Kendel Hippolyte in his collection “Night Vision” aims to address issues within the Caribbean, which stem from history and those that have manifested from these initial issues and others that have simply been procured over time. Hippolyte particularly focuses on how change relates negatively to cultural, moral and social patterns among the Caribbean populace. While pinpointing this phenomenon of change as an ominous herald to social degradation within the Caribbean when it is not carefully monitored, he suggests that by acknowledging the concern we are able to mend the wounds created within our sphere. Hippolyte in his poems “The Piper’s Song” and “The Piper’s Children” addresses what happens when we, that is the Caribbean, decides to adapt another region’s culture, one that can become sinister as we lose ourselves for mere fringe benefits. He attempts this by mimicking a vivid feature of this culture (American) which is that of nursery rhymes. Subsequently, what is the result of this materialistic culture?

Stanza one of “The Piper’s Song” encompasses a sum of twelve (12) lines, and the first line signals the approach of the Piper; “…piper was nearby…” /line 1. Who or what is this piper? Here is the first vivid allusion to that of the “Piped Piper” a famous nursery rhyme in which a piper is able to rid a town of rodents, but the people are unwilling to pay him and he leaves with the children, luring them with his music as he had done with the rats. The piper here represents those of this “other” culture, a materialistic culture in which all wants and needs are supplied for. Upon arrival of the piper, the atmosphere changes drastically as everyone is now suddenly aware of the struggle, the ongoing battle to get there, “…seemed suddenly restless,/ listening…something subtly disturbing…” /lines 3-4. The device here is that of alliteration, and the stressed sound here is that of the snake-like ‘sss’ which indicates danger. This allusion to danger is downright tense and creates “Tension”/ line5, with tension here separated from the other words within its sentence and the preceding sentence as well, signifying the magnitude of the feeling. Lineation here is highly effective. Hippolyte likens the tension to that of the feeling right before a race by using simile, “Like when a race was on…” line 6. But apart from this acknowledged tension, the Caribbean people still plunge onwards in this race, and in a race only one person can win. It is now “one man for himself”, and we are no longer “our brother’s keeper”, “All seemed the same, just that/ no one looked you in the face.” Lines 7-8. Everyone is a competitor in this chase of the American dream from school children, clerks (church clerks, court clerks or both?- if church it goes to show that no one is excluded from the desire to gain money and wealth in this materialistic world), and “beady –eyed salesmen.” Everyone is aware
of the music that is playing, that is the desire for wealth and everyone is working towards it, that is, they are listening to the music, “Listening” line 12. This illustrates the extended idea/symbol, of music being the dream for money and hence materialism.

Stanza two constitutes a total of 8 lines/quatrain. The loss of lines here may indicate that the people must lose what it is that they really are, that is, they must lose their culture to adapt a new culture. What is this new culture? It is the desire to have and to have all while disregarding the wants of those who we were once cronies with. Indeed, this new country is that of the “Rich Yankee Doodle trill”. The rich here does not refer to the high quality of the music, but the pun refers to the culture of wanting to be rich- having money. Additionally, one must notice that this is of the “Yankee”, with Yankee being an informal reference to an American. This solidifies the notion that this attitude is not of the Caribbean but of another worldly place and people. As one dances to the beat of the music, so does the people scuttle after the notes, not the notes of the music but dollar notes, i.e. money. They scuttle, with obvious draw to the ‘s’ of scuttle; they move towards a better life, they think, when they are truly crawling towards something sinister as the ‘s’ sound often denotes. The ‘s’ sound persists; “…a sneaking swarm swelling into a race…”/line 16. This vivid chase continues with the creeping bodies. What creeps? A snake does. What is sneaking? A snake is. The Piper is misleading the people. But notice that they become a “swarm swelling”. Like the myriad of wasps or bees in a swarm, the entire populace has gravitated towards this idea of a better life and they realize too late that they have lost themselves when they have gone completely “downhill” and begin to ask a multitude of questions.

With only four lines in the last stanza, we see that the people have lost all aspects of their former life, and are now moving unaware of all the features of this new life. “They stopped. Dead…” line 21. This may very well be the literal death of the people or perhaps the metaphorical death of their way of life. They and their culture, unlike the children taken to paradise by the Piper, they die in the river like the rats taken there by the piper. They are dead, hence a funeral or they have found themselves in a more melancholy place and culture, one that makes theirs look like utopia. Life here is “slower” and “shrill” in a new world.

In “The Piper’s Children”, the way this selfish culture has molded the characters of persons within it and those places and other people affected by it are addressed by Hippolyte. He goes into more vivid detail about what really constitutes this society and the means or routes taken to achieve a higher step within the social hierarchy. Hence, this is a projection of “The Piper’s Song”, informing us about the lifestyles of those who actually make it and did not hear the “Funeral melody”. Like the preceding poem, it is structured within the nursery rhyme format; in order to take home the point once more that this is civilization is that of the “Americas” seeing that nursery rhymes make up a common part of those states.

The first two stanzas show the initial progress from “little” to the supposedly “big” lifestyle. In stanza one, Hippolyte pays close attention to the Marxist theory, which in short states that all should be equal regardless of race etc. However, this is not the case in the Piper’s society and with the Piper’s progeny. Here, in a typical light one presents something to all and the majority accepts the idea, but the preacher does not practice what he preaches. This is the ironic feature of this stanza. From this grows inequality and despite the fact that a person may claim to be
associated with you (brother/ line 5), you and that person are not equal, because he jumps into a Mercedes and you wait on the bus. This is the distinguishing feature of the theory, with the plebeians at the bus stop because they cannot afford anything else and the upper class way at the top to the extent where they can even afford a Mercedes. It is so that anyone is willing to turn his or her back on close associates and a cause to reach for something considered greater. Indeed it is a “struggle” for equality.

In stanza two, once again we see that “progress” continues with anyone doing anything to gain a position higher than the one he or she had before. Tommy Tucker’s profession of singing is a sly reference to the Pied Piper’s music. The plot therefore thickens. It says he “still sings for his supper,” he has lived most, if not all of his life, going by this custom and it has turned him completely inhuman and somewhat barbaric. He eats “Flesh on a silver platter.” Is this an allusion to Christ’s betrayal for thirty pieces of silver and then the ultimate death of his person, his body as a sacrifice for the savage people? Although Tommy is above others, he is below others and must therefore appease those above and around him to keep his position and so he must “play it sweet, sing to the boss’s daughter.” The boss, of course, is above the employee. Lastly, the song within Tommy’s head is the “dark dirge …song of the Pied Piper.” This is directly speaking of the Piper’s song and his deathly effect, perhaps soon heralding Tommy’s demise. Maybe this is the song that Tommy sings. The entire stanza resonates with the Piper’s song as the greed of his offspring augments.

Jack Sprat as known throughout nursery rhyme is a meager man. But what is the result of this meagerness within the society that Hippolyte portrays? It is his selfishness to not see things go, to have it forever. Note that he gains from the “various Third Grade countries”, but he does not grow fat. He is a miser. His wife is another sort of miser, who must consume things in order to keep it all to herself, so she grows fat. She is among the affluent, she eats from “banquets”, “celebrity junket” and “a daily course of social patter.” Jack’s skininess represents depleting third world countries (particularly the Caribbean) and his wife’s fatness the growing wealth of first world countries (the United States). With their weight aside, coupled together they are that set of people within the world that work solely for self gain and are content to sit and watch others around them suffer and struggle. This stanza is just as bluntly barbaric as the preceding, but without the reference to the Piper’s song. How so? The silver platter from which they lick clean all that the world has to offer; “They scoop the bounty of the crumbling earth onto a silver platter and between them both they lick it clean.” So although fat and skinny, they work concurrently to take all from the earth until there is nothing left to bind it and it crumbles. They forsake the world for self gain.

Margery and Johnny are of course Jack and Jill, but note the turn of the words, i.e. the change in juxtaposition, with Johnny in place of where Jill is. This stanza of the poem is structured to oppose that of the original nursery rhyme so as to establish a crucial point. Hippolyte indicates with this that within the race to the top one must fall from the top so that the one below can take the top; as one goes up another goes down, a position is hardly ever stable. “One went up, another came down.” Therefore we have Margery/Jack and Johnny/Jill, as one goes up and one goes down. Hippolyte plays on the circumstances within Jack and Jill. Jack tumbles down the hill. Margery studies the circumstances and knows that as Johnny falls (Jack tumbling down) she has a chance to get to the top of the cooperation, “She saw, Margery Daw, how the game was
played.” She is surely a descendant of the Pied Piper. So Johnny “after he reached the top, things started to slide.” This reinforces that things never remain stagnant, particularly in the working world which revolves widely around the Piper’s song. At the end, Margery pulls through for the position of boss. Like Tommy, Johnny must now know his place and work to please the boss, as he has been demoted within the work place and the social hierarchy.

Finally, after all this progress, incumbency of a short while and then decline there are some individuals who must work hard to maintain their status. This last stanza “Aging Playboy on the American Economy” shows the twisted end to the drive towards materialism. “The Playboy” within the American society is an old man who lives solely for pleasure; all his wealth and endeavours are spent on attaining pleasure. Similarly, men who have made it to the top and have been there for so long within the Piper’s system, must put all their energy and planning into maintaining that position. This stanza does not contain a reference to a nursery rhyme, hence we see a change. What change? This entire stanza is focussed on money and wealth, with increasing innuendoes to them. The poet says “minimal investments, quick turnovers, high turnovers.” One must know the tactics and the secrets to trade to be successful; one must begin with a small input of money, that is, the minimal investment. However, based on this culture of money and power, one must expect to fall behind after the boom. This is similar to the switch of power between Margery Daw and Johnny. In short terms, this man, being old, has been around for a long time and should be able to explain the crucial steps and the secrets of the economy in order for others to make money. Despite being on the back burner, one must try assiduously attain wealth to retain or attain a notable position within the Piper’s society, which the poet concludes to be the American society, “This is what made us great, this is America.” So the poet close, implying that money is the backbone of this country’s culture. The question that remains is, what kind of a culture is this?- money may breed contempt but often disregards morality.

Kendel Hippolyte uses distinct features of the American society, the nursery rhymes and even the playboy to prove his point. Money has driven the Caribbean people to America, and during this they lose themselves completely in an attempt become wealthy.

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**Pointed in the right direction: A conversation with John Robert Lee**

**Interview © John Robert Lee and Ania Kowalik**


*October 17, 2013*

John Robert Lee (bn. 1948 in St. Lucia) is a prolific St. Lucian poet, critic, journalist, and educator. His work has appeared in numerous regional and international journals, magazines, and anthologies, including Caribbean Quarterly, Savacou, Small Axe, Wasafiri, Trinidad & Tobago Review, Callaloo, The Jamaica Gleaner, The St. Lucia Mirror, Catholic Chronicle, The Faber Book of Contemporary Caribbean Short Stories, The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse. For a number of years John Robert Lee worked for the St. Lucian radio and TV where he conducted
interviews with personalities in the world of art, literature, politics, and entertainment. Among those were Derek and Roderick Walcott, Dunstan St. Omer, Msgr Patrick Anthony, Kendel Hippolyte, Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, Rex Nettleford, Seamus Heaney, Arthur Miller, and Little Richard.

As a literary and theater critic John Robert Lee has written widely about St. Lucian cultural history, contributing an astute critical eye to a vibrant tradition of St. Lucian art criticism. His reviews are characterized by an unwavering insistence on the relevance of the arts in St. Lucia as a way of working through socio-political contradictions in a post-colonial country, and a generous appreciation of the tenacity of St. Lucian writers in the face of limited resources. “Despite colonialism and the new imperialisms of thought that entice us to deny ourselves again,” he wrote in a 1982 review, “we are responsible to ourselves and our people to provide answers, possible solutions, hope, and a vision of our final destinies” (36). He has also painstakingly chronicled St. Lucia’s literary history compiling with Kendel Hippolyte *Saint Lucian Literature and Theatre: An Anthology of Reviews* in 2006 and *Bibliography of St. Lucian Creative Writing: Poetry, Prose, Drama by St. Lucian writers 1948 – 2013* in 2013.

Since 1975 – when *Vocation & Other Poems*, his first collection of poetry, was published – John Robert Lee has given us poignant and carefully crafted verse in which he charts his own cultural and spiritual paths. To this day he has published eleven collections, including *The Prodigal* (1983), *Clearing Ground* (1991), *Artefacts* (2000), *Canticles* (2007), *Elemental* (with Peepal Tree Press, 2008), and, most recently, *Sighting and other poems of faith* (2013), which earned him a firm position in the Caribbean poetic canon. While unmistakably Caribbean in its exploration of Creole cultures and in its acute historical sensibility, John Robert Lee’s poetry is also original in its inquiry into the intricacies of Christian faith. Of John Robert Lee’s work, poet Vladimir Lucien writes:

*John Robert Lee is a poet that has been a caretaker of the files in the archive of the St. Lucian soul. Both creatively and in his work as information manager at the Folk Research Centre, he has continued to interact with forms that would in other hands be left to the sibilant hands of dust. He has worked in the media, as a columnnist and reviewer, a poet, preacher—in a myriad of capacities. As poet (and otherwise) he has resembled his own creative conjuration, ‘the manbird’ with one foot firmly grounded on the St. Lucian soil, and the other suspended in air, acutely aware of the trajectory of the world filtered through his Christian faith, and his belief in the messages of its prophets; the approaching rapture. As Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott says, ‘He is a fine poet.’*

* * *

John Robert Lee kindly agreed to talk with me about his life, his work at the Folk Research Centre, the current literary landscape in St. Lucia and beyond, as well as the directions his writing has taken.
Ania Kowalik: We meet at the Folk Research Center (FRC) which has been celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. FRC was established in 1973 by Patrick ‘Paba’ Anthony who has been a staunch supporter of folk heritage not only in terms of sustaining cultural tradition but also as a way of enriching the church in local practices and cultural elements. He has just been named a National Cultural hero. Would you talk a bit about who were some of the people involved with FRC and what programs you organize? What is the role of the Center in supporting the arts in St. Lucia?

John Robert Lee: Well, FRC is a center for research on the folk culture of the country, with strong connections to the arts community. So it has served a great purpose. It has helped us to get to know our root culture which we can now bring into art. And it has played a great role in that. And “Paba” Anthony has been pretty much a force to bring people together – culture people, arts people, and folk people themselves.

AK: How did you become part of the Center?

JRL: Well, I was at the University of the West Indies when it started and because I’ve been friends with ‘Paba’, I’ve been involved with FRC from the very beginning. I came here to do a consultancy in 2002, and ended up staying. Too long I think sometimes. I’m the Librarian and Information Officer and I organize educational programs for the center for young people and adults.

AK: In fact, you’ve worn many professional hats. You’ve also been a teacher…

JRL: Yes, I have taught Literature, Creative Writing, Media, Library Science, Theatre, and Drama…

AK: In 2012 the Folk Research Center launched the Harold Simmons Folk Academy whose main goal is educational – to celebrate and spread Kwéyòl culture through language classes and arts courses. Does the education system in St. Lucia support creative arts education?
JRL: Not enough, no. We have called for a more integrated curriculum and that is not happening at all. We’ve called for that for many years and it should have happened but it has not happened. There is no culture education, there is no arts education. These things are lacking in the education system.

AK: Would you then say that the Harold Simmons Academy is trying to fill in this gap?

JRL: It is trying but it hasn’t been very successful. There hasn’t been much response to what we are trying to do. People are not responding as we had anticipated.

AK: I am really impatient to ask you about Saint Lucian Literature and Theatre: An Anthology of Reviews (2006), the collection of reviews that you compiled with Kendel Hippolyte. It is an indispensable anthology for anyone interested in St. Lucian and Caribbean literature, literary history, and criticism. Would you talk a little about the idea behind this publication?

JRL: I think it must have been something I wanted to do for many years, as I recall it. Patricia Charles [Chair of the Cultural Development Foundation at the time, 2005], who has now died, was a good friend of mine – she immediately liked this idea and decided to publish the collection. I wanted to put together a kind of history of our literature and theatre through the compilation of reviews. There are a lot of photographs most of which I collected myself. Kendel had quite a bit of this material himself, so we just needed to put it all together.

AK: The Anthology includes reviews complemented by images of posters advertising literary events, book covers, photographs documentation of readings and literary meetings. The impression I got is that there is a counter-story told in these pages: while so many of you note that there is little institutional support for arts in St. Lucia, the documents you have collected seem to be saying “Look what a strong community we are and how we have continued to thrive and support one another against all obstacles.” Was this part of the message you wanted to share? Was part of the idea to encourage the next generation of writers not to give up and continue their work?

JRL: I think so, yes. In fact, it is dedicated to all those “who have contributed to the development of St. Lucian literature and theatre.” And certainly to encourage the new artists. And of course it is a record of what has been accomplished so that we can continue to grow, you know?
AK: In his review of your second collection of poetry *Dread Season* (1978), included in this anthology, Kendel Hippolyte stresses the need for an explicit critical framework through which St. Lucian (and more generally Caribbean) art can be assessed. He says that “the reviewer should reveal his framework of thought and feeling, should show where he is coming from. This is particularly necessary in a Caribbean context where we so desperately need to judge our response to artistic creativity by reference to some vision of who we are, what we need, where we are going and why” (Anthology 22). As a literary and theater critic yourself, you seem to share this sense of intellectual responsibility. Would you be willing to expand on Kendel Hippolyte’s statement? Why is local art criticism so important? What, in your opinion, is the role of the critic?

JRL: The critic and local criticism put the work into its context. All literature, theatre, and art come out of a cultural and social context. And the responsibility, I think, is to ensure that the context counts. And to identify for the reader, especially of newspapers and magazines, where the work is coming from. And there is need for criticism because the local critic hopefully understands the context where the work is coming from. We do need people from the outside, of course, who bring their own perspective but the local critic is rooted himself to understand what is happening. Context, social setting, and history are important to understand and to know.

AK: You have just compiled a *Bibliography of St. Lucian Creative Writing: Poetry, Prose, Drama by St. Lucian writers 1948 – 2013*, another indispensable document for students and scholars of St. Lucian literature. So in your work as a critic you are committed to affirming the long tradition of national literature. Would you say a few words about how you came to this project? Who are some of the writers in St. Lucia (or in the Caribbean) you feel especially excited about?
JRL: I had been working on this for several years. I am a professional librarian and I know the value of these kinds of reference works. It becomes a valuable record of our national literature. It is in itself a historical work. I guess you can say I have been a literary archivist and historian as well as a literary journalist. The Cultural Development Foundation through its current chairman encouraged me to finish the compilation. There will also be an ebook version.

In terms of writers, local and Caribbean that I am enthusiastic about: St. Lucian Vladimir Lucien for sure, who is still to publish his first collection. He has a lot of talent. In the Caribbean I like Kei Miller from Jamaica, he’s very good. From Trinidad, I like Danielle Boodoo-Fortune. There are others, older and younger, like Lorna Goodison and Kwame Dawes; and the senior classic writers like Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Martin Carter remain standards. In St. Lucia, Kendel Hippolyte, Jane King, Adrian Augier, McDonald Dixon and the unpublished Irvin Desir are personal favourites.

from left to right: Kendel Hippolyte, McDonald Dixon, John Robert Lee

AK: Let me ask you here what St. Lucian identity means for you in the larger context of Caribbean identity. For instance, in some of your reviews in the Anthology you use the Arawak name Iyanola to refer to St. Lucia. How do you negotiate between these two kinds of belonging?

JRL: Well, I was born here, I live here, this is my culture which I know first. But I’m also part of the Caribbean culture. My great-grandma was a Carib from Dominica. So I’m very aware of the mix of cultures that we share. So it’s very important for the St. Lucian writer to understand the larger context. You can’t be only St. Lucian, trying to live apart from the international culture which Derek Walcott, for example, exemplifies. With all the connections and links in this connected world, we are also writing for an international audience who, because of Walcott, is looking at us also now. So things like the Anthology and the Bibliography bring together what we, writers, have done, consolidate our identity and bring us to international attention also.

As to the name Iyanola: this is actually a Rastafarian version of the old Arawak name Iouanalao (land of the iguana) which the Caribs called Hewanorra. The Rastas began to use the name Iyanola sometime in the seventies.
In terms of identity I would not, however, consider myself a flaming, flag-waving nationalist in terms of island or race. That kind of identification is too limiting for me.

AK: What other identities do you interrogate in your work?

JRL: I’m a Christian and a Bible teacher and preacher, I’ve been a Christian writer for many years. And my poetry reflects my Christian faith. My Christian faith gives me a viewpoint of the world overall. I try to see my world through my faith without being preachy, without being overbearing about it, you know? Without making a big fuss about it. C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton, Harry Blamires, Dorothy Sayers – these Christians were also writers, critics, literary scholars and they are models for me. In terms of theology I look to the Reformation and the great reformers. I’m Protestant. I like many theologians of past and present. And I have a strong interest in Christian literature and Christian arts. Unfortunately the Caribbean is not very strong on that kind of literature even though Christianity has been the main religion. So I do feel a bit isolated sometimes…