

Maritime Discourse and the Bi-Part-Soul in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

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Abstract

This article examines the extent to which Derek Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros*, captures the challenges of maritime activities and the notions of home and return for African and Caribbean identities in transit. It argues that Walcott draws from Homer's *Illiad* to represent the complicated history of the Caribbean through episodes of clashes among Western nations fighting for new territories in order to redefine their superpower statuses. Basing my arguments on an ecocritical theoretical stance, the article interrogates the characters' manifestation and exploration of their bi-part souls through rational and spiritual engagements with their immediate environments and cross-cultural encounters. The article starts from the idea that landscape and seascape images in *Omeros* articulate perspectives of self-definition and identification by reconstructing historical, socio-cultural, religious and political spaces. As such, Walcott's St Lucia in the poem is a hub for post-colonial encounters where relationships between individuals and the collective are constructed. Furthermore, the article explores Walcott's recourse to cultural history and memory to argue that he blends language, storytelling and mythology to represent characters whose fate and destinies are determined by the gods of the landscape and the seascape. By examining the representation of the rational and spiritual parts of Walcott's characters, it concludes that

the sea in the archipelago is indispensable as the moon and the sun because of its interconnectivity of live substances and healing potentials. This is in line with the tenets of ecocriticism which plead for the erasure of existential boundaries between humans and other living species in their communities.

Keywords: maritime, identity, bi-part-soul, spiritual part, rational part, ecocriticism

Introduction

“A man who cursed the sea had cursed his own mother,
Mer was both mother and sea . . .”
(Walcott XLIV.XLV.iii.53-54)

The above quotation by Achille alludes to Hector, whose demise results from his rejection of the sea and maritime activities that sustained his existence, which confirms the importance of the sea to the Caribbean. Derek Walcott's *Omeros* is an epic poem made up of seven books, sixty-four chapters of three cantos each, and is set in St Lucia. The poem captures the history of the Caribbean Islands, paying tribute to all those who died in founding and liberating the Islands. It satirises the effects of colonialism and borrows characters from Homer's *Illiad*. The characters include fishermen like Achille, Hector, Philoctete and the retired Major Plunkett and his wife Maud. Their religious beliefs are in contradiction with Ma Kilman, the shamanistic bar owner whose charms remain a mystery to her customers. Memories of the trans-Atlantic routes described as the “Seven Seas” are metaphors that construct slavery, loss of identity and capture the different forms of stigmatisation. These images redefine the “self” that now exists as a hybrid, with a bi-part soul or double identity which reflects the discourse of home and return for Africans in transit. Walcott borrows from Homeric characters and themes in the *Illiad* to represent the sea in *Omeros* as a mother and a place of physical and spiritual deracination from several ancestries. Walcott postulates that:

... I said, "Omeros"

and *O* was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean Patois,
os, as grey bone, and 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. (I.II.iii.9-15)

This image of the sea, therefore, as a mother and a burial ground (bones), calls for an ecocritical investigation through a postcolonial critical lens that analyses the interaction between characters and their environment. Such interaction will reveal that memory, identity, spatial negotiations and the belief system are important in understanding the Caribbean's connection to the sea. This article will borrow from Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin who argue in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* that "Postcolonial studies have come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend" (6).

Huggan and Tiffin read the imperial agenda from an environmental perspective to assess the different levels of racism. My representation of maritime discourse will present ecological racism as a sociological issue for the Caribbean who was treated like an animal in the jungle. It will use Walcott's allusion to Homer to interpret why the words "Homer" or "Omeros" refer to joy and peace in the sea.

The Poetics of the Seascape and the Search for Lost Time

The sea in *Omeros* is central to understanding the life of the Caribbean, especially as it serves as the abode of the gods.

Historically, as the trans-Atlantic route, the sea represents destruction and rebirth and carries important myths for the Caribbean. That is why Rita Dove in “Either I’m Nobody, or I’m a Nation” concludes that “Walcott’s primary metaphor is the sea. The sea is history or, more precisely, a history book, her pages steadily turning, writing and erasing themselves” (60). Given that Caribbeans are inspired by the sea, this section uses the sea to examine how the characters’ quests to satisfy bodily needs reveal the meaning and purpose of their existence. As an important site in ecocritical discourse, Walcott uses the reflections of the stars at night on the sea to comfort Achille’s lonely soul as:

... He would go and sit with the canoes

far up the beach and watch the star-crowned silhouette
of the crouched island. Even there, the DJ’s voice
carried over the shallow’s phosphorescent noise. (II.XXI.i.45-48)

Achille’s description of these comforting images to his blind old friend, Seven Seas, is also a way to reconnect him with lost time.

Achille’s glorification of the calmness of the sea is interrupted by images of the destruction of the forests, which articulate Walcott’s satire on man’s logging activities to build canoes and boats. Achille says:

... The men bound the big logs first
with new hemp, and like ants, trundled them to a cliff
to plunge through tall nettles. The logs gathered that thirst

for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with.
New trunks in eagerness to become canoes
plunged into breakers of bushes, making raw holes

of boulders, feeling not death inside them, but use –
to roof the sea, to be hulls. (I.ii.37-44)

Such Walcottian images which satirise the destruction of the forest ecosystem for boats and canoes in maritime transportation are a call that alternative raw material is needed to build boats. As such, it will preserve the St Lucian Forest, which is important in building their socio-cultural and religious identity. These trees are important because they come from different parts of the world, as George B. Handley highlights in *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott*:

Trees in the Caribbean largely come from outside the region, due to the massive transformation of the environment following the discovery and the development of the plantation complex. Trees from Asia, including the casuarinas, the breadfruit, the cedar, and others, were brought to the islands to provide fuel and food for the slave and peasant populations, who suffered most acutely the ravages of the plantation economy. (290)

Handley further explains that Caribbean trees have scientific and creole names whose destruction for maritime purposes will make it difficult for ecocritics and environmentalists to preserve these heritage sites. In the same light, Axel Goodbody in *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century German Literature: The Challenge of Ecocriticism* thinks that ecocriticism should perceive the destruction of the forest as a sign of an “impending global environmental collapse” (6). Goodbody demands a re-examination of the environment in the survival of cultures, which is why maritime discourse figures prominently in *Omeros* as Walcott’s crusade for environmental consciousness.

From another perspective, the Caribbean Sea serves as an illegal transit zone for weapons and contraband goods between many countries. Walcott describes the problems caused by these maritime activities through Major Plunkett, serving in the British Navy under Admiral Rodney. According to Walcott, Plunkett uses his ship, “The Marlborough,” to spy on the illegal activities of Dutch merchantmen in St. Eustatius. Plunkett’s report to Admiral Rodney on these illegal activities states that:

Gunpowder and stores were shipped to St. Eustatius
from these innocent, moonlit harbours, in support
of French aid to the colonies. . .

.....

. . . These merchantmen
sold guns not only to North American agents
but to British merchants selling their countrymen

to profitable conflict. The intelligence
would be used by the Admiral at home, to wreak
massive revenge, not only on the Dutch islands

but on the French island bastion of Martinique. (II.XIV.ii.1-16)

The intelligence gathered by Plunkett helps in the ensuing battle that ends with the defeat of the Dutch in the Caribbean. Walcott alludes to the battles between the British and the Dutch on the island of St Kitts in the 17th and 18th centuries. They ended with the Dutch losing the island to the British forces led by Admiral James Modyford and Sir John Harman in 1666 and 1667, respectively. In *Omeros*, Walcott describes Britain's victory over the French and the Dutch stating that the destruction of enemy ships made news in Europe and boosted Britain's position in the Caribbean. This makes the Royal Navy the master of Europe and helps to curb the problem of piracy in the Caribbean. The images of dead French and Dutch soldiers reveal the consequences of the war on human lives as the narrator says:

. . . Midden built on midden;
by nature men always chose the same dumping ground

or an ancestral grove, and what lay hidden
under the heap of waste was the French cemetery
when the place was an outpost, facing Gros Ilet. (II.XVIII.iii.29-33)

The destruction of French and Dutch ships and outposts usher a long-term environmental degradation of the islands and the sea. According to Anita Patterson in *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernisms*, the former Dutch islands were sold to the French West India Company, and the first successful colony was established there by the French in 1635. That is why “England and France were constantly warring over possession of the island, and it changed hands several times during the eighteenth century before finally being ceded to the British in 1814” (Patterson 162). Patterson’s reimagining of the seascape historicises the destruction of indigenous cultures and problems of colonialism such as slavery, race, religion and ethnicity, making the Caribbean Sea a burial ground for both Europeans and Africans who die in the crossing. The narrator describes these uncertain journeys of African slaves who are arrested in their villages by the slave masters as follows:

The raid was profitable. It yielded fifteen slaves
to the slavers waiting up the coast . . .

.....

Achille climbed a ridge. He counted the chain of men
linked by their wrists with vines; he watched until the
line was a line of ants. He let out a soft moan

as the last ant disappeared. (III.XXVII.i-ii.25-34)

The surprise attacks on African villages leave many families divided and children orphaned because their parents have become slaves. This deracination, which makes them lose part of their souls in distant places, bears painful memories of slavery and the slave trade as they weep for their wives, children and cultures. Forced maritime migration leads to a loss of identity through contact with foreign languages and cultures because the slavers give them new names, and they learn foreign languages in their new environment. Achille is a victim of slavery who loses his African name, ‘Afolabe,’ and his origins in the Gulf of Guinea. His entire life

revolves around fishing activities in the St Lucian seas. Walcott's lament for such historical tragedy and loss is accentuated by Achille's description of the numerous bones at the bottom of the ocean. These belong to both slaves and slave masters who died during the crossing from Africa to the Caribbean as Achille says:

The shreds of the ocean's floor passed from corpses
that had perished in the crossing, their hair-like weeds,
their bones were long coral fingers, bubbles of eyes

watched him, a brain-coral gurgled their words
and every bubble englobed a biography ...

.....

. . . He thought of the white skulls rolling out there like dice
rolled by the hand of the swell, their luck was like his;

he saw drowned Portuguese captains, their coral eyes
entered by minnows, as he hauled the lobster pot
bearded with moss, in the cold shade of the redoubt. (I.VIII.ii.22-54)

Here, the cruelty of slavery and of the slave trade is reinforced through the image of the chained bones, confirming that African slaves died in transit and were thrown overboard by the slave masters. This recalls the incident in 1803, when Igbo slaves committed mass suicide by jumping into the Atlantic Ocean as a way of protesting against the inhumane treatment during the middle passage. This incident sparked discussions about the fate of slavery and the slave trade and ended with the British Parliament's abolition of it in 1807.

From another perspective, slavery and the slave trade during the Roman conquest of ancient Greece was different. Walcott says that:

. . . The Romans
acquired Greek slaves as aesthetics instructors

of their spoilt children, many from obscure islands

of their freshly acquired archipelago. (V.XLI.i.1-4)

Here, the difference is that the precolonial Greek civilisation was rich in philosophy, logic, art, calculations, etc., and, with the Roman conquest, they used Greek slaves to teach Romans in these disciplines. On the other hand, African slaves were labourers and orphans on Caribbean plantations, as Paul A. Griffith suggests in his analysis of the plight of African slaves in *Afro-Caribbean Poetry and Ritual* which led to the formation of the Caribbean lore. As a form of consolation, the lore says they sang “Negro Spirituals” to “restructure a demoralised underworld organised by the abduction and consumption of human life potential” (Griffith 173). Maritime discourse, therefore, involves up-rootedness and migration, revealing images of human cruelty which resulted in the loss of identity and the bi-part souls of the slaves.

Worth mentioning is the fact that when the ships arrive in the Caribbean, they need to be refuelled with coal. Achille describes how slaves transport coal from distant hills to the ship in long lines like ants over long distances. Ironically, this labour is reserved for black women and children with little pay. Achille’s disgust for such exploitation is captured thus:

Hell was built on those hills. In that country of coal
without fire, that inferno the same colour
as their skins and shadows, every labouring soul

climbed with her hundredweight basket, every load for
one copper penny, balanced erect on their necks
that were tight as the liner’s hawsers from the weight.

The carriers were women, not the fair, gentle sex.
Instead, they were darker and stronger. (I.XIII.ii.38-46)

Each supply of coal is calculated by clerks, who then throw the pennies to the scrambling women expecting their pay. At times, the

clerks cornered and raped these black labourers in their ships, and such acts remain unpunished in the all-white governed Caribbean. This partly accounts for the mulattos or children born by African women slaves and their white masters. The recurrence of identity problems in West Indian writing shows that mulattos are hybrids with difficulties of tracing their origins, hence, their constant search of their bi-part souls. Walcott's *Omeros* captures identity crises because he is a hybrid; his father, Warwick Walcott, was African with Scottish ancestry, and his mother, Alix Maarit, was Finnish with British descent. Walcott confirms his hybrid identity:

I was raised in this obscure Caribbean Port,
where my bastard father christened me for his shire:
Warwick. The Bard's country. But never felt part

of the foreign machinery known as literature.
I preferred verse to fame, but I wrote with the heart
of an amateur. It's that Will you inherit. (I.XII.i.32-37)

Though he laments his hybrid identity like many mulattos born in transit, Walcott equally celebrates these children of mixed parentage by immortalising the suffering and resilience that come with maritime experiences. In *Omeros*, Walcott advocates for the building of individual and community identities. According to Walcott's biographer, Helen Vendler, in "Poet of Two Worlds," he was a divided child between his geographical place, his historical time, and his mixed blood. This affected his writing career, causing him to migrate as "from St Lucia, he went to Trinidad, from Trinidad to the United States, becoming not only the colonial but also the exile and, in his returns to the West Indies, the prodigal son" (Vendler 28). In conclusion, Walcott's stride towards literary decolonisation is evident in his characters' search for the bi-part soul in *Omeros*. This is articulated through maritime myths that construct the self through remapping and retrieving the lost identity in the ecocycle.

The Sacred and the Spiritual Spaces

The discourse of migration and forced displacement in *Omeros* carries with it mystical and spiritual dimensions which impact religious identities. This section discusses the creation and exploration of sacred and spiritual spaces through the conflicts between Christianity and indigenous religions from Africa and the Caribbean. Given that maritime activities are the major preoccupation of the St Lucians, the need to construct boats and canoes entails cutting down trees in the sacred forests. Indigenous St Lucians believe in sacred forests that have trees which they use to carve their gods, produce camwood or for other spiritual purposes. The narrator describes Achille's participation in the destruction of these sacred forests under the command of his Christian church in the following terms:

... With his cutlass he made
a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips
while the height rang with axes. He swayed back the blade,

and hacked the limbs from the dead god, knot after knot,
wrenching the severed veins from the trunk as he prayed:
'Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!'

.....

... The gods were down at last.

Like pigmies, they hacked the trunks of wrinkled giants
for paddles and oars. (I.I.ii.7-26)

The desecration of the sacred forests and their ancestral heritage is observed by the powerless indigenes in tears. Arguably, though Christian teachings prompt Achille to make the sign of the cross before cutting down the sacred trees, he knows that the forest serves as abode for the gods of the indigenous communities. This view is supported by Lance Callahan who posits in *In the Shadows*

of *Divine Perfection: Derek Walcott's Omeros* that "the fact remained that a West Indian identity had been forged in the midst of the unprecedented physical and social destruction which the islands had witnessed" (1). Callahan thinks that West Indian writers capture the destruction of their ancestral forests and heritages as a satire on imperial activities on their islands. That is why in Walcott's poetry, the reader can see how traditional spirituality is destroyed by Christianity especially when Walcott reimages the Christian rituals performed by sailors before the canoes set for the seas. Achille describes how the priest says mass and blesses the newly constructed canoes before they set sail:

Then everything fits. The pirogues crouched on the sand
like hounds with sprigs in their teeth. The priest
sprinkled them with a bell, then he made the swift's sign.

When he smiled at Achille's canoe, *In God We Troust*,
Achille said: 'Leave it! Is God's spelling and mine.'
After Mass one sunrise the canoes entered the troughs

of the surplice shallow, and their nodding prows
agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees. (I.I.ii.52-59)

These blessings, Achille believes, purify canoes of the traditional spirituality and bring good luck to him and his friend, Hector, as they go fishing. The fact that Walcott constantly makes reference to the Methodist Chapel in St Lucia and Achille's references to the presence of this church in the town shows the successful implantation of Christianity in the Caribbean. Furthermore, the constant ringing of the iron bells calls Christians to mass, so that the entire town is emptied into the nearby churches during mass hours. Achille's reference to Ma Kilman also suggests her spiritual hybridity because she is a devoted Christian and an African seer who practises black magic. He says:

... La Sorcière,
the sorceress mountain with a madras kerchief

and flashing spectacles. They called her Ma Kilman

because the village was darkened by their belief
in her as a *gardeuse*, sybil, obeah-woman
webbed with a spider's knowledge of an afterlife

in her cracked lenses. She took Holy Communion
with Maud sometimes, but there was an old African
doubt that paused before taking the wafer's white leaf. (I.X.ii.19-27)

Ma Kilman's bar called "No Pain Café, All Welcome" serves as a meeting point in the heart of the village. She is a hardworking and independent woman, who is admired by many for her shamanistic practices. Walcott celebrates spiritual hybridity because, despite her busy schedule, she never misses the five o'clock evening Mass even if she has to go to church in heavy rains. In the chapter "The Magic Wound: Derek Walcott's *Omeros*," Michael Mitchell examines her blend of Christian and African spirituality, saying that:

When Walcott describes Ma Kilman as an obeah-woman, he is following a widespread but not entirely accurate use of the term. Obeah is actually witchcraft used for harmful purposes, and practitioners of obeah with its proximity to death and dark forces are still regarded with fear in the Caribbean, although accurate information about them is hard to find. The tradition of obeah can certainly be traced back to African witchcraft, but perhaps not exclusively so. (259)

As a shamanist, she knows the curative properties of every plant and their names because her trade requires that she visits and invokes both the gods of the forests and the seas, described in *Omeros* as "the unburied gods." From an ecocritical perspective, Hubert Zapf in "The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology" advocates such cultural practices that preserve the environment by "revising the anthropocentric cultural value system" (52). Zapf sees such interconnectedness as a major ecocritical turn in contemporary literary and cultural studies

which necessitates a redefinition of the place of “nature” in cultural studies discourses and critical theory for future generations.

From another perspective, Walcott interrogates Christian dogma through Achille’s examination of the activities of the Christian missionaries on his island. He criticises their hypocrisy in imposing cleanliness and spirituality on Christians while secretly exploiting them sexually. Sex is sacred to the Caribbean psyche, but the coming of Europeans violates this sanctity as native women are sexually exploited, and this makes Achille question the biblical teachings imposed on Christian converts. He thinks that whites do not deserve resurrection because of the social crimes committed by white soldiers on the islands:

I look to the white church spire and often think,
Is the cross for them also? The resurrection
of their bodies? The snow and the blood that we drink

for our broken Word? Ask your wheat-headed soldiers.
(III.XXXV.iii.55-58)

Achille doubts the existence of heaven because the priests pardon only the sins that are committed by the blacks and not by the whites. He concludes that colonialism has painted the black man as a sinner because of his colour, which is why the priests pray for them continually, convincing them that they have sinned, even in their thoughts.

Despite Achille’s doubts about Christianity, he believes that man is born inherently good. The church only brings foreign examples to strengthen the goodness in man, which is why Achille thinks that man’s activities in society is more important in influencing his relationship with God. That is why, when Hector abandons his maritime activities and buys a car, names it the ‘Comet’ and engages in land transport, Achille gets angry at him because he thinks the occupation will expose him to more sin. As a fisherman and a Christian, Achille makes donations to the church to thank God for the maritime protection. When Hector dies shortly after abandoning Christianity and his maritime activities, Achille

concludes that this is punishment from God, and that Hector is in hell. Achille thinks Hector dies as a sinner and that special prayers need to be said to grant his soul swift passage from purgatory to paradise. That is why during Hector's burial, Achille says a prayer of forgiveness because he was very angry when the beautiful Helen lured Hector into abandoning his maritime activities to get married. The fact that Hector is buried on the beach suggests that, as a former sailor who once loved the sea, his soul should remain in the sea. As Hector's true friend who believes in the journey beyond, Achille bends over Hector's coffin and says his last words of farewell:

... He said: 'Mate, this is your spear,'
and laid the oar slowly, the same way he had placed
the parallel oars in the hull of the gommier

the day the African swift and its shadow raced ...
'The spear that I give you, my friend is only wood.

Vexation is past ...

.....

... You hear me? Men
did not know you like me. All right. Sleep good. Good night.'
(VI.XLVI.i.22-35)

Achille believes that Hector's sins - abandoning maritime activities to engage in land transport - will be forgiven, and he is at peace with himself. That is the faith of a true Christian who is able to forgive. Line Henriksen examines the importance of the oar in Achille's farewell to Hector in *Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound's Cantos and Derek Walcott's Omeros as Twentieth-Century Epics* and says "the oar that replaces the warrior's spear remains one of the faithful metonyms of epic poetry. The oar connects the sea to death and associates the funeral of *Omeros'* Hector with the tomb of Pound's Elpenor, and *Omeros* with the *Cantos* and the *Odyssey*"

(46). The oar Achille places on Hector's coffin symbolises his tribute to the fishing profession. Walcott extends such tributes to Caribbean fallen Christian heroes when he describes Major Plunkett's prayers to his naval colleagues, Mortimer, Glendower, Tumbly and Scott, who died trying to defend the royal navy in the Caribbean. Plunkett is a devoted naval officer and a Christian who suffers from an injury that leaves him in a wheelchair. He retires and becomes a landowner but becomes increasingly depressed and feels isolated. According to Paul Breslin in *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, Christianity heals Plunkett from psychological burdens, which is why Walcott creates a contrast between Philoctete's visible wound, believed to be a curse from the ancestors, and Plunkett's wound, which is psychological. Breslin contends that:

Philoctete's wound is in the shin, Plunkett's in his head, at nearly opposite extremes of the body; Philoctete's pain is mostly somatic, whereas Plunkett's is mostly psychological. The Afro-Caribbean fisherman and the English expatriate, then, are alike in suffering from a wound that refuses to heal, but the contrasts imply that they are complementary opposites. (252-253)

While Achille, Philoctete and Hector carry historical wounds that afflict the descendants of slaves, Dennis Plunkett carries the wounds of the descendants of slave masters. As a mulatto, Walcott carries a third variant of the historical wound, the effect of the European sexual exploitation of black women. Plunkett's dilemma is intensified when his wife, Maud Plunkett, dies of tuberculosis. He is left alone, and he offers prayers for her as a Christian. Arguably, Maud's death in *Omeros* is an allusion to the death of Walcott's mother, Alix Walcott, who also died of tuberculosis. During Maud's burial, Walcott brings this autobiographical element to celebrate both Maud and Walcott's mother as strong women loved by their husbands and children. The theme of loss is further revealed in the death of his paternal grandfather, Charles Walcott, who left England for Barbados and ended up as a plantation owner in St Lucia. Handley goes further to state that "Charles's wife,

Christiana, was a dark brown St Lucian who delivered five children, including Derek's father, Warwick, who was the oldest" (295). Walcott's grandfather died in a suicidal fire before he was born, and this background of grief supports my argument in this article that Achille's search for his bi-part soul is a metaphor for Walcott in *Omeros*.

Furthermore, Achille's search for his bi-part soul takes him back to his village in Africa after a very long time. As a former slave, his master had changed his name from Afolabe to Achille during the crossing. He prays that God should guide him back to visit his village of origin in the Congo to bond with his estranged family. The narrator describes God's response to Achille's prayer thus:

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.

And thou shalt have no god should in case you forgot
my commandments.' Achille felt the homesick shame
and pain of his Africa. (III.XXV.i.31-36)

The fact that Achille thinks about Africa with shame and pain is because Christianity has deracinated him from his ancestral spiritual heritage and made him embrace an alien god, one that is not recognised by his people. That is why, when he finally visits his people and takes a walk in the village's sacred forest, the gods do not recognize him, and the trees ignore his incantations. Given that the gods, through the ecocycle, refuse his incantations, his ancestors no longer recognize him and cannot intercede for him, thus resulting in a non-recognition of the spiritual part that makes up his bi-part soul. Consequently, we see the failure of the rituals and celebrations organised by his community to welcome and reconnect Achille with the gods. As such, he returns to St Lucia where he believes his soul will be saved by Christianity. Davis Gregson's "With No Homeric Shadow: The Disavowal of Epic in

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*” examines Achille's predicament and concludes that:

The persona named Afolabe summarises succinctly, even gnomically, the insight that underlies and informs the rhetoric of disavowal . . . Achille has spoken of the means by which he has been transported to his ancestral homeland “by a swift, or the shadow of a swift”. The attentive reader, immediately recognizing the muse of *Omeros* in the recurrent emblem of this seabird, is thereby alerted to the implications of Afolabe's aphoristic response: “No man loses his shadow except it is in the night, / and even then his shadow is hidden, not lost.” (146)

Here, the rejection of Achille by his ancestors and the gods of his native community ironically betrays the Walcottian perception and representation of African gods. Therefore, in Walcott's poem, the gods are associated with negativity because Achille describes the hurricane as the time when the gods are out having a private party and all humans have to stay indoors. Achille says:

In the grey vertical forest of the hurricane season,
when the dirty sea returns the wreaths of the dead,
all the village could do was listen to the gods in session,

playing any instruments that came into their craniums,
the harp-sighing ripple of a hither-and-zithering sea,
the knucklebone pebbles, the abrupt Shango drums

made Neptune rock in the caves. Fête start! Erzulie
rattling her ra-ra; Ogun, the blacksmith, feeling
No Pain; Damballa winding like zandoli. (I.IX.iii.19-27)

So, while the people pray for the hurricane to stop, their gods hold a private party in the hurricane, which lasts for days and causes massive destruction of landed property and the forests. Towns are flooded, roofs of houses blown off, trees pushed down with branches, leaves littering the streets, and electricity poles pushed down. From a spiritual perspective, the gods are not happy with the

St. Lucians and use the forces of nature to express their discontent. Furthermore, the problem with these hurricanes is that they can also be justified ecocritically, and, in some cases, the people deny or ignore warnings. This is pointed out by Patrick D. Murphy in *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields* who says that people disregard evidence of approaching disasters and historical evidence. From Murphy's standpoint, St Lucians fail to accept a scientific justification as to why such elements of nature as fire, wind, water, air and light can bring disasters to human societies. Man's activities and manipulation of these forces through maritime activities, deforestation and uncontrolled urbanisation make the island vulnerable to the forces of nature, causing frequent floods in the archipelago.

Walcott's image of the damaged town and of the different attempts at reconstruction reveals the cycle of life, death and rebirth, which characterises man's bi-part soul. Days after the hurricane, the entire town starts repairing, while the gods take their rest waiting for the next rainy season. Arguably, Walcott's subjective representation of St Lucian gods and belief systems remains questionable because elements of nature exist in all world religions. Ecocritics and climatologists will explain that St Lucia is more likely to be affected by hurricanes coming across the Caribbean Sea. Secondly, his representation betrays the imperial Christian agenda that everything black is negative and that indigenous gods like Ogun, Shango, Damballa, etc. can only be associated with negative occurrences like floods and hurricanes. From another perspective, the fact that, after the hurricane, the winds become gentle to Achille shows that the Christian God has taken precedence over the St Lucian gods, as seen in the quote below:

I smelt the leaves threshing at the top of the year
in green January over the orange villas
and military barracks where the Plunketts were,

the harbour flecked by the wind that comes with Christmas,
edged with the Arctic, that was christened *Vent Noel*;

it stayed until March and, with luck, until Easter. (VI.XLIV.ii.1-6)

This wind refreshes the environment and is soothing to everyone, which is why people open their doors and windows to ventilate their homes. Moreover, the light rain that comes with this wind washes the environment and rejuvenates the vegetation, with animals enjoying the sprouting leaves and grasses on the fields. The clash between the Christian God and the local gods is a recurrent metaphor in *Omeros* that dominates the Caribbean psyche in relation to Afro-Caribbean myths and cultures. Patricia Ismond's assessment of Walcott's use of metaphors concludes that they serve as "a repository of that culture's dominant mode of intelligence and tradition" (4). Through these metaphors, the Afro-Caribbean experience of migration, return and homeland is highlighted, with the sea in the Middle Passage being a signifier of a history of scattered peoples. In conclusion, this section has explored the different perspectives through which Walcott represents the sacred and the way in which the Caribbean's quest for spirituality reveals the problems that affect his bi-part soul.

Reconstructing Identity, Human Dignity and Social Development

This section examines the different perspectives through which maritime activities establish the identity and dignity of characters, and the way in which these characters contribute to building society. As a nature poem, *Omeros* fictionalises the seascape as a world where dwellers search for the bi-part souls through different maritime activities in the Caribbean Archipelago. This section's exploration of the seascape shall draw on the arguments of Glen A. Love in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* who thinks that the "degradation of a natural world is most in need of active human recognition and engagement" (8). This is because nature and culture shape human behaviour. To Love, the effects of man's activities on the environment such as pollution and despoliation have continuously threatened the pastoral since

ancient times. From a sea-centred context, the ecocritical viewpoint of maritime activities reassesses the construction of identity and dignity. Therefore, if the sea is the source of the problems between Achille and Hector, Walcott highlights the importance of forgiveness between the two friends and sailors in the same vein as the bond between sailors and the sea should not be broken:

Philoctete tried to make peace between them. He told
Hector that they were men, that he bore his own wound
as patiently as God allowed him, that the bad blood

between them was worse, that they had a common bond
between them: the sea. The sea that changed the cedars
into canoes, from the day they had hacked the

trees in the heights. (I.VIII.iii.1-7)

Philoctete's allusion to the sea here is important because of its numerous benefits to the life of the St Lucians, and a love quarrel should not hamper social development. Arguably, Philoctete revisits Troy in Homer's *Illiad* to satirise the socio-cultural and political consequences of the battle between Achille and Hector over Helen's love. Similarly, Hector's love for Helen is the reason why he abandons maritime transport for land transport.

From another perspective, the sea contributes to social development through the presence of particular species of shrimps, which are rare to find and sell expensively in the archipelago. The fact that Achille and Philoctete sail to distant places to fish these marine decapod crustaceans highlights their importance as a delicacy in the region. The search which takes them far from home for days is described thus:

. . . So he and Philoctete loaded the canoe and went
searching down the coastline, Anse La Raye, Canaries,

past cliffs pinned with birds, past beaches still innocent . . .

.....
 But he found no cove he liked as much as his own. . .

. . . so he told Philoctete
 that until they found it, they would keep going south,
 as far as the Grenadines, though supplies were tight. (VII.LX.i.50-63)

This migration in search of particular shrimps is enriching according to Donald Worster, who examines food production in an evolving ecology in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* and states that groups of people have historically been identified by their particular foods and eating habits. This has led to several displacements to get certain natural ingredients or species from the natural world to satisfy their growing curiosity and demands. Through his search for the shrimps in the sea, Achille discovers new tribes and cultures along the ocean belt and establishes friendship ties with the fishermen he meets on his way. In this way, Walcott foregrounds the theme of migration that helps in intercultural communication and in learning new ways of life and experiences, which, if taken back home, can help in reshaping one's identity. This is exactly why Achille finds it hard to forgive his best friend, Hector, when he abandons the peace that comes with maritime activity in order to become a taxi driver in the crowded town. Achille expresses his discontent as follows:

He'd paid the penalty of giving up the sea
 as graceless and as treacherous as it had seemed,
 for the taxi business; he was making money,

but all that money was making him ashamed
 of the long afternoons of shouting by the wharf
 hustling passengers. He missed the uncertain sand

under his feet, he sighed for the trough of a wave,
 and the jerk of the oar when it turned in his hand,
 and the rose conch sunset with its low pelicans. (VI.XVL.iii.36-44)

As a seaman, Achille is disappointed with Hector because Castries is crowded, and the competitive taxi business corrupts him with its roaring life. Achille thinks Hector is under Helen's spell as she constantly enjoys being driven in his taxi. Hector displays an emasculation of African manhood which ends tragically. That is why, when Hector dies, Achille and his friends forgive and bury him on the beach. This will connect his soul and identity to his most cherished place, which is the sea. Elizabeth M. Deloughrey celebrates the importance of the sea in *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, contending that it is linked to the human origins and explores the histories of colonialism and nationalism. That is why in Pacific patois, canoe means "vaka," *vessels of history*, canoes and vaka are vital to the historical genealogy of both regions" (Deloughrey 22). Deloughrey's examination of maritime vocabulary points to race, identity, naming and continuity. This conceivably highlights that the English language used in *Omeros* translates the Caribbean patois using metaphors that capture maritime cultural paradigms to promote social and environmental development.

Moreover, Walcott's biography is inherent in maritime discourse because, as a child growing up, he and his father visited the sea port to watch women load coal on ships for little pay. *Omeros* reimages these scenes to immortalise and glorify their courage and tenacity. He describes their labour thus:

Kneel to your load, then balance your staggering feet
and walk up that coal ladder as they do in time,
one bare foot after the next in ancestral rhyme.

.....

. . . Look, they climb, and no one knows them;
they take their copper pittances, and your duty

from the time you watched them from your grandmother's house
as a child wounded by their power and beauty
is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice.
(I.XIII.iii.16-36)

Walcott's *Omeros* is a tribute to women and womanhood, especially those who suffered deracination and displacement during slavery and the slave trade. Handley contends that after his mother's death, Walcott started to question eternal life and resolved to see "death in nature's bounty and bounty in death. Poetry is the language of resurrection, since it sees ecologically" (177). Therefore, by immortalising women's struggle in his art, he creates an identity for them as they contribute to the socio-economic development, and this identity defines Caribbean women's courage, which is represented in West Indian literature in general. Arguably, this new and emblematic identity is similar to other iconic structures like the Greenwich Meridian, Big Ben and the Thames River in the United Kingdom. Through these examples, Walcott invites us to see the extent to which the British have used important places and objects to define their identity. Therefore, the Caribbean, as well as the post-colonial writer, needs to revisit important moments in his history and immortalise them so as to create an identity for his society that future generations will learn from and celebrate.

In that light, the task of defining the Caribbean identity begins with an understanding of terms like "migration," "displacement," "home" and "return." Migrants yearn to establish their bi-part souls in their native soil, even though they have found a home in their new territories. Achille's return to the Congo from St Lucia highlights his desire to reconnect with his people. He wants to gain a sense of identity and belonging which culminates in an emotional outburst the moment he first meets them:

... Achille, weeping, fastened the bow
of the dugout, wiped his eyes with one dry palm,
and felt a hand help him up the shaking pier.

Half of me was with him. . .
An old man put an arm

around Achille, and the crowd, chattering, followed both. . .

.....

... A man kept walking
 steadily towards him, and he knew by that walk it
 was himself in his father, the wide teeth, the widening hands.
 (III.XXV.ii.16-30)

Having been a slave for forty years, Achille's family and the entire village receive him with joy. They perform traditional rituals to reconnect Achille to their ancestral land and the gods so as to establish a socio-cultural and religious identity for him. This ceremony underscores African hospitality and communal life as a developmental engagement. Even though Achille spends some time in his village, his desire for a migratory life at sea takes him back to St Lucia. He goes back as a hybrid who blends African tradition and Christianity for his social integration and survival. Michael Thurston examines Achille's hybridity in *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott* saying that the costume worn by the villagers when they initiate Achille is similar to that which Philoctete wears during the St Lucian Boxing Day celebrations. This means that "Africa and St Lucia are joined in these lingering, syncretically adapted rituals" (Thurston 140). To Thurston, Achille's African past is recovered on his return, and this enables him to see its presence in his activities. In St Lucia, he celebrates Christmas with his Christian community, and, on the second day, he goes out with his friend, Philoctete, dressed in African traditional attire and celebrates "Boxing Day" as an African. The narrator describes Helen's participation in preparing the African costume Achille wears:

... Helen helped him stuff the rags and align his breasts.

At first she laughed, but then, with firm tenderness,
 Achille explained that he and Philo had this
 every Boxing Day, and not because of Christmas,

but for something older, something that he had seen
in Africa, when his name had followed a swift,
where he had been his own father and his own son. (VI.LV.ii.3-9)

Dressed in African costume, Achille and Philoctete go to the streets and dance to entertain the people who, in return, offer coins for their performance. Achille's engagement here reveals the spiritual hybridity which is important for his survival.

Similarly, Ma Kilman blends Christianity and tradition in treating Philoctete's wound. As a herbalist, she harvests the plants and gets other traditional items to treat his wound. When everything is ready, Walcott says that she invokes the Christian God and her ancestors to lift the sore from Philoctete's rotting shin as she prepares a powerful concoction in which Philoctete is immersed in order to begin his healing process. The narrator says:

. . . Into this she then fed
the bubbling root and leaves. She led Philoctete
to the gurgling lava. Trembling, he entered

his bath like a boy. The lime leaves leeches to his wet
knuckle spine like islands that cling to the basin
of the rusted Caribbean. An icy sweat

glazed his scalp, but he could feel the putrescent shin
drain in the seethe like sucked marrow, he felt it drag
the slime from his shame. (VI.XLIX.i.13-21)

Ma Kilman's combination of senna, tisanes and medicinal flowers effectively treats Philoctete's long-infected wound, which had caused him much physical and emotional pain and had made him resent social interaction. Edward Baugh contends in *Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature: Derek Walcott* that Philoctete's treatment is successful thanks to Ma Kilman's shamanistic powers, who finds the secret root or herb with the curative power especially as "she is drawn by a will greater than herself. Nature and centuries have been preparing the event. The

root has been waiting for Ma Kilman to find it" (192). Baugh argues that the seeds of these healing plants had been brought across the Atlantic from Africa and dropped in the forest by an African swift. That is why her invocations trace the mythical journey of the plant that has become very important in Caribbean shamanism. Arguably, her spiritual hybridity facilitates the invocation of the black ants that lead her from church to the cedar in the sacred forest. In this light, the interpretation of the ritualistic language of her great-grandmother shows her communion with the ants that represent the spirits of her ancestors and all the slaves that died in the middle passage at the time of the crossing. From another perspective, Ashok Bery postulates in *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* that Philoctete's wound is a major theme in *Omeros* which highlights physical, mental and environmental conflicts. Bery thinks that the "swelling came from the chained ankles of his grandfathers" (175). To Bery, Walcott's Plunkett, Achille and Hector all carry wounds of history, which can serve as a cure for the future if the socio-cultural and religious harmony is negotiated in the archipelago. That is why, over the years, all attempts at treating the wound fail because the ancestral cross of slavery they are carrying is not invoked in the form of forgiveness and reconciliation in the previous attempts at healing or getting treatment for the wound. That is why, Jahan Ramazanim suggests in "The Wound of Postcolonial History: Derek Walcott's *Omeros*" that Walcott's image of the wound interrogates imperial injury and gives a new voice to the Afro-Caribbeans by making it a "site of interethnic connection within *Omeros*, vivifying the black Caribbean inheritance of colonial injury" (177). The wound becomes Walcott's metaphor that makes poetry a vibrant genre of postcolonial writing. Here, the wound motif is a tribute to the black transatlantic experience and the diversity of the archipelago in *Omeros*. Through the seascape, the inhumane treatment of blacks points to the process of colonialism and the world geopolitics triggered by the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Walcott's image of the wound and its remedy are fundamental in the characters'

search for their bi-part souls in reconstructing the Caribbean cross-cultural identity and social development.

Conclusion

Walcott's *Omeros* foregrounds the struggle to assert an identity against the backdrop of slavery, colonialism and cultural memory. This article has used ecocriticism to argue that Walcott points to how the seascape reflects split personalities in search of their bi-part souls. The search reveals an engagement of their spiritual and rational parts. The conflicts of interest ushered by imperial activities in the Caribbean archipelago shaped the culture, history and identity. Evidently, these serve as sources of healing and pain that reveal the complexities of the past. From the arguments in this article, there is evidence that the sea represents a source of tranquillity and peace to Walcott's characters. Their search for a place within the ecosystem provides solutions to the erasure of the boundaries that have set humans apart from other living communities.

Furthermore, as a transit zone, Walcott's sea is a meeting point for different peoples and cultures. It also serves as a burial ground for sailors and ships with treasure hunters who explore its bottom to uncover its great wealth of histories and identities. This article has equally established that through the search for the bi-part soul, images of light representing love, beauty, truth and the protection of the environment are highlighted and juxtaposed with violence, cruelty and anger. In *Omeros*, Walcott crafts rich metaphors and images in blank verse to produce an effective rhythm and musicality to arouse ecological awareness in his characters. Finally, by borrowing from Homeric myths and history, the article has contended that social development can only be attained if the characters define their pristine identities. This will help them use the spiritual and rational parts of their bi-part souls to reconnect with their ancestors and the gods of the natural environment.

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