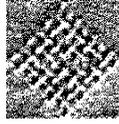


Tout Moun

Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

*Seeking Space
Shaping Aesthetics*

Caribbean Interrogation of the Empire's Foundation Myths



GENEVIEVE RUTH PHAGOO

The sense of the void, the hole of time, can be an idea of nothingness that fosters dislocation. In Caribbean thought it is often at the heart of the traumatised Caribbean psyche that is perpetually seeking wholeness through re-establishing roots. While the early English crafted a single root using the Trojan and Arthurian myths to reconstruct a history lost through Norman colonisation, Caribbean thinkers like Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott revisit their own eclipsed cross-cultural histories and remythologise their existence, through the imagination which offers infinite possibilities for recovery from the oblivion of the void which is re-interpreted as a psychic space filled with creative potential expressed through limitless narrative fictions. Despite the disparateness of British identity/nascent nationalism/full blown nationalism possessed by many Caribbean territories and the Caribbean struggle for a cohesive identity, England and the Caribbean come to the stories of Troy with a shared understanding that they have a recoverable past.

The Caribbean experienced colonisation quite differently from the early English which informed the way the archipelago constructs national identity. The intense loss of home, identity, family, language and connectivity that enslaved Africans in particular suffered via the Middle Passage, is different from the experiences of the early English who managed to retain a sense of identity and home, a sense of connectivity with the land and with each other. This facilitated an idea of rootedness for the English as opposed to an impulse to draw from multiple cultures that we find in the Caribbean, perpetuated in part by the continuing movement of peoples.

While the early English desired a totalitarian Trojan and Arthurian root to homogenise Englishness and establish rigid hierarchies, Caribbeanness is represented by the heterogeneous rhizome, as Édouard Glissant sees it. The notion of the void is linked to the concept of the rhizome at its base, which constitutes a leap of the imagination to create a bridge with the past through temporal interweaving of the future and spectres of the past. Useful in conceptualising constructions of identity, the rhizome is an assemblage of connected multiplicities, without centre or origin, whose premise is connection: “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze, and Guattari 7).

Its heterogeneous nature is perpetually in a state of flux, of becoming, always growing and discarding old connections, without single origins or hierarchies as it establishes horizontal

connections. To Glissant, this responds to the abyss of the Caribbean past, where the nature of the rhizome loosens fixities of identity, time and history, since the rhizome opens avenues for cross-cultural diversity, destabilising Western hegemonies. A third space, an interstitial space, opens between oppositional frames of identity which allows new multiplicities to thrive in new perceptual landscapes, without single reductionist realities that stem from a static past.

Harris's theories of time, art, myth and genre are significant in offering an alternative discourse of the Caribbean subject, empowering and validating buried cross-cultural ancestries. Creatively reviewing history involves a re-evaluation of progressive, linear time. Harris speaks of the consolidating agenda of the "static clock" where colonial experience is measured in carceral European accounts of history ("Continuity" 172). To Harris, "time has precedence over the conception of space," where "the architecture of space is temporal in that it designates, through a subtle dialectic, a temporalising of space *and* a spacing of time" (Chowdhury 126). Revisioning time recovers an artistic space to retrieve those others confined to the abyss of non-existence. Colonial dominance meant indigenous subordination to Western principles of cultural order, where, as Glissant says, "the control of nature, and of one's nature, by culture was the ideal of the Western mind" (*Caribbean Discourse* 73).

In his rejection of linear history, Harris conceives of a cross cultural womb of space and time, "an invisible arch, an invisible text, running from the ancient world into the originality of the future" which contains the spiritual legacy of the past and the potentiality of the future ("Unfinished Genesis" 239). This infinite time, the time of "*unfinished* knowledge, unfinished genesis of the Imagination" in which humans interact with the living landscape, is multi-layered and irreversible ("Merlin" 63); it is a space where "one pre-incarnates, one post-incarnates, one prolongs the self in the fable of history" (Bundy 26). Harris's concept of paradox opens a space for those contradictions within a world divided by binary logic, into which complexities of alterity are absorbed. In this "paradoxical womb," the genesis of imagination as it relates to infinite time and consciousness has the power to create a borderless space that destabilises monolithic logics, as time becomes "open and transformative, rather than static and imitative, multi-racial rather than racial" ("Phenomenal Legacy" 47, 44).

Harris's argument is that infinite time, preserved in oral memory, could never produce a totalitarian account of history, unlike the linearity of Western time which has produced single documented "truths." Thus, revisioning linear time allows for the infinite potentialities of the creative imagination to bridge cross-cultural chasms. The continuous creativity of art upsets Western linearity to include the "historylessness" of the "fortressed individual" imprisoned by lost cultural legacies and who is therefore unable to appreciate the possibilities of life, both latent and present ("History, Fable and Myth" 159; "Apprenticeship to the Furies" 223). This will recover the stasis and silence of the void of eclipsed historical place and time. The temporal void, as Harris imagines it, by virtue of its infiniteness, is incomplete and therefore fluid, unlike static completeness. This void is the "*insoluble* paradox" of the thread of wholeness that provides

temporal continuity within temporal variables ("Unfinished Genesis" 241). The wholeness of continuity is to be found in the scope of the imagination where the "paradoxical tapestry of spectrality" – the myriad presences of the past – intermingles with the now ("Unfinished Genesis" 241). Harris' metaphor of the beggar's mask illustrates his rejection of temporal linearity as the fissures and gaps in the mask represent the chasm, the abyss of history and allow the resurrection of those victims of history behind the eyes of the beggar.

The notion of spectrality, the spectre as possibility, offers potential to revision and deconstruct sites of historio-cultural conflict, as "the thinking of the spectre...signals toward the future...[it]is the thinking of the past, a legacy that can come only from that which has not yet arrived – from the *arrivant* itself" (Derrida 196). The ghostly return of the *revenant* is a return to oneself through revisioning time. As Derrida says, "they are always *there*, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet (221). Therefore, spectres can originate from two heterogeneous times, the past and the future, each with the possibility of appearing in the other in double synchronicity. This idea of spectrality in a way accounts for the return of ancient European myths, along with other ancestral myths that reside in the unconscious of the Caribbean subject and are creatively revived through art. Their spectres can be summoned forth as in *Hamlet*. But perhaps Derrida's sense of spectrality and the return "to oneself through revisioning time" differs from Harris' who needs to shape a new figure, that of the phantom limb to suggest *both* emptiness and presence, an unforgotten absence.

Derrida's notion of hauntology asserts that there is no symmetry between the past and the future; spectres of the past are only conjured when there is the promise of an alternative future based on the same past. Harris's tapestry of spectrality speaks to the interwoven multitude of cross-cultural spectral presences that inhabit the Caribbean persona, a notion which finds articulation in the Anansi-like web of cross-cultural and trans-historical horizons, expressed through the motif of the wound in Walcott's *Omeros*. The spectres and ghosts, "there in the blood of the living, ghosts of the living past and unborn future" that haunt *Omeros* are the trope that challenges binary constructs that define alterity (Harris, "Apprenticeship to the Furies" 218). In *Omeros*, there is the notion of the haunting of eclipsed narratives of the Caribbean peoples which are part of the synchronous relationships present in the text.

Conceptualising time as infinite allows for the creation of a narrative framework that re-values those traditionally dispossessed and the un-recorded. Infinite time weakens History's authority and creates an artistic space for the New World experience which comprises a cross-cultural jigsaw, as Harris calls it, where fragments of 'pasts' and 'presents' and likely or unlikely 'futures' located in the collective Caribbean unconscious are excavated to create a bridge to the chasms in historical memory ("Letter" 48). These fragments of history operate together onstage in what Harris identifies as a "Memory theatre," a series of stages "upon which one retraces one's steps into a labyrinth of deprivations and apparent losses, where "[e]xtinction'...grew into many parts...bodily extensions, masks, limbs, prompted and sculpted by the comedy of ghosts within

active traditions" (50). The idea of comedy, of theatre, speaks to the multiplicity of loss, ancestral presences and Glissant's concept of the rhizome. Simultaneity, as the vehicle for syncretism, allows the cross-cultural latent selves and worlds of the ignored and forgotten to be performatively remembered through adventures that Caribbean people have undergone together.

The idea of the memory theatre provides a space that brings together those spectres, histories and experiences stored in the Caribbean unconscious. It operates as a drama of consciousness which unravels the imprisoned memory of the New World African to recover and people the void. Through simultaneity, parallel existences are revealed through a web of immaterial connections with ghostly presences that reside in the memory. The imagination of all great writers gestates in the womb of space as they have a similar grasp of the archetypal imagination, sharing and experiencing the historical spectres of the Caribbean experience that fuel art. Re-membering the brutal legacy of colonialism activates or unlocks sites of creativity "beyond all cults, or closures, or frames" such as colonial frameworks of time, documented history and hegemonic binaries ("Letter" 50).

The act of memory retrieval and the exploration of the transformative possibilities of the wound of history allow for the construction of an inclusive, multicultural national narrative. Creating such narratives involves acknowledging multiple histories, inclusive of that of the oppressor, to achieve culturally syncretic wholeness. When Harris speaks of cultural syncretism achieved through unlocking archetypes, he includes the "European skeletons and archetypes" that are so deeply interlocked with Caribbean histories ("Wilson Harris interviewed by Alan Riach" 40-41). With this inclusion, there will be a more encompassing understanding of cultural hybridity in the Caribbean, beneficial to any endeavour to craft a national identity.

The return to beginnings works to craft a notion of a syncretic "architecture of cultures" that is Caribbean ancestry, connected by the cross-fertilisation of histories of displacement and inequality (Harris, "History, Fable and Myth" 152). The word "architecture" for Harris aptly describes a gateway culture, and a community involved in the reconstructions of myth in the process of self-determination, which is the hallmark of Caribbean effort. This complex definition of hybridity is metaphorised by the limbo, which Harris identifies as a "new corpus of sensibility" that encompasses African *as well as* other legacies – Christian, Indian, Amerindian and European ("History, Fable and Myth" 152). Harris' limbo metaphor complicates Derrida's idea of spectre and also the concept of hybridity.

Shalini Puri argues against the essentialising evident within conceptualisations of hybridity in the Caribbean and advocates for a consideration of multiplicity, instead of generalisation, in defining hybridity (3), a view supported by Stuart Hall in his re-definition of a hybrid diasporic identity which involves recognising "necessary heterogeneity and diversity" in the constructs of identity which are based on "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through

transformation and difference" ("Cultural Identity" 235). Bhabha argues that constructions of nation and culture are narratives derived from hybrid sites of conflict, from interstitial spaces where "intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" which empower cultural hybridities (*Location of Culture* 2). However, this "interstitial perspective", or "'middle passage' of contemporary culture" as Bhabha calls it, fosters within the nation-space the notion of "cultural liminality *within the nation*" (3, 5, 148). This ensures that "no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves" (Bhabha 148).

Indeed, Bhabha's discourse on cultural hybridity as it relates to cultural difference somewhat evades the issue of its role in creating a national collective as he effectively theorises a delinking of cultural and political nationalisms. Shalini Puri critiques Bhabha, saying that his "valorization of a formal deconstruction of narrative authority displaces any exploration of the continuing effects of power and inequality as well as any work to construct an opposition to that inequality" (22). Puri outlines the flaws of theorising hybridity, arguing that hybridity is often generalised as a "synthetic transcendence of tyrannical and reductive binary oppositions" conceptualised in terms of East/West, which ignores power relations in more "local" processes of cultural hybridisation (38). In other words, hybridity discourse, for thinkers like Bhabha, becomes merely academic, an "intellectual version of 'we are the world'" (Puri 40), highly theoretical, but lacking in practical application. But Puri is not simply discarding the concept, emphatically stating that "the very vision of the Caribbean as a place of historical possibility turns on the question of hybridity" (43). She suggests instead that the discourse has to "recontextualise migrancy," affording it "a privileged epistemological and political vantage point" (40).

Migrancy complicates traditional Western essentialist perspectives of the formerly colonised. This finds expression in new avenues of creativity and literary potential seen, for example, in *Omeros* which attempts to demonstrate a multicultural and multiracial nation, through privileging the forms of plural indigenous ancestral origins, framed in neo-colonialism to negotiate the issue of hybridity within a nation state. Not only does Walcott's discourse of hybridity in *Omeros* decentre institutions of power and inequality, it also engages issues of language, ethnicity and indeed genre. Hybridity, the result of generations of racial intermingling, creates in the New World, a new group of people resisting totalising Western racial boundaries, and who, therefore, hold cultural potential as a consequence of genetic cross-cultural diversity.

Within hybrid Caribbean consciousness those vestiges of cross-cultural ancestries are revived in the present through the creative potential of art. To Harris, art is spiritual, "steeped in numinous inexactitudes" as the portal to unity of the self, where "fluid identity creates a number of windows into reality" ("Profiles of Myth" 197). These inexactitudes, spiritual voices of nature that are heard but remain incomprehensible, evolved from inadequacies of native representation in traditional linear narratives, and can be revived through transformation into archetype. Their inexact nature

undermines absolutes, monolithic discourses, and creates an infinite space for the imagination to project itself.

Harris speaks of the “extreme originality” of specific aspects of the Caribbean’s brutal history and relates it to “humanity” rather than to a particular race or culture of a people (“Phenomenal Legacy” 45). The “extreme originality” which is the historio-cultural context of the Caribbean, lies outside of usual ethnic, national or regional frameworks. Rather, unity is located in the “absolute medium of consciousness which we must learn to accept as the language of art” (45, 47). Art, therefore, as a creative resource of the imagination, has the power to bridge temporal and spatial chasms, and link versions of the self that lie dormant in the psyche, operating as “a gateway between living and dead worlds, black and white habit or wake of memory” (46), producing an imagined unity in the Caribbean collective.

Harris’s discussion of art as a gateway, or portal, is significant as this concept lies at the heart of simultaneity where the artist is able to move between worlds of time and space. Simultaneity, according to Harris, is the “imaginary response to gestating resources in *the womb of the present and the past,*” which offers historical and cultural continuity with a capacity “for renewal of an inner dynamic of a universal civilisation” (“Creoleness” 231). Simultaneity, a temporal phenomenon, occurs when the echoes and presences that reside deep within the unconscious in a state of latency are unearthed by art, and brought to a state of parallel coexistence with the present, thus allowing primordial images to be transported to different realms of existence – past and present. Latency is linked to the notion of the Jungian collective unconscious, a fundamental and deeper layer of the unconscious that universally links all humanity together. The collective unconscious, according to Jung, is a “storehouse of latent memory traces inherited from man’s ancestral past, a past that includes not only the racial history of man as a separate species but his pre-human or animal ancestry as well” (Hall and Lindzey 80).

In other words, human beings are born with entire networks of behaviour, with traces of pre-existence already existing in their unconscious. And, through simultaneity, art has the capacity to access the unconscious and make concrete the latent resources of multiple ancestral personalities and realise the potential for creativity born from diverse strands of ancestral histories. European myths of Trojan and Arthurian ancestry interact and become interwoven with African, Indian, Amerindian and other ancestral and originary myths that are latent within the diasporic psyche of the Caribbean persona.

This sense of the redemptive potential of latency, though dormant and hidden within memory, is utilised by the artist as a portal to genesis. Therefore, having prophetic knowledge of archetypal, human truths, existing through the ages, the artist has the sensibility to move between past and present to rediscover these truths from pre-existing works, like the figure of Lazarus in the bible, or from pre-Columbian times like Quetzalcoatl, and experience the times that have existed in previous ages. Harris and Walcott share this concept of truth that fiction discovers via the artistic

sensibility, but while Harris speaks of a sliding gateway to truth that opens via the route of creative consciousness, Walcott speaks of it as a simultaneous truth that is present in all ages.

Simultaneity activates those mythic presences latent in the imagination, evoking a “rainbow arc” between times and worlds which has creative and resuscitating power. Harris’s notion of the rainbow arc perceptualises “a creation bridge or myth between sky and earth at a time of catastrophe when a new genesis or vision has become necessary” (*Womb* 50). The cross-cultural poetic of the “rainbow arc” shows that creative force can be derived from pain (50). The rainbow arc, through simultaneity, also connects with the Carib bone-flute, a musical instrument crafted from the bones of the Caribs’ war victims. When the flute is played, a bridge is created with the past and the ghosts of past victors are reactivated and sublimated.¹ The bone-flute is an archetype that holds within it “the blood of the imagination” for generations and has the power to produce manifestations of past lives through memory (“Music of Living Landscapes” 41).

This trope of rebirth enables frames that give art the capacity of temporal fluidity to negotiate loss “as ultimate block,” or provide therapy as a fissure of re-birth to conceptualise limitless unknown futures although “they exist paradoxically in the heights and the depths of eclipsed present and past” (“The Schizophrenic Sea” 102). The bridge that the arc provides absorbs the reductionist binaries of identity that conquest introduced and makes visible a space of infinite variety and future possibility. The mythic manifestation of this bridge in the Caribbean imagination is the motif of wings, “to fly home across the sea” and “an African cult of wings in a tree of life and death” (Harris, “Jean Rhys” 116).²

Marginal societies revitalise myths to illuminate the essence of an identity that has been traditionally regarded as irrelevant and incoherent. It is an identity that reflects “inner confidence” and “inner hope” realised “*through* fissures of capacity in which the scope and the potentials of buried traditions revision themselves (Harris, “Literacy” 85). In the Caribbean context, the mythic imagination offers re-negotiated futures free of the loss and dislocation created by the static colonial past. As Harris notes: “To arrive in a tradition that appears to have died is complex renewal and revisionary momentum *sprung from originality and the activation of primordial resources within a living language*” (“Quetzalcoatl” 180). Through myth’s imaginative interaction with history, then, the absolutes of imperial historical binarism are scrutinised through

¹ The meaning of the Carib bone flute should be cited in full. “The Carib bone flute was hollowed out from the bone of an enemy in time of war. Flesh was plucked and consumed and in the process secrets were digested. Spectres arose from, or reposed in, the flute. [The anthropologist Michael] Swan identifies this flute of soul with ‘transubstantiation in reverse.’ In parallel with an obvious violation ran therefore, it seems to me, another subtle force resembling yet differing from terror in that the flute became the home or curiously mutual fortress of spirit between enemy and other, an organ of self-knowledge suffused with enemy bias so close to native greed for victory.” See Harris, *The Guyana Quartet* 9-10.

² See Walcott’s pervasive use of this motif in *Omeros* later on.

engagements with latent possibility, those “eclipsed proportions one needs to unravel” (“Reflection and Vision” 83). Myth, as an affirmation of existence, with its temporal flexibility, penetrates the myopia of linear, documented history as it engages the communal collective, specifically as a reaction to or reflection of the desire of a depressed community to be transformed, to be regenerated out of a context of shared historical trauma. That uncolonisable imaginary of the Caribbean’s cross-cultural heritage, intermingled in diverse mythic tributaries, allows for an expression of historical trauma and enfranchises traditionally debased heritages.

The interaction of myth and history, taking into account diverse Caribbean ancestries, therefore, finds literary expression in “the subconscious imagination” of the Caribbean’s mythic past, which, according to Wilson Harris, is “a drama of consciousness” reading back “through the shock of place and time for omens of capacity that were latent, unrealized, within the clash of cultures and movements of peoples into the South Americas and West Indies” (“Amerindian Legacy” 164). Glissant writes that, “myth anticipates history as much as it inevitably repeats the accidents that it has glorified; that means it is in turn a producer of history” (*Caribbean Discourse* 71). Therefore, myth allows for the creation of a unified narrative that “forgets” a history of oppression and loss; it is a form of what Harris calls the art of fulfilment, which reforms historical consciousness. Re-mapping the terrain of the living landscape, through art, in Harris’s view, seeks to “visualise a *fulfillment* of character” rather than consolidation of character which moulds the West Indian into established boundaries of commonality such as race and class, for example.

Such consolidation, when considered in the context of the ideology of inherited tradition, invokes the fallibility of tradition in terms of establishing frames of “dogmatic identity and dogmatic homogeneity,” with their related notions of racial purity which are reinforced by “complacent habit into absolutes.” (“Profiles of Myth” 194, 202). Such fulfilment, according to Harris, will not be an effort of mimicry; it would be a transformed and transformative original enterprise that is based on the past, with new complications, edges and elements (“History, Fable and Myth” 156; “Literacy” 84).

The epic’s use of myth has been the traditional platform to valorise and legitimise national hegemonies, imperial conquest and cultural monologism.³ Traditionally, epics have been the literary framework underpinning Europeans’ sense of their own cultural dominance.⁴ They have been influential in establishing European benchmarks for alterity and have been literary justification for Europe’s far reaching history of colonisation. The epic sets up the dialectic of civilisation and barbarism. Conceptually linked to savage wildness and wilderness, sorcery and anarchy, inhabited by beasts (human and otherwise) and dangerously seductive women, the ideological space of the island is perceptually recounted through the lens of the hero, the

³ See, for example, *Beowulf* and *Chanson de Roland*. See also Reichl 55-74.

⁴ See for example Homer’s epic of Greece and Troy and Virgil’s epic of Aeneas and Dido.

outsider, who conquers, and escapes, with an eventual return to “home.” The dual motifs of “wandering” and “homecoming” found in classical epic poetry framed European colonisation efforts long before the “discovery” of tropical islands.

On the surface, the islands of the Aegean share similar geographical traits with the Caribbean, but conceptually, through spatial simultaneity, time is collapsed and ancient Greece becomes analogous with the Caribbean. Traditionally, the coloniser appropriated ancient Greece to validate their monologic hierarchies which denied the colonised any esteem. Written accounts of the colonisation experience constitute a totalising project in Western colonial, imperial discourse, which, utilising the privilege of its literate resources, and through classical privilege, construct a universal narrative which sets Europe at the centre and the uncanonised to the margins. Conceptualising the Caribbean as the Black Aegean, a symmetrical development to Paul Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic, Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson effectively link Africa to ancient Greece and Asia Minor. Re-imagining the Caribbean as a Black Aegean thus empowers colonially subordinated Caribbean histories, and re-negotiates the cultural dependency (39).

To the West Indian, then, “[e]pic is an *arrival* in an architecture of space that is *original* to our age...” (Harris, “Quetzalcoat!” 180). While epic is traditionally viewed as finalised and complete,⁵ for Harris, the epic is symbolic, without the traditional conventions of form and characterisation, where memory is cyclical and relies on mythical indeterminacy. Harris' idea of originality engages epic traditions in a new space where the incomplete past is carried over into the future through a cross cultural gateway, and both exist simultaneously and are continuous. Spatial, rather than temporal, reordering, therefore, removes the tension between tradition and originality as they exist parallel with each other. There is no return to received traditions; instead, there would be the arrival into a new space through an original route.

The epic, therefore, because of its potential for originality, is a genre marked by its openendedness, a genre still in the making as epic inspiration can be mythologically revived and transformed. Thus, Harris is able to argue for the liberating potential of the epic as it is a living open tradition that starkly contrasts the rigid Western regimes that foundationalised Caribbean national identity (“Quetzalcoat!” 182). The re-birth of epic from the native standpoint, instead of from a narrative of privilege, facilitates a “renewed scrutiny” of inequalities bred from Western bias and transforms such inequalities into “*numinous inexactitudes*” (“Quetzalcoat!” 186). These numinous inexactitudes are the spiritual voices of the past that destabilise absolute truth through the very nature of the uncertainty of one's inability to translate their meanings. Therefore, within the tradition of the epic, through the art of storytelling, the linearity of time becomes destabilised

⁵ Bakhtin, for example, argues that “[w]e speak of the epic as a genre that has come down to us already well defined and real. We come upon it when it is almost completely finished, a congealed and half moribund genre. Its completedness, its consistency and its absolute lack of artistic naiveté bespeak its old age as a genre and its lengthy past” (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 14).

and the tradition is spiritually transformed, in what Harris calls a “numinous arrival” in an original space of creativity.

Wilson Harris's exploration of Caribbean consciousness and its artistic expression is useful as a theoretical framework for Walcott's artistic vision in *Omeros*, an *oeuvre* that is a culmination of decades of creative interest in Caribbean history and identity. Yet, conceptualising a New World aesthetic did not originate with Walcott. Almost every Caribbean writer, post 1950, who writes with a sense of national consciousness has been trying to negotiate the idea of the void and the resulting nihilist angst, which often produces “a literature of recrimination and despair,” considering the pervasive, and sometimes crippling sense of loss which accompanied the experience of the Middle Passage (Walcott, “Muse” 37).⁶ Writers like Brathwaite, for example, recognise the cross-cultural potential of the Caribbean when he says “the coral needs this pain” to force growth to produce something of beauty and worth; but it is with a sense of pessimism that he envisages a future of uncertainty, where “hurts of history flicker” and haunt the potential to create (*Arrivants* 232, 249).

When Brathwaite asks, “Which one / of you,...will return / to where this / future paces / and dare / to let it out?” (252-253) Walcott, in a sense, writes back with his vision of an Adamic aesthetic for the New World: “nothing will always be created in the West Indies...because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before” (“Culture or Mimicry” 9). Walcott renegotiates the nothingness of the void and speaks here of its creative potential to produce a new way of seeing and a new Caribbean aesthetic that dismantles the imperial myth of Old World nothingness, thereby liberating the Caribbean consciousness from its persistent sense of loss and betrayal. In place of despair, there is historical cleansing by the curative sea salt for the Caribbean persona who arrived on the shores of the New World, a rebirth of sorts derived from a loss of innocence, which gives a sense of “the possibility of a man and his language waking to wonder here” (“Muse” 53). His rhetorical “Where else to row, but backward?” insists on the need for re-visiting and complicating the psychic monuments of colonial trauma as the impetus for cultural renewal and evolution (*Collected Poems* 217).

Walcott's aesthetic of amnesia re-positions those mechanisms used to conquer indigenous peoples in *Omeros*. Speaking of “all that Greek manure under the green bananas” (271), Walcott simultaneously invokes an aspect of the Caribbean's cultural inheritance, and rejects the imperially transmitted literary authority found in Greek classical myths of origin, and this is linked to the figure of Helen, whom Walcott has made into a very strong woman, who contrasts quite sharply with her classical predecessors. Although she is the target of the men's attempts to re-make her, Walcott gives her the capacity and the power to refuse being Plunkett's mistress, the poet's muse, and the object to be won in Achille and Hector's possessive masculine battle. Helen

⁶ See Naipaul who insisted that “nothing was created in the West Indies” and “these small islands...will never create” (29, 250).

carries a child who beckons the future, which demonstrates that Walcott invests the woman with the power of future potential.

For the slave, “amnesia is the true history of the New World” (“Muse” 39). Redeeming the wound, through cultural assimilation, involves the power of art in its imaginative capacity to forget, forgive and re-create. The colonial legacy of loss that haunts the Caribbean mind is replaced by limitless creativity that the New World engenders. Cultural assimilation, which recovers the past and attempts to empower the Caribbean subject, should be the creative force behind Caribbean endeavours. So amnesia, which is paradoxically the presence of nothing, therefore constitutes a wholeness that compensates for the fragmentation of what Walcott calls “the partial recall of the race” (“Muse” 37). For the amnesiac, the New World is a world “without monuments and ruins” a fertile green space of new beginnings, where imagination creates a scar that remembers the endless history of the multicultural tribe (“Muse” 38).

Returning to the past to re-creatively transform History involves revisioning time. Walcott foregoes chronological time, using mythology's temporal mechanism of simultaneity to explore history. He is not advocating a static return to history; instead, his rower is creatively moving backwards into the future, revisiting myriad landmarks of the past, remembering origins and retrieving lost histories, in a self-actualising voyage of crafting a future. The destination of the rower is “Beyond origins, to the whale's wash, / to the epicanthic Arawak's Hewanora,” which is a pre-Columbian time of unrecorded history (*Collected Poems* 217). In putting forth the image of an unblemished island, the idea of pre-colonial beginnings in a timeless past, Walcott emphasises the need to re-create, to start anew the process of historicisation without being hindered by temporal fixities. He attempts to demonstrate how a culturally diverse people should start to become rather than be fixated on what they were.

Walcott's notion of simultaneity, which allows for temporal fluidity, does appear to be moving towards Harris's, in terms of the motif of the portal; but, to Walcott, simultaneity is a leap of consciousness, a co-existence of similar ways of seeing all the vestiges that exist within the mind, which brings radiance to every great writer's art, while Harris has a spiritualised understanding of the concept, where the spirits of the dead actually return through reincarnation. In *Omeros*, various readings, stories and histories have become presences that are simultaneously present, and present in all ages. His comment that the Caribbean persona is “a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past” engages his idea of the Old World's simultaneity with the New as part of the Caribbean subject's process of becoming (“Muse” 37).

Walcott uses the concept of simultaneity to suggest that the lessons and inherited myths derived from colonialism “haunt” the imaginary of Caribbean writers. In noting this, he also states that these myths are in fact only fictions or fictionalised versions and, in so acknowledging, he then gives himself the freedom to imagine a new myth or a reversal of what the old myths taught in terms of both women and enslavement as well as colonial subjugation. So he opens the door to

the past and invites it in. He says that Caribbean storytellers create in a way that is identical to old story tellers. Our heroes share similar passions. At the end of the day “a girl smells sweeter than a book”. Our myths, like theirs, derive from experiences of love and lust. But as a nationalist and one committed to creating a new aesthetic Walcott appropriates the Helen of Troy stereotype and presents her as resistant, a fighter, even a destructive individual. Her autonomy will destroy what was there before and will enable a new narrative. She, therefore, in this new construction infects the Trojan myth with a new dynamic and one that has always been there in some form. So it is Harris's idea of the existence of the past in the present and the cross cultural influences that shape the present that enables a new image of Helen in *Omeros*. Harris' vision of simultaneity sets up the link for the figure of Helen specifically with latent ideas of female resistance, or more specifically with male writers' recognition of the potential of female resistance and alternatives to their subservience and silence.

Omeros demonstrates the potential that resides within the Caribbean consciousness, once the traumatic historical past is transformed. Walcott also re-visions the pre-Independence and post-Independence rhetoric or narrative of nation that saw both Africa and the male as determining factors of experience. Walcott's double consciousness allows him to use markers of imperial dominance and re-vision them in an attempt to claim for the Caribbean those cultural signs of prestige to craft a national identity that would allow for the realisation of Caribbean potential.

In a sense, Walcott is re-mythologising history, creating new myths out of a syncretised native history, building a communal mythology on which to construct the multicultural Caribbean self, similar to the way the Trojan and Arthurian myths were used by the early English to craft an idea of Englishness. In this way, the enterprise of *Omeros* circles back to the issues of gender, home and identity that engaged the developing English consciousness but with an essential difference in that it assumes a rhizomatic idea of culture and identity.

Walcott argues for the maturity that comes from the cross-cultural assimilation of all ancestries that comprise Caribbean heritage. Himself a study in hybridity, he imagines “a concept of Caribbean culture that legitimizes the range and depth of his own literariness and in the process validates the authenticity of Caribbean literary culture” (Pouchet Paquet 164). Through the retrieval of memory and exploration of the curative possibilities for the wound of exile through “remembering the body from which it has been severed” there can be some effort toward nation building and wholeness of cultural identity (“Antilles” 67). As Hall argues, cultural identity is always transforming, with identities contextualised in the past but subject to ongoing influences of history, culture and power (“Cultural Identity” 394).

With its cross-cultural horizons of memory, *Omeros* is a complex and inclusive discourse of syncretic cultural hybridity. Indeed, as an affirmation of linguistic hybridity, the title *Omeros* is polyvalent. It recalls the classic Homer: “O-meros...that's what we call him in Greek” (14); “O was the conch-shell invocation,” a call to sacred ancestors; “mer was / both mother and sea in our

Antillean patois," which calls, in French both in vocabulary and sound, to the sea as mother, the giver of life and keeper of native history; and "os, a grey bone," a memorial of those drowned in the trans-Atlantic crossing (14). Walcott's agenda is a call to all origins that comprise Caribbean ancestry, of which the European is also a part.

A recurrent metaphor that Walcott uses to represent cultural hybridity is the scar. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, when Walcott mentions restoration, he links it to a wholeness to be derived from re-piecing fragments, where something new can be re-built from shards ("Antilles" 69). Thus, he links fragments of memory with a celebration of new beginnings, rather than the loss of tradition. Fragments have the potential to be coherent, should the artist assume the task of creative archaeologist who unearths and reconstructs those fragments to rebuild gods "phrase by phrase" in a syncretic fusion of language, shared disjunctions and historical chasms ("Antilles" 82). He explains that, "what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessary, as invention" ("Mimicry" 6).

The scar remembers the wound, and in *Omeros*, the wound is hybridised. Ancestral wounds have to be healed to enable progress. While Walcott is known for problematic representations of gender, in particular of women, the focus of *Omeros* is not characterisation *per se*. Instead, Walcott's thrust is the holistic role and function of the genders, as they work together to creatively imagine the national potential. The men are charged with renegotiating historical trauma, and the women hold the future. Woundedness and disease seem to primarily affect the men of *Omeros*. Philoctete's wound of History's human injustice to the African spirit is clearly visible: "puckered like the corolla / of a sea urchin" and is mentioned very early in the poem (4). Major Plunkett has an old head injury (56); Achille suffers an identity crisis; Hector suffers from "a frightening discontent" with both his job and Helen (231). The Walcott persona identifies with Philoctete: "There was no difference / between me and Philoctete...We shared the one wound, the same cure" (245, 295).

The memory of colonisation has left lasting wounds for the Caribbean and all of its people. As Walcott's interest lies in the Americas, even those who did not reside in the Caribbean get representation, as illustrated in *Omeros* by the mirroring of Philoctete's wound in Catherine Weldon's son who died from a wound by "a rusty nail", spanning the wound motif to a different time, territory and tribe (176). Even the landscape bears its wounds, like the volcano with its "wound closed in smoke," smoke that "signalled the thunder / of the dead (59); and the marker of imperial power, the French ship *Ville de Paris* "wallowing in her wounded pride" (85). As Walcott says, "affliction is one theme / of this work" for both oppressor and oppressed alike (28). Walcott hybridises the trope, cross-fertilises it, as Jahan Ramazani notes, with the afflictions of other colonised peoples, reflecting hybridity of "intertextual ancestry" as a "trope of polymorphous diversity within the text" (190).

This “polymorphous diversity” references the cross-racialised, cross-cultural wound, evidenced in Walcott’s white protagonist, Major Plunkett, who, like the Africans of *Omeros*, is also wounded as a casualty of empire. The wounded consciousness of the postcolonial subject is closely linked to feelings of exile, which create a schizophrenia, a theme which resonates through Walcott’s early work. In his 1962 “A Far Cry from Africa,” he speaks of himself in terms of exile and hybridity as “poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?... / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? (*Collected Poems* 18).

Through exploring the cross-fertilised wound which is also in language, as a point of connect in a postcolonial world of disconnect, there is the implicit sense of liberation through acknowledging the hybrid cultural origins of the Caribbean people, leading to the possibility of rebirth and a sense of belonging. A “mulatto of style” that Walcott embraces, reflected in the dislocated Shabine’s “I had no nation now but the imagination”, is “not...the jettisoning of ‘culture’ but...the writer’s making creative use of his schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new” (“Twilight” 9; *Collected Poems* 350; “Twilight 16”). Such schizophrenia, as articulated by Walcott, “is a shadow, a kind of meridian, a crossing that has to be examined” (White 156). The “cultural mixed-ness” that exists in the Caribbean, if not re-assimilated by the creative power of the hybrid, would ensure that the wound of history remains open, keeping the territory “illegitimate, rootless, mongrelized” with the people existing as “fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken” (Huddart 7; “The Antilles” 67-68).

In *Omeros*, Walcott examines the schizophrenia of cultural hybridity in Helen’s mixed ancestry, her clothes, her language and, arguably, her hesitance in giving her child an African name. While she is not specifically called a *mulatta*, she is not purely African, evidenced by her “slanted almond eyes” and her “brown” skin (62, 153). In other instances, her skin is described as ebony, which attests to her different shades of black skin depending on how shadowed she is. Her non-fixity of cultural identity, therefore, resists what Harris calls “dogmatic identity and dogmatic homogeneity,” and embraces the multiplicity of cross-cultural influences that comprise Caribbean identity (“Profiles of Myth” 194). Traditionally, someone possessing African blood, to any degree, faced public ostracism. Racial mixing provoked anxiety, challenging white supremacy as it was thought to produce “many amazing racial hybrids and some ethnic horrors that will be beyond the powers of future anthropologists to unravel” (Grant 90, 92).

This eugenic rhetoric of the West simply endorses the dystopian and mongrelised liminal space that persons who are racially and culturally mixed have to negotiate, and which Walcott makes reference to when he speaks of the “mongrelized” West Indian. More recent regard sees the *mulatto* constructively and positively, which re-values the anomic space they occupy. Teresa C. Zackodnik, for example, comments on the strengthened contemporary image of the hybrid figure of the *mulatta* in terms of race, as she “reaches across, challenges, and confounds the color line”; and in terms of gender as her liminality destabilises “racialized notions of womanhood in order to challenge dominant cultural understandings of such identity categories” (xii). Walcott empowers

his liminal Helen, both woman and land, to upset Western insistence on monolithic authority, and destabilise universals, while re-negotiating Caribbean identity. He thus complicates the myth. Helen's role in *Omeros* provides a new foundation for an idea of Caribbean belonging and marks a transition in the appropriation of myth.

Omeros demonstrates Fanon's three phases of decolonisation: colonial assimilation, doubt, and self-determination (222-223). While Fanon, however, speaks solely of the African past, Walcott's sees the past as multi-culturally inclusive of the past of the coloniser, which indubitably has been assimilated into the psyche of the West Indian. *Omeros*, located in Fanon's last phase of decolonisation, not only gives its author a Homeric role, but also assumes the responsibility of being a "fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature," through its sustained exploration of cross-cultural Caribbean history and its call to arms to forge a future of hope (223). *Omeros* synthesises the Caribbean ancestral imagination. Through the thematic scope of *Omeros*, Walcott becomes that colonised man, who Fanon regards as "an awakener of the people," who "writ[es] for his people us[ing] the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (223, 232).

Omeros relies on an aspect of its colonial heritage for its structure as it uses a classical frame of context, the marker of colonial nobility on which Walcott superimposes a Caribbean consciousness. It is not a mere repositioning of textual authority that Walcott engages in. Rather, he intertextually reformulates original texts and celebrates "the post-colonial in the very stories Europeans have identified as specifically their own – their founding texts of 'master narratives'" (Martyniuk 143). He revisualises the Helen of the Aegean archipelago both as the island of St. Lucia, and as the Helen of St. Lucia, giving his people an identity articulated in their own words, rather than those of their European or African ancestors.⁷ In his Helen, Walcott refigures the Caribbean's colonial legacy into a rebirth of experience, reconceptualising the tumultuous colonial past to assume a new shape that would create the possibility of a positive future.

In creatively reimagining the mythical Trojan backdrop, with its Arthurian resonances, in *Omeros*, Walcott allows memory its freedom to re-envision a self-determining St. Lucian future. This is done through the superimposition of classical mythology, myths of recent past as in the Amerindian re-mythologised through cowboy movies, and the present conflict over a woman called Helen. Here simultaneity serves to provide a mythic truth about the sources of poetry and the catastrophes that lie behind national narratives. The "catastrophe [that] accompanies, or is

⁷ See also the figure of Walcott's medieval knight in "The Flock" which speaks to both his acknowledgement of European tropes like the Arthurian foundation myth in Caribbean literature and his poetic of syncretism in his constructions of the Caribbean persona as the knight takes on the identity of the poet who could be seen as a Crusoe-like figure, the creator who uses the tools available to him, in this case, the pen and the page. Thus, Walcott appropriates the image of the knight, originally a representative of Arthurian imperialism, and uses it to reference yearnings for "our tropic light", migrations and crossings, salient themes in Caribbean thought (77).

associated with, genuine change” which also accompanies self-discovery, offers the promise of rebirth (Harris, “Some Aspects of Myth” 97). Harris theorises that, “[i]t is as if because of the debasement of the psyche over generations and centuries there can be no bypassing some degree of catastrophe as one experiences the regenerative potential of the muse” (97).

There are several “catastrophes” in *Omeros* that lead to true self-knowledge and the truth of what it is to be Caribbean. Achilles’ potentially catastrophic psychic journey that transcends time has to be undertaken for the future to be re-imagined. The present catastrophe in *Omeros* is cyclical, stemming from an un-negotiated colonial past which forces a neo-colonial paradigm of dependency on the tourist industry, leading to the destruction of the landscape, and driving the human resource to a different kind of enslavement, devotion to the white tourists. The start of the poem shows the need for a revisualisation of the past as current national energies are focused on selling the island’s attractions, resulting in a debasement of St. Lucia’s natural resources. This would “release new implications, a new kind of thrust” that would unlock new possibilities for the future (Harris, “Literacy” 84).

This new thrust, the concept of the infinite rehearsal which a writer undertakes through a return to the process of the imagination, transforms catastrophe into potential. This is represented in *Omeros* through the pervasive image of smoke. Significantly, while smoke accompanies the catastrophe of successful conquest, in this case the burning of Troy, the decimation of the tribes, and the destruction of the natural landscape of present-day St. Lucia, we witness the transformative virtue of the symbol in *Omeros*. Smoke recalls ancestral presences, conjuring spectres, especially as they relate to Helen, in whose figure spectrality is embodied. It is a haunting, a continuing presence, a trace, or vestige, or spectral presence that signifies an origin: “smoke signalled the thunder / of the dead” (59); the phantom limb; and a continued existence: the “stone-faced souls” of the Aruac watch Achille through the smoke rising from the bonfire of pomme-Arac leaves (164). Smoke also signifies the continuity of names: both European classical and indigenous African.

The whole process of *Omeros* is crafted to reveal that no history is whole. Walcott attempts to make clear what fragments of history have been omitted. Within the gaps of history, there exist populations of unrecorded individual lives that, in a sense, have been historically discarded as unknowable, untranslatable, and ungraspable – existing on the margins of colonial understanding. Walcott takes these lives and places them in a narrative framework that has the same impact as a Homeric narrative. The narrative unity that *Omeros* offers gives these disregarded lives epic status, worthy of being recorded. His aim in using the epic frame is not to displace the esteem of ancient Greece, nor is it to simply reclaim from the West a space for the historically marginalised. Rather, Walcott makes them “equal partners in a common culture that is complex and diverse, to be sure, but not describable in terms of centre and margin, same and other” (Burian 80).

Walcott's interest in the Caribbean relationship with (H)istory finds expression in the way he complicates the figure of Helen. A figure of the mythic past, she is representative of St. Lucia and also a woman who exists in the present. He attempts to release her from her classical web of metaphors that sought to interpret and represent her. Yet, in the process of doing so, he entangles her in yet another set of metaphors. For example, Helen is imaged as St. Lucia, woman and island as a prize, as a historyless woman, and as an object to be oppositionally re-defined. Many other images in Walcott's work are taken from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, among which is St. Lucia being referred to as the "Helen of the West;"⁸ but most prominent is the Ulyssean parallel, seen particularly in Walcott's travel poems⁹ where the poet, or some version of him, becomes socio-political commentator on his travels through the Caribbean or American regions.¹⁰

However, the poet yearns to allow Helen freedom and agency in her own existence, which could re-define a St. Lucian future without the insidious infiltration of neo-colonialism. When he bemoans, "When would I enter that light beyond metaphor?" he refers to the truth of the Caribbean, represented in the figure of Helen, conventionally masked by a series of representational frameworks that sought to simplify and homogenise alterity (271). Walcott's task in *Omeros* is to unveil the festering wound that is history in order to truly see "Helen of the West Indies," both woman and island, which was characterised as the "cause of more blood-letting than was ever provoked by Helen of Troy," and who/which was "regularly violated...Her name was clouded with darkness and misfortune" (Baugh 12; Walcott, "Leaving School" 24). To Walcott, Helen is not the absolute archetype whose abduction provoked an epic war which cost the ancient Greeks and Trojans thousands of lives; she is a timeless image.

Walcott's canvas for translating imperial history to situate the Caribbean is the ironic use of the epic. *Omeros*, a syncretic meeting of the fragments of epic and indigenous folk material, explores the Caribbean in relation to (H)istory, and through its symbolic open endedness, the concept of Caribbean origins is elevated. Its fragmented nature naturally resists Western ideas of belonging, of wholeness; yet, like Walcott's sense of the mosaic whose disparate pieces fit to create beautiful wholeness, so too do the fragments of Caribbean identity, which cohere to form "a society, nation, culture...whole despite the apparent differences of which it is made" (King 518).

Walcott authorises alterity by not only utilising the traditionally prestigious epic to give voice to the traditionally demoralised, but also by documenting and unifying mythical folkloric material.

⁸ Also regarded as such in St. Lucia's national anthem.

⁹ See *The Gulf, Sea Grapes, Star Apple Kingdom, Fortunate Traveller, Midsummer and Arkansas Testament*.

¹⁰ "Sea Grapes," for example, sees a traveller's homecoming from foreign lands, similar to Ulysses: "That sail which leans on light, / tired of islands, / a schooner beating up the Caribbean / for home, could be Odysseus, / homebound on the Aegean" (297).

This honours the ancestral material of the origins of the tribe, perpetuated and preserved through the oral tradition, which has been ignored in documented accounts of history. *Omeros* is a cyclical work of temporal indeterminacy that mythically binds all the elements of the folk together, positioning the Caribbean at the centre of the New World.

Walcott records the history and destiny of the Antilles, frequently making the comparison between Homer's Aegean archipelago and the Caribbean. Walcott's wishes that St. Lucia remain a "naturalist's scrapbook," "till our Homer with truer perception erect it, / Stripped of all memory or rhetoric, / As the peeled bark shows white" ("Roots" 60). And Walcott's voice echoes through his Odyssean voyager Shabine who declares: "I am satisfied / if my hand gave voice to one people's grief" ("The Schooner Flight" 360). *Omeros* relocates the *Iliad* from ancient Troy to "backwater" St. Lucia ("Twilight" 13). But Walcott's engagement with the epic tradition is not colonial mimicry nor is it satirical. *Omeros* is not simply a re-invention of the *Odyssey*; and Walcott reinforces this, saying that the originality of the work separates it from its possible Homeric parallel, thus valorising its own worth without the inherited reverence for a literary classic such as the *Odyssey* ("Reflections on *Omeros*" 232). His aim in *Omeros* is to celebrate the "day-to-day heroism of people who go out and face the arrogance" (232). He approaches the canonised trope of Troy through a space of originality.

Walcott counter discursively uses the epic to frame his interrogation of conventional epic values such as "originality, centrality and hierarchy" (Moss 147). *Omeros* defies labels, occupying a space of ambivalence, of indecision, what Bhabha calls "the area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (*Location of Culture* 86). The epic parallels of *Omeros* centre the island space, replacing the metropole. The island is used as an imaginative and intellectual construct of the Arthurian utopian/paradisaal space and the poem becomes a "sustained meditation upon the island's and the poet's relations with European power, history, language, literature, culture and identity" (Moss 148). Paul Breslin suggests that *Omeros* engages with Homeric allusions as representative of the cultural and historical alienation that needs to be destabilised as part of the work's revisionary effort (242). Thus, *Omeros* can be said to remythologise Caribbean history by imbuing its structure with the esteem of the epic as it explores the originary myths of the Caribbean people.

Omeros also celebrates the ordinary as Walcott de-emphasises traditional notions of nobility, conceptualising the heroic differently. The true "stars of [his] mythology" are the "poor fishermen...common people... dreamers, philosophers, artists" (*Another Life* 22; Sjoberg 79). Finley argues: "Homeric heroes recite their genealogies frequently and in detail, and without exception a few steps take them from human ancestors to gods or goddesses" (297); but the Caribbean Shabine remarks, "Who knows / who his grandfather is, much less his name?" ("The Schooner Flight" 353). None of Walcott's heroes in *Omeros* has cultural advantages which stem from prestigious forebears, as would traditional knightly heroes.

Peopling the cosmological emptiness of Caribbean ancestry inspires Walcott's art in *Omeros*, a project which relies on the world of the ordinary. Walcott speaks of the conceit behind history and art in their attempts to elevate "the ordinary, the common, and therefore the phenomenon. That's the sequence: the ordinary and therefore the phenomenon, not the phenomenon and therefore its cause" ("Reflections" 233). But it is the ordinary that is truly the miracle, to perceive and validate ordinary life. The concept of the ordinary, the historically and socially unremarkable, is linked to the notion of re-viewing, or seeing something almost as though for the first time, through new eyes, which is a major theme of *Omeros*. Rather than elevate it, Walcott's poetics honour and transform the ordinary into something revelatory. As he says, "it is ordinary at first, then it is wonderful" ("Lowell" 91). There is no need to elevate the ordinary in order to celebrate it.

In honouring the traditionally worthless, Walcott disputes "the way that the Caribbean is still looked at, illegitimate, rootless, mongrelized" ("Antilles" 67). With its Greek epic parallels, Walcott returns to the classical source of the epic and jettisons its pretensions: "Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow.../...when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?" When Walcott continues with "All that Greek manure under the green bananas" (271), he is referring to a creative becoming, utilising what used to be a classical foundation for prominence, to produce something new and original by both representing difference, and re-creating from the latent past. In a powerful liberating thrust, Walcott releases the island from external metaphors as a source of meaning, depth, stability and legitimacy.

As the poem ends, Walcott's language is reminiscent of Virgilian and Homeric beginnings: "I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son.../...I sang the only slaughter / that brought him delight, and that from necessity – / of fish.../ I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea" (320). Conspicuously absent are the aggression and claims of dominance that underlie the traditional heroic epic, and the valorisation of homogeneity found in the romance epic. What emerges instead in Walcott's Caribbean epic are the markedly unheroic endeavours of diverse, yet ordinary people who struggle with each other and with a world that was created through the maintenance of Western prerogatives that deemed them worthless.

In taking this original route to an established literary tradition, Walcott explores the open ended nature of the epic and engages in what Glissant terms "errantry," with specific reference to genre and poetic material. The term is derived from the French *errant* and Latin *errare*, meaning "to wander," and Glissant uses the word to mean "the desire to go against the root," which again recalls the rhizomatic nature of Caribbean identity and cross-cultural origins (*Poetics of Relation* 15). Glissant is remarking upon the Western tradition of genre divisions, which forms the basis of first world aesthetics. His concept of errantry, therefore, speaks to the potential for transformation and new beginnings. While advocating the notion of rootedness for cultures and individuals through his metaphor of the rhizome, he challenges the dominance of a totalitarian

root which forms the catalyst for the errantry observed in *Omeros*, which moves beyond the boundaries of literary convention and the limitations of chronological history.

Walcott's exploration of form in *Omeros*, through its rhizomatic network of cross-cultural folktales and language, is given substance by those conventionally discarded oral histories that frame the Caribbean's sense of origin and belonging, which inspires creative power in the individual to "defeat alienation by creating a symbolic 'home,' in whatever external conditions life may be lived" (Burnett 27). Achille, swimming among the turtles and sea horses, is crucial to the issue of "home." Proximally placed to the turtle, Walcott's image of the wandering traveller who carries home on his back, Achille's Odyssean journey and epiphany are fundamental to the transformative process from trauma to potential through the creation of a solid foundation, a home based on human endeavour.

Yet, undeniably, Homeric parallels exist in *Omeros* in its length, ambition, and characters' names. In re-defining the epic, Walcott demonstrates the fluidity of genre. *Omeros* invokes mythic classical simultaneity, but it defines Caribbean experience in Caribbean terms, positioning the Caribbean as having the potential to evolve into a formidable and unique civilisation. Using the metaphor of the coral that feeds on its death and regenerates, Walcott speaks of re-birth in the Caribbean overcoming the burden of history where "the mirror of History / has melted and beneath it, a patient hybrid organism / grows in his cruciform shadow" (297). A longstanding metaphor to refer to the colonised, the shadow's liminality and the established sacral essence of the cruciform are intertwined, giving the shadow sacred power and divine substance to its form. Using myth in the form of the epic, Walcott addresses the multiplicity of the Caribbean experience. His move towards mythic timelessness in *Omeros*, an open ended continuum, suggests that Walcott is engaging in another form of mythologising. Franco Moretti, in discussing mythopoeic art, calls it the product of "the desire of contemporary societies for 'meaning,' imagination, *re-enchantment*" (249). Moretti's primary argument is that "rewriting an event in mythical form is tantamount to making it *meaningful*: freeing it from the profane world of causes and effects, and projecting it into the symbolic richness of the archetype" (248-49).

Walcott's interest in myth transforms archetype. The Jungian collective unconscious, where the primordial past informs the basis of the psyche, is communicated through archetype. Latent traces of nature and instinct, which pattern archetypal human behaviour, are the foundations of myth. Colonial hegemonies erode indigenous structures of belief and tradition and systematically institutionalise substituted mythologies to control behaviour and thought. Colonial subjects, therefore, were re-socialised to negate or modify instinctive behaviour learned through subconscious interaction with their latent ancestral and evolutionary pasts, resulting in "progressive alienation from [their] instinctual foundation" (Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* 288). Hence, complex identities are reduced to convenient archetypes.

Creatively transforming the archetype to unlock its potential, therefore, re-acquaints the subject with his origins. To do this, Walcott re-mythologises history. *Omeros* is a new myth, and part of his myth-making process is syncretic inclusion of old myths and transforming different folkloric sources, since he argues that our original myths have been lost through neo-colonial appropriation. His concern is “an Africa that was no longer home...[with] the dark oracular mountain dying into mythology” (“Twilight” 34).

Within the framework of the Trojan myth, *Omeros* incorporates African and Arawak traditions, and speaks to the notion of latency. In *Omeros*, Walcott engages with the mythic archetypes that Harris identifies: wings in the form of the sea swift which engages the idea of a flight back to Africa, and the tree of life and death – the Arawak creation myth – which emerges in images of fire. Doubly nuanced through the motifs of smoke and fire is the burning of noble Troy, which, because of the parallel, recalls the Arawak civilisation and implicitly likens the two noble civilisations. As *Omeros* starts, we are presented almost immediately with the meeting of fire and wings, a deadly combination as it references the Icarus myth. While some of the felled trees burn, Achille spies, through “the hole the laurel had left,” the swift (6).

Achille's act of seeing privileges the notion of sight, the gaze, which brings into focus the destructive European colonising influence responsible for the destruction of past tribes in the name of industrialisation and progress. The butchered trees signify the lost native ancestral community of history preserved in language (6). Nature rebels against and self-protects from the destruction of the forest. The iguana clouds its lens, turning sight inward to the memory of loss; the nettles “guard” the holes left by the trees; the mosquitoes attack Achille's eyes, blurring his sight, in an effort to encourage a different way of seeing to reconnect with memory that would redeem the value of native ancestry (4-7).

Also, the iguana, whose gaze spans centuries, is able to see history repeating itself. Bridging time, it looks inward at the events that comprised historical loss, looks outward and notices the same myopia involved in wanton destruction of sacred history in the men who felled the trees. In some ways, the iguana is the backdrop of memory and amnesia, breaching the gap of time and linking the native tree of life myth with contemporary St. Lucia (4).

The swift signifies hope arising out of immeasurable loss. A central metaphor of *Omeros*, the swift, which “carr[ies] the cure / that precedes every wound” (239), operates as a tool of cultural integration in a hybrid present, linking the Omeric characters, regardless of their diverse cultural heritages.¹¹ In *Omeros*, the swift provides that bridge, which “touched both worlds with her

¹¹ The swift brings the seed that Ma Kilman uses to cure Philoctete's wound of history; it gives the poet direction to his home port in which his creativity is rooted: “the sea-swift was sent to you: / to circle yourself and your island with this art” (291); at Maud's funeral, the swift flies off her silk shroud and joins “all the horned island's / birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching” (267).

rainbow, this frail dancer / leaping the breakers, this dart of the meridian" (130).¹² The swift triggers latent memories in Achille, who begins to "yearn for a sound that was missing," and "for the first time, he asked himself who he was" (137, 130). Belonging to both African and Caribbean culture, the swift represents the dislocation of the Caribbean peoples brought about by colonisation and slavery. As Charles Pollard argues, "[f]or Achille the swift is a transatlantic muse who prompts him to question "his name and origin" and who figuratively pulls his canoe "home" to Africa" (185).

The swift also manifests as the cruciform shape, representing crossings of space, time, cultures and histories, all of which characterise the Caribbean people. The cruciform also symbolises God's guiding light, blessing those crossings – journeys that come at great cost and pain: "And God said to Achille, "Look, I giving you permission / to come home. Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot, / the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion" (134). Here, God is the God of crossroads, the intersection of two worlds, which gives power to the notion of merging, of syncretism. Interestingly, in this scene, linguistic choice becomes significant. While the narrative voice is in Standard English, God's only words in the entire *oeuvre* are in Creole, which divinely privileges Caribbean language, a study in itself of linguistic syncretism. Implicit in both the swift and the iguana is Harris's "rainbow arc" that bridges past trauma and future creative potential.

Walcott also treats with the Icarus myth in the figure of Hector. Hector is Achille's diametric opposite who avoids an atavistic search for self. While Helen is able to pass through the doorway of memory into the light, and Achille seeks self-knowledge, Hector stays in psychic limbo, a place where "hell was certain to him as much as heaven" (292). He becomes, like the yams that Philoctete cuts down, "curled, / head down without their roots" (21). Significantly, Hector, corrupted by a lucrative tourist economy, leaves the sea, the origin of the identity of Caribbean "peoples of the sea" as Benitez-Rojo calls us, to drive a transport vehicle (26). Although latent traces of his ancestry attempt to surface, evidenced by his decorating his seats with leopard skin, an African tribal marker of hunting prowess, his hold on his history is tenuous.

Denying his history to pursue "wide horizons" (117), Hector ignores the fact that the boundless sea provides an immensity of the mind, "a sense both of infinity and the acceptance of the possibility of infinity" which renders the material man insignificant in the face of such powerfully spiritual enhancement of nature (J. P. White 158-159). Avariciously heading to an "Icarian future" (117), Hector "paused in the smoke...his "spectre's punishment was / a halt in its passage towards a smokeless place" (292). Smoke here recalls a parallel moment when Helen negotiates the smoke as a doorway to rehabilitative potential, a possibility denied to Hector because he refuses self-

¹² Thieme contends that the swift, as a "migrant figure," "occupies much the same role as Athena, Odysseus's guiding deity in *The Odyssey*" (185-186). It is interesting to remember that one of Athena's forms in *The Odyssey* is a bird. She eventually transforms into a swallow, further support for the swift known as "*l'hirondelle des Antilles*" (88).

awareness. His restlessness, superficially provoked by Helen, is indicative of a deeper sense of alienation; he feels adrift from his real home, the sea. He realises that the sea is an inescapable part of himself, "a love / he could never lose made every gesture violent" (231).

Walcott's metaphor of the sea is his "eternal present" (Breslin 269). For example, in *Omeros*, after Achille fails at revising history, Walcott affords him another vision, this time of crossings and cross-overs, instead of returnings. His vehicle for this manipulation of time and space is the sea, in whose depths three centuries of colonial history are held (155). Indeed, the very last line of *Omeros* demonstrates the enduring continuity of the sea, through Walcott's use of the past continuous tense, "When [Achille] left the beach the sea was still going on" (325). The agelessness of the sea represents the source of wholeness, from whence all life originated, whose salt is a source of cure. It is a sea of intertextual stories, of history where time and space coalesce, bridging the temporal divide protectively like a "parentheses of palms shielding a candle's tongue" (75), which holds in its depths, not just the history of the folk, but the recovery and renewal of the Caribbean people.

Refusing to explore what Walcott characterises "this love of ocean that's self-love," ignoring "the conch's summoning note," and settling instead for the commercial present, Hector becomes a "flaming wound that speed alone could not heal" ("Codicil" 97; 231, 118). His death is "the penalty of giving up the sea" (231). His future is foretold in the stars, more significantly, the one star that falls out of the sky which goes largely unnoticed, except by Achille who idly recalls Hector in that moment: "He watched a falling star singe the arc of its zone / and traced the comet as its declining vector / hissed out like a coal in the horizon's basin/ over the islet, and he trembled for Hector, / the title he gave his transport" (112). This image syncretically recalls both the Amerindian myth of the Arawak Tree of Life and the European Icarus myth. With the ancestral spirits of the Arawaks constituting the Pleiades, the fall of a star, like Icarus's plunge, is a fall from grace, a falling out of favour from the gods. Hector, like Icarus, is unable to resist the pull of the sun, in his case, the lucrative tourists. Hector, like Icarus, crashes into the sea and perishes – ironically for Hector who deliberately tries to escape the sea, his history.

His van, apocalyptically named the Comet, becomes the vehicle of his death, a catastrophe which symbolically should open the path for something new. But his self-rejection disallows any transformative rebirth for him; so he joins other lost souls in purgatory. However, with his death, others can progress: Philoctete is cured; Helen, pregnant, returns to Achille; Maud dies. All these events signal the awakening of the possibilities of changed futures – both national and individual, from which Hector, unfortunately, is excluded. Hector's death opens the door to a new dimension or leaps to new insights. It allows Walcott to meditate on death and loss and the ways in which these enable new insights into a different realm of reality, what he calls a sixth sense. This is heralded through his use of dialectical montage, which leads to a leap to a new concept or new

idea. The various deaths that follow are all segments of one idea: in Walcott's aesthetic death, as in *The Prodigal*, gives new vision, even transfiguration.¹³

Omeros explores the hybrid cultural inheritances of the Caribbean that influence the construction of Caribbean identity. Legitimising Caribbean origins through its epic Trojan frame with its Arthurian resonances, Walcott creatively translates the fragments of Caribbean experience. Drawing on other postcolonial experiences, namely the Irish and the English themselves, in *Omeros*, Walcott engages in a creative reconstruction of Caribbean subjectivity through a dismantling of traditional Western mechanisms of binary logic, which sought to de-legitimise Caribbean people. Through simultaneity, which is the vehicle for syncretism, the primordial ancestral past, latent in the imagination, re-surfaces in the present and ennobles formerly dislocated peoples, providing a sense of belonging and kinship with each other and with the land. Such a sense of unity could rewrite a national narrative that promotes a future of potential.

WORKS CITED

- Antoine-Dunne, Jean. "Introducing Eisenstein's Theory" in *The Montage Principle*. Edited by Jean Antoine-Dunne and Paula Quigley. Rodopi Press, 2004.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981.
- Baugh, Edward. *Derek Walcott*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Benitez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd ed., translated by James E. Maraniss. Duke UP, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Brathwaite, E. Kamau. *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. Oxford UP, 1973.
- Breslin, Paul. *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*. The U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Bundy, Andrew. Introduction. *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*. Edited by Bundy. Routledge, 1999.
- Burian, Peter. "'All That Greek Manure under the Green Bananas': Derek Walcott's *Odyssey*." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 96, no. 2, 1997, pp. 359-77.
- Burnett, Paula. "'Becoming Home': Modeling the Caribbean Subject." *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*. Edited by Paula Burnett, UP Florida, 2001.

¹³ See Jean Antoine-Dunne's audio-visual application of Eisenstein's notion of the contrapuntal montage to the New World, where historically dispossessed persons derive a sense of wholeness from the piecing together of renegotiated fragments of diverse heritages, where form and content are mirror images of each other as a way to re-connect the psychic ruptures of the past (125-153).

- Chowdhury, Aniruddha. *Post-deconstructive Subjectivity and History: Phenomenology, Critical Theory, and Postcolonial Thought*. Koninklijke Brill, 2014. *Google Book Search*.
<https://books.google.tt/books?isbn=9004260048>
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Continuum, 1987.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 1993.
- Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press Inc, 1963.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. Translated by J. Michael Dash, UP of Virginia, 1989.
- . *The Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Goff, Barbara, and Michael Simpson. *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone and Dramas of the African Diaspora*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Grant, Madison. *The Passing of the Great Race; or, The Racial Basis of European History*. 1918. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932. *Google Book Search*.
<https://books.google.tt/books?isbn=0266540244>
- Hall, Calvin S., and Gardner Lindzey. *Theories of Personality*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1957.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Patrick Williams and Chrisman. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994.
- Harris, Wilson. "The Amerindian Legacy." Bundy, pp. 161-168.
- . "Apprenticeship to the Furies." Bundy, pp. 217-226.
- . "Continuity and Discontinuity." Bundy, pp. 170-176.
- . "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" Bundy, pp. 227-236.
- . *The Guyana Quartet*. Faber and Faber, 1985.
- . "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas." Bundy, pp. 147-160.
- . "Jean Rhys's Tree of Life." Bundy, pp. 113-117.
- . "Letter from Francisco Bone to W. H." Bundy, pp. 47-51.
- . "Literacy and the Imagination – A Talk." Bundy, pp. 73-85.
- . "Merlin and Parsifal: Adversarial Twins." Bundy, pp. 57-64.
- . "The Music of Living Landscapes." Bundy, pp. 39-45.
- . "The Phenomenal Legacy." *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*. Edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Dangaroo, 1981.
- . "Profiles of Myth and the New World." Bundy, pp. 193-202.
- . "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror." Bundy, pp. 177-187.
- . "Reflection and Vision." *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*. Edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Dangaroo, 1981.
- . "The Schizophrenic Sea." Bundy, pp. 95-103.
- . "Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination." *Explorations*, pp. 97-106.
- . *The Womb of Space*. Greenwood Press, 1983.
- . "Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination." Bundy, pp. 237-248.

- . "Wilson Harris interviewed by Alan Riach." *Wilson Harris: The Radical Imagination*. Edited by Alan Riach and Williams, L3-Liège Language and Literature, 1992.
- Huddart, David. *Homi K. Bhabha*. Routledge, 2006.
- Jung, Carl. "The Undiscovered Self." *Civilization in Transition*. Translated by R. F. C Hull, Routledge, 2014.
- King, Bruce. *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Locke, Alain, and Lothrop Stoddard. "Debate on the Cultural Equality of Blacks and Whites in America." 1927.
http://jstedman.tripod.com/APUS/Locke_Stoddard.pdf
- Martyniuk, Irene. "The Irish in the Caribbean: Derek Walcott's Examination of the Irish in *Omeros*." *The South Carolina Review: Ireland in the Arts and Humanities*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1999, pp. 142-148.
- Moretti, Franco. *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*. Translated by Quintin Hoare, Verso, 1996. *Google Book Search*.
<https://books.google.tt/books?isbn=1859840698>
- Moss, Roger. "Derek Walcott's *Omeros*: Representing St. Lucia, Re-presenting Homer." *Islands in History and Representation*, edited by Rod Edmond and Smith, Routledge, 2003.
- Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*. Andre Deutsch, 1962.
- Pollard, Charles W. *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*. University of Virginia Press, 2004.
- Pouchet Paquet, Sandra. *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
- Puri, Shalini. *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Ramazani, Jahan. "The Wound of Postcolonial History: Derek Walcott's *Omeros*." *Derek Walcott*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Reichl, Karl. "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages." *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, edited by Catherine Bates, Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Sjoberg, Leif. "An Interview with Derek Walcott." Edited by William Baer, William, UP of Mississippi, 1996, pp. 79-85.
- Smith-Pryor, Elizabeth M. *Property Rites: The Rhinelander Trial, Passing, and the Protection of Whiteness*. The U of North Carolina P, 2009. *Google Book Search*.
<https://books.google.tt/books?isbn=0807832685>
- Thieme, John. *Derek Walcott: Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester University Press, 1999.
- Walcott, Derek. "Codicil." *Derek Walcott: Collected Poems 1948-1954*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.
- . "Leaving School." *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, edited by Robert D. Hamner, Three Continents Press, 1993.
- . *Another Life*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.

-
- . "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory." *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998, pp. 65-84.
- . "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1974, pp. 3-13. *JSTOR*.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/174997>
- . *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- . "The Muse of History." *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, pp. 36-64.
- . *Omeros*. Faber & Faber, 1990.
- . "On Robert Lowell." *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, pp. 87-106.
- . "Reflections on *Omeros*." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 96, no. 2, 1997, pp. 229-246.
- . "Roots." *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-60*. Jonathan Cape, 1962.
- . "The Schooner Flight." *Collected Poems*, pp. 345-361.
- . "What the Twilight Says." *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, pp. 3-35.
- White, J. P. "An Interview with Derek Walcott." Baer, pp. 151-74.
- Zackodnik, Teresa C. *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*. The UP of Mississippi, 2004.

