

Nadia Isasa

# | BASTARD

Derek Walcott, literature and decoloniality



**Nadia Isasa**

**| BASTARD**

**Derek Walcott, literature and decoloniality**



*brumana*

editora

*Translation:* Laura Rossi, © Brumana Editora

brumana.editora@gmail.com

*This translation serves only informative purposes.*

Realizado con el apoyo de Ministerio de Cultura de Santa Fe.  
Convenio Plan Fomento 2021.

This text was translated thanks to the support of the Ministry of  
Culture of Santa Fe. Plan Fomento 2021 Agreement.



Cultura  
**Santa Fe**  
Provincia

## Introduction

Current times urgently demand new paradigms that allow us to think about contingent issues: in the case of an author like Derek Walcott, we approach the particular configurations of the Caribbean as a “contact zone”. But first, it is necessary a thorough process of unweaving, of disentangling the Eurocentric foundations on which the historical, cultural, social and economic imaginaries of Latin America and the Caribbean were built. This will be the scenario in which the epistemic turn that emerges with decolonial thought will take place.

Walter Mignolo proposes the concept of decoloniality following Aníbal Quijano, who maintains that the critique of the European paradigm of rationality/Modernity is both indispensable and urgent. But the path cannot consist only in the simple denial of all its categories, it is necessary to detach oneself from the links of rationality-Modernity with coloniality, with all power not

constituted in the free decision of free peoples. It is the instrumentalization of reason established by colonial power, in the first place, what produced distorted paradigms of knowledge and ruined the liberating promises of Modernity (Mignolo, 1992).

This new paradigm, essential to rethink Latin American vernacular realities, will erase the capital letters in History, Culture and Modernity by shedding light on its reverse: coloniality. The salvationist rhetoric of European Modernity presupposes the oppressive and condemning logic of coloniality. Border thinking aspires to modify the Eurocentric paradigm from the diversity of local reflections that begins to operate beyond the locality; it therefore wants to show a planetary reality and propose a way of rethinking our relationship with other historical and knowledge localizations (Mignolo, 2007).

In this sense Walter Mignolo argues that *the invisibles* have an entity in the very fabric of this oppressive logic:

The basic argument (almost a syllogism) is the following: if coloniality is constitutive

of modernity since the salvationist rhetoric of modernity presupposes the oppressive and condemning logic of coloniality (hence Fanon's *damnés*); that oppressive logic produces an energy of discontent, of distrust, of detachment among those who react to imperial violence. This energy is translated into projects of de-coloniality that, in the last instance, are also constitutive of modernity. (Mignolo, 2005:5)

The tendency towards the construction of this new paradigm in South America, North Africa and other parts of the planet arises from the malaise produced by the growing imperial globality and the emerging will to decolonize<sup>1</sup> being and knowledge<sup>2</sup>. It is the darker side of Modernity that comes to light and reveals itself.

Sustained and grounded in this new paradigm —decoloniality— Derek Walcott's work is oriented towards the search for other representation, both in his literary texts and in his expe-

1 In the strict sense of the compound term: to remove the condition of coloniality.

2 When we say "coloniality of being/knowledge" we refer to: knowing what is imposed on us to know and being what the imperial normative regulations want us to be.

rience directing the Trinidad Theater Workshop. Walcott's artistic production as a whole is organized around an interest in generating new artistic approaches to "otherness," with the conviction that it is also possible to decolonize representation as a tactic of social visibility.

Walcott's work can be read in confrontation with the colonial matrix of power installed in the Caribbean, as a search through art for the originality of becoming<sup>3</sup>-in-the-Caribbean. The figure of the *bastard*, its genesis and its development in Walcott's work, can be read as a mode of figuration of his own process of search for identity as a West Indian. Born in St. Lucia, an island that was alternately a British and French colony until its independence in 1979<sup>4</sup>, from a black mother who descended from slaves and a white father of British origin, the figure of Walcott delineates well the singular condition of the complex process we call becoming-in-the-Caribbean.

---

3 The author prefers the term "becoming" instead of "being" in order to avoid any essentialist approach that tends to reproduce the logic that is being questioned.

4 In 1930, the year of Derek Walcott's birth, the island belonged to the British Empire.

Going through Derek Walcott's work from his earliest texts to his most recent ones allows us to trace the search he was weaving as an artist and as a subject: from his point of view, art and identity are one and the same inquiry that involves issues such as the relationship with Africa and the past, with the imperial countries, with the language(s) of the Caribbean, with his ancestry.

The textual triad analyzed below is, then, doubly representative: on the one hand, they are texts which belong to different moments of Walcott's work that give an account of his path of inquiry as a subject and as an artist; on the other hand, a representative text of each of the genres developed by the author will be approached here: *Dream on monkey mountain* (1970, theater), *El reino del caimito* (1979, poetry) and *Las Antillas: fragmentos de una memoria épica* (1992, essay). The first of the aforementioned texts sheds light on the crisis to which every Caribbean person who tries to build his or her identity is subjected. In the other two we can appreciate the evolution of his reflection and his maturation as an artist, until he arrives at the ca-

tegrity of *bastard* as a synthesis of the vital and literary experience.

As an orienting cartography, we will first outline a historical overview of the events that gave rise to the social and cultural complexity of the Caribbean. In this sense, we must bear in mind the significant role that the region played in the colonial struggles of the European powers since the 15th century: it is a review of concepts in relation to the historical, the hegemonic and the invisible, the reactions provoked by such silencing. Only then we will be able to approach and analyze the aforementioned textual corpus from the established framework in this first part.

## **Part I**

### **Slavery: the founding system of the Caribbean sociocultural framework**

The Caribbean is traversed by phenomena such as genocide, slavery, immigration and rivalry between world powers that have given the region's history a singular slant:

In the case of the Caribbean it is not only the effect of the relationship between two cultures, as could be the one of the metropolitan cultures and the one of the slaves brought from Africa, but in this case the situation acquires greater complexity given the political-military history of the area marked as the epicenter of the struggle in the 16th, 17th AND 18th centuries for primacy in the international market, between Spain, Portugal, France, England and Holland. This causes the islands to pass through different political domains and this situation is also reflected in its cultural complexity of different features that are expressed as simultaneity as well as in the chaotic fragmentation of its history and its effects on the fabric of identities (Pizarro, 2002:16).

From the very beginning of the colonizing process, the hegemonic powers glimpsed that these territories, although they did not have great economic resources, were fertile for the implementation of cultivation systems, and at the same time had an obvious strategic location because they were in the center of the recently discovered maritime passage. European colonialism modified the financial potential of the region through the introduction of the plantation system. This transformation gave rise to a first social impact: the clash between natives and Europeans, the exploitation of those natives by the European.

When the indigenous labor force began to prove insufficient, since the Indians were not accustomed to working under the required conditions, black slavery and the transatlantic slave trade were decisive for the economic functioning of the new societies that emerged after the European invasion of America. The plantocracy incorporated African and later Asian slaves and generated a complex system of social and symbolic relations (Pizarro, 2002: 16).

Triangular trade was the implemented system. Ships carrying commercial products — weapons, alcohol and horses— sailed from European ports to West Africa, where they would exchange these items for slaves who had been captured in wars or were victims of the growing local business of capture and sale. From there, they were taken to the colonies. After selling the surviving slaves, the ships returned to Europe loaded with goods produced with captive labor: sugar, tobacco, cotton, rum and coffee (Franco, 1966).

Trafficking involved the sacrifice of millions of human beings and its effect was the development of European powers and the fortunes of local plantocrats:

The triangular trade departed from Europe, filled the ships on the African coasts —Gorée, in front of Senegal, is one of the places of sad memory— after having kept those captured in dungeons. There was here, in this hunt, a first space of death. How many perished in the flight, in the consequences of this nameless butchery? The second death was in the dungeons at the bottom of the slave ships. Human beings were already becoming “piec-

es” as they were called in the sale, as recorded in the documents (Pizarro, 2002:17).

Prisoners would lose their family, their social group, their clothing; the violent process of deculturation drove them to suicide when it was possible on the ships. Others died of disease, of starvation, of “black melancholy”, as the sadness that led them to prostration was called. Collective depression often induced them to take their own lives, also collectively (Pizarro, 2002:17).

Thus with a prevailing Eurocentric scheme, colonizers, natives and “imported” blacks began to “mix”. *Black slaves, coming from almost every corner of Africa, have brought with them their gods, their dances, their cultures. But they have suffered the influence of European civilizations, they have learned the prayers of the white people, and slavery has broken the social structures of their native tribes* (Franco, 1966:18). Social, cultural and religious patterns of great complexity were established and originated, according to the hegemonic classifying criterion (Western/colonizing man), first, second and fourth class inhabitants; supermen and

subhuman; subjects of rights and soulless bodies for exploitation. “Caribbean society is one of the most complex systems on earth, because of the double or triple articulation of systems of social symbolization” (Pizarro, 2002:16).

Such is the problem of the Afro-descendant in the Caribbean. Their ancestral origins, crossed by the experience of transplantation, configure them as a subject carrying a dislocation expressed in a certain nostalgia for Africa, the homeland of their ancestors, a land where they were not born and which they do not know. Born in the Caribbean, under the imperial domination of the white gaze, they find in the return to the past, to the origins, that is, to mamma Africa, the possibility of building their own legitimate space from which to observe themselves and reorganize their vital praxis or, at least, try to do so.

