Bruce King. *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Pp ix, 714. £30.00.

Bruce King's extensive biography of Nobel prize winning poet, playwright, journalist, and painter Derek Walcott is appropriately subtitled with the indefinite article "a." It is appropriate in that any life is subject to a range of readings. Furthermore, King's precaution is well because disclosures in plays, poetry, prose, and interviews make fair use of poetic license. Walcott reveals truth about himself as he perceives it, but truth is protean and the image that emerges from his work as from his life is a faceted version of the creative artist. King expects other biographies to follow (viii). At the age of 71, Walcott remains a prolific writer. Furthermore, we know from Gestalt psychology that even if Walcott's genius were less complicated than it is, the whole of any life, as with a work of art, is always greater than the sum of its parts.

We can be grateful for Dr. King's diligence in seeking out obscure notes, sketches, letters, unpublished manuscripts in scattered archives and private holdings. Beyond the written sources, there is testimony from Walcott as well as many of the relatives, friends, actors, stage technicians, editors, and fellow artists who have been privy to parts of his remarkable career. In fact the text is so rife with details that the narrative can sometimes seem burdened. For example, at a 1993 Port of Spain reading of Walcott's play *The Odyssey*, even the attire of service personnel, snacks, and background music in the lounge are described (566). Including as much as he does, however, ensures concreteness and a sense of the kaleidoscopic rush of Walcott's daily life. It also avoids what could have been a bramble of arcane footnotes in favour of a reasonable number of helpful references.

The straight-forward chronology of events is accompanied by evaluations of influences and accomplishments, even speculation as to alternatives that might have taken the record in other directions. After covering the early years in St. Lucia, Walcott's taking a degree from the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Walcott's founding the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in Trinidad and up until the early 1960s, the book then conveniently divides into chapters covering short spans of one to three years. The blocks of time suggest an orderliness quite at odds with the frenetic activities described within. Perhaps sensing that the information might be getting out of hand at times, King uses

Walcott's practice of making lists of sources of income or of pending obligations to serve as a kind of running summary.

In addition to the obligatory account of marriages, divorces, children (three of each), professional associations, and friendships including such poets as Robert Lowell, Joseph Brodsky, and Seamus Heaney, King focuses on Walcott's life within a changing social and critical context. In his earlier marriages, Walcott drank, could become abusive, and was prone to favour his career above domestic obligations. There is delicately reasoned handling of the headline-grabbing sexual harassment charge against Walcott by a Harvard student in 1996. Considering Walcott's creative methods of prompting students in his classes to react to challenging, even embarrassing situations, facts and the matter of innocence or guilt can easily be open to distortion and sensationalism. It is Walcott's genius, his emergence as an artist, however, that sets his life apart.

King notes Walcott's life-long drive to fulfill the truncated artistic ambitions of his father. Just as Warwick Walcott's amateur poems and drawings grew out of copied originals, Walcott deliberately pursues his apprenticeship by learning from the masters. From the start, he has such respect for craftsmanship and tradition that he proceeds as though "in art originality is a vice" (22). In spite of his tradition-oriented sense of discipline, however, King draws from Walcott's commentary on Robert Penn Warren to confirm his fundamental belief in native, authentic roots. He quotes Walcott's essay: "your vision is out of what you know, out of knowing where you are, where you *come* from" (459). As King points out, Walcott's position between the established literature of declining empire and an emerging post-colonial aesthetic makes for a controversial milieu. His principled insistence on craft and technique "would continue to set his work aside from, and make it far superior to, those who assumed that something supposedly essentially West Indian—such as being 'black,' using dialect, or as a kind of political slogan—was the heart of poetry and art" (47).

While an internecine disagreement unfolded between the "humanistic" Walcott and the advocates of folk nationalism, in the 1950s and '60s, larger philosophical and aesthetic transformations were taking place on the international scene. Walcott was temperamentally, and as King puts it, "without knowing it, part of a larger movement, a change in the sensibility of our age in which those on the margins of the cultural establishment were to become a new establishment, a counter-tradition, part of, while challenging and outside of, the tradition" (67). Subsequently, hydra-headed post-modernism has spawned its politicized argot and new camps have been established. At one time, for example, Walcott's creative assimilation of cultural shards from

polyglot West Indian society might have been described as a positive example of "multiculturalism." Walcott has recently come to reject this term because, influenced by the forces of political correctness, it has taken on negative connotations along the lines of "racial victimization and separatism" (569). Walcott has also found cause to react against tenets of post-colonial theory, charging that the term itself has now been reduced in practice to meaning "anti-colonial." He prefers to estimate the achievement of emerging literatures "on their own and not as part of, reaction to, or in relation to others" (583).

Seasoned critic that he is, King candidly admits that in undertaking *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, there was much he stood to find out beyond the life of a single man. "I would learn much about the arts and culture in our time. After all these years what did I know about how poets support themselves, what a literary career meant, how great publishing houses become great, how Nobel Laureates are chosen, what it would mean to try to live in the West Indies as a poet or dramatist?" (626). Midway through his book, King comments that in his essays Walcott's prose style resembles "a series of evocations in which plot or narrative is hidden, ignored" (431). In comparison with the bel canto of Walcott's "prose poetry," King's recitative maintains its steady rein on an explicit story line.

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Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 276 pp. $54.95; $19.95 pb.

Autobiography offers obvious access to representation of identity, subjectivity, and conceptions of community, and Kenneth Mostern aims through the venue of life narratives to provide, in his words, "a genuinely radical analysis of political identities" (8). Mostern's project is to recuperate identity politics from the suspicion in which it is held by infusing the concept with a Marxist structural analysis. Although Paul Robeson, bell hooks, James Baldwin, Barbara Smith, Michelle Wallace and others get respectful attention, Mostern selects the autobiographies of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Malcolm X, Nikki Giovanni, and Angela Davis for the main focus of his argument, and it is his reading of these texts and their contexts that is the great