

The Quest for Caribbean Identities: Postcolonial Conflicts and Cross-Cultural Fertilization in Derek Walcott's Poetry

by Catherine Douillet

Delving into Nobel Prize laureate Derek Walcott's poetry and plays is a dive in the depths of the Caribbean past, present, and futures. Born in Saint-Lucia in 1930, Walcott explores in his writing the processes of identity-making in the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean and the complex connections between Caribbean identities and the Caribbean sea and landscape. Like other Caribbean islands, Saint-Lucia has endured several centuries of colonialism, switching several times between French and British control to finally gain its independence in 1979. The intricate relationships between the colonized and the colonizer and the ways in which the Caribbean self embraces and is split between different places and loyalties are central themes of Walcott's writing.

As American social theorist C. Wright Mills wrote, similarly to social scientists, the best literary writers frequently possess what he calls a "sociological imagination," a "quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities" (1959). Walcott's work gives us a glimpse of the making of contemporary Caribbean identities, and examining his work can help us understand the contemporary Caribbean dilemmas and struggles in identity-making in a context of a colonial legacy of global socio-economic and political inequalities. As Mary Lou Emery puts it, twentieth-century writers and artists who have crossed from the Caribbean to Britain, Europe or the United States "illuminate the significance of vision to one of the major intellectual shifts of the twentieth century – the refiguring of identities across national, racial and cultural boundaries" (1). In addition to offering unique literary value, Walcott's work can therefore serve as ethnographic documents of the challenges and tensions of postcolonial societies, calling into question the place of colonial history and language in their contemporary culture and identity. Walcott explores and documents the past and present of the Caribbean, but, like other contemporary Caribbean writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant, he also suggests the ways in which the Caribbean should or can position itself in the postcolonial world, providing a model of Caribbeanness that values the fertilizing nature of cultural and racial multiplicity. The socio-political therefore often merges with the literary in the work of these authors.

For Walcott, past colonial and racial divisions constitute the crux of Caribbean identity, and the question of the divided nature of the postcolonial self is central to his intellectual quest. He has often quoted Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to Franz Fanon's crucial text in postcolonial studies *The Wretched of the Earth*, where Sartre stresses the duality of the colonial world between the white colonizer and the black colonized: "They must have both. Two worlds; that makes two bewitchings; they dance all night and at dawn they crowd into the churches to hear Mass; each day the split widens. Our enemy betrays his brothers and becomes our accomplice; his brothers do the same thing."

For Walcott, the Caribbean writer breathes two different traditions, namely the African and the European traditions:

I am a kind of split writer; I have one tradition inside me going in one way, and another going another. The mimetic, the narrative, and dance element is strong on one side, and the literary, the classical tradition is strong on the other. (Meanings 1970)

Such a split reality has various consequences for the ways in which the colonized self can think of itself, particularly for Walcott, whose mixed racial heritage highlights the historical dilemma between races. In his best-known poem, “A Far Cry from Africa,” he grapples with the issue of conflicting loyalties and asks,

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, who 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? (26–33)

Yet, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, Walcott has criticized New World literatures of “recrimination and despair ... written by the descendants of slaves” (“The Muse of History” 421) which exploit and wallow in the history of colonial suffering. Rather than a “literature of revenge”, Walcott’s is a literature of the new creativity and potentials of the New World which explores the wounds of colonial history and the Caribbean’s various connections to Europe. Like postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabba, for whom colonizer and colonized are interdependent and for whom claims to the inherent purity and originality of cultures are ‘untenable’ as he is in support of a “Third Space” where “we may elude the politics of polarity” (cited in Ashcroft), for Walcott, the crux of Caribbean identity is a hybridity that he claims. In “What the Twilight Says,” he refers to the Caribbean self as a “mongrel” of Africanness and Britishness, a mongrelity that he embraces as positive: “Mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word Ashanti as with the word Warwickshire, both separately intimating my grandfathers’ roots, both baptising this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian” (10).

It is in this context of “in-betweenness” with various competing cultural models and influences that the colonial self constructs its personal and national identity. It constitutes the creative marrow of the Caribbean, which the poetic process and language explore. In an oft-quoted line, the central character of the poem “The Schooner Flight,” Shabine, beautifully and powerfully expresses the implications of the intricacy of his racial and colonial background for nation-building:

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. (40-43)

In Walcott’s work, the poetic creativity and imagination can serve to explore and at times unite and re-connect historical gaps, cultural tensions, and racial divisions, as the example of “A Latin

Primer” shows. Walcott’s is a poetry that probes, engages and at times transcends differences and divisions through poetic imagination. Several critics have pointed out that the Caribbean landscape is central to the imagination and creativity in Walcott’s work. It is through this Caribbean mixture of African and European models and the use of the local landscape that Walcott finds the potential for “the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry” (*What the Twilights Says?*), a language that would be uniquely Caribbean.

In his collection of poems *The Arkansas Testament* (1987) which includes “A Latin Primer” and “The Light of the World”, Walcott continues his exploration of the ambiguous identifications of the Caribbean self in a multi-racial context stemming from the colonial era, but he also addresses the related issue of international migration where Caribbean people migrate outside of the West Indies. Like much of his writing, *The Arkansas Testament* often reflects on historical and political tensions through his reflections upon very personal themes. As in *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *The Arkansas Testament* is divided into two main sections, “Here” and “There,” with poems respectively set in the Caribbean and the United States, as the collection addresses Walcott’s own position as a Caribbean author who, starting from the early 1980s, settled to work in the United States, with frequent travels back to the Caribbean. Yet, the relationship between the two terms “here” and “there” is more complex than the words suggest. As Edward Baugh (1991) points out, “With Walcott, ‘here’ has become increasingly a place to which one returns, a place one has to reclaim repeatedly in an effort made more and more precarious and compulsive as the gulf of memory widens” (126).

The Arkansas Testament explores the complexity of the relationships between the places that are embedded in the “here” and “there”: the Caribbean geography and its relationship with Europe and Africa in the case of “A Latin Primer” and the Caribbean citizen living in the United States and his relationship to his homeland in the case of “The Light of the World.” In both poems, poetry and memory serve to bridge and connect various divisions: divisions between here and there, between the colonizer and the colonized, and between the expatriate and his people.

For Walcott, “the process of poetry is one of excavation and of self-discovery” (from the *Nobel Lecture*, 1992) and, in “A Latin Primer,” he examines the ways in which a colonial education affects a young boy (probably Walcott himself), his relation to literature, and the process through which he eventually becomes a teacher and a poet. New York Times journalist Dennis Donoghue mentions that Walcott “has had at least two lives. One of them, acknowledging his white English grandfather, has kept in touch with the Empire, the classics, English literature, but also the insignia of Greece and Rome. The other has stayed in the streets of Port of Spain, speaking the patois, Creole.” “A Latin Primer” investigates the often conflictual interplay between these two lives. Progressing chronologically from his childhood to early adulthood, the narrator of the poem reflects on his experience with the multifaceted impact of colonial education, growing up in British-controlled St. Lucia.

The poem stresses the narrator’s frustration with a British educational system which does not encapsulate, but in fact is antithetical to the local Caribbean sensitivity and landscape. As a child, the narrator felt constricted by the rigid traditional teaching methods that analyze poetry through “signs of scansion” (25) that he “hated” (25) and that distorted delightful, poetic language into “darkened discipline” (28) and “Mathematics” (29). Literary texts, which the poem metaphorically amalgamates with various richly evocative elements of the Caribbean natural and cosmological worlds, become constrained: “thrown sticks of stars” (31-32) of poetry become “sine and cosine” (31-32). The narrator/emerging poet struggles to make sense of the “sea” of

texts. But the literary text remains aloof and dully technical under such algebraic colonial methods of analysis:

Raging, I'd skip a pebble
across the sea's page; it still
scanned its own syllable:
trochee, anapest, dactyl (33-36)

As an adult, he continued to have to sort out the ways in which he was to personally deal with various colonial cultural dualities that divide the Euro-Creole elite from the Afro-Creole majority in terms of race, class, and language: After becoming a school teacher, he found himself affiliated with the elite and had to adopt the constraining British dress code of "tweed jacket and tie" (45) which is not suitable for the Caribbean tropical climate. He also had to utilize the very methods that he believes stifle literature as he "watched the old words dry like seaweed on the page" (47-48). Moreover, as required by the colonial system, he banned from the classroom the use of "Patois," the Creole language that interweaves linguistic traits of French and African languages and which is used most commonly by St. Lucians in everyday interactions. The narrator therefore considered himself a "hypocrite" (54) who preached a confining "discipline" (53) which contrives the fluid freedom of the St. Lucian people. His St. Lucian pupils, predominantly from African origins, are likened to the natural world and, similarly to literary texts, become desiccated under the colonial discipline: their "heads plunged in paper softly as porpoises" and their "lithe black bodies, beached, would die in dialect" (55-56).

For the narrator's pupils, finding a firm Caribbean identity in a divided world between the North and South sociopolitical blocs to which the Caribbean does not really belong proves difficult:

I spun the globe's meridian
showed its sealed hemispheres,
but where were those brows headed
when neither world was theirs? (57-60)

The poem alludes to the literary void of the Caribbean region, where the British curriculum focused on literatures of the classical traditions, rather than on the Caribbean culture. Feeling estranged by these "distant literatures" (8) that he nevertheless loved, the narrator had no local literatures to help him shape his literary sensitivity during his developing years. But he had the Caribbean landscape which penetrates and amplifies the expressive texture of the poem:

I had nothing against which
to notch the growth of my work
but the horizon, no language
but the shallows in my long walk
home (1-4)

Caribbean nature constitutes a powerful source of inspiration for the literary production of the emerging poet/narrator, in a context where Caribbean identity is in the process of defining and

establishing itself. Caribbean nature constitutes also a fundamental element of liberation and self-definition, as the narrator is “trying to find [his] voice” (64) away from the “silence” that “clogged [his] ears” (61).

In the final stanzas, the narrator recounts a walk he took near the St. Lucian seashores and identifies some of the landscape’s landmarks: a peninsula that forms the northern side of the Castries Harbor; a gommier tree (71); a “sea without seasons” (72). The landscape includes visible reminders of the island’s colonial history, such as Vigie (66), Rat Island (73), and Half-Moon Battery (68), the remains of a colonial fortification used during the three centuries of battles between the French and the British over ownership of St. Lucia.

Then, in the midst of his walk amongst colonial remains, the narrator makes a crucial, liberating encounter with the frigate bird, a tropical bird with V-shaped wings and known for its ability to fly very high for long distances. As noted above, Walcott has written against “a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge” (“The Muse of History”) that remains trapped in the angry contemplation of the wrongs of past history. He argues instead for a literature of the New World that “neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force” (422). The hero of great literature “remains the wanderer, the man who moves through the ruins of great civilizations with all his worldly goods by caravan or pack mule, the poet carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered.” Likewise, in “A Latin Primer”, the narrator wanders through ruins, but lets the encounter with the frigate, [his] “phoenix” (9) elevate him away from “the curse of revenge.” As such, the bird metaphorically carries out, like the mythical bird which has the power to renew itself out of its own ashes, a vital and powerful role of elevating transcendence.

It is through the “emblem” (77) of the frigate, a native bird, that the metaphoric uniting of the different linguistic traditions of St. Lucia—English, Latin, and Patois—can be achieved. The narrator highlights the different exquisite nuances that each language suggests for the frigate bird: while the English “sea scissors” connotes “the common sense of fishermen” (79), the Patois “ciseau-la-mer” evokes the bird’s

cloud-cutting course;
and that native metaphor
made by the strokes of oars (82-84)

The use of different languages in St. Lucia is therefore no longer a cause for division or alienation, but an enriching mixture and synthesis. Furthermore, the narrator’s encounter with the bird helps him reclaim his own lexical voice: Towards the end of the poem, the narrator uses the word “scansion” again, yet it now no longer refers to an estranged metrical analysis of the verses, but to the rising of the bird:

with one wing beat for scansion,
that slowly levelling V
made one with my horizon
as it sailed steadily (85-88)

Moreover, while the narrator used the word “horizon” in the first stanza to refer to cultural void and disconnection, he now uses it to intimate a newly-found harmony between the narrator and

his region. Thus, the apparition of the local bird makes the narrator re-visit in positive terms his relationship with St. Lucia and its different languages.

In the final verse, the bird continues its course beyond “the roofless pillars once sacred to Hercules” (91-92). While flying beyond the mythical Pillars of Hercules, which flanked the Strait of Gibraltar between Gibraltar, in Europe, and Mt. Acha, in Africa, the bird gloriously re-connects and sacralizes the different European and African cultural traditions that comprise the Caribbean. Hence, the luxuriant Caribbean nature and fauna serve as a literary and cultural bridge that transcends racial divisions and can create the poet’s own “horizon,” away from colonial alienation.

Walcott therefore posits the idea that the Caribbean people can find an uplifting liberation from the acknowledgement of the glory of their different cultural traditions, including Ancient Greece, Africa, and Europe. Poetic creativity serves to truly unify and find points of connections in a disjointed postcolonial world. In other words, for Walcott, as for the phoenix of Greek mythology, a new Caribbean culture can be re-born anew out of the ashes of the past. Such a political stand has been scrutinized by scholars such as Ian Strachan, for whom Walcott’s invocation of elements of an allegedly splendid and glorious Ancient Greece as a sort of model to reconfigure an “artistic golden age in the Caribbean” (210) is questionable: “the conspicuous absence of democracy in the ‘glory that was Greece’ and the slavery and colonialism that were that empire’s foundation make it a questionable ideal toward which Caribbeans should strive” (210). In addition, Strachan finds Walcott’s “philosophy of making a positive from a negative” (210) problematic in that it regards the results of a colonial situation that was destructive and disempowering as potentially liberating if sublimated through poetry.

But Walcott is not the only Caribbean writer to invoke the cultural multiplicity created by colonialism as the springboard for the creation of a new and unique Caribbean identity. Contemporary French-Caribbean *créolistes* also emphasize a Caribbean identity that “embraces all strands that have contributed to the making of Antillean” (Price and Price 1997: 7, cited in Murray 2002: 71). In addition to Edouard Glissant, one of the forefathers of the “*créoliste* movement,” who stresses the multi-ramified, syncretic mosaic of the Caribbean, Chamoiseau and Confiant glorify the creative *mélange* of the Caribbean, using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) metaphor of the rhizome:

All these people precipitated into the crucible of the Caribbean archipelago in which no synthesis occurred but rather a kind of hesitant *métissage*, always contested, always chaotic, carrying anthropological densities, across vaporous borders, bathing in a creole space that was almost amniotic (Chamoiseau and Confiant 1991: 51).

The French-Caribbean *créolistes* celebrate creoleness as a “kaleidoscopic totality” and they praise its interactive complexity as a liberating instrument of creation of a truly independent Caribbean literature and consciousness. For Jean Bernabé et al. in their *In Praise of Créolité*, the complex, kaleidoscopic nature of *créolité* has liberatory potentials: “once our interior vision is applied, once our Creoleness is placed at the center of our creativity, we will be able to re-examine our existence, to perceive in it the mechanisms of alienation, and, above all, to grasp its beauty” (1990: 99).

Likewise, Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who, like Walcott, is interested in the sociological and political facets of Caribbean societies, argues that the Caribbean is

characterized by its complex process of *creolization* between Europeans and Africans. He defines creolization as:

a cultural process which may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case the enslaved/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from this yoke. The creolisation which results (and is a process, not a product) becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society (1974: 6).

Brathwaite insists on processes of cultural dialogue and exchange despite a context of power differential during slavery: The creolization process is not simply a one-way mimicry; instead it is “both imitation (acculturation) and native *creation* (‘indigenization’)” (1974: 16, emphasis in original). Social scientists have also documented the notion that Caribbean creolization involves new cultural creation. For example, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price have underscored in the classic *The Birth of African-American Culture* (1992) the importance of the new cultural creations of African-American cultures.

Of course, the work of social scientists, not unlike literary writers, is never completely apolitical, and one can argue that their insistence upon the cultural creativity of Caribbean people and the empowering cross-fertilization of the postcolonial situation is wishful and political rather than objectively descriptive. Field researchers in the Caribbean know that behind the façade of racial harmony, the daily reality of ethnic relations in the region also involves divisive “us vs. them” discourses and practices as well as varying degrees of status and power according to one’s skin complexion and physical features, whiteness being evaluated as more positive than blackness as it continues to be associated with prestige, status, and wealth. Yet the Caribbean is often considered the epitome of multiplicity and cultural creativity, a sort of multi-ethnic, creolized paradise of mixtures. Aisha Khan (2001) contends that the region has become among social scientists a “master symbol” for worldwide contemporary processes of globalization where differences enter relationships of co-production, dialogue, mimicry, syncretism, creativity, and ambiguity. As such, Khan argues that the Caribbean is considered an “index” of what the global world will supposedly be like.

The work of Derek Walcott could arguably be perceived as participating in the creation of an international wishful myth of a racial paradise, where the colonizer and colonized cross-fertilize equally to create a unique, vibrant culture and have equal access to power, resources, and privileges. The conferment of the Nobel Prize of Literature of course does not happen in a political void and is not simply a reflection of purely literary talents, but also of what some social circles seem to favor. The fact that Walcott was chosen as a recipient of the prestigious award perhaps speaks to his agenda of cross-fertilization and positive regeneration, which the Nobel Foundation seems to favor, as much as to his literary genius. One should note that the awarding of the Nobel Prize to J.M. Le Clezio in 2009 was accompanied by much commentary in the international press on Le Clezio’s truly nomadic lifestyle and cosmopolitan intellectual interests, as opposed to American writers’ lack of international outlook. Horace Engdahl, the Permanent Secretary of the Nobel prize jury, explained that “the US is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature ...That ignorance is restraining” (Guardian.co.uk October 2, 2008).

But Walcott’s agenda of cross-cultural fertilization never denies or subdues the importance of the colonial scar or the long-term disempowerment of people of African descent.

In fact, much of his writing is obviously about the wounds, alienations, and distortions created by the colonial situation and about the poverty and despair of his contemporaries. In Paula Burnett's words, "the Caribbean personae [that Walcott models] are essentially plural and are shown engaging creatively with colonial trauma" (20). It is this creative engagement with the colonial wounds that make his poetry so uniquely powerful. Walcott made an assertive and affirming choice away from a literature of despair and to a literature of hope. He would most probably agree with Franz Fanon's statement in the *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that the "colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (187).

For Walcott, such a hope is often based on the power of the local landscape. Several scholars such as Patricia Ismond have indicated that "It is through a clear and concentrated engagement with [his] landscape" (26) that the author "search[es] for fresh, indigenous metaphors" (52). Once they are bridged and synthesized, the classical tradition and the West Indian environment and culture become a source of strength and renewal. In Louis James's words, "the splendour of the classical words, the vividness and rhythmic sounds of the Caribbean idiom and the majesty of the huge bird itself, came together in an epiphany" (258). The metaphoric use of the bird in "A Latin Primer" serves a epiphanic, ecstatic liberation from colonial tensions. And the bird is, importantly, a local bird. For Walcott, true liberation comes from local life and inventiveness, not from outside influences, even though he validates the importance of the colonial heritage to Caribbean societies.

Thus, no longer "divided to the vein," the poet of "A Latin Primer" reaches, through the metaphoric use of the local bird, a linguistic and cultural unity that blurs colonial dualities. The poem explores the politics of cultural identity of the Caribbean and, as Emery puts it, this exploration "reveals the interconnected patterns in global histories of conquest and migration . . . through which figures of his own poetic persona emerge" (181). His poetic evaluation and illumination of global patterns and histories implicitly take a political stand against a colonialist definition of the Caribbean as region void of a unique creativity and culture. Indeed, the Caribbean has often been described by colonialists as a region where "there are no people in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own" (James Anthony Froude, cited in Breslin 2001), a notion echoed by V.S. Naipaul, who, in his book "The Mimic Men" (1967), controversially described West Indians as "mimic men" (146) and the West Indies as a region where "nothing was created" (29). "A Latin Primer" can thus be read as a poem that outlines and celebrates the creation of a unique Caribbean identity and poetry originating from and transcending the complex colonial history of the region and its divisions. As the local landscape allows such a transcendence, the Caribbean becomes a space opened for the imaginative and creative impulse.

The poem "The Light of the World" is likewise a celebration of the poetic creativity which can serve to bridge gaps and can somewhat offer consolatory value to the solitude and sadness in a situation of migration and separation. But "The Light of the World" is much less confident in the power of poetry to remedy the socio-economic gaps that colonialism has perpetrated locally and globally. While "A Latin Primer" deals with Walcott's childhood and formative years, "The Light of The World" addresses his present: the poem explores the postcolonial reality and emotions of a Caribbean person who has migrated to a more powerful country like the U.S and returns to his poorer homeland for a visit. Written in free verse with a prose-like narrative style, the poem muses over the poet's relationship with the beauty of Saint-Lucia, its people, particularly women, as well as its poverty and sadness. Like "A Latin Primer,"

“The Light of the World” is placed in the “Here” section of *The Arkansas Testament*. And the poem is very much anchored in the local Saint-Lucian world: it begins with an epigraph of a song by Bob Marley, echoing the ubiquitous reggae music that one hears loudly and continually in the Caribbean, thereby incorporating the Caribbean sound in the sensory texture of the poem. It is also very much grounded in the visual details of the Saint-Lucian everyday reality that the poem describes, using local Saint-Lucian terms and expressions. The narrator takes a “transport,” the omnipresent collective taxi and mini-van of the Caribbean and silently observes the scenery: ordinary visual sites and scenes of the Caribbean urban-scape such as the market, “with its grit of charcoal and the litter of vegetables after Saturday’s sales,” the “roaring rum shops,” “the old roar of vendors and traffic,” and “vendors still selling to the empty streets – sweets, nuts, sodden chocolates, nut cakes, mints.” In his pensive musing, the poet also mentions the typical humorous linguistic style of Caribbean people:

And the shadows quarreled for bread in the shops,
Or quarreled for the formal custom of quarrelling (35-36)

Meanwhile, in the midst of his meditative observations, he becomes enamored with one of the female passengers, a woman of striking beauty. He compares this woman to the woman in the famous Delacroix painting which depicts a powerfully commanding woman as an allegory for liberty during the French revolution:

it was like a statue, like a black Delacroix’s
Liberty Leading the People, the gently bulging
whites of her eyes, the carved ebony mouth (13-15)

At the primary level, such a comparison gives the Saint-Lucian woman a universal dimension, and the poem is as such a tribute to the grand beauty of black Saint-Lucian women: “and I thought, O Beauty, you are the light of the world!” (19).

But the comparison of the black woman to Delacroix’s painting also constitutes a visual re-telling of the European artistic tradition. It is an iconoclastic and powerful caribbeanization of the famous painting where the 1830 French revolution, represented allegorically as a white woman, leads the commoners away from monarchic oppression to power and freedom. Thus, through poetic metaphor and comparison, Walcott creates a Caribbean vision that counters and challenges the European visual norm and practice. As Emery (2007) in her brilliant study of “ekphrasis” (the verbal description of a work of visual art) puts it, the poetic re-interpretation of the visual arts “anticipates, re-contextualizes, and frequently contests mainstream philosophical and theoretical investigations into visibility” (3).

Neither a European nor an African mimicry, the poetic imagery that Walcott creates is anchored in the Western tradition and transformed into a uniquely Caribbean form through the indigenization of a Western figure. The indigenization of Western characters has often been used by other postcolonial authors such as Césaire in *Tempest*, Brathwaite in *Arrivants*, and Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to explore themes of colonial suffering and oppression. But, whereas Césaire, Brathwaite and Rhys appropriate Western characters who are oppressed, Walcott often appropriates liberating Western heroes and employs, for example, the figure of Crusoe rather than Friday to incarnate the Caribbean and, as Jahan Ramazani (2000) points out in his analysis of *Omeros*, he uses the white Greek hero Philoctete to personify the colonial wound. Similarly,

in “The Light of the World”, the personification of the black Saint-Lucian woman through the allegory of the French revolution constitutes a complex, iconoclastic re-appropriation of the colonized black body through the appropriation of the canonical French character. The French colonizer that victimizes the Saint-Lucian people here allegorically becomes the black liberator and leader of the Saint-Lucian people. Walcott therefore blurs anew traditional racial and national boundaries to re-inscribe a new postcolonial world where the Caribbean creates its own poetic vehicle using a variety of images and allegories, appropriating both colonial and local traditions and strengths. Walcott commented in an interview with journalist Anthony Milne that “empires are smart enough to steal from the people they conquer. They steal the best things. The people who have been conquered should have enough sense to steal back” (Baer 1996: 75).

But quite unlike the French painting where the people that follow Liberty are very combative and triumphant, in Walcott’s poem, the allegorical Black Liberty leads a lost and vulnerable people. As the narrator continues his ride on the “transport,” he looks at poverty-stricken and incapacitated Saint-Lucian women: “you saw drunk women on pavements, the saddest of all things, winding up their week, winding down their week.” He also describes a poor, old woman carrying heavy baskets “in a panic” for fear of missing the transport:

she said to the driver: “Pas quittez moi a terre,”
which is, in her patois: “don’t leave me stranded,”
which is, in her history and that of her people:
Don’t leave me on earth (57-60)

The, perhaps darkly ironic, choice to contrast the combativeness portrayed in the French painting with the vulnerability of Saint-Lucians makes another political statement, wherein Walcott comments on Saint-Lucians’ continued socio-political position on the “periphery” of the European “core”, to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s terms to distinguish power differentials in the “world-system” between former colonizers and colonies. Some scholars such as Baugh (1991) have criticized Walcott for his condescending tendencies towards the poor and for letting “his pity kee[p] them locked in postures of hopelessness (‘abandonment was something they had grown used to’)” (Baugh 129). One might indeed wonder whether Walcott’s referring to Saint-Lucians as “they” rather than “we” and to the old woman’s people as “her” people rather than “our” or “my”, as if Walcott were no longer a Saint-Lucian himself, is a linguistic choice that involuntarily connotes a sort of “uppity” attitude towards “little people” or whether this is a voluntary choice on Walcott’s part to convey his sense of alienation and estrangement towards Saint-Lucia linked to his status as an emigrant settled in the powerful U.S.

Whatever the case might be, Walcott’s sense of sadness for abandoning his homeland and his people feels poignant and heartbreaking in several verses of “The Light of the World.” The poem is in many ways about remembrance for his native land and what Salman Rushdie (1991) calls the “broken mirror” of the memory of exiles, as “exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back.” Here, all the scenes that the poet observes through the window of the “transport” are intricately intertwined with his memory, as they make him reminisce over his childhood: “I remember the shadows” (37); “That evening I had walked the streets of the town where I was born and grew up, thinking of my mother” (43-44).

What is “broken” in Walcott’s case is his relationship with Saint-Lucia and Saint-Lucians. His emotional reminiscences for his native land make him movingly measure the

distance that now separates him from the people of his native land. His falling in love with the woman on the “transport” is limited to unspoken emotions and remains void and unfulfilled. All the many emotions that the poet feels as he is observing his native land and people must remain confined to the imaginative world, separated as he is now from their lives and realities. He is now no more than a passing visitor, a “transient” (113): He describes how he would like to spend the night with this woman, but has to get off the transport at his hotel, where “the lounge would be full of transients like [him]self” (113). The poem is told from the point of view of a sort of habitual but unattached tourist for whom everything feels so familiar but who no longer belongs. Towards the end of the poem, it is no longer Saint-Lucians who are an abandoned people, but the poet: “They went on in their transport, they left me on earth” (117).

His role and place in Saint-Lucian society are now extraordinarily restricted to that of the occasional visitor, despite the depth of his own emotions toward Saint-Lucia. The last verse highlights the emotions that are tied to the limitations of his current interactions with Saint-Lucians:

Then, a few yards ahead, the van stopped. A man
shouted my name from the transport window.
I walked up towards him. He held out something.
A pack of cigarettes had dropped from my pocket.
He gave it to me. I turned, hiding my tears (118-22).

Both “A Latin Primer” and “The Light of the World” address the gap between the narrator and other Saint-Lucians, a gap fraught with colonial tensions. In “A Latin Primer,” the narrator felt he became a “hypocrite” who enforced the colonial curriculum after he became a teacher, while “The Light of the World” examines the fissure between himself, a successful poet working in the U.S, and the impoverished people of his country of origin. While “A Latin Primer” places much faith in the power of the poetic language to generate an idyllic unity away from colonial divisions, “The Light of the World” reveals some anxiety over the power of the written word to bridge socio-economic and socio-political gaps:

There was nothing they wanted, nothing I could give them
But this thing I have called “The Light of the World” (123-24).

Walcott therefore addresses the limitations of the written word in a context where contemporary societies favor music and popular culture over written poetry: he acknowledges that his poem cannot do much for the St. Lucian people and will probably not even be read by them, contrary to the ubiquitous Bob Marley’s music with which Walcott began the poem. Walcott thus poses the double political question of readership and power differentials between the narrator, who has the power to travel, write, and be read by an educated foreign audience, and the Saint-Lucian people, whose poverty and illiteracy anchor them to Saint-Lucia and prevent them to read a potentially liberating poetry.

Some authors have argued that Walcott’s treatment of the socio-economic inequalities that stem from colonialism is often questionable. Strachan insists that Walcott is “dangerously close” to “accept[ing] powerlessness” and to viewing inequalities as “unchangeable” (210). But Walcott’s apparent contradiction between a very optimistic and confident “A Latin Primer” and angst- and guilt-ridden “The Light of the World” shows the very difficulties that Walcott has in accepting inequalities, coming to terms with them, and finding solutions for them. As Paul

Breslin argues, Walcott's poetry is often in "an agonized state of unresolved conflict" (7) and far from being set on any position, Walcott points out to the reader how divided and unequal the world remains and explores his own uneasy position vis-à-vis his formerly colonized people in a global world of inequalities. He does not provide any easy answers and humbly questions the power that his poems have to resolve inequalities. When Strachan argues that Walcott "should not [rule] out so quickly" "the possibility of neoteric forms of political organization in the region" (210), one wonders whether Strachan expects Walcott to step out of his role as poet to become a politician. Walcott addresses the political implications of his position as a postcolonial writer and he legitimately asks the extent to which poetic imagination alone can change socio-political and economic inequalities. In "The Light of the World," he points out his own powerlessness in the face of poverty, which does not mean that he considers inequities to be despairingly "acceptable" or "unchangeable" nor that he considers the Caribbean people to be pitifully powerless. In fact, he argues in his essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" that "in the Caribbean, we do not pretend to exercise power in the historical sense . . . what energizes our society is the spiritual force of a culture shaping itself, and it can do this without the formula of politics" (257). He further asserts that American culture owes much to "the black man" who "energized that culture." In turn, American culture owes much to "the poets and intellectuals [like Garvey, Césaire, Fanon, Padmore, and Stokely] of our powerless archipelago . . . our definitions of power must go beyond the immediately political" (258). Thus, the colonial subjects from the Southern bloc are never passively powerless, for their creativity and ideas can affect and shape more powerful countries from the Northern blocs in significant ways.

Walcott does not underestimate the power of the written word and of the poet. In an interview with Bill Moyers, he argues that Plato rightfully made the decision to rid the Republic of poets because the poet dangerously criticizes and challenges the political status quo. The poet would "spoil the idea of a perfect republic [...] The poet does not accept a situation called a perfect condition of man in materialistic terms [...] the poet doesn't complain only on the level of sociology, the poet complains of points of discontents that lie at the heart of man [...] of the human condition." Walcott is the consummate poet/socio-political critic whom Plato would have repudiated from his republic, a writer who makes various critical commentaries on the Caribbean's contemporary socio-cultural situation. He investigates the postcolonial experience, probing and revealing its discontents, ambivalences, struggles for power and dignity, as well as its various points of disconnections and tensions in the local and global contexts. Yet his poetry, as the examples of "A Latin Primer" and "The Light of the World" show, is often a poetry of hope that, although not simplistically optimistic, seeks for ways in which the Caribbean and the rest of the world can bridge gaps and tensions.

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