness the mysteries of religion, the shades of politics and fraud. His poetics is characterized by instability as his heroes glide from one nature to its contrary making life and death seem reversible. The context of the carnival allows for the upsetting of the hierarchy or the established order, the spectator is often confused by slippery or parodic references. The collective ceremony, which punctuates the archaic ritual of sacrifice and resurrection performed in front of the spectators, is underlined mainly by its poetic quality. It re-establishes order and peace after anarchic cruelty and violence. The irrationality of magic temporarily gives a voice to the "disremembered and unaccounted for," to borrow Toni Morrison's words, and power to the disempowered. Imperialism has been duly resisted through the play in various instances, which offer an anti-imperial perspective. Yet, all this may be a dream, an illusion, a magic spell, or "*the evenin' sighs in the cottonwood trees*," the poetics efficiently serving the politic, but probably exceeding it due to the vanity of existence, and the transience of humanity.

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²¹ Marie puts to use her rank as widow of a free-colored valorous soldier, for marriage remains, even after death, a way of emancipating, and of lightening one's color, hence Didi's hope of marrying Philippe Betenoir, whose name suggests the absurdity of the prospect; but the marriage which gives a happy ending to the musical comedy is a love-marriage between two colored lovers, the young man, still a slave.

²² Drama for Walcott is "a vast business of killing by undertakers (putting people under the earth). Charlie plays trickster, and sexton, and literally buries the characters in the play" (Wallart 264), Even the verb to "rehearse" suggests the morbidity of acting.

²³ The chorus devised by Walcott makes the link between anonymous groups (such as the slaves) and the audience, explaining, "denouncing the ambiguity of appearances", as Barthes remarked, as in antique tragedy (Roland Barthes, "Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique" in *Théâtre populaire* 2 (juillet-août 1953), p. 21.

- . *Marie Laveau*, a musical. Galt MacDermot, Derek Walcott, BOX 5A, #382, archives of the University of the West Indies in Trinidad.
 - . *Marie Laveau*. Gayelle Programme (a film, recording of the play by the troupe of College of the Virgin Islands).
 - . *Marie Laveau*, comédie musicale d'après un texte inédit de l'auteur caribéen Derek Walcott, prix Nobel, Climax, Passages en voix, producer Nicole Ollier, Université Bordeaux Montaigne, 2009.
 - . *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*, London: Faber & Faber, 1992 (USA & Toronto, Canada: Harper Collins 1986)
 - . *What The Twilight Says. Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Wallart, Kerry-Jane. *La Poétique du trickster dans le théâtre de Derek Walcott : la référence en jeu*, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne, 21 oct. 2005.