

## Beyond the Classics: Legacies of Colonial Education in C. L. R. James and Derek Walcott

*By Paula Makris*

A commonly accepted tenet of postcolonial studies is that the system of education Britain provided to its colonies was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it inculcated in many colonial students a respect and admiration for British values and culture that were essential to the smooth maintenance of a vast overseas empire. On the other hand, it provided Britain's colonies with small groups of native intellectuals with the knowledge and confidence to challenge British colonial policies and eventually to aid in the decolonization of their countries. The legacy of British colonial education is also double-edged for many postcolonial writers in that, while it introduced students to the rich heritage of English literature, it also relegated them to the margins of that heritage, in effect giving them ties to two traditions (both the metropolitan center and the colonial nation of origin), but resulting in their feeling of truly belonging nowhere. This crisis of identity is even more acute in the case of Caribbean writers who, due to the hybrid, diasporic constitution of the Caribbean population, do not have a clear-cut, longstanding national literary tradition other than the European tradition they learned in school.

In this article, I consider C. L. R. James's *Beyond a Boundary* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* in relation to the issues of education and identity raised in the above paragraph. I focus specifically on their attempt to forge an alternative identification with the supposed origins of British literary tradition: the Greek and Latin classics. An inveterate myth of origin for the British nation is that, through the progeny of Aeneas, it is the legitimate inheritor of Greek and Roman culture and imperial ascendancy. James and Walcott take a very different view, identifying the Caribbean people as having a claim to the cultural heritage of Greece and the classics that is just as valid as the British people, if not more so. This article investigates the reasons behind their revision of this cultural inheritance, as well as the ways in which they demonstrate the legitimacy of this claim.

Before I discuss James and Walcott's approach to this topic, I will first provide some context as to the British educational emphasis on classic Greek and Latin texts and how this focus helped to shape British imperial consciousness. Education played a pivotal role in the British empire's ability to control the populations of the territories it subjugated. This control was much more subtle than direct military oppression and likely accounted for the relative success of the British empire as compared to that of other European countries.

In the Renaissance, during a crucial stage of development in the history of British education, educators used Greek and Latin texts as models of rhetoric and artistic sensibility for their young students. During this period, many politicians and writers were also exhorting their fellow countrymen to engage in the race for colonies and imperial expansion; the model of Greek and Roman empires played an important and persuasive role in such arguments, particularly because Greek and Roman writers were held in high esteem by humanist scholars and educators. A popular myth of English ethnic and national origin, derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, claimed that the English people were actually the descendants of ancient Roman and Trojan heroes,

through the lineage of Aeneas, whose grandson, Brutus, supposedly founded the English nation.<sup>1</sup> As the inheritors of the culture and imperial ambition of both ancient Greece and Rome, the English viewed themselves as the appropriate people to conquer and enlighten the "uncivilized" areas of the world. For instance, in his 1835 *Minute on Indian Education*, Lord Thomas Macaulay claimed, "We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us. . . ." <sup>2</sup>

Although all aspects of colonial education were important as a means of colonialist control, classical and literary education had a particular significance. Through the presentation of specific literary texts as the pinnacle of human cultural achievement, British colonial education was able to reinforce ideas of British superiority; as the rightful inheritor of the cultural capital attached to both Homer and Shakespeare, the British empire could claim to be the representative of the universal values that its educational system valorized in canonized literary texts. In contrast, these same texts often represented the colonized as inherently inferior beings: Calibans as opposed to Prosperos.

Postcolonial writers have issued many challenges to this notion that British culture represents the pinnacle of Western culture, and, thus, of world culture in general. One such challenge contests that Greek civilization, the so-called "cradle of Western Civilization," had been strongly influenced by many elements of African and Eastern culture. Marcus Garvey, an early proponent of this challenge, claimed in 1923, "The white world has always tried to rob and discredit us of our history. . . . Every student of history, of impartial mind knows . . . that thousands of Negro professors at that time taught in the universities in Alexandria, then the seat of learning; that ancient Egypt gave the world civilization and that Greece and Rome have robbed Egypt of her art and letters, and taken all the credit to themselves."<sup>3</sup> A more recent version of this challenge has sparked a significant debate in Classical Studies. In *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal charges that the Ancient Greeks did not try to conceal the afroasiatic roots of their culture; instead they fully acknowledged the contributions of such cultures as the Phoenicians and Egyptians. According to Bernal, the denial of African and Asian influence was instigated much later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by Europeans, particularly the Germans and English.<sup>4</sup>

Caribbean writers have contributed to this debate from an interesting perspective; with ties to both European and African tradition, they inherit the legacy of Ancient Greece through multiple channels. James and Walcott both acknowledge the influence of their colonial education on their interest in classical works and themes, but also point to other influences as well, influences that run counter to their colonial educations and that keep them from identifying fully with their imperial teachers. In his preface to *Beyond a Boundary*, James first indicates his splintered or bifurcated perspective on colonial identity and his own personal history:

The autobiographical framework shows the ideas more or less in the sequence that they developed in relation to the events, the facts and the personalities which prompted them. If the ideas originated in the West Indies it was only in England and in English life and history that I was able

to track them down and test them. To establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must pioneer into regions Caesar never knew.<sup>5</sup>

James acknowledges that he must have recourse to both the West Indian and the English facets of his knowledge and understanding in order to conceptualize his text, which is part memoir, part cultural commentary. He further notes, drawing upon a Shakespearian allusion, that the colonized must go to much greater lengths than the colonizer in order to "establish his own identity." That James conceives of himself as the colonized, rather than the colonizer, is unmistakably clear, and yet his means of articulating that position bear the equally unmistakable mark of the colonizer's cultural identity. The allusion to Caliban provides a fitting symbol of both James's absorption of and alienation from cultural identity. A "thing of darkness" neither quite human nor inhuman, Caliban is a favorite topic for Caribbean writers, as he represents the profound ambivalence they feel for English language and culture, which is neither completely accessible nor denied to them. Caliban complains to Miranda and Prospero, his masters, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language,"<sup>6</sup> and yet his curses contain some of the most eloquent, creative language in *The Tempest*. The beauty and power of Caliban's language transform him from a minor character of malice and spite to one who has captured the imagination of critics, artists, and audiences for centuries, as well as that of postcolonial writers attempting to describe the agonizing uncertainty of their cultural position and identity.

James's account of his colonial education, and how it fueled the two primary passions of his life, cricket and literature, demonstrates a clear link between that education and a resulting ambivalence that permeates his life's work as a sports journalist, literary author, and political commentator. For instance, James was torn between his admiration for the British public school code of honor and discipline on the playing field and his eventual awareness that this code did not necessarily extend beyond the playing field:

I had been brought up in the public-school code. It came doctrinally from the masters, who for two generations, from the foundation of the school, had been Oxford and Cambridge men. . . . [The students] lived in two worlds. Inside the classrooms the heterogeneous jumble of Trinidad was battered and jostled and shaken down into some sort of order. On the playing field we did what ought to be done. . . . Eton and Harrow had nothing on us. Another source of this fierce, self-imposed discipline were the magazines and books that passed among us from hand to hand. *The Boy's Own Paper*, a magazine called *The Captain*, annuals of which I remember the name of only one: *Young England*. . . . These we understood, these we lived by, the principles they taught we absorbed through the pores and practiced instinctively.<sup>7</sup>

The structure of colonial education and its focus on competitive games, camaraderie, and the maintenance of a "stiff upper lip," as James terms it, in the face of failure or ill-fortune, become second nature to the colonial students with whom James shares a classroom and playing field. He claims that they internalized the morals, customs, and attitudes of their masters, meaning of course their instructors, but the resonance of the word is worth

noticing. This internalization came about as a result of formal instruction in the superiority of Western culture and the practice of ritual traditions in competing and sportsman-like behavior. Many cultural critics and theorists have commented on the role of public-school sports in creating young imperialists ready to leave England and shoulder "the white man's burden" as colonial officials. Indeed, English educators themselves often referred to this positive benefit of games such as cricket and soccer. E.S. Dudding, Headmaster of Wolborough Hill School (1892-8) is known to have remarked, "The boy who learns to play for his side at school will do good work for his country as a man."<sup>8</sup> Public-school games were as central to the education of students (both English and colonial) as was the study of English history and language, or even the classical languages of Greece and Rome.

The imperial spirit that fired the imaginations and competitive nature of students in English public schools did not simply disappear when that educational structure was exported to the colonies. It was translated into the rhetoric of colonial education as both an exhortation to colonial students to identify with the goals and aspirations of the imperial elite and a challenge to leap for the brass ring of Western cultural superiority. As much as James loved and admired the sport of cricket and English literature, he was still painfully aware of the bind in which that translated imperial spirit placed the colonial student:

I began to study Latin and French, then Greek, and much else. But particularly we learnt, I learnt and obeyed and taught a code, the English public school code. Britain and her colonies and the colonial peoples. What do the British people know of what they have done there? Precious little. The colonial peoples, particularly West Indians, scarcely know themselves as yet. It has taken me a long time to begin to understand.<sup>9</sup>

The ideology of the educational institution works at a variety of levels: those of national loyalties, class loyalties, cultural loyalties, gender loyalties. As a Marxist, James is well aware of the implications of his colonial education, and yet he is unable, and quite possibly unwilling, to divorce himself from its pervasive influence.

In his introduction to *Beyond a Boundary*, Robert Lipsyte provides some pointed commentary on James's ambivalence toward the game of cricket and its impact on colonial students; he discusses both James's friendship with a white classmate, as well as James's later inability to comprehend how poor, inner-city college athletes could betray their universities and their own sense of ethics by throwing games for money. First, Lipsyte discusses the painful lesson James learns from his friendship with a boy he calls "U—":

They were battery mates in the cricket wars, classmates howling together over Dickens. The white boy went to Europe to study; afterward, there was only embarrassment and guilt when they met. Beyond the boundaries, learned James, the only real links are family and class.

The brotherhood of the game is only of the game.

James writes so dispassionately, almost distantly at times, that one must infer how cruelly personal this lesson was and, ultimately, how political.

It seemed like a classic ploy by the conquerors: games, particularly so restrained and ritualistic a game as cricket, could be imposed upon the

colonies to tame them, to herd them into psychic boundaries where they would learn the values and ethics of the colonist.

But once given the opportunity to play the master's game, to excel at it, the colonials gained a self-esteem that would eventually free them.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this acknowledgement that cricket provided men such as James a means to overcome the "psychic boundaries" of the colonial system, Lipsyte ultimately claims that James's passion for cricket both liberates and oppresses him. He cites as evidence James's reaction to an American scandal involving college athletes and bookies. James is shocked and dismayed that poor college athletes, scholarship winners, could sell out their schools and teammates for material gain. His belief that school loyalties should be placed above individual economic interests is a direct reflection of the English public-school code, and proved a puzzle to his fellow idealists and Marxists. As James says, "I, a colonial born and bred, a Marxist, declared enemy of British imperialism and all its ways and works, was the last person they had expected that sort of thing from."<sup>11</sup> This exchange leaves James, at the age of fifty, questioning his allegiance to his colonial school, a tie he admits to never having examined critically before. Considering this reminiscence, Lipsyte concludes that James was "ennobled and crippled by cricket; he reached beyond his boundary but would always have a blind spot."<sup>12</sup> While I generally agree with this point, I would amend Lipsyte's conclusion in order to cite the public-school code that James internalizes through his colonial education as the more specific force that both ennobled and crippled him. Cricket was the primary medium through which the school transmitted the code, but not itself the cause of James's ambivalence.

At times, James refers to himself as British (but not of course "English"), and he seems generally to conceive of his identity as a syncretic collaboration between his Caribbean and English sensibilities. At other times, however, he shows strong symptoms of the condition Patrick Hogan has identified as "alienating hybridity," in that James feels isolated from both cultures, able to identify fully with neither. Hogan describes alienating hybridity as "the paralyzing conviction that one has no identity, no real cultural home, and that no synthesis is possible. In literature, at least, the condition is linked with madness." He also notes that alienating hybridity seems to appear most often in Caribbean literature, an occurrence that he attributes to "the high degree of severance experienced by all colonized people in the region."<sup>13</sup>

Even while still a child, James's passionate feelings of reverence toward English sport and literature could not completely offset the antipathy he felt toward English political and military control:

When reading elementary English history books, I became resentful of the fact that the English always won all, or nearly all, of the battles and read every new history book I could find, searching out and noting battles they had lost. I would not deny that early influences I could know nothing about had cast me in a certain mould or even that I was born with certain characteristics. That could be. What interests me, and is I think, of general interest, is that as far back as I can trace my consciousness the original found itself and came to maturity within a system that was the result of

centuries of development in another land, was transplanted as a hothouse flower is transplanted and bore some strange fruit.<sup>14</sup>

One example of the "strange fruit" born of James's colonial education is his appropriation of Western philosophies and literature to contest Western colonial power and oppression. James achieves the ideal syncretic state in his use of Marxist theory and Shakespearian allusion to critique the very system that gave him access to these tools. Accordingly, a dilemma confronts him: competing feelings of alienation and loyalty toward a system which both enlightened and constrained him:

It was only long years after that I understood the limitation on spirit, vision and self-respect which was imposed on us by the fact that our masters, our curriculum, our code of morals, everything began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and learning, and our business was to admire, wonder, imitate, learn; our criterion of success was to have succeeded in approaching that distant ideal—to attain it was, of course, impossible.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, despite James's professed conception of himself as primarily British, he does not point to England as the land and culture for which he feels the greatest affinity. Nor does he point to Trinidad. Interestingly enough, he singles out Ancient Greece as the closest representative of a culture and an educational system in which he would feel at home.

James's fascination with Ancient Greek culture and education may at first seem an anomaly; in what way, after all, are Greece and the Caribbean connected? They appear to share no common heritage or ethnicity, no common history or culture. And yet, James claims that of all geographical locations and time periods, the world of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is closest in spirit to his own mind. "I believed that if when I left school I had gone into the society of Ancient Greece I would have been more at home than ever I had been since."<sup>16</sup> James attributes this feeling of solidarity partly to his colonial education, with its emphasis upon the classics. Even though colonial education focused upon English literature and history, the students were always aware that their English schoolmasters had acquired, at Cambridge and Oxford, a "deeper" education with the classics as its basis. Indeed, with such role models to guide them, many colonial students, such as James, studied Latin and Greek while at secondary school and discovered connections between the classics and their lives, connections about which the schoolmasters did not speak and perhaps were not aware. In the process of educating himself "into a member of the British middle class with literary gifts," James claims that he became aware of a similarity between his own methods of learning and those of Ancient Greece:

In the course of duty and for my own information I have read the classics of educational theory and taken an interest in systems of education. Each suited its time, but I have a permanent affinity with only one, the ancient Greek. When I read that the Greeks educated their young people on poetry, gymnastics and music I feel that I know what that means, and I constantly

read (and profit by) the writings of most learned professors of Greek culture, who I am sure don't know what they are talking about .<sup>17</sup>

In his pursuit and study of the game of cricket (as well as his parallel literary aspirations), James feels he reaches a far closer understanding of and harmony with the culture and practices of Ancient Greece than do the "learned professors" he mentions.

This belief is notable in that it is not anomalous; in their desire to claim all facts of their cultural and literary heritage, several of the more syncretic Caribbean writers, Derek Walcott being the most prominent, have considered themselves legitimate inheritors of Hellenic spirit and civilization. A number of Walcott's works, most notably his long poem *Omeros*, provide an interesting perspective on this argument in its suggestion that Walcott, as a poet with ties to both European and African tradition, inherits the legacy of Ancient Greece through multiple channels. Following the path of C. L. R. James, Walcott left the Caribbean island of his birth to complete his education overseas. Also in the tradition of James, Walcott questions through his writing the effects of his colonial education on his sense of identity, both as a native of the Caribbean basin and as a poet. In his poem, "The Schooner *Flight*," the speaker, Shabine, describes himself in terms that seem relevant to Walcott's sense of his own identity.

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,  
I had a sound colonial education  
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,  
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.<sup>18</sup>

Shabine, a Caribbean seaman, readily recognizes his mixed ancestry and, in doing so, neatly states the conundrum that the Caribbean writer faces in his or her own Caribbean origin and "sound colonial education": is being from the Caribbean equivalent to having no identity, to being "nobody," or is it equivalent to being replete with identity, to laying claim to a personal identity so encompassing that it is a nation unto itself? In creating the character of Shabine, Walcott suggests a shadow-image of himself as a poet and native of the Caribbean. The descendant of both African and European, Walcott is a seafarer as well as a writer, traveling from his native home of Saint Lucia to Jamaica to attend the University College of the West Indies on a British Colonial Development and Welfare Scholarship, to Trinidad to establish the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, to London to reach an international audience, to the United States to teach. As with other Caribbean writers of his generation, Walcott leaves his home in order to realize his full artistic potential but never ceases to return; Caribbean concerns and sensibilities unmistakably mark the entirety of his work. Central to the topics he pursues is the question Shabine articulates above, and although he describes the ambivalence of his position in agonizing detail, Walcott's answer is unequivocal. Walcott as poet embodies a nation. Walcott's themes and use of language proclaim a triumph of syncretic unity, both geographically and historically.

Walcott poses Shabine's question most poignantly in the poem, "A Far Cry from Africa." Written in 1962, this poem refers to the Kikuyu tribe who, as Mau Mau fighters, rose up against the British colonial settlers in Kenya. Infamous for its merciless violence, this conflict counted among its dead many non-military victims, including children. An

observer who cannot remain dispassionate, objective, Walcott's speaker notes the attempt of colonial policy to do just that:

Statistics justify and scholars seize  
The salients of colonial policy.  
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?  
To savages, expendable as Jews?

The conflict is much closer to home: the conflict of the colonial writer who cannot fully own or disown either of the warring sides.

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?<sup>19</sup>

Here is the cry of alienated hybridity: how can one choose between two parts of one's own being; how can one have any clear sense of identity at all?

According to June Bobb in *Beating a Restless Drum*, many critics point to these lines as evidence "characterizing Walcott as a poet and a person, that is as artist and man torn apart by divisions of self and world."<sup>20</sup> In other words, these lines imply that Walcott has succumbed to the despair inherent in alienated hybridity, due to his professional and personal ambivalence. Such critics cite Walcott's family background: "descended from a white grandfather and a black grandmother on both the paternal and maternal sides, he is a living example of the divided loyalties and hatreds that keep his society suspended between two worlds."<sup>21</sup> Bobb claims, however, that the agonized question in "A Far Cry from Africa" is a prelude to a richer, fuller answer elsewhere. To critics who suggest that Walcott's question implies a paralysis on the part of the poet, Bobb counters:

While focusing on the poet's tortured consciousness and personal pain, critics lose sight of the wider implications of Walcott's lines and the poet's conscious recreation of the universal struggle between possessor and possessed. This struggle does not result in paralysis, however, for the poet attempts to impose an order on his world, an order denied by the forces of colonization. . . . For Walcott, the questions raised in 'A Far Cry from Africa' are rhetorical; while he agonizes over the possibility of submitting to the forces of destruction, he is at the same time at work reinventing a Caribbean identity that would purge these negative forces and restore order to the Caribbean world.<sup>22</sup>

Walcott's broad corpus of work provides many examples of his restorative, syncretic vision, but none so fully as his poem based on a classical model and transported to a Caribbean landscape, *Omeros*.

In this twentieth-century epic, Walcott takes as his project the inscription of the Caribbean people's "rightful name and place within their own narrative."<sup>23</sup> As previously noted, inhabitants of the Caribbean have a wide-ranging, but hazy sense of cultural inheritance. In *Omeros*, Walcott attempts to merge the Caribbean's European cultural inheritance (in its use of the Homeric epic as a model), with African and Native American narratives that resurrect the long suppressed legacy of the transported slaves and dispossessed indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. A central part of this project is the fusion of the English language and prosody with the Creole languages of the islands. The incorporation of foreign language in a text can facilitate the ability of postcolonial writing to depict the linguistically and culturally fractured world of the bilingual writer. As well, the efforts of bilingual writers to blend the various aspects of their linguistic heritage effortlessly and seamlessly in their writing can indicate a step in the direction of healing those linguistic and cultural fractures.

Walcott claims that the metrical pattern of *Omeros* is "roughly hexametrical with a terza rima form," but Robert Hamner notes that "Walcott's overall pattern never really approaches Dante's intricately wrought hierarchical framework . . . a Germanic language such as English does not lend itself as easily to rhyming as Dante's gender-inflected Italian."<sup>24</sup> Already, Walcott is juxtaposing one linguistic system's expectations with another, incorporating them into the text as part of the creation of a "creolized" epic.

In using Caribbean patois along with English in his text, Walcott not only demonstrates the very theme of his work within the words he chooses to use, he also makes it so challenging that his success seems that much more spectacular. Walcott doesn't just drop a word here or there for effect; he uses entire lines of patois next to entire lines of English, balancing the rhythm of the different languages off one another within the loose confines of the poem's meter.

*"Touchez-i, encore: N'ai fendre choux-ous-ou, salope!"*  
 "Touch it again, and I'll split your arse, you bitch!"  
*"Moi, j'a dire—'ous pas preter un rien. 'Ous ni shallope*

*'ous ni seine, 'ous croire 'ous ni choeur campeche?"*  
 "I told you, borrow nothing of mine. You have a canoe,  
 and a net. Who you think you are? Logwood Heart?"

*"'Ous croire 'ous c'est roi Gros Îlet? Voleur bomme!"*  
 "You think you're king of Gros Îlet, you tin-stealer?"  
 Then in English: "I show you who is king! Come!"

This challenge precedes the battle of Hector and Achille, ostensibly over the tin Achille had borrowed from Hector's canoe, but really "over a shadow, and its name was Helen."<sup>25</sup> In this passage, Walcott merges the epic battle of Troy with a violent fight between two Caribbean fishermen. By minimizing the heroic scale of the combatants, Walcott brings the Caribbean's classical inheritance of the Homeric myths in line with the everyday reality

of the Caribbean people. This fusion of European and Caribbean culture is emphasized by the fusion of patois and English in the above nine lines. In addition to the layering of the two languages, one on top of the other, the rhyme scheme also facilitates this fusion. Because not all of Walcott's lines rhyme, when they do, the effect is that much more emphatic. There are only two end-rhymes in these three stanzas; the first occurs immediately (the patois words "salope" and "shallope"), but the next doesn't come until the end of Hector's challenge. This rhyme ("bomme" and "come") brings together a patois word and an English word. Merging the two languages in rhyme here underscores the fusion between epic heroes and Caribbean fishermen, as well as the fusion between the disparate strands of Caribbean cultural inheritance that Walcott has set out to unite.

Walcott establishes the connection between Ancient Greek and twentieth-century Caribbean culture in various ways throughout *Omeros*. The most central parallel is, of course, the revision of the epic struggle between the Trojan and Greek heroes, Hector and Achilles, and the role of the famously beautiful Helen in their dispute. Other methods that Walcott uses to forge this connection include the subplot involving the Greek sculptress, Antigone, who teaches the poet-figure Walcott the correct pronunciation of the name, "Omeros," as well as the repeated appearance of the Omeros figure himself, who is at times also identified as the character, Seven Seas. I will focus on these two methods because they most effectively demonstrate the construction of an association between Greek and Caribbean cultures that deliberately excludes the mediating authority of the British empire and the institution of colonial education.

Although it might seem that the main connection between Greek culture and a postcolonial writer such as Walcott would be the British educational system, since it taught the classics, the reader of *Omeros* tends to get a very different impression. Near the end of the poem, Walcott's assumed persona confesses to the Omeros figure that he never read his epics, "not all the way through."<sup>26</sup> The bond that Walcott describes between Greece and the Caribbean exists not merely in the study of the classics available from colonial education, but more so, as in the experience of C. L. R. James, in the common spirit of the two admittedly disparate cultures. In a 1990 interview, Walcott claims, "Part of what I'm saying in the book is that the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean. If we looked at them now, we would say that the Greeks had Puerto Rican tastes. Right? Because the stones were painted brightly. They were not these bleached stones. As time went by, and they sort of whitened and weathered, the classics began to be thought of as something bleached-out and rain-spotted, distant. People who praised classical Greece, if they were there then, would consider the Greeks' tastes vulgar, lurid. . . . They would not be looked at as stately classical painters, but as exotica, barbarous exotica. All the purple and gold—that's what I'm saying is very Caribbean, that same vigor and elation of an earlier Greece, not a later Greece, a Romanesque Greece." Even as James claims that he understands the Greeks better than do "learned" (presumably European) professors of the classics, so does Walcott assert that he, because of his Caribbean background, understands the Greeks in a way that others cannot even perceive. Although Walcott never conflates Greek and Caribbean cultures in *Omeros*, he does imply that a special affinity exists between them. He is, of course, aware of their differences (in the same interview he states, "Everything is reduced, as soon as a comparison begins. An almond leaf is not an olive leaf"),<sup>27</sup> and yet he is careful to show certain similarities as well, similarities which work to bypass, ignore, or even ridicule British claims to the inheritance of the Greek Classical tradition. As noted

earlier, Walcott uses two characters in particular to develop these similarities: Antigone and Omeros.

The main scene involving Antigone takes place early in the poem, setting the tone for Walcott's identification with Greek people, culture, and literature. In this scene, Walcott's persona learns the authentic pronunciation of the anglicized name "Homer," not from a classics teacher or a British textbook, but from a Greek woman. The scene implies that Walcott and the woman share a romantic, sexual relationship:

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as  
cold as marble, then the shoulders in winter light  
in the studio attic. . . .

The intimate relationship between the two serves to underscore the similarity between them: they are both migrants, living away from the countries of their birth. "Antigone turned and said: / 'I'm tired of America, it's time for me to go back to Greece. I miss my islands.'"<sup>28</sup> If one replaced the name "Greece" with that of "St. Lucia," this statement could easily have been made by Walcott's character at several points throughout the poem.

The connection made here between the geographical origins of a Greek artist and those of a Caribbean poet is not coincidental; in one of his essays, Walcott states, "I think that an archipelago, whether Greek or West Indian, is bound to be a fertile area, particularly if it is a bridge between continents, and a variety of people settle there."<sup>29</sup> A central element that all archipelagos share is the overarching presence of the sea. A direct link between the Homeric epics and Walcott's is the role the sea plays in the fortunes and aspirations of the poems' characters. According to Jill Gidmark:

The sea that in line seven of *Omeros* 'feed us fishermen all our life' (O 3) is, in the poem's final line, 'still going on' (O 324), cast in a progressive tense that maintains its eternity. The sea is the poem's prime flow and force. It unites opposing shores, levels great empires, and generates Walcott's visual and visceral art. The sea also artistically and genuinely links ancient Greece with the modern Caribbean. . . . Both people are seafarers, and, as Brad Leithauser has observed, Walcott makes much of the notion 'that to a marine community the daily nudge and drain of the tides . . . overrides life rhythms.'<sup>30</sup>

In the very word that Antigone teaches Walcott, the name "Omeros," the sea itself is manifest:

and *O* was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was  
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,  
*os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes  
and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.

Walcott deftly weaves the Caribbean and Greek elements of this image of the sea together. Although the word "Omeros" itself is Greek, it consists of words that have meaning in the St. Lucian dialect, all of which relate to the sea; moreover, the syllable, "os," in its

suggestion of ossification, evokes an image of antiquity and endurance that is resonant of Ancient Greece. In Latin, "os" means "mouth," and "Omeros" could be understood as "the speaking mouth of the sea." The syllable, "O" represents the sound of the sea in a conch shell in any language, and is also the sound that the Greek woman makes in the back of her throat at the end of this scene: "a hollow moan exhaled from a vase." It is this sound that initially impels Walcott as poet to connect the Greek tradition of epic to his own island home: when he hears this sound, he decides that it need not only be connected to the Homeric heroes: "not for kings floundering in lances of rain." Instead, for Walcott, the sound reflects "the prose / of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes." As Walcott eventually tells Omeros, "That's why I walk behind you. / Your name in her throat's white vase sent me to find you."<sup>31</sup>

In order to stress the validity of the association between Greece and the Caribbean, Walcott carefully excludes any mention of a previous interest in or familiarity with the classics which may have been due to the influence of his colonial education. Instead, his inspiration has a much more direct link through Antigone, a link which has many elements in common with his Caribbean heritage. His very description of Antigone, a Greek woman, betrays his perception of her as non-European: "I saw how light was webbed / on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black almond's outline."<sup>32</sup> In this section as well, Walcott makes the first positive identification between Omeros and Seven Seas, which constitutes my second and final example of the connection between Greece and the Caribbean that is developed throughout the poem.

When Walcott's persona looks at Antigone "stroking the small bust with its boxer's broken nose," he thinks of "Seven Seas sitting near the reek / of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise."<sup>33</sup> Seven Seas is an ambiguous character in the poem. At times he is just another inhabitant of the island, a blind, old seafarer living out his last days on St. Lucia; at times he is a transhistorical figure of prophecy who serves as witness to the horrors and glories of the past. In this latter capacity, Seven Seas becomes interchangeable with Omeros, the blind poet of the Greeks. As the poem progresses, the implied parallels between Seven Seas and Omeros become increasingly obvious, until they eventually appear as two parts of the same figure, continually metamorphosing into one another. An early hint of the connection between them occurs in Ma Kilman's shop, where Seven Seas would often spend his days:

He claimed he'd sailed round the world. "Monsieur Seven Seas"  
they christened him, from a cod-liver-oil label  
with its wriggling swordfish. But his words were not clear.  
They were Greek to her. Or old African babble.<sup>34</sup>

Although, as Robert Hamner points out, there is an element of irony in the fact that Ma Kilman is as ignorant of African languages as she is of Greek,<sup>35</sup> the comparison of the two language systems here implies an uncertainty as to the origins of Seven Seas; his words could be African, Greek, or some unknown fusion of the two languages, or any languages.

That Seven Seas has African connections becomes apparent in his appearance in the African village that Achille has visited in his dream-induced voyage. After watching slave traders raid the village, Achille comes across Seven Seas in a deserted house, "foaming with grief. He must / be deaf as well as blind, Achille thought. The head / never turned but

it widened its mouth to the river, / the same list of battles the river had already heard." The role of the blind shaman that Seven Seas plays is mirrored in a later scene with Omeros in a North American Sioux village that had also just been raided, not by slave traders but by the U.S. Army. "There were hoof-marks frozen in the flour dust / near a hungry-tent mouth. . . . Through its door / I saw white-eyed Omeros, motionless. He must be deaf too, I thought, as well as blind, since his head / never turned. Then he lifted the dry rattle / in one hand."<sup>36</sup> The similar details in these scenes predominately indicate Walcott's perception of the relation between histories of oppression in different parts of the world, but they also indicate a special relation between Seven Seas, the first blind witness, and Omeros, the second. Although they are helpless to intervene in these injustices due to their blindness, they can record their grief and rage either in reciting the litany of battles that their people have fought, as does Seven Seas, or in inciting resistance to the injustice, as does Omeros in the brandishing of a war-rattle. Their roles as witness and recorder represent to some degree the ability of the poet to transcend both culture and history in the making of an epic, such as Walcott's, that spans centuries and continents.

The development of the connection between Omeros and Seven Seas, a Greek poet and a Caribbean voyager, culminates in the arrival of Omeros to St. Lucia, where he confronts Walcott's poet-figure at his beach-front hotel. Walcott had last seen Omeros in London, where, in the guise of an old bargeman, Omeros had been chased off the steps of a cathedral in Trafalgar Square by "a raging sparrow / of a church warden." The irony implicit in this scene is that British imperial authority, which ostensibly celebrates the association between British and Greek culture, is unable to recognize Omeros for who he is. Walcott, of course, does not have this problem; on the contrary, he is able to recognize facets of Omeros's identity that other admirers may have overlooked. For instance, when Walcott sees Omeros come out of the sea on a St. Lucian beach, he sees the marble head momentarily darken and transform into the features of Seven Seas, and then change back again:

They kept shifting shapes, or the shapes metamorphosed  
in the worried water, no sooner was the head  
of the blind plaster-bust clear than its brow was crossed

by a mantling cloud and its visage reappeared  
with ebony hardness, skull and beard like cotton,

. . . . .  
So one changed from marble with a dripping chiton  
in the early morning on that harp-wired sand  
to a foam-headed fisherman in his white, torn

undershirt, but both of them had the look of men  
whose skins are preserved in salt, whose accents were born  
from guttural shoal, whose vision was wide as rain. . . .<sup>37</sup>

The strong similarities between these Greek and Caribbean figures, who both have the simplicity and strength of old fishermen, as well as the power and vision of prophetic seers, endorses the poem's association of Ancient Greek myth with modern Caribbean

culture and history. Walcott, as the inheritor of a fragmented cultural and historic tradition, harmoniously blends the representatives of these traditions into the figure of the blind poet-voyager who has inspired him throughout the poem.

Although Walcott insinuates in *Omeros* that this connection is appropriate and viable, he ultimately indicates that it is unnecessary. The people of St. Lucia, the Hectors, Achilles, and Helens, do not need "Grecian grandeur," as Keats put it, "the shadow of a magnitude,"<sup>38</sup> to provide them with nobility. They do not need to appropriate the myths and culture of another nation to invest themselves with a sense of superiority and excellence. Their innate sense of nobility and self-worth, which was enough to prompt Walcott to suggest the comparison of poor fishermen to Homeric heroes, is also enough for them to do without the comparison. In the closing sections of *Omeros*, Walcott writes,

. . . Names are not oars

that have to be laid side by side, nor are legends;  
slowly the foaming clouds have forgotten ours.  
You were never in Troy, and, between two Helens,

yours is here and alive; their classic features  
were turned into silhouettes from the lightning bolt  
of a glance. These Helens are different creatures,

one marble, one ebony. . . .<sup>39</sup>

The beauty of the marble statue has no power to augment or diminish the beauty of the mortal Helen, which defines the machinations of Walcott as epic poet to define and thus possess it.<sup>40</sup> This wild free beauty of Helen on some level represents the island of St. Lucia and the spirit of the Caribbean people: both are as worthy of epic comparisons as any people or place on earth, but both are also fiercely independent and without need of grandiose claims and gestures made on their behalf. Ultimately, Walcott's choice to cast Caribbean characters and locations in the guise of Ancient Greece has little to do with the need to validate the importance of the Caribbean in relation to other nations and histories. Instead, the choice is that of a poet who wishes to celebrate all aspects of his literary and cultural heritage. In a 1983 interview, Walcott claims, "I believe myths are unkillable. Either man is a myth or a piece of dirt. I prefer the former view. Whatever happened before me is mine, the guilt is mine, the grandeur and horror were mine. Roman, Greek, African, all mine, veined in me, more alive than marble, bleeding and drying up. Literature reopens wounds more deeply than history does. It also releases the forces of joy."<sup>41</sup>

Although, as do many Caribbean writers, Walcott may owe a debt to C. L. R. James for his pioneering exploration of fruitful historic and literary themes, James never seems to embrace the contradictions and ambiguities of a postcolonial world as enthusiastically as Walcott. For James, Ancient Greece represents the ideals of games and literature that he holds most dear, and he looks to that long-ago culture with a longing born of his sense of alienation toward the world he inhabits: "For cricket and English literature I fed an inexhaustible passion. I had had it from the earliest days that I remember. The boys in ancient Greece must have had the same. If for them games and poetry were ennobled by

their roots in religion, my sense of conduct and morals came from my two, or rather my twin, preoccupations, and I suspect that it was not too different with a Greek boy. But he went out into a world for which his training had prepared him. There was no world for which I was fitted, least of all the one I was now to enter."<sup>42</sup> Due to his feelings of alienation toward the world he must enter upon the completion of his education, James strategically "counter-colonizes" the imperial cultural heritage to which Britain has laid claim, emphasizing the unique historical and social parallels between Greece and the Caribbean and suggestively minimizing the understanding that even celebrated English scholars could have of the Ancient Greek world. Indeed, both James and Walcott, as colonially educated Caribbean writers, rely upon their knowledge and intellect to agitate for Caribbean self-determinism, ever aware of the irony inherent in the means they use to achieve their ends.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo Saxons*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England; Montreal: Harvest House Ltd., 1982), 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 428.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Garvey, quoted by Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), xxi.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1961), 1.2.444-446.

<sup>7</sup> James, 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> E. S. Dudding, qtd. by Donald Leicester-MacKay, "The nineteenth-century English preparatory school: cradle and crèche of Empire?" in *Benefits Bestowed? Education and British Imperialism*, ed. J. A. Mangan, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988), 72.

<sup>9</sup> James, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Lipsyte, introduction to *Beyond a Boundary*, by C. L. R. James, xiii.

<sup>11</sup> James, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Lipsyte, xiv.

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<sup>13</sup>Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>14</sup>James, 41-42.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>18</sup>Derek Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*," in *Collected Poems 1948-84*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc., 1986), lines 40-43.

<sup>19</sup>Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry from Africa," in *Collected Poems 1948-84*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc., 1986), lines 7-10, 26-33.

<sup>20</sup>June Bobb, *Beating a Restless Drum: The Poetics of Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott*, (Africa World Press: Trenton, NJ, 1998), 37.

<sup>21</sup>Robert D. Hamner, qtd. in Bobb, 37.

<sup>22</sup>Bobb, 38.

<sup>23</sup>Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's "Omeros"*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>25</sup>Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, (New York: Noonday, 1990), 1.3.1-9, 17.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.3.12.

<sup>27</sup>Walcott, interview by Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson. "An Interview with Derek Walcott," *Cream City Review* 14 no. 2 (winter 1990): 216-17.

<sup>28</sup>Walcott, *Omeros*, 2.3.7-9, 18-20)

<sup>29</sup>Walcott, quoted in Hamner, 16.

<sup>30</sup>Jill Gidmark, "Derek Walcott's *Omeros*: Reconfiguring Myth for a New World," in *Nationalism and Sexuality: Crises of Identity*, ed. Yiorgos Kalogeras and Domma Patourmatzi, (Thessaloniki: Hellenic Association of American Studies, 1996), 100.

<sup>31</sup>Walcott, *Omeros*, 2.3.10-13, 40-42.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 16-18.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.2.18-21.

<sup>35</sup>Hamner, 42.

<sup>36</sup>Walcott, *Omeros*, 27.2.13-16, 43.2.15-20.

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.2.28, 56.1.40-55.

<sup>38</sup>John Keats, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), lines 12-14.

<sup>39</sup>Walcott, *Omeros*, 42.2.21-28.

<sup>40</sup>Hamner, 143-144.

<sup>41</sup>Walcott, interview by Leif Sjöberg, "An Interview with Derek Walcott" in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 85

<sup>42</sup>James, 34.

Objections that classical Athenian civilization was characterized by slavery and exclusions of women obscure the fact that James always acknowledged the limits of Athenian society and implored his audiences to question their own elitism and improve on the direct democratic model for modern politics. Increasingly, the clash of so-called Western civilization and the Third World in the post-colonial era undermined the potential of James's Athens as a productive thought experiment, although African American and Caribbean activists did try to grapple with this argument, and some found it valuable. Walcott explores these themes again in *Another Life*, a book-length autobiographical poem that examines the important roles of poetry, memory, and historical consciousness in bridging the distances within the postcolonial psyche. This investigation transferred to his dramatic writings in the 1970s, which address the problems of Caribbean identity against the backdrop of political and racial strife and which increasingly find solutions to these troubles in the individual. In these works, he continues to explore the complex legacy of colonialism with a poetic vision that recognizes the range of traditions comprising his beloved West Indies, and with a poetic voice that harmonizes the discord between the English canon and his native dialect. Lyndersay, Mark. "Photography of Derek Walcott." In *Derek Walcott's Dream on Monkey Mountain*, for example, ritual becomes the mode by which the values, spirituality, and identity of sociocultural groups can be imagined. The types of groups imagined in Walcott's play complicate this dynamic in that they are all to some extent exiled and dispossessed of a sense of common humanity (due to the legacies of colonialism). The great Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott is typical of many postcolonial writers in that he feels immersed in both a colonial tradition (specifically, English language and literature) and in the indigenous culture of his native land. As a result, he is critical but not completely dismissive of the English tradition and asserts a place within it.