
FATED TO UNORIGINALITY: The Politics of Mimicry in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

by Paul Jay

I.

In his essay on Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, Joseph Farrell points out that "when it comes to the assessment of postcolonial literature, the critical discourse of epic poetry acquires a racist tinge," since it "speaks with the voice of the accumulated authority of generations of White imperialist culture" (251). For this reason, debates about its status as an epic have played a key role in structuring the critical discourse about *Omeros*. Critics tend to take one of four critical positions. Traditional classicists, Farrell points out, have been attracted to the poem's epic structure, see it as a major strength, and are untroubled by its supposed Eurocentric roots.¹ Another set of critics, including Dougherty and Farrell, affirm the poem's status as an epic, but insist that it foregrounds elements of the classical epic the traditionalists have ignored and which link it to oral or folk traditions within and outside the classical tradition.² A third set of critics, including John Figueroa, Patricia Ismond, and Walcott himself, have played down or denied altogether the poem's epic qualities.³ Finally, a fourth set of critics argue that while *Omeros* draws on conventions of the classical epic, it remakes the form into something specifically Caribbean and postcolonial. Jahan Ramazani, for example, insists *Omeros* "contravenes the widespread assumption that postcolonial literature develops by sloughing off Eurocentrism for indigeneity" (405), that by "exemplifying the twists and turns of intercultural inheritance," the poem "belies the narrative of postcolonial literary development as a progression from alien metropolitan influence to complete incorporation within the native cultural body" (409).

This critical debate about *Omeros*, which raises the question of whether its reliance on the form of the European epic undermines its status as a Caribbean and postcolonial text, is hardly surprising. For three decades critics and reviewers have argued about how to reconcile Walcott's St. Lucian roots and his undeniable interest in Caribbean culture with his absorption of the Western canon, his propensity for grounding poetry in something very close to the kind of Great Tradition espoused by Leavis and Eliot. Indeed, the bulk of negative criticism aimed at Walcott argues he is a Eurocentric poet too deeply committed to Western humanism.⁴ In his introduction to *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* (1993), Robert Hamner reviews Walcott's early indebtedness to Hopkins, Auden, and Dylan Thomas (4), and notes the extent to which his early poetry was criticized as an "academic exercise" (4). Long associated with Western humanism and universalism (5), Walcott's poetry, Hamner points out, seems to address a "foreign, elite audience" (5). He includes in *Critical Perspectives* J.D. McClatchy's review of Walcott's *Collected Poems* (1986) which

“brands them rhetorical, consciously derivative, and literary” (9). No wonder Farrell observes, “the epic element in *Omeros* threatens to reopen an old debate over Walcott’s relationship to the European and African elements in his personal heritage and in the culture of the West Indies as a whole” (251–2).

While Farrell seems puzzled about why Walcott would risk reopening critical debate about his poetic identity, I want to argue that this is precisely the aim of the poem. *Omeros* does not inadvertently open old wounds. It is *designed* to open and explore them. For this reason it is hard to take Walcott too seriously when he complains that the poem’s critical reception has been marked by “stupid historicism” that sees him “reinventing the *Odyssey* [. . .] trying to make it via Homer” (“Reflections on *Omeros*,” 232). Given the history of criticism Walcott has taken on this score, what else could he have expected? The poem, in fact, seems quite consciously calculated to elicit the kind of “stupid historicism” that finds Walcott’s poetry Western, derivative, academic, and universalist. By writing himself into the poem as a figure I will call “Walcott,” playing “Walcott’s” writing off of Plunkett’s (the exiled British Major is writing a history of the island while “Walcott” is writing his own poem about it), and by using the last quarter of the poem to critique its own epic pretensions, Walcott designs *Omeros* to explore, negotiate, and try to come to terms with many of the major issues extant in critical debate about his work. As such, *Omeros* is less a poem about the Caribbean than a poem about *writing about the Caribbean*, one that embodies the various stands of Walcott’s identity—African, European, Caribbean, American—in a range of characters and scenarios carefully orchestrated to explore critical debates about Caribbean writing and Walcott’s relationship to it.

As Isidore Okpewho has pointed out, there is nothing new in Walcott’s use of Homer, who has been “the commanding guide in Walcott’s explorations of classical European literature” and a “model” he had deeply internalized long before he came to write *Omeros* (5). Images and allusions to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, she reminds us, are replete in Walcott’s poetry, and “the Odyssean journey may be seen as the commanding paradigm in most of Walcott’s middle period—*Gulf*, *Sea Grapes*, *Star-Apple Kingdom*, *Fortunate Traveller*, *Midsummer*, and *Arkansas Testament*” (6). Seen in this context, *Omeros* traverses familiar territory, setting up a web of Homeric analogies in its epic structure that reinforces just the kind of reliance on Homer Okpewho calls attention to. *Omeros*, for all of its breadth and originality, does not mark the beginning of some new Odyssean phase in Walcott’s poetry. It marks the culmination of that phase, a culmination in which Walcott actually criticizes his reliance on Homer and the epic structure he has borrowed from both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Walcott reopens the old critical wound caused by his indebtedness to European literature in order to heal it, creating a profoundly paradoxical poem that uses a classical Western poetic structure to argue against using classical Western poetic structures.⁵

Of course, this reliance on Homer, particularly for a Caribbean writer, has its problems: one is the imperialist and racist tradition it is invariably connected with; the other, its being so thoroughly unoriginal. After Dante, Wordsworth, Whitman, Joyce, and Hart Crane, why another epic poem based on tropes from Homer, especially from a postcolonial location? Such a project seems fated to unoriginality. However, the project’s unoriginality is its major premise, because the condition of the Caribbean poet Walcott wants to explore in the poem is unambiguously that of the mimic man. “The moment [. . .] that a writer in the Caribbean, an American man, puts down a word,” Walcott writes in “The Caribbean:

Culture of Mimicry?" (1974), "at that moment he is a mimic, a mirror man [. . .] fated to unoriginality" (54). The argument in this essay is, in my view, crucial to our understanding of Walcott's aim in writing *Omeros*.

The concept of the mimic man, of course, was developed by V.S. Naipaul, and Walcott sees in it both a "crippling indictment" and an "astonishing truth" (53):

To mimic, one needs a mirror, and, if I understand Mr. Naipaul correctly, our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smallest gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or pathetic, and because it is mimicry, uncreative. The indictment is crippling, but like all insults, it contains an astonishing truth. [. . .] Once the meridian of European civilization has been crossed, according to the theory, we have entered a matter where there can only be simulations of self-discovery. The civilized virtues on the other side of this mirror are the virtues of social order, a lineally clear hierarchy, direction, purpose, balance. [. . .] Somehow, the cord is cut by that meridian. Yet a return is also impossible, for we cannot return to what we have never been. (53)

The notion this is a "crippling indictment" is literal for the poet, who seems in this scenario condemned to subservience, learned repetition, and academic exercise. "Self-discovery" is figured here as merely a path to the realization that one's subjectivity has been wholly constructed by the insidious operations of colonization, that one is caught between the realization that, on the one hand, "order . . . direction, hierarchy and purpose" derive from the West, and on the other that one's genealogical connection to, or "racial memory" of, some other identity, principles, hierarchy, and purpose are lost to time and memory. Subjectivity and behavior seem condemned to colonized mimicry.

Bleak as this seems, the "astonishing truth" Walcott wants to salvage from Naipaul's formulation is that "mimicry is an act of imagination" and "cunning" (55), a generalized condition in the Americas, a hemisphere which is itself fated to unoriginality.⁶ Walcott attempts to take Naipaul's most stinging dismissal of his world—"nothing has ever been created in the West Indies, and nothing will ever be created" (54)—and turn it into a positive, even an enabling, truth:

Precisely, precisely. We create nothing . . . Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite a long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before. The ceremony which best exemplifies this attitude to history is the ritual of Carnival. This is a mass art form which came out of nothing, which emerged from the sanctions imposed on it. The banning of African drumming led to the discovery of the garbage can cover as a potential musical instrument whose subtlety of range, transferred to the empty oil drum increases yearly, and the calypso itself emerged from a sense of mimicry, of patterning its form both on satire and self-satire. The impromptu elements of the calypso, like the improvisation and invention of steelband music, supersedes its traditional origins.[. . .]

From the viewpoint of history, these forms originated in imitation if you want, and ended in invention. (55)

The stress on mimicry as imitation that leads to invention is based here on culture, art, and social action's grounding in found things, in the disorder of what is left over, what has been discarded. In this reading of Naipaul, mimicry gets rehabilitated; its status as something secondary to originality is complicated by a kind of loosely deconstructive analysis, which argues for the central role of mimicry in originality, and vice versa. There are no pure origins in the West Indies; being fated to unoriginality is simply the realization that all imaginative creation involves mimicry.

As Arjun Appadurai has shown, mimicry as appropriation and imaginative reinvention has in fact been central to the construction of diasporic identities throughout the history of modernity, particularly in Walcott's West Indies. Appadurai sees the accelerating transnational flow of cultural commodities in late modernity, for example, not as a homogenizing force (11), but as a set of processes in which "different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently [. . .] the genealogy of cultural forms is about their circulation across regions," and the "history of these forms is about their ongoing domestication into local practice" (17). Central to this process of circulation, appropriation, transformation, and domestication in local practice is what Appadurai calls "the work of the imagination" (5). In modernity, the imagination has "broken out of the special expressive space of art" to "become a collective, social fact," a "practice" of everyday life (5). The subordination of local practices to the commodities and culture of Western—and now global—capitalism may lead to the kind of paralysis Naipaul writes about, but for Appadurai it also "provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, *agency* . . . a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (7).⁷ It is precisely this kind of agency Walcott has in mind in his reformulation of mimicry as a creative, inventive force, and the processes of selectivity, irony, and resistance Appadurai calls attention to are at work in Carnival, calypso, and the steel band as Walcott describes them.

Taken together, Walcott's rereading of mimicry and Appadurai's analysis of how diasporic subjectivities are constructed suggest an important context for understanding what the poet is trying to get at in *Omeros*. Walcott opens himself up to accusations that he is a "mimic man" because he wants to use the poem to explore such accusations and to rethink their meaning. In the analysis that follows, I will be arguing that Walcott's poem simultaneously uses and critiques the structure of the Homeric epic in order to think through the politics of mimicry, and that he divides his poetic persona between Achille, the descendent of African slaves, and Dennis Plunkett, the exile from England, in order to explore the African and European roots of his identity. The autobiographical figure in the poem, the writer/narrator "Walcott," dramatizes the struggle to negotiate a kind of reconciliation between these two figures, a hybrid or bastard figure who is at once African and European, Caribbean and American, local and metropolitan, resistant and co-opted, and fated to unoriginality, but an unoriginality redefined in terms aimed at underwriting a positive Caribbean poetic.⁸

II

Omeros is an insistently self-reflexive text, a poem about writing and historiography. Although the story of Philoctete and Achille's rivalry over Helen places an overtly Homeric narrative at the poem's center, it is actually dominated by Plunkett and "Walcott," both of whom are writing historical narratives about St. Lucia based on their erotic-mythic fascination with Helen (formerly Plunkett's housekeeper and a waitress at various tourist bars and restaurants). As a number of critics have pointed out, Walcott uses Plunkett and his autobiographical protagonist to foreground different strategies for writing about the Caribbean.⁹ Major Plunkett's approach is ostensibly empirical and historical, informed by dogged research and a pretense to impartiality, while "Walcott's" is, of course, overtly poetic, steeped in metaphor and symbol and drawing regularly on a range of Homeric parallels. It would be a mistake, however, to reduce these two approaches in too schematic a way, to see Plunkett's as exclusively historical and "Walcott's" as purely poetic or mythic. Ted Williams has argued, for example, that "Walcott"

utilizes both historical and mythical modes of representation precisely in order to foreground the way in which one discourse relies upon and cancels out the other. [. . .] Instead of privileging one mode of discursive production over the other [. . .] the relationship between history and mythology [in *Omeros*] is mutually constitutive and radically nullifying [. . .] the truth of one discourse is dependent upon and rendered intelligible by its repudiation of the other. (277)¹⁰

While Plunkett and "Walcott" seem to "signify discrete modes of literary representation" (Williams 277), over the course of the poem their modes of writing intersect. Plunkett becomes increasingly aware that his historical narrative is driven by erotic desire for Helen ("As the fever of History began to pass [. . .] He had come that far / to learn that History earns its own tenderness / in time; not for a navel victory, but for / the V of a velvet back in a yellow dress" [103]) and that his narrative is structured by the same Homeric parallels that drive "Walcott's" poem.¹¹ For these reasons, Plunkett comes to realize his "history" is in fact derived from mythology, or, as Williams puts it, he comes to "question the idea that history operates in a space of representation independent of myth" (280). "Walcott," on the other hand, increasingly criticizes his reliance over the course of the poem on "Greek manure" (271), the mishmash of myth, history, and poetic metaphor that drives an epic structure and undercuts any genuine connection with the history of the island:

All that Greek manure under the green bananas,
under the indigo hills, the rain-rutted road,
the galvanized village, the myth of rustic manners,

glazed by the transparent page of what I had read.
What I had read and rewritten till literature
was guilty as History [. . .]

[. . .]When would it stop,
 the echo in the throat, insisting, "Omeros";
 when would I enter that light beyond metaphor? (271)

Plunkett's historical narrative and "Walcott's" poetic one seem at cross purposes—the one "historical" and empirical, the other "poetic" and metaphorical—but they intersect at the point each recognizes his poetic project is infected by the discursive principle driving the other. Plunkett's positivist, research-based history is, in the end, driven by a reliance on the same mythic parallels underwriting "Walcott's" project. Plunkett ends up having to find a way to reconcile the "historian's task" with fiction and emotion, while "Walcott" worries that his literature might be guilty of history. His desire to move "beyond metaphor," moreover, has its parallel in Plunkett's desire to move beyond history.¹²

Of course these conclusions do not have to be derived from a fancy theoretical or critical analysis of the poem. *Omeros* is quite clear about this ironic set of insights and what they mean:

I remembered that morning when Plunkett and I,¹³
 compelled by her [Helen's] diffident saunter up the beach,
 sought grounds for her arrogance. He in the khaki

grass round the redoubt, I in the native speech
 of its shallows; like enemy ships of the line,
 we crossed on a parallel; he had been convinced

that his course was right; I despised any design
 that kept to a chart, that calculated the winds.
 My inspiration was impulse, but the Major's zeal

to make her the pride of the Battle of the Saints,
 her yellow dress on its flagship, was an ideal
 no different from mine. Plunkett, in his innocence,

had tried to change History to a metaphor,
 in the name of a housemaid; I, in self-defence,
 altered her opposite. Yet it was all for her.

except we had used two opposing stratagems
 in praise of her and the island . . . (270)

The "opposing stratagems," one based on design, charting, and calculation, the other on impulse and metaphor, turn out to mirror one another because they are grounded in the same romantic idealization of Helen. She cannot stand as a metaphor for the island because the island must be seen without the light of metaphor, beyond the "Homeric shadow." All of this is made quite explicit in the poem:

[. . .] Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
 swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,
 as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door? (270)

The important point here is that the poem is *designed* to cancel out its structuring premise—that a Caribbean epic can be fashioned out of the stuff of Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. The poem stages its epic parallels in order to undermine them. This is why Walcott finds criticism of his use of the epic structure so galling. The “stupid historicism” of critics who think he is simply “reinventing the *Odyssey*” results, in his view, from the fact that these critics do not take “the last part of the book seriously” (232):

[T]he last third of it is a total refutation of the efforts made by two characters. First, there is the effort by the historian, Plunkett, to make a woman he has fallen in love with grander and nobler. [. . .] The second effort is made by the writer, or narrator (presumably me, if you like), who composes a long poem in which he compares this island woman to Helen of Troy. The answer to both the historian and the poet/narrator—the answer in terms of history, the answer in terms of literature—is that the woman doesn’t need it. (“Reflections on *Omeros*,” 232–33)

Williams argues that Walcott stages this confrontation between the historian and the poet for epistemological reasons and that this contestation over reading and meaning is meant to focus our attention on a fundamentally theoretical point. “The poem,” he concludes, “embodies two meanings, both of which are mutually exclusive. [. . .] The simultaneous affirmation and refutation of historical and mythical discourses in *Omeros* mean that ‘two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings’ are both possible and impossible” (283–4). The quoted material here is from Paul de Man’s “Semiotics and Rhetoric,” a text which determines—and limits—Williams’s reading of the poem as an undecidable text, implying “that new questions must issue from the contested field of critical theory itself” (285). As valuable as Williams’s analysis is, this critical contextualization is, in my view, too abstract and limiting. The Plunkett/“Walcott” relationship has to be read in terms of Walcott’s desire to explore his own identity and impulses as a writer, to come to terms with his mixed identity, and resolve some of the critical debates about the orientation and politics of his writing. It cannot be limited to an epistemological or hermeneutical exercise.

For this reason it is important to connect the poem’s self-reflexive focus on writing the Caribbean to its exploration of Caribbean identity, an exploration clearly driven by Walcott’s desire to come to terms with the criticism that his poetry is compromised by its Eurocentric focus. This criticism most often surfaces in unfavorable comparisons with the Barbadian poet Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite. Brathwaite himself drew a sharp line between his poetic orientation and Walcott’s as early as 1965, when he sought to distinguish between his own grounding in local “folk” culture and Walcott’s Western-oriented “humanism.” “The humanist poet,” Brathwaite argued, “naturally takes his inspiration from his society,

and his [Walcott's] voice is often speaking away from that society rather than speaking in towards it" (quoted in Morris, 177–78). Brathwaite, Breslin reminds us, makes a distinction between "little" and "great" traditions in the Caribbean, the first rooted in Africa, the second in England (Breslin 3). The "Euro-creole élite," according to Brathwaite, was "unable or unwilling to absorb in any central sense the 'little' tradition of the [African] majority"), a division he believes persists in writers like Naipaul and Walcott (Brathwaite 309). In her essay, "Walcott versus Brathwaite," Patricia Ismond notes this kind of distinction came to harden into "cliché attitudes" towards these two poets, with "Brathwaite [. . .] hailed as the poet of the people, dealing with the historical and social themes that define the West Indian dilemma," while Walcott "remains Eurocentric," hampered by "European literary postures" that continue to assert themselves throughout his career (220).¹⁴

This argument about competing Caribbean poetic identities and strategies (one that is both aesthetic and political), gets written into *Omeros* in a number of ways, and is complicated by Walcott's own divided genealogy (African on his mother's side, European on his father's). Farrell's question about whether the author of *Omeros* is "the White Walcott descended in blood from men of Warwickshire and in ink from the Bard of Avon," or "the Black descendant of slaves whose history and language have all but disappeared" (251), suggests we ought to read Plunkett and "Walcott" as representative figures of this divided genealogy.¹⁵ Moreover, Walcott's complex genealogy ("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?" he asks in "Far Cry from Africa," 1962) has to be figured into the critical debate that Brathwaite launched. Walcott's seeming refusal to choose between Brathwaite's African and European literary traditions is partly a function of his own desire to embody the various strains of his own identity, strains which mirror the syncretic makeup of Caribbean culture. Walcott, as we have already seen, insists that "illegitimacy" and "historical bastardy" are the norm in the Caribbean (Hamner 79), which is why he resists the temptation to "exploit an idea of Africa," a temptation he argues leads both to "heroic idealism" and "historical sentimentality" (Hamner 79).

In *Omeros*, Walcott divides himself between Plunkett and "Walcott" in a way that foregrounds his bastard, illegitimate identity as a writer. Avoiding the kind of historical sentimentality he associates with an essentializing Afrocentrism, Walcott foregrounds the shared condition of displacement and dispossession that joins these two characters and colors their approach to writing.¹⁶ The problems each encounters as a writer are grounded in this displacement and dispossession. Both Plunkett and "Walcott" struggle to come to terms with their identity by trying on, and then rejecting, different narrative and historical strategies in ways that underscore their shared, postcolonial status. "Walcott" is haunted by his connections to the poem's overtly African characters, Philoctete and Achille, on the one hand, and to Western epic writers like Homer and Dante, on the other, while Plunkett struggles with his links to the history of colonialism and empire and his connection through that history to Philoctete and Achille.¹⁷ "Walcott's" attempt in the poem to achieve some kind of balance between his reliance on the Western epic and his evocation of the island and its inhabitants in a way that escapes that structure's Eurocentric reductiveness reflects his attempt to come to terms with an identity "divided to the vein" by slavery and colonialism. Likewise, Plunkett's failed struggle in his writing to keep fact and metaphor separate underscores the division in his own identity between a Western episteme linked

to the logic and rationale of empire *and* his identification with the islanders in their shared fate under colonialism. Of course, we cannot simply map the division between Plunkett's and "Walcott's" historicism over the debate about Brathwaite's great and little traditions, or his distinction between humanist and folk poetry, for neither man's approach to writing fits these neat categories. However, we *can* read Plunkett's failed positivist historicism and "Walcott's" abandonment of the Eurocentric device of the Homeric parallel as an attempt on Walcott's part to come to terms with his own overdependence on the great tradition of humanist writing that has fed criticism of his work for over forty years, while he struggles to reconcile the various threads of his identity.

III.

The need for such a reconciliation in the poem is figured by its central trope, the wound, which first surfaces as an emblem of slavery for Philoctete. "I am blest / wif this wound," Philoctete says to Ma Kilman, and the poem's narrator explains that "he believed the swelling [on his shin] came from the chained ankles / of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure? / That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's / but that of his race" (19). Philoctete's wound is complemented by Plunkett's, a "wound," according to the narrator, that is "in his head" (27), a reference both to the literal wound he received during World War II and the more figurative wound of his experience with and complicity in empire.¹⁸ Later, this link between Philoctete's and Plunkett's wounds expands to include "Walcott." When Philoctete finally comes to Ma Kilman to have his wound treated, Walcott explicitly relates both the wound and its cure to the poet's suffering over the wayward course of his own poem. Ma Kilman bathes Philoctete's wound in "one of those cauldrons from the old sugar mill" and "an icy sweat glazed his scalp, but he could feel the putrescent shin drain in the seethe like sucked marrow" (247). As Philoctete's wound is healed the narrator asks, "What else did it cure?" (247). The answer, of course, is "Walcott" himself, and what follows is a passage crucial to understanding the symbolic link between Philoctete, Walcott, and Plunkett. The narrative voice is "Walcott's":

And I felt the wrong love leaving me where I stood
on the café balcony facing the small square
and the tower with its banyan [. . .]

The process, the proof of a self-healing island
whose every cove was a wound, from the sibyl's art
renewed my rain-washed eyes. I felt an elation

opening and closing the valves of my paneled heart
like a book or a butterfly [. . .] (249)

As Philoctete's cure represents a symbolic coming to terms with the legacy of slavery so "Walcott's" cure purges the "wrong love" his poem tried to express for the island and

its inhabitants through his mythic focus on Helen and his reliance on Homer.¹⁹ It is only after this cure, of course, that “Walcott” can recognize his complicity with Plunkett, their shared fate as colonized writers trying to right the island’s wrongs: “Plunkett, in his innocence, / had tried to change History to a metaphor, / in the name of a housemaid; I, in self-defense, / altered her opposite” (270).

Linked as it is to Philoctete, Plunkett, and “Walcott,” this wound in *Omeros* carries a tremendous burden, for it ultimately must stand for slavery, colonization, and a certain kind of misdirection in writing about the Caribbean shared by both Plunkett and “Walcott.”²⁰ In the exchange I cited above with Edward Hirsch, in which Walcott insists on the bastard illegitimacy of Caribbean identity, he warns that remaining fixed solely on what slavery did in the Caribbean is like the “chafing and rubbing of an old sore. It is not because one wishes to forget; on the contrary, you accept it as much as anybody accepts a wound as being a part of his body. But this doesn’t mean that you nurse it all your life” (Hamner 79). There is a clear link between the wound in *Omeros* and the wound Walcott discusses in this exchange with Hirsch. The wounds of slavery and colonialism in turn wound the Caribbean writer. Walcott attempts in *Omeros* to incorporate the wound of slavery into a complex Caribbean body wounded also by colonialism and characterized by a complicated set of cultural genealogies, African, European, and indigenous, Protestant, Catholic and Obeah, Homeric and West Indian. The Caribbean Walcott struggles with in *Omeros* is not essentially African or European, and so it is finally not possible for “Walcott” to choose between Brathwaite’s strategy and a Homeric, Western one. To the degree *Omeros* endorses a poetry of the actual over a poetry of metaphor, it seems to me it produces an ending not quite earned, for Breslin is right that in the end the poem embraces a resolution it does not quite enact: The Homeric parallels are simultaneously employed and rejected in a somewhat disingenuous way. However, this does not mean the poem has failed in evoking something essential about the Caribbean.

To understand what that is, we need to turn to Antonio Benítez-Rojo, who in *The Repeating Island* paradoxically insists that “the main obstacles” to a study of the Caribbean are the very elements most central to its identity: “its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism, etc.” (1). All of these qualities are evoked in the complex and somewhat contradictory poetics Walcott foregrounds in *Omeros*. What seems most confused about the poem, then, is in fact a sign it is getting the Caribbean “right,” for *Omeros* is characterized by just the kind of “supersyncretism” (12) Benítez-Rojo associates with the Caribbean, a region whose “cultural expressions” are “European, African, and Asian” (12). Benítez-Rojo’s recipe for studying the Caribbean becomes a virtual gloss of the locations and journeys that comprise *Omeros*:

Certainly, in order to reread the Caribbean we have to visit the sources from which the widely various elements that contributed to the formation of its culture flowed. This unforeseen journey tempts us because as soon as we succeed in establishing and identifying as separate any of the signifiers that make up the supersyncretic manifestation that we’re studying, there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points, be they in Europe, Africa, Asia, or America, or in all these continents at once. (12)

The experience of reading *Omeros* is “erratic” and disorienting in just this way, for Walcott takes the reader on a series of “unforeseen journeys”: Plunkett muses about the British empire from Africa to Asia; Achille travels in an extended dream sequence back to Africa; “Walcott” visits European cities associated with imperialism and colonialism such as London, Dublin, Lisbon, and Venice; and the poem traces the Cherokee Trail of Tears across the American plains while evoking the spirit of the Ghost Dance.²¹ Philoctete’s and Achille’s connection with the slave trade fuses with Walcott’s evocation of the ravages of Native American displacement, and both of these narratives are merged with Plunkett’s increasingly bleak musings about colonialism and empire and “Walcott’s” second thoughts about the “monumentality” of European history.²² *Omeros* gives us a Caribbean very much like the one Benítez-Rojo evokes, a world marked by “erratic displacement” and multiple “spatio-temporal points,” one whose historical and culture sources have just the kind of “bastardy” and “illegitimacy” Walcott discusses with Hirsch.

Paradoxically, these multiple displacements and spatio-temporal points are what, following Benítez-Rojo, makes *Omeros* so thoroughly Caribbean a poem. The Caribbean, in his view, is a sum of its sources, and it is a mistake to “persevere in the attempt to refer the culture of the Caribbean to geography” (24). The Caribbean has “no circle or circumference” but is in fact a chaotic assimilation of “African, European, Indoamerican, and Asian contexts” (24), extending from “the Amazon to the Mississippi delta,” from the “north coasts of South and Central America, the old Arawak-Carib island bridge, and parts of the United States. [. . .] Antilleans [. . .] tend to roam the entire world in search of the centers of their Caribbeanness” (24–5). The poem’s disparate locations mirror the terrain Benítez-Rojo covers here (St. Lucia, Africa, London, Lisbon, Boston, the Plains States, etc.), and the peripatetic “Walcott” emerges in the poem as an Antillean writer roaming the world in search of his Caribbeanness. The poem’s rather forced or over-orchestrated conclusions—Plunkett and “Walcott” reconcile, “Walcott” gives up his Homeric parallels for a Helen “beyond metaphor,” Philoctete and Achille come to terms with their displacement, etc.—mark an aim but not a realization. What we are finally left with is what Benítez-Rojo calls a “*mestizaje*” work (26), but one without synthesis, a “concentration of differences, a tangle of dynamics obtained by means of a greater density of the Caribbean object,” a complex of “binary oppositions Europe/Indoamerican, Europe/Africa” that “do not resolve themselves into the synthesis of *mestizaje*” but into “insoluble differential equations, which repeat their unknowns through the ages of the meta-archipelago” (26). What repeats in these repeating islands and in Walcott’s poem is the inscription of difference, heterogeneity, multiple roots, conflated identities, paradoxical linkages, and impossible geographies.

In the final analysis, these qualities ground Walcott’s poem in the Americas. This is the expansive geography *Omeros* covers, “America” construed as a hemispheric location and implicated in the historical roots/routes of Paul Gilroy’s black Atlantic.²³ In a discussion about *Omeros* with Rebekah Presson in 1992, Walcott explains the importance of this hemispheric location:

The whole idea of America, and the whole idea of every thing in this side of the world, barring the Native American Indian, is imported; we’re all imported, black, Spanish. When one says one is American,

that's the experience of being American, that transference of whatever color, or name, or place. The difficult part is the realization that one is part of the whole idea of colonization. Because the easiest thing about colonialism is to refer to history in terms of guilt or punishment or revenge, or whatever. Whereas the rare thing is the resolution of being where one is and doing something positive about that reality. (*Conversations with Derek Walcott*, 193)

Seen in light of Walcott's earlier insistence that Caribbean identity ultimately has to be characterized as bastardized and illegitimate—and that the terms have positive connotations that need to be embraced—his insistence here that everyone in the Caribbean is imported, “part of the whole idea of colonization,” is crucial. This key idea constitutes the links among Helen, Plunkett, “Walcott,” Achille, and Philoctete in *Omeros*, and it helps explain why the poem's geography includes not only the Caribbean, but Africa, Europe, and the United States as well. The poem explores the disparate roots/routes of Antillean identity as they construct the subjectivity of these particular characters (African, British, European, etc.), but it is the experience of colonization and the fact of displacement that predominates. Walcott rejects the impulse toward guilt, revenge, or nostalgia for a lost home (be it Achille's or Plunkett's) for a resolution that focuses on the necessity of being where one is and the struggle to do something positive with that reality.

Mimicry in the poem finally has less to do with Walcott's trying to copy Homer than with his desire to explore the centrality of mimicry in the construction of Caribbean identity. The syncretic or hybridizing effects of colonization define the context in which subjectivity and identity develop, so that mimicry, defined in positive terms by Walcott as the imaginative work of appropriation and invention, is central both to being Caribbean and writing about it. *Omeros*, as I have been arguing, is as much a poem about writing about the Caribbean as it is a poem about the Caribbean, one that explores the politics and poetics of mimicry, linking “unoriginality” to the condition of colonization and the processes of cultural syncretism. We cannot understand what Walcott is struggling with in *Omeros* without a sustained awareness of the connection the poem makes between bastardy and mimicry, and how it attempts to link the nature of Caribbean identity *and* writing to the historical processes associated with both.

NOTES

1. Farrell singles out in particular Mary Lefkowitz, Oliver Taplin, Bernard Knox, and the comparatist George Steiner (249).
2. Farrell argues that critics who deny *Omeros* status as an epic take an unnecessarily narrow, conservative approach to the genre, one that is Eurocentric and misses “the genre's capacity to reinvent itself through inversion, opposition to epic predecessors, and ironic self-reflexion” (262). Dougherty argues, “in their original native context, the Homeric poems, just like *Omeros*, comprised an ever-fluid synthesis of stories and traditions that aimed to forge or consolidate a sense of national identity in a time of crisis and change” (339).
3. For Walcott's disavowal of the poem's status as an epic, see “Reflections on *Omeros*.” Davis complicates the matter by insisting that what he calls the “performance of disavowal” is actually central to the classical epic tradition (see especially 326–8).

4. For an excellent summary of this debate see Hamner, 1–12. See also Farrell, 269, fn. 17, and Ismond.
5. Breslin argues that while *Omeros* develops a critique of its own “analogical model,” the poem itself does not seem written with that critique in mind. “Too many parts of [*Omeros*],” he observes, “seem sincerely invested in the Homeric analogy critiqued elsewhere” in the poem (272). I would add that the long section in Book VII patterned on Dante’s *Inferno* has Walcott playing Dante to the *Inferno*’s Virgil, just the kind of Eurocentric hubris he has always been criticized for.
6. Walcott, as we shall see a little later in this essay, often associates the Caribbean with “America,” defined broadly in hemispheric terms. He writes in “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry”:

We live in the shadow of an America that is economically benign yet politically malevolent. [. . .] We were American even while we were British, if only in the geographical sense, and now that the shadow of the British Empire has passed through and over us in the Caribbean, we ask ourselves if, in the spiritual or cultural sense, we must become American [. . .] it is an absurdity that I can live with; being both American and West Indian is an ambiguity without a crisis, for I find that the more West Indian I become, the more I can accept my dependence on America . . . because we share this part of the world, and have shared it for centuries now, even as conqueror and victim, as exploiter and exploited (51).

7. Appadurai rightly argues that these processes are a specific hallmark of globalization and the accelerating link between electronic media and mass migration (5–11), but Walcott would certainly argue that these processes have been at work for generations in the Caribbean.
8. Walcott is emphatic about embracing the hybrid, mongrel nature of Caribbean identity. In an interview with Edward Hirsch, he warns of the dangers of an Afrocentric “historical sentimentality” and insists that “the whole situation in the Caribbean is an illegitimate situation. If we admit that from the beginning that there is no shame in that historical bastardry, then we can be men” (79). One hopes that by this he meant that we can be women, too. Ramazani notes that in “intermingling Caribbean and European literary paradigms” in *Omeros* Walcott “thickens the cultural hybridity of each, accelerating, complicating, and widening rather than purifying what might be called the dialectic of the tribe” (410).
9. See in particular Williams, Davis, and Breslin.
10. Williams’s argument develops as a critique of Barbara Webb’s suggestion that Caribbean writers tend to privilege mythical forms over the alienating effects of purely historical representation, a formulation that is, in Williams’s view, oversimplified.
11. See Book II, Chapter XVIII, where Plunkett’s empirical research begins to give way to his interest in developing a set of parallels between Homer’s Helen and his own. Here he comes face-to-face with the desire to see a set of parallels between Helen of Troy and St. Lucia-as-Helen. “He had no idea,” Walcott writes, “how time could be reworted, / which is the historian’s task. The factual fiction / of textbooks, pamphlets, brochures, which he had loaded / in a ziggurat from the library, had the affliction / of impartiality; skirting emotion” (95).
12. See Breslin, 261, for a concise summary of this kind of analysis.
13. See Book One, Chapter Four, Section Three, 23–4.
14. Ismond argues Walcott’s engagement with European sources has to be understood in terms of his larger commitment to engaging the multiplicity of populations and cultures that have constructed the Caribbean. Walcott, she writes, realizes “that there is no turning back.” He “believes that the destiny of the West Indian peoples must depend on the resources they find within themselves for acting with confidence towards what has been left, negative as well as positive” (235). She insists that “this is not to be derivative or beholden. [. . .] The very confidence and tenacity of his approach challenges and defies any such notions of inferiority” (235).
15. This schema is of course complicated by the presence of Achille, who is at times played off against Plunkett in the poem in ways that have him representing Walcott’s African heritage to Plunkett’s British. I have emphasized the “Walcott” / Plunkett pairing in this essay because I am interested in how the poem uses it to explore approaches to writing and historicizing the Caribbean.
16. Walcott’s position here is similar to Paul Gilroy’s. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy is critical of black nationalism among U.S. and Caribbean critics. Indeed, his opposition to “nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches” is central to his geographic focus on the black Atlantic. “I want to develop,” he writes, “the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational

and intercultural perspective" (15). I will be arguing that it is just this perspective that drives the cultural syncretism in *Omeros*. See Okpewho for an analysis of *Omeros* as a "black Atlantic" poem. For an extended discussion of *Omeros* as an epic about dispossession, see Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*.

17. Researching the history of the island, Plunkett discovers a Midshipman Plunkett who ostensibly spied on the Dutch for the British and eventually fought with Admiral Rodney in the Antilles. Major Plunkett comes to think of him as "a namesake and a son" (94). See 77–83 for his story. The Midshipman provides Plunkett with his own historical link to the island, and by using this section of the poem to connect the Midshipman to Achille's ancestors in St. Lucia Walcott also forges a link between Plunkett and Achille.
18. The reference to Plunkett's wounding during the war is on 27–28. Walcott pauses here to underscore the metaphorical significance of Plunkett's wound, writing that "This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character/He has to be wounded. Affliction is one theme of this work, this fiction" (28). The poem is replete with Plunkett's nostalgia for, and musings about, empire. See, for example, 37–8 on how foreign markets drove the Roman and Spanish empires, and later (90), Plunkett's nostalgia for the British empire. The poem's treatment of colonialism, empire, and the contemporary spread of globalization deserve a more extended analysis than I can develop here.
19. Plunkett also visits Ma Kilman later in the poem as he mourns the death of this wife, Maude. She effects a kind of cure for this wound as well, one that Plunkett says "bound him for good to another race" (307).
20. See Ramazani for a detailed reading of *Omeros* and the trope of the wound.
21. While Walcott's aims in creating such a sweeping canvas for his poem are clear, I agree with Breslin that these disparate elements do not always cohere very effectively. Breslin complains, for example, that "the metamorphosis of Sioux into Cherokee into African Americans who are also Afro-Caribbeans who in turn are like Homeric Greeks proceeds so rapidly, and with so little interest in the particular qualities of any of these peoples, that the universal becomes a blank category" (264).
22. During "Walcott's" visits to European cities connected to empire and colonialism he reflects on the extent to which "history" is a construction of Western experience. These reflections are developed in his musings about historical monuments to conquest. In Lisbon, for example, confronted with the statue of a bronzed horseman, Walcott observes that "We had no such erections / above our colonial wharves, our erogenous zones / were not drawn to power, our squares shrank the directions / of the Empire's plazas [. . .] For those to whom history is the presence / of ruins, there is a green nothing" (192). It is important to read passages like these in connection with how Walcott treats Plunkett's attempts at historiography.
23. Gilroy insists that "marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (19). In my view *Omeros* works to put the emphasis on "routes" in just the way Gilroy outlines here.

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