

“When I Was a Noun”: the Modern Caribbean Epic

by

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Class of 2012

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in General Scholarship

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To both my parents,
To Whom I owe everything.
You know I love you.

To Clint, my brother.
For late night conversations,
You are always there.

To Karamcheti,
Without whose guidance and aid
I would be adrift.

Professor Andy,
You have always had my back.
Four years is too short.

To my awesome friends,
For all your encouragement.
You know who you are.

Linda and Ashley,
To all the fun times we've shared,
Being trolls and trife.

To fellow writers,
In camaraderie and breaks.
We're finally done!

To groaning women,
Unknown, insignificant,
Who walk as I write.

1 - INTRODUCTION

The most notable Anglophone epic out of the Caribbean is Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, a lengthy poem published in 1990 for which the author received much attention and which eventually earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. The Caribbean has produced a number of works which have been called "epic," including José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1879),¹ Horatio Nelson Huggins' *Hiroona* (1937), Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939),² Namba Roy's *Black Albino* (1961), and most recently Anthony Kellman's *Limestone: An Epic Poem of Barbados* (2008). Building upon this tradition, *Omeros* has become the embodiment of the modern Caribbean epic. Raymond Williams notes that in the 20th century, "modern" had become "virtually equivalent to improved, satisfactory or equivalent" (Williams 208). *Omeros* modernizes the epic tradition in the Caribbean by reassessing the Caribbean and its place in the world. Moreover, it reconfigures the literary genre of the epic. *Omeros* is epic in scope and theme, and it is exemplary because it insists on the primacy of the local. It claims defining aspects of the classical³ epic; the Caribbean epic is similarly concerned with place, displacement and the search for home. Ultimately, too, like its classical predecessors which defined the Aegean archipelago as the cradle of the world, *Omeros* defines the Caribbean archipelago as the cradle of a new civilization.

¹ The poem was published in two parts; the first part in 1872 and the second in 1879.

² Originally published in a French periodical, *Volontés*, in 1939, Césaire's work was reprinted with the help of Breton in 1947.

³ In academic use, "classical" refers primarily to Greco-Roman classical texts. However, the term "classical" can of course apply to other foundational texts from other parts of the world; for example, there are many classical texts out of India such as the *Ramayana* or the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Omeros*, however, explicitly evokes the classical world of the Aegean.

The classical epic is characterized by length and language of a high poetic level. Its subject matter may be an historical event, heroic quest, or significant mythic or legendary achievement central to the traditions and beliefs of its culture. Its hero or heroes may be semi-divine, engage in battles, and/or perform difficult or virtuous feats and deeds, acting out a predetermined fate. Occasionally, supernatural beings interrupt the plot line of the story. At its core, the classical epic is concerned with a two-fold perception. It depicts on one hand the way a society views itself and on the other the way a society wishes to be viewed by the world. This manifests in the story of the hero who embodies his people. A traditional epic is proto-nationalist and pre-literate. It constructs a nationalist ethos before the nation exists. Such a text exists in an oral past, but once it becomes standardized in print, it retains its metrical formulae, its epithets and its speaking voice. Typically, the traditional epic is exemplified and specified by the Homeric epic. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines epic as “[p]ertaining to that species of poetical composition... represented typically by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic personages of history or tradition.”

In “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel” (1981), Bakhtin defines the epic as the genre of the past, an official narrative of power, one that describes a national epic past, having at its source a national tradition and an absolute epic distance that “separates the epic world from contemporary reality... from the time in which the singer (the author and the audience) lives. Bakhtin notes that changes within the epic are most apparent in the treatment of the individual and that the

epic world knows only a single and unified world view, obligatory and indubitably true for heroes as well as for authors and audiences. Neither world view nor language can, therefore, function as factors for limiting and determining human images or their individualization. In the epic, characters are bounded, performed, individualized by their various situations and destinies, but not by varying “truths.” (Bakhtin 35)

In *The Rise of the Novel* (2001), Ian Watt, too, identifies that “plots of classical and renaissance epic... were based on past history of fable, and the merits of the author’s treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre” (Watt 13).

When the classical epic is refracted through the lens of the novel which developed between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the result is *Omeros*, the modern Caribbean epic. A novelistic reorientation makes room for the everyday, the present, the local, the individual and the original within the epic genre, resulting in a different and new epic. The novel is the “form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation” of truth (Watt 13), and it is “in nothing so characteristic of our culture as in the way that it reflects [a] characteristic orientation of modern thought” (Watt 22). Similarly for Bakhtin, the novel allows for less distance between the author, readers and the world he is depicting as a “crucial tension develops between the external and the internal man, and as a result the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation” (Bakhtin 37). Due to its novelistic qualities, the newness and difference of *Omeros* materializes through an insistently realistic form, one which

insists on the “primacy of the individual experience” (Watt 15). It is a realism that “does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it” (Watt 11) though “detailed depiction of the concerns of everyday life also depends upon its power over the time dimension” (Watt 22). The use of realism results in a persistence and awareness of societal structures and placement, of class relationships, both on a local and global scale. Because of its focus on the everyday and the individual, flexibility becomes one of the defining characteristics of Walcott’s epic; the construction of the text allows for a novelistic ability to engage with multiple spaces and times while simultaneously making room for multiple interwoven plot lines as well as the inclusion of other genres. Finally, the novelistic nature of *Omeros* results in the “associat[ion] with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought” (Bakhtin 20), allowing it to retain its orality even as it becomes standardized in print.

Like the ancient Aegean, the Caribbean until fairly recently could have been thought of as a proto-nationalist region. Benedict Anderson notes that a nation is “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 7). Although Caribbean colonies of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries officially became independent nations in the second half of the 20th century, notions of the imagined and community existed within the Caribbean region long before these societies declared themselves nations. Along with national sovereignty, literature played an instrumental role in the self-definition of individual Caribbean nations as well as the Caribbean region as a whole. Poetry in particular became central to this assertion of nationhood.

The modern Caribbean epic is also a post-colonial epic. In their canonical text *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Griffin define a post-colonial text as one which depicts the “culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day... the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures” (Ashcroft et al. 2, 1989). The interplay of place and displacement is a major concept in post-colonial literatures because “[i]t is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place” (Ashcroft et al. 8, 1989). Walcott’s characters are post-colonial subjects as they navigate their personal odysseys in search of their histories. Huggan believes the “post-colonial, in this context, is both an index of *anti*-colonial resistance and a code word for the *neo*-colonial process by which cultural ‘otherness’ is assimilated, reproduced, and consumed” (Huggan 38). *Omeros* is born out of the post-colonial Caribbean region, and it is precisely because of this origin that it translates and tailors the epic genre to fit the Caribbean. *Omeros* creates the modern epic in order to make it fit the Caribbean by modernizing the genre.

Omeros explicitly places itself into the traditions of classical epics such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; it is a story of place, displacement and the search for the place of home. Walcott’s text contains seven books, divided in turn into sixty-four chapters and further into three sections per chapter. It deliberately evokes the Homeric epic in its title and the names of its characters. The story of *Omeros*, set on the island of St. Lucia, has many heroes and

as a result many plot lines, each featuring its own cast of stars and each defined by its own journey. The first of these plot lines is the story of the love triangle featuring two fishermen, Achille and Hector, and a beautiful waitress, Helen. When Helen leaves Achille for Hector who becomes a taxi-driver, Achille sets out on a quest to recover her which leads him ultimately to self-discovery. When Hector dies in an automobile accident, Helen returns to Achille though she is pregnant. It is unclear whether the father of the child is Hector or Achille. The second major plot line is that of the retired Sergeant Major Dennis Plunkett and his wife Maud who settled in St. Lucia after World War II. Plunkett participated in the North African campaign in World War II, and Maud is from Wicklow, Ireland. Although Plunkett is married to Maud, who dies during the course of the plot of *Omeros*, he has a strong attraction to Helen, whom he likens to the island of St. Lucia. He is interested in the history of the island and in particular his own identity within this history, and he is determined to pen that record in his retirement. The third plot line is that of the narrator, who follows a sea swift, traveling physically as well as emotionally throughout the plot of the poem to Europe (he references Lisbon, London, Dublin, Greece, Istanbul, Venice and Rome); North America (he references Boston, the Trail of Tears and Toronto); and also back to his native St. Lucia, entering and exiting the worlds of his characters at will. The narrator's love interest is Antigone, a Greek sculptress who lives in America. The final plot line is that of Ma Kilman, the owner of the No Pain Café, who hunts for a cure for the wound of Philoctete, an old fisherman who is forced to remain on shore because of his wound. She discovers the cure through recalling her own history as she remembers the language of her ancestors. The rediscovering of history is a central

topic for Walcott's plot lines, and that theme returns again and again to the centrality of memory.

While these characters exist within their own worlds and seem on the surface to construct the singular internal view Bakhtin identifies as an attribute of epic, their abilities to shift temporally in their own consciousness allows for a secondary cognizance of an external world.⁴ Achille enters an alternate world as he travels back to Africa through collective memory. Ma Kilman undergoes a similar return to Africa as she searches for a cure for Philoctete's wound. Dennis Plunkett is able to return to his own past, reliving moments in his military career as well as his time with Maud in their younger years. However, he is also able to travel back to the time of his own ancestors as he attempts to write a history of St. Lucia. The narrator, most obviously, is able to travel physically as a character, and he also travels between multiple levels of consciousness. He travels with his characters spatially. However, he too is able to travel between ages as he returns to Catherine Weldon's era and writes of the Trail of Tears. Its novelized nature allows *Omeros* to maintain the ability to contain this second consciousness, and it is the ability to contain both the insular view of the Caribbean (seeing the Caribbean from within the Caribbean) and the relational view of the Caribbean (seeing the Caribbean in relation to the rest of the world) that allows Walcott to claim the Caribbean as the center of a new world.

⁴ This concept is akin to DuBois's double-consciousness in which the subject experiences a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008, 12.

Omeros is published into a post-independent Caribbean, a region where nationalism is continuously being constructed. As literature emerges, the region retains a proto-nationalist feeling which sometimes outweighs the recognition of the state. Through a discussion of mimicry, Chapter 2 will focus on defining *Omeros* as a text which claims the epic genre through sharing characteristics with the classical epic. While *Omeros* insists on the *terza rima* form for most of the epic, the obvious deviations from this set form stem from its novelistic nature. *Omeros* is modern because of its insistence on multiple heroes with a focus on the individual, its use of the present tense, and its use of the vernacular.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which *Omeros* establishes a Caribbean nationalism through its multiple heroes. Its form results in a Caribbean heroism; Walcott's heroes become "modern" heroes, exemplifying traits of both the epic hero and novelistic hero, both embodying the nation and contemporary individuals. Each contributes his own history and memory to the formation of a Caribbean nationalism. While Caribbean nationalism is shaped by the respective ancestries of Walcott's heroes, it is also formed through the relationship of these heroes with the different manifestations of the island of St. Lucia: the landscape (the physical), the iguana (the signifier of the land's memory), and the character of Helen (the mouthpiece, who expresses the thoughts of the island). The result is a heteroglossic Caribbean nationalism, comprised of multiple parts and complex islands, represented and speaking.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the epic as local, Chapter 4 discusses the epic as global. This chapter is predicated on the concept of a dual consciousness in which the

Caribbean subject sees himself as defined internally through the identification with a Caribbean nationalism on the one hand and on the other by the rest of the world. This interaction on a global scale manifests itself most prominently in the character of the narrator who is allowed the freedom of mobility. The narrator, a Caribbean travel writer, is able to travel physically, spatially, temporally and also between his own consciousness as well as those of the characters he creates. The result is a Caribbean (embodied in the character of the narrator) that is able to interact with the Old Worlds (Africa and Europe) and the other parts of the New World (North America) on its own terms. This ability to move freely reverses the established trope of the Caribbean as an exotic and fixed location and allows for the Caribbean to have a voice through the narrator's character. The Caribbean becomes a culture which embodies the possibility of harmony with the existence of difference. For the narrator who is in search of his home, the geographical space of the Caribbean becomes his destination.

2 - *OMEROS*: DEFINING THE MODERN CARIBBEAN EPIC

Walcott's modern Caribbean epic establishes itself within the classical tradition as it retains an epic form and themes such as travel, home, memory and wandering that are common to the classics and by doing so claims the cultural capital of the classics for the Caribbean. However, more than utilizing these classical attributes, Walcott tailors them to fit the Caribbean. In doing so, *Omeros* deviates from the classical in its use of concepts of Homeric characters, plot, language and characteristics.

Mimicry and Conversing with the Classical: Form and Content

Because *Omeros*' connections with Greco-Roman classical texts are evident even in its title, many scholars have been tempted into extensive comparisons between Walcott's poem and classical texts. Walcott's thoughts about this connection are as follows:

I did not plan this book so that it would be a template of the Homeric original because that would be an absurdity. If you consider for instance, the massive parallel that Joyce's *Ulysses* constitutes—the exact overlay, moment by moment, between *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*, in which everything in Homer is echoed by the Irish experience—that's on a scale no artist today with any sensibility would attempt because then you would be doing a third version of the *Odyssey* via Joyce. (Walcott 231, 1997)

Walcott rejects that his poem is based on Greco-Roman epic. Katharine Burkitt believes that Walcott “draws attention to the intertextual nature of epic genealogy and complicates the relationship between his text and Homer’s epic by alluding to Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (Burkitt 158). However, it is not just the utilization of the form and content of Joyce’s work which sets Walcott’s work apart from other epics. What distinguishes *Omeros* from its predecessors in the “epic genealogy” Burkitt points to is its contemporaneousness, and, more importantly, its point of origin, the Caribbean.

Burkitt calls *Omeros* a verse-novel, or at least a forerunner to the form; she calls the poem a post-epic, one of a category of “polyglot post-colonial verse-novels” which are “reworked versions of classical epic[, and this allows her to] investigate the complex engagement with history and mythology, which is inherent in the form” (Burkitt 158-60).⁵ However, Burkitt’s definition of Walcott’s work limits the poem to a “reworked version,” and this initial definition overshadows her later analysis of post-epics as “texts that are philosophically and structurally unsteady and that both reflect and dissemble classical epic, or at least modernist interpretations of it,” texts which “capitaliz[e]” on the “generic ambivalence” of epic tradition (Burkitt 168). Rather than viewing works like *Omeros* as “philosophically and structurally unsteady,” Burkitt overlooks that the root of this seeming unsteadiness lies in the birthplace of *Omeros*. This unsteadiness does not stem from a lack of history but

⁵ In Burkitt’s view, *Omeros* specifically is “more suited to being considered as a verse-novel, or at least the forerunner to that form” and then exists in a liminal space between the epic and the verse-novel. Burkitt’s acknowledgement that *Omeros* has attributes which point to a post-epic-ness is apt; Walcott’s piece indeed is “philosophically and structurally unsteady ... reflect[s] and dissemble[s] classical epic, or at least modernist interpretations of it... [It also has the quality of] generic ambivalence” (Burkitt, 158-68). However, to simply classify Walcott’s poem as a post-epic would do a great injustice to the subtle nuances of the poem.

rather from an insistence on the inclusion of a plethora of histories, from the ability of the Caribbean to claim many different histories as a creole culture.⁶

Jay explores the concept of mimicry; he believes that “mimicry as appropriation and imaginative reinvention has in fact been central to the construction of diasporic identities throughout the history of modernity, particularly in Walcott's West Indies,” taking the following stance:

Mimicry in the poem finally has less to do with Walcott's trying to copy Homer than with his desire to explore the centrality of mimicry in the construction of Caribbean identity. The syncretic or hybridizing effects of colonization define the context in which subjectivity and identity develop, so that mimicry, defined in positive terms by Walcott as the imaginative work of appropriation and invention, is central both to being Caribbean and writing about it. *Omeros*, as I have been arguing, is as much a poem about writing about the Caribbean as it is a poem about the Caribbean, one that explores the politics and poetics of mimicry, linking 'unoriginality' to the condition of colonization and the processes of cultural syncretism. (Jay 556)

While Jay suggests that mimicry is central to the Caribbean as the concept is practiced in the region, he misreads Walcott's intentions in his writing of *Omeros*.⁷

⁶ A discussion of this view of the Caribbean lies in Chapter 4.

⁷ More recently, Anthony Kellman, a prominent scholar of the Caribbean epic has expressed: “[*Omeros*] employs... imported forms. And this is *Omeros*'s structural failure. Like Hart Crane and Melvin B. Tolson, Walcott insists (out of homage? gratitude? loyalty?) on imitating a borrowed Western form. For a “post-colonial” epic effort Walcott's structural imitation cannot therefore be seen as a complete model for a Caribbean epic, only the beginning of the journey towards a national Caribbean epic. He does not make the structural borrowing his own in any patriotic sense. Walcott's formal imitation glaringly stands out, undermining the epic's nationalistic requirement and, in the end, casting a shadow of inauthenticity on the work as a whole.” Kellman is too quick to write off Walcott's work as one which does not recreate the epic for the space of the Caribbean.

More than imitating the classical epic, the poem exemplifies the destabilizing power of mimicry through its intentional use of epical form, devices and content. While Jay sees “mimicry” as a closed phenomenon, as one of “appropriation and imaginative invention,” in his “Of Mimicry and Man” (1994), Homi Bhabha defines mimicry as

the metonymy of presence... does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the fixation of the colonial as a form of cross-classifactory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the authorization of colonial representation, a question of authority that goes beyond the subject’s lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation... [M]imicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. (Bhabha 129)

As Bhabha suggests, Walcott’s poem questions the authority of the ancient epic form and its function within a post-colonial space. Thus, mimicry is not simply an appropriation and invention which casts the Caribbean as a space “fated to unoriginality” as the title of Jay’s article suggests; instead, it inversely “deauthorizes” authority of the form and of the colonizing power itself.

Indeed, Walcott, in his essay “Culture or Mimicry” (1974) proposes, “Mimicry is an act of imagination...Camouflage...is mimicry, or more than that, it is design...We take as long as other fellow creatures in the natural

world to adapt and then blend into our habitats, whether we possess these environments by forced migration or by instinct.” (Walcott 10, 1974)

In many ways, Walcott’s modern epic is a manifestation of this idea of mimicry. The form of *Omeros* clearly parallels those utilized by Homer, Dante, Joyce and Césaire. The presence of the epic genre in the Caribbean undermines the authority of the classical because it claims the cultural capital of the classical for the Caribbean through mimicry. This translation of Homer into the Caribbean, as Joseph Farrell notes, is a

transitive process: if Creole must be translated into English, the converse is also true. If European colonialists bring foreign categories of intellection to the interpretation of Caribbean realities, it is equally possible to translate European culture into West Indian terms; and this latter type of translation, while it is, given the asymmetrical power relationship between the European colonialists and the islanders, less common than the first, shares with all forms of translation the impossibility of leaving the "original" unchanged. The decision to translate Homeric epic into West Indian terms cannot but change one's perception of Homer. Thus Walcott's characterization of Caribbean dialects as "oral poetry" finds its parallel in Walcott's refusal to cede Homer to the scribal culture of European colonialists. (Farrell 278)

Not only is the genre transformed in its transplantation to another space, the understanding of the classical texts also changes.

Classical and Modern: Plot & Characters

While *Omeros* invokes Homer in its title, it also identifies a muse; however, unlike Homer who calls to the gods, *Omeros* claims the classical poet himself as its muse, calling, “O open this day with the conch’s moan, Omeros, / as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun / gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise”

(II.II.12). Walcott’s invocation differs from the Homeric in tone as well as placement (rather than remain in the first lines as per the Homeric epic, Walcott places his invocation in the second chapter). Homer’s *Iliad* begins, “Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles” (Homer, *Iliad* 1.1) and Homer’s *Odyssey* begins, “Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns” (Homer, *Odyssey* 1.1). While Homer’s epics describe their main protagonists in the first line, Walcott’s invocation emphasizes the present (“this day”), evokes the past (“my boyhood”), and establishes the presence of the narrator “when I was a noun.” In doing so, Walcott draws attention to the distinction between his epic and its predecessors; it is a modern epic which evokes the past but which writes about the present as the culture of the Caribbean is still being “exhaled.” It is also an epic in which the role of the narrator is central.

Omeros also invokes the classical epic tradition in its characters, both in their names as well as descriptions and characteristics. However, while Walcott’s characters are comparable to their classical counterparts, they are not carbon-copies. Bakhtin notes that the changes in temporal orientation, which played a large role in the development of the novel, are most apparent in the treatment of the individual. The epic hero is

entirely externalized...everything in him is exposed and loudly expressed: his internal world and all his external characteristics, his appearance and his actions all lie on a single plane. His view of himself coincides completely with others' views of him—the view of his society (his community), the epic singer and the audience also coincide. (Bakhtin 34)

The hero in epic poetry embodies his community. However, in the novel, the hero's fate and situation are not fixed as the "subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation" (Bakhtin 37). By creating a world in which multiple heroes exist, Walcott's characters contain attributes of both the epic and novelistic hero.

The most obvious analogies between the classical and modern characters are that of Walcott's Achille, Hector, Helen and Philoctete with Homer's Achilles, Hector, Helen and Philoctetes respectively. While Homer's Achille, Hector and Helen are all cast in the story of the Trojan War, their Caribbean counterparts retain their essential, defining characteristics though in the Caribbean, the relationship between the three characters changes. In Homer's world, Helen is neither courted by Achilles nor Hector, nor does she directly influence the conflict between the two warriors. Instead, Walcott's trio is involved in a love triangle. Because they share a profession, the Caribbean Achille and Hector share a similar social standing like the Homeric pair. When Hector dies, Achille attends his funeral and says, "'Mate, this is your spear,' / and laid the oar slowly ... / 'you stood / crossing the sun at the bow of the long canoe / with the plates of your chest like a shield'" (XLVI.I.232). They are likened to Homer's warriors though for these Caribbean men, their weapons become their oars,

the tools suitable to their jobs. Walcott illustrates the “duel of these fishermen / [as one] over a shadow and its name was Helen” (III.I.17).

Like Helen of Troy, a central defining characteristic of Helen of St. Lucia is her beauty. The first description of Helen of St. Lucia is through the eyes of the narrator whose thoughts mix with the perception of another woman of the same class as Helen. The narrator writes,

now the mirage

dissolved to a woman with a madras head-tie,
but the head proud, although it was looking for work.

I felt like standing in homage to a beauty

that left, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake...

The waitress said, “She? She too proud!”

As the carved lids of the unimaginable

ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-wool cloud,

the waitress sneered, “Helen.” And all the rest followed. (IV.III.23)

Helen’s connection to ships directly ties Walcott’s Helen to Homer’s Helen as it evokes the famous line by sixteenth-century English dramatist Christopher Marlowe in his *Doctor Faustus*, “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” (Marlowe, V.I.91-92). The reference to Homer’s Helen is filtered through the lens of the sixteenth century, reminding the reader that although

she shares a name with Homer's Helen, Helen of St. Lucia exists in a different place and time. The description of Walcott's Helen specifies her clothes and features as mask-like, coloring the image with the emphasized "ebony" as a marker that distinguishes her from her Homeric namesake, who is "white-armed" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.46). In this first description of Helen, the people of the island define Helen first through her pride, not her beauty, and she is proud despite the fact that she is in search of a job, an indication of her social standing. This pride becomes the central point of difference between the two Helens. In the *Iliad*, Helen laments her actions: "if only death had pleased me then, grim death, / that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking / my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child, ... / and the lovely comradeship of women my own age... whore that I am!" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.209-18). Unlike the Homeric Helen who refers to herself as a whore, Walcott's Helen is too proud to refer to herself in such a way. When Achille angrily asks her "What make you this whore? / Why you don't leave me alone and go fock Hector? / More men plough that body than canoe plough the sea," Helen allows "the lance of his hatred [to] enter[] her with no sound" (XXI.III.115). Even though she does not respond to Achille in speech, the next day, Helen leaves Achille for Hector. In doing so, Helen of St. Lucia distinguishes herself from Helen of Troy and further refuses to be cast as a stereotypically promiscuous Caribbean woman. By alluding to the Homeric epics through names and character attributes, Walcott invites a comparison between his world and the world of the Aegean. However, by altering the characters, their names and their relationship to each other, he simultaneously modernizes the classical epic.

Walcott also draws on the story of Homer's Philoctetes. Walcott's Philoctete,

like his classical predecessor, suffers immensely from a wound on his leg. In the *Iliad*, Philoctetes “lay on an island, racked with pain ... agonized by his wound, the bite of a deadly water-viper. / There he writhed in pain” (Homer, *Iliad* 2.822-25). Walcott’s Philoctete too has an “itch in the sore / tingles like the tendrils of the anemone” (III.III.19), and he feels “the sore twitch / its wires up to his groin. With his hop-and-drop / limp, hand clutching one knee, he left the printed beach to crawl up the early street to Ma Kilman’s shop” (II.I.10). Homer’s Philoctetes and Walcott’s Philoctete share similar fates; they are both marooned and their wounds will eventually be cured by familiar people. However, while the healing of the Homeric Philoctetes results in his return to, as well as the continuation of, an established civilization based on warfare, the healing of Walcott’s Philoctete results in a rebirth of the Caribbean as he Adamically “sh[akes] himself up from the bed of his grave, / and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand” (XLVIII.II.245). Philoctete’s wound represents the wound of memory and through its healing, a new Caribbean is created.

The epic heroes of *Omeros* are not “heroic” by profession as their occupations do not afford them high esteem within their culture in St. Lucia. Many critics have questioned Walcott’s choice to portray people of a lower class. They need only look to the text to find the author’s answer. The narrator, upon questioning why one should “waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea-floor,” answers his own question with: “Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture / Is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor, / Deeper than it seems on the surface; slowly but sure, / It will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time” (LIX.II.296). Achille is an Adamic ancestor. The culture of the Caribbean, one created in the New World, must be

“healing” as it is predicated on a history of violence through colonization. This violence is one that has wounded both the colonized peoples of the Caribbean and its colonizers, both of whom have remained in the region and made it their home. Achille’s occupation as a fisherman is a result of this violence, and the insistence upon the centrality of the fisherman’s story underscores its formative quality in national perceptions.

Not all of Walcott’s heroes are nominally linked to the classical tradition. Another ancestor, Major Dennis Plunkett, is part of the history of violence by profession; he is a former military man, a veteran of World War II. However, Dennis Plunkett is an immigrant to the region from Britain. Plunkett is judged a “honky” by one of the native Caribbean workmen in Hector’s van as they say “Here comes the white man.” Because of Plunkett’s race, the workmen reject his claim to the region and fear the power he derives from being white as they “froze like recruits” when he approaches them. From the safety of the van, they continue to adamantly insult him, as they call out “Fock da honky.” It is only when Hector “h[olds] out one hand [which was] as hard as cedar roots,” recognizes Plunkett and addresses him as “Major” that Plunkett’s claim to a place on the island is acknowledged (L.I.256-57). Moreover, Plunkett’s claim to the island is rooted in his status as a former Major in the military. Like Achille, the Major is in search of a past. However, unlike Achille whose past lies in the recesses of his memory, Plunkett’s past lies in literary history, to which he devotes much of his time. Tied to finding his ancestry is his project of writing Helen into history. As he explores this history, he “f[inds] his Homeric coincidence,” telling Maud, “Look, love, for instance, / near sunset, on April 12, hear

this, the *Ville de Paris* / struck her colours to Rodney. Surrendered. Is this chance / or an echo? Paris gives the golden apple, a war is / fought for an island called Helen?" (XIX.I.100). Plunkett grounds his history in the military, one of the main tropes of Homer. Plunkett's contribution to the Caribbean based on his ancestry becomes literacy, specifically the historical portrayal of colonial violence through texts as well as the Greco-Roman canon of history with its connections to mythology.

While some of Walcott's characters have namesakes, *Omeros*' narrator, with whom he identifies,⁸ is analogous to both Homer's Odysseus and Vergil's Aeneas, cast as both the wanderer and the founder respectively. Walcott's narrator embodies the essential characteristics of Homer's Odysseus, a man "of twists and turns" and one who must undertake an extended quest before he returns home.⁹ Walcott complicates this comparison by conflating his narrator's Odyssean quest with a foundational quest comparable to that of the Virgilian Aeneas. Walcott's resulting narrator is in search of a home which has yet to be founded. Rachel Friedman believes that Walcott

takes the classical western narrative of homecoming and makes of it a model for his own postcolonial journey towards at-homeness in the world...the poet casts himself as an Odysseus of longing and nostalgia. His Odyssean nostos becomes both a homecoming to his island and a journey that enables him to internalize the sense of home." (Friedman 457-58)

In doing so, through the re-visioning and the re-invention of the character of Odysseus as comparable to the author/narrator, Walcott is able to invoke the traditions

⁸ Walcott has identified with the character of the narrator in a number of interviews, and many scholars identify Walcott with his narrator.

⁹ I will discuss how Walcott's narrator exemplifies the "man of twists and turns" in Chapter 4.

of the Homeric epic in a way that allows for the assertion of similarities between the Greek archipelago and the Caribbean archipelago, which in turn also results in a revision of contemporary canonical understandings of Homeric texts. While the narrator is an Odysseus of longing and nostalgia, he is also an Adamic Aeneas who founds a new “Rome” which will become the center of the world.

Language & Deviations from English: the Use of Vernacular and Latin

Walcott utilizes Latin and Greek throughout *Omeros*. However, he does not feel the need to translate these words like *demos*, *oracracy*, and *fasces* (XLI.I.206) and phrases such as *Dominus illuminatio mea* (XXI.II.112). He assumes the reader will understand their meaning as they will have already been familiar with Greco-Roman literary traditions. Further, in appropriating these classical languages for the Caribbean, he claims their established cultural capital for the region and assumes the reader is capable of making a cultural translation. However, Walcott’s quasi-exception to this rule is Homer’s name; he goes through great pains to explain the significance behind the name “Omeros,” distinguishing it from its common understanding. Antigone identifies her sculpture of Homer by explaining to the narrator, “Omeros ... That’s what we call him in Greek.” However, the narrator’s etymological breakdown of the name of the classical author becomes:

and *O* was the conch-shell’s invocation, *mer* was
 both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.

Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes

that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed. (II.III.14)

Walcott's definition fits Homer to the Caribbean. In this name, the island itself seems to come alive and speak through its geography in the conch-shell, the sea, the bones, the leaves and the caves. The redefinition of the name of *Omeros* suggests a redefinition of the genre of epic, modifying it for the modern Caribbean; claims literacy for the oral Caribbean; and redefines the contemporary canonical understanding of Greco-Roman texts.

While Walcott maintains a tone of high poetic language as the narrator, the dialogue of the St. Lucian characters emphasizes the coexistence of the high poetic with the vernacular, establishing the translation of the oral into literacy as it becomes standardized through the writing of the modern epic. The poem begins with Philoctete describing the making of canoes to some tourists; the first line reads "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes" (1.I.3). The primacy of the line, uttered in the vernacular by a fisherman, emphasizes Walcott's insistence on the use of this form of english¹⁰ while also establishing its centrality in Caribbean literature.

George Lang explains that "Walcott's Patwa¹¹ is based on 'classic' Patwa, whose vocabulary is comprised largely of French etymons, and he thinks 'basically creole is French'... This orientation is reflected in his spelling of Patwa throughout."

¹⁰ The capitalized "English" refers to a standardized English, one which is formalized in convention and affirmed by institution; I am using the non-capitalized "english" as a term inclusive of other types of englishes. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin feel the need to "distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" (Ashcroft et al. 8, 1989).

¹¹ Lang uses an alternate spelling of the word "patois."

The effect of this is that “we, and most St. Lucians, read and recognize the French etymons of Patwa through varying degrees of knowledge of standard French” (Lang 77-78). In fact, Walcott takes great pains to ensure the reader comprehends the text even while employing such forms. Not only does he insist on distinguishing these forms by italicizing them, he uses words such as *laurier-cannelles* (I.I.3), *camerades* (XXII.II.118), *Aruac* and *pomme* (XXXI.II.163), for example, which are all decipherable to the reader either etymologically or contextually. However, even when he utilizes this form more extensively, Walcott takes the trouble to translate them for the reader such as:

“Touchez-I, encore: N’ai fender choux-ous-ou, salope!”

“Touch it again, and I’ll split your arse, you bitch!”

“Moi j’a dire—‘ous pas prêter un rien. ‘Ous ni shallope,

’ous ni seine, ‘ous criore ‘ous ni choeur campêche?”

“I told you, borrow nothing of mine. You have a canoe, and a net. Who you think you are? Logwood Heart?”

“ ‘Ous criore ‘ous c’est roi Gros Îlet? Voleur homme!”

“You think you’re king of Gros Îlet, you tin stealer?”

Then in English: “I go show you who is king! Come!” (III.I.15-16)

Even as Walcott translates, in this example, he also adds the directional “then in English,” inserting the narrator’s voice as a reminder of the self-consciousness with which the dialogue is constructed. Emily Greenwood reminds us,

These words from the New World pose an implicit challenge to the dominant English language in which Walcott writes. Nouns such as *pomme-arac*, *bois-canot*, *laurier canelles*, and *bois-flot* require translation and remind us that St. Lucia is not wholly within the language of empire.” (Greenwood 181)

Walcott legitimates the use of the vernacular through his insistence on misspellings and grammatical deviations from standardized English and French. However, Walcott’s translation allows the reader access to both the vernacular french and english while at the same time making the reader aware of his own ignorance and misunderstanding. Far from understanding patois as language “not wholly within the language of the empire” as Greenwood suggests, Walcott’s translation invites the possibility of the engagement of english with other languages, a possibility which acknowledges the history of colonial jostling for power in the Caribbean.

Classical and Modern: Epic Form

Omeros is a 325-page, lengthy poem written in a modified *terza rima* rhyme scheme and divided into seven books, each of which are in turn divided into chapters and further into sections. This organization has roots in that of Homer’s poems; in the original Greek,¹² Homer’s *Iliad* is a poem of 15,693 lines (Knox 5, 1990) while his *Odyssey* is comprised of 12,109 lines (Knox 3, 1996). Both works, written in hexameter, are comprised of 24 books. In his introduction of *Epic of the Dispossessed* (1997), Hamner notes that although *Omeros* is written in a more or less hexametrical *terza rima* form, “variations of the basic foot are frequent enough throughout the

¹² These poems were thought to have been composed in the late eighth or early seventh century.

poem that the meter approximates free verse” (Hamner 5). While the design of Walcott’s poem alludes to Homer’s works in its length, its division into books and its use of hexameter, Walcott modifies the classical form by employing a *terza rima* rhyme scheme reminiscent of Dante’s more contemporary *Divine Comedy*. Walcott’s poem also refuses line numbers as its presentation, Walcott consciously distinguishes his work from the conventions of the epic genre.

Translating Homer: Deviations from Form

While for the most part Walcott’s work follows the *terza rima* rhyme scheme, he modifies this form at two moments in the text, moments in which the consciousnesses of Achille, Catherine Weldon and the narrator wander from their present situations. These moments become ones which both exemplify manifestations of Walcott’s alterations of the classical epic, transforming it into a modern text, and also point to key themes and preoccupations which resurface often within Walcott’s work such as memory and the home. These metrical changes exemplify the reflexive quality of *Omeros*. During the scene in which Achille speaks to his father, Afolabe, he relives the middle passage of the slave trade and spiritually returns to Africa even as he remains physically in the Caribbean (XXV.III.137-39). The stanzas remain in triplets though the dialogue is recorded as though it were a screenplay or the dialogues of an ancient Greek play with each speaker’s name labeling his respective lines. Just before the two characters begin their conversation, the author sets the tone of the scene by noting that Achille “was moving with the dead.” Bakhtin notes that in the novel the dead are removed from the sphere of contact and one can, and indeed

must, speak of them in a different style (Bakhtin 20). Walcott's use of a modified form exemplifies the modern approach to portraying interactions between one of his heroes and the dead. As Afolabe of the Old World speaks first to Achille of the New World, the narrator notes that "[t]ime translates." Just as Walcott translates the epic of the Old World into one that fits the New World Caribbean, so too Afolabe's words are translated so that Achille is able to comprehend. Central to their conversation is the concept of the name and naming.

AFOLABE

A name means something...
every name is a blessing

ACHILLE

In the world I come from
we accept the sounds we were given

I can only tell you what I believe,
or had to believe. It was prediction, and memory,
to bear myself back...

with the same sign I was blessed with, with the gift
of this sound whose meaning I still do not care to know.

AFOLABE

If you're content with not knowing what our names mean,

then I am not Afolabe, your father...

I am not here

or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost

of a name. (XXV.III.137-39)

Walcott's formulaic adjustment coupled with the use of the present tense throughout this dialogue removes the typically epic focus on the setting of the scene and moves it into the realm of the novel where the absolute past is removed. This adjustment allows for a modern interaction with the dead. Strachan has noted that this interaction is not romanticized or satirized but rather becomes a "necessary step in Achille's understanding of his self-story and of his past" (Strachan 223). Afolabe of the Old World places incredible importance on names though Achille of the New World has moved away from this. In accepting his name, Achille accepts his history and rejects the possibility of a return to the Old World of Africa, instead acknowledging his new name as part of his New World.

Omeros consists of sixty four chapters arranged in seven books. The books respectively contain 13, 11, 9, 4, 7, 12, and 8 chapters. The second example of a deviation from the form of the rest of the poem occurs in Book 4, the middle book, which contains four chapters, notably fewer than the others. The first of these four chapters contains a section composed of seventeen couplets with a rhyme scheme of a/b, c/d, e/f, and so on. The main trope of these couplets is the "house," a word which

appears at least once in almost every couplet. Rootedness and the search for a home has been a long fixation in the field of both Caribbean literature and classical epic. As is the case for the previous example of a deviation of form, the present tense of the direct address allows the narrator, who speaks these couplets, to connect with the reader:

House of umbrage, house of fear...

I do not live in you, I bear

my house inside me...

House that lets in, at last, those fears

that are its guests, to sit on chairs

feasts on their human faces, and

takes pity simply by the hand

shows her her room, and feels the hum

of wood and brick becoming home. (XXXIII.III.174)

The narrator's affirmation that he "bears his house inside of him" and his rejection of the house of "umbrage" and "fear" refers to the attitude of the New World, an attitude which recognizes that a home is found within oneself when fear and pity are let in.

Omeros establishes the Caribbean as home for the narrator and for the other characters of the epic, a concept which will be explored in the next chapter.

3 - EPIC AS LOCAL: PLACE, DISPLACEMENT AND THE PRIMACY OF THE LOCAL

Walcott's work is published in 1990 at a time when the Caribbean is attempting to articulate itself as a nationalistic space, a place creating for itself a national identity. In her Introduction to *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature*, which analyzes Caribbean literature between 1840 and 1940, Leah Reade Rosenberg notes,

Since their inception, Anglophone Caribbean literature and literary criticism have been the products of nationalist discourses designed to extend the political rights of Caribbeans. Under colonialism, writing literature was at root part of an argument for Caribbean political rights, because both British and West Indian intellectuals regarded literature as evidence of a people's cultural legitimacy and political competence. After independence, the ability to produce national literature became a basis for claiming the right to determine national culture. As a result, canon formation has been and is likely to remain political. (Rosenberg 3)

The absence of national literature then points to the fact that the Caribbean was at some point during colonialism a pre-literate region.¹³

While classical epic is concerned with a culture's self-reflection as well as its perception by other cultures, these preoccupations have to contend with the formation

¹³ Bernabe, Chamoiseau and Confiant point this out in their "In Praise of Creoleness" (1990). They declare, "We are still in a state of preliterate: that of a written production without a home audience, ignorant of the authors/readers interaction which is the primary condition of the development of a literature" (Bernabé et al. 886).

of a shared cultural identity, a proto-nationalist sentiment. Recently in the Caribbean, modern manifestations of the epic have to contend with a developing concept of nationalism. Ernest Renan has rejected traditional notions of defining the nation as determined by a common race, religion and language as proposed by Hobsbawm. Instead, he proposes that a nation is “a soul, a spiritual principle” which constitutes two things: “[o]ne is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is a present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” However, while Renan concedes that “[g]eography is one of the crucial factors in history,” he believes geography, along with other factors,¹⁴ to be “not adequate” for the creation of such a “spiritual principle” (Renan 19). However, Ashcroft et al. note in their anthology of post-colonial concept that theorists such as Renan employ ideologies of the construction of nationalism which “always fail to represent the diversity of the actual ‘national’ community for which they purport to speak, and, in practice, usually represent and consolidate the interests of the dominant power groups within any national formation” (Ashcroft et al. 135, 2007). In creating post-colonial societies, Ashcroft et al. note that

place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in English... Landscape, flora and fauna, seasons, climactic conditions are formally distinguished from the place of origin as home/colony, Europe/New World, Europe/Antipodes, metropolitan/provincial, and so on, although of course, at

¹⁴ Other factors include race, language, material interest, religious affinities, and military necessity (Renan 19).

this stage no effective models exist for expressing this sense of Otherness in a positive and creative way. (Ashcroft et al. 9, 1989)

Contrary to Renan, Ashcroft et al. believe geography is central in defining the post-colonial society. Walcott's epic, published a year after *The Empire Writes Back* both exemplifies the nation as a "soul or spiritual principle" and insists on the centrality of geography in defining the Caribbean, tailoring the concept of nationalism to the modern postcolonial Caribbean and creating a Caribbean nationalism. As exemplified in Walcott's *Omeros*, Caribbean nationalism addresses "the relationship between the imported European and the local, between ancestry and destiny, and between language and place" (Ashcroft et al. 145, 1989) through an exploration of the relationship between its multiple heroes and St. Lucia, a relationship which results in a reconfiguring of the view of the world which entails a "writing back":

"Directly and indirectly, in Salman Rushdie's phrase, the 'Empire writes back' to the imperial 'centre,' not only through nationalist assertion, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place" (Ashcroft et al. 33, 1989).

More than simply "writing back to the imperial centre," through its insistence on geography, Caribbean nationalism reorients the world, a world which claims the Caribbean as its cradle of civilization.

Heroes and the Island: Deconstructing and Forming the Narrative of the Nation

Geography becomes central to forming Caribbean nationalism. Walcott's *Omeros* contains several representations of "the modern Caribbean nation": the physical land in its natural splendor; the recurring iguana who seems to become a character unto itself; and the character of Helen herself. Each of these manifestations points to a different aspect of the island and are revealed through their interactions with the other characters; the physical land evokes the spatial sense of the nation, the character of the iguana signifies memory and embodies the presence of the past, and Helen's character becomes equated with the island as she is objectified and as she speaks out, giving a voice to the island.

Landscape

Ideas about the Caribbean were penned long before Caribbean writers developed any sort of canon of their own through colonial travel narratives. These travel writings depicted the Caribbean through colonial eyes, both as an exotic and curious paradise which existed for the enjoyment of the colonial gaze and also as a dark, mysterious and dangerous place. In the eyes of many of these travel writers, the people of the Caribbean also became integrated into the landscape; early narratives about a proto-nationalistic Caribbean were constructed by writers such as Christopher Columbus, Lafcadio Hearn and Charles Kingsley.¹⁵ In forming a canon of Caribbean literature, a task associated deeply with forming national identities, Caribbean writers find themselves in dialogue with these older colonial narratives; moreover, they find

¹⁵¹⁵ For a more in depth discussion of colonial travel narratives, see Chapter 4.

themselves rewriting these narratives in order to reclaim the Caribbean. Ashcroft et al. note that the

crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place ... [through] the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' ... as well as the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, mark[ing] a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (Ashcroft et al. 38, 1989)

Language becomes one of the tools they employ in reappropriating the land, and it is through rewriting the land that this reappropriation comes about.

Walcott's descriptions of the land of St. Lucia arise out of its interactions with the different characters of *Omeros*. At the inception of the poem, the island of St. Lucia is depicted as a site of sacrifice as Philoctete recreates the slaying of the laurel trees to make canoes:

He has left it to a garrulous waterfall
to pour out his secret down La Sorcière, since
the tall laurels fell, for the ground-dove's mating call

to pass on its note to the blue, tacit mountains
whose talkative brooks, carrying it to the sea,
turn into idle pools where the clear minnows shoot

and an egret stalks the reeds with one rusted cry
 as it stabs and stabs the mud with one lifting foot.
 Then silence is sawn in half by a dragonfly

 as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,
 when the sunrise brightens the river's memory
 and waves of huge ferns are nodding to the sea's sound. (I.I.4)

While Walcott's romantic description depicts the island as paradisiac, this harmonious nature hides the secret of the cure for Philoctete's wound. Walcott establishes that the Caribbean landscape is both beautiful and mysterious. However, its mysterious quality does not connote danger as colonial travel narratives have suggested.¹⁶ For the Caribbean, the landscape is one that is tied to his identity, but unlike the colonizer who sees the land as the object of his gaze, the Caribbean views the land as a source of knowledge and healing. It is also a land which is "tacit," though when it is "talkative," the secrets it speaks are carried away to be stored in the sea, and talkative brooks turn to idle pools. Depicted as storage for memories, the sea becomes as much a part of the landscape as the island.

St. Lucia is a site of beauty and mystery as well as a site of the memory and continuation to violence. However, Walcott distinguishes between the harmful violence of the colonizer and the sacrificial violence of the Caribbean. After the slaying of the trees, the landscape becomes contaminated with violent images; the narrator describes the aftermath of the sacrifice: "Now, over the pastures / of

¹⁶ Sheller believes the European view of the Caribbean was constructed through fusing ideas they held about the exotic Orient and savage Africa. The concept of the "dangerous Caribbean" is rooted in the European view of Africa as "dangerous, primitive and wild" (Sheller, 109).

bananas, the island lifted its horns. Sunrise / trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars, / and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice” (I.I.5). Unlike the violence of the colonizer, the violence of the native Caribbean is a sacrificial invocation to the gods of the trees, and sacrifice becomes an integral part of this landscape. The relationship of the Caribbean subject (particularly the fisherman) to the landscape is one of respect; the trees are cut down so that fishermen can make canoes out of them to earn their livelihoods.

Achille’s interaction with the island is predicated on his occupation as a fisherman. His interaction with both island and sea, with the holistic landscape of St. Lucia, is one of belonging and respect. As he begins his day, the island in the dark seems to greet him:

As he neared the depot,
 the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street
 past sleep-tight houses, under the sodium bars

 of street-lamps, to the dry asphalt scraped by his feet;
 he counted the small blue sparks of separate stars.
 Banana fronds nodded to the undulating

 anger of roosters, their cries screeching like red chalk
 drawing hills on a board. Like his teacher, waiting,
 the surf kept chafing at his deliberate walk...

the light was hard overhead

and there was a horizon...

The surf did not raise its voice, even the ribbed hounds

around the canoes were quiet...

This was the light that Achille was happiest in. (I.III.8)

The harmony of the morning is evident as Achille makes his way to the sea, and the narrator notes Achille's happiness in the beginning of the day. Achille interacts a great deal with the Caribbean Sea, which he likens to a teacher waiting for him, saturated with memories and stories of the past which are formative to Achille's identity. In fact, it is while he is at sea that he has a sunstroke and allegorically travels back to Africa. The pedagogical relationship between the native Caribbean and the Caribbean Sea creates a sense of authority, belonging, and respect, a harmonious relationship in which Achille both claims and is claimed by the landscape.

When Achille returns from his odyssey to Africa, he is unable to utter a hymn which concludes, "Because man must work like the birds until he die." Achille's view of the landscape of St. Lucia is framed by this idea:

He could see the heightening piles of the jetty

in front of the village hung with old tires, the mate

standing in his torn red shirt, the anchor ready,

then the conch-shell blowing and blowing its low note
like a ground dove's. And way up, in his yam garden,

Philoctete planting green yam shoots heard the moaning sea,
and crossed his bare, caving chest, and asked God pardon
for his doubt. In the sharp shade of the pharmacy

Seven Seas heard it; he heard it before the dog
thudded its tail on the box and the fishermen
ran down the hot street to pull the tired pirogue. (XXX.III.160)

Achille's interaction with the scenery is predicated on the notion that man must work until he dies; however, because work entails an interaction with the landscape, Achille reaffirms his continued relationship with the landscape. Akin to the colonial perspectives of European travel writers, Achille sees the characters on the island as part of the St. Lucian landscape. However, unlike those travel writers, Achille does not objectify the island through an imperial gaze.¹⁷ Instead, he widens his gaze, classifying the people as inhabitants of St. Lucia who are, like him, connected to the island through their respective occupations: the mate who has been helping him man his boat works on the sea, Philoctete plants in his garden, and Seven Seas, who is blind, remains with his dog. Finally, the fishermen who will pull the tired pirogue are rushing to help Achille; even as Achille looks on at his comrades, he is only apart from them for the moment, just long enough to marvel at the picturesque in front of

¹⁷ For a definition and greater discussion of the "imperial gaze," see Chapter 4.

him. Achille is very much part of this world he describes, and as a result also classifies himself and the others he sees as citizens of the island. In the closing of this distance between the writer and the landscape, the Caribbean subject is able to claim the land as his own.

Dennis and Maud Plunkett are immigrants to St. Lucia, but they are also both white; Dennis is British while Maud is Irish. Because of their race and colonial history, their relationship to the island is contentious. As he describes the plethora of tin-roofed shacks which have formed into towns, he thinks,

That was how History saw them...
the broken roads, the clear rivers

that congealed to sepia lagoons, from which some case
of bilharzia would erupt in kids whose livers
caught the hookworm's sickle. Pretty, dangerous streams. (X.II.57)

Plunkett acknowledges the prevalence of the perspective of History in his description. However, as Plunkett considers himself a historian, he also subscribes to this mode of thought. Like colonial travel writers, Plunkett invokes the image of the threatening and mysterious Caribbean, full of disease, but also pretty and alluring, much like his view of Helen.¹⁸ Plunkett thinks of England as “merely the place of his birth” and comments,

How odd to prefer, over its pastoral sites—
reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth—

¹⁸ I will explore this later on in this chapter.

these loud-mouthed forests on their illiterate heights,
 these springs speaking a dialect that cooled his mind
 more than pastures with castles! To prefer the hush

of a hazed Atlantic worried by the salt wind!

Others could read it as “going back to the bush,”

But harbour after crescent harbour closed his wound. (X.III.61)

Plunkett sets up a comparison based on his experience as an outsider between England, the motherland, and St. Lucia, the colony. He characterizes England as “reasonable” and “pastoral.” St. Lucia, however, is “loud-mouthed,” “illiterate,” and “speaks in dialect.” In spite of this comparison, Plunkett “goes native” as he, a European, claims the Caribbean as his home.¹⁹

Unlike Dennis who feels an albeit befuddled comfort in staying on the island despite his acknowledged distaste for the island in his descriptions, Maud Plunkett does not find the landscape appealing. For her, the landscape includes much more than forests, springs and the Atlantic Sea; in fact,

There was a lot in the island that Maud hated:

The moisture rotting their library; that was the worst...

After that, the cluttered light

¹⁹ Sheller notes that one of the dangers to Europeans was “tropicalization” or the “transformation of the European in the Caribbean, and the effects of consuming the Caribbean,” a fear that “Europeans [who] visit the colony and promptly die, go crazy, go native, drown in alcohol or sex... It seems that Westerners are only safe if they strictly maintain their position of colonial or racial authority” (Sheller, 118).

on the choked market steps; insects of any kind,

especially rain-flies; a small, riddling termite

that cored houses into shells and left windows blind;

... there was a plague of [barefoot Americans] now, worse than the insects

who, at least, were natives. Turbanned religious cranks

urging sisters with candles to the joy of sects,

the velocity of passenger transports on

uncurbed highway, comets that hurtled out of sight

and brought a flash to the heart. (X.III.61-62)

Maud hates moisture and insects, but her hatred extends to the specifics of tourism, the fast vans, the sect leaders and the tourists themselves. These become aspects of the landscape as much as nature is. Like the narrator, Maud contemptuously sees tourism as part of St. Lucia. However, her disdain for the landscape does not result in her rejection of the nation. Maud has two views of the island; she constructs the second prior to moving to the Caribbean:

She thought: I dreamed of this house with woods around it,

with trees I'd read of, whose flowers I'd never seen.

Part of a barracks, with no noise to surround it

but cicadas chattering like my sewing-machine.

I loved the young teak with bodies clean as birches
 in light that freckled the leopard shade of the path,

when martins at dusk with their crisscrossing stitches
 would sew the silk sky, or preen around the birdbath.

I saw it when we first came. Unapproachable

cliff on one side, but its ledges a nesting place
 for folding herons and gulls, and my teak table
 with its lion-claw legs and its varnished surface

spread with fine scalloped linen, white as the sea's lace,
 and ringing crystal, with a fresh wreath of orchids
 like Remembrance Day, at my brass candlestick's base,

in Dennis's honour mainly, and the place cards

near the bone-china of my huge lily-pad plates. (XI.III.66)

Maud's sentiments are based on an expectation, one constructed in conjunction with her identity as a colonizer. Her ideal view of the Caribbean is one that contains all the furnishings of modernity like the sewing-machine, the varnished teak tables, scalloped linen and candlesticks. At the same time, these signs of modernity which she constructs as part of the overall landscape interact with the natural landscape harmoniously. The plates become "lily-pad plates," and the sound of the cicadas is

compared to that of her sewing-machine. Finally, this view of the landscape is one which exists “in Dennis’s honour”; Maud understands herself as a colonial subject and her place in the Caribbean is heavily based on her connection to her husband. At the same time, Maud accepts the island as her home; even though it is dark, it’s “as clear as a dream, / but more real. Well, folks lived for centuries / like this... But then we all trust in Him, and that’s why we know / the peace of a wandering heart when it is housed” (XI.III.67). Maud’s view of the landscape of the Caribbean then is one which is based on expectation and reality as well as her place as a colonial subject. However, even with her dissatisfactions, she still finds a house for her wandering heart, albeit a house based on the trust of God.

Iguana

If the landscape evokes notions of space in *Omeros*, the iguana is a motif that reflects the indigenous, specifically the island’s connection to memory. Even though the sea is a geographical entity which has strong connections with memory in Walcott’s poem, the land also contains traces of the past; the iguana becomes a part of the landscape of the island that has remained unchanged over many centuries in the Caribbean:

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called

“Iounalao,” “Where the iguana is found.”

But, taking its own time, the iguana will scale

the rigging of vines in a year, its dewlap fanned,

its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail

moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes

ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries,

that rose with the Aruacs’ smoke till a new race

unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees. (I.I.4-5)

The iguana is a living witness to the goings-on of the island; in fact, even when other aspects of nature on the island have forgotten, the patient iguana remains a staple, witnessing all the inhabitants that come and go. Not only does the iguana witness this new race of people, the people who will come to be known as the Caribbeans, the lizard also shares a lost name with the island. The iguana witnesses the sacrifice of the modern Caribbean as well as the modern imperial violence of the tourists who “try taking / [Philoctete’s] soul with their cameras” (I.I.3).

In its interactions with the other characters on the island of St. Lucia, the lizard becomes a reminder of the violence that has shaped the Caribbean.²⁰ The presence of the character of Dennis Plunkett maintains that the colonizer’s view and his history is as much a part of the new nation of St. Lucia as the view of the former colonized. In its association with violence, the animal is compared frequently to a

²⁰ As Plunkett explores history, the battle (described in the present tense, a choice which draws history into the present) the narrative reads, “Rations / for the cannon’s mouth, the black iron lizard’s flame” (XIX.II.102). Once again, the cannon is equated with the history of warfare in the Caribbean.

cannon. As Plunkett pores over the history of battles of St. Lucia in search for his ancestors, he spots

the lizard, elbows akimbo,

bellling its throat on the hot noon cannon, eyes slit,

orange dewlap dilating on its pinned shadow.

He climbed and crouched near the lizard. "Come to claim it?"

the Major asked. "Every spear of grass on this ground

is yours. Read the bloody pamphlet. Did they name it

Iounalo for you?

The lizard spun around

to the inane Caribbean. Plunkett also.

"Iounalo, twit! Where the iguana is found...

Is that how it's spelt?"

The tongue leered....

"Iounalo, eh? It's all folk-malarkey!"

The grass was as long as his shorts. History was fact,

History was a cannon, not a lizard...

Hewanorra, my hole! Was the greatest battle

in naval history, which put the French to rout,
 fought for a creature with a disposable tail
 and elbows like a goalie?...

For a lizard

with an Aruac name? It will be rewritten

By black pamphleteers, History will be revised,

And we'll be its villians, fading from the map

(he said "villians" for "villains"). And when it's over

we'll be the bastards! (XVII.I.91-92)

Plunkett's attitude towards the iguana unveils an aspect of Plunkett's views of the island, as an island that is "disposable" like the iguana's tail and one where history must be rewritten. He also views the island as a thing that can be claimed and believes that the lizard has already claimed it. His bitter attitude about whom the island belongs to points to a real concern among St. Lucians. Of interest to Plunkett the historian is the correctness of spelling and word-play. On one hand, he does not certainly know how to spell the name of the island; in fact, he rightfully doubts himself as Walcott spells the name correctly (Iounalao) both in Chapter I (4) and again in Chapter XLV (229). Even as he calls the island Hewanorra, too, there is an alternate spelling, Hewannorra, which surfaces in Chapter XLV (229) as well. The

iguana, who seems to speak for the island in its silence, mocks Plunkett's shortcoming, his inability to name correctly because the word is grounded in an era of pre-literacy and orality, an era to which Plunkett has no ties. On the other hand, Plunkett puns by noting that once history is rewritten, he, representative of the colonizer, will be its villains (serfs) as well as its villains.²¹ Plunkett will not be the historian to document such facts of history; this will be documented by "black pamphleteers." As the representative colonizer figure, Plunkett's acknowledgement of his inability to fully rewriting history revises the colonizer figure; instead of a character who simply reflects the perspectives of earlier European colonizers, Walcott's revision is what allows Plunkett to belong to the island. There is an acknowledgement that a history of St. Lucia is in the works, of which there will be multiple accounts.

Plunkett sees the iguana resting on a cannon and believes it has come to claim the island, for he recognizes that the iguana has been an inhabitant of the island for longer than all its human inhabitants. Both the narrator and Plunkett associate the iguana with the Aruacs, the indigenous peoples of St. Lucia. Achille, too, retains this concept when he sees the iguana, which notably appears just before Achille discovers the indigenous totem in Seven Seas' backyard:

Then Achille saw the iguana

in the leaves of the pomme-Arac branches and fear

froze him at the same time it fuelled the banner

²¹ Walcott constructs Plunkett's characters as one who "punned relentlessly" (V.III.30).

of the climbing flame. Then the ridged beast disappeared.

He stepped back from the pomme-Arac's shade on the grass
diagrammed like the lizard. Then, as if he heard
his thought, Seven Seas said: "*Aruac* mean the race

that burning there like the leaves and *pomme* is the word
in patois for 'apple.' This used to be their place."

Maybe he's heard the iguana with his dog's ears,

because the dog was barking around the trunk's base.

He had never heard the dog's name either. It was
one of those Saturdays that contain centuries...

Gradually, Achille

found History that morning...

A thousand archaeologists started screaming
as Achille wrenched out the totem, then hurled it far
over the oleander hedge. It lay dreaming

on one cheek in the spear-grass, but that act of fear
multiplied the lances on his scalp. Stone-faced souls

peered with their lizard eyes through the pomme-Arac tree,

then turned from their bonfire. Instantly, like moles

or mole crickets in the shadow of History,

the artifacts burrowed deeper into their holes. (XXXI.III.163-64)

For Achille, the iguana too is connected with remembering and the past. While Plunkett believes history lies in remembering the events surrounding the cannon, history for Achille entails remembering names, a skill which Plunkett does not possess. Through etymology, Achille uncovers the history of the island; the violence he discovers is the eradication of the indigenous Aruacs, a history that is centuries old. Achille is frightened by this past, by this facet of St. Lucian history; he freezes in fear at the sight of the iguana and throws the totem away in an “act of fear.”

The iguana’s makes a brief appearance when Ma Kilman prays in her ancestors’ language to remember how to cure Philoctete’s wound as “her howl made the emerald lizard / lift one clawed leg, remembering the sound. / Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave, / and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand” (XLVIII.II.245). The iguana becomes a symbol of remembering violence for the heroes of *Omeros*. However, for different characters, remembering violence brings different ends as it reveals different narratives of history. For Plunkett, the history of war must be textually documented; this is the history that counts, not the “folk-malarkey” associated with the iguana. For Achille, the history of violence associated with indigenous population is frightening, one he acknowledges and one with which he refuses to engage. Ma Kilman, on the other hand, immerses

herself in the past and fully acknowledges and understands its power and interaction with the present. The narrator casts the iguana as a witness to the events of the island, in particular the violence that has ensued and continues to do so through the industry of tourism; both the past and the present of St. Lucia are contained within the lizard. The iguana's interactions with the characters of *Omeros* signify memory and a maintained connection to the past. In its final appearance, the narrator gives a voice to the iguana, who differentiates between the Greek and Caribbean Helen although like Helen of Troy, Helen of St. Lucia "offers the gift of her sculptured nakedness" (LXII.II.313) as she embodies the island.

Helen

While the island interacts with the characters in *Omeros* through its physical manifestation and through the memories it retains, it is also able to "speak" to other characters through the actions and voice of Helen. Philoctete watches the island from the inside of Hector's van, the Comet, and thinks, "He was her footman. It was her burden he bore. / Why couldn't they love the place, same way, together, / the way he always loved her, even with his sore? / Love Helen like a wife... The way the leaves loved her" (XX.II.108). Philoctete's language muddles the image of the island with the image of Helen, conflating the two entities. As the narrator describes Helen, the whooping of a dove which is compared to a conch and lower than a nightingale's grief to Helen comes "from the hole in her heart" and she tries to shoo the dove away while "look[ing] for the flight / of the startled dove from the branches of her nerves"

(XXIX.I.152). The narrator proposes that the grief of the animals of St. Lucia reflect Helen's emotional state.

Like St. Lucia, Helen is defined by other characters. In her first appearance, Helen is described by the narrator and a woman from her own class as beautiful and proud. In the same scene, Maud and Dennis Plunkett also recognize their former employee. Plunkett sees "the pride of Helen passing" (V.III.29) but recasts this pride, interpreting her lowered head as "not like the arrogant servant that ruled [his and Maud's] house"; instead, for him, the lowered head evokes "a duty / towards her hopelessness, something to redress / (he punned relentlessly) that desolate beauty / so like her island's" (V.III.30). Helen's beauty, a characteristic Plunkett identifies as one she shares with her Homeric counterpart and also one he equates with the landscape of the island, evokes pity. However, the same lowered head is interpreted differently by the narrator as a sign of pride and by another waitress in the bar (someone of the same class as Helen) as a sign of arrogance. Helen, like St. Lucia, is perceived in multiple ways.

Unlike other heroes, the narrator of *Omeros* never describes Helen's perspective. She is mostly portrayed from the viewpoints of other characters and seems to have no voice. However, she finds a voice within the narrative through the interplay of silence and language, tools which ultimately stem from Helen's pride, her defining characteristic. By depicting Helen as promiscuous in the eyes of other characters, Walcott addresses the common trope of the promiscuous Caribbean woman. However, Helen expresses her dissatisfaction with this view. In one instance, Helen's voice breaks through the narrative as she asserts herself, a moment at which

her pride is strongest. As the narrator describes Helen's reaction to men touching her while she works as a waitress, Helen usurps the narrative voice as the narrative reads: she "take off her costume, and walk straight out the hotel / naked as God make me, when I pass by the pool... I still had panty and bra" (VI.I.34). Helen takes charge of telling her own story even though doing so means hijacking the voice of the narrator. Both silence and language become tools Helen can utilize as a weapon against accusations. Though the action of undressing and walking away is a silent one, Helen verbally resists allowing others to tell her story by inserting her own voice.

At another instance when she is seen as promiscuous, Helen responds through actions and words. When Maud accuses Helen of being involved with too many men after Helen asks to borrow money from her, Helen responds, "I am vexed with both of them, *oui*" (XXIII.III.124). When Maud returns from getting the money inside the house, Helen has left the yard and has wrenched Maud's flowers from their vine. Helen's angry response and actions are born out of her positionality as a Caribbean woman as she expresses her disdain for being seen as licentious. She leaves Achille because he attacks her and calls her a whore (XXI.III.115), and even though she needs financial aid from Maud, she refuses to be insulted. Such views reflect the views of the nation of St. Lucia, a nation that has been historically defined by the male gaze as well as its financial state. As Helen claims agency, so too, St. Lucia gains agency. Walcott's use of such a character as representative of St. Lucia has a twofold effect. Firstly, it acknowledges the historic objectification of the island by both the colonizer-historian as well as the narrator-writer. Secondly, it conversely

points to the island's repeated attempts to challenge such views through taking pride in itself, like Helen.

On the other hand, *Omeros* does not offer even this basic two-dimensional view of Helen. Shullenberger notes,

In *Omeros*, Helen, like her Greek prototype, is the great enigma and driving force behind men's acts of courage and desperation. Walcott heightens her mystery by providing the reader little access to her thoughts. This reserve, paradoxically, humanizes her by allowing Helen a kind of privacy of conscience unusual for a literary character. The poet refuses to intrude upon or speak for her experience, as he does for his male heroes. (Shullenberger)

Similarly, as Walcott points out in an interview, the narrator, being in a position of privilege, complicates this picture of Helen in his own process of self-evaluation upon his return to the island in the final third of the poem. He begins this process by looking with "renewed rain-washed eyes" at "a self-healing island / whose every cove was a wound" (XLIX.III.249). This self-healing is what allows the narrator to understand the processes that have shaped the rest of the novel. In a lecture in which he reflects on *Omeros*, Walcott proposes that the last third of the poem is a total refutation of efforts made by two characters, Dennis Plunkett and the narrator. Plunkett fanatically attempts to compare Helen of St. Lucia to the Helen of Troy by comparing St. Lucia to the Homeric narrative through a historical investigation. The writer or narrator (he notes, "presumably me, if you like") follows suit and compares Helen of St. Lucia to Helen of Troy as well. Walcott concludes that the "answer to both the historian and the poet/narrator—the answer in terms of history, the answer in

terms of literature—is that the woman doesn't need it" (Breslin 242). The narrator reflects on Helen's character as he comments, "Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow, swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone, as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door?" (LIV.II.271). The poem "pivots on itself and accuses itself of vanity, of the vanity of poetry, of the vanity of the narrator." It is this conflict that writers of the Caribbean face; the writer must contend with a Caribbean that has historically been exoticised and objectified by colonial travel writers. In the following chapter, the Caribbean travel writer tackles the task of re-envisioning this perception of the Caribbean.

4 - EPIC AS GLOBAL: TRAVEL, CONTAINMENT AND THE CARIBBEAN TRAVEL WRITER

The need to establish cultural legitimacy and political competence rises out of a need to participate in an increasingly global modern world comprised of nations. If literature itself is political, the epic genre, which has, from its inception, been preoccupied with the construction of collective culture, becomes a fitting conduit for promoting such sentiment. It is in this capacity that Walcott evokes the genre since epic is concerned concomitantly with both how a society views itself as well as how it wants to be viewed by the world, both the epic as local as well as the epic as global. For the Caribbean, a place which is still in the process of forming its own nations and nationalism, this dual consciousness, an attribute of the classical epic, translates to the region. While Caribbean writers attempted to create a literary canon, they were writing their national cultures. These writers were aware of themselves as Caribbeans within their respective home communities, but they were also keenly conscious of their relationships with other worlds (Europe, the U.S. and the connection to Africa) and consequently conscious of the relationship of the Caribbean itself with these other worlds. As the Caribbean writer takes on the task of writing the nation, he/she also recognizes that once works are published and canonized, they become representative of the Caribbean to the world. Benítez-Rojo discusses this dual consciousness of the Caribbean within Caribbean literature:

[T]he Caribbean text...opens its doors to two great orders of reading: one of a secondary type, epistemological, profane, diurnal, and linked to the West—the

world outside—where the text uncoils itself and quivers like a fantastic beast to be the object of knowledge and desire; another the principal order, teleological, ritual, nocturnal, and referring to the Caribbean itself, where the text unfolds its bisexual sphinxlike monstrosity toward the void of its impossible origin, and dreams that it incorporates this, or is incorporated by it. (Benítez-Rojo 23)

Benítez-Rojo understands the relationship between the Caribbean text and the world outside as one which leaves the text open to be an “object of knowledge and desire,” a relationship of which Caribbean authors are aware. Caribbean authors construct texts with the understanding that their works will be scrutinized by both “the West” as well as from within the Caribbean itself.

This awareness becomes central in the case of the Caribbean epic, particularly in the case of Walcott’s work in which the author pointedly expresses multiple levels of consciousness within his audience and himself as both narrator and author. Thieme believes that

the figure of Odysseus had come to provide a personification of Walcott’s view of Caribbean artistic subjectivity – and one might argue of Caribbean identity more generally – as a migrant predicament perennially poised between restless journeying and a longing for home. (Thieme 151)

Walcott constructs *Omeros* as a meta-text in order to convey the aware Caribbean duality as he constructs the character of the narrator/poet to be both the embodiment of central themes of Caribbean subjectivity as well as a migrant. Through this awareness, Walcott is able to create a multi-layered text which proposes to be, and

renders itself open to, consumption by the West. However, the “teleological, ritual, and nocturnal” aspects which Benítez-Rojo identifies deny the audience a singular understanding of the poem. Walcott leaves little available for definitive interpretation; rather, the project becomes precisely what is invoked in its title, a journey. Walcott’s accounts of his consciousness and his characters do not leave the Caribbean vulnerable and exoticised; instead the modernized nature of *Omeros* constructs a text which twists and turns so frequently that it eludes such interpretations. Walcott’s poem exists in dialogue specifically with classical texts, post-colonial texts based in different regions, texts of the Caribbean literature canon (texts written by “authentic” Caribbean writers who both claim and have been claimed by the region), and also texts which canonically define the genres of epic and novel.

Theorizing the Caribbean and Caribbean Literature

Theories of Caribbean literature become the cornerstone for the construction of a Caribbean nationalist sentiment and the foundation on which the Caribbean epic, and in particular Walcott’s *Omeros*, is built. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant speak for the Caribbean when they declare themselves Creole and define Creoleness as “the *interactional or transaction aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history.” It is a concept which embraces complexity and diversity and dismantles notions of purity. The theory of creolization as defined by Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, though one which surfaced during the same year of publication as *Omeros*, is one which is exemplified within the epic poem. What binds

the characters of *Omeros* together ultimately is in fact the yoke of history. In fact, these three theorists believe that “*full knowledge of Creoleness will be reserved for Art, for Art absolutely*” (Bernabé et al. 891-93, original emphasis). Art then, in particular literature, becomes a means of manifesting Creoleness and, they declare, “our literature restores us to duration, to the continuum of time and space; only then will it be moved by its past and become historical” (Bernabé et al. 897). *Omeros* exemplifies this theory in its art in form and content, and the poem attempts to restore its people. Each hero in search of his/her own history understands himself/herself as a Caribbean subject though a subject retaining cultural elements from their own regions.

In her article “Journey to the Center of the Earth: Caribbean as Master Symbol” (2001), Aisha Khan has posited that the Caribbean has been “[d]epicted today as uncertain, variegated, and unfinished—as creole—the world seems to have found its emblem in the Caribbean.” However, while Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant view Creoleness as praise-worthy, Khan believes that this view of the Caribbean has its limitations; she warns, “a paradigmatic ‘creolization’ can, against intention, reproduce certain forms of knowledge about a people or a place-knowledge that is both elusive and, on the surface, persuasive” (Khan 271). Recently, in her discussion on the consumption of Caribbean literatures by the West, Mimi Sheller notes that Caribbean literature became prominent in the 1980s “when it became increasingly fashionable to read postcolonial and non-Western literatures.” She concludes that

Caribbean language and literature is perceived as being more dynamic, chaotic, improvised, musical, and impure without the clear rules, grammars, and stabilising features of “mature” languages and literatures... By positing an essential difference of Caribbean literature, rooted in its *créolité*, it is treated... [such that] it opens up access to the primitive, the natural, the magical, the feminine, the wells of poetic inspiration. Such interpretations of *créolité* as civilisation's “other” and dark mirror are extended to entire cultures and peoples, as can be seen in typical [contemporary] travel journalism on the region. (Sheller 184-85)

Creoleness becomes a central definition of the region. However, while Sheller points to its initial employment as one which opens up different facts of inspiration for poets, she also believes that constructing the creole in such a manner may promote the “otherization” of places like the Caribbean. *Omeros* complicates the view of the Caribbean as simply a place which preaches such an understanding of the “creole” as it also subscribes to other theories of viewing the Caribbean as well. These theories do not necessarily conflict but rather offer a multi-layered platform from which to understand a region like the Caribbean.

Glissant’s theory of seeing the Caribbean employing a conception of rhizomatic identity emerged in 1992 with the publication of his “Poetics of Discourse.” The rhizome-based theory of identity was first proposed by Deleuze and Guattari as “an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently” (Glissant 11). In her

analysis of Glissant's work as it applies to postcolonial theory, Britton identifies that for Glissant,

identity is no longer a permanence or "root" but a "capacity of variation..." in which the elements are constantly changing. One of the elements of creolization, equally, is the principle that "what supports us is not simply the definition of our identities but also their relation to the whole set of possibilities: the mutual mutations generated by this play of relations" (103). The subject is constituted within this fluid and multiple, "relayed" circulation of identifications. (Britton 170-71)

Caribbean identity remains one that is constantly changing and adapting. In his discussion of epic poetry, Glissant has identified such texts as "great founding books of communities" and furthermore as "books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history" (Glissant 15-16). The genre becomes a conduit for the exploration of identity, self-identity but also the foundational identity of the community. Walcott's epic exemplifies this relational possibility as well as national foundation by utilizing the epic form. Most obviously, it strives to include an array of experiences in its affirmation of multiple heroes; however, the author/narrator embodies Glissant's "Poetics of Relation" as he engages with different worlds his travels and grapples with multi-layered levels of consciousness.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Islands* was published first in Spanish in 1992 and then in English in 1996. His theory of the meta-archipelago follows in the similar line of thought from Glissant's rhizomatic theory:

[W]ithin the sociocultural fluidity that the Caribbean archipelago presents, within its historiographic turbulence and its ethnological and linguistic clamor, within its generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane, one can sense the features of an island that “repeats” itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs... [T]he Caribbean is not a common archipelago, but a meta-archipelago...and as meta-archipelago it has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center. (Benítez-Rojo 3-4)

Benítez-Rojo’s theory recognizes that the culture of St. Lucia depicted by Walcott is not one which is limited to that locale. Rather, it is in constant dialogue with the rest of the Caribbean, tied by common features. As a result, Walcott’s writing of St. Lucia, his narration of a people, becomes a project which applies to all of the Caribbean. At the conclusion of *Omeros*, the narrator acknowledges the fulfillment of the duty his father gives him by proclaiming, “I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea” (LXIV.I.320). The features of *Omeros* are ones which are repeated elsewhere in the Caribbean and perhaps the whole world.

Walcott the Caribbean Travel Writer

Travel is central to the Caribbean. In claiming to be a post-colonial Caribbean travel writer both as the narrator and author, Walcott must contend with the enormous amount of travel literature written by Europeans about the Caribbean. From its inception, the Caribbean was formed through an accident of travel; Europeans were in search of alternate routes to “the Orient” when they stumbled across the Caribbean.

European contact with the New World resulted in a shift in what Mary Louise Pratt refers to a shift in European²² “planetary consciousness” which she defines as the “construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history” (Pratt 15). This shift is one that

coincides with many others including the consolidation of bourgeois forms of subjectivity and power, the inauguration of a new territorial phase of capitalism propelled by searches for raw materials, the attempt to extend coastal trade inland, and national imperatives to seize overseas territory in order to prevent its being seized by rival European powers. (Pratt 9)

Their fascination with their “discovery” of a new land of different peoples turned quickly to consumption, an attitude well-rooted in what Mimi Sheller refers to as the “transatlantic... flows of natural substances, scientific knowledge, bio-power, real estate, and cultural capital,” processes with roots in the eighteenth century but which continue to exist in contemporary times as well (Sheller 15). The idea of the Caribbean as it has been passed down historically is one grounded in notions of representation and has been one constructed first by Western Europe and later additionally by North America through American imperialism. Sheller demarcates three different modes of consumption: “the degree of commodification of the body itself ...the means of global circulation of commodities, people, information, and images ... [and] the proximity or 'co-presence' of consuming and consumed bodies at the site of consumption” (Sheller 27).

Textual representation of the Caribbean began with cartography and travel-

²² For Pratt, “European” refers to “a network of literate Northern Europeans, mainly men from the lower levels of the aristocracy and the middle and upper levels of the Bourgeoisie” (Pratt, 38).

writings, followed by the physical movement of objects, people and ideas. European writing canonized the Caribbean landscape as a tropical island. Sheller points out that over time, the viewer's relation to scenery has shifted; while in the eighteenth century, the Caribbean was pictured predominantly with an emphasis on “the beauty of cultivated areas set within the tropical landscape” and in particular the image of the plantation (Sheller 48), by the nineteenth century, it turned towards “an increasingly 'naturalised' and primordial view of Caribbean nature” as depicted through travel-writings (Sheller 58). By the beginning of the twentieth century and the rise of American imperialism, the Caribbean once again became the subject of contemporary travel literature which was “reassembled as a primeval, untouched site of luxuriant profusion... then used as the lure for economic 'development,' military adventures, and tourist fantasies” (Sheller 60). The history of the consumption of the scenery of the Caribbean unfurls the oscillating views of the Caribbean held by Western culture. The tropical Caribbean reveals the way the Caribbean was constructed, viewed and depicted by the Western world.

During the eighteenth century, the fear of “becoming tropicalized,” becoming like natives who were not European, became a common theme in traveling writing (Sheller 116). At the same time, the Caribbean was subject to construction according to the views of such fearful travelers. The tension between these two conceptualizations becomes apparent in the travel narratives in particular with regard to the Caribbean landscape. One account notes how one could

walk on carpets of rose leave and frenchipone; be fanned to sleep by silent slaves, or have my feet tickled into extacy by the soft hand of a female

attendant... Thus to pass away life in the arms of voluptuous indolence; to wander over flowery fields of unfading verdure, or through forests of majestic palm-trees, sit by a fountain bursting from a savage rock frequented only by the cooing dove, and indulge in these enchanting solitudes all the reveries of an exalted imagination. (Sheller 119)

In the elaboration of the decadence of the tropics, humanity seems to have been forgotten as slaves become part of the landscape. This account in particular depicts all three modes of Sheller's theory of consumption: the body, the goods, ideas and images, and all of this happening at the site of consumption. This depiction is also particularly reminiscent of Orientalist discourse which “as Said found, associates corruption both with excesses of wealth and with the excessive profusion of nature” (Sheller 119-21).

The history of travel literature within the Caribbean is one in which the privilege of mobility has been afforded to the figure of the European colonizer. While colonial travel writers were in search of new worlds and trade routes, they retained their sense of home, grounded in an understanding of a geographical homeland. For the Caribbean traveler, a diasporic disconnected to his history, the freedom of mobility becomes a freedom to pursue connections to a place and history and as a result, the freedom to find a place with a history to which he can lay claim. This inversion of travel-writing results in the production of counter-travel-writing, a term which Huggan understands as a post-colonial approach. He believes that earlier European/outsider

travel writing has also served as a useful medium of estrangement and as a

relativist vehicle for the reassessment and potential critique of domestic culture. Both of these registers can be seen in contemporary travel writing, which acts alternately as a repository for exoticist forms of cultural nostalgia and as a barometer for the recording and calibration of cultural change... [Contemporary travel-writing becomes a text which seeks to understand] continuing complicity between travel writing and cultural imperialism; to analyze new forms of travel narrative that resist these earlier models, and that explore the possibilities inherent in travel writing as cultural critique; and, finally, to assess the extent to which these various revisionist or counter-narratives are themselves bound up in an ideology of exoticist consumption – the very ideology to which their writers are ostensibly opposed. (Huggan 39)

The shift from an imperial to a post-colonial approach to travel writing accompanies the shift to a world defined by nationalism. Post-colonial travel writing is exemplified and evoked by the character of Walcott's narrator, the manifestation of which becomes a new modernized form of travel narrative which resists the exoticism and commodification of the places he visits so inherent in earlier European travel narratives. Instead, Walcott utilizes his travels as a form of cultural critique, as Huggan suggests. In the end, too, he addresses his privileged mobility when he questions his own intentions as a writer; he reflects, "Didn't I want the poor / to stay in the same light so that I could transfix / them in amber...?" (XLV.II.227).

The narrator of *Omeros* is a Caribbean travel writer. Many scholars have compared the character of the narrator to Homer's Odysseus. Greenwood discusses Odysseus as the "man of many turns" (*anêr polutropos* in the original Greek). She

notes that

The adjective *polutropos* is ambiguous and can signify both his versatility ('of many turns,' 'ingenious') and his wandering ('much roaming/travelling') ... Recent critical discussions have insisted on the ambiguity of this adjective, linking the placement of this adjective right up-front, in the first line of the epic, with Odysseus' polymorphous guises in the poem. Walcott exploits this ambiguity in his refiguring of both the character of Odysseus and the *Odyssey*, which return a very different Odysseus. In Walcott, Odysseus' 'many moves' evoke the forced migrations and uprooting that led to the modern settlement of the Caribbean, and the legacies of exile and alienation that resulted. However, the 'many moves' are also reminiscent of the resourcefulness celebrated in Caribbean folklore, derived from figures such as Anansi in African folklore, or Br'er Rabbit and Tar Baby.²³ (Greenwood 43)

While Greenwood points to the evocation of migrations through travelling stories, her "ambiguous" reading of the *polutropos* of the Caribbean region itself is also centralized in the character of Walcott/the narrator of *Omeros*. She also notes that "there are many different, sometimes contradictory, Odysseuses in Walcott's oeuvre"; while there is certainly the embodiment of the "estranged wanderer," he can also appear as a "cultural hero" (Greenwood 46).

The Odyssean figure of the narrator searches for signifiers of home wherever he goes. He does not seek the exotic in the lands he visits nor does he seek opportunities to consume these spaces like European travelers. Instead, he seeks the

²³ Greenwood further notes that "In fact, this Odyssean epithet is already on its way to becoming a key trope in Black Classicism in the Americas" (Greenwood, 43).

roots of his own Caribbean-ness. Wherever he visits, the narrator discovers the marginalized. In Europe, his lover is Antigone, a Greek with “Asian cheeks” and “eyes with a black / almond’s outline,” and the narrator comments on “the fragrant rain of black hair” (II.III.14). The narrator exoticises the Greek figure, represented by the female Antigone, and like the Caribbean Helen she retains the traditional literary function of signifying object; however, unlike the Caribbean Helen, Antigone maintains a position of privilege as she demonstrates her knowledge of classical literature and Homer. The relationship between the narrator and Antigone points to a relationship between the Caribbean archipelago and the Greek, inviting comparison between the two spaces. As a result, the relationship between the Greek archipelago and classical Homeric epics parallels that of the Caribbean archipelago and the modern Caribbean epic: epics are attempting to define their cultures of origin. In his travels, the narrator also explores the former colony of Ireland as he evokes Joyce, whose post-colonial epic novel, *Ulysses*, evokes the voice of the marginalized. In North America, through the story of Catherine Weldon, Walcott is able to explore the institutional marginalization of indigenous peoples. However, like Odysseus, the narrator never identifies any of these places as his home.

The Second Consciousness: Realizing the External

Omeros portrays the global consciousness of the Caribbean writer on different levels. The Caribbean interacts with the global world through the odysseys of its various heroes who become a collective embodiment of the region. Some of Walcott’s heroes physically interact with other parts of the world. While Achille does

not physically travel, his emotional journey back to Africa becomes an interaction with one of the “Old Worlds,” Africa. Dennis Plunkett, too, travels as he undertakes his research for the writing of his history; he, like Achille, returns to his “Old World,” Europe, as he relives his union with Maud and his time in the military. However, Dennis and Maud Plunkett both physically travel back to Europe as well.

Perhaps most obviously, the narrator travels both metaphorically and physically; like Dennis Plunkett, he travels physically to North America as well as Europe, but he also travels temporally within these regions. The narrator recounts the history of the indigenous peoples of North America through Catherine Weldon’s eyes. When he finds himself in Europe, the narrator does not need to travel metaphorically, for this Old World is littered with traces of its past like statues. The narrator is able to navigate between both the Old and New Worlds, though he eventually settles back in the Caribbean. Much of the interaction with the modern Old and New Worlds Walcott describes are embodied in the narrator’s journeys. Isabella Maria Zoppi believes the narrator “can be seen as the pivot round which the odyssey revolves,” a figure which has two fulcrums “one of which is more intimate than the other, which starts from a personal dimension only to move gradually towards broader horizons, resonating within that most universal of themes, History” (Zoppi 509). Zoppi’s two fulcrums distinguish between the narrator and Achille’s love affairs on one hand and the wandering poet as a Ulysses figure on the other, limiting the narrator to containing only two fulcrums. While the narrator is the central pivot of the poem, the narrator points directly to a notion of multi-consciousness when during his travels he describes his “disembodied trunk [which] split” and his “widening mind”

as he moves between the Old and New Worlds (XLI.II.207). Its construction as a modern epic creates the narrator as a character who exists in the present and also contains all the experiences of the other heroes of *Omeros* as he crafts these characters.

Narrator/Author: Traversing and Containing the World

As Walcott establishes a place for himself within the world canon of literature, he also creates a space for the Caribbean itself within the world.²⁴ Walcott's interruptions in the flow of his narrative and his insistence upon the reflexive voice of the narrator remind the reader that the narrative is contained within his persona. When he describes Dennis Plunkett's past, he inserts, "He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme / of this work, this fiction, since every "I" is a / fiction finally. Phantom narrator, resume" (V.II.28). Not only does Walcott seem to speak directly to the reader from the voice of the narrator, his inclusion of the phrase "Phantom narrator, resume" makes the reader conscious of the many layers constructed within the poem. Walcott wants the reader to know that such a break in the narrative is intentional and purposeful.

As the narrator continues his quest, upon his arrival in Europe, he thinks, "My shadow had preceded me. How else could it recognize / that light to which it was attached, this port where Europe / rose with its terrors and terraces, slope after slope?" (XXXVII.II.191). Walcott firmly claims a place for himself in Europe upon his

²⁴ Friedman believes that "Walcott's quest to be rooted on his island becomes really a quest to be rooted in the world at large; he comes, through the writing of the poem, to find both an internalized sense of home and the confidence in his own poetic voice that it depends on" (456).

arrival. He finds that Europe itself is fragmented. When he visits Ireland, Maud's country of origin, he discovers a post-colonial Europe:

[t]he weight of the place, its handle, its ancient name

for 'wood with a lake,' or 'abbey with hooded hills,'

... echoed the old shame / of disenfranchisement. [He] had no oasis,

no pebbled language to drink from like a calm horse

or pilgrim lapping up soul-watering places" (XXXIX.I.198-99).

Ireland is a place of disenfranchisement for Walcott, one where there is a lack of "pebbled language," a lack of a creole language. However, Ireland is also the birthplace of James Joyce, "Muse of our age's Omeros, undimmed Master / and true tenor of the place," who signifies the modern and in whose voice the narrator claims to have "blest [him]self." The narrator also claims commonality with Ireland for the Caribbean as he "murmur[s] along" with Maud Plunkett and Thomas Moore, Ireland's national bard, as "Mr. Joyce led [them] all, ... / his voice like sun-drizzled Howth" (XXXIX.III.200). Through connecting with Joyce's writings, and specifically the concept of the Ireland's construction of nationalism through song,²⁵ Walcott claims a relationship to this side of Europe and aligns his work with the modern, post-colonial work of Joyce, aligning Caribbean and Irish post-coloniality.

²⁵ Thomas Moore was a famous nationalist Irish poet, singer and songwriter.

On the other hand, while Walcott finds this connection to Europe, he discovers another imperial Europe whose “weight of cities... [he] found so hard to bear” for, he writes,

in them was the terror of Time, that I would march
with columns at twilight, only to disappear
into a past whose history echoed the arch

of bridges sighing over their ancient canals
for a place that was not mine, since what I preferred
was not statues but the bird in the statue’s hair. (XL.III.204)

The narrator finds it difficult to accept columns, bridges, canals and statues, the relics of empire. Instead, he is interested in the contemporary, in the “bird in the statue’s hair,” not the glorification of colonialism but rather the modern reinterpretation of it.

For Walcott, North America holds a different significance. While Europe contains the former colonizer as well as the Irish post-colonial, the history of North America is similar to that of the Caribbean. Unlike his musings as he traverses the Old World, when the narrator travels in the New World, his musings become reflective. As he learns of the history of the Trail of Tears from a guide, he writes,

Then I made myself hear the water’s
language...

and how Greek it was, the necessary evil
of slavery, in the catalogue of Georgia’s

marble past, the Jeffersonian ideal in
 plantations with its Hectors and Achillesees,
 its foam in the dogwood's spray, past towns named Helen,

Athens, Sparta, Troy. The slave shacks, the rolling peace
 of the wave-rolling meadows, oak, pine, and pecan,
 and a creek like this one. From the window I saw

the bundles of women moving in ragged bands
 like those on the wharf, headed for Oklahoma;
 then I saw Seven Seas, a rattle in his hands...

terror in the oaks along red country roads,

or the gibbet branches of a silk-cotton tree

from which Afolabes hung like bats. (XXXV.I.177-78)

The New World of North America is comparable to the Caribbean for Walcott. A similar history of brutality and slavery permeates both regions, and likewise, remnants of an empire remain as testament in the naming of towns, the plantations with Hectors and Achillesees, the native women on the Trail of Tears like the women on the wharf, and the lynching of Afolabes. However, even while Walcott seems to find a connection with this New World, he also believes that “[t]he New World was

wide enough for a new Eden / of various Adams” (XXXV.III.181). While Walcott makes room for the creation of a new valued world, he also makes room for the creation of multiple cultures within this New World of the Americas, a world which allows for the existence of multiple heroes. Walcott’s text insists on layers of connections. While the peoples of the Caribbean are bound by a Caribbean nationality, the people of the New World and the people of the Americas, are also bound by a common history and similar experiences.

Because of this connection, as he travels in North America, Walcott finds that he is able to blur the lines between his own consciousness and that of Catherine Weldon as he reflects on his writing:

When one grief afflicts us we choose a sharper grief
 in hope that enormity will ease affliction,
 so Catherine Weldon rose in high relief

through the thin page of a cloud, making a fiction
 of my own loss. I was searching for characters,
 and in her shawled voice I heard the snow that would be blown

when the wind covered the tracks of the Dakotas,
 the Sioux, and the Crows; my sorrow had been replaced.

Like a swift over water, her pen’s shadow raced” (XXXV.III.181).

This use of meta-textuality identifies the possibility of the translation of sentiment across national lines; Weldon’s sorrow overshadows Walcott’s. It also creates a

connection between the characters of Walcott and Weldon, both of whom are strongly connected to the histories of their regions. As a result, the connection between these characters translates into a connection between the two New Worlds, Weldon representing North America and Walcott representing the Caribbean. At the same time, America is markedly distinguished from the Caribbean through this description of the Trail of Tears, a phenomenon particular to America. While the Trail of Tears is an event specific to North America, the violence done to indigenous peoples of the Caribbean maintains the connection Walcott establishes. Within the new global world that Walcott, the Caribbean travel writer constructs, the Caribbean is similar but notably distinguished from North America.

When he returns to St. Lucia, the narrator grapples with his own privilege of global mobility. On his first return to the island, Walcott confronts his parents, his ancestral roots on the island. Even in his interaction with his parents, the most tangible manifestation of the narrator's roots in his homeland, Walcott finds that his connections to other worlds lies in his duty to represent the Caribbean to the global world. When he interacts with the memory of his father, Walcott finds his literary roots as Warwick Walcott narrates his own history whose connection with literature was limited to the barbershop where "[o]n their varnished rack, / *The World's Great Classics* read backwards in [the barber's] mirrors / where he doubled as my chamberlain. I was known / for quoting from them as he was for his scissors" (XII.I.71). Walcott's literary training was born in a St. Lucian barbershop; the book becomes as much a part of the scenery of the barbershop as much as the mirror or the scissors, claiming an inherent literacy for the Caribbean. The author's father

demarcates his son's "duty" to represent his "native town, / unknown, raw, insignificant" in "ancestral rhyme." The narrator's task is to use the language whose "desire [is] to enclose the loved world in its arms" in order "to give those feet [which no one knows] a voice." Furthermore this task becomes a way for the narrator to represent the unnamed people of St. Lucia within texts which will then "achieve that height / whose wooden planks in couplets lift your pages / higher than those hills of infernal anthracite" (XIII.III.75-76). The height Warwick refers to stems from his ancestral rhyme and is firmly rooted in St. Lucia but is perceived by the world. His description of Walcott's task directly defines Walcott's aims in his writing of the Caribbean epic and also frames Walcott's journey as a Caribbean travel writer. Walcott's father directly references the politics behind the construction of a text such as *Omeros*.

If his father calls him to create such a text, the narrator's mother understands her son as existing between worlds. Even through her amnesia when the narrator visits her in St. Lucia and tells her he must return to the States, she responds, "Well, we can't be together all the time... I know who you are. You are my son. Warwick's son... Nature's gentleman" (XXXII.I.166). She remembers him because of his ancestral relationships, and her recognition of his connection to his literate father as well as "Nature's gentleman" suggests that she understands the task he has been given by his father, a task he is reminded of as he returns to his travels. Even as he at first feels disconnected from the place, a place where he finds "untranslatable / answers accompanied these actual spirits / who had forgotten me as much as I, too, had / forgotten a continent in the narrow streets," he "hea[rs] patois again, as [his]

ears unclogged” (XXXII.II.167). Walcott returns to the States with his identity as a St. Lucian intact by reconnecting with the vernacular. Walcott’s interaction with both his parents indicates that he is grounded on the island of St. Lucia; simultaneously, his literary conscience, intricately woven into his sense of self, is born out of his Caribbean-ness. These interactions with “memories” of his parents (his father seems to be a ghost character, and his mother has some form of amnesia) serve to frame his travels and refocus his journey.²⁶ He will only establish St. Lucia as his home when he has traversed the globe, visiting and evaluating the Old and New Worlds.

After visiting both Old and New Worlds, Walcott returns to St. Lucia where he reflects on his duty as a writer. On one hand, he questions his own intentions, thinking to himself, “Didn’t I want the poor / to stay in the same light so that I could transfix / them in amber, the afterglow of an empire...?” (XLV.II.227). He describes the driver of the taxi he takes:

His back could have been Hector’s ferrying tourists
 in the other direction home, the leopard seat
 scratching their damp backs like the fur-covered armrests.

He had driven his burnt-out cargo, tired of sweat,
 who longed for snow on the moon and didn’t have time to face
 the heat of that sinking sun, who knew a climate

as monotonous as this one could only produce

²⁶ This is a common trope in ancient Homeric epic as well. Aeneas’ interaction with the ghost of his father, Anchises, serves to refocus his journey, and Odysseus, too, speaks to his father. It also exists in the Virgilian epic as Aeneas visits his father in the Underworld.

from its unvarying vegetation flashes
of a primal insight like those red-pronged lilies

that shot from the verge, that their dried calabashes
of fake African masks for a fake Achilles

rattled with the seeds that came from other men's minds. (XLV.II.228)

The narrator reiterates the possibility that he and Hector could have been in the same position, a possibility which reflects a connection to the people of St. Lucia and his claim to the island as home. In this view of the Caribbean, attributed to "other men's minds," the Caribbean becomes seemingly two-dimensional and boring with its "monotonous" climate, "unvarying vegetation," and it is "primal." These "other men," tourists, produce a paternalistic narrative reflective of earlier colonial narratives about the Caribbean when they seem to pity the driver for his unfortunate primal life of monotony. In this reflection of his homeland, Walcott recognizes Europe and Africa as points of authenticity; he claims these two Old Worlds as ones which contain real Achilleses and real African masks respectively. However, on the flip side of this view and in the same breath, Walcott responds,

So let them think that. Who needed art in this place
where even the old women strode with stiff-backed spines,
and the fishermen had such adept thumbs, such grace

these people had, but what they envied most in them
was the calypso part, the Caribbean lilt

still in the shells of their ears, like the surf's rhythm,

until too much happiness was shadowed with guilt

like any Eden, and they sighed at the sign:

HEWANNORRA (Iounalao), the gold sea

flat as a credit-card, extending its line

to a beach that now looked just like everywhere else,

Greece or Hawaii. Now the goddamn souvenir

felt absurd, excessive. The painted gourds, the shells.

Their own faces as brown as gourds. Mine felt as strange

as those at the counter feeling their bodies change. (XLV.II.229)

St. Lucia's place in the world is reflected in the narrator's interactions with the island.

If the character of Achilles and African masks are authentic to Europe and Africa respectively, then Walcott identifies "calypso" and "Caribbean lilt" as authentic to the Caribbean and as markers of the polyglossia and creole Caribbean. However, Walcott complicates this idea of authenticity with the notion of the sea as flat as a credit-card, an image which suggests commodification and a reference to the continued impact of global imperialism through tourism.

Through the figure of the post-colonial Caribbean travel writer, Walcott portrays the Caribbean as having a unique Caribbean lilt. In her discussion of the

nation, Patricia Joan Saunders points to the need for postcolonial subjects in the Caribbean to reimagine themselves and their existence in the world but notes that the act of looking back or reflecting is not an effort to return to a romanticized linear narrative of forward progress, but an effort to reverse into Selves that have been buried and silenced within the recesses of institutional discourses on identity and being.” (Saunders 3)

Walcott too echoes this sentiment when he thinks of having the ability to re-enter a “reversible world” as he travels spatially and temporally between the Old World and the New World (XLI.II.207). This reversal into the self becomes an unearthing of the containment of many worlds within the character of the narrator. Zoppi believes too that Walcott portrays “the West Indies as an example of a historical situation in which new realities have been created from the stratification of ‘dominations,’” and that *Omeros* shows that contemporary epic “can only be ‘updated’” (Zoppi 527).

Walcott’s writing of *Omeros* not only portrays the West Indies as a space where multiple realities exist as Zoppi suggests but also that these realities are housed within the construction of the character of the author/narrator. What Zoppi recognizes as an updating of the epic points not just to the subject of epic becoming History with a capital “H” as she puts it instead of military ethic as does the ancient epic, but also the intersection of History with the present within lived experience, the experiences of the narrator.

5 - CONCLUSION

Even as Walcott evades referring to *Omeros* as an epic, the poem he has created claims to be a modern Caribbean expression of the genre. It employs the form, plot, characters, language and characteristics of the classical epic though it modifies and modernizes these accepted canonical features to fit the Caribbean. Through these alterations of form, *Omeros* insist on multiple heroes who embody a Caribbean nationalism based on the exploration of their ancestry through remembering and through their relationship to St. Lucia in its three manifestations: the landscape, the iguana and the character of Helen. The Caribbean hero embodies a dual consciousness, the insular perception from within the Caribbean and the relational perception between the Caribbean and the world. This dual consciousness is particularly embodied by Walcott's narrator, the modern Caribbean travel writer.

Walcott identifies with the narrator, thus conflating narrator and author.²⁷ Because authors from post-colonial nations are often read as representative of their people, the interaction between the author/narrator of the poem becomes representative of the interaction between the Caribbean and the Old and New Worlds portrayed in *Omeros*. Furthermore, it permits *Omeros* a meta-textual quality as the narrator pauses on occasion to reflect on his own writing. When he pauses to reflect on his writings or on his characters, when he constructs *Omeros* as a meta-text,

²⁷ Most scholars acknowledge this, as within *Omeros*, the narrator's father bears the same name as Walcott's father, and the narrator is also the author of the lives of the other characters in the same way that Walcott authors *Omeros*. Walcott has also acknowledged this connection in interviews, as cited earlier (Breslin 242).

Walcott creates a persona for himself as a writer who is able to uncover the attribute of Caribbean identity in dialogue with other parts of the world.

His identification with the author/narrator invites the reader to always be aware of Derek Walcott, the writer. While Walcott explores insular and relational views of the Caribbean in his epic, the politics surrounding the publication, distribution and attention given to *Omeros* has reflected some of the key conflicts Walcott identifies in his text, particularly the place of the Caribbean in the global world. The attention *Omeros* garnered heightened when Walcott was awarded the Nobel Laureate in 1992. In his writing on Walcott as a Nobel Laureate, Breslow acknowledges Walcott's successful reconfiguration of the epic genre and concludes his review with the following statement:

We may detect in Walcott's microcosmic Caribbean a paradigm for the most tolerant, mutually enriching coexistence of all the world's voices. Most wonderful of all, Walcott thoroughly exemplifies a 'both/and' global political and cultural philosophy rather than an 'either/or' divisive one. The Swedish Academy has certainly perceived this, and my congratulations go to its members for their choice, as well as to this profoundly accomplished, inspirational author whom they have lauded. (Breslow 271)

While Breslow's review of Walcott's work praises the author's abilities, other reviews have been much less kind. Jonathan Martin takes up the question of the resolution of *Omeros*:

But contrary to Walcott's hopeful conclusion, *Omeros* marks no new access of freedom for its author from the coils of history, and the poem offers no

evidence that Walcott has resolved the antinomies of his birth and dual heritage. On the contrary, with its wild veerings among exquisite pastoral, novelistic character analysis, and the posturing of a poet who knows no measure, *Omeros* is the purest expression yet of those contradictions, the surest proof possible that Walcott remains the kind of exemplary victim whose suffering evokes in the spectator-reader a mixture of pity and fear. Yet, if Derek Walcott shares the tragic hero's fatal propensity for overreaching, he shares too the qualities of magnitude and courage which often compensate for a multitude of lesser sins. Like its author, *Omeros* is a large work, largely flawed as well as greatly gifted, one more testament of the Mariner's need to rehearse the details of his inscrutable sin, and the manner in which he shall soon, very soon, slip from its grasp. (Martin 204)

Martin finds the resolution of *Omeros* unsatisfactory as he suggests the poet's sin is constructing a text that offers "no evidence that Walcott has resolved the antinomies of his birth and dual heritage." However, Martin misreads the ending and conclusions to which Walcott guides his readers. The narrator acknowledges his journey as he states, "I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; / her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking / basins of a globe" (LXIII.III.319). He followed the swift at a time when he felt like a diasporic hyphenated being, akin to the bird. However, Walcott ends the epic writing from the place he has founded and the place he claims as home as he "lie[s] wrapped in a flour-sack sail" (LXIV.I.321). At the conclusion of the epic, Walcott invokes the Caribbean: "let the deep hymn / of the Caribbean continue my epilogue" (LXIV.I.321). While the project of defining the Caribbean has

origins in Homer as is suggested by the initial invocation of the classical poet as a muse, the successful founding of the Caribbean through the publication of *Omeros* results in a new muse, the Caribbean hymn, a hymn which reflects the “Caribbean lilt” and “calypso” native to the region which continues to be defined. The image of the continuous yet constant Caribbean lingers in the mind of the reader with the final line of Walcott’s modern Caribbean epic, “When he left the beach the sea was still going on” (LXIV.III.325).

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