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"Circle Yourself and Your Island": The "O" as a Generative Tension in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

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Derek Walcott's work often operates within a dynamic tension that simultaneously seeks to bear witness to the trauma the Caribbean world has experienced, pursuing an affirmative way forward that resists further displacement, while seeking to develop Caribbean culture. Walcott demonstrates this formation of culture in generative tensions like hybridity and mimicry, both of which are well known within postcolonial scholarship. Yet he also identifies alternative sites of tension in his work, particularly through his use of "O" in his epic poem *Omeros*, an image that depicts personal, cultural, and geographical wounds, while ultimately seeking a sense of healing and belonging. The "O" moreover functions as both sound and signifier in the poem, giving voice to colonial and postcolonial injustices, and providing the creative labor to develop a culture and sense of belonging from these circumstances. Out of this tension, Walcott therefore pursues a knowledge of woundedness, healing, and cultural understanding, engaging in transnational and transatlantic maneuvers that recover and evolve the St. Lucian identity personally, culturally, and geographically. Walcott realizes this recovery through his frequent use of the "O" in *Omeros*, which serves as a circular image that demonstrates both Walcott's and St. Lucia's identity, or when it is fractured, how it indicates a lack of development.

Keywords: O; circles; tension; Derek Walcott; image; sound; wound; belonging

St. Lucian author Derek Walcott conceives of imaginative landscapes filled with tensions, seeking to examine the dialectic between an accurate understanding of the world around him and the possibilities within that world. In his poetry and prose, he considers recurrently discussed postcolonial tensions like hybridity and mimicry, though he also develops alternative yet corresponding generative tensions that are more peculiar to his work. Consisting of both creative potential to develop his work and aesthetic actuality that might impact human existence outside of his writings, Walcott believes these tensions hold the power to cultivate Caribbean culture, offering healing and recovery of identity to both individual and community through his art. For instance, he frequently utilizes the twilight as a flexible metaphor that demonstrates the movement and multivalent nature of human experience in the Caribbean. He examines twilight at length in essays like "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?," "What the Twilight Says," and "The Muse of History," as well as poems such as "A Far Cry From Africa," "The Arkansas Testament," and "The Schooner *Flight*." Another distinctive tension Walcott employs is the "O," most notable in his epic poem *Omeros*.

This study examines generative tensions in *Omeros*, focusing primarily on the "O" as it signifies the circular, cyclical orbit of the poem through personal, cultural, and geographical wounds, while ultimately seeking a sense of healing and belonging. The "O" embodies both sound and signifier, as the characters in the poem circle back to their ancestors by vocalizing "O" sounds that give voice to the inarticulable colonial and postcolonial circumstances Caribbean inhabitants have faced. Walcott therefore uses the "O" as both image portraying and sound giving expression to lived experience in the Caribbean, from healing the wounds¹ of the Middle

¹ Since wounds are a prominent theme in *Omeros*, many critics have discussed this theme. See for instance Paul Breslin's *Nobody's Nations*, where he argues for the importance of remembering the wounds of the past while eventually forgetting these wounds to Walcott's vision of reshaping the epic genre in *Omeros* (241). See also Jahan Ramazani's "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction."

Passage, slave labor, and postcolonial inequalities, to the creative labor of developing a culture and sense of belonging out of these circumstances. The metaphor, therefore, generates cultural connections among Caribbean people and expresses a profound cultural healing in light of colonial and postcolonial wounds.

Discussing dialectic tensions in Walcott's work is not a novel consideration. Walcott himself writes about these points of tension explicitly, particularly the twilight. For Walcott, this dialectic produces an imaginative city, island, and archipelago for a people to inhabit.² Though the twilight might seem dim and dark, Walcott uses it as a challenge to Caribbean artists as a place they might develop their identity in the twilight in which they live, between their indigenous, African, Asian, and European history and ancestry. And though the twilight incorporates components of hybridity and mimicry, it yields a more complex and flexible image for him, recognizing both the traumas and the possibilities experienced by the postcolonial Caribbean artist.

In Walcott's seminal "What the Twilight Says," among his most cited essays, he depicts the twilight as a dusky and mysterious, yet generative space. The twilight in part demonstrates the displacement that St. Lucians experience as a result of their ancestors' dislocation from Africa because of the Middle Passage and the colonization of their island by imperial powers. And though the twilight can also lead to a vision that Walcott describes as a dim reflection in a mirror, paralleling Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry as "almost the same, *but not quite*," Walcott ultimately prefers to use the twilight as a more affirmative image than mimicry in its traditional usage (86).³ Near the end of the essay, he describes the experience of the twilight as a tension that is potentially obscuring, though one that might also lead to wholeness, self-understanding, development of identity, and a return home: "When dusk heightens, like amber on a stage set, those ramshackle hoardings of wood and rusting iron which circle our cities, a theatrical sorrow rises with it, for the glare, like the aura from an old-fashioned brass lamp, is like a childhood signal to come home" (3). Twilight spaces are, therefore, by nature fraught with complexity, where Walcott contends that in the face of the displacing traumas the Caribbean encounters, the twilight glimmer might "circle our cities" and potentially lead home, anticipating the central concern of returning home for many of the protagonists in *Omeros*.⁴

Critics have examined Walcott's use of the twilight as a metaphor from a variety of angles, though none have focused on the "O." For instance, Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh read Walcott's use of the twilight in Shelleyan terms. Baugh and Nepaulsingh cast *Another Life* as a poem that must decline before it might renew, comparing the twilight to Shelley's "fading coal" that "awakens to transitory brightness" (qtd. in Baugh and Nepaulsingh 170). They maintain that the twilight provides "an artistic opportunity to begin again, an overture," ultimately asserting that Walcott values the tension the twilight conveys because it reveals the possibility of renewal, where what appears to be the end, the night, actually gives way to the beginning of something in the dawn (223).

Moreover, in *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, Patricia Ismond situates Walcott's use of the metaphor in "What the Twilight Says" amongst the black nationalist revolutionary movements gaining momentum in the Caribbean in the 1960s as a way to define his artistic focus. She examines the multiple layers of Walcott's twilight tension, asserting that the metaphor demonstrates Walcott's disagreement "with black nationalist doctrines and its ideology of African revival as the basis of revolutionary possibility," ultimately contending that it "claims and establishes his colonial origins; and, evoking the dividedness and marginality of these origins, its symbolism also heralds the mission of searching out a clear light and truth" (105). Walcott instead seeks to fuse together his African and European roots, embodied by the twilight metaphor, which Ismond believes becomes "one of the most comprehensive and inclusive definitions of Walcott's effort and its dynamic" (107). As she articulates, the twilight serves as a suggestive and fundamental metaphor for Walcott.

In response to these positions, some scholars have sought a corrective for the critical understanding of metaphor in Walcott's work, believing the term too broad. For instance, Nicole Matos calls for a reassessment of the discourse on Walcott's use of metaphor, contending that critics like Ismond use "overbroadened

² Walcott's twilight correlates with J. Hillis Miller's "strange borderland," which Miller describes in "The Critic as Host" as "a frontier region which seems to give the widest glimpse into the other land ('beyond metaphysics'), though this land may not by any means be entered," yet "the border zone itself may be made sensible, as quattrocento painting makes the Tuscan air visible in its invisibility (231). Walcott's twilight has the same effect as Miller's "quattrocento painting" by making what is invisible visible; however, Walcott's twilight remains more affirmative.

³ Hector's turn away from the sea is an example of this dim reflection in *Omeros*. Hector rejects his traditional St. Lucian occupation as a fisherman to become a taxi driver, an act that distances him from his St. Lucian identity through his involvement in the Western capitalist tourist industry. This dislocation ultimately claims his life when he crashes his taxi van, the Comet.

⁴ Caryl Phillips similarly affirms the fraught nature of home and identity in the introduction to his collection of essays *A New World Order*. He recounts twilight ambiguities inherent in human experience, asserting: "These days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid. Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions" (6). This fluidity of identity demonstrates that human experience is not monolithic, but instead contains many ambiguities. Both Walcott and Phillips emphasize the possibility within this state of ambiguity.

definitions" of metaphor that ultimately "obscure more specifically metonymic and synecdochal aspects of *Omeros's* figuration" (42). Matos, instead, asserts that such a broad definition of metaphor loses some of the subtlety that distinguishing among metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor provides as she seeks to explore "the slippages between metaphoric and metonymic modes" to demonstrate that metaphor in *Omeros* is "something uniquely Antillean, a version of metaphor that requires its paradoxical mode of figuration" in order to "achieve the contiguity of a belated, much-desired reassembly" (43). Matos' critique adds significant nuance to the scholarly dialogue on Walcott's use of metaphor, particularly in her assertion that Walcott's figurations exist in a space that seeks "completeness" rather than "substitutions, doublings, or parallels," as well as her discussion of "the slippages between metaphoric and metonymic modes," though I believe that broader considerations of metaphor in Walcott's work like Ismond's can be examined alongside these "slippages" (42).

Jahan Ramazani offers an additional broadened example of metaphor in *Omeros* that illuminates important aspects of the poem, persuasively demonstrating how Walcott employs metaphors like the wound as a site of generative tension. Ramazani argues in "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction" that the affliction caused by the wounds many characters experience in *Omeros* forms a "site of interethnic connection," where the wounds work to vivify "the black Caribbean inheritance of colonial injury and at the same time deconstructing the uniqueness of suffering" (405). Ramazani continues speaking about Walcott's poetic achievement in *Omeros*, stating that: "Hybrid, polyvalent, and unpredictable in its knitting together of different histories of affliction, Walcott's radiant metaphor of the wound helps dramatize poetry's promise in postcolonial writing" (405–406). Ramazani highlights how Walcott's use of sites of generative tension like the wound become "radiant" metaphors, acknowledging traumatic colonial histories as well as postcolonial poetry's ability to seek healing from these wounds.

Yet there are generative tensions in *Omeros* that scholarship has yet to explore, such as the "O." The circular shape of the "O" provides Walcott a malleable image and sound in *Omeros* that represents a return home from exilic voyages and expresses a pursuit of healing. In other instances the "O" typifies an empty zero or simply a wound, while a half-circle or arc often symbolize incompleteness or a still diseased wound.⁵ The "O" also signifies the cyclical, circular nature of lived experience. For instance, life goes on at the end of the poem with an acknowledgement that trauma and displacement will always exist. But this, however, is not an endorsement of despair, simply a recognition that recovery from these traumas requires a series of repeated choices rather than one single act. Like the waves that continue to crash on the shore at the end of the poem, the poet summons his readers to continually seek to recover a sense of belonging. He articulates the ongoing nature of this recovery as a cyclical, circular process that the reader must repeatedly choose to enact.⁶

Though Walcott scholarship has examined various circular aspects of *Omeros*, the "O" as a metaphor has not been considered in any sustained manner. Robert Hamner, for example, discusses the circular trajectory of the characters: "Structurally, *Omeros* converts linear narrative development into incremental loops of self-reflexive exposition. No matter how far the leading characters may wander literally or imaginatively, their lives continually revolve around each other; and much as they learn, they inevitably return to their point of origin" (35). Hamner's comments demonstrate the importance of the "O" to the structure of the poem as well as the narrative. Paul Breslin also considers the circular nature of the poem in his essay "Walcott's 'Reversible World': Centers, Peripheries, and the Scale of Nature," contending: "The circular passage from old to new worlds and back again, always repeatable, eventually casts doubt on the notion that one endpoint of the journey is origin, the other destiny" (20). Breslin's remarks indicate how *Omeros* enacts a vibrant conception of time and space, rather than a flat one. With these various considerations of the circular aspects of the poem, examining the "O" as both image and sound will therefore further develop scholarship on Walcott's generative sites of tension in *Omeros* that acknowledge both cultural wounds and seek a sense of healing and belonging in light of these wounds.

Frequently used throughout the poem and always in the back of the reader's mind, the "O" forms a resonant noise, functioning as a song of praise and as a groaning against the still oppressive weight of colonialism. One of the first instances of the "O" in *Omeros* occurs near the beginning of the poem, in the second section of chapter one, where the poet frequently uses "O" images to convey both the colonial wound and the self-healing power of the island and the ocean surrounding it. Achille, a fisherman from the village of

⁵ This image of an "O" is also prominent in poets that influenced Walcott, such as W.H. Auden. For example, in the poem "In Sickness and in Health," Auden desires, "That this round O of faithfulness we swear/May never wither to an empty nought/Nor petrify into a square" (97–99).

⁶ I believe this explains one reason why Walcott writes on the same topics yet from different angles over and over throughout his career.

Gros Islet, gazes up at the gaping "hole the laurel had left./He saw the hole silently healing with the foam/of a cloud like a breaker" (6). The felling of the *gommier* trees creates a circular hole in the canopy of trees that Achille looks upon. The very shape of this geographic wound forms an "O" in the poem. Likewise, so do the wounds to characters like Philoctete, Achille, and Major Plunkett. Moreover, comparing the cloud that heals the circular wound to the ocean foreshadows the healing that eventually occurs in the narrative as Achille returns to the sea as a fisherman.

The "O" reemerges in chapter two as the poet invokes his epic muses. The poet introduces Seven Seas, a blind St. Lucian character who sees with "a sixth sense," an allusion to the blind bard of previous epic poems such as Homer and John Milton (12). Seven Seas, also called Omeros, acts as the first muse the poet invokes as he sits in his kitchen with his fingers drumming the table "recounting the past/of another sea, measured by the stroking oars" (12). Envisioning Seven Seas, the poet implores him: "O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros,/as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun/gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise" (12). By crying out to Omeros and using the "O" as a vocal sound, the poet imagines the dawn as a site of linguistic creation, seeking a return to this place of fundamental innocence before experiencing life's wounds. And the poet insists that he can only achieve this return with Omeros' assistance: "Only in you [Omeros], across centuries/of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise/of the surf lines," which wander "like the shambling fleece/of the lighthouse's flock, that Cyclops whose blind eye/shut from the sunlight" (13). Across time and place, and despite the round "O" of the lighthouse's "blind eye," the poet seeks a second sight, believing that Omeros will provide him with an imaginative vision that will bring a return to a sense of belonging.

Walcott believes chronicling the emergence of a new culture out of tensions like the "O" will achieve this sense of belonging, ultimately forming an imaginative archipelago broken off from a larger continent to create its own culture. Walcott also uses this image in the essay "The Antilles: Epic Fragments of Memory," asserting that: "Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent" (69). Though not fully realized at this point in the beginning of the poem, depicting this cultural genesis ultimately allows a new culture to emerge as Walcott joins European, Asian, and Caribbean worlds and epic works. Out of his vision of the Caribbean rising out of the sea, the poet hears Antigone's voice humming "'Omeros,'" which is the last word of the end of section two of chapter two (13). Antigone, another muse figure, moreover utters Omeros' name in the first word of the next section, serving to pull the poet into his imaginative vision. Stroking the bust of the Greek epic poet Homer, Antigone, who is Greek, announces in the opening line of the section: "'O-meros,' she laughed. 'That's what we call him in Greek'" (14). Antigone recontextualizes the epic poet in a new time, rechristening Homer as Omeros. Pensive, the poet eventually agrees, arguing that: "Homer and Virg are New England farmers" (14). Walcott's christening his Caribbean bard as Omeros establishes a new poetry to chronicle the Caribbean people, a people with ancestral and literary connections to many other cultures.

Speaking the name Omeros out loud also further conveys the narrator's belonging to the region. He gives an etymological analysis and pronunciation guide of sorts, demonstrating how the name embodies language, ocean, island, and its inhabitants: "O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was/both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,/os, a grey bone," as well as the "white surf as it crashes/and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore" (14). The sound of the "O" therefore invokes the circular and cyclical sounds of the waves crashing on the shores of the island. Rhonda Cobham-Sander maintains, "the repeated O sound mimics the way the hollows between the rocks distort the booming noise of the surf," furthermore contending that it "becomes the originary breath of his epic poem, the apostrophe that inaugurates language's attempt to enclose the world in its arms" (223, 224). And as the narrator notes, "*mer*" in Caribbean vernacular means mother, from the French *mère*, as well as signifying the sea, thereby casting the sea as sustaining mother. Adding a human element to this incantation, "*os*" plays off of the Latinate root for bone, fusing human existence and the ocean. Melding patois, French, and Latin consequently highlights the poet's multivalent sense of belonging.

Vocalizing these sounds has a profound impact on the poem. Demonstrating the considerable power the utterance of this name holds, Cobham-Sander argues, "the Caribbean poet domesticates the sound of the word *Omeros*, filtering it through his specific cultural experiences: his colonial education in classical languages, his Creole mother tongue, the legacy of slavery, the ever-present sound of the sea, even the race and gender politics of his casual sexual liaison with a white woman" (223). She further asserts: "It vindicates the Creole-speaking subject's appropriation of the colonizer's languages, which in other contexts has been represented as mere mimicry or abjection" (223–224). Furthermore, renaming Homer as Omeros also achieves what Jahan Ramazani, following Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, defines in *A Transnational Poetics*

as "cultural decolonization," which he contends recreates "the land through the act of renaming it and thus imaginatively and linguistically repossessing it" by reimagining and reintegrating "a mythical and historical past for the indigenous community, repopulating that past with a different cast of heroes, heroines, and perhaps even villains" (154, 155). The sound of this first "O" and the invocation of the name Omeros therefore reverberates throughout the rest of the poem, offering both a voice to the personal and cultural wounds inflicted on the region, as well as a sense of healing and belonging.

In chapter eight, the poet employs the "O" image with great frequency in the Fort Rodney museum, located on Pigeon Island near Gros Islet, conveying the ripples of history on St. Lucian shores. Attempting to discern the origin of a pyrite-encrusted wine bottle, the poet asserts that one legend claims it came from a ship in the Battle of the Saints, the 1782 nautical battle that took place off the coast of Dominica, two islands north of St. Lucia, between British forces led by Admiral George Rodney and the French fleet under Comte de Grasse. The British won the battle and "the myth widened its rings every century" (43). As the rings of this myth ripple over the centuries, the legend claims that the sunken French flagship the *Ville de Paris* and its treasure was protected by "an octopus-cyclops, its one eye like the moon," the eye of the octopus and the round moon offering the wreck a ring of protection (43). With this myth on his mind, as well as the money with which he might win Helen back, Achille decides to dive in the area in order to find sunken treasure.

In chapter twelve, the Walcott narrator meets the shade of this father in the Castries neighborhood in which he grew up, where his father meditates on the generative tensions his son encounters in St. Lucia. The shade painstakingly entreats his son to foster a distinctly St. Lucian culture rather than seek an illusory return to Africa, particularly though his poetic gift, a gift that might witness to both wound and belonging. He furthermore calls his son's attention to the arduous labor St. Lucian women once undertook by hefting coal from Castries to ships in the harbor, whose dedicated effort, rhythm, and beauty he compares to the poet's gift. The shade describes seeing "women climb/like ants up a white flower-pot, baskets of coal/balanced on their torchoned heads" (73). Moreover, the women balanced these coal baskets on their heads "with a strength that never altered its rhythm," witnessing a beauty and poetry in these women despite the colonial labor forced upon them (73). Yet rather than seeking vengeance on those that caused these circumstances, the shade cautions his son against a vision frozen in the past by mouthing an incomplete and untenable "O" that signifies nothing. He argues that uttering: "O Thou, my Zero, is an impossible prayer,/utter extinction is still a doubtful conceit./Though we pray to nothing, nothing cannot be there" (75). Concentrating solely on the terrible suffering his slave ancestors endured does not configure the completeness of a circle, but instead its negative, a zero that flounders as "an impossible prayer" and "utter extinction." Walcott expresses similar sentiments in his essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?," claiming that there might be a more affirmative maneuver to be made in this tension, where he asserts that "cultures can only be created out of this knowledge of nothing, and in deeper than the superficial, existential sense, we in the Caribbean know all about nothing. We know that we owe Europe either revenge or nothing, and it is better to have nothing than revenge. We owe the past revenge or nothing, and revenge is uncreative" (12). Paradoxically then, through this "knowledge of nothing," Walcott seeks more creative, affirmative endeavors, while avoiding the restrictiveness of vengeance.

The shade then communicates to his son that his prayer might still form a complete circle, not simply an empty zero, as the shade of Walcott's father counsels him to focus on developing St. Lucian culture through his craft. He advises his son to: "Kneel to your load, then balance your staggering feet/and walk up that coal ladder as they do in time,/one bare foot after the next in ancestral rhyme," further articulating, "Rhyme remains the parentheses of palms/shielding a candle's tongue, it is the language's/desire to enclose the loved world in its arms" (75). Moreover, the shade asserts that language might also "heft a coal-basket; only by its stages/like those groaning women will you achieve that height/whose wooden planks in couplets lift your pages/higher than those hills of infernal anthracite" (75). Advising his son to kneel as if in prayer, a fitting suggestion since Walcott often casts poetry as a spiritual endeavor,⁷ the shade suggests his son seek a sense of belonging to his home by understanding the past while living fully in the present, pursuing the complete "O" of *Omeros*, and avoiding the nothingness of the "Zero."

Ultimately, voicing these "O" sounds allows the narrator to circle back to his ancestors and their occluded histories, where the "O" is both sound and signifier. The shade conveys to his son that obliterating the past through forgetting or revenge is not possible, since uttering an "O" still expresses something. In his

⁷ For instance, in an interview with Edward Hirsch for *The Paris Review*, Walcott states that "I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation" (99).

instruction to his son, the shade urges the narrator to convert his empty "impossible prayer" into meaningful grief, where the "O" vowel sounds would instead express a deep sense of mourning for the St. Lucian women that were forced to heft coal baskets on their heads. In this sense, the "O" sounds might become cries that signify the suffering of the narrator's ancestors, utterances that establish a connection to his forebears through this linguistic remembrance and offer a witness to these women who suffered with dignity to prevent history from repeating itself.

And despite depicting an imaginative recreation of the colonial suffering their ancestors endured, the lines contain expressive elegance and agility. For example, the poet employs a medial caesura in the line: "Though we pray to nothing, nothing cannot be there," where the pause's lack of sound holds as much weight as a spoken word, echoing the silences that the narrator experiences as well as the silenced voices of his ancestors (75). The medial caesura further demonstrates that even through vocalizing a "Zero" as a prayer, the narrator communicates something, since metric onsets are not always sounded, yet are still expected by the reader. Additionally, the shade encourages his son to persist in his work as a poet, continuing the "ancestral rhyme," which forms the alliterative sounds of "the parentheses of palms" that seek to "enclose the loved world in its arms," where sound and image surround the St. Lucia the son loves (75). The poet also frequently uses regular end rhymes in these lines, which he periodically returns to in the poem to provide particular emphases: "prayer" and "there," "stages" and "pages," and "anthracite" and "write" (75). Through these poetic devices, the poet consequently sounds out a circling link between the narrator and his ancestors.

Achille is another character in *Omeros* that experiences generative tensions like the "O," which he encounters by remaining buoyantly connected to the sea, a link that both roots him in his cultural past and to his present home, St. Lucia. Achille's devotion to the sea allows him to embark on an imaginative vision of self-knowledge, circling back to his African heritage in order to understand himself as a St. Lucian. This journey prevents Achille from perceiving either Africa or St. Lucia as a romantic ideal, an understanding of belonging that Walcott frequently critiques, whether of the colonial and postcolonial vision of the Caribbean as an Edenic paradise, or a Caribbean perception of a return to Africa as an Edenic homecoming. For instance, in his interview with Hirsch, Walcott argues: "There is a duty in every son to become his own man. The son severs himself from the father. The Caribbean very often refuses to cut that umbilical cord to confront its own stature. So a lot of people exploit an idea of Africa out of both the wrong kind of pride and the wrong kind of heroic idealism" (114). Walcott refuses either idealistic perspective as an othering impulse, instead desiring to witness to the Caribbean people as rooted in the archipelago rather than solely in the cultural past.

At home in St. Lucia but also displaced, Achille begins his circular return journey home in chapter twenty-four at the close of Book Two. In his boat on the ocean, he sees a sea-swift flying "as if the humming/horizon-bow had made Africa the target/of its tiny arrow" (125). Achille begins this imaginary episode by experiencing a sense of belonging as he works as a fisherman in the ocean: "Achille felt the rim/of the brimming morning being brought like a gift" (126). He perceives his job as a fisherman as a gift, where he experiences the sea as "home./This was his garden" (126). He moreover expresses his gratitude for the sea, where "his heart trembled with enormous tenderness for the purple-blue water" (126). Yet Achille still questions his sense of belonging, even where he feels most at home, the ocean. Catching sight of the swift, which makes "a semicircular turn," as if to indicate the incomplete nature of Achille's journey thus far, he perceives that the swift "was guiding and not following them," feeling that "her one, arrowing aim/was his happiness and that was blessing enough" (126). Over the next four chapters, the bird draws him into an imaginative vision of his ancestral home in Africa. Like the place that Achille seeks during this reversal of the Middle Passage, Bhabha discusses a corresponding place of tension in *The Location of Culture*, where these "'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). Like Walcott, Achille visits his father's shade on his journey, seeking a sense of belonging, not in a return to Africa, but in a return to place in St. Lucia, as he collaborates and contests his African ancestry in this "'in-between'" imaginative place.

Walcott saturates Achille's imaginative exile with "O" imagery, for instance through the sea swift. Described as bridging disparate worlds, the swift "touched both worlds with her rainbow ... this dart of the meridian" (130). Not only traversing between Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe, the swift's circular, cyclical journey spans time as well as place: "She could loop the stars with a fishline, she tired/porpoises, she circled epochs with her outstretched span" (131). And perhaps most significant to the poem's narrative, the swift was present at the cutting down of the *gommier* trees: "She was the swift that he had seen in the cedars/in the foam of the clouds, when she had shot across/the blue ridges of the waves, to a god's orders" (131). Called by the gods to lead Achille across the Atlantic, the swift guides him on his journey that causes him to feel "he was headed home" as he imaginatively travels to Africa, a spiritual journey offers him the opportunity to return to his ancestral home (131).

Throughout his vision, Achille expresses a dual sense of belonging and a tension situated between cultures. For instance, as Achille's African ancestors help him ashore from his canoe, the Walcott narrator breaks into the poem: "Half of me was with him. One half with the midshipman/by a Dutch canal. But now, neither was happier/or unhappier than the other" (135). The narrator also professes his African and European ancestry in these lines, and in so doing expresses his belonging to both continents. This belonging to a range of cultures is at the heart of *Omeros* and of Walcott's entire poetic oeuvre because he sees it as consonant with the Caribbean experience, recalling the false choice that he examines in the poem "A Far Cry from Africa," questioning "how choose/Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?" (29–30). Furthermore, after Achille steps on shore, he encounters his father's shade, where: "He sought his own features in those of their life-giver,/and saw two worlds mirrored there" (136). Not only does Achille see himself in his father's shade, but the African and European worlds are "mirrored" between father and son.

In this meeting filled with circular imagery, Achille interrogates his understanding of his ancestral home through language and naming. With the fishermen of the tribe, Achille "sat in a circle" and he and his father introduce themselves to one another by pronouncing their names (137). Afolabe then asks his son what his name means, further stating that he forgets the name he gave him, as does Achille, who utters: "Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know./The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave/us; trees, men we yearn for a sound that is missing" (137). In one sense, Achille's forgetting demonstrates the profound linguistic displacement many Caribbean inhabitants endure, shorn from their ancestral home. Yet, as Martin McKinsey contends in his article, "Missing Sounds and Mutable Meanings: Names in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*," Walcott ultimately "defines this gap between name and being ... as a space of potential," moreover noting that "we become our names neither by assuming new ones," nor by mimicry, but "through the writing of his West Indian narrative" (900). Achille's connection to yet distance from his African ancestors therefore offers the poet a site to develop St. Lucian culture in his writing.

Experiencing further displacement from his ancestral home by witnessing Africans selling fellow Africans into slavery, this tribal war signifies an example of arcs or incomplete circles that occur in *Omeros*, particularly in the first half of the poem. One principle instance occurs when Achille attempts to deliver his people from oppression through war and wrath after he imaginatively returns to Africa. Trying to stop tribes from selling other tribes into slavery, Achille seeks to disrupt the unity of the African tribal council by "cut[ting] off their circle," a move that also formally cuts off the rhythm of the line with its caesura (147). He then kills an archer with his oar-turned-blade, believing he can deliver his people "by hiding in a half-circle, then I could change their whole future, even the course of the river/would flow backwards" (148). Achille misinterprets the tension through his imaginative violence, where the poet utilizes the "half-circle" as an image for Achille's misguided wrath and ultimately an incomplete and deficient response to being cut off from his ancestral past. The archers "half-circle" shaped "bow" conveys a corresponding displacement that violence cannot resolve. Achille cannot turn back time through revenge in this scene, echoing the words the narrator's father speaks earlier in the poem. In his wrath, Achille's exposes the colonial affliction inflicted upon him as well as his weakness, like Homer's Achilles: "Then a cord/of thorned vine looped his tendon, encircling the heel/with its own piercing chain. He fell hard" (148). The chains of slavery that shackled his ancestors still wound, and he simultaneously becomes enslaved by his wrath for the slavery of his ancestors. Achille falls and must find another way, which he soon begins to achieve by seeking to complete the circle of his journey to Africa and return home in section two of chapter thirty (159).

Before this journey home, the poet provides an imaginative witness of the Middle Passage, testifying how slaves were taken from Africa to the Caribbean and the U.S., displaced like uprooted trees. Walcott uses this image to circle back to the beginning of the poem, providing a poetic parallel to the trees that were cut down in poem's opening lines to make the fishing canoes. They became "firewood, dismembered/branches, not men," and where "each carried/the nameless freight of himself to the other world" (150). Stripped of identity through slavery, these Africans were transported to a new place, where: "after wreaths of seaweed, after the bitter nouns/of strange berries, coral sores, after the familiar irons/singing round their ankles, after the circling sounds" and "dry sand their soles knew. Sand they could recognize" (151). These slaves never again found their home in Africa, "but on a palm shore" in the Caribbean (151). Though from various tribes, "they felt the sea-wind tying them into one nation/of eyes and shadows and groans, in the one pain/that is inconsolable, the loss of one's shore" (151). Through their displacement and the ocean acting as a connective tissue, the poet maintains that these Africans sold into slavery became a people possessing a sense of belonging to one another in the Caribbean.

In chapter thirty-six, the poet cycles back to the image of the circle again through a touching final encounter between the narrator and his father's shade. The shade communicates to the narrator the importance of understanding the sophistication of Western culture while being grateful for the beauty of his home in

St. Lucia. The last words that the shade of Walcott's father speaks to him are: "Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere,/cherish our island for its green simplicities" (187). The shade asserts that the Walcott narrator must first journey away from St. Lucia, but also return to the island in order to recover a sense of identity and self, completing a circular journey. The shade continues: "The sea-swift vanishes in rain,/and yet in its travelling all that the sea-swift does/it does in a circular pattern. Remember that, son" (187–188). Another recurrent image, the swift, further signifies the "circular pattern" of exile and return that characterizes the narrator's Odyssean path, implying that he must first journey away from St. Lucia, but also return to complete the circular journey. This tender moment between father and son also develops the connection between the flourishing of Walcott's poetic gift and a return to his home in St. Lucia.

At this point in the poem, another circle emerges: the meridian. The Walcott narrator traverses this circle with the first words of Book Five: "I crossed my meridian" (189). After imaginatively exploring his African ancestors, he leaves St. Lucia for Europe, effectively crossing one side of his ancestry to the other, now considering his European roots by traveling through the great cities of the continent. The second section of this chapter reinforces this circular image, as it begins: "Across the meridian, I try seeing the other side," that is, the other side of his lineage, where the narrator seeks to understand and connect the African and European arcs of his heritage (191). It is therefore unsurprising that the remaining chapters depicting the narrator's journey through Europe teem with circular imagery: "from the O's of a Roman aqueduct," to "the circle of Charing Cross" in London and the "meridian of Greenwich" (192, 193, 196). In his essay "The Gift of Displacement," Caryl Phillips perceives of a corresponding vision where crossing meridians and boundaries encourages possibility and development, stating that though standing "outside the grand procession of European history [which] may occasion some to mourn," the Caribbean also escapes many of the ills that European culture suffers from: "A self-determining history is still there to be created. The truth is, it could be argued that the synthesizing new world vision of the Caribbean provides the perfect model for the age in which we live. An age in which migrations across boundaries are an increasingly familiar part of our individual lives as national borders collapse and are redrawn" (132). Ideally situated for navigating the meridians of self, culture, and place, the possibility arises for the Caribbean poet to achieve a creation of a "self-determining history," rather than the narrative imposed through colonial history.

Walcott also discusses meridians in his essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?," arguing: "Once the meridian of European civilization has been crossed, according to the theory, we have entered a mirror where there can only be simulations of self-discovery" (6–7). Walcott firmly critiques this stance, where: "Somehow, the cord is cut by that meridian. Yet a return is also impossible, for we cannot return to what we have never been. The truth in all this is, of course, the amnesia of the American, particularly of the African. Most of our definitions of American culture are fragmentary, based on the gleam of racial memory which pierces this amnesia" (7). Mimicry therefore can enact a false severing by "the meridian of European civilization," or what Bhabha calls the "almost the same, *but not quite*." Walcott's view of mimicry instead makes a circular image of this arc, where he acknowledges the degradations of mimicry, while yet asserting that all art is mimicry. Paul Jay affirms the poet's revision of mimicry, establishing how Walcott argues that "mimicry gets rehabilitated" and that, for Walcott, "being fated to unoriginality is simply the realization that all imaginative creation involves mimicry" (548). Unoriginal because of its similarity to all artistic creation, Walcott's rehabilitation of mimicry therefore acknowledges the artist's exile while simultaneously seeking a return home. The narrator's meridian crossing in *Omeros* therefore performs a real "self-discovery," generating a recovery of belonging to the Caribbean rather than a mere simulacrum.⁸

Having crossed his meridian, the poet reverses his geographic and psychological crossing and returns to his adopted home in Boston, using exilic language to convey his continued feeling of displacement. He begins the second section of chapter forty-one with one of the more famous lines from *Omeros*: "I re-entered my reversible world" (207). Back in Boston, he cites the connection between humans and their birthplace: "Men take their colours/as the trees do from the native soil of their birth" (208). He moreover

⁸ Walcott further considers the notion of mimicry in "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?," where, on the one hand, he agrees with V.S. Naipaul's critique of those in the Caribbean whose "mimicry of power defrauds their own people" (5). Yet Walcott ultimately criticizes Naipaul roundly, contending that Naipaul's "indictment is crippling, but, like all insults, it contains an astonishing truth" (6). Walcott later makes his most affirmative maneuver in the essay by arguing that "mimicry is the painful, new, laborious uttering that comes out of belief, not out of doubt. The votive man is silent, the cynical is articulate. Ask any poet which he would prefer, poetry or silence, poetry or wisdom, and he would answer wisdom. It is his journey to self-annihilation, to beginning again" (13). Mimicry for Walcott therefore remains a site of tension that can be both creative and uncreative, demonstrating the beginning of the journey for the Caribbean writer, not the whole of it.

laments that, though perhaps now in a globalized world, frequent movement away from "the native soil" seems normal, after these "trees" move from their "native soil," "a desert place widens in the heart" (208).

Ultimately, crossing these meridians allow the poem's characters to develop a renewed sense of belonging to the Caribbean. For instance, Ma Kilman's use of St. Lucian herbs to cure Philoctete's wound not only connects the remedy with the island, but a swift also transports the seeds of the plant from Africa to St. Lucia, a cycle that the poet dramatizes through recurrent "O" imagery. The poet notes this transportation, expressing that: "A swift had carried the strong seed in its stomach/centuries ago from its antipodal shore" (238). The poet further casts the swift's attempt to cure the wounds born out of the African diaspora by completing the isolated arcs of the one-way journey during the Middle Passage: "She aimed to carry the cure/that precedes every wound," where "the reversible Bight/of Benin was her bow, her target the ringed haze/of circling horizon" (239). In these lines, he cleverly puns on the name of the bay bordered by Benin, Togo, and Nigeria. The Bight serves as a "bow" that launches the bird, a "reversible" line it crosses to travel back and forth across the Atlantic, "reversible" because it works to heal the wounds of the Middle Passage and it can be traversed in both directions, working much like the Walcott narrator and Achilles. And employing a further "O" image, the swift uses the "circling horizon" to mark its trajectory toward its final end, the Caribbean.

As Ma Kilman heals Philoctete, the shrieks of centuries of suffering endured by Caribbean inhabitants resounds from his wound, which Ma Kilman then heals by enacting an ironic reversal of the "O" as a colonial wound by transforming the tools of slavery into instruments of healing. This event causes a ripple effect that propels other figures toward a physical remedy and a recovery of belonging to the island. Ma Kilman prepares the cure for his wound in "one of those cauldrons from the old sugar-mill," a mill associated with slavery, which sits "agape in its crusted, agonized O: the scream/of centuries" (246). Fittingly, Ma Kilman refashions a cauldron from the sugar-mill that functioned by means of slave labor, the circular opening still screaming the horrors of slavery. Yet, once a tool used in slave labor, the ringed mouth of the cauldron now serves as a threshold into healing for Philoctete and achieves a redemptive irony for both characters.

Philoctete's healing reverberates throughout the rest of the poem. The narrator, who sees no "difference/between me and Philoctete," begins to recover a sense of belonging to St. Lucia as he heads back to the island (245). Again, circular imagery is used to convey this recovery: "My braceleted Circe/was gone ... the Caribbean ringed me with infinite mercy/as it did the island" (250). The narrator conveys that he has experienced freedom from his captor, whether one aspect of his ancestry dominating another, or the painful emotional loss of love that has shackled him throughout the poem. He finds a sense of freedom and "infinite mercy" in the recovery of his Caribbean identity, of reconciling his European and African roots. Not only accessible to the Walcott narrator alone, "the island" St. Lucia experiences this recovery as well. Soon after this, the Walcott narrator begins to see "the light of St. Lucia at last through her own eyes,/her blindness, her inward vision as revealing/as his, because a closing darkness brightens love," thereby reclaiming his sense of belonging to the island (282).

The narrator continues to develop his sense of belonging to St. Lucia as Omeros leads him into the Sulphur Springs volcano in Soufrière, further embodied in circular images and enacted in the sounds these images make when pronounced. In this scene, after Omeros paternally castigates the narrator, he implores the narrator to cultivate a sense of belonging to his island and return to the home that he loves, which he accomplishes by employing "O" images, articulating that "the sea moves round an island" and "love moves round the heart—/with encircling salt, and the slowly travelling hand/knows it returns to the port from which it must start" (291). Omeros here pronounces ecstatic circular images of exclamation in the grateful, almost breathless rhythm of the lines. Moreover, he voices repeated sounds, notably utilizing "moves" or "moving" three times in a matter of two lines, which emphasize how the narrator is moved by Omeros' words, signifying a sense of gratitude. Moreover, he also repeats the word "round," indicating the narrator's journey toward wholeness, achieved through his recovery of belonging to the island.

Finally, Walcott's art creates a circle of completion, even if only in a limited sense, through his return to St. Lucia and his development of Caribbean culture through his poetry. Omeros conveys this final recovery by the narrator by declaring: "this is what this island has meant to you,/why my bust spoke, why the sea-swift was sent to you:/to circle yourself and your island with this art" (291). The healing that the Walcott narrator experiences does not become solipsistic, as Omeros calls him to circle the island with his "art" so that this recovery of identity might be available to all St. Lucians. This recovery becomes the central concern for the poet, that his poetry might not only be healing for himself, but for the St. Lucian people as well, forging an identity for both, where the use of circular images and sounds communicates this profound cultural healing.

Near the end of the narrative, the poem comes full circle by tracing the tension between displacement and belonging through the flight of the swift. The narrator casts the bird's circular path as one that joins together

disparate worlds: "I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text," where the bird's "hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking/basins of a globe in which one half fits the next/into an equator, both shores neatly clicking/into a globe" (319). The swift therefore not only serves as an image that binds the narrative together as well as the narrator's diverse cultural lineage, but also operates beyond the poem, working to connect cultures from around the globe. The narrator continues, articulating that "its meridian/was not North and South but East and West," casting Africa and the Caribbean as "halves of one brain,/or the beat of both hands rowing that bear the two/vessels of the heart with balance, weight, and design" (319). Acknowledging the bird's flight path from east to west and back, the narrator demonstrates how Africa and the Caribbean are distinct places, yet intimately linked like the two hemispheres of the brain, or different parts of a beating heart that work together to maintain existence. The swift's circular journey also serves to portray the Atlantic Ocean as a connective tissue between Africa and the Caribbean despite historical conflicts like the Middle Passage and existential divisions like the narrator's disparate ancestral roots: "Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa,/she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line,/the rift in the soul" (319). The swift's circuit therefore functions as an image of the generative circular tension between the Caribbean and African aspects of the archipelago's culture, where even after diaspora, colonial history, and current postcolonial circumstances in the region, the poet might help create a culture out of his work and ultimately engender a sense of belonging in the islands.

Walcott creatively employs the "O" in *Omeros* as a flexible metaphor, as both an image that depicts and a sound that gives voice to lived experience in the Caribbean, recognizing the archipelago's colonial and post-colonial wounds while employing his creative labor to develop a culture and sense of belonging from these circumstances. Fittingly, the poem ends where it began, circling back to Achille the fisherman by the ocean. Ending spectacularly in this cyclical, circular place between cultures, Achille leaves the beach content and grateful for his home as "the sea was still going on" (325). The reader likewise inhabits this cyclical, circular place, feeling gratitude for a gift seemingly as continual as the sea.

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