

Green Waves and Wish Lines: Derek Walcott's *Art Nouveau*

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Abstract

This article is about two poems and a play by Caribbean writer and painter Derek Walcott which, published at different stages of his career, engage with Hokusai's print *Under the Great Wave off Kanagawa* and Van Gogh's canvas *The Starry Night*, thereby indirectly opening the core issue of fashion ever: its relationship with art. This is because these two masterpieces have been part of fashion discourse since its start in the mid-19th century when they too were created, to the present time, when swirling stars and cresting waves have become global icons worn and exhibited, *cap-à-pie*, in both haute couture and the mass clothing industry.

Keywords: Hokusai; Van Gogh; Walcott; Fashion; Art.

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Germinal Cultures, Mausoleums and the Art-Fashion Link

This article is about two poems and a play by Caribbean writer and painter Derek Walcott which, published at different stages of his career, engage with Hokusai's print *Under the Great Wave off Kanagawa* and Van Gogh's canvas *The Starry Night*, thereby indirectly opening the core issue of fashion ever: its relationship with art.¹ This is because these two masterpieces have been part of fashion discourse since its start in the mid-19th century when they too were created, to the present time, when swirling stars and cresting waves have become global icons worn and exhibited, *cap-à-pie*, in both haute couture and the mass clothing industry.² Therefore, while conversing with Hokusai and Van Gogh's masterpieces, Walcott's ekphrastic poems and play, *The Hurricane. After Hokusai* (1962), *Jean Rhys* (1981) and *O Starry Starry Night* (2013), incidentally address the three key aspects of fashion which have long been theorised as positively qualifying its embodied nature and so its difference from art: 1) as *performance*, because clothing, accessories and interior design are physically used, experienced and made representative of our life; 2) as *determining social history*, intended as a socio-political dynamic that shapes differences across class, gender, ethnicity as well as the environment confirming or contesting the status quo; 3) as *transcultural material*, because its products have always been made of fabric, colours, decorations, and objects stemming from non-European cultures that have used them to construct power discourses based on visibility. In all these respects, by focusing on the dialogue between Walcott's texts and the two 19th-century masterpieces, this article also raises the question as to whether this special conversation offers new insights on the art-and-fashion link which, stitched and ripped over the centuries, in European culture has ever been co-terminus to that of life and art, time and eternity, performance and iconicity, culture and nature, man and woman, mono- and transculturalism, and so has ever talked to the perennial attempt of making the division seam into a worldview.

What light, then, does Walcott's perspective cast on this picture? It is one that both sees fashion and art as equally partaking in the shaping of life and art as well as one that brusquely divides them following art's more serious attempt to maintain its contact with nature and the need of the common people, away from socio-political and economic interests. In the first pages of *The Prodigal*, Derek Walcott's poetic travel book partly set in Europe, the traveller compares himself to the train he is journeying on, similarly stuck in the late 19th century but, importantly, he is like a boy enjoying its motion and looking at things for the first time.³ It is a picture of Walcott's view of fin de siècle Europe as seen from a Caribbean perspective, that of a new *flâneur* indulging the endless associations that places and cities offer, in a way that recalls Baudelaire's enthusiastic merging of fashion and art in the life of the modern artist,⁴ but no *mal de vivre*, no aesthetician's exotic greed or needs. His Antillean gaze is fresh, stemming from a world that from its incipit Walcott's poetics has described as culturally green:

in small, germinal cultures, unformed because they are so new, the process has to begin again. Philosophers of European art, because of this, often seize on the primitive, because of their quality of innocence, their naïve optimism. In some cases, the craze enters the mainstream, as it did after the First World War [...] Negrophilia became as popular as chinoiserie had been before the war. On another level, artists revived their innocence, a fresh way of seeing the world by adapting child art. [...] The writer, painter or composer is still regarded with

1. For a thorough discussion of this topic see Adam Geczy and Vicky Karaminas (eds.) *Fashion and Art* (London New York: Berg, 2012).
2. For a survey of Van Gogh's painting as used by high-fashion maisons like Dior, see Niyati Parikh "The love affair of art and fashion", *Elle Gourmet India*, February, 2023, <https://elle.in/van-gogh-inspired-fashion/>. See also the ready-to-wear collection by Selkie based on Van Gogh's *Starry Night* canvas <https://selkiecollection.com/products/the-starry-night-day-dress?srltid=AfmBOorxT78Qu6C1dX4ZGkxpuvtpXxNzhH-NnsW46V3VE405ntghYHt>.
3. "trains / (their casual accuracy, the joy in their gliding power) / had (there were no trains on the islands / of his young manhood) a child's delight in motion, / [...] / a little farther than Baudelaire Station / where bead-eyed Verlaine sat, my train broke down, / and has been stuck there since." Derek Walcott, *The Prodigal* (New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 5.
4. Charles Baudelaire, "Beauty, Fashion and Happiness," in *The Painter of Modern Life*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Publishers, 1964), 1-4.

respect here by that part of the public which counts, the working man. [...] He has a still-green faith in a people's theatre, in active art, in the community of folk-forms, not like the mausoleums of Europe, shrines of tradition, but as a working challenge.⁵

If this view widens and changes our perspective on Europe's decadence, it yet maintains the distinction between aesthetic movements, like *Art Nouveau*, and actual art which artists everywhere have tended to sustain. For instance, Walcott's vision shares the principles expressed in Leo Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* where the novelist dismisses the aestheticians of his times and also (perhaps too radically) most European writers, composers, and painters from early modern times to his days.⁶ The problem for Tolstoy is the growing obsession with beautiful forms whereby art has suited the elites and become incomprehensible to normal people. Art has thus lost its true nature and function, which consist in the maker's urgent need of conveying a unique feeling whose immediate perception by the receiver is art's only meaning and purpose, art's lymph and seeds. In our times a similar view has been voiced by Australian poet Les Murray who has expressed his credo for the independent life of true art and its substantial difference from objects that fascinate us due to their power to work as fetishes that nourish our physiological need for imaginative satisfaction.⁷ Murray's two-part essay is particularly important for explaining both the reasons why we are attracted to pseudo art items, clothes, lifestyles, as well as the emotive-physical processes whereby we allow these objects, trends and ideas to shape our life through their aesthetic power. Interestingly, both Tolstoy and Murray identify early-modern times as the moment in the history of art production and consumption when the supposedly perverse dynamic that diverts art's function and cuts its vital relation to its public falls into place, although none of them mentions the waves of colonial aggressions in terms of their backlash impact on the arts. Walcott notoriously does in his two manifesto essays *What the Twilight Says* and *The Muse of History*.⁸

Bringing together this twofold perspective, this article focuses on Walcott's view of the fin de siècle as represented in three texts from which the *leitmotif* of the relation between Europe and the Antilles emerges, marked by a specific geometrical pattern that is also tightly connected with *Art Nouveau*. A transcultural space appears that shows the creative and cultural-political dynamics enacted by painting and the arts and crafts movement. It shows the way they differently create the sense of the relation between metropole and colony at the historical moment when European culture is on the wane, dispirited by the weight of its politics, relying on exotic ideals and objects to bring new lymph to its moribund states, while the Antillean world is on the rise, its long-repressed energies about to burst. Relatedly, and chronologically, I will first read *The Hurricane*, subtitled "After Hokusai", a 15-line poem featuring in Derek Walcott's first international poetry collection *In a Green Night* (1962), to represent, I will sustain, the spirit and the dexterity whereby the challenges posed by the European and North American culture markets would be faced. An effective ekphrasis of Hokusai's world-famous print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*, Walcott's poem renders the artist's excitement for dealing with the perilous transcultural encounter, as well as the sense of its reception by late 19th-century Europe where Hokusai's art entered the flood of Japanese craze and took to opposite directions, into the circles of *Art Nouveau* and the imagination of post-impressionist artists like Van Gogh and Gauguin. I will then read the six-stanza poem *Jean Rhys*, published in the mid-1980s in which the rise of a creole Caribbean vision is imagined as stemming from Rhys' growing-up in symbiosis with the Dominican environment, which is rendered through a pattern of images reminiscent of Hokusai's print. I will conclude by looking at Walcott's latest play *O Starry Starry Night*, published in 2014, which dramatizes Van Gogh and Gauguin's collaboration in the South of France at the end of 1888, after which Van Gogh would paint his iconic *Starry Night* canvas visibly inspired by Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*,⁹ whose geometrical design

5. Derek Walcott, "A Dilemma Faces W.I. Artists," in *The Journeyman Years. Occasional Prose 1957-1974*, Vol. 1, edited by Gordon Collier (Amsterdam New York: Rodopi, 2013): 69-70.

6. Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, translated by Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (London: Penguin, 1995).

7. Les Murray, "Poems and Poesies," *PN Review*, Vol. 14, no. 4 (1987): 25-31; Les Murray, "Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment," *PN Review*, Vol. 16, no. 6 (1989): 28-35.

8. Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 3-64.

9. Mark Brown, "How Hokusai's Great Wave Crashed into Van Gogh's Starry night," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2018,

Walcott's play adapts to build a surprising Antillean version.

The Hurricane and Hokusai's Under the Great Wave off Kanagawa

The Hurricane is a powerful ekphrasis of Hokusai's iconic woodblock print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* which, part of the print series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, was an immediate blockbuster in Japan at the time of its publication in the mid-19th century as well as in fin de siècle Europe where it became the emblem of a fascination for Japanese art among the *Art Nouveau* circles as well as an inspiring source for artists like Van Gogh. The poem is a faithful mimetic rendering of the huge wave's kinetic force foregrounded in Hokusai's print. It depicts the moment when it is overwhelmingly about to impact upon a comparably tiny boat that is caught in the swell's gigantic grip while boatmen are labouring hard to gain command of the seemingly ungovernable boat. In the poem the huge wave is about to crash against the inert shore, whereas in Hokusai's print the coast does not appear. The Caribbean relocation, highlighted in the poem's title that names the storm as "hurricane", greatly potentiates the force and scale of the original wave and relatedly maximises the message of the Japanese artist's image. Clearly, in the poem the "hurricane" does not coincide with the "grey storm" that is about to capsize the boat and devastate the shore. Indeed, a series of exclamative imperatives address the hurricane exhorting its intervention, turn out to be addressing also the viewer and, especially, to be voicing the maker's self-encouragement, his invocation of elemental power to overcome the grey storm that has long been shuttering the beaten shore. As a result, hurricane, viewer and artist converge to create a counterforce: "Come [...] on this last shore of broken teeth/[...] Find the storm's swirling core, and understand/That mad, old fisherman dancing on his barge, [...] Study the grey storm [...] and prize [...] / The salt delight of wrinkled eyes, [...] / And his strange sorrow when all storms are ended."¹⁰ The first imperative "Come" drags the hurricane into the picture to play its major part in the poem's dynamic and the following exhortations — "find", "understand", "study", "prize" — direct and invoke the hurricane's force making it converge with that of the poem's maker as well as with that of us readers as if to join forces against the storm's upcoming devastation, possibly the final blow of several that have hit the shore so far. Therefore, a decisive combat is under way, in which we are asked to play our part. In the foreground is the joined energy of hurricane, poet and reader depicted as an audacious counterforce against a historically implacable "grey storm" which is explicitly long-known for its savage attacks and whose features are configured in the background in such a way as to make its power visually smaller, significantly belittled, already defeated. The grey storm's features symbolically combine history and images reminiscent of European late 19th-century avant-garde art and together form a neatly defined realistic idea of the lethal enemy that the hurricane party is confronting. The grey storm's breakers are a galloping army — "spume and fury of snorting battle-horses" — that stand for invading hordes of colonising ages, and its waves are hairs of remorseful treacherous women whipping the shore as wildly — "lashing their drenched hair / Like treacherous women come to grief". The storm waves' swishing blows that leave their mark on the shore and on the fisherman's head — "streak his hair" — reproduce *Art Nouveau* whiplash line which is therefore associated to slavery and colonial history, a topic that specialists have generally only hinted at with reference to exotic taste and Japanese motifs, and have only recently studied and documented.¹¹

But why does the poem produce a faithful reproduction of Hokusai's iconic print, while also pointing at the way Hokusai's image was received and transformed at the hand of *Art Nouveau* experts and practitioners? What is Hokusai's image's original meaning and how does it compare and relate to its later use? Why does this talk to Walcott's Caribbean so urgently? By addressing these questions Walcott's poem renders the original meaning of Hokusai's image, namely the fear and the wish of contact with Europe

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/sep/28/vincent-van-gogh-starry-night-hokusai-great-wave>.

10. Derek Walcott, "The Hurricane," in *In a Green Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), 69.

11. See Peter Selz and Mildred Constantine (eds.), *Art Nouveau: Art and Design at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 14–16, 19–24. For a detailed study on the direct connection between Brussels Art Nouveau and Belgian Congo see Debora Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (2011): 139–181.

after centuries of isolation, and makes it speak of his own international debut as well as of his newly independent homeland after centuries of detrimental contacts with the old continent. So, centre-staged in both Hokusai's print and Walcott's poem is the dramatization of a transcultural encounter, which Hokusai's print can only foreshadow and which Walcott's poem fully knows from the famous afterlives of the Japanese artist's image in Europe and the USA. The poem displays its knowledge of Hokusai's print's reception through its subtitle, "After Hokusai", and the threefold meaning of "after" which refers to the poem's ekphrastic imitation, to its temporal distance, and to the awareness of Hokusai's image's Euro-North-American fortune. Relatedly, through its title, the poem inscribes the intricately hybrid indigeneity of the Caribbean at whose origin is the imposed encounter with Europe, which the word "hurricane" flashes out, with its mysterious etymology that symbolises the cruel nonsense inaugurated by Columbus' travels and which the poem, and by extension Walcott's poetry, are setting out to redress.¹² The questions that the poem seems to be asking are: Is there a way to make productive sense of that initial tragedy, of the obnoxious enmeshing that followed? Can the question that was first posed by Hokusai's print be of some use to contemporary readers?

The central message is the same in Hokusai's image and Walcott's poem, namely the contact of nature and human vital energies that art represents in its ever-new performances through the viewers' participation. In this respect, it has been convincingly explained that Hokusai's wave shows nature imitating art like a kabuki's player in a "stop-action pose" on a stage that extends into the audience and so enters the viewers' space involving us body and mind.¹³ Relatedly, both poem and print also convey the enjoyed theatricality of the tumultuous scene and so emphasise how the storm of transcultural encounters may be amusing in its "uproarious war", the epithet also meaning hilariously funny. The poem (like the print) also asks us to see, enjoy and share the old fisherman's excited dexterity as he tries to dominate the unconquerable storm. Specifically, it asks us to enter the scene as cleverly as to discover "the storm's swirling core" and with the same eager enthusiasm to feel like "That mad, old fisherman dancing on his barge". Only so can we partake in the fisherman's joy as he faces the impossible struggle and like him long for future ones: "The salt delight of wrinkled eyes, / And his strange sorrow when all storms are ended." At stake is a vision of art that celebrates the fusion of elemental and human nature, of a force able to resolve historical conflicts which Hokusai's art prefigures and Walcott's knows firsthand.¹⁴

A study on the socio-cultural context of Hokusai's print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* explains that the print series of which it is part, was created to represent and respond to Japan's preoccupation with foreign invasion after centuries in which only Dutch ships once a year had been allowed to enter the Nagasaki's port. The print series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* emerged from this discourse and its wave-based iconography of which Hokusai's cresting wave motif was the forerunner, finally yielding his famous print series and its giant wave print that would become a global icon.¹⁵ Crucially, as Christine Guth theorises, what distinguishes Hokusai's wave motif is a series of innovations that constitute the engine of a new vision of nature as part and parcel of art's experience: 1) the presence of Mount Fuji, image of religion and immortality providing reassurance in the prefigured encounter with foreigners, which in *Under the Wave* appears in the distance as solid original of its huge wave double; 2) the kinetic dynamic whereby the viewer is drawn into the picture and, as the title says, made to look at it from "under the wave", so to partake in the life-risking drama; 3) the scene depicted from a foreign perspective, since the wave's left-to-right motion runs opposite to the natural direction of Japanese reading; 4) the use of geometrical shapes — the conic mount in the distance seen through the curling wave's circular orbit, whose function is to make the viewer aware of the dynamic whereby authority, marked by size,

12. For an extensive account of the origins of the word "hurricane" see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London and New York: Routledge, 1986), 13–44.

13. Christine Guth, "Hokusai's Great Waves in Nineteenth-Century Japanese Visual Culture," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 93, no. 4 (2011): 474.

14. For the notion of "contact zone" as productive space of cultural tension between unequal forces and as inspired by creole contexts, see Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, Vol. 91 (1991): 33–40; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

15. See Christine Guth, *Hokusai's Great Wave* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 17–53. See also Guth, "Hokusai's Great Waves", 468–85.

depends on the manipulation of viewpoint; 5) the use of Prussian blue as dominant colour, to show the use of a foreign product — and of European maritime painting — to represent a local scene as well as to make viewers experience this idea.¹⁶ We can conclude that Hokusai's print series stages the imminent encounter with Europe and gives the viewer tools to face and manage the impact, of which the print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* is specifically representative, perhaps even intimating its future reception, multiple adaptations and distortions.¹⁷ In this sense, Hokusai's final goal is to make us see the world journeys that an art object may go through, the extent to which and how (if at all) its meaning can resist the storms of different times and cultural trends. Ultimately, Hokusai's image may be intended to ask us the question as to what makes a true artwork, what makes it enduring and become a classic. In Coetzee's revisitation of Eliot's theory, it is a matter of passing the test of becoming, or not, the enjoyed object of reproduction by expert practitioners who consider the labour worth engaging in.¹⁸

By the late 19th century Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*, along with many other Japanese prints, had become a hit in *Art Nouveau* circles and an inspiring artwork for post-impressionists like Gauguin and Van Gogh. The ample documentation of *Art Nouveau* reception of Japanese art and crafts and specifically of Hokusai's print, shows their quick absorption into the global art market centred in Paris and networked all over Europe's main capitals, especially Brussels.¹⁹ The Japanese wave motif was soon employed to decorate prestigious porcelain dishes, book covers, as a model for sculptures, architecture, and poster designs, all referred to as *Japonaiserie*. A book based on Hokusai's biography (translated into French by a Japanese art dealer) became the object of a famous dispute between the French conservative novelist Edmond de Goncourt, author of *Hokusai* (where *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* is renamed "la Vague") and the most eminent *Art Nouveau* collector Siegfried Bing who claimed ownership on the biography that he had commissioned. The dispute is emblematic of the chauvinistic neoliberal trends that paradoxically characterised the appreciation of Hokusai's art. One sustained the need of protecting national values against foreign intrusions. The other sustained the need of overcoming national boundaries in favour of the global market.²⁰ Following this trend, simplified and often radically changed versions of Hokusai's print began to travel the world, under the new name *The Great Wave*.

Japanese prints and specifically Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* followed a completely different path in Van Gogh's art. He saw them as reflecting a clear view of nature and its organic relation to a genuine sense of human life and ideals, which he wanted his painting to embody and convey and whose making he would convincingly pursue from 1888 when he moved to the south of France. His letters to Theo express these positions very neatly, also showing his awareness of the way Japanese art was being discussed by *Art Nouveau* experts. In a letter of early September 1888, he relates his view that seemingly unrealistic colours may produce a more authentic result than a photographic rendering based on the feeling they give the viewer, to Hokusai's print and specifically to *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*:

It is colour not locally true from the point of view of the delusive realist, but colour suggesting some emotion of an ardent temperament. When Paul Mantz saw at the exhibition the violent and inspired sketch by Delacroix that we saw at the Champs Elysées — the "Bark of Christ" — he turned away from it, exclaiming, "I did not know that one could be so terrible with a little blue and green." Hokusai wrings the same cry from you, but he does it by his line, his drawing, just as you say in your letter — "the waves are claws and the ship is caught in them, you feel it." Well, if you make the colour exact or the drawing exact, it won't give you sensations like that.²¹

16. Cf. Guth, "Great Waves", 472–476.

17. Cf. Guth, *Hokusai's Great Wave*.

18. John Maxwell Coetzee, "What is a Classic?" in *Stranger Shores* (New York: Viking, 2001), 1–16.

19. For references to this issue see Guth *Hokusai's Great Wave*, 54–96 and Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness", 139–181.

20. Cf. Guth, *Hokusai's Great Wave*, 81–85.

21. Van Gogh, *Van Gogh a Self-Portrait. Letters Revealing His Life as a Painter*, edited by W.H. Auden (New York: Graphic Society, 1989), 332.

Later in the same month he returns to speak of Japanese print art and of Hokusai's defending them from the typical racist view expressed in Paris,²² and to relate them instead to the moral ideals that Tolstoy had recently expressed in his just published book *My Religion*. Both Japanese print art and Tolstoy's book speak to the life that he had chosen as an alternative to Paris, to experiment his new art:

I think the drawing of the blade of grass and the carnations and the Hokusai in Bing's reproductions are admirable. But whatever they say, the most common prints coloured with a flat wash are admirable to me for the same reason as Rubens and Veronese. I know perfectly well that they are not real primitive art. But even if the primitives are admirable, that's no reason whatever for me to say, as it is becoming the fashion to do, "When I go to the Louvre, I cannot get beyond the primitives." If one said to a serious collector of Japanese prints, to Levy himself, "My dear sir, I cannot help admiring these prints at 5 sous," he would probably be rather shocked, and would pity one's ignorance and bad taste. Just as formerly it was considered bad taste to like Rubens, Jordaens and Veronese.²³

In an imagined combination of Japanese art and Tolstoy's ideals, Van Gogh projects a view of the future that he sees as sustainable and as sustaining him because immersed in the life of nature:

If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismarck's policy? No. He studies a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure. [...] isn't it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers? And you cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming much gayer and happier, and we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention. [...] I envy the Japanese the extreme clearness which everything has in their work. It is never tedious, and never seems to be done too hurriedly. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes with the same ease as if it were as simple as buttoning your coat.²⁴

Jean Rhys' White Orchid, Chinese Vase, Butterfly, Mountain and Sea

The six-stanza poem *Jean Rhys* imagines the way the famous novelist's perception and prose grew and blossomed in late 19th-century Dominica, through the child's widening sense of the epochal change her country was undergoing and whose creolised relation with Britain she would voice in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, first published in 1966, in response to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.²⁵ The poem draws this creole picture by depicting the transformation of the child's insight into writing, in tune with the Caribbean zeitgeist and natural world, by making use of the wave-mountain symbol and movement that characterises Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*.

In the first stanza we see little Jean Rhys in her privileged Dominican-British family milieu, their world about to end like a history page grown outdated that emancipation time has finally turned. Their disappearing lives are compared to blotched sepia photographs and their ineffectiveness and vacuity is rendered by associating these people to "the left hand of old spinster aunts"²⁶ as well as to the ghostly women in white of Whistler's paintings: "like the left hand of some spinster aunt, / they have drifted to the edge

22. Guth, *Hokusai's Great Wave*, 59, 74–75.

23. Van Gogh, *Van Gogh a Self-Portrait*, 321.

24. Van Gogh, 333.

25. Derek Walcott, "Jean Rhys," in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948–2013* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 300–302.

26. Walcott, "Jean Rhys," 300.

/ of verandas in Whistlerian / white". Ruined rich people at the mercy of the new age, they are represented as cringing sideways in a vain attempt to escape its mortal blow, "the axe stroke!" which, as we read on, turns out to be the one performed by the future novelist's pen implacably writing about them.

The poem then traces Rhys' growing voice, starting from the meanings that the little girl could not express yet. Her still silent voice is compared to a white orchid bud, to a Chinese porcelain vase and a gull winging over Cornwall, her father's homeland that Rhys visited and may have retained in her memory: "white as an orchid / on a crusted log / [...] / a V of Chinese white / meant for the beat of a seagull / over a sepia souvenir of Cornwall, / as the white hush between two sentences."²⁷ Next, the poem depicts her in a typical Sunday afternoon, sitting on a lion-pawed sofa, intently looking at an old aunt resting in a hammock and noticing how the aunt enjoys her Pre-Raphaelite daydream through the swaying Carib craft: "A maiden aunt canoes through lilies of clouds / in a Carib hammock."²⁸ Farther than that, the girl sees the canoe-hammock's sways draw a space in which the Dominican hills rise and fall like huge Atlantic waves, "sees the hills dip and straighten with each lurch",²⁹ the very same natural elements and motion that we saw in Hokusai's print. The mountain-wave pattern marks the kid's growing symbiosis with the Caribbean, its new epoch rise as performed by its nature. We see her senses being honed as they attune with the place's turning-point moment, organically fusing with it: "the cement grindstone of the afternoon / turns slowly, sharpening her senses, / the bay below is green as calalu, stewing Sargasso."³⁰ The little girl imagines the butterfly-effect that these imperceptible signs will have, on their way to bring about the long-due change, comparable, the poem suggests, to a black woman's portrait, perhaps a hint at young Rhys' often expressed desire to be black. This is a black woman who would go down the mountain where she lives (where maroons and dissenters dwelled during slavery times) to visit the village, perhaps a metaphor of the mature Rhys's response to European cities. The apparently eventless moment is depicted through the image of a butterfly turning into a black woman's golden ear, then into her swing dress becoming in turn a withering flower as she enters the urban environment: "between Dominican mountains / the child expects a sound / from a butterfly clipping itself to a bush / like a gold earring to a black maid's ear —/one who goes down to the village, visiting, / whose pink dress wilts like a flower between the limes."³¹

As Rhys grows one with the feel of the place, embodying its evolving gigantic motion, her old colonial world is left behind. The aunts are compared to "moths" that burn in the gas lanterns' light or get flattened and buried inside books with their fading view of Europe, represented in their embroidered reproductions of metropolitan landmarks: "doomed to be pressed into a book, to fall [...] / embroiderers of silence / for whom the arches of the Thames, [...] / fades from the hammock cushion from the sun."³² Not like them Rhys, who is growing to use her "right hand", to commit herself to actual art and express a better view of English-Creole culture: "her right hand married to *Jane Eyre*, / foreseeing that her own white wedding dress / will be white paper."³³

The poem also inscribes two further ways by which it reverses the trend and lifestyle of European and of Europe-inspired fin de siècle Creole culture. The first reversal consists in the gradual blackening of the white space inhabited by little Rhys, in the way her growing insight and writing are depicted as filling out unexpressed meanings by capsizing the basic technique used in *Art Nouveau* graphic design where the black background was the negative space where figures emerged through white whiplash lines that exploited it as a foil.³⁴ Relatedly, the second reversal sees Rhys as future artist compared to Whistler, the sophisticated painter and aesthete who introduced Japanese art to Europe and anticipated *Art*

27. Walcott, 300–301.

28. Walcott, 301.

29. Walcott, 301.

30. Walcott, 301.

31. Walcott, 301.

32. Walcott, 301–302.

33. Walcott, 302.

34. Cf. Peter Selz and Mildred Constantine, *Art Nouveau*, 24.

Nouveau,³⁵ known for his paintings of evanescent women in white which he composed with black and coloured pigments to make a multitonned kind of white.³⁶ At the beginning of the poem, Rhys is such a woman but she gradually emerges from spectral whiteness as her voice and insight get formed and she writes herself into a substantial being and one that, the poem suggests, marks her identity and artistic impact as opposite to the malicious ornamental butterfly which excentric Whistler used to sign his works with.³⁷

O Starry Starry Night, Van Gogh and Gauguin

A similar geometrical design has a central role in Walcott's latest two-act play *O Starry Starry Night*, where the cresting mountain wave delineates a circular and triangular movement that shapes Van Gogh's wished connubium between life and art's fulfilment based on their genuine contact with nature. The play's "Prologue" opens with Van Gogh standing on top of a hill above Arles invoking the help of a star-decked night to uplift his and the times' dejected spirit: "*Vincent appears on a hilltop overlooking Arles; stars, streets ablaze below him. O starry, starry night how shall I exult?*"³⁸ This geometrical design patterns the entire play whose story recounts the two-month collaboration between Van Gogh and Gauguin in Provençal Arles at the end of 1888, working and living together in the famous yellow house where Van Gogh had moved in February of the same year and where he had dreamed of founding a studio of the south, a refuge for artists and the future of art.³⁹ However, the dream would materialise in tragic disillusion, though one that saw Van Gogh produce some of his most renowned masterpieces. The play indicates the debacle by repeating the initial scene, where Van Gogh recites his 10-line invocation to the starry night, at its conclusion, to coincide with the point in the story where Van Gogh's dream has ruinously precipitated.⁴⁰ The collaboration with Gauguin has run its course and we realize that the hilltop that we saw in the "Prologue" was the peak of Van Gogh's insanity and the mark of his difference from Gauguin. In this respect, the rise-and-fall motif outlines the play's conceptual design and inscribes the difference between the two artists and, more widely, Walcott's vision of the European fin de siècle as represented by the two painters' brotherhood and, in contrast, by *Art Nouveau* and the avant-garde. As actress Martina Laird (in the role of Lotte) has said during the British première, the line in which Theo defines Van Gogh's painting as "mythological" — "Vincent, you make the ordinary mythological"⁴¹ — is true of the play as a whole and of Walcott's entire work.⁴² Indeed, the play is a symbolic representation of the European belle époque as culminating point of self-destructive centuries and of art's desperate wish to re-root and find new lymph to regenerate itself.

To sustain the play's symbolic geometrical design through the end, Walcott has made substantial use of detailed and at times lengthy captions like a storyboard that helps us decode the allegorical meaning

35. Selz and Constantine, 14–28.

36. Joyce H. Townsend, "How Whistler Painted White in Full Colour," *National Art Gallery*, accessed November 16, 2024, <https://www.nga.gov/blog/how-whistler-painted-white-in-full-color.html>.

37. Kathleen King, "Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee: James McNeill Whistler," *Gardner Museum*, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/blog/james-mcneill-whistler-walking-stick>.

38. Derek Walcott, *O Starry Starry Night* (New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 5.

39. "Now if I set up a studio and refuge right at the gates of the South, it's not such a crazy scheme. And it means that we can work on serenely. And if other people say that it is too far from Paris, etc., let them, so much the worse for them. Why did the greatest colourist of all, Eugene Delacroix, think it essential to go South and right to Africa? Obviously, because not only in Africa but from Arles onward you are bound to find beautiful contrasts of red and green, of blue and orange, of sulphur and lilac. And all true colourists must come to this, must admit that there is another kind of colour than that of the North. I am sure if Gauguin came, he would love this country; if he doesn't it's because he has already experienced more brightly coloured countries, and he will always be a friend, and one with us in principle. And someone else will come in his place." Cf. Van Gogh, *Van Gogh a Self-Portrait*, 329.

40. Derek Walcott, *O Starry*, 93.

41. Walcott, 58.

42. "O Starry Starry Night: The world première of Nobel Laureate's new play", filmed 1 May 2013 at Lakeside Theatre University of Essex, video 2:19, <https://vimeo.com/65215081>.

against the grain of the unfolding plot. One such picture composes the “Prologue” that, besides tracing the initial scene, also intimates the cascade of dramatic events to follow. As we saw, Van Gogh is precariously standing at the vertiginous end-point of a vertical line, at the top of his hallucinating aspirations. Simultaneously, Gauguin’s night train is nearing Arles, moving along a horizontal line that splits up the space and outs the altitude where Van Gogh is sited, so that we are visually made to associate travelling Gauguin with the train’s linear projection and its steady arrowing toward destination. Van Gogh’s mystical abstraction is therefore drawn as the opposite of Gauguin’s solid pragmatism, to identify two conflicting artistic temperaments. At the same time, at the bottom-end of the scene the other two characters are drawn to represent the bigotry and chauvinistic politics of the times. Lotte, a French-Algerian prostitute, is being thrown out of the inn that, along with the Café de la Gare, is owned by Monsieur Ginoux who is also a local politician, and from whom van Gogh has rented the yellow house where Gauguin is about to arrive. The same spatial depiction defines the “Epilogue” which is composed of the letter that Gauguin has sent to Theo, who is now reading it, to tell him about the tragic facts that hastened his departure from Arles. Gauguin’s sober prose reflects the stolid balance that has characterised his life in Arles and survived Van Gogh’s excesses. His letter gratefully parts company from Theo, who promoted and sold his paintings, and courteously mentions Lotte’s likely death. Especially, with the same moderate warmth Gauguin asks Theo to tell Vincent of his perduring affection and the reasonable style is made to stand out as it clashes with the two shots that the caption makes us hear, signalling Van Gogh’s suicide, so that the two *reports* overlap conveying an ambiguous message. Is the play telling us that Gauguin had an involuntary role in Van Gogh’s suicide, as indeed the plot suggests (for instance when Van Gogh tells Gauguin that he feels like a scarecrow in a cornfield and Gauguin replies that he should shoot the rooks). Or is the play suggesting that their cooperation actually counters and makes up for Van Gogh’s tragedy? Or both?

THEO, in Paris, reading a letter. GAUGUIN walking alone in Paris.

This is your favourite rascal. Paul. In Paris.

Dear Theo. I went for a last walk along

Les Alyscamps, without saying goodbye

[...]

The bold benign owner who had first befriended
me was not sweeping in front of the door of his café,

but he would be there tomorrow. I would not.

We see the PROPRIETOR sweeping, then stopping

[...]

I am leaving Vincent. Ha! This would be more true
than loving, since he has worn me out. As for Lotte [...]

*Two shots ring out. He pauses. He resumes.*⁴³

To be sure, all along the play exploits its performative nature to involve the viewer in art’s actual life, making us enter Van Gogh’s paintings, his vision and practice. It does so in three main ways. First, the play makes anachronistic and imaginative use of some of Van Gogh’s famous canvases. For instance, *The Potatoes’ Eaters* is employed to depict the real fact that Van Gogh strongly associated Arles’ surrounding landscape with his native Holland, but also to represent his insane confusion of life and art to build a dramatic plot that culminates with the cut-off ear episode. Similarly, *The Sower* — which was painted months before Gauguin’s arrival — is used to represent a mentally ill Van Gogh thoroughly identified with his painting, at once humoured and pitied by Gauguin. Similarly, *Wheatfield with Crows* — painted months after Gauguin’s departure — is used to mark the path of Van Gogh’s madness based on his homosocial affection and jealousy toward Gauguin. Secondly, the play drags us into the drama through the use of short scenes that compress multiple times and spaces and which make us see the present as looked at from the future as well as foreshadowed in its past, which makes them plausibly accessible also to us. One such scene occurs when Theo is reminiscing the time that he is actually living. Far more extensively, the same strategy applies to the play’s use of Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* canvas, painted in Saint Rémy, months after the two artists’ life in Arles, and which the play shows us in progress

43. Derek Walcott, *O Starry*, 105.

in Van Gogh's mind (realistically depicting the fact that Van Gogh had long wanted to paint a starry sky, as he says in his letters) but uses it to picture his hallucinatory state. In this respect, a big question arises: why does the play put this specific painting centre-staged while diminishing it in embryo? The answer emerges from the third and most explicit way by which the viewer is made to enter the stage, when toward the conclusion, desperate Van Gogh in search of Gauguin, reaches the café and Monsieur Ginoux brutally brushes him off with these words: "move on sir, people are watching."⁴⁴ The play is literally sweeping Van Gogh's off stage, asking the viewer to dismiss his destructive attitude and, therefore, to make Gauguin the protagonist, perhaps even suggesting that in this play Gauguin is the actual maker of the starry night, i.e., of the dream where a full life and art are possible.

The reason why the real focus is on Gauguin is that in the playwright's view, he is closer than Van Gogh to the idea of art's rebirth in a new world located in the south of the metropolitan centres. Gauguin was born in South America, and the play is constellated with hints at his Peruvian origins and his related vision. Gauguin had spent some months in Martinique before living in Arles, and the play imagines that the Caribbean is brought into the yellow house with the canvases that Gauguin has carried with him. Martinique is the object of his conversations with Lotte, of his comments, reminiscences and recurring wish to return there, which works like dynamite in Van Gogh's mind. Undeniably this coup de theatre is forced into the story to distort real facts and the play represents this very manipulation through two additional "mountain scenes" that make us further understand why. In the first mountain scene, Van Gogh and Gauguin are painting the landscape with a church that becomes the object of a long discussion. While Gauguin sees it as a deadly presence killing his art and one reason why he prefers Martinique and the tropics, where no similar institutional presence intimidates the art maker nor anyone imposes repressive behaviour, Van Gogh dismisses his friend's tirade and suggests simply to cut the church out. The scene depicts Van Gogh's historically true reluctance to portray Arles' renowned architecture that had long made the town a celebrated tourist destination.⁴⁵ However, the play transforms iconoclastic Van Gogh into a confused mixture of catholic fanaticism (unrealistically talking of Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradise*) and Protestant bigotry (obsessed with accuracy). Along these lines, Van Gogh is depicted as a parallel figure to Monsieur Ginoux, paradoxically opposing and following his bigot chauvinism by which Ginoux celebrates the beauties of Arles and colonial France. We first see Ginoux at the beginning of the play praising Arles also for the legendary print of Christ's knee for which it is known and visited, and this is echoed in the ridiculous scene where Van Gogh identifies with Christ and genuflects before Theo and Gauguin asking Gauguin if he would like to talk to his knee!⁴⁶ Van Gogh's world is clearly invented to form the negative background from which Gauguin's stands out and yet one that is as self-evidently fabricated, since its Caribbean view is depicted as devoid of its well-known exoticism. The play, therefore, stages also the playwright's largely indulged temptation of celebrating the Caribbean in contrast to decadent Europe.⁴⁷

The second mountain scene is a sort of dreamlike counterpart in which we can see the reason why the play makes the two artists overlap and differentiate so neatly. The scene consists of a long caption in which Gauguin is walking down a hill early at night, carrying grocery bags, and stops when he hears footsteps behind him. Van Gogh is after him, a razor blade in his hand but then recovers his senses and runs away, so, finally, Gauguin — who hasn't seen him — resumes his walk home.⁴⁸ The play seems to be telling us that its intent is to rationalise the two friend's common dream and make it as close as possible to a fulfilled reality. Hence the primary role given to Gauguin who had been in the Caribbean and would soon leave for Tahiti. In fact, Van Gogh's letters show that he shared Gauguin's view of the tropics as the place where the arts could thrive. Also, their friendship and mutually-enhanced artistic cooperation

44. Walcott, 102.

45. See Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000). Debora Silverman, "Framing art and sacred realism: Van Gogh's ways of seeing Arles," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 2001, accessed 20 November 2024, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_vano12200101_01/_vano12200101_01_0004.php.

46. Derek Walcott, *O Starry*, 9, 66–70.

47. See, for instance: "the world centre / will shift from Paris to the tropics. From Montmartre to Martinique", Walcott, 21.

48. Walcott, 91.

continued, if from a distance.⁴⁹ In this connection, we can read the moment when Van Gogh expresses his fear of success, his wish to be a failed painter instead, and his positive view of failure as a spurring whiplash: “I love failure because it is the spur / that wakes you up the next day to work, to drive you, to whip you like a damn mule to do better.”⁵⁰ Gauguin has none of this self-defeatist attitude and explicitly opposes European culture for its existential emptiness and aesthetic nihilism which he looks down at from his South American perspective and direct knowledge of Martinique. And this comically entitles him to call himself a “Peruvian Prince”, “Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie”⁵¹ who defiantly and derisively quotes Eliot’s erudite quote from *The Waste Land* and who can reverse its decadence by infusing it with the joyful naivete of the Prince starring in Andersen’s *The Swineherd* fairytale whose magic harmony with nature goes unacknowledged in a world grown too old to appreciate it. “Sings. Ach du lieber Augustin, alles ist weg, weg.”⁵²

So, All Is Not Lost?

Overall, Walcott’s poems and play have re-opened the conversation at the historical point where art and fashion were conceived as one and would soon be parted to pursue different careers, epitomised by the fortune of Hokusai’s wave in *Art Nouveau* and Van Gogh’s painting. Perhaps, in an attempt to redirect their course, the Antillean artist has brought the two icons home, literally to the Caribbean, thus giving us the chance of rediscovering and of widening their original message, and so, why not, to more deeply enjoy our luck in being able to wear them! This answers this article’s initial question (as to which insights the conversation between Walcott and Hokusai and Van Gogh’s artworks gives us on the several divides that the art-and-fashion one has come to symbolise) and makes us rethink of Hokusai’s wave and Van Gogh’s starry night in the contemporary catwalk and retail stores through a combined view that we can call *fashioning art* as it comprises the core performative nature of both crafts. Though manifesting in different ways, it consists in their enhancing impact on our life’s needs and in *contributeautying* to the needs of contemporary times, which, if variously listened and met, have still always asked for accessibility, ethical practice, respect for the natural environment.

The twofold direction that Hokusai’s print marked in its immediate afterlife, in *Art Nouveau* and Van Gogh’s painting, may be seen as paradigmatic of the repressive relations that Europe established with the parts of the world it colonised and of the dialogue opened by the arts. In this respect, the fin de siècle is particularly important because the opposite encounter happens during post-emancipation years when the transcultural relations between colonies and metropolises has become self-evident. At this turning-point moment, the shared culture more clearly shows. It marks trends and substances along with the rise and fall of creative lines, also producing approaches to nature that reflect different ways of being in the world. The neat distinction between the reading of Hokusai and of Japanese art as experienced and reproduced by Van Gogh and the way they were conceived and employed in *Art Nouveau*, marks the difference between the liberating drive asking for individual freedom and a sustainable life and the socio-political mechanism that involves colonising processes and mindsets that counter them. Their crucial difference has been defined as a combat between humans’ “right to look” and the “complex of visibility” that European history has erected over the centuries to impose its authority.⁵³ *Art Nouveau*, was never art. “‘*Art Nouveau*’, ‘Jugendstil’, ‘Secessionstil’, ‘Stile floreal’, — whatever one calls the style, it belongs to the decorative arts. It was largely a way of *designing*, not of painting, of sculpting, of

49. Evert Van Uitert, “Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin in Competition: Vincent’s Original Contribution,” *Simiolus: Netherland Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 11 (May 1980): 81-106. See also “The Mango Trees, Martinique,” Van Gogh Museum, accessed December 12, 2024, https://catalogues.vangoghmuseum.com/contemporaries-of-van-gogh-1/cat52?promo_create=teaser&promo_pos=www-vgm&promo_name=catalogue&promo_id=www-vgm-catalogue-teaser&_gl=1*17wy8dh*_ga*NTY5MzgXNjY4LjE3NDQyMTk4MjE.*_ga_SB3MZVR8HS*MTcoNDkwOTE5Ni4zLjAuMTcoNDkwOTE5Ni4wLjAuMA.

50. Derek Walcott, *O Starry*, 99.

51. Walcott, 88.

52. Walcott, 18.

53. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

building.”⁵⁴ This was mainly because this fashionable movement was always part and parcel of processes not concerned with the substance of the creative arts, their uncompromising ethical views and attempts to speak to people, as it was more interested in partaking in the national and the transnational networked life of the élites, of economic interests and their ideas. We may conclude by thinking that Walcott’s conversations with Hokusai and Van Gogh have also cast new light on the role that fashion could play in contemporary times by fuelling a proactive performative attitude toward the present ecological turn which invites us to have a better relation with the natural world. Relatedly, we can also be hopeful that the much-needed connubium of fashion, crafts, and the arts that artists have long ignored or looked at with suspicion,⁵⁵ may in fact bring about a possible way of participating body and mind, even by shaping our own individual lives, in making the planet a more sustainable place, right because we can wear it and walk with it.

54. Selz and Constantine, *Art Nouveau*, 47.

55. See Elke Gaugele ed., *Aesthetic Politics in Fashion* (Vienna: Sternberg Press, 2014).

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For a survey of Hokusai's "great wave" motif as used in haute couture by Dior and Kenzo and Alena Akhmadullina, see Nicholas Carolan "After 180 years, Hokusai is still making waves", *Grazia Magazine*, September 2017, <https://graziamagazine.com/articles/hokusai-exhibition-opens-at-ngv/>. For the use of Hokusai's wave and Van Gogh's Starry Night images in popular eco-friendly footwear, see <https://galartsy.com/collections/van-gogh-shoes>. See also Hokusai's image featuring in the 2018 collection launched by Vans <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/07/205472/vans-van-gogh-collaboration-2018> and the Van Gogh Museum's collaborations with Cariuma to promote the relationship between art, nature, and sustainable living, <https://www.brandsuntapped.com/eco-friendly-sneaker-firm-cariuma-debuts-van-gogh-museumcollection/>.

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