

Vincent van Gogh and Barack Obama in a poem by Derek Walcott

Thijs Weststeijn

Remember Vincent, saint
of all sunstroke...!
The sun explodes into irises,
the shadows are crossing like crows,
they settle, clawing the hair,
yellow is screaming.
Dear Theo, I shall go mad.¹

Speaking here is a young Antillean artist, in a poem by Derek Walcott (1930), a writer from the island of Saint Lucia. The wish to identify with Van Gogh is a theme from Walcott's own past: originally he wanted to be a painter. Together with a friend he decided to depict every corner of their windswept island. This ambition explains why Walcott's vision of poetry is so often characterized as "painterly."² He calls his writings "frescoes of the New World,"³ and declares: "I still smell linseed oil in the wild views / Of villages and the tang of turpentine... Salt wind encouraged us, and the surf's white noise."⁴

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¹ Derek Walcott, 'Another life', in *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar Staus Giroux, 1986), p. 199.

² See Mary Lou Emery, 'Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris. The poetics of Painting', in *Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 181-208; Peter Erickson, 'Artists' Self-Portraiture and Self-Exploration in Derek Walcott's "Tiepolo's Hound"', *Callaloo*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2005): pp. 224-235; Sarah Fulford, 'Painting the Sublime in Visible Syntax: Derek Walcott's "Tiepolo's hound"', *Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2004): pp. 11-27; T.J. Cribb, 'Walcott, Poet and Painter', *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2001): pp. 176-184; Edward Baugh, 'Painters and Painting in "Another life"', in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert Hamner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997); Robert Bensen, 'The Painter as Poet: Derek Walcott's "Midsummer"', in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert Hamner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997); Clara Rosa de Lima, 'Walcott: Painting and the Shadow of Van Gogh', in *The Art of Derek Walcott*, ed. Stewart Brown (Chester Springs: Dufour, 1991), pp. 171-192; and Marian Stewart, 'Walcott and Painting', *Jamaica Journal*, no. 45 (1981): pp. 56-68.

³ Walcott, 'Another Life', p. 204.

⁴ Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 17.



Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners* (1857), oil on canvas, 83,5 × 110 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Walcott's artistic role models were the nineteenth-century masters. Recently he dedicated an epic poem, *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), to the impressionist Camille Pissarro. The hybrid origins of Pissarro, born in the Danish colony on the Leeward Island of Saint Thomas, son of a mother from the Dominican Republic and a Portuguese-Jewish father, meant he connected well with Walcott's work. Here the Antillean melting pot of different cultures is an important theme. Before this, Gauguin had already been one of the poet's heroes: his journey to Martinique supposedly turned him into a "Creole painter."⁵ Moreover, Walcott was strongly attracted to social themes. He describes the continued impression made by a reproduction of Millet's *The Gleaners* in his childhood home.⁶

So it should come as no surprise that, in his younger years in particular, Walcott was inspired by Vincent van Gogh. The Dutch master played a role in

⁵ Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound*, p. 16; see also Erickson, 'Artists' Self-Portraiture and Self-Exploration', pp. 227-228.

⁶ Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound*, p. 11; Rosa de Lima, 'Walcott: Painting and the Shadow of Van Gogh', p. 172.

Walcott's descriptions of sun-drenched landscapes: he sought after a creative intoxication "as Van Gogh's shadow rippling on a cornfield."⁷ In this way Walcott's poetry opens an Antillean perspective on the shadow of Van Gogh and how it shifts over issues of birth ground and origins.

Although Walcott's more recent poems have paid less attention to Van Gogh, a political revolution returned him to the love of his younger years: the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. This event confronted him once more with themes such as racial and national identity which had already played a major role in his early work. Walcott wrote some lines in response to the election results. Here, he uses Van Gogh's imagery to give poetic form to the history and future expectations of black people in the New World.

Walcott's poem, which features both Van Gogh and Obama, combines artistic imagination with historical and social themes and political reality. This means it can be interpreted in a number of ways. The following interpretation takes a specific viewpoint, namely that from the person the poem is dedicated to: the 44th American president. After all, Obama himself has written extensively about the themes that determined the course of his life. The president and the poet have each at some time labeled themselves as "mongrel," referring to their mixed European-African origins.⁸ As it will become clear, they agree on yet more things, such as their idea that poetical imagery can improve the world.

Shortly after the elections in November 2008, Obama was photographed carrying a book under his arm: Walcott's collected works. What was the significance of this photograph?

Walcott and Obama

In the Netherlands, Walcott – whose ancestry includes Dutch blood – is probably best known within the Antillean community. When this Nobel Prize winner held a recital of his work in Amsterdam in the summer of 2008, the auditorium remained half empty.⁹ Only one journalist attended.

In November of that same year, the poet received a warmer welcome in 'New Amsterdam.' The assembly hall of the City University of New York was fully booked, and latecomers could watch the poet on a video screen. His

⁷ Walcott, 'Another Life', p. 193.

⁸ Obama described himself as a "mutt" during his first press conference as president-elect, November 7, 2008, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uHn6ydl6TM, accessed 03/02/2011. Walcott called himself a "mongrel" in his 'What the Twilight Says. An Overture', in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, 1970), p. 10.

⁹ May 20, 2008, first Cola Debrot lecture, organized by the Chair of Caribbean Literature, aula of the University of Amsterdam.

lecture was on power. The only power of the Third World, he stated, is cultural power.¹⁰

These were significant words in the light of the election results and the photo of Obama carrying his book of verse. A photograph like this would have been far less believable under the previous president. In fact, up until now American leaders have been careful not to be associated with poetry. John Kerry's elitist preference for wine instead of beer led to his downfall. Bill Clinton camouflaged his Oxford education with a strong southern accent and Arkansan aphorisms regarding hogs.

Indeed, the skin color of the new president was possibly less astonishing than the fact that he himself had in the past written poetry and taught at the University of Chicago. Critics praised the literary qualities of his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* (1995). A few years later, Obama signed a one-and-a-half-million-dollar contract to write *The Audacity of Hope*. However, for many voters his academic background was neutralized by his African origins, which lent him credit in a country where "intellectual" is used as a term of abuse. In the words of Beat Generation writer William Burroughs: "intellectuals are deviants in the U.S."¹¹

A black man in the hot seat was cause for jubilation in the elitist *New York Times*. Once more there would be a president like John Adams, one-time consul in the Netherlands and recognizable from the poetry book under his arm, and James Garfield, who wrote Greek with one hand and Latin with the other. Paradoxically enough, it was not the Democrats who tried to cover up Obama's literary qualities, but rather the Republican blogosphere that spread rumors that Obama does not write his own books. Still, the notion that intellectuals are suspect returned in the theory about Obama's ghost writer: William Ayers, front man of a leftist terror group.

The discussion on Obama's penmanship was fuelled by the contrast with his opposition candidates. An analysis revealed that Obama spoke on 'reading level' nine, while John McCain did not score higher than seven. New York intellectuals ridiculed the preference of many Americans for Sarah Palin as Republican vice president despite her poor grasp of her mother tongue. In a country such as the US, where many people speak their parents' language as well as English, one might expect a failing ability to express oneself in correct English to evoke sympathy. Yet it was a majority of immigrants in particular

¹⁰ November 7, 2008, Derek Walcott in conversation with Tom Stoppard, City University of New York.

¹¹ See Nicholas D. Kristof, 'Obama and the War on Brains', *The New York Times* (9 November 2008), at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/opinion/09kristof.html> accessed 03/02/2011.

who voted for a Harvard-educated lawyer speaking in well-formed sentences. Or rather, as the commentators emphasized, Obama spoke in paragraphs rather than sound bites.

Obama and Van Gogh

During his lecture in New York, Walcott remained silent regarding the intellectual ability of the new president. He did, however, honor him with a poem entitled 'Forty Acres,' which begins:

Out of the turmoil emerges one emblem, an engraving –
a young Negro at dawn in straw hat and overalls,
an emblem of impossible prophecy, a crowd
dividing like the furrow which a mule has ploughed,
parting for their president: a field of snow-flecked
cotton
forty acres wide, of crows with predictable omens
that the young ploughman ignores for his unforgotten
cotton-haired ancestors, while lined on one branch, is
a tense
court of bespectacled owls and, on the field's
receding rim –
a gesticulating scarecrow stamping with rage at him.¹²

The title was originally 'Forty Acres and Fifty States,' told Walcott. Yet it is clear to Americans that he is alluding to the expression "forty acres and a mule," which is what freed Afro-American slaves were promised after the American Civil War: farmland and a mule to pull the plow. Emotionally charged words indeed: when Spike Lee named his film company Forty Acres & A Mule he was of course being ironic. Walcott used the expression as an ambiguous metaphor. The field as a microcosm in which the history and the future of America are enclosed.

This type of historical theme is typical of Walcott, whose masterpiece, the epic poem *Omeros*, links the ancient classics to the colonial history of the Antilles.¹³ The snow surrounding the "young Negro" in the poem is a symbol of the slavery in the past, when black people were put to work in the cotton fields. Fortunately, today's plantation owner is reduced to a powerless bogeyman that not even the crows are afraid of.

In New York, Walcott explained that his imagery was primarily inspired by the artworks from his youth. The election poem, which evokes an

¹² Derek Walcott, 'Forty Acres', *The Times* (5 November 2008), at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article5088429.ece, accessed 03/02/2011.

¹³ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber, 1990).

“engraving,” does indeed have a strong pictorial quality. For readers familiar with Walcott’s biography and his earlier writings, the association is clear: the “emblem” that the poet refers to, the figure working the field at dawn, is Van Gogh’s painting *The Sower*, currently on display in Amsterdam.¹⁴



Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower* (1888), oil on canvas, 32 × 40 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The poetic combination of Van Gogh’s art with current affairs and a historical theme can be explained by the important role the Dutch master plays in Walcott’s work. The poet has repeatedly identified himself with his unstable artist’s persona. Sometimes he quotes Van Gogh’s letters, attributing this affinity to his own partial Dutch origins.¹⁵

The tormented *émigré* artist Van Gogh was used by Walcott to write about his countrymen, with their rootless, hybrid past. In one of his best-known

¹⁴ Van Gogh painted thirty paintings of sowers; the one in Amsterdam is probably the best known. Compare his *Sower*, 1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

¹⁵ Rosa de Lima, ‘Walcott: Painting and the Shadow of Van Gogh’, pp. 171-174.

poems, an inhabitant of a Caribbean island says: “I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.”¹⁶ In practice this of course means: “I have no nation but the imagination.”¹⁷ This statement characterizes the poet mirroring himself on the model of Van Gogh, whose visionary artist’s eye transcends nationality, origins and history.

Walcott’s appreciation of Van Gogh’s subjects answers a poetic concept that he describes as “the grace of effort.” When accepting the Nobel Prize, the poet recounted how, growing up on Saint Lucia, he did not have much access to high culture. However, in the faces of those he saw around him, the farmers and laborers, he could read what he needed to know. The passage clarifies how Walcott’s visual and literary conceptions form a continuum:

That is what I have read around me from boyhood, from the beginnings of poetry, the grace of effort. In the hard mahogany of woodcutters: faces, resinous men, charcoal burners; in a man with a cutlass cradled across his forearm, who stands on the verge with the usual anonymous khaki dog... the fishermen, the footmen on trucks ... all fragments of Africa originally but shaped and hardened and rooted now in the island’s life, illiterate in the way leaves are illiterate; they do not read, they are there to be read.¹⁸

The concept of “the grace of effort” explains how Van Gogh’s pity for the outcast became a model for Walcott’s theme. It inspires his own care for his fellow countrymen. He presents Saint Vincent, the neighboring island of Saint Lucia, as a character, thus placing the Dutch master in the Antilles.¹⁹ Van Gogh’s “hallowed toil” of painting seascapes is comparable to the labor of the West-Indian fishermen.²⁰ His artistic genius offers an antidote to the low culture of the islands’ tourism. The painter embodies the potential power of the Third World: transforming lack into virtue, suffering into strength.

The poem for Obama closes:

The small plough continues on this lined page
beyond the moaning ground, the lynching tree, the tornado’s
black vengeance,
and the young ploughman feels the change in his veins,
heart, muscles, tendons,
till the land lies open like a flag as dawn’s sure
light streaks the field and furrows wait for the sower.

¹⁶ Derek Walcott, ‘The Schooner “Flight”’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 346.

¹⁷ Walcott, ‘The Schooner “Flight”’, p. 350.

¹⁸ Lecture upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, December 7, 1992; for an audio recording, see http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html, accessed 03/02/2011.

¹⁹ Rosa de Lima, ‘Walcott: Painting and the shadow of Van Gogh’, p. 179.

²⁰ “Saint Vincent... the allowed toil of crowning a wave”; Walcott, *Tiepolo’s Hound*, p. 17.

With the electoral victory, the issues of crime and punishment have been dealt with, so that the new man enters a virginal field. Walcott compares Obama to the Messiah, in the same way as Van Gogh's painting that honors a farmer with a halo.²¹ Moreover, the farmer is himself an artist, a poet whose pen covers "this lined page."

Van Gogh's work that portrays an ordinary man as Christ is in keeping with narratives about Obama in the run-up to the election. In New York, Walcott's poem was rewarded with applause. Apparently, America needed a redeemer for president. This asks for an explanation.

Obama's Promise and the Symbolism of *The Sower*

Van Gogh's *Sower* acts as a model for Walcott's "young Negro at dawn," an "emblem of impossible prophecy." These formulae not only allude to Obama's promise to change American politics, but also to ideas that had taken root in the Afro-American community decades earlier.

Within mainstream American culture, a black president was always an impossible promise, something for a Hollywood film depicting the end of the world, or science-fiction novels such as Irving Wallace's *The Man* from 1964.²² Wallace received death threats as a result of this sympathetic portrait that appeared at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. When a film was made of the book some time later, the story was thoroughly rewritten.

It is no wonder that many Afro-Americans prefer a different literary vision of the future: the Old-Testament image of a Redeemer leading the oppressed to the Promised Land. Ever since the 1960s, the black Civil Rights Movement has been interwoven with Judaic ideas of the Messiah.

Obama's literary work offers enough matter for such prophetic speculation. His main theme is a quest for a "narrative of origin." From here he can work towards a better future. With an absent Kenyan father, who met his mother during a Russian course at the University of Hawaii, Obama's youth was characterized by the desire to "plug up holes in the narrative" of his youth.²³ As a child he devoured a book on various creation myths: Genesis, Prometheus who stole fire from the gods, the tortoise that supports the world

²¹ A similar procedure was repeatedly used in the run-up to the 2008 elections. Obama was photographed standing in front of a source of light or an object which caused a halo effect (for example on the cover of *Time*, March 19, 2008). For Christian symbolism in Van Gogh's *Sower* see, among others, Kathleen Powers Erickson, *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 95-99.

²² Irving Wallace, *The Man* (New York & London: Simon and Shuster, 1964).

²³ Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004) (first edition 1995), p. xvi.

according to Hindu mythology. Later, in Indonesia, his mother gave him a copy of the speeches of Martin Luther King.

While a New York student on Amsterdam Avenue, Obama wrote a diary with some “very bad” poetry, and he listened to gospel songs in which he caught “a fleeting glimpse of that thing which [he] sought.”²⁴ The longing for a story of origin inspired him to visit a church. In *Dreams From My Father* he confessed that he had doubts about the faith: it was from choice rather than revelation that he became part of the traditional Afro-American collectivism. Bible stories provided a context for his future expectations. He finally took the title of his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, from a sermon by his pastor, Jeremiah Wright. And besides stories that lay the foundation for an identity, Obama also mentions “counternarratives” which actually separate groups of people. For example, he read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* “to understand just what it is that makes white people so afraid [...] how people learn to hate.”²⁵

For many Afro-Americans the presidential elections were colored by a prophetic narrative. Shiloh Baptist Church compared the Reverend King with Moses, who died before he was able to cross the river Jordan. Obama would be a sort of Joshua, who would lead his people into the Promised Land.²⁶ When asked from the pulpit “Who will save the world?” the church responded by chanting the name of the president, while spirituals pronounced that new fields were being sown.

What Walcott’s poem implied via symbols was put into words that same week by another Nobel Prize winner, Toni Morrison. Famous for a proposition that she never actually made, namely that Clinton was the country’s “first black president,” Morrison was presenting her latest novel at the New York Public Library.²⁷ She admitted that her endorsement of Obama was based on his talent as a storyteller. Having read *Dreams* she was amazed that “...he writes so well. Really well, with really nice, big, strong, artful sentences.” She felt that other memoirs she had read, for example by Bill Clinton, were of no literary significance: “...nobody was a writer, with reflection and change and

²⁴ Obama, *Dreams*, p. 120-121.

²⁵ Obama, *Dreams*, p. 195, p. 103.

²⁶ Kevin Sack, ‘The Moment. A Time to Reap for Foot Soldiers of Civil Rights’, *The New York Times* (5 November 2008), at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/us/politics/05civil.html>, accessed 03/02/2011.

²⁷ Toni Morrison presented *A Mercy* at the New York Public Library on November 12, 2008.

meditation and strength. But *Dreams from My Father* was very, very compelling.”²⁸

This judgment clarified Morrison’s earlier warning about the changes that the elections would bring. Some people might be so frightened of the birth of the new future that they would “refuse to abandon their nostalgia for the womb.” The writer lyrically attributed Obama with “a creative imagination.” This derives not from education but from a prophetic touch: “Wisdom is a gift; you can’t learn it in a class or earn it in the workplace... When was the last time this country was guided by such a leader?... Someone who understands what America needs to become in the world?”²⁹

On election day Morrison didn’t want to be in anybody company until the results were announced: “I felt this relief like something was lifted. Even though I can see the hard work of the next term, I know we can do it. It made me feel like that phrase Martin Luther King, Jr. had said about having been to the mountaintop. I could never visualize the metaphor until now.”³⁰ Here she was referring to King’s second-most famous speech. After he had recovered from an attempt on his life in 1968, he spoke in Memphis using an overview of world history. He said that given the choice, he would rather pass by the time of the Greeks, the Romans, and even the Renaissance, if he could experience just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, when for the first time people of different races began to work together:

We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter to me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. [...] Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!³¹

“I’ve been to the mountaintop,” to see the heavenly Jerusalem: this is probably the most important metaphor in Afro-American religious experience. In James Baldwin’s novel on this theme, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1952), the

²⁸ Morrison in an interview with Christine Smallwood on November 19, 2008, in *The Nation* (8 December 2008).

²⁹ Morrison to Barack Obama, reprinted in *The New York Observer* (28 January 2008).

³⁰ Interview with Jamin Brophy-Warren, ‘A Writer’s Vote: Toni Morrison on Her New Novel, Reading Her Critics and What Barack Obama’s Win Means to Her’, *The Wall Street Journal* (7 November 2008), at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122602136426807289.html>, accessed 03/02/2011.

³¹ Speech of April 3, 1968, Mason Temple, Memphis. Audio version available at www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm, accessed 03/02/2011.

protagonist reconciles himself to the past of his black parents in the knowledge that his faith will provide a solution. This novel on religion and identity is the example upon which authors such as Morrison still model themselves.

The mountaintop metaphor clearly shows that for black Americans the election of Obama meant far more than political emancipation. King closed his speech in Memphis with the words: "And I'm so happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" Walcott's poem is also about seeing the Redeemer. His young Negro at dawn illustrates the emotional state of many Afro-Americans during election night. King had only seen the Promised Land; the generations after him would be able to enter it. This prophecy was fulfilled by Obama's presidency.

These exalted Nobel Prize winners were expressing what was probably a widely held sentiment. After all, the academic elite came up with an even more pretentious story about Obama's election. Harvard professor Orlando Patterson wrote in the *Times*: "America has, at last, delivered, in creating the most sublime example of democratic governance since its invention in Greece 25 centuries ago."³² In this manner, Obama's narrative of origin could, by way of the American Founding Fathers, be traced back to a hero from antiquity.

The president himself does not get carried away by all these exaggerated ideas about origin and future. Obama, who is quite happy to demonstrate his eloquence, is well aware of how limited stories are when it comes to forming identities. People cannot hold it against black Americans that they are searching for an untarnished past, he says in *Dreams*: "They're not unique in this desire. The Germans, the English [...] they all claim Athens and Rome as their own, when, in fact, their ancestors helped destroy classical culture."³³ He also comments on his own abilities as a storyteller. From the moment he was able to convince his classmates that Obama meant "Burning Spear" and that his father was a tribal chieftain, he learned to "distrust [his] childhood and the stories that shaped it."³⁴ He even confesses that during his first Democratic convention he could only rattle off sound bites, dictated by Kerry's team, "each word of which had been undoubtedly tested in a battalion of polls."³⁵ Of course Obama's ability to put the human desire for stories into perspective is in itself a strategy of rhetoric and one which disarms his critics.

³² Orlando Patterson, 'An Eternal Revolution', *The New York Times* (7 November 2008).

³³ Obama, *Dreams*, p. 433.

³⁴ Obama, *Dreams*, p. 63, p. xv.

³⁵ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts On Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 358.

A poetic passage in *Dreams* reflects on the power of language to form reality. Obama's conclusion is that only a language that can be understood by all men will bring deliverance. While on safari in the deserts of Africa he has a philosophical vision:

This is what Creation looked like. The same stillness, the same crunching of bone. There in the dusk, over that hill, I imagined the first man stepping forward, naked and rough-skinned [...] with no words yet for the fear, the anticipation, the awe he feels at the sky, the glimmering knowledge of his own death. If we could only remember that first common step, that first common word – that time before Babel.³⁶

Obama longs for that time in the past before the Babylonian confusion of tongues, and to a time of a “common language” in which races and peoples understand each other. He seems to share this expectation of deliverance with his electorate. Yet, he also acknowledges the inability of political rhetoric to solve the problems of the world today.

Could Derek Walcott have taken this passage to heart when writing his poem for the new president? The language of images is open to all. This is why Walcott sought refuge in Van Gogh's *Sower*. “Saint Vincent” portrayed the first man in whose footsteps we tread on the common path of origin and deliverance. The poem combines – as in an emblem – the various stories of past and future surrounding Obama's election. These were probably more important to his victory than the party program of the Democrats.

Conclusion: Walcott and Van Gogh

For Walcott, Van Gogh's *Sower* does not just symbolize the leader who vanquishes political oppositions. The furrows of the “young Negro” are at the same time the lines written by the poet. His language is comparable to that of the first man, speaker of the first, common, word. Just like the ideal artist, he is “...blest with a virginal, unpainted world / with Adam's task of giving things their names.”³⁷ This formulation reflects Walcott's preference for Van Gogh's subjects: the visual beauty of simple people “...they do not read, they are there to be read, and if they are properly read, they create their own literature.” He expresses a sentiment that would indeed have been familiar to Van Gogh. After all, the parables of Christ use the same metaphors. The Amsterdam painting may well point to Mark 4:14: “The sower soweth the word.”³⁸

³⁶ Obama, *Dreams*, p. 356.

³⁷ Walcott, ‘Another Life’, p. 294.

³⁸ Van Gogh refers to this parable in a letter to Émile Bernard, June 26, 1888; see Ronald de Leeuw & Arnold Pomerans (ed. and trans.), *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 369.

van Gogh and Obama in Walcott

This painting by a Dutchman living in France is in the eyes of a West-Indian writer a portrait of the first Afro-American president of the United States. In him the *Sower* becomes an emblem of a political promise of global change and the unifying power of the word. Walcott's poem illustrates how the imagery of Van Gogh, that is nowadays anchored in the collective consciousness of many, can give artistic form to identity issues from a post-colonial society. The once so misunderstood painter has been given a leading role in the globalization of the poetic imagination.