SARGASSO Interview

*Sargasso: Caribbean Poetry 5 (1988)*

I have written poetry continuously over the last thirty years. I had not intended to be a poet nor a professor; I initially began my writing career as a journalist. I covered everything in small newspapers, a multitude of things from sports to the notorious, which is an excellent background for any writer. It gives you the ability to work under pressure and to get things out, a sense of deadline which I find extremely important for most writers.

I went to Spain when I was in my 20s still working as a journalist. I had thought I'd like to be, as most people from my generation, a novelist. I tried that, but it didn't work very well. So almost by accident, I drifted into poetry, to very early romantic stuff, which I have saved but never published. That went on for a while, then I went back to journalism, then to teaching, and it was about that time that I started really getting quite serious about poetry. I decided that was the one genre that I was continuing to work in. It was by no means the only genre that I was continuing to work in; I also did a lot of academic publishing. Poetry by necessity has been somewhat sporadic because I was a drama
critic for about twelve years, and that took a tremendous amount of time which was one of the reasons that I gave it up. I find that I need rather large spaces of time to work on poetry. Not necessarily that the poems are long; the poems are usually quite short. A five or eight line poem might take three or four days or longer.

Drama is a communal experience whether you are sitting on my side as an audience, or whether you are on the other side of production or acting. You are part of a community, you get together, it is a communal celebration. I may not have been the most popular guest at these feasts, but I was always there. Poetry for me is a more private thing. My audience would embrace all countries or anybody who would be sufficiently interested or moved by my poetry. I know that it would definitely be a very small audience.

I don't know how my long Caribbean experience has been affecting my poems, although I know it has. Let me give you one example. When I first came to Puerto Rico twenty-five years ago, I lived at the beach in Naguabo. At that time my first wife, who was a painter, was doing a lot of lovely paintings which very definitely reflected
the landscape around us. I wrote a number of poems in that period which was one of my richest periods when I first came here. I never felt that I had to write a poem about the Caribbean. It's very possible that my images, now that I am somewhat removed from the Caribbean, (in the sense that I am still here but I'm not involved, in teaching, criticism or journalism) could draw a lot more from my Caribbean experience and incorporate it into the imagery of the poem.

Both Derek Walcott and John Figueroa have a very definite European background. They tend to write in a more classical manner. In that sense I identify with them very much because my background has been rather somewhat classical European-oriented, moreso than North American. I don't see myself as a Caribbean poet, nor as a North American poet. I don't see myself in any context as being a part of a particular country because I've lived in so many different countries.

James Collins