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I Set Foot on Eldorado

By Barbara Paca

The slate grey blue Caribbean rippling beneath the north easterly trade winds raced the vessel towards the coast of South America. We had crossed the Atlantic under the steady cooling influence of such winds, traveling through the Sargasso Sea, which is a zone of the Atlantic Ocean situated between the currents from Western Spain—as high up as Portugal, continuing to flow southward along the coast of West Africa to be deflected towards Brazil, by the bulge of the West African coast, and the gulf stream.¹

Frank Walter was wide awake for his midnight arrival on May 20, 1961, to the coastal plain of Venezuela's harbor city of La Guaira. Standing on the bow of the ship, he was elated to see the giant letters *F* and *W* in bright neon lights shining forth above the city skyline in clear view from the deck. His friends were surprised as they pointed to the light display, commenting on the coincidence of their friend's initials emblazoned over their first port of call, but Walter was not. He believed that this illumination, as with much in his life, was a cosmic sign – in his mind, this was intentionally staged by a higher force to celebrate his return from an eight-year global wanderlust. This, he was convinced, was part of a mysterious form of divine providence that ultimately ordered his life.

For Walter, the journey to Venezuela was monumental because it marked his return from what was intended to be a decade-long industrial tour of Britain and Europe, and is well documented in his autobiographies, poetry, prose, and audio, enlivened by lengthy descriptions of unlikely encounters and atypical interactions with others. Among his 5,000 paintings are many landscape compositions that act as visual aides to his writing, including the abstracted sea and nocturnes featured above. Among these masterful works, we – the viewer – are transported to another time and place; a sea reflecting black sunspots in slate and red, and quiet velvety soft night scenes with dull glittering lights, somber clouds and black peaks, all viewed from the water.

Walter held fast to the belief that South Americans were by far the most enlightened people, best traveling companions, and that their civilized lifestyle mirrored his own. For Walter, the stars were aligned in his return to Venezuela; his homecoming was a serious matter, embedded with a perspective of "returning":

Reading about Sir Walter Raleigh, I had traced Eldorado the city of his doom, to some place in Venezuela on the Caribbean Coast. Almost any part of Venezuela became Eldorado to me, but following the description of that place narrated by historians, I believed that there was truly some marking left somewhere behind the hills, that would indicate that Sir Walter Raleigh had reached thus far and no further towards the discovery of his legendary city of gold. He had fooled my forefather James VI King of Scotland who became in 1603 by such dissent as I have thrived on in this book King of Great Britain 1603-1625.

Arriving at what was a politically tumultuous time for the Venezuelan government, Walter was advised by a police officer to refrain from embarking on the perilous journey from La Guaira inland to Caracas. Following that advice, he opted for an uphill hike into the jungle, where he felt happy to be back in contact with a familiar natural environment that he suddenly realized he had missed for nearly a decade: "The golden dirt road seemed to stray deeper into the woods, as the trees grew

¹ All quotes are taken from Frank Walter's autobiographical manuscripts, compiled and archived by Barbara Paca.

thicker, and larger, with greener foliage on the side of the road at the fertile escarpment of the hills where the alluvial was from the eroded hills made fertile thick soil.” He was heading northwards to Guyana. He believed he was now being led by a deep spiritual force to the Orinoco Delta, where he would possibly encounter hostile head-hunting Amerindians, a meeting he found thrilling.

In the end, he cut his journey short, heading back into a canteen in La Guaira not far from the ship. It was his first evening in the Caribbean since his departure in 1953, and he continued to search the evening sky for secret messages while engaging in friendly conversation with Venezuelan people and South American tourists that he met in the bar. Happy to be reunited with his brethren, he continued to be distracted by forces others could not see, looking heavenwards for more revelations, “as the lighting effect of La Guaira blended with the tropical sky lit up with thousands of brilliant stars, set in a black velvet canopy, the warm breeze lifted to the balcony.”

Another momentous observation since his landing in South America – Frank Walter believed that for that the first time since leaving Europe he was regaining the complexion of a Black man. He wrote that he actually enjoyed being Black, adding that his Blackness made him feel neither inferior nor superior to others, stipulating, “I only felt more in contact with the people with whom I lived and worked. This is why I was glad that I was fair in Europe and brown in South America, where the phenotypes are fair of complexion and brown. Those complexions when I sported them did nothing more than what black does for me in the Caribbean, as all the changes that I felt were no different from changing the colour of my clothes and standing by the mirror to see the effect.”

Venezuela became my greatest New World Overture

Surriento, a modern liner, of 10,698 tons, capable of doing 18 knots per hour. This ship has features of striking importance. It has a promenade deck and a sun deck, spacious, and with plenty of seating accommodation on the decks. There are besides those two previously mentioned features, three other decks. There are many other luxury accommodations. Swimming pools and bars. The bars are fitted with modern couches and chairs and the decoration of those public places is most attractive. These are the aspects of the ship that I acquainted myself with before the ship sailed, and before I did anything else.

Thus begins the story of Frank Walter’s return to his homeland. His arrival in Latin America after an eight-year sojourn to Europe and the UK occurred not without strong mixed emotions. Having left Antigua in 1953 as a young man in his mid-twenties, Walter was full of hope for mastering new technologies overseas and returning home as a kind of industrial hero to modernize Antigua. In truth, his experiences were diminished by institutional racism. As he applied for jobs with the credentials of an accomplished sugar plantation manager and educated man, his work was relegated to menial tasks of cleaning, serving, and the repetitive strain of factory labor. Creating art and writing became his salvation during his time abroad, and libraries were his primary refuge as he was able to keep warm and found solace among books. As a devout Catholic, churches were important sanctuaries for him to gather his thoughts, and as art-filled spaces these became for him free museums, inspiring his own work as a visual artist, particularly evident in his strong use of light and color.

Frank Walter’s triumphal return to Latin America was the topic of an unpublished book, entitled *Homeward Voyage*. Although only a fragment of this manuscript has survived, it is clear that he managed to persuade himself that his trip to Europe and the UK was not in vain, and that he had done a magnificent job of mastering the requisite skills to develop new economies within his own country. Frank Walter yearned for a better life for his countrymen – one of self-sufficiency and food security – and was troubled by the poverty of uneducated people working on the plantations where he served as manager.² He also took careful note of underserved communities in Europe, writing, “There was no hidden secret in the backwoods of Europe. I knew every slum and every working people community, every modern community of more opulent Europeans, and

² “I had felt ashamed of those meager houses, not of the people who lived in them. I had looked down over the roof of some Cottage lodged snugly at the bottom of my Bluffs at Vernons, and North Sound, and asked myself the question. “Can those people not be glorified?” Should I not be able to play tennis with them in the afternoon, or Billiards in a Club House in the evenings?”

the Aristocratic environments.” Mostly, he was hoping to instill traditional values for all people living in developing countries, providing them with a sense of progressive history that was commensurate to European nations.

En route from Europe to Venezuela, Walter documented the celestial skies while passing Gibraltar, Ceuta, and Tenerife. The ocean crossing offered a combination of uplifting experiences for Walter, from quiet times of deep meditation to social interaction with his closest traveling companions who were mostly South American. As a gregarious loner, Walter could modulate effortlessly through his “world of oblivion, where the tranquility of solitude ever inspires the mind to probe the cosmos,” or read the ship’s wake, studying the compass and the winds while sketching wave formations. As the *Surriento* traveled west, Walter began to feel the warmth of the Caribbean, fondly lamenting about how he would have loved to build a barge in the middle of the Caribbean and live there forever – if it weren’t for the hurricanes that constantly rage over the sea. As he seemed to regale in thawing out after nearly eight frigid winters shivering without heat in the UK and Europe.

A wave of sentimentality washed over Frank Walter when he realized that he was back among his “countrymen.” In spite of the fragility of the Betancourt government and isolated pockets of violent Communist uprisings, South America as a land mass felt more secure to him than the unpredictable situation he dreaded returning to in Antigua: “Wistfully he departed for Barbados, St. Lucia, and finally his home; fortified by his uplifting experiences on the South American continent. Curiously, for Walter, islands, including the place of his birth, were problematic, because their identities were everchanging, shifting as the sandy beaches. He felt more comfortable working with the concept of large landmasses such as Europe and South America and recounted their embroidered histories with a magisterial bearing.

A sense of foreboding and inner torment lingered as the *Surriento* departed from La Guaira for the island of Barbados: “Like an infant trying to step off, my heart refused to leave the shores of Venezuela, its holding was with the people with whom I had gone to that country, and those who hailed me on the streets as if already I belonged there. I suspected what I was going home to suffer. In Venezuela, I was home from home in Europe.”

Homeward Voyage

You have the same problem as me. You are away from Africa without your Tribal Mark, I am away from Europe outside of my Castles, and Registers.” But we keep good enough ones here, and besides it was not so long since the chain is broken!”

Stories about Frank Walter’s life involve endless journeying, typically beginning somewhere in the middle—and as this is the first introduction of the artist to a South American audience, it is helpful to wind back to his early life. Born on the small Leeward island of Antigua in 1926, Frank Walter devoted eighty-three years to expanding its physical and theoretical boundaries with his own creative history, fusing thousands of years of Arawak, Carib, African, British, and European occupation in an incredible story.³

Aware of the fact that he descended from German slave owners and free and enslaved Africans, Walter deployed his active imagination to compensate for the inherent challenges associated with the reality of a family that in many ways was at war with itself. Although Walter’s childhood was also compromised by WWII and the general malaise of a small island nation that was a forgotten part of Britain’s far-flung empire, he received a good education which laid the foundation for his career as the first person of color to be rewarded with the title of “manager” on Antigua. A wide variety of mentors recognized his genius at an early age, including his august teachers at the Antiguan Grammar School, who also noted signs of neurodivergent behavior. Support from school, with additional guidance from his family in a kind of guild system that made the island self-sufficient, tutelage in art from the Antiguan Artists Group, training as a botanist and planter, and a strong dose of family lore from his grandmothers and maiden aunts empowered the bright young Walter to succeed in spite of his eccentricities which manifest early in life⁴.

³ To learn more about Frank Walter’s life, please see FrankWalter.org. From this website it is also possible to download for free books on the artist which are now out of print.

⁴ For more on Frank Walter’s mental capacity, please read essay by neurosurgeon Caitlin Hoffman, *Frank Walter, The Last Universal Man* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2017): 334–335.

Antigua is officially 108 square miles in the insular geographical sense. There are two major gulfs, which I myself have sailed in the smallest possible seaworthy crafts for many years, so it is impossible for any sea vagrant to approach Antigua from any point, without being noticed in time. This made our little island of great strategic importance to the British Royal Navy.

To compensate for the family's lack of funds, Walter's rich imaginary sense of hereditary rights was magnified, and the impressionable youth was fed on fantastic stories of golden carriages, Antiguan palaces, vast flower gardens, and living two lives – one under the "private" name of Charles II. Quoting the monarch, Walter reported that shortly after the Restoration of 1660 Charles II (who according to Walter was "privily known as Francis Walter") declared to Parliament, "I have other estates of a private nature in the Americas and the West Indies; I do not have to be King of Great Britain; because I could find it more profitable working my New World plantations; there I think that I shall find my peace!" Lucy Walter and Charles II's son, the Duke of Monmouth, was apparently spared assassination, having been disguised as a young Black boy and secretly smuggled from the palace to Antigua where he enjoyed a healthy childhood nestled in picturesque Rendezvous Bay, growing up to be an artist, who although quite popular adopted the life of a recluse. If the latter part of this outlandish tale sounds much like the story of Frank Walter, that is intentional. This atypical intersection of fantasy, genealogy, history, and autobiography is unique to Frank Walter, specifically in his complex linkages to art, music, poetry, prose, and experiences in a life that reads like fiction.

Frank Walter engaged with the universe. His base camp was the cosmos, and he expanded upwards from there. His unique combination of personalities as an affable dancing partner, pensive philosopher artist, non-conformist with perceived mental challenges, and well-spoken person with a startlingly posh accent provided him with the bandwidth to artistically capture the nuances of people from other times and dimensions, making them accessible and appealing to others who lacked the imagination to do so.

Transporting Frank Walter's Kunstkammer on the Last Leg Homewards

Compromised by poverty, Walter's maritime journey from the UK/Europe was made even more complicated by the accompaniment of a heavy, oversized trunk that he felt compelled to insure for an astounding sum because, as he explained, it contained his "entire personality."⁵ The cumbersome trunk was really more like a personalized cabinet of curiosities, with an artistically arranged signature collection of the artist's notes, sketches, musical compositions, tapes, and even some paintings taken during his travels that he hoped to present to his fellow Antiguan in a generous act of connecting them to what he believed was a more elevated way of living. More than being just a thoughtfully curated selection of ephemera, within this precious cargo were his indelible memories of landscapes, events, and human interaction—all of which were simultaneously stored in his mind, and recounted in painting, sculpture, writing, and music until the last days of his life.

As a Latin scholar, Walter easily acquired languages during his travels. As a trained botanist, he interpreted cultures as a horticulturist, with families, genus, and species, and used his creative genius to connect disparate cultures by identifying variants and providing lengthy, fanciful genealogies connecting them together. He applied all forms of knowledge to painting, writing that the modern artist leads a mostly solitary life in search of "moods," rather than natural orders—"what the artist should like to express reveals the radical."

⁵ "My gravest concern was about my trunk. I could not see myself in order to restore my notes doing another Eight Years in Europe, covering the same old territory of researching. After all the trunk contained my personality, covering centuries of civilization. It contained the scanty and ill constructed notes ill filled, but nevertheless the date that for the first time in the history of our New World Peoples, a New World Citizen had taken the care and pains to put together, to throw light upon our very existence and pursuits in these parts. That told the truth about where we came from, not in some mere geographical and historical descriptions of places and things, but a deeper in survey of the persons who put us together, their philosophies, their vices and their virtues. What I had taken home with me, is the true anthropology and brain chemistry of our New World Peoples. I was taking home the good medicine of truth for our all New World Peoples, and it costed me many a frozen finger, and a meal less day, many a jobless season to achieve what I had done. All in all, I was carrying home in my trunk, the components of my own personality, and this is why the trunk was so much of a concern...I could have picked up pebbles in any wilderness that in a few hours at least before I could have succeeded in being settled on any possible claim to my lost trunk."

His depictions of trees are much like his portraits of people. In his careful brushwork, it is immediately clear that he has an understanding of horticulture and the natural systems that support a given specimen's existence. With an efficiency of line, Frank Walter shares with you everything you need to know about a given plant and the community around it. In the next brushstroke, he pushes the viewer toward abstraction. The branches are swaying in a gentle breeze, but suddenly they are twisted horizontally or thrust upside down. And as he deftly turns the sky from pale blue to blood red, the foliage from green to turquoise, and the sea from blue to slate grey, we are intrigued; stepping foot into an unfamiliar yet informed world. He succeeds in persuading us that this all makes sense: and in so doing alters our way of seeing as few other painters. Again, it is his complicated biography that holds the key, for he was an educated horticulturist, and planter, with the genius of a poet.

Walter commonly uses black tree trunks as framing devices, often seen as an organizing device in his tiny landscape series which were mostly made in 1984. Working as a miniaturist, Walter employed a handmade brush that was sometimes as thin as an eyelash, used to trace the shadows of trees or the back of a wave as it crashed. As with all of his paintings, these works were made in secret, intended for an exhibition that never occurred. The works didn't come to light until he gifted them to his nephew and niece later in life. I was fortunate enough to have been introduced to the artist at this time by his family, and although we had many conversations about specific pieces, it was not possible to discuss every one of the 5,000 paintings.

As an artist inspired by nature, Walter believed that he had special gifts that empowered him to tap into the "colorful changes" within nature, recording his observations for posterity. In his personalized theory of color, yellow was one of the most impactful colors in a landscape painting, and he explained that it was powerful because it mixed the "celestial" color (blue) with the "terrestrial" color (green). Stemming from nature, this template connects all of his painted landscapes, particularly the more geometric ones, as in his golden flora series. Again, the trunks and branches of trees organize a given composition, and the color scheme is a pleasing combination of greens and yellows as everything shifts toward abstraction. In the two larger golden works, which were made on the backs of photographs, fauna are introduced in the form of white birds in one and a placid cow munching on sugar cane in the other.

What appears on the back of his photographic paintings is oftentimes nearly as interesting – and always intentional – with images of people quietly sharing with us unspoken biographies of Antiguan people.⁶ Photos of serene West Indian women, blocks of four proofs of lanky Antiguan school children, and shots of touristic hotels work together to share another story behind the artist's painting. As Walter's work transitions from literal depictions to abstraction, new worlds come into focus for the unsuspecting viewer, and these elements are added to his formula. The link to these paintings lights up their own constellation, forming impressions of an artist who was always straining his eyes to breathe in his universe, translating it in its staggering truth and beauty, for others to behold.

Nothing was ever accidental for Frank Walter. All was fate. As an artist, he assigned a high level of responsibility to himself and other artists as having the capacity, and with that the responsibility, to create "incidents" in other people's lives through the expression of art.

It is as if the human being is an innocent bystander, or one who actively concerns one's self with the workings of nature. The few of us who are concerned, are generally seen to be Artists. Surely all human beings observe the phenomena of the colourful changes of Nature, but only few of us are able to capture the scenes and colours by way of recordings, to be left to posterity.

⁶ Both scholars Krista Thompson and Kalani Michell have studied and written about Frank Walter's innovative photographic paintings.