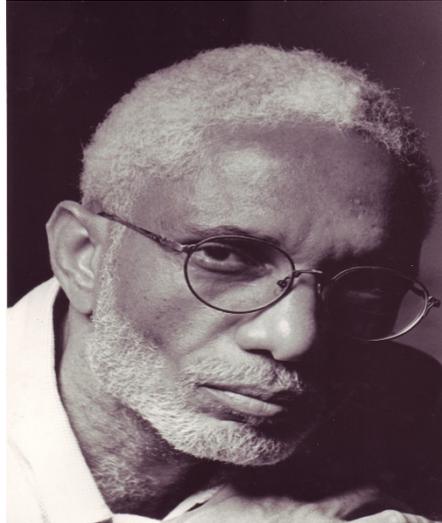


John Robert Lee: Librarian and Writer from St. Lucia

Interview conducted by Lorraine Nero



Author photo by Stephen Paul

Introducing John Robert Lee

John Robert Lee is a librarian and an outstanding St. Lucian writer who has published across several genres. In preparing for this *Caribbean Library Journal* interview, I conducted a search in The University of the West Indies [catalogue](#) and was amazed at his creative output spanning several decades and I am equally proud that he is a librarian who is passionate about his practice. He belongs to that circle of creative individuals coming out of St. Lucia that includes Derek Walcott, Kendel Hippolyte and Jane King to mention a few. He is also an active social media contributor who maintains the blog, [Mahaniam Notes](#), and several Facebook pages for his different projects. These products reflect his passion for Caribbean culture and documentation, therefore it is no surprise that he strongly identifies as a Caribbean citizen born in St. Lucia.

LN: How would you describe yourself? Are you a librarian, folklorist, poet or all of these?

JRL: I am a Librarian by profession and it is a vocation I love. I am also a writer (poetry, fiction, non-fiction, journalism). I would not describe myself as a folklorist, even though I have been

working with the Folk Research Centre of St. Lucia (whose mandate is research into the folk culture of St. Lucia). I came to FRC to do a library consultancy and ended up working full time. But of course I do have an interest in the folk and contemporary culture of my island and in cultural education. I also have been a teacher for many years – literature, language, library science, drama, creative writing and Bible. Plus, I have been involved in media – print and electronic for many years also. But I think librarianship and archive work encompass all of those other activities. They are all connected. Production, documentation and dissemination of information, essentially.

LN: How long have you been involved in documenting St. Lucian folk traditions and how has this evolved over the years? Can you tell us about the St. Lucia Folk Research Centre and your work at this Centre?

JRL: I have been involved with research and cultural education fully from 2002 when I came to the Folk Research Centre (FRC) as a Librarian. The Centre was established in 1973, by St. Lucian priest Msgr Dr. Patrick Anthony and a group of his friends. He had been trained in Trinidad and was influenced by the Vatican 2 reforms in the Catholic Church. He became part of the radical movements in Trinidad and the Caribbean in the late sixties and early seventies, and returned home with a zeal to make his church more indigenous and to help St. Lucians know more of and appreciate more truly, their own culture. This must be seen in the context of Independence and post-colonial movements throughout the Caribbean.

Research, education, community activism, Kwéyòl Language advocacy, publication are among the cultural programmes supported by the FRC.

LN: Are there similar centres in the region?

JRL: I am not aware of similar centres, but certainly the [Institute of Jamaica](#), and a number of organizations throughout the region have been involved in some way with similar work. But I think the FRC has remained a unique place.

LN: What are some of the significant programmes and achievements of this centre?

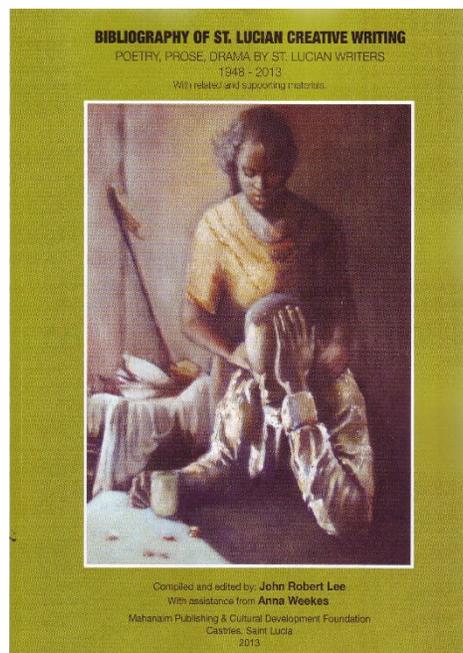
JRL: After 40 years you know there would have been highs and lows, times of plenty funding, times of scarce resources. Significant achievements would include seminal work with Dominica and Martinique on standardizing the orthography of St. Lucian Kwéyòl with publications of a Dictionary, several works in St. Lucian Kwéyòl, collaboration on the publication of a New Testament in Kwéyòl; the establishment of what has become the biggest National celebration, Jounen Kwéyòl, held on the last Sunday of October, since 1984 after a month-long Creole Heritage Month; documentation of St. Lucian calypsos from the mid-90s with an annual

publication. We continue with education programmes through the Harold Simmons Folk Academy established in 2012, host a biennial St. Lucia Studies Conference, and publish monographs regularly. All this and more in the face of serious financial and staffing constraints.

LN: This is good work coming out of the FRC and resulting in tangible products which our readers can acquire for their respective collections. I will just share the link to the FRC's [homepage](#) so readers can explore this further.

LN: **You are the author of the Bibliography of St. Lucian Creative Writing 1948-2013, a personal project that you undertook. Tell us more about this project.**

JRL: Yes. I began this project in the eighties and eventually completed it in 2013 after it had lain dormant for several years. I guess my librarianship, coupled with my involvement in the arts of St. Lucia as a writer and theatre person made me see the importance of documenting the work of our poetry, prose and drama writers, as well as of critical comment from various places on their work. We are the country of Derek Walcott and Arthur Lewis, both Nobel Laureates and a host of other well-recognised writers. I am pleased with this work and would like it to be better known in St. Lucia and beyond, especially among my librarian colleagues everywhere. I have also been doing occasional work on an online [Bibliography of Caribbean writing](#), but that is a mammoth undertaking to which I would have to give full attention if it is to develop further.



Cover for his *Bibliography of St. Lucian Creative Writing*

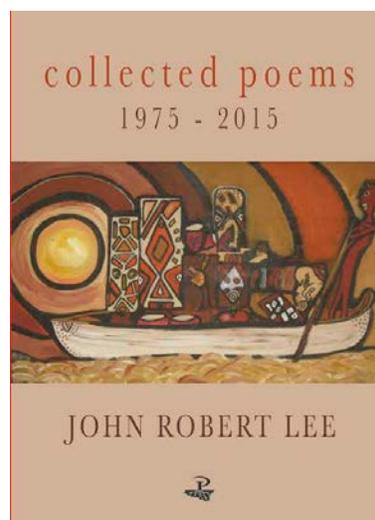
LN: John, in an era in which online access to documents, databases and search engines seem to be replacing the need for bibliographies, it is heartening to see you demonstrate that this is still a viable avenue that librarians can explore to highlight the intellectual output of the region.

LN: You are a well-known poet in the Caribbean, how has your work in documenting St. Lucia's cultural heritage fed into your poetry or vice versa?

Well, over the years, and principally through the FRC, even before I went to work there, and my friendship with Msgr 'Paba' Anthony, I learned everything I know about my traditional culture. I had grown up in Castries, my two grandparents were Barbadian, I had no contact with rural St. Lucia of the time; English, not Kwéyòl was my first language – so it was not until I returned from Cave Hill in the early seventies, and linked up with Paba and the FRC, that I began to know and to love my St. Lucian Kwéyòl language and culture. And much of what I have learned and come to love, has borne fruit in my poems.

In April, Peepal Tree Press will be publishing my Collected Poems 1975-2015, and readers will see my development, not only as a writer, but as one becoming slowly but surely, more aware of his culture and people, and will see me using the window of St. Lucian and Caribbean culture to look out at the wider spaces and at the realities of faith in a secular world. I have always regarded myself as a Caribbean person, who lives in the parish of St. Lucia, next door to French Martinique and English St. Vincent. All one family.

LN: Congratulations John! And I want to share with our readers the cover of the upcoming book, so our collection development and acquisition librarians can look out for it.



LN: Do you want to share one of your favourite poems with us? And also tell us why this one is significant.

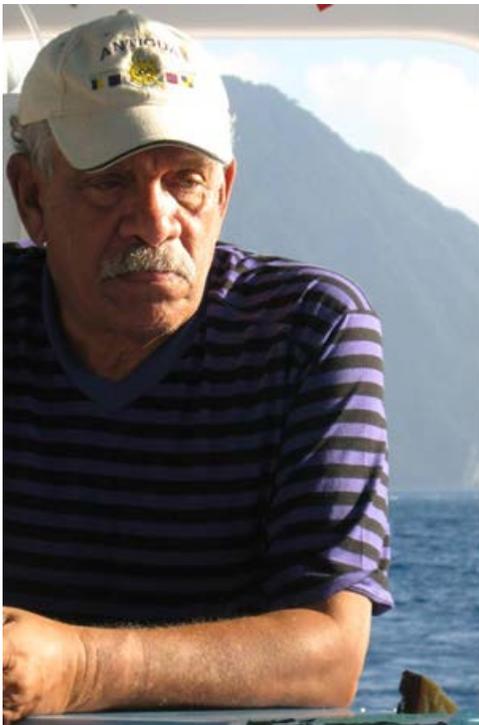
JRL: Here is a stanza from a poem dedicated to Derek Walcott, which reflects not only my debt to him but also stands within the context of the rich St. Lucian culture from which we come:

Excerpt from the poem entitled **“Line: for Derek Walcott.”**

“to every line there is a time and a season.” (DW)

When have I not measured this land by your lines?
When have I not tracked blue-smoke pits to their river-stone roots by your metaphor?
When have I not walked, Walcott, by your fire-scorched love, through uptown lanes
of old Castries, strolled the revolving corners of Chaussée, Coral, Broglie, Victoria?
You leave us your covenants with the everlasting fretworked eaves
of Riverside Road, gommier canots and their men from Dauphin to Vieux Fort,
the epiphanic groves of Mon Repos, the stone chapel of Rivière Dorée, the turning
leaves’ whispering of Methodist hymnals on Chisel Street.
It’s what’s left, at the end of the line (I imagine you insisting) that scans our lives,
marks our season’s faith, and amortizes all indentured loans.

Photo of Derek Walcott



Courtesy John Robert Lee

LN: Do you think there is a brand of Caribbean Librarianship? If yes, how would you describe it?

JRL: Hard question, I don't know. But there has to be. If I had to speculate, I think I would say that our societies, our history and cultures, our levels of education, our place in today's world, the forces that impact on us, media and entertainment, the new social media world, the needs of several classes and generations, and other related matters, lead us to think of dissemination and provision of information in ways that would have to be different from the approach to librarianship in more developed, or even poorer societies. And these impinge as much on environmental as social issues.

LN: What future plans do you have for yourself?

I look forward to retiring eventually so I can spend more time writing, and compiling bibliographies and editing anthologies of various kinds.

Closing words from JRL: We librarians in the Caribbean need to take a good look at ourselves. There are so many new avenues to receive information that the traditional view of libraries and librarians – still strong – needs to be readjusted. The old basic principles and needs of research for learning, for information and education remain. The library as a cultural and community Centre remains a model for our kinds of societies. But today we compete with virtual and cyber spaces for galleries, museums, libraries; we are bombarded with Wikipedia, Wikileaks, Netflix, fake news and alternative facts, and of course dwindling resources and unfortunately, new political directorates who seem less interested in arts, culture and library centres.

A new wave of functional illiteracy is abroad among us, I think, even in the face of so many access points to learning and information. More schools, but so many questions about the state of our educational systems and curricula abound. We need libraries – of whatever shape or form – and dedicated, trained librarians – more than ever.

LN: Thank you John Robert Lee for sharing your craft and passion with the readers of the *Caribbean Library Journal*.