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A WORLD OF POETRY AND SPOKEN WORD



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Despite decades of political independence declared since 1962 and millions of taxpayers' dollars disbursed through whichever incarnation of the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, to celebrate folk and oral traditions, there is a widely held view in literary criticism that the poet who weaves the nation language is bold and subversive. Truly, there is nothing avant-garde about speaking in the nation language on this island. For I think, write and speak in the language of my grandmother. Standard(ised) English is my second language. Only pockets of bourgeois, university educated and literary society make an issue in either condemnation or celebration of the perceived "subaltern status" of nation language.

I have observed that contemporary poets in Trinidad and Tobago possess the linguistic dexterity and confidence to switch language registers in poetry and performance. For the most part, contemporary spoken word performers disavow a nativist position in the exclusive use of the nation language. Most spoken word performers interchange between both Standard English and nation language without seeking to superimpose one on the other. As a boy, I would listen to the seven o'clock news read in a Trinidadian variant of a BBC reporter's English interlaced with commercials featuring iconic local comedians Sparangalang and Nikki Crosby marketing Diana Candy Company's Power Mint in the nation language on the streets of Port-of-Spain. The cadence and conventions of both languages formed the nation of my tongue.

In interviews and meetings, I am asked about the poets and performers who inspired me to perform spoken word. Like all social hierarchies, the hierarchy of influences fluctuates and shifts according to the time, space and usually, the aims of a current creative project. When I am asked about those who have shaped my "voice" I want to include the masters of speech such as Fidel Castro, Thomas Sankara and Michael Manley. I also want to pay tribute to the cadence of a secondary school Vice Principal who possessed the quality to discipline boys in such powerful prose and philosophy that it converted the unruly into good listeners.

They ask, “Who is your work inspired by?” I repeat, “Walcott, Neruda and Césaire.” Of course, I am influenced by many more writers and three dead men from the Caribbean and the Americas literary canon do not sufficiently capture the sources of my expression. But these are the three poets I read every day and whose works I have returned to more than any other. Still, the interviewer is taken aback. The follow-up question is then, “do you have any influences in spoken word?” It is the kind of inadequate follow-up question because these are the writers who have influenced my spoken word performance more than any other spoken word performer. When I am being generous, I politely submit “Louise Bennett and Paul Keens-Douglas.” I acknowledge these two pioneers as the founding mother and father of every spoken word stage I walk on, but their craft and style played a smaller role in my writing and delivery on a microphone.



Short story. My parents had the habit of bringing my brothers and I along to open lectures. We attended many of these lectures at the University of the West Indies. At one of these evening lectures, I entered a packed auditorium where the fight for seats was so difficult my parents had to split up since we could not find enough chairs to sit together. The university hosted a Saint Lucian poet, well dressed, with a full head of grey hair. He possessed a very refined version of St. Lucian English, quite different from the hymns, prayer and back-of-the-church confessions by St. Lucian women of my childhood Sundays. The poet approached the stage to a thunderous applause. He stood behind a podium, turned each page and read in what was a drawn-out recitation of iambics. I fell deeper and deeper into sleep. My mother, who cared less about my after-school tiredness than her public embarrassment, pinched my cheeks for me to get up and give my undivided attention to the famed winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. At the end of the lecture, my cheeks were sore on one side from all of the pinching. The next day in school, my history teacher opened the class with a laudatory review of Derek Walcott’s poetry reading at the university. She turned to me, “and you mister man, sleeping away. At least you were there.” I replied, “Miss, he was the poet of my dreams.”

In Form Three, students are introduced to all of the subject areas as they prepare for the syllabus in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate. I consistently underperformed in English Literature class. The teacher coached us to learn pre-determined interpretations and critique of the poetry for the purpose of examination writing. We recited the poem one by one, then discussed the poem collectively for five minutes and took notes of the themes prescribed in the textbook. There was a horrible practice of seeking to “understand” a poem. We performed a kind of CSI forensic search for the “true” motivations of the poet and what they tried to say in the early 19th or 20th centuries, long after they or their landscapes were gone. Poetry, at this level, was not explored as a literary form of ever expanding meanings; it was

taught as a container for history and biography. Among students, It was also not particularly “manly” to profess a deep interest or desire for poetry, and even moreso to read it aloud with enthusiasm. Speaking Standard English was enough to raise suspicious eyebrows in the classroom. An animated reading of “The Wild Swans at Coole” by W.B. Yeats certainly would not have earned you an easier time on the football field or during lunchbreaks. Yet, for all these routinised and faint readings of poetry, some had the quality of to make us laugh or to contemplate crying (because “bad man don’t cry”).

The textbook that guided the poetry component of the curriculum was *A World of Poetry for CXC* (1994) edited by Mark McWatt and Hazel Simmons-McDonald. It was a slim book with a purple cover. The cover illustration was an image of a recreational club with black and brown women and men dancing, a few bottles and glasses placed on a partition and a man blowing into the long body of a saxophone. The book claimed to take on “the work of poets from the Commonwealth and other parts of the world.” It was an anthology of world literature for the Caribbean student and child.

A large chunk of the time in literature class was spent standing up and reading poems in the textbook out loud. The illiteracy of some and narrow conceptions of manhood for most of us were exposed during this class exercise. One day, the teacher called upon one of the boys to read “A Letter from Brooklyn” by Derek Walcott. The poem transports readers to a scene of Walcott reading a letter from a woman who suggests that she intimately knew his parents, in particular his deceased father. Walcott effectively creates a reply to this letter in the form of a poem and shows his renewal of his faith in poetry and painting. The last two lines of the poem reads, “So this old lady writes, and again I believe/ I believe it all, and for no man’s death I grieve.” I do not remember who read the poem in class but the boy who was on his feet read the line and slammed the book on the desk! The classroom suddenly exploded into commotion. Boys threw up gun fingers and banged the desk covers and the teacher threatened us with discipline in order to regain quiet order in the classroom. Without doubt, the teacher was unable to put a finger on the source of drama – “for no man’s death I grieve.” These six words drew a line from Walcott to the poetry of Bounty Killer, Jay-Z and 50 Cent. It was the line that transported us from a poem in response to a letter from Brooklyn to a maxi taxi on the Eastern Main Road in Trinidad and Tobago. The line was a poetic antecedent to the badman music and gangster rap that we sang, studied and debated for hours on concrete benches. From then, I knew that the poetry I wanted to read, write and perform belonged in a scale wider than that of a solitary reader with eyes glued to the pages of a book. I wanted poetry that searched, during the hottest afternoon temperature in a boys’ school, for its restless audience and lifted them from their seats in joy and revolt. I yearned for a poetry that elicited unruliness, bad behaviour and violent applause. In short, I fell asleep on Walcott’s words from his own mouth. Then, I discovered him in the voices of a classroom of boys holding on to a line, grabbing for meaning.

I was always convinced that the world we live in now believes that it is better to be “literate,” “cultured” and “civilised” than it is to be free to express yourself in your own voice. In the university, I had to look past Walcott. In school, I rose from my seat only to look past my teachers and even my classmates. I believed there was much more to write, read, perform and live for in a world of poetry and spoken word. A world where the choice to part with either poetry or spoken word was similar to parting with an arm. A world that was not marked by old borders and dictates for the page and performance.