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‘These New Plantations by the Sea’: The Caribbean Hotel as Site of Exploitation and Scene of Writing

Introduction

The quotation in my title comes from a poem in Derek Walcott’s latest collection *White Egrets* (2010).¹

... I watched the doomed acres
where yet another luxury hotel will be built
with ordinary people fenced out. The new makers
of our history profit without guilt
and are, in fact, prophets of a policy
that will make the island a mall, and the breakers
grin like waiters, like taxi drivers, these new plantations
by the sea; a slavery without chains, with no blood spilt –
just chain-link fences and signs, the new degradations.²

‘The Acacia Trees’ is an elegy to a beach he fears will soon be ruined by a new phase of tourist development which he compares to earlier, more brutal, forms of expropriation. Walcott is not the first to make this analogy. It is developed in Ian Strachan’s study *Paradise and Plantation* (2002) which argues that Caribbean hotels are modern plantations – locally-run but foreign-owned businesses that create a product for customers who live overseas, but instead of sugar or tobacco what they offer is a holiday experience in ‘paradise.’³

Walcott’s poetry is sprinkled with negative images of Caribbean tourism, including a tirade against industrial-scale development in *Omeros* which talks of ‘the traitors / who, in elected office, saw the land as views / for hotels,’ a line quoted in another seminal study of Caribbean tourism, Polly Patullo’s *Last Resorts* (1996).⁴ Walcott himself has campaigned against hotel development in St Lucia, especially the complex that became (despite the protests) the Jalousie Plantation luxury resort.⁵ Thus the first half of my subtitle: the hotel

¹ This paper is no more than an outline of work in progress, specifically three projected articles (on Derek Walcott, on *Vers le sud*, and on travel writings about Haiti) in which the theme of tourism figures strongly. My thanks to fellow participants in the workshop at which this was first presented (University of Liverpool, 25 June 2010); their valuable suggestions will no doubt eventually bear fruit in a more developed version of the arguments sketched out here.

² Derek Walcott, ‘Acacia Trees’, *White Egrets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p.11.

³ Ian Gregory Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), pp. 7-11.

⁴ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 289; Polly Patullo, *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp.54.

⁵ See Patullo, *Last Resorts*, pp2-3; Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp489-90, 509. The resort’s website is: <http://www.jalousieplantation.com/>

as site of exploitation – on several levels: of its workforce, of the local economy, of the environment, and so on.

But the hotel also features in Walcott's work in a very different way. Walcott – who is routinely described in biographies as someone who 'divides his time' between the Caribbean and the United States – for many years never had a place he would call 'home' and has a carbon footprint possibly greater than any other poet. He certainly has spent an lot of time in hotels (not just in Europe and North America but in the Caribbean too), and hotels are where he has written much of his work. Given that his poems often situate himself in time and space, hotels not only feature as settings but also (and this is the other half of my subtitle) as the scene of writing.

In other words, Walcott often represents himself occupying hotels – a poem's observations or argument emerging from an opening scene in which the poet stares into the mirror in his room, or gazes out across a city from a private balcony or enjoys chance encounters in the dining room or lobby.

The opening of his poem 'Hotel Normandie Pool' offers a particularly extended example, depicting Walcott at dawn on the first of January beginning his day's work, writing by the pool of this Port of Spain hotel, before he looks up to see Ovid in a towelling bathrobe.

Around the cold pool in the metal light
of New Year's morning, I choose one of nine
cast-iron umbrellas set in iron tables
for work and coffee. The first cigarette
triggers the usual fusillade of coughs.
After a breeze the pool settles the weight
of its reflections on one line. Sunshine
lattices a blank wall with the shade of gables,
stirs the splayed shadows of the hills like moths.⁶

These two aspects of the hotel in Walcott (the site of exploitation and the scene of writing) exist almost in complete ignorance of each other. The hotel as a site of exploitation is viewed from a distance as if by someone who would never set foot in them; the hotel as a scene of writing is viewed from within, by a guest, who has no sense of the exploitative relationships around him, never acknowledging the presence of the staff or the effect of the hotel on the local economy and natural environment.

Site of Exploitation

Haiti does not feature extensively in discussions of Caribbean tourism.⁷ The received view is that tourism hardly exists there; or at least is nothing like it once was. Perhaps its most famous resort is Labadie Beach on the north coast, only a few miles from Cap Haïtien, but as a favoured mooring for cruise ships, it might not be in Haiti at all. Indeed, it is reported

⁶ Derek Walcott, 'The Hotel Normandie Pool', *Collected Poems 1948-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 439.

⁷ But see Landon Yarrington, "From Sight to Site to Website: Travel Writing, Tourism, and the American Experience in Haiti, 1900-2008" (master's thesis, College of William and Mary, 2009).

that those tourists who come ashore to enjoy a few hours in a fenced-off enclave are not always told what country they are in, as if it might ruin the illusion of paradise.⁸ Brochures tend to locate it ‘on the north coast of Hispaniola’, sometimes adding, as if the proper name of the country was somehow unofficial, ‘otherwise known as Haiti’.

Perhaps the most incisive analysis of tourism in Haitian literature is Dany Laferrière’s *La chair du maître* (1997): a series of interlocking stories with the common theme of sex, money and power during the Duvalier era.⁹ Several of them focus on the relationships between white women and black men, including the North American sex tourists Brenda, Sue and Ellen whose annual visits to the Hotel Anacaona formed the basis of Laurent Cantet’s feature film *Vers la sud / Heading South* (2005). Subsequently Laferrière issued a revised edition of his novel, retitled *Vers la sud* (2006), removing ten chapters and adding five.¹⁰ The purpose does not seem to be make the book more faithful to the film (although it does incorporate some elements that were new to the screenplay), but rather develops and responds to it, as if it were partially a sequel.¹¹

Laferrière’s narrative voice is restrained and unobtrusive. In one story (‘Vers le sud’) the tourists directly address the reader without comment; in another (‘Le bar de la plage’) we overhear the ‘magic boys’ talking amongst themselves, joking about the sexual preferences and appetites of the women who enjoy their company. But the final chapter of the book (‘La chair du maître’) may be construed as an extra-diegetic commentary on all that goes before, as the story of a family portrait takes the reader back to a revolutionary-era passion of a slaveholder’s daughter for a slave. The dynamics are complicated: the daughter initially seduces him by threatening to accuse him of rape; but later, as the victorious revolutionary forces (to which the now-former slave belongs) prepare to massacre the remaining French colonists, at his request his lover is spared by Dessalines, who remarks to his heroic officer, ‘Tu aimes bien la chair du maître.’

If this is meant to justify the title Laferrière chooses for his book, it sets up a fairly strong parallel between the stories of the eighteenth-century plantation and the twentieth-century hotel. In ‘Vers le sud’, alongside the voices of the three women is that of Albert, the head waiter, whose monologue offers a withering denunciation of sex tourism. Or rather offers a glimpse of the denunciation which his father and grandfather may have voiced, having fought against the US occupation of 1915-34 against which his father fought valiantly. And it’s a sacrifice Albert feels some shame in having betrayed, working as he now does

⁸ Scott Doggett and Joyce Connolly (eds), *Dominican Republic & Haiti*, 2nd edition (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2002), p.398.

⁹ Dany Laferrière, *La chair du maître* [1997] (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 2000).

¹⁰ Dany Laferrière, *Vers le Sud* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2006).

¹¹ For a useful discussion of the film and books, see Françoise Lionnet, ‘Postcolonialism, language, and the visual: By way of Haiti’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Volume 44, Issue 3 September 2008, pp227 – 239. Previous treatments of sex tourism in Haitian literature include Jacques Roumain’s short story, ‘La Veste’, *La proie et l’ombre* (1930), reprinted with *La montagne ensorcelée* (Paris, Messidor, 1987), pp. 47-51; and Jacques-Stephen Alexis, *In the Flicker of an Eyelid* [1959], translated and with an afterword by Carrol F. Coates and Edwidge Danticat (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002). See Martin Munro, *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature: Alexis, Deprestre, Ollivier, Laferrière, Danticat* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), pp. 61-79.

*serv*ing these new white invaders, whose weapons are not firearms but drugs, sex and easy money.

I was born in Cap Haïtien, in the north of Haiti. My grandfather too. I don't know if you know what that means. Everyone in my family fought the Americans during the occupation of 1915. I come from a family of nationalists. My father died without ever having shaken the hand of a *blanc*. A *blanc* was for him something lower than an ape. He always said: 'When I see a *blanc*, I always try to get a view of his behind to check if he hasn't got a tail.' My grandfather, on the other hand, never bothered. He knew the *blanc* was an animal, that's was all there was too it. He said *blanc* but he was thinking specifically of Americans. Those who dared to trample on Haiti's soil. The supreme insult. A slap in the face of an entire generation. I came to work in Port-au-Prince at the age of 22, after my father died. And I straight away found work in this hotel. If my grandfather knew that his grandson today serves those Americans, he would die of shame. These new occupiers are not armed. They bring in their luggage a weapon much more destructive than guns: drugs. And the queen of crime is always accompanied by her two attendants: sex and easy money. There is nothing here, sir, that has not been touched by one or other of these three weapons. In the old days, there was a sense of propriety. Now, I look around me and it seems that anything goes. I look at our customers, the respectable women who, when I started twenty years ago, would have been accompanied by their husbands. And what do I see? Lost women, creatures with a thirst for blood and sperm. And who is to blame? Him, the master of desire. He's seventeen, with eyes of fire, a perfect profile. Legba, the prince of darkness.¹²

In the screenplay of the film, Albert's ambivalent feelings are less pronounced. He delivers a more directly anti-imperialist sermon, closer perhaps to the one that his father or grandfather may have made. Thus, *drogue* becomes *dollar*; and the closing passage with its image of grotesque desire of the women and the arresting – almost homoerotic – image of Legba disappears. The moralistic focus on the degenerate character of older women and the fatal sexual allure of the young man they obsess over gives way to a geo-political critique.

The mutation continues in Laferrière's revision, with one added chapter ('Trafic') imagining a reversal in which the hotel becomes a place where white men come to meet black women. It may be that this simply reinforces an unduly cynical view of the power relationship between the rich tourists and the young men and women exploited by them, as if all we can do is shrug and move on: it will always be with us. And yet the final chapter (which survives in the new version) does seem to at least allude to the possibility of a transformation of power relations that would end this cycle of dependency (symbolized by Dessalines' decision to spare the French woman). But of course it is not something Legba could ever accomplish on his own.

¹² Laferrière, *La chair*, pp235-6.

Scene of Writing

Like Walcott, Laferrière is widely travelled. As a ‘diaspora’ in Haiti and North America, as a journalist who travels as part of his job, as a famous award-winning author who is invited to speak at a wide range of international events, he spends a lot of time in hotels – which also feature strongly in some of his semi-autobiographical first-person narratives. For instance, the vignettes that capture his nomadic life in ‘Je voyage en français’; or the introduction to his most recent work, *Tout bouge autour de moi*, on the Haitian earthquake, which he wrote hurriedly in ‘three hotel rooms and a train’.¹³ Indeed the first half of this book draws on his experiences at the Hotel Karibe where he was staying when disaster struck on 12 January 2010.

But the hotel that is most commonly the scene of writing in books about Haiti is not in Pétionville but down the hill in Port-au-Prince, a kilometre south of the Champs de Mars. The authors of most travel accounts stay at the Hotel Oloffson – a place they will invariably tell you was the model for the Hotel Trianon in Graham Greene’s *The Comedians* (1966), run since the fall of the Duvaliers by a Haitian-American musician Richard A Morse whose ‘vodou rock band’ RAM plays there every Thursday night. Their narratives typically include a scene or two set in the hotel, usually on its veranda.

It is true that it is not the kind of tourist hotel one has in mind when talking about the Caribbean. It is an old building, celebrated for its distinctive ‘gingerbread’ architecture, and attracts a clientele that consists of journalists, art collectors, writers, musicians, foreign aid workers and so on. Nevertheless, its writer-guests seem to share with those who stay at all-inclusive resorts what Debbie Lisle has called ‘a problematic geographical imagination that secures the West as safe and civilized and produces the rest of the world as dangerous and uncivilized.’¹⁴ In other words, they invest a good deal in the contrast between a rather scary world beyond (to which they may venture out only with caution) and the reassuringly comfortable and predictable hotel, where they first write up their adventures.

This ‘danger’ may owe more to the romantic aesthetics of the sublime (in which the poetically-inclined enjoyed the frisson of delight in experiencing the awesome power of, say, thunderstorms or avalanches or volcanic eruptions from a place of safety) or the rhetoric of the modern travel advisory (often exaggerated warnings issued by the foreign ministries of western governments) than to the actual likelihood of coming to any harm.

In Haiti this ‘false sense of insecurity’ has been used to justify the heavily militarized nature of the foreign presence in the country.¹⁵ It also allows visiting travel writers to experience a keener thrill and to boost their self-image as daring and adventurous.

¹³ Dany Laferrière, ‘Je voyage en français’ in Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (eds), *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 87-101; *Tout bouge autour de moi* (Montreal: Mémoire d’encrier, 2010), pp7-12.

¹⁴ Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 163

¹⁵ The phrase, ‘false sense of insecurity’ was popularized by an influential article warning of the consequences of exaggerating the threat posed by international terrorism: John Mueller, ‘A False Sense of Insecurity’, *Regulation*, Vol 27 No 3 (2004), pp42-46; and was used in an online comment in response to Andy Kershaw, ‘Stop treating these people like savages’, *Independent* (21 January 2010):

This investment means that these accounts feel compelled to continually signal this danger, even when ‘back at the hotel’. Now, the sublime is as traditionally noisy as the beautiful or picturesque is quiet. And ‘noises off’ are the favoured means of signalling this danger.

We lounge outdoors at a pool with drinks. When there is a sharp sound it’s probably a backfire, not a shot.¹⁶

We ate lobster and drank champagne. The first thunderbolt of the evening cracked just as a nearby vigilante let out a rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire. I caught Guy’s eye. ‘Don’t worry,’ I lied. ‘It’s just a car backfiring.’¹⁷

I had scarcely begun the tenth chapter... when a sound of machine-gun fire reached me from outside the hotel. It troubled at first, but one got used to it, like the rattle of musketry in a Hollywood epic.¹⁸

But it is a danger that is not *really* dangerous. Ultimately these noises are reassuring, as the reader is reminded in the repeated scenes like these in which a problematic noise is domesticated, ensuring the guest feels safe. But this oscillation between the serious and the trivial draws attention to what Debby Lisle has called the cartography of safety and danger - and in doing so weakens the sharp distinction between them.

But an even more striking challenge to this distinction is the perspective on the Oloffson offered by Port-au-Prince resident Kettly Mars in her memorable piece ‘The Last of the Tourists’. She describes coming across a backpacker in Pacot, an adjacent neighbourhood. She doesn’t speak to him, but from his manner and appearance she guesses he is North American and staying at the Oloffson. ‘If you want a taste of the country that’s not too artificial, you are in the right place.’ She imagines giving him some parting advice: ‘Don’t stray too far. If things get too heavy, head back to the hotel.’

OK, I won’t keep you. My work is on the other side of this neighbourhood. It was nice seeing you. Goodbye my friend. *Peace and Love*. Maybe we’ll meet again, some day, in Manhattan, why not? We could hang out at Ground Zero and conjugate the verb *imagine*.¹⁹

I like to think of this extended apostrophe as a gentle rebuke addressed to the literary guests for whom Morse’s hotel is a safe haven in which the intrepid adventurer composes narratives that aestheticize personal suffering and social conflict.

<http://www.independent.cuk.uk/opinion/commentators/andy-kershaw-stop-treating-these-people-like-savages-1874218.html> (last accessed 31 May 2010). On the militarization of ‘aid’ see Peter Hallward, ‘Securing Disaster in Haiti’ (22 January 2010) <http://www.haitianalysis.com/2010/1/22/securing-disaster-in-haiti> (last accessed 31 May 2010).

¹⁶ Herbert Gold, *Haiti: Best Nightmare on Earth*, revised edition (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2001), p. 311.

¹⁷ Julia Llewellyn Smith, *Travels Without My Aunt: In the Footsteps of Graham Greene* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 249.

¹⁸ Ian Thomson, *Bonjour Blanc: A Journey Through Haiti* [1992] (London: Vintage, 2004), p.31.

¹⁹ Kettly Mars, ‘Le Dernier des Touristes’ in Thomas C Spear (ed), *Une journée haïtienne* (Montreal: Mémoire d’encrier, 2007), p.19. My translation.

The last sentence in particular I find suggestive. In proposing the site of the World Trade Center for their next rendezvous, Mars urges us in the strongest terms to question “the cartography of safety and danger”²⁰ that places New York and the Oloffson on one side and the streets of Port-au-Prince on the other.

Conjugating verbs (especially the verb *imagine*) is something travel writers could do more often – stuck as they usually are in the first-person singular (extended, occasionally, when holed up in places like the Oloffson, to the first-person plural). If Mars hints at the way she occupies (or orients herself in) Haiti’s capital city, she also imagines how the tourist would do so. Inviting the tourist to reciprocate, so they can do this together, points towards a more complex (even heterotopic) geography in which the Oloffson may simultaneously figure in radically different, possibly incommensurable, imagined spaces.

Conclusion

I have tried to place these two aspects of the hotel in closer proximity than they are usually found in representations of the Caribbean, but the relationship between them still remains to be addressed and theorized. The ‘ethics of tourism’ so often revolves around questions of the environmental and economic impact of those who actually go there; but perhaps there is also an ethics that imposes demands on those who write and read about it from a distance?

At present, I can only offer a series of questions.

1. Analogies. In the Nineteenth Century, the very use of the term ‘slavery’ beyond chattel, plantation slavery (common in the extended Caribbean) to refer to other forms of oppressive labour regimes – particularly by those who talk of the ‘wage slavery’ of industrial Britain and New England – was politically controversial, exploited as it was by anti-abolitionists who argued that plantation slaves were better off than factory workers. Now that plantation slavery has been abolished, perhaps such analogies are more permissible, although, since other forms of human trafficking are very much still with us, that judgement may be premature. Even so, we would need to ask what relationships are obscured as well as illuminated by making analogies between plantations and hotels. For example, the relationships between owners, managers, employees, and end-consumers are different in each case (especially the presence of the end-consumers in-situ, as hotel guests, as opposed to the distant consumers of the produce of plantation labour). Furthermore, the analogy tends to marginalize other dimensions of mass tourism (such as the impact of its arrival and expansion on the local economy; its effect on the natural environment).

2. Consumers. Abolitionists could hardly escape the dilemma of indirectly enjoying the benefits of slavery even while they denounced the institution. But they did take a stand on more direct benefits by boycotting slave produce and promoting free produce alternatives. Does the analogy between plantation slavery and mass tourism extend far enough to recommend a similar boycott of hotels (for reasons other than those that might be given by the related environmental campaigns to reduce one’s carbon footprint)?

²⁰ Debbie Lisle, *Global Politics*, p.164.

3. Readers. If the tourist hotel resembles a slave plantation, then so perhaps does travel writing. In this analogy, the author is the absentee planter, the narrator is the manager or overseer, the words the slaves and the experiences the raw cotton or cane that is to be fashioned into a product (poem, narrative) for sale to a customer. The analogy is not so fanciful. Walcott himself returns again and again to his worry that his poems exploit those who lives provide the raw material for his literary imagination, that for all his wish to do well by the ordinary people of St Lucia, he cannot help fearing that he misuses them.²¹ The relation between author and reader, though, might point to one way of bringing the two parts (site of exploitation, scene of writing) together – as Walcott does, however cryptically, in another poem in *White Egrets*.

... though I have cause
 I will share the world's beauty with my enemies
 even though their greed destroys the innocence
 of my Adamic island. My enemy is a serpent
 as much as he is in a fresco, and he in all his
 scales and venom and glittering head is
 part of the island's beauty; he need not repent.²²

The poem reminds us that the people behind rampant tourism development ('my enemies') will number among its readers, with whom the poet shares 'the world's beauty' through his writing. But by denouncing them in his poems they feature in the works of art he produces, and are thereby, 'part' of that 'beauty' he celebrates, even while they are responsible for destroying it. The logic is convoluted and finds comforting resolution only in the thought of a nature that is ultimately indifferent to human vanities and will continue to exist long after the poet and his adversaries have disappeared. This may feel like a cop-out for some. Yet the complicities and reversals that are invoked here do hint at the complicated work ahead for those who might seek to confront the relationship between the place of writing and the material conditions that make it possible.

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²¹ Most notably in 'The Light of the World', *The Arkansas Testament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp48-51.

²² Untitled poem (numbered '22'), *White Egrets*, p55.