

Our *International Gate Late: Island Poetry on Stage* event took place on 22 October 2020. Below is a transcription of the online discussion between editor and academic Malachi McIntosh and writer and editor Nicholas Laughlin, hosted by Gate Associate Director Yasmin Hafesji. We hope you enjoy it.

YASMIN: Hello everyone. Welcome to this evening's Gate Late, thank you so much for joining us on Zoom. My name is Yasmin Hafesji, I am the Associate Director at the Gate Theatre and in a moment I am going to introduce you to our brilliant speakers, Malachi McIntosh and Nicholas Laughlin.

This Gate Late is part of a new series of online events celebrating international performers and global voices, where we talk about some of the themes of the shows on at the Gate now and some of the productions that are yet to come. This one, about Island Poetry, sits somewhere in between, as it's a response to one of the shows that was playing online recently, called *Letters*, where guest performers wrote letters to one another over lockdown. The letters were opened and shared during performances on Zoom, months after they were written, and these letters contained a poem to the other performer. One of our performers, who I think is here today, sent the poem, *Love after Love* by Derek Walcott, so it feels very apt. You can still view those performances on our website so please check them out.

This discussion is also in response largely to our production of *Omeros* which sadly had to be postponed until next year; keep an eye on our website for more information about that. But it's really

for us to invite Malachi and Nicholas to use *Omeros* and the writing of Derek Walcott as a starting point for a broader discussion about Caribbean poetry and writing today. So it's my great pleasure to welcome our two speakers this evening. Hi Malachi and Nicholas, I thought you should both introduce yourselves because you're such interesting guests! Maybe Malachi, you can kick us off with a short introduction.

MALACHI: Hello everyone. My name is Malachi McIntosh, I am the editor and publishing director of Wasafiri Magazine, which is placed strategically behind me, a magazine of international contemporary writing. I am based in Birmingham and I have a backstory as an academic. I taught at Warwick University, Cambridge University and Goldsmiths over a period of some years, and I write a bit, but nowhere near as much as Nicholas, and publish a tiny bit also. It's a pleasure to be here and a pleasure to be invited to talk about Caribbean literature which is one of my great loves and I think ought to be a great love of more people.

YASMIN: Thanks Malachi.

NICHOLAS: Hi everyone. My name is Nicholas Laughlin, I think I am probably the most geographically distant person in the call, I am in Trinidad in the Southern Caribbean, and I am a writer and editor. I used to edit a magazine called the Caribbean Review of Books which is in long term hibernation at the moment. I also am a member of a team that runs an annual literature festival here in Trinidad, called the NGC Bocas Lit Fest. It's a festival with a very strong Caribbean focus and a strong focus also on new writers, the new generation of Caribbean

writers. I don't have any kind of scholarly background, unlike Malachi, and in fact when the Gate asked me to do this I had to think about it 3 or 4 times because I did not want to misrepresent myself as a Walcott expert of any kind, which I am not. But like many people in the Caribbean, in the literary world, I have certainly been reading him for many years and I have a broad sense of what he has tried to do in his career and lots of opinions on different elements of his work. So I guess that is where I will try to enter the conversation from, and the thing that I am really interested in discussing with Malachi, and hearing questions from all of you on, is this bigger question of where Walcott fits in the broader context of Caribbean literature, Caribbean writing and Caribbean poetry in particular.

MALACHI: I think the nature of Nicholas's modesty will reveal itself as time passes. I don't want to spoil it.

YASMIN: Thank you both. I think that's a great place to kick off from. Part of that discussion is how you found your way to Walcott's work. In experience, it was through Malachi's teaching; I am kind of ashamed to say it was as a 20 year old, that I first properly engaged with it. I want you both to talk a bit about your relationship with Walcott's work but also, as you said, Nicholas, how it fits into the discussion today, because a lot of conversations that we are having in the theatre landscape are about how certain texts, particularly international texts, fit into our own theatrical landscape. Actually when I was preparing for this event I realised that I had misremembered my first encounter of Derek Walcott, thinking it was *Omeros* I studied but actually it was *The Schooner's Flight*. Somehow across the years I made it

into a different story about *Omeros*, and I wonder why that is, maybe because of how it's revered in the Western world, more so than some of the other texts? I wonder whether you could speak to some of those ideas?

MALACHI: Do you want to go first Nicholas?

NICHOLAS: Sure, I think the first thing you asked is how we came to Walcott. I mean, I came to him reading his work at school. When I was at secondary school, we read a poem or two of his in Year 7 or 8, but we studied one of his early plays, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, later in Year 10 or 11, something like that. I think my real big introduction to Walcott's work actually came when I was an A level student. One Literature class was the day it was announced that he won the Nobel Prize, so everyone got that news on the radio, or in the car, going to work or school that morning, and my Literature teacher decided that his class, a small class of 6 A level Literature students, could not possibly proceed in life without knowing a bit more about Derek Walcott. So he arrived in class with a load of photocopies. I remember some of the specific things that he brought to class, one of the poems from *Midsummer*. We read them, talked through them, this is all off syllabus, and for most of us that was the first time we seriously read him.

And then of course, I went to university in Trinidad, the University of the West Indies, and studied Literature and it's impossible to study Literature at UWI without seriously engaging with Walcott. I was lucky to do a class with Patricia Ismond, who died a few years ago, who is one of the great Walcott scholars. I read his work very broadly and deeply. I don't recall if *Omeros* was

a formal subject for study... I'm sure we all read it but I can't remember if it was a main text. Pat Ismond's main focus was generally Walcott's early work, from what she called the Carribean phase of his writing, up until the late 70s / early 80s, the point at which he moved for much of the time to the United States. So that is where I started with Walcott, where I first grappled with his work...

A fun little anecdote; that year he won a Nobel prize, he was of course living in Boston at the time, but as soon as it was practicable, some months later, he came back to Trinidad. Many of you will know that Walcott actually spent a chunk of his life living in Trinidad. He was a St Lucian writer, born in St Lucia, went to university in Jamaica, but then from the late 50s/early 60s was based in Trinidad, where his family was. He married a Trinidadian woman and had two daughters, and he of course was a founder of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. So really for a key part of his career, he was working in Trinidad, in the cultural context of Trinidad. So he came back here and one of the local bookshops had a book signing, where people could get their books signed by the new Nobel Laureate. I, at the age of 17, decided to see what a Nobel Prize winner in Literature looked like in the flesh...

Unfortunately I did not own any of his books, I was too young, but I did have a school anthology with one of his poems in it, so I took that bold-facedly. I stood in the queue and it was clearly a queue of people who had known Walcott and been reading him for years there. They had stacks of books. They were all like "Derek, it's so lovely to see you, sign this one, sign that one." I got to the front. I did not have one of his books. It was a small text book basically

with one of his poems in. I got to the front and I nervously started to say, "Mr Walcott, I don't own any of your books, but I wanted to meet you." He just kind of looked at me and I was terrified what would come next. He just gave me a big wink which was unexpected and grabbed the book and put his signature next to the poem. That is the most productive personal contact I've had with Derek Walcott.

Anyway, that's me and Walcott. The other question you asked, Yasmin, was a sense of where he fits into that bigger picture of Caribbean literature. The short answer to that is that he is obviously one of the best known Caribbean writers, largely because he won the Nobel Prize. He was well-known in poetry circles before that but then of course became internationally famous after he won the Nobel. But in a lot of ways he is not a typical representative of Caribbean writing and I guess we will get into the conversation a bit more, in terms of his preoccupations, in terms of his style and approach and ideas of what literature is or should be, his idea of what Caribbean culture is or should be. *Omeros* is a good example because it's clearly inspired by this great classical work of the Western literary tradition, or two of them actually, equally deriving from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, doing his very typically Walcott thing, which is pulling elements from it, names, images, but doing what he wants with them, because it's in no way a faithful adaptation of anything in Homer. There are characters in *Omeros* that have parallels with Homer's characters, but they are also very much ordinary people from a fishing village in St Lucia that Walcott wants to write about for his own reasons. Anyway I have said enough. Malachi?

MALACHI: My story is almost the opposite. My grandparents

moved to Birmingham, England, in the 1950s as part of the Windrush Generation. My parents were born here, I was born here but I was educated in the US, hence my accent, and came back to Britain for a postgraduate study. In that entire education, until I was 22/23 years old maybe, I did not learn a single thing about the Caribbean except that Columbus landed there. And not even that specifically, when we learned Columbus in US, it was “he came to the Americas, he landed on some island” but then you know, “this wonderful thing called the US was born.” So it was always very much marginalised in my education, and the nature of my grandparents’ migration, I think common to people of their generation, was that they didn't really talk too much about Jamaica, where they are from. It’s as if they restarted their lives you know, like an old video game system, where you press reset and everything starts over, when they moved here.

There was an absence in my understanding and I think quite embarrassingly, but I know this is the experience of lots of people of my generation, and hopefully not so much these days, I felt that the Caribbean was a place that did not have a history or did not have much of a history, I just didn’t know anything. It was in my postgraduate study and an MA class on postcolonial literature that I discovered Caribbean literature and could begin to be engaged with Caribbean history. That was only because in that class, in my MA, we received a reading list, which was two-sided, that said “this is the literature that is considered colonial.” And on that list was Caribbean literature and that’s it. So I didn’t even learn Caribbean literature at that point, I was just given a photocopied piece of paper saying that Caribbean literature existed and that it was considered post-colonial.

But I was interested in it. I had read some Latin-American writers, which I think maybe you do if you go to school in the US, I also went to school in Florida, with a big Cuban population. So then, just starting to explore Caribbean literature, I started that journey by sending, this is an embarrassing story, an email to the University of West Indies, to their Alma Mater, just to the general department inbox, saying “my name is Malachi McIntosh, I have just discovered Caribbean Literature, can you recommend anything for me to read?” which I’m sure was received really wonderfully by whoever read that email. “Hello my name is John, I’ve just discovered English Literature, where should I begin?!” (Laughs) I did not receive a response, as you would expect, but then started to study and ultimately did a PhD in Caribbean writing and ultimately went on to teach Caribbean writing. And in that move from doing a PHD and then into teaching, and this is where our stories overlap, Nicholas, you sort of necessarily encounter Walcott because of his significance. You can’t *not* study his work, I think, if you are a student of that body of work, I mean not least because of the Nobel but also I think coming back to that question of where he fits in, because of the unique things he was attempting to do with his poetry.

NICHOLAS LAUGHLIN: Exactly. Would this be a good point to read a little snatch of *Omeros* just to get some Walcott voice in our ears before we continue?

MALACHI MCINTOSH: I’ve got a little tiny bit. I will not suppose that everyone knows how *Omeros* works but I will not give you chapter and verse. The story is a frame narrative about an

individual poet who sort of decides to write, or decides to try to envision this space in Saint Lucia, through the example of Homer effectively, reimagining the island space as a space of epic events as it were. This is the moment where he thinks about the key character in this story that he is about to tell. It's a multiply nested narrative but that's the top frame. So he's in a restaurant and he says:

*“That was when I turned with him toward the village
and saw, through the caging wires of the sky,
a beach with its padding panther; now the mirage

dissolved to a woman with a madras head-tie,
But the head proud, although it was looking for work.
I felt like standing in homage to a beauty

that left, like a ship, widening eyes in his wake.
“Who the hell is that?” A tourist near my table
asked a waitress. The waitress said, “She? She too proud!”

As the carved lids of the unimaginable
ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton wall crowd,
the waitress sneered, “Helen.” And all the rest followed.”*
- (Excerpt from *Omeros* by Derek Walcott)

He sees a Helen figure sinking back in the island, and from an encounter with that Helen so the story unfolds... Nicholas, should we talk about the book, before we talk about other stuff?

NICHOLAS: I was going to say, under the subject of Helen, something that is well-known to every Saint Lucian school child and I guess for a lot of people in the Caribbean, is that Saint Lucia

has this old nickname, the Helen of the West Indies, obviously going back to the colonial era, and the island is called that. Just as you know the Greeks and the Trojans went to war supposedly over this beautiful woman, the island of Saint Lucia was one of the Caribbean islands that was most fought over by colonial powers, in particular the British and French. I can't remember the statistics, it changed powers 12 or 14 times over its history, so generations of school teachers in Saint Lucia would have told their students, Saint Lucia is the Helen of the West Indies, and Walcott has actually said quite openly in an interview once, that was one of the routes of his interest in classical tradition, in the classical Greek literature or myth, because if you are told your island is the Helen of the West Indies, you obviously want to know what that means. And so that leads onto the myth of Helen, the other figures in the story, what the Trojan war about, and it branches off from there. So in a basic way the Helen in the story is a woman, a very beautiful woman from a small fishing village in Saint Lucia, and there are two fishermen who are rivals, friends who are now kind of romantic rivals, so Achilles and Hector from *The Iliad*. But also, I mean, Helen in the book is always in some kind of idealised sense, standing in for the island of Saint Lucia.

MALACHI: If I can dive in, I guess that everything in the book is not just itself, everything is referencing something else, everything is double or tripled, which I guess is part of the artistic achievement with the book and why it's considered one of the major works. Because there is an earlier work where some of this stuff is forecasted visually; the first autobiography called *Another Life*, where there is this engagement with myth which goes through Walcott's career but it is much more of a traditional free-verse poem, or reflection, much looser, whereas this book is

attempting to do a lot of things. Is that right, is that a fair characterisation?

NICHOLAS: Some may say it's attempting to do too many things. I think it's attempting to do a lot. You know, writers write things because they want to ultimately, because there is something nagging away at them and they want to do it. But I also feel like [Walcott] saw it as a test of his ambition and ability to write this, you know. It's a 300-page kind of verse, not quite an epic in the traditional classical sense, but of epic scope and story that draws on Homer, draws on Greek myth, draws on a great deal else, because there are references to a whole lot of other things in it. James Joyce appears at one point, there is a whole section that refers to the ghost dance tradition from the US about which Walcott wrote a play. And it's also about himself, because, as Malachi says, he is a character in the story and very closely adhering to his own biographical details. There is a scene where he visits his now very elderly mother who is suffering from dementia in an old people's home. It follows the character Walcott on his travels back to Boston, and there is very much a sense of him trying to come to terms with something, with that sense of himself as someone that is roving and trying to figure out where home is and why home is, and comparing himself in that sense, in some way, to Odysseus, which he had done many times before, you know, the wanderer trying to find his way back home. Again what is home? What has become of the wife he left? What happened to him along the way?

There are numerous poems throughout his entire career which reflect on that; there is a poem, maybe I can read a snatch of it,

called *Sea Grapes* which is from the early 70s. To put it in context, this is just around the time that his marriage is breaking up, fault mostly on his side, I think it is fair to say. A sea grape is a tree that grows in the Caribbean, that grows along the sea shore, it has a big brown leathery leaf and fruit that looks slightly like grapes. You can title a whole book after them, so obviously it's part of the landscape that he felt some kind of emotional resonance from. It starts:

*“That sail which leans on light,
tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean*

*for home, could be Odysseus,
homebound on the Aegean;
that father and husband's*

*Longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is
like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa's name
in every gull's outcry.*

*This brings nobody peace. The ancient war
between obsession and responsibility
will never finish, and has been the same*

*for the sea-wanderer, or the one on shore
now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,
since Troy sighed its last flame,*

*and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough,
from whose groundswell the great hexameters come
to the conclusions of exhausted surf.*

The classics can console. But not enough."

- (Excerpt from *Sea Grapes* by Derek Walcott)

There is a very pointed biographical reason for him, talking about the adulterers' cry in the call of the seagulls. So yeah, of course, it's also useful to remember that having done *Omeros* and won a Nobel prize, he then did a stage adaptation of *The Odyssey*, at the Royal Shakespeare Company, so it's a series of characters and images and ideas that he returned to over and over and over again throughout his career.

MALACHI: It's a good segway to get you thinking about legacies and other writers and things like this. It's worthwhile thinking about Walcott, this book and the rest of his work in context so, you know, he was a member of a generation of writers from a place that, within the global landscape of writing, was considered marginal. I mean you could argue, maybe in Britain, that is still kind of the perception. In the 1950s, 60s, 70s, a huge number of authors emerged and migrated to Britain, some to the US, in order to establish themselves in the literary space. Walcott is one of the people that did not migrate but was, like the others, however, still trying to assert themselves within the space of writing. And I think it's a very familiar story right, the young man, in this case, most often from the fringes, goes to the big city as an artist and tries to make their name.

Various different writers took various different approaches to that attempt, and Walcott's approach, also probably a familiar story, was to prove mastery of the traditional forms, a way of sort of flexing, can I say that, to say that you are as good as this tradition

you are trying to enter, if not better. There is always this kind of conversation with tradition in his work, but also I think there's a kind of tension. This is where we think about the people that come after him. There is an extent to which this form doesn't necessarily fit the subject matter and there is a kind of negotiation with form and subject matter that's happening through his work, and 'the classics can console but not enough' is pretty much the theme of Walcott's writing. "How far can somebody like me engage with these forms and make them new and localise them? How far can somebody like me think of this epic story, that is the core of the Western canon, taking place amongst fishermen in St Lucia? You know, where does this form fall short? And interestingly it goes back to the Helen character and kind of acknowledges that this way of representing does not quite work and that character kind of escapes it to an extent. There's also stuff in there around gender, representation as well, like the woman that he is trying to possess but can't quite possess, that goes back to the adultery stuff that's in the other work, it knits together. But there is a sense that this generation of writers were actively in conversation with their forebearers but their forebearers for the most part in their eyes weren't people from the region, they were people from the centre, from London, and so on.

NICHOLAS: Yeah, I think there's very much a sense in Walcott's world that the world does not exist until it's been written about, a place does not exist until it's in literature. As a young man, you know maybe ambitiously, maybe arrogantly, he got this idea in his head that he never let go of, which is that he would be the one that would write his island, St Lucia, the West Indies, the

Caribbean, into literature. And this idea reoccurs in different ways, there is that line of his, you know, “the Caribbean is a green world without metaphors” and if it’s without metaphors then someone has to write the metaphors, and he saw that as his job, to write this world into being, write about people from this unimportant little corner of this unimportant island and make them into figures that were as important and as significant in the eyes of the world as Helen of Troy, as Achilles.

MALACHI: To bring it back to contemporary British writers, you can see a similar kind of movement in the work of Bernadine Evaristo, for instance, in the work of Zadie Smith, people who come from communities that are overlooked and attempt to bring those communities into literature, and through bringing them into literature, assert the value, the centrality, to turn the gaze back and say “look it’s right here, it’s always been here, we have always been here” sort of thing. But it’s double-edged; I think what you’re gesturing to, Nicholas, you know, is this idea that you feel like you need to represent yourself to the people that have ignored you to an extent.

NICHOLAS: I think it’s also good to remember there were poets from the Caribbean before Walcott. But oddly it’s more obvious to us now than it would have been to him. Because for the most part, these would have been poets who were published at home, in their individual home islands, self-published in very small editions that did not travel. Walcott was probably one of the Caribbean poets whose work traveled beyond the island it was written on. He self-published two of his own books as a teenager and would send copies of them in a suitcase. There were famous

anecdotes about Barbadian writer Frank Collymore, coming upon this book and thinking, this child is a genius and everyone must know about this, and showing the book around.

So there's a way in which it seems to him that there was no one else. He would not have found those books in a library or bookshop. Somewhere in one of his essays he said, the thing about growing up in a place like Saint Lucia then, in the 1940s, was there was a library but if you went to the library you had the classics and you had trash; you didn't have anything in between. It would have had the works of Homer, probably in translation, it would have had Shakespeare, it would have had Milton, and all of that, and then it would have had popular novels which were what most people wanted to borrow, but nothing in between. And there certainly weren't Caribbean books, so it would have felt to him like he was doing this for the first time.

I mean, a huge difference, is that this is just a matter of history and chronology, between Walcott's situation and writers who came after him, especially writers now. A young person who's trying to invent themselves as a writer in the Caribbean now, they have 3 or 4 generations of literary history. They have a canon they can reflect on. And starting with the generation of Walcott, scholarship has now slowly excavated older texts from the earlier 18th, 19th, 20th century that people just did not know about before. For him it really was, I mean, he used the metaphor 'the task of Adam to name things', he saw himself as Adam in the garden of Eden giving everything its name because nothing had a name. No longer here in the Caribbean do we think we are living in the garden of Eden and no one is walking around naming

anything.

But I guess to get back to something that we mentioned a little bit at the very beginning, is Walcott now seems to a lot of people outside the Caribbean as the exemplary Caribbean poet because of his famed Nobel Prize, and all of that, but he was not the only one of his generation, and within the Caribbean he was not the most highly regarded or the most popular in his generation. It's worth reflecting on the fact that in the late 60s/early 70s, Walcott was a bit of an outsider because of his interest in the Western tradition and traditional Western forms, precisely because he was writing poems where he compared himself to Robinson Crusoe cast away on his island, and that kind of thing. But there was another tradition which, rightly or wrongly, has come to be personified by Barbadian writer Kamau Brathwaite who died earlier this year, who did something quite different to Walcott.

Brathwaite, like Walcott, left the Caribbean to go to university and he ended up working in West Africa for some years before coming back home. And actually being in West Africa, which is the ancestral homeland of great parts of people of the contemporary Caribbean, and having had exposure to a living tradition which most people in the Caribbean are cut off from, radically shaped his work. So, Brathwaite was very much concerned with that, what was lost, in the process of the middle passage, what was lost by people torn away from Africa against their will and brought to the new world, what was lost in terms of culture, stories, language, but also the spiritual loss from being cut off from your roots and so he wrote very much about that.

It's not that Walcott did not recognise this dilemma and in fact,

there is an early poem that gets quoted a lot, called "A far cry from Africa" where he tries to come to terms with his divided heritage. He describes himself as "divided to the vein" as in the blood flowing through his veins was literally divided, because he had African ancestry on one side of his family and European ancestry on another. He thought it was a false choice or a false dilemma to have to choose one or the other. He thought that the point of being here in the Caribbean was, you know, in historical terms this was not accurate, it's not that this was a tabula rasa, there were people here before, there were indigenous peoples, but in Walcott's poetic myth, this was a green world without metaphor, everything had to be named, and the privilege of coming out of this traumatic colonial experience was that you can draw from all the elements of it, draw from the African experience and also from the European experience and also the Asian experience. In his Nobel lecture, it opens with him going to a performance of *Ramlila*, which is a traditional folk performance of the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, which was brought to Trinidad in the 19th century and is still performed here. He has never been before and he goes to it, and then at some place he says something like, "I am one eighth the writer I could have been if I'd manage to absorb the influences of all of these."

MALACHI: I suppose we are kind of swanning around this question we talked about before, of authenticity and what it means to be authentic to the place, and these twin Caribbean traditions are two different ways of perceiving the authentic to an extent. One which is really the Wakadian, and this is really kind of rough and ready, so maybe don't quote me exactly, saying the

Walcott tradition is something along the lines of, 'everyone that has been here is a part of what this is and we need to swirl it altogether in some way,' like Nicholas said. 'All of the traditions belong to us, we can show a mastery in any of them. Look, I can do the stuff with high European writing...'

And then the other tradition is something different. I mean, we could say that Brathwaite, certainly early on, is trying to re-connect specifically with African heritage of the Caribbean which is a majority population in most islands and many regions, trying to think what that would look like and assuming the European influence, to create something new. Twisting back to my bookshelf, you can actually physically, on the page, if you look at the *Middle Passages* [poetry] by Brathwaite, the later mid-career stuff, the actual way that it looks on the page, is something significantly different from the order of Walcott's *Omeros* in particular. A lot of Walcott's work has tried to go to all forms and take possession of them where perhaps, this is a style of writing that has tried to invent its own form.

NICHOLAS: What's really interesting, Malachi, is of course the term that Brathwaite came up with for this form of writing that kind of evolved in the late 80s/early 90s, was "Sycorax video style." Sycorax of course is a reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. There's this interesting way in which the very form he is using to try and subvert this Western orderly stance going down the page is rooted in a reference to Shakespeare. With the Walcott / Brathwaite thing, in the Caribbean, I don't know if it's an important dynamic for readers elsewhere, but certainly within the Caribbean for generations now, at least since the early 70s, they

have been seen as opposite poles of ways to write Caribbean poetry but also to be a Caribbean poet.

Pat Ismond, who I mentioned earlier, wrote a notorious essay back in 1971 which was actually called "Walcott verses Brathwaite," where she summarised the feeling at the time. It's a good historical snapshot because - apart from whatever she thought, I mean, she was a total Walcott partisan, so, Walcott as far she was concerned, was the more impressive poet, which was the attitude of the time. She describes Brathwaite as the poet of the people, Walcott as the poet's poet. Walcott is the cosmopolitan and Brathwaite is more interested in the nation and the folk, and there's an interesting line in there, because Ismond actually writes, it is Walcott that needs to be vindicated. She was writing in a sense, certainly in 1971, that she had to prove that Walcott was a worthwhile Caribbean poet while it was accepted at the time that Brathwaite was. The point Malachi made about assembling all the pieces by Walcott, taking all the bits from different traditions, there's actually a famous metaphor in his Nobel Laureate: the broken vase. "Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love that took its symmetry for granted when it was a whole." It strikes me that Brathwaite, at the end of his *Arrivants* trilogy, in the very last lines of it, describes Caribbean people making with their thumbs something torn and new. I think you could summarise the difference between them there because Walcott was also trying to make something new but he saw it as something whole and new, as opposed to torn apart and new.

YASMIN: I wonder if now would be a good moment to bring in

the contemporary writing and poetry

MALACHI: Yes. I just want to say, as maybe a quick way to close that part of our conversation, I think it's on my mind because of Black Lives Matter and other things like that, but it's interesting how these kind of battles over authenticity often take place in these kinds of contexts. And how much, I don't know, that within novel forms of representation often camps emerge around who is doing it right and who is doing it best and how that can become its own thing, and turn eyes away from the fundamental thing which is making anew, which is representing, which is often steadying opposition.

NICHOLAS: Of course, when we talk about authenticity in cultural terms it always has to be the plural. It's always authenticities. It's the standard of authenticity for the Caribbean, even on an island as small as Saint Lucia where Walcott was born. He was in some senses born into a cultural minority, because he was born to a Methodist family. Saint Lucia is predominantly Catholic, and as much as he identifies with the island, as much as he is embraced by Saint Lucia, growing up [Walcott] had a sense of being an outsider because he didn't belong to that same kind of full Catholic tradition like most of the people around him. He didn't speak St Lucian Creole for instance. I mean, he learnt a little later in his life and attempted to write in it; there's a poem from the 70s that he wrote in an English and Creole version, but he was not fluent in it, as I have been told by people that knew him well and saw him trying to communicate to people in Creole.

So I guess the answer is that what is authentic for one writer is not necessarily what's authentic for someone else, but those

shades, those gradations get lost, as you say, Malachi, at heated moments and moments of pressure. The 1970s in the Caribbean was just after the height of the independence period, when nationalist fever had played itself out around independence and the hangover of nationalism was setting in and you're contending with ideas around the Black Power revolution in Trinidad, the rise of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, all of the political movements at the time. So it was a heated moment and these seemed like really important major intense urgent questions and they were debating in heated terms. It never got like this with Walcott but, I mean, another kind of difficult person for the Caribbean literary tradition was V. S. Naipaul. Famously, Naipaul went to a literary conference in Jamaica also in 1971, a key year in Caribbean literary history, and someone stood up in the audience and told him he should be shot for basically being a traitor. He was upset and walked off the stage and never came back. That might have been the decisive moment, when he decided he was done with these people.

MALACHI: We should talk about new writers - but there was an incident with Sam Selvon as well, where in the 70s he read a passage from one of his specific memoirs, *Moses Migrating*, and a woman walked up to him on stage and slapped him because she did not think he was properly representing black women. This was a time of a lot of tension around representation, and where you aligned yourself in relation to the mainstream, and inner struggle was an active struggle. I think we should talk about new writers, Nicholas. You said at the beginning you didn't know anything and then you just told everybody everything you know!

NICHOLAS: To cleanse the palate, as it were, Malachi, you should read something from Dionne Brand, and that may lead us into talking about what changed in Caribbean writing and that kind of twist in the 80s and 90s, especially the rise of Caribbean women writers, that switch in the gender dynamics, because women basically now dominate contemporary Caribbean writing.

MALACHI: There is not much to say and I think we both have stuff that we would like to read, to introduce folks to, but it is marked how the early writing in the 50s and 60s, and then the transition into the 70s, was dominated by men, dominated by people that migrated, rather than were born abroad, outside of the Caribbean, and I suppose, in a lot of the things we talked about in relation to Walcott, it was something of a battle for assertion of literary prowess between the writers, in relation to tradition, that I think later generations did not get so hung up about. More and more women writers entered the scene and we get the writing of, I mean, what we call second generational, whatever, folks born outside of the region and who move in and out of the region, have family back home, come back and forth, and circulate.

And one of these writers, she is probably one of my favourite writers full stop ever, in anything, is Dionne Brand, a Trinidadian author, based in Canada, who writes across genres of poetry, fiction, criticism etc. and writes work which is just not hung up on these questions so much, certainly in later works, of whether or not the Caribbean is an okay place to write about and how you write about it. She does have a book called *No Language is Neutral*, which talks about the experience of being from a place

and coming and going and what it is to be a writer and trying to represent the generations coming before you. But it's a very different sort of internalised struggle, it's not so much outwards at the canon, sort of more reflective.

There is a work that I really love of hers and just wanted to introduce; apparently she does not have a UK publisher which I didn't know until recently. Her newer work is traditionally engaged literature, in a sense, politically active, thinking about the Caribbean in a global network, thinking about Canada where she is based, and I wanted to read the opening of *Ossuaries*, because of it being so markedly different from the Walcott.

*"I lived and loved, some might say,
in momentous times,
looking back my dreams were full of prisons
in our narcotic drifting slumbers,
so many dreams of course were full of prisons,
mine were without relief

in our induced days and our wingless days,
my every waking was incarcerated,
each square meter of air so toxic with violence

the atmospheres were breathless there,
the bronchial trees were ligatured
with carbons

some damage I had expected, but no one
expects the violence of glances, of offices,
of walkways and train stations, of bathroom mirrors,*

*especially, the vicious telephones, the coarseness of
daylight, the brusque decisions of air,
the casual homicides of dresses,

what brutal hours, what brutal days.
do not say, oh find the good in it, do not say
there was virtue; there was no virtue, not even in me.”*
(Excerpt from *Ossuaries* by Dionne Brand)

It's a very long poem and it's about the contemporary, in the way that Walcott is not thinking about the present so much as he is thinking about the past and tradition and other things. It's about what it is to live in modernity as a woman, as someone from the Caribbean, the woman in the poem is not from Trinidad, as somebody oppressed by technology and structures, and it's doing something different with, to and for the Caribbean, than Walcott and contemporaries.

NICHOLAS: That's a good point. Walcott was always conscious of his place in history, like where he felt in a tradition, I mean, there's a poem he wrote around the age of 40, where he is saying he is looking over his shoulder to see who is going to eclipse him. It seems a bit premature to be worrying about that then. What's interesting about the very wide, diverse variety of more contemporary Caribbean poets, is that they are much more concerned with now. It's not that they don't have a historical consciousness or are not concerned with the past of the Caribbean, whether that is a much older past or the past of their childhoods, but, as Brand does, there is a sense of the grappling with the here and now. If a bit of Greek myth comes into it for

instance, that's because they've pulled something that is relevant, it's not because it's Greek myth. It's not because the idea needs that scaffolding, like you need to pull out classical characters to make it fit for polite company; it's because they are drawing something useful from it.

I mean, a good example, a poet who is a bit younger than Dionne Brand, but similar in the sense that she's Trinidadian but currently based in the UK, is Vahni Capildeo, who writes in a vast variety of forms and styles and very often references classical myth but always subverting them. If she writes about the God Zeus it's not like, "oh powerful Zeus," she's writing about Zeus as a sexual predator, and her most recent book is actually a book called *Odyssey Calling*, which oddly enough has a series of poems where she reworks the character of Odysseus just as Walcott did himself.

I know we want to get some questions asked and we are running out of time but something I think is important to say is that if, 40 years ago, it seemed possible to say that in Caribbean poetry, there was a Walcott camp and Brathwaite camp, with the vast number of poets, whether they are born in the Caribbean or, as Malachi says, they are first or second generation diaspora writers, with a vast number of subjects, voices, you can't settle people down into camps. They don't adhere to magnetic poles in the same way, and that is obviously a good thing. I think if that traditional sense of a great Caribbean book is *Another Life* or George Lammings *In the castle of my skin*, like the novel of 'a bright boy is born somewhere in the Caribbean, struggles through school, proves himself to the world and becomes famous by doing some great literary work', that is the classic narrative of the

generation of writers of the 30s and 40s, that is what their first books are all about. Nobody is writing that kind of book anymore because the kinds of stories and voices and concerns are way too various.

MALACHI: It's a sign of a confident tradition, right, it's not necessary to feel you have to do it one way or another, it's not necessary to feel you have to speak back to anybody.

NICHOLAS: There are so many models and examples and places if you feel you need to engage with the Caribbean canon, there are so many points to enter it from, there's no single door, and maybe you don't need to engage with that canon at all, maybe you don't believe in the idea of a canon.

YASMIN: Thanks Nicholas and Malachi. We have 5 minutes left for questions and I thought it would be great to get some in.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. Thank you very much for everything. I am from Martinique and live here now. I was wondering, because we have this literature as well from the French Caribbean point of view, and I wanted to know if there is a link between, Césaire, for instance and Derek Walcott? Did they meet and, if they did, what is the link between them?

MALACHI: I don't know... I can talk about links in their works, I don't know about links in their lives.. I don't know if you know, Nicholas?

NICHOLAS: If I had the biography of Walcott I would look it up. I am not aware they ever did meet. I mean Walcott would have

known about Césaire's work; he knew some French, but he would not have been able to read Césaire in the original French, but I'm sure he would have [read it] in translation. Oddly enough as a biographical side note, Walcott's eldest daughter Elizabeth is a fiction writer but also a scholar of French Caribbean literature. She would know Césaire inside out and she would probably be the person to tell you definitively about her father's relationship with Césaire. I mean you can maybe put it in a literary context, Malachi?

MALACHI: I guess in a literary context a similar thing was happening in the French Caribbean. You had a generation of writers that went a bit earlier to Paris to study and produced their works there in response to a French literary canon. Césaire maybe leaned more towards a Brathwaite than a Walcott. If we go back to that dichotomy, to someone who is to an extent trying to explode the tradition that preceded him, and also gesturing back to Africa, in Césaire's experience, I don't know if everyone knows this but when he went to Paris to study he encountered French students from all across the colonies at that time, French worlds, and their understanding of blackness in particular developed into a collective sense that could not have been possible where they were from. And they rooted that collective sense of blackness and ethnicity in Africa, in lots of problematic ways, trying to turn what were then negative stereotypes of African rhythm and sensuality into positives. So he produced fantastic poetry, *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*, and his work I think over time starts to do things, but it's similarly in dialogue with what preceded from the French tradition of course, in the way that parallels with Walcott and his generation.

NICHOLAS: There is actually an essay where Walcott references Césaire. It's called *The Muse of History*, I have not read it for a long time, but what I remember from it is he talks about Césaire and he also talks about the poet Saint-Jean Perse.

MALACHI: Also a Nobel prize winner.

NICHOLAS: Yes and writing in some ways influenced by classical Greek tradition, white and cosmopolitan. Walcott actually refers to them as men of diametrically challenging backgrounds and then somewhere in this essay he says if he was going to try to translate them he would rather translate Perse than Césaire, for the simple reason that he is perhaps simpler. I feel more akin to Césaire's tone, maybe I can't speed read the essay and it's too long since I read it, but it's there. The answer might be locked up in there.

YASMIN: Thank you. Any other questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is about spoken word poetry. What is the link between our contemporary spoken word poetry in the Caribbean with the poets you spoke about? I have a feeling that there is a relationship between directing and making theatre with poetry, and today we have here in the Caribbean this necessity of authenticity as well, and in poetry to say it out loud on stage, I want to know what your insight is on that.

NICHOLAS: Well first of all, in terms of Walcott, I don't think he would have been particularly interested in spoken word poetry as we currently understand it. The equivalent of that in the 70s was dub poetry coming out of Jamaica. I can't recall if I ever heard

Walcott speaking about it directly. There is a famous or infamous BBC TV documentary that he did in the early 80s. One of the guests was Linton Kwesi Johnson who was an important figure in that rise and legitimisation of dub poetry. Walcott is polite to Linton in the conversation, not trying to pick a fight with him, but what is interesting is that there is a clip of Brathwaite reading one of his famous poems, and the interviewer turns to Walcott and says what do you think of this? And Walcott says it is not a good poem. Brathwaite was apparently extremely hurt and never forgave him for it.

Spoken word poetry is huge in Trinidad right now. There was a big revival over the last 10 years, and there was a big movement about 20 years ago with a lot of women writers in particular, but the current surge is mostly young male writers. From what I have observed a lot of them are not particularly concerned with poets like Brathwaite and Walcott from the more conventional literary canon. There is a clear divide between the page and the stage. Kimil is a good example of Caribbean poets who have become quite well-known as page poets, who started out in that performance poetry circuit and were certainly shaped by it. He has an essay that he wrote about winning a spoken word competition by accident and feeling slightly embarrassed about it.

To me it's almost another genre; they are both kinds of poetry but trying to do things so radically different to each other, and you have to almost consider them with separate criteria, with a different critical apparatus, and each has its own context.

Certainly here in Trinidad there is a long tradition; before we had spoken word, there was a half-spoken half-sung musical form called Ratso, dating back to the 70s, which is the immediate ancestor for us here, our indigenous form of performance poetry, but Ratso's ancestors is calipso, which is our national musical form. Rough times right now, but 50-60 years ago that was the predominant art form in Trinidad and Tobago and that is how things got debated. Calipsonians were the real bards of the people, something did not exist if it was not in a calipso, you weren't famous if a Calipsonian hadn't sung a tune on you. I don't know if it answers your question at all, it's part of the bigger literary picture, but I am not sure if they are bleeding into each other, the connections, or two streams following separately and not connecting.

YASMIN: Thank you so much, we should probably leave it there. Thank you so much again Malachi and Nicholas, it's been a treat to have you both talk about so much in one hour I can't believe how much you have opened up our minds to this.

NICHOLAS: We did ramble a lot, I hope it was somewhat enjoyable.

YASMIN: It was and thank you everyone who joined us, as I said before we will share the audio recording and a transcript of all of this so you can access all of that as well, thank you so much everyone have a good evening.

MALACHI MCINTOSH: Thank you for having us. Nicholas good to see you. See you soon.