

ABSTRACT

Prismatic Vision: Aspects of Imagery, Language and Structure in the Poetry of Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott

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The study proposes a non-linear Caribbean style of cognition called prismatic vision, defined as “the disposition to construe reality in sometimes unresolved pluralities.” Prismatic vision is said to emerge from the historical conjunction of cultures in the Caribbean, as well as a social dynamism focusing cultural energy so that societies arose and altered with unusual speed. Historical and anthropological studies provide descriptions of the circumstances inducing prismatic vision.

Prismatic vision appears in Caribbean literature which is a cultural-linguistic product. Metaphors for creativity and the art of writing in Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite’s oeuvres are found to reflect the notion of refracted perception.

A taxonomy of prismatic images is developed from the writing of Wilson Harris and applied to Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s imagery. The study finds that Walcott and Brathwaite both use

prisming to create and organize symbols, Brathwaite more so than Walcott. Prisming in Brathwaite's poetry drives poetic syntax, prompting consistent use of certain prismatic images, and characterizing his experimentation. It fractures verse, syncopates rhythms, plays on creole and standard. Litany stylizes the poetry, demands it be performed. In Walcott's poetry, prisming is especially represented in choice and 'working' of images; as an organicizing principle; and in the creole 'ghost' on the English line.

Regional chaos may explain prisming, which seems less evident when both poets treat other-than-regional themes. This, as well as whether prisming and good poetry 'go together,' needs further study. Further research should also identify cognitive styles and discover whether performance in the classroom enhances learning across disciplines and levels. Methods to evaluate performance works should be devised.

It is hoped that the prismatic taxonomy may contribute to developing a method for appreciating performance poetry, and provide terms more familiar to Caribbean students. A multi-disciplinary approach to Caribbean literature is endorsed.