The Faculty of Humanities

Master´s Thesis Project

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Fragments and Echoes of Real People: Derek Walcott's Negotiation of a Postcolonial Caribbean Identity Through "Omeros"

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Handed in by: Ida Christel Gamst Nielsen

First name:	**Last name:**	**Date of birth**
Ida	Nielsen	240795

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Abstract

Placed within the framework of postcolonial studies, this Master's thesis titled "Fragments and Echoes of Real People: Derek Walcott's Negotiation of a Postcolonial Caribbean Identity Through *Omeros*", examines the cultural heritage of colonialism on postcolonial identities in the Caribbean, and how a postcolonial, national identity is negotiated through literature.

Taking the Nobel Prize winning, St. Lucian writer Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* as its analytical object, the present paper examines how the colonial history, with its institutionalized slavery and dispossession of African peoples from their ancestral lands and cultures, has led to Caribbean individuals being defined as identities broken or wounded by the colonial past, as well as it examines how Walcott deals with the issues relating to the wounded identities.

Previous studies on the subject, made by Jahan Ramazani and David Hart, amongst others, discuss the fact that Walcott examines Caribbean identities by inflicting one of his characters with a wound; a trope for the African ancestors' traumatic experiences during colonialism. By doing this, Walcott represents St. Lucian people as victims of the colonial past, but the research made by Ramazani and Hart concludes that Walcott tries to reverse the wound to indicate that he does not, in fact, believe Caribbean identities to be wounded – an argument which the findings of the present paper supports.

Despite the research on the wound of the colonial past in *Omeros*, previous investigations of Walcott's negotiation of identity does not go into depth with additional contexts which inform Caribbean identities. Therefore, the present paper examines four contemporary factors which either shape or define postcolonial Caribbean identities.

Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory on how to think about cultural identity in the context of the constantly changing world, the present paper introduces a close reading analysis of Walcott's epic poem *Omeros*, which examines how Walcott negotiates a postcolonial, St.

Lucian identity in his people's behalf. Besides the colonial past, the paper presents four contexts in which Walcott negotiates a national identity, namely the multiculturality of the Caribbean, the Caribbean landscape, the global developments of St. Lucia, and the literary tradition of 'victim's literature'. Contexts which are all consequences of colonialism and play a role in representing St. Lucians as wounded identities.

The findings of the analysis indicate that while the multicultural characteristics of the Caribbean, as well as the Caribbean landscape, are positively defining aspects of the St. Lucian identity, the two last contexts, the global developments, particularly tourism which marginalizes the St. Lucian people, as well as literature's representations of the Caribbean peoples, are issues of great critique for Walcott.

Applying Edward Said's theory on how literature informs identities, the present paper further discusses how Walcott contests literature's representation of Caribbean identities as broken by the colonial history, while attempting to use his own poem to reverse the wounds which he and other Caribbean poets nevertheless impose on their peoples – a goal Walcott attempts to reach by advocating a collective amnesia of the traumatic, colonial past and a rebirth to the Caribbean landscape.

As its main argument, the present paper thus claims that Derek Walcott uses his epic poem *Omeros* as a vehicle to contest the representations of Caribbean identities as wounded, and negotiate an unbroken, postcolonial, Caribbean identity, by addressing the causes of the fragmented identities and advocating a rebirth of his St. Lucian people to the new, multicultural world of the Caribbean.

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Fragments and Echoes of Real People: Derek Walcott's Negotiation of a Postcolonial Caribbean Identity Through "Omeros"

> A shame for the loss of words, and a language tired / of accepting that loss, and then all accepted. /…now, quite clearly the tears trickled down his face / like rainwater down a cracked carafe from Choiseul, / as he stood like a boy in his bath … / … So she threw Adam a towel. / And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day's. (Walcott, *Omeros* 248)

Introducing the problem: Who are we?

Being a point of interest for Europeans during colonialism, the Caribbean islands witnessed colonization with all that it entails, including the reshaping of the Caribbean landscapes, plantation life, slavery, and the subsequent mix of the masters' and enslaved peoples' cultures (later colonizers' and colonized peoples' cultures). Due to its colonial history, the Caribbean is a cultural melting pot in which many of its inhabitants are of African descent – individuals whose forefathers were uprooted from their ancestral land and forced into slavery to work the European's plantations in the Caribbean. During decolonization, the empires abandoned their colonies, leaving the once colonized individuals to fill the void of the formerly superior culture of the empire and define a postcolonial national identity of their own. Defining a postcolonial identity is an ongoing process which is complicated by the influences of the many cohabiting cultures – none of which are native to the Caribbean geography. Furthermore, scholars of postcolonial studies often conduct their studies from the perspective that colonialism is unfinished business because peoples and individuals still struggle with coming to terms with their ancestors' enslavement and dispossession from their ancestral roots – consequences often appertaining to colonialism.

After political decolonization, political and cultural movements as well as literature have represented Caribbean individuals as wounded identities – as individuals broken by the colonial history. This paper deals with two main causes for this view; both consequences of colonialism. The first cause is the removal from the ancestral lands which is connected to the traumatic experience of slavery as well as the adjustment to a life in a new landscape away from the ancestral roots. The second cause is the multiculturality of the new home and the problematics of how to unify individuals with different origins as a people. Due to these effects of colonialism, Caribbean peoples have been represented as limps severed from the body of their cultures and ancestral lands; as individuals who are no more than "fragments and echoes of real people" – pieces of who they used to be before the empires intervened (Walcott, "Antilles").

This thesis examines how the colonial past has affected the notion of a Caribbean cultural identity. As its main focus, the present paper investigates how Derek Walcott, a Caribbean writer, poet, and playwright attempts to negotiate a postcolonial identity, mend the wounds of the colonial past, and establish an affiliation to the Caribbean landscapes for Caribbean individuals through his epic poem *Omeros*.

Being of both European and African descent, Walcott is an individual who encompasses the multiculturality defining the Caribbean peoples. Despite being raised within a European culture and not noticing the consequences of his African descent until his teens, Walcott neither favors his European nor his African descent, but he negotiates what it means to be a Caribbean individual in a hybrid, postcolonial world, and proposes ways to move on from the brokenness that seems to be a part of the postcolonial, Caribbean identity.

Walcott's *Omeros* is considered one of his greatest works; it deals with, amongst other themes, the St. Lucian characters' loss of roots because of the colonial past, their subsequent confusion of identity, and their quest for identity, making Walcott's epic poem a relevant piece of literature for a close reading and examination of how a Caribbean individual negotiates a postcolonial, national identity through literature.

To shed light on how Walcott, as a Caribbean individual, negotiates a postcolonial identity, it is necessary to examine *Omeros*'s characters' relationships to the past as well as the present. How does Walcott delve into the Caribbean identity through his characters and *Omeros* in general? What defines the Caribbean cultural identity? Are Caribbean individuals broken by their colonial history, and how is it possible to unite all the cultural fragments? And why did Walcott feel the urgency to establish a St. Lucian identity in the 1980's when writing *Omeros*? All those questions are important to consider when examining this thesis's main argument; that Derek Walcott uses his epic poem *Omeros* as a vehicle to contest the representations of Caribbean identities as wounded and negotiate an unbroken, postcolonial, Caribbean identity by advocating a rebirth of his St. Lucian people to the new, multicultural world of the Caribbean.

Derek Walcott: A long and productive career

Derek Walcott was born on the Caribbean island St. Lucia in 1930, an island which had formerly been a British colony. He began writing poems at an early age and at the age of fourteen he had a poem published in the local newspaper. At around the age of twenty he paid to have his first collection printed, and in his early thirties he had his "major breakthrough … with the collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962), a book which celebrates the Caribbean and its history as well as investigates the scars of colonialism" ("Derek Walcott").

Since then he has published a vast number of poems and plays until his death in St. Lucia in 2017. Even though he was born and died in St. Lucia, he did not spend his entire life on the island: he went to college in St. Lucia, university in Jamaica, but studied theatre in New York and lived for some time in Trinidad. Furthermore, Derek Walcott taught at universities in both the US and England. During his career, Walcott received many prizes and acknowledgements, amongst others the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, two years after publishing his epic poem *Omeros*, as well as the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1988.

Omeros: The search for a St. Lucian identity

Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* was first published in 1990. The poem consists of three main stories which are occasionally intertwined.

The primary story is about the two fishermen, Achille and Hector, who live in St. Lucia. This story also introduces the woman, Helen, whom the two fishermen are both in love with, and the retired fisherman, Philoctete, who has an unhealable leg wound. During this story, Achille attempts, although only in a sunstroke-induced hallucination, to return to his pre-colonial African past, while Hector leaves his profession as a fisherman to become a cab driver for tourists. Meanwhile, the local obeah-woman and owner of the No Pain Café, Ma Kilman, searches for an atavistic cure that will heal Philoctete's wound.

Intertwined with the story of the fishermen is a second story which involves the two British expatriates, Major Plunkett and his wife Maud. Major Plunkett and Maud settled on St. Lucia after the Second World War in which Major Plunkett was wounded in the head. They live their lives on the island and Major Plunkett enjoys it, and Maud too, even though she longs for her roots in Ireland. Major Plunkett has a fondness for their housemaid, Helen (the same as above), whom he attempts to give a history by writing the history of "Helen of the West Indies"; one of the names of St. Lucia.

The last story does not only take place in St. Lucia but around the world. This third, and less fictional story, belongs to the poet and third person omniscient narrator. In this story, Walcott (as the poet) is told, by his father's ghost, to speak for the people who cannot speak for themselves, and the reader follows the narrator's travels around the world as well as his personal development, while the real Walcott searches for a St. Lucian identity and questions his role as a poet.

St. Lucia: Iguanas, colonization, and independence

Throughout St. Lucia's history, many different peoples have inhabited the island. In the period between 1000 and 500 B.C., the island was inhabited by peoples from South America. At some point, however, these people disappeared, and later, after 200 A.D., St. Lucia was inhabited by a new people: "the peaceful Arawak Indians arrived whom archaeological sites show to have been adept in pottery, weaving, farming and boat building. The Arawaks named the island, Iouanalao, which meant 'land of the iguanas'" ("History"). Like the previous inhabitants of the island, the Arawaks did not get to stay, because around 800 A.D. a new people from South America arrived; the Carib Indians who killed the Arawak men and took their women. Up until the 1650s they fought off several French, Dutch, and British settlers, until a French military officer married a Carib woman and managed to establish a settlement for The French West India Company ("History"). Today, the Carib Indians are gone.

St. Lucia's colonial history, in the time following, is primarily marked by the French and British attempts to take possession of the island which was a good place for sugar plantations. In 1765 the first sugar plantation was established by the French, and it was driven by enslaved people from West Africa. During the French Revolution and a French period of possession of St. Lucia, the French Governor abolished slavery on the island in 1794. However, the plantation owners were not content with the decision, and when the British later gained possession of the island, they reestablished slavery after battling resistance from formerly enslaved people and French republicans. Between 1660 and 1814, the island had changed hands almost 15 times (Coates), but the battles over St. Lucia were over in 1814 when Britain gained possession of the island under the Treaty of Paris ("Saint Lucia: History"). In 1834 slavery was abolished, and the plantations were later worked by East Indians who migrated to the island. Descendants of the East Indian laborers are still present on the island today ("History").

St. Lucia is no longer a British Crown colony: from 1959 to 1962, St. Lucia was a member of the West Indies Federation; in 1967 the island gained "full internal self-government under universal franchise, as one of the states of the Federated States of the Antilles"; and finally in 1979, St. Lucia gained independence "as a constitutional monarchy and member of the Commonwealth" ("Saint Lucia: History").

The history of settlements of different peoples and the colonial history of St. Lucia is still visible today. Most of St. Lucia's inhabitants are descendants of enslaved Africans (85.3 % of the population in 2010 was counted as blacks – many of those descendants of enslaved people), 10.9 % of the ethnic composition is mixed, and other ethnic groups such as Asian are also visible (Tolson). These ethnic groups, the different peoples, and their different cultures have contributed to the formation of a multicultural St. Lucia which is also marked by the previous presence of the French and British. This is seen in the French creole that is spoken on the island, and in the educational system and the official language which is English ("History").

Even though St. Lucia is a popular island for tourists to visit, the island still struggles with poverty. Even 40 years after independence, there are still huge economical differences between the middle class and the poor. In 2009 40% of young people aged 15-24 were unemployed, and many people did not earn much from low-paid jobs in tourism. Furthermore, tourism and a "lack of transparency over property deals" have been a source of dissatisfaction among many inhabitants of St. Lucia, amongst others Derek Walcott, who in 2008 "chastise[d] regional governments … for 'selling our land like whores to foreign investors'" (Coates). This dissatisfaction with the global developments of St. Lucia is also present in *Omeros* and will be touched upon in the present paper.

Scholarly interests in Walcott and Omeros

Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* is "Perhaps the most ambitious English-language poem of the decolonized Third World", according to scholar of poetry and literary history, Jahan Ramazani ("The Wound" 406). Walcott's epic covers a broad range of themes, imagery, and references to other works of literature as well as to the past and the present, making it an interesting piece of literature for all kinds of studies. Scholars from an array of different research areas have shown an interest in analyzing the poem from different perspectives.

Within the field of language, studies have been made of language features within *Omeros*, and in Walcott's literature in general, as well as the form of the epic poem. Among this research are studies on "The Design of Derek Walcott's 'Omeros'" (Van Sickle), temporal adverbs in Walcott's poetry (and what his use of these reveal about his relationship to the past) (Greenwood), and on Walcott's use of Creole "as a Marker of Hybridity and Postcolonial Identity" (Pop).

Other studies have examined Walcott's relationship to religion as well as studied his use of references to God and faith in his poetry (D'Aguiar), while other studies, not surprisingly (considering the title means ‘Homer’ in Greek), have been conducted with a focus on the poem’s connections to the classical Homeric epics. Research on the classical context of *Omeros* has, amongst others, been made by Rachel Friedman who classifies Walcott’s epic poem as an “Odyssey-like poem of homecoming” (Friedman), indicating that Walcott, in his writing of *Omeros*, has drawn on the form of the Homeric Odyssey in which the hero returns home but is still driven by a desire to wander.

Gender studies have also shown an interest in Walcott’s epic poem. In her study of gender hierarchy in *Omeros*, Julie Minkler examines the role of Helen and argues that instead of imitating her classical counterpart, an abducted and exiled woman, Walcott rewrites her story and makes her a woman who, instead of being exiled like her namesake, creates a life for herself in the Antilles and draws her energy from the past.

To shed light on Walcott’s life and literature, especially two works are of great help. The first, Bruce King’s *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, is a somewhat unstructured but informative biography about Walcott’s personal life, his career, and his literary works. The second work is Paul Breslin’s *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, which relates Walcott’s literature to the history of the West Indies. Especially King’s work has been applied in the present paper and forms the basis of an understanding of Walcott’s early life in the St. Lucian society, as well as the position from which he attempts to negotiate, or define, a St. Lucian identity.

The present paper is placed within studies concerned with representations of the past and issues of postcolonial identity. Especially two contributions lay the ground for the current paper’s argument that Walcott attempts to mend the wounds of the past through *Omeros*.

The first input comes from Jahan Ramazani’s “The Wound of History: Walcott’s Omeros and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction”, in which Ramazani primarily focuses on how Walcott's *Omeros* fits into the literary tradition of postcolonial poetry written by individuals from formerly colonized parts of the world. In this connection, he examines the meaning of Philoctete's wound, which he characterizes as "The wound of History" – a formulation which the present paper uses when referring to the consequences the colonial history has had on different aspects of the epic's characters' lives. Ramazani argues on the one hand, that by stitching a wound into his characters, Walcott victimizes the people of St. Lucia, something which Walcott has accused other Caribbean writers of doing, while at the same time he manages to turn the people of St. Lucia into someone who also inflicts pain on nature, making suffering universal and not confined to ex-colonized peoples.

The second input is a dissertation from the same year as Ramazani's text, 1997, made by David Hart, who is currently an English professor at the University of Wisconsin and specializes in, amongst other fields, Postcolonial Studies and Caribbean literature and culture ("David Hart"). Hart's dissertation has the title "Saint Lucia's National Epic: Derek Walcott's "Omeros" and the Quest for a Cultural Identity". Like Ramazani, Hart deals with Philoctete's wound, the image of historical suffering, and places it into a postcolonial context. Furthermore, the dissertation examines what Stuart Hall calls a 'quest for identity', and Hart's dissertation is therefore an example of a study which, like the present paper, examines Walcott's *Omeros* in the context of negotiation of identity.

Taking its inspiration from Ramazani and Hart, the present paper examines how Walcott deals with the wound of history and its impacts on the Caribbean identity through *Omeros*. Walcott examines the alleged brokenness of Caribbean peoples as an effect of the colonial history, caused by the trauma of slavery and dispossession from the African ancestral land, as well as the problems with piecing together the many fragmented cultures and identities in the Caribbean after decolonization.

As its original contribution to the research on Walcott and *Omeros*, this thesis aims at showing how Walcott not only addresses the trauma of slavery and removal from ancestral roots, but takes into account four additional contexts in which he negotiates a postcolonial St. Lucian identity: The multiculturality of the Caribbean; the "new" geography; the global changes relating to the island, tourism in particular; and the context of a Caribbean literary tradition of 'victim's literature'. Through a close reading of Walcott's epic poem, the present paper shows and discusses how Walcott addresses these issues which, supposedly, stands in the way for creating an 'unbroken' national identity – that is, a unified national identity not based on the wounds of history - and how he uses *Omeros* to show how it is possible to work through the issues, mend the wounds of the colonial past, and propose a future as a people reborn into the "New World" (a pun made by Austenfeld).

Considerations relating to theory, method, and material

Choice of topic

The Caribbean colonial history is, compared to other former colonies' histories, particularly interesting in connection with negotiation of identity, because the Caribbean geography was a 'Terra Incognita', a term used in this context as a 'new land', to which many different peoples were brought but did not belong originally. After the empire left, there was no native culture to return to, because the Arawaks and Carib Indians, who had lived there before, were gone. Being a 'melting pot' of cultures fragmented by dispossession from ancestral lands and the interference of other cultures, a need for a 'national' postcolonial identity seems to have arisen.

To examine how a Caribbean individual attempts to gather the fragmented cultures and identities and negotiates a national identity in the Caribbean historical context, the present paper examines, as already mentioned, how Derek Walcott uses his epic poem to do just that.

Why the interest in Walcott's Omeros?

It is not coincidental that the present paper focuses on Walcott and his epic poem. Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992, just two years after publishing *Omeros*, and even though he was awarded the prize for "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment" ("The Nobel Prize"), *Omeros* stands out as one of his greatest works and functions almost as a résumé of his previous works. Furthermore, Walcott's epic poem is one of the works in which his "Three loyalties … - the Caribbean … the English language, and his African origin" are visible ("The Nobel Prize"), making *Omeros* a likely candidate when examining how Walcott as a postcolonial, Caribbean individual negotiates identity.

Literary works written by former colonial subjects have taken different stances towards the colonizers. As an example, the Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, has portrayed Caribbean peoples as victims of colonialism, writing himself into a tradition of what Ramazani calls "victim's literature" ("The Wound" 405). Other ex-colonized writers have, on the other hand, tried to rid themselves of the 'Presence Europeenne', by trying to remove everything from their identities with relations to the former oppressor. Such writers make what Ramazani calls "resistance literature" ("The Wound" 405). One of the more pronounced examples of a writer belonging to the resistance tradition is the Kenyan professor and author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who with his idea of decolonizing the mind abandoned English as the language of his creative writing and began to write in Gikuyu instead. Walcott, however, differs from both traditions. Even though Walcott despises slavery and describes empires as "swinish" (Walcott, *Omeros* 63), he neither shuns European traditions (most likely because of his European cultural upbringing which is elaborated on later in this paper) nor believes Caribbean peoples to be victims of the colonial past. Instead, he sees a potential to create a new and original identity in the new environment, which is another reason for the interest in Walcott as an analytical object.

Literature's impact on identities

Drawing on Edward Said's work on the relationship between culture and imperialism, the present paper examines how discourses on colonial subjects have affected these individuals' views of themselves and informed their identities. In his work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said, who is often considered the founder of postcolonial studies as an academic field, examines the relationship between culture and imperialism. He notes that 'culture' covers two functions in his book: the term culture is firstly used to describe cultural objects made by people, in Said's case novels, while the second use of the term refers to the estrangement of other cultures, often the cultures of colonized peoples, by contrasting 'us' and 'them'.

Representations of 'the other' is one focus of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, in which he explores, in particular, European novels written at the time of colonialism, and their relationships with and representations of imperialistic ideas as well as the colonial subjects, seen from especially, but not exclusively, the imperial view. Said engages with the novels of the "modern Western empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" as he believes them to have been "immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences" (Said xii), because many readers of imperial novels acquired their knowledge of colonized cultures through these works. Writers of novels therefore become participants, through the novel, in the history and the "wider experience between England and its overseas territories" (Said xvi) and have, perhaps unintended, helped justify colonialism. This means that literature plays a role in defining the relationships between the colonizer and the colonized.

Literature and imperial discourses on the colonial subjects not only influence the relationship between the empire and its colonies; representations also play an important role in shaping the identities of the colonial subjects, according to Said. Using this theory as a point of departure, the present paper touches upon how discourses affect the identities of the peoples in focus, but instead of dealing with representations of Caribbean peoples made by the former empires after political decolonization, this paper examines discourses on the Caribbean peoples made by a Caribbean poet himself. Walcott not only contests the former empire's representations of the Caribbean peoples; he also criticizes how Caribbean poets depict their peoples as victims of the colonial past and in that way create a wounded identity for Caribbean individuals. Creating a wounded identity for Caribbean peoples suggests that they are individuals with little to be proud of, that they are in fact only fragments of people from the past – a view which maintains and justifies the inferiority and poverty of the Afro-Caribbean individuals in relation to the white foreigners like tourists, whom the St. Lucian government, according to Walcott, favorizes over the 'native' inhabitants of St. Lucia. In other words, such representations shape and maintain relationships reminiscent of colonial power relations between master and slave.

Literature has not only benefitted empires in justifying colonialism and the exploitation of 'the others'; it has also been applied by colonial subjects in the struggle for political independence to contest and sway opinions about colonization. Literature that contests imperial representations of 'the other' thus takes on one of the central aspects of postcolonial studies, which deals with "… a general worldwide pattern of imperial culture, and a historical experience of resistance against empire" (Said xii). Even though Walcott did not only write poetry after political decolonization but also during colonialism, he is still one of those formerly colonized individuals who Said refers to as "newly empowered voices asking for their narratives to be heard" (xxii). According to Said:

> Many of the most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them – as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending towards a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire. One sees these aspects in Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Pablo Neruda, and Brian Friel. And now these writers can truly read the great colonial masterpieces, which not only misrepresented them but assumed they were unable to read and respond directly to what had been written about them ... (34-35)

Literary works have the power to contest and change views of the actions of empires – or governments and tourists. Accepting the assumption that colonialism is unfinished business, and that literature may alter behavior, the present paper touches upon Walcott's attempt to make the reader aware of the neocolonial aspects of tourism and the behavior of the St. Lucian government.

Like it is necessary for Walcott to deal with the imperial mentality of the St. Lucian government and the tourists, it is also necessary for Walcott to deal with literature's victimization of Caribbean individuals in order to create a new narrative for his St. Lucian people. According to Stuart Hall, pioneer of cultural studies, creating representations and narratives are important aspects of negotiating identity, as he points out that

> …questions of identity are always questions about representation. They are always questions about the invention, not simply the discovery of tradition. They are always exercises in selective memory and they almost always involve

> the silencing of something in order to allow something else to speak.
> (“Negotiating” 5)

Furthermore, “Silencing as well as remembering, identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they came from” (Hall, “Negotiating” 5). Examining the colonial past, the foundation on which the supposed brokenness of the Caribbean identities is established, allows Walcott to create a new narrative for his Caribbean people and negotiate a postcolonial Caribbean identity in which they are not merely echoes of the past. In this way, Walcott is participating in what Stuart Hall calls a “cultural revolution of identity” (“Negotiating” 9) – a kind of cultural and mental decolonization by negotiating an identity different from that of ‘colonial subject’.

Negotiation of Caribbean identities

To examine how Walcott negotiates a postcolonial Caribbean identity, the present paper draws on research made by Hall. Like Said, Hall works within postcolonial studies, but while Said’s work often deals with Middle Eastern issues arising in the postcolonial era (due to his Palestinian/American background), Hall has broadened the field and included research on Caribbean cultural identity – a subject linked to his own Jamaican/British background. Hall notes that creating an understanding of a Caribbean cultural identity might be problematic because the Caribbean peoples have no uniform cultural heritage to take as a reference point for understanding such an identity. In “Negotiating Caribbean Identities”, Hall suggests that it is difficult for Caribbean individuals to deal with questions of identity, primarily because “the search for identity always involves a search for origins, [and] it is impossible to locate in the Caribbean an origin for its peoples” (5). Hall notes how the Caribbean peoples’ difficulties with defining a Caribbean cultural identity are linked to imperialism and the colonial past:

> Now the question of what a Caribbean cultural identity might be has been of extraordinary importance, before but especially in the twentieth century. Partly because of the dislocations of conquest, of colonization and slavery, partly because of the colonial relationship itself and the distortions of living in a world culturally dependent and dominated from some centre outside the place where the majority of people lived. ("Negotiating" 4)

This means that not only the domination by a foreign empire has caused confusion with identities, but perhaps even more importantly, slavery has brought many different peoples and cultures to the Caribbean, making the islands a melting pot of enslaved peoples' cultures, as well as dislocating the peoples from the geographical places to which they associate their cultures. The colonial history of the Caribbean has thus informed and complicated the identities of Caribbean peoples.

Two types of cultural identity

Attempts of negotiating a cultural identity in the Caribbean can in general be divided into two categories or ways of thinking about cultural identity, according to Hall.

The first way of thinking about cultural identity is what Hall calls a "collective" identity in which peoples define their collective identity based on "one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" ("Cultural Identity" 223). To avoid confusions with other uses of the word 'collective', Hall's 'collective identity' will henceforth be referred to as 'ancestral identity'.

What has been at the center of the ancestral cultural identity is the idea of returning to the ancestral African roots:

> … the discourse of identity suggests that the culture of a people is at root – and the question of roots is very much at issue – a question of its essence, a question of the fundamentals of a culture. Histories come and go, peoples come and go, situations change, but somewhere down there is a throbbing … culture to which we all belong. It provides a kind of ground for our identities, something to which we can return, something solid, something fixed, something stabilized, around which we can organize our identities and our sense of belongingness. (Hall, "Negotiating" 4)

Hall notes how "representing or 'figuring' Africa as the mother of these different civilisations" "offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" ("Cultural Identity" 224). Hall's point is that it is not possible to find such roots, and especially not in the Caribbean, because firstly, the African continent has changed since the African ancestors left, and secondly, the identities of Caribbean peoples have changed too much due to historical circumstances to make that possible. The existence of pure roots as a foundation for identity is thus what Hall categorizes as perhaps the most prevailing myth of identity.

The second way of thinking about cultural identity is one which is not fixed in the past, but instead it considers identity as changing with circumstances. "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 225). According to Hall, cultural identity is more a question of "what we have become" rather than "what we really are" ("Cultural Identity" 225). This second category is also applicable for negotiating a collective, or national, identity, but it cannot be applied as a theory to unify peoples across countries like the former 'ancestral identity', because this second kind of identity is not placed in a fixed past and culture, but instead it has been shaped by the historical circumstances and contexts which differ from one geographical place and people to another.

This second way of defining cultural identity considers identity to be what Hall calls a ‘production of identity’. Instead of focusing on ancestral ‘roots’, he views identity as shaped by ‘routes’. In an interview with the Caribbean Beat Magazine, Hall describes how “Culture is always a translation” because one culture translates, or adopts, other cultures into its own, and he notes that “If you think of culture always as a return to roots … you’re missing the point. I think of culture as routes … the various routes by which people travel, culture travels, culture moves, culture develops, culture changes, cultures migrate, etc.” (Paul).

Being “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power”, the second way of viewing cultural identity must take into consideration, and deal with, three main presences, according to Hall. These he calls the ‘Presence Africaine’, the ‘Presence Europeenne’, and the ‘Presence Americain’. Whereas the two first presences refer to the cultural presence or absence, as well as memories, of Africa and Europe, the last does not refer to America “in its ‘first-world’ sense … but in the second, broader sense: America, the ‘New World’, *Terra Incognita*” (“Cultural Identity” 230). Hall points out that, oftentimes, the ‘Presence Africaine’ was everywhere among enslaved peoples and “Africa, the signified which could not be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspoken, unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture. It is ‘hiding’ behind every verbal inflection, every narrative twist of Caribbean cultural life” (“Cultural Identity” 230). ‘Presence Europeenne’, on the other hand, is about “exclusion, imposition and expropriation” which is why formerly colonized peoples are often “tempted to locate that power as wholly external to [them] – an extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin” (“Cultural Identity” 233). The African and European presences thus have a history of being two poles within the Caribbean society – the repressed and the repressors. To this power relation is added the third presence, the presence of the land, which Hall points out was "the 'empty' land" where "None of the people who now occupy the islands… originally 'belonged'… It is the space where the creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated … where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West" ("Cultural Identity" 234). According to Hall, negotiation of identity must consider the contexts in which identity is negotiated, and therefore the negotiation must acknowledge the different presences and cultural and historical influences in the surrounding environment. For this reason, the present paper refers to this second way of thinking about cultural identity as identity 'in context'.

Methodological considerations

The present paper only takes a single work as its analytical object; a fact which has been considered in terms of advantages and disadvantages. The first question that arises is "why only analyze *Omeros* and not multiple works by Walcott?". There are mainly three reasons for this. First, many of Walcott's other poems deal with more personal issues of identity, mainly the split between his African and European descent as an adolescent, a split expressed in e.g. Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa". *Omeros*, on the other hand, is written after Walcott had come to terms with his heritages and neither saw himself as defined by his African descent nor his European descent, but instead he viewed himself as a Caribbean individual (King). Analyzing *Omeros* thus makes it possible to examine how Walcott negotiates from a Caribbean point of view. Secondly, and linked to the previous reason, is the fact that Walcott had a long career as a writer, and he published works both during colonialism and after political decolonization. *Omeros* is a postcolonial work, which makes it possible to analyze how a Caribbean poet negotiates an identity in the postcolonial era.

Lastly, and related to the reasons above, is the fact that the theme of national identity is more pronounced in *Omeros* than in any of his other works. Tracing the development of the question of identity throughout Walcott's literary works might be an interesting topic for another paper, but for the present paper, it is doubtful that including other works by Walcott would have benefitted the analysis. In addition to the first question, a second question arises: "Why not also examine how other Caribbean writers negotiate identity?". The short answer to this is: to make a more thorough analysis. There is, of course, the issue that the result of the present analysis will only illustrate how a single Caribbean individual negotiates a postcolonial identity. It would be possible, maybe as a subject for another analytical paper, to make a comparative analysis of two or more Caribbean writers and works; it could for example be Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and Walcott's *Omeros*; works which treat the same theme of Afro-Caribbean identities in the New World, but at the same time differ greatly in how they negotiate identity. However, choosing to focus only on Walcott's *Omeros* allows a more thorough analysis considering the requirements of length for this thesis, which is why the choice has been made to place the main focus on *Omeros* and only occasionally comparing Walcott and Brathwaite.

The analysis of *Omeros* takes the form of a close reading with three main steps, based on the theories developed by Said and Hall. Taking Hall's first type of cultural identity, the 'ancestral identity', as its point of departure, the present paper firstly examines how Walcott deals with, and rejects, the desire to return to the African continent. Secondly, the analysis focuses on the contexts in which Walcott negotiates a postcolonial Caribbean identity. As already mentioned, those contexts are, besides the trauma of slavery, the multiculturality of the Caribbean, the Caribbean geography, the global developments of St. Lucia, and the Caribbean literary tradition of 'victim's literature'. The fourth context is, however, placed in the part of the paper which discusses Walcott's role as a poet, as literature's representations of Caribbean peoples as victims is a context which Walcott feels a strong need to contest. The analysis not only shows how Walcott describes the different contexts, but also how he works through them to create a national identity for his St. Lucian people. Lastly, following the analysis of how Walcott takes into consideration the different contexts which inform Caribbean identities, Said's and Hall's theories on the relationship between literature and identities are applied in a discussion of Walcott's role as a poet – e.g. having to contest former representations of Caribbean peoples, as well as create a new narrative of the St. Lucian people in which a rebirth into the 'new' conditions of a Caribbean life, as well as a collective amnesia of the colonial past, makes it possible to move on from the role as victims of the past.

A close reading approach has the benefit of making it possible to dive deeper into the text and pinpoint specific words or sentences which convey Walcott's stance towards the issues he addresses - a great advantage with a poet like Walcott, who uses tropes and puns frequently. The shortcoming of a close reading is, however, that it is easy to dive so deep that one drowns. A close reading does not make much sense alone – it must benefit from knowledge about, as well as other perspectives on, the text. For this reason, as the analysis will show, I occasionally come up for air to discuss new perspectives on the analysis from scholarly research on the topic in question, as well as point to the analyzed topic's relevance for Walcott's negotiation of identity.

Using, in particular, Hall's perspectives on cultural identity, the present paper examines how Walcott attempts to negotiate a postcolonial Caribbean identity in the St. Lucian people's behalf, but it is also important to remember that the subjective individual is always present in such negotiations. As Hall, a Jamaican-born individual living in England, says in connection with his own interest in "the diaspora experience and its narratives of displacement", "all discourse is 'placed', and the heart has its reasons" ("Cultural Identity"

223). People not only speak or write from their own experiences, what Hall has termed ‘positions of enunciation’, but their discourses are also ‘positioned’, a term used to describe the fact that people “write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’” (“Cultural Identity” 222). Therefore, when examining how Walcott, as a Caribbean individual, negotiates a national, St. Lucian identity, it is necessary to be aware of the circumstances concerning his narrative.

Walcott’s African and European origins: “I who am poisoned with the blood of both”

To answer how Derek Walcott negotiates a postcolonial Caribbean identity, it is necessary in the first place to ask on what background he negotiates and consider whether he is qualified to speak for the St. Lucian people. Being a St. Lucian individual should be enough to qualify him to write a narrative from his own position of enunciation, but Walcott might not be considered the ‘typical’ St. Lucian. Like most of the population of his birth island, St. Lucia, Walcott was of mixed descent. Like most St. Lucians, Walcott had African roots. Unlike many St. Lucians, however, Walcott was mainly of European descent.

Walcott’s grandfathers were of European descent, but even though Walcott grew up at a time when being white was linked with privilege, Walcott’s European heritage was associated with some shame. Derek Walcott’s paternal grandfather, Charles Walcott, was white and came to St. Lucia from Barbados to buy a plantation. In St. Lucia, Walcott’s father, Warwick Walcott, was born out of wedlock. According to Bruce King, author of Walcott’s biography “Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life”, the illegitimacy of the family would later inform Walcott’s writing and his “later criticism of defining the Caribbean by its past” (King 9), as illegitimate children were frowned upon and marked as illegitimate (in Walcott’s youth, illegitimate girls had to wear different school uniforms separating them from the legitimate girls). Walcott’s maternal grandfather, Johannes van Romondt, was Dutch and owned a large estate on the Caribbean island St. Maarten. Walcott’s mother, Alix Walcott, was born on St. Maarten but immigrated to St. Lucia to finish school. Walcott thus not only had illegitimacy in the family, he was also a second-generation immigrant, a fact he later incorporated into his sense of belonging to the Caribbean, because many Caribbean people were immigrants (King 17).

Because of Walcott’s grandfathers’ European descent, Walcott and his two siblings were surrounded by the European privilege and a European culture throughout their upbringing. Warwick Walcott died in Walcott’s infancy, which meant that Alix Walcott had to raise their children alone. According to King, “The Walcotts were part of an English-speaking high-brown élite in a society in which education, colour, position, property, propriety, and family counted”(King 13), and they knew the Governor and all the important families, whether black or white. Speaking English correctly was one of the defining characters of the elite, and even though the family did not have much money, and even though Walcott’s mother had several jobs to provide for the family after Warwick’s death, “their washing was done by Creole-speaking servants, and a servant looked after the children while Alix worked” (King 13). The divisions of society, his European descent, and his parents’ light-brown skin, meant that Walcott was raised to feel more European than African, despite having Afro-Caribbean grandmothers, and Walcott prided himself with his belonging to, and knowledge of, European culture. According to King, Walcott even imagined that his paternal grandfather had named Warwick Walcott after Shakespeare’s county, Warwickshire, which would make him “spiritually an heir of the great tradition of English literature” (King 8). Early on, Walcott read a wide array of British literary classics, and he took pride in knowing them well enough to cite them. In *Omeros*, Walcott describes a scene at the corner barber: “On their varnished rack, / *The World’s Great Classics* read backwards in his mirrors

/ where he doubled as my chamberlain. I was known / for quoting from them as he was for his scissors" (Walcott, *Omeros* 71). To the young Walcott, *The World's Great Classics* might have seemed an appropriate title for the collection of British literature as European culture was his world. His engaging in European culture might have caused Walcott to feel superior to the Afro-Caribbean barber who "doubled as [his] chamberlain". His upbringing, centered around European culture, thus came to shape Walcott's sense of identity and position in society in his youth.

Despite boasting of his European culture and secretly wishing to be white as young (King 49), Walcott knew he was of African descent as well. King describes Walcott as:

> someone who as a child was raised to think of himself as much more like the 'whites' than those darker and lower on the social scale, until in his teens he discovers the history of slavery, becomes conscious that his grandmothers were descended from slaves, that there is illegitimacy in his family, and who himself experiences the discriminations of racial prejudice. (King 4)

Learning about his own African descent might have been the beginning of Walcott's ambiguous feelings towards his European heritage. In addition, being an apprentice to the painter Harold Simmons changed Walcott's views on the St. Lucian landscape and its dark-skinned peasants as he came to see the beauty of the peasant people and their dark complexion. It did, however, also make Walcott feel alienated from those same people and the St. Lucian community: "The more Walcott studied the peasants the more unlike them he felt. He was part-white, part of the urban, educated, middle-class, Protestant, English-speaking minority, everything they were not" (King 31). Learning about his African roots therefore made Walcott feel a sense of alienation from the society he lived in, and it changed his views on his own identity.

In his teens, Walcott began to be conflicted by the gap between his different cultures. Having studied many of the European poets, Walcott found it difficult to accept his African descent. “How could he be a poet writing in ‘white’ English when he was in part a descendant of African slaves like the Creole-speaking … rural peasants?” (King 32). The idea of poetic culture being white came to further Walcott’s confusion with identity. In his 1980 poem, “Self Portrait”, Walcott not only expresses his fear of failing within his artistic field, but a confusion of identity is also visible. Van Gogh, the artist, is struggling to paint his own self portrait: “He looks into a mirror, / and begins to paint himself. / He discovers nobody there” (Walcott, “Self Portrait”). Furthermore, some of Walcott’s writings suggest that he might at some point have seen his European and African lineages as posing a problem for his identity, at a time when the ‘Presence Africaine’ and the ‘Presence Europeenne’ stood as two, although intertwined, opposites. In “A Far Cry From Africa”, Walcott questions how both cultures could possibly form a unified sense of identity:

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

According to King, “It was not until middle age [and perhaps after political independence of St. Lucia] that [Walcott] began to feel that such self-divisions were false, that life is universal, and that St. Lucia and his youth embodied the universal” (King 32-33). When writing *Omeros*, Walcott did therefore not identify with a European culture; what he loved about it was only “the English tongue”, the language of his poetry. He has, however, been accused of being Eurocentric (Ismond 54), which is one reason for why he examines the African heritage of St. Lucians (including himself) in *Omeros*, and shows that it is possible to write in English, draw on inspiration from European classics and poets, while at the same time examining one's African descent and being loyal to one's Caribbean identity. Walcott's initial pride of his European culture, his distancing to his African heritage, and his later acceptance of the latter is important to be aware of, as it shows that he spent much of his life negotiating an identity on the myth of pure roots and came to see that, to Caribbean people in particular, pure roots do not exist.

It goes without saying, that whenever someone speaks, it is from their own position of enunciation, Walcott included. The current paper claims that Walcott attempts to speak in the interest of the St. Lucian people and negotiate a national identity in his people's behalf through *Omeros*. Walcott is, however, different from many St. Lucian individuals: Walcott has been raised feeling closely connected to European culture, he did not belong to the group of poor St. Lucians much noticeable in his epic poem, and during his upbringing his family held a high position of power, separating them from the darker creole-speaking individuals who served as their maids. Even as an adult, Walcott was still to some degree separated from the St. Lucian people visible in *Omeros*, because he was well-educated and spent much of his life away from St. Lucia because of his work as a professor. Despite being different in so many ways, Walcott does, however, also have much in common with his St. Lucian people: He is a Caribbean individual with multicultural roots, he, too, is descended from enslaved people like many Caribbean people, and St. Lucia is his place of birth, which firmly establishes the Caribbean as a place of belonging for Walcott. Walcott's epic poem is positioned within all these circumstances, and even though Walcott's affiliation to European culture was evident during youth, he had combined the different fragments of his multiple heritages into a Caribbean identity at the time he wrote *Omeros*. This makes him, to some degree, able to negotiate a national identity in his St. Lucian people's behalf, even though the result of the present paper's analysis will only show how *Walcott* defines and imagines a postcolonial Caribbean identity.

Wounded identities and traumatic pasts

To figure out what a postcolonial Caribbean identity looks like, Walcott examines how Caribbean identities have been defined earlier. In his Nobel Lecture "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory", Walcott discusses the representations of Caribbean peoples as broken by the enslavement of their African forefathers and the fragmentation of their ancestral cultures. Similarly, the literary movement of Negritude has emphasized the loss of African culture and traditions during colonialism and attempted to resist the assimilation of African cultures into European cultures. Caribbean writers, like Brathwaite writing within the tradition of Negritude (Breslin 4), have taken a return to an African culture and the victimization of Caribbean peoples by the empires as their focus, claiming that the colonial history has resulted in fragmented, or injured, Caribbean identities – a theme which will be discussed later in this paper. In his narrative about the St. Lucian people, Walcott investigates these injured identities and the wound of history, which has been claimed to be a central part of Caribbean identities, by inflicting his Afro-Caribbean characters with a trauma. Thematizing the trauma in terms of uprooting from the ancestral land, and the following loss of African culture, allows Walcott to examine the importance of descent in shaping a Caribbean identity. Furthermore, inflicting the retired fisherman, Philoctete, with an unhealable leg wound allows Walcott to examine how the loss of African culture and the suffering from the violent treatment of enslaved people under colonialism have been passed on through generations and still colonizes the bodies and minds of the descendants in the New World.

A central theme in Walcott's *Omeros* is 'loss of roots' and the subsequent 'loss of culture'. It is no coincidence that Walcott opens the first chapter of his epic poem at the scene of the two Afro-Caribbean fishermen, Achille and Hector, in the process of cutting away roots while crying. The St. Lucian Achille is cutting down a tree to make a canoe, and "Dew [is] filling [his] eyes" (Walcott, *Omeros* 3). Unknowingly, removing the trees from the ground on which they have lived for years, reminds the fishermen of past traumas which are linked to their ancestors' enslavement and uprooting from Africa, and they are not the only ones to feel this trauma affecting their bodies. The trauma of a violent uprooting is also felt by the retired fisherman, Philoctete, whose roots Walcott compares to those of the hacked yams in Philoctete's field:

> The wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa, / their veins bled white… / …He hacked every root at the heel. / He hacked them at the heel, noticing how they curled, / head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams: / "*Salope!* / You all see what it's like without roots in this world?" / Then sobbed, his face down in the slaughtered leaves. A sap / trickled from their gaping stems like his own sorrow. (Walcott, *Omeros* 20-21)

The consequences of a forced and violent dispossession of the African ancestral land thus affects most of Walcott's Afro-Caribbean characters in one way or another.

The loss of roots is linked to a deprivation of ancestral culture which is also thematized in *Omeros* and seen in three ways in particular.

The two fishermen felling the trees in the beginning of *Omeros* is the first way in which the loss of culture becomes evident:

> … Now they cut off the saw, / still hot and shaking, to examine the wound it / had made. They scraped off its gangrenous moss, then ripped / the wound clear of the net of vines that still bound it / to this earth, and nodded. The generator whipped / back to its work, and the chips flew much faster as / the shark's teeth

> gnawed evenly… / … the island lifted its horns. Sunrise / trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars, / and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice. (Walcott, *Omeros* 5)

This might as well just be a description of an everyday scene in which two fishermen are cutting down trees and making canoes. The dew filling Achille's eyes could have been sweat running into his eyes, and the blood splashing on the cedars could also describe the picturesque sight of the sun rising, shining its red morning-light on the tress. But the reader of *Omeros* is left with a sense of destruction and an idea that something else is going on. The African tradition of personifying nature has been forgotten. It is, however, still a part of the Afro-Caribbean fishermen's heritage, which makes them "turn into murderers" (Walcott, *Omeros* 3) when cutting down the trees. Had they remembered how their ancestral culture personifies nature, and had they seen how the trees' "leaves start shaking / the minute the axe … hit the cedars" (Walcott, *Omeros* 3), they would have respected the trees as live creatures and would not have slaughtered them.

Secondly, and linked with the personification and idolization of nature, a loss of culture is seen by the loss of the African religion. The falling trees leave "a blue space / for a single God where the old gods stood before" (Walcott, *Omeros* 5). The scene of felling the trees is described almost as religious with the "light of sacrifice". In this connection, the meaning of the sacrifice is twofold; not only the tree is sacrificed, but the ancestral African religion is as well. The African tradition of celebrating trees as gods has been replaced by a monotheistic religion imposed on the fishermen's enslaved ancestors by the European slave-owners, and the loss of an African religion is thus connected to the trauma of enslavement.

Lastly, and felt most acutely by Achille, is the lack of the tradition of storytelling leading to a loss of identity that comes with not knowing one's roots. In *Omeros*, Walcott lets his character, Achille, return to Africa during a sunstroke. During his stay in Africa, Achille becomes a spectator of the enslavement of his ancestors, as he experiences the people in his village being captured by another tribe and led away to be sold into slavery: “He counted the chain of men / linked by their wrists with vines; he watched until / the line was a line of ants…” (Walcott, *Omeros* 145). The capture of his ancestors makes Achille feel a loss:

> He foresaw their future. He knew nothing could change it. / The tinkle from coins of the river, the tinkle of irons. / The son’s grief was the father’s, the father’s his son’s / … Achille died / again. Thinking of the ants arriving at the sea’s rim, / or climbing the pyramids of coal and entering inside / the dark hold, far from this river and the griot’s hymn. (Walcott, *Omeros* 146)

Achille’s loss relates to his ancestors’ enslavement, dispossession from their land, and their loss of the “griot’s hymn”. The trauma not only lies in the violent removal from the ancestral land, but the removal also causes Achille’s ancestors, and therefore Achille, to be removed from the griot, an African storyteller who encompasses the African peoples’ culture, traditions and history through oral narratives.

In all three cases, the colonial past thus poses as a problem for Walcott’s characters, as the removal from the African continent and culture equals a loss and confusion of identity.

The trauma of colonial history is not only thematized in terms of loss of ancestral roots and African culture, but also in terms of a physical wound which Walcott has stitched into one of his characters. Walcott has given his character, Philoctete, an unhealable leg wound, which symbolizes the suffering of his enslaved ancestors, and is a significant, almost defining, part of his identity. From the first pages in *Omeros*, the theme of cutting away old, godly, ancestral roots is introduced. Then Walcott introduces Philoctete, the carrier of a physical wound which he shows to interested tourists: “For some extra silver, under a sea-almond, / he shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor, rolling one trouser-leg up with the rising moan /

of a conch" (Walcott, *Omeros* 4). Even though the centrality of Philoctete's wound is not known to the reader this early in the poem, it later becomes clear that Philoctete's wound is the metaphor for all suffering of St. Lucians caused by the colonial past. Philoctete is the embodiment of historical suffering in connection with the transatlantic slave trade, dispossession from the ancestral land and the loss of ancient African culture – in other words, he is almost a perfect example of the kind of broken Caribbean individual who Walcott attempts to negotiate a new identity for. Philoctete himself assigns the wound its cause:

> He believed the swelling 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, for a village black and poor / as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage, / then were hooked on the anchors of the abbatoir. (Walcott, *Omeros* 19)

The wound of history has been passed on through generations to Philoctete, manifesting itself in his body as an unhealable leg wound. By inflicting Philoctete with the unhealable wound, Walcott is, according to Jahan Ramazani, "anatomizing the wounded body of Caribbean history through Philoctete" (Ramazani, "The Wound" 406). Making Philoctete the embodiment of Caribbean suffering, Walcott stresses how some Caribbean people are still suffering the consequences of colonialism, as Philoctete's leg, symbolizing his roots, has been cut by the anchor carrying the weight of his race. Ramazani examines Walcott's trope of the wound, and he notes that "*Trauma* is, of course, Greek for wound, and Walcott's *Omeros* could be said … to remember, repeat, and work through the trauma of African Caribbean history …" (Ramazani, "The Wound" 414). The wound symbolizes the suffering of Philoctete's African, enslaved ancestors, and the wound is, like the cutting of roots, linked with violence and trauma by comparing a black and poor race with pigs anchored in the slaughterhouse of slavery. For Philoctete, colonization and enslavement do not belong entirely in the past, and Ramazani notes how the pain of the wound is colonizing Philoctete's body:

> Early on in *Omeros*, Walcott uses one of Philoctete's seizures to suggest that the inexpressible physical suffering of enslaved Africans is retained in the bodies of their descendants and that the pain still presses urgently for an impossible verbal release:
>
> …and behind the bars
>
> of his rusted teeth, like a mongoose in a cage,
> a scream was mad to come out; his tongue tickled its
> claws
> on the roof of his mouth, rattling its bars in rage…
>
> Naming conditions of black enslavement with the words "iron," "bars," "rusted," and "cage," Walcott portrays the pain of the wound as colonizing Philoctete's entire body. More than any of Walcott's previous works, *Omeros* memorializes the institutionalized atrocity of New World African slavery. (Ramazani, "The Wound" 406-407)

As Ramazani notes, the inhumanity practiced in connection with slavery under colonialism is an important theme in *Omeros*, and Walcott examines this theme in terms of trauma. Walcott thus applies the wound as a tool to examine dispossession and slavery as some of the causes for the injured Caribbean identities.

A quest for ancestral identity

To examine Caribbean identities further, Walcott makes his characters explore their African origins, because as Ramazani points out, “One way of approaching the question “Who am I?”… is to ask “Who were we?”” (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* 9). Black nationalist movements such as the Black Zionism, beginning in the last decade of the 1700s (Adams), the Caribbean Garveyism from the beginning of the 1900s (Reed), as well as the literary movement of Negritude, beginning in the 1930s (Encyclopaedia Britannica), have attempted to negotiate a post-slavery identity for the descendants of African enslaved peoples. Whereas the two first favored the creation of a nation reserved for people of African descent either by a return to the African continent or by creating an African nation elsewhere, the latter arose as an answer to the threat of assimilation into European cultures posed to the ancestral African cultures, and as a result, writers worked to assert and decolonize their cultural identities through writing. Black nationalism has also been present in the Caribbean where the African diaspora, including poets, has given attention to memories of the African past in an attempt to deal with the fear of forgetting who they were in a society influenced by European colonialism. Attempting to examine what it means to be a St. Lucian, Walcott applies the ideas of such movements, as well as the concept of an ‘ancestral identity’, when sending his characters on what Hall has called a “quest for identity” (“Negotiating” 5).

Achille is the first character whom Walcott sends on a spiritual journey through time, to a pre-colonial Africa, to explore his descent. Walcott makes this journey possible by letting Achille suffer a sunstroke while on the ocean in his canoe. During his sunstroke, Achille suddenly feels “… the tribal / sorrow that Philoctete could not drown in alcohol” (Walcott, *Omeros* 129), and when he sees the ghost of his ancestral father at the end of a fishing line, it sparks an interest for his African heritage: “…Achille saw the ghost / of his father’s face shoot up at the end of the line. / Achille stared in pious horror at the bound canvas / and could not look away, or loosen its burial knots. / Then, for the first time, he asked himself who he was" (Walcott, *Omeros* 130). Achille has not felt the historical trauma on his own body so directly before, and "once Achille had questioned his name and its origin", the sea-swift, a "mind-messenger" whose "speed outdarted Memory" carries the canoe to a pre-colonial Africa (Walcott, *Omeros* 130-131). When arriving at the coast of Africa, Achille recognizes everything as had he been there before. Achille recognizes the landscape with its muddy rivers and rhinoceroses: "It was like the African movies / he had yelped at in childhood" (Walcott, *Omeros* 133). As Stuart Hall stresses, it is not possible to return to pure roots as they do not exist. Walcott concurs with this idea, but he chooses to disregard it to examine the importance of the African past on Caribbean identities. This makes it possible for Achille to return to an African village which seems untouched by history. To Achille, who is unaware that he is only suffering a sunstroke, what he sees are "real mirages" (Walcott, *Omeros* 133). Upon his arrival, Achille is greeted by the people of the village who "smiled at the warrior / returning from his battle with smoke, from the kingdom / where he had been captured" (Walcott, *Omeros* 136). The Africans lead Achille to one of the elders, who turns out to be Achille's ancestral father, Afolabe. During a conversation with Afolabe, Achille discovers that he has lost his connection to his ancestral language and that Achille and the people of St. Lucia "yearn for a sound that is missing" (Walcott, *Omeros* 137), a sound which, according to David Hart, is about origins (Hart 63). Fortunately, Afolabe tells Achille that his ancestral origin can be reclaimed (a detail noticed by Hart), as "No man loses his shadow except it is in the night, / and even then his shadow is hidden, not lost…" (Walcott, *Omeros* 138). During his stay in Africa, Achille becomes aware that his African heritage is important for his sense of identity. Unfortunately, he believes this African "sound" to be missing in St. Lucia.

Two other St. Lucians, Ma Kilman and Philoctete, also long for ancestral origins, but unlike Achille, Philoctete seems almost paralyzed by his leg wound, mentally more than physically, and therefore the healing of his wound relies on Ma Kilman's journey of rediscovering her family's ancestral traditions. Philoctete often visits Ma Kilman, the local obeah-woman and owner of the No Pain Café, who treats his wound, even though it is only a temporary fix. The treatment is not a cure, but Ma Kilman knows of a flower which her grandmother used as medicine: "”It [*sic*] have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways / my grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants / climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in which place?" / Where was this root?" (Walcott, *Omeros* 19). Using the ants as representatives of African ancestors, Walcott connects the flower to an atavistic cure by making ants climb the flowerpot containing the flower, and furthermore, he lets the ants follow Ma Kilman on her journey into the woods to rediscover her heritage. Coming from five o'clock Mass, Ma Kilman smells the healing flower, linked to Philoctete's wound by sharing the same foul smell, and she follows the smell into the woods, where she notices a line of ants following her: "She saw the course / they had kept behind her, following her from church, / signaling a language she could not recognize" (Walcott, *Omeros* 238). Seeing the ants makes Ma Kilman rid herself of the clothes she wore for church, distancing herself momentarily from the European culture to reclaim her origins, enabling a connection to the ancestral African gods:

> She glimpsed gods in the leaves… / by the weight of a different prayer, [they] had lost their names / and, therefore, considerable presence. They had rushed / across an ocean, swifter than the swift, numerous / in loud migration as the African swallows / or bats that circle a cotton-tree at sunset… / so the deities swarmed in the thicket/of the grove, waiting to be known by name… (Walcott, *Omeros* 242)

Distancing herself from the European monotheistic religion and culture imposed on the colonial subjects by the colonizers, helps Ma Kilman notice the presence of the African gods who ultimately lead her to the healing flower that cures Philoctete's leg wound. Philoctete's return to his African roots thus happens through Ma Kilman's rediscovery of her own ancestral African traditions, without which he could not have been cured.

Through Achille, Ma Kilman, and Philoctete, Walcott examines an identity like Hall's 'ancestral identity'; a way of defining a Caribbean identity which neither of the two Caribbean intellectuals recommend. The wish to return to African roots was, however, present in some parts of the St. Lucian society during Walcott's youth. Walcott's father, Warwick, had a relation to a barber – the corner barber also mentioned in *Omeros*. In Walcott's biography, he is described as "a Marcus Garveyite" (King 5). Being a devotee to the politics of the Pan-Africanistic and black nationalistic Garveyism, hoping for the unification and empowerment of peoples with African descent, the barber was the counterpart to Walcott and his family. A contrast Walcott renders visible in *Omeros* by labelling the barber the "town anarchist" (Walcott, *Omeros* 71). The barber was a passionate advocate for black rule at a time when the island was still a British colony, and because Walcott was closely affiliated to a European culture, it is widely probable that Walcott did not share the hope for the future represented by the barber. After letting his characters discover their African affiliations, Walcott argues, through Achille in particular, that Africa is not the future of the St. Lucian people. Even though Achille believes that the African sound is missing in St. Lucia, he does not feel at home in the African village, and he longs for his home in St. Lucia as he feels "… homesick / for the history ahead, as if [his] proper place / lay in unsettlement" (Walcott, *Omeros* 140). The meeting with Afolabe helps Achille realize that his home is in St. Lucia, and that he and his forefather "were not one reflection but separate men" (Walcott, *Omeros* 141). Achille accepts the loss of some parts of his ancestral culture, and he does therefore not have a nostalgic view of Africa as something desirable to return to, but his experiences with his African descent nevertheless makes him “renegotiat[e] … a Caribbean consciousness with the African past” (Hall, “Negotiating” 9). Trough Achille, Walcott passes on his own personal experience that “Travel seems to be a key to finding some poetic identity or knowing what one is not by seeing other places” (Bourne 8). Instead of dedicating his epic poem to describing a utopian return to the ‘ancestral identity’, Walcott therefore uses *Omeros* to propose a different way of viewing Caribbean identities.

Identity ‘in context’

Walcott is an advocate of viewing identity in relation to not only origins but also the different factors which shape identities in the Caribbean environment. The present paper deals with four factors present in Walcott’s epic poem: the multiculturality of the Caribbean, the Caribbean geography, the global developments of St. Lucia, and the literary tradition of ‘victim’s literature’. Whereas Walcott has a positive attitude towards the first two factors, the last two seems more problematic to deal with for the Caribbean poet.

Multiculturality: Pieces of a whole

In “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”, Walcott describes how he was once watching a celebration of Indian traditions in the town of Felicity in Trinidad. In “The Antilles”, Walcott points out how Caribbean peoples have sometimes been considered broken by the colonial past, and their ‘true’ identities (e.g. African or Indian) have been considered reduced or destroyed by the influence of their colonizers’ cultures and the dispossession from the geographical center of their original cultures:

> These purists look on such ceremonies as grammarians look at a dialect, as cities look on provinces and empires on their colonies. Memory that yearns to

> join the centre, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed... In other words, the way that the Caribbean is still looked at, illegitimate, rootless, mongrelized. “No people there”, to quote Froude, “in the true sense of the word”. No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken. (Walcott, “The Antilles”)

Walcott’s point is, however, that Caribbean peoples are neither unoriginal nor broken as he compares them to a vase:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. (Walcott, “The Antilles”)

The Caribbean peoples are original in the practice of the many cultures visible in the Caribbean, and the different cultures which have come together should not be seen as separated pieces of a vase, but as a vase made whole by the many pieces, linked by their common colonial history; their white scars. In his essay “The Muse of History”, Walcott points to the importance of reconciling the many cultures in order to create a new culture as he notes how “… maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor”(36). Such a reconciliation is what Achille practices upon his return from Africa.

Instead of letting his characters, Achille in particular, discover their ‘true’ identities in their African origins, Walcott lets them continue their quests for identity in St. Lucia. Returning to St. Lucia after his sunstroke, Achille realizes that his African heritage, the African sound, is already visible in his home-village. As Hart pointed to, Achille’s shadow, the shadow of his ancestral past, is only hidden and not lost. Walcott plays on this as he makes Achille understand that his African roots are not gone but just translated into a St.

Lucian setting. Achille’s spiritual return to his past helps him negotiate a postcolonial, St. Lucian identity in three ways. Firstly, it strengthens his love for his occupation as a fisherman. Discovering that his ancestors were also fishermen confirms Achille’s feeling that he is destined to be a fisherman, even in hard times when it seems easier to change ones occupation and serve the tourists like his friend, Hector, did. Secondly, his return to Africa made Achille realize that the dance he and Philoctete performs every year on Boxing Day mimics the African warrior dance he experienced in Africa. For the dance, Achille wears his girlfriend, Helen’s, yellow dress. Wearing the dress during the dance on the English holiday symbolizes the many cultures, European as well as African, which are involved in the new, hybrid dance created by Achille and Philoctete, as wearing a skirt makes Achille “both woman and fighter” (Walcott, *Omeros* 143). Embracing the fact that European and African cultures and traditions in the Caribbean are intertwined and inseparable makes Achille a good example of what Hall thinks it means to negotiate a Caribbean cultural identity; using the past to create an identity in the future, as well as joining the fragments of the many cultures of the Caribbean together into a new, hybrid culture. Thirdly, Achille’s return to Africa makes him realize what future he wants for St. Lucia, as he wants the pregnant Helen’s child to have an African name. During his conversation with Afolabe, Achille was told that “A name means something. The qualities desired in a son, / and even a girl-child” (Walcott, *Omeros* 137). Wanting to give Helen’s child an African name thus suggests that Achille wants to pass some of the African heritage on to the next generation. In addition, because of Walcott’s use of Helen as being the name of the woman as well as the island, wanting Helen’s child to have an African name might indicate that Achille wants the children of Helen, the inhabitants of St. Lucia, to have an African sound in the future while still being the children of St. Lucia. Achille thus believes that the past is important, but it should be incorporated into the hybridized, St. Lucian culture.

Philoctete's cure is similarly linked to the hybrid culture of St. Lucia, despite being the character who longs for the African past the most. According to Ramazani, the multicultural aspect of the cure to Philoctete's wound becomes especially visible through Ma Kilman's multicultural journey: "Ma Kilman relies on a specifically African plant and on African gods to heal Philoctete's wound, but she attends five-o'clock Mass the day she delivers Philoctete of gangrene" (Ramazani, "The Wound" 411). Very similar to Achille who found peace in discovering the presence of the African culture in St. Lucia, though now a hybrid culture, Philoctete is healed by the presence of the flower which, as the reader of *Omeros* is told, has been brought from Africa to St. Lucia, carried as a seed inside a bird-like sea swift.

The multiculturality of St. Lucia is thus a factor which informs the identities of the individuals living there, and the multiculturality of the Caribbean is not only visible in the traditions of the people, but also in the Caribbean geography and landscape; the 'Terra Incognita' in which all the cultures come together.

The strange Caribbean landscape

In *Omeros*, nature is almost always present in one way or another, which indicates that to Walcott, the different elements of the St. Lucian landscape with its plants, animals and even the sea, are parts of the Caribbean experience and thus part of the Caribbean identity. During a conversation with his father's ghost, the poet in *Omeros* is warned not to take the Caribbean nature for granted:

> Way back in the days… / I longed for those streets that History had made great, / but the island became my fortress and retreat, / …With His privilege, / I felt like the "I" that looks down on an island, / … But there is pride in cities, so

> remember this: / Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere, /
> cherish our island for its green simplicities. (Walcott, *Omeros* 187)

In this passage, Warwick admits how his white privilege made him look down on the island like the godly ”I”, while at the same time indicating that viewing the island in that way is not ‘native’ behavior. Warwick tells the poet to see “everything” and go “everywhere”, but in the end he advises him to return to his home and “cherish … its green simplicities” which is what the poet, Walcott, did. In Walcott’s epic poem, parts of nature are almost always present, if not in his descriptions of the landscape in which his St. Lucian characters live, then in descriptions of their daily lives. In the introductory scene in which the fishermen fell the trees, the chainsaw acts as a shark with its “sidewise jaw, / [sending] the chips flying like mackerel over water / into trembling weeds…” (Walcott, *Omeros* 5). The nature is alive as the weeds tremble, and the trees’ leaves shake with the thought of what the fishermen are about to do. Sometimes, the nature even takes an active role in leading the characters to the discovery of their pasts, like the ants leading Ma Kilman to the healing flower in the woods. Nature therefore plays a role, and sometimes it acts as a participant in the characters’ lives and in their discovery and negotiation of identity as a guiding factor on their quests for identity.

Despite being an important part of the Caribbean life to Walcott, some scholars note that the Caribbean nature might pose a problem for Caribbean identities, because it serves as a reminder of the colonial history. Linked to the sense of dispossession and the wish for a return to either the ancestral culture or the African continent, is the notion that the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands do not belong in the Caribbean geography. In his essay “All Strangers Here”, Mac Fenwick notes how the colonial past has changed Caribbean landscapes, not just in terms of buildings, but because the different colonizers brought different plants to the islands in order to cultivate them on the plantations and sell the end products in the mother country. Much of the Caribbean vegetation is thus non-native, and Fenwick notes the interesting "realization that in the West Indies one finds a landscape which physically reflects and even embodies the cultural and historical complexity of the people who live there and who call it home" (Fenwick 11). Some Caribbean individuals' descendants were brought to the islands by European colonizers to work the fields as slaves, "like the plants … transplanted to this soil by the gardeners of Europe" (Fenwick 21), others came later as migrant workers, but they all have in common that they originate from somewhere else. Originating from somewhere else, and having problems with growing roots in St. Lucia, is a problem Walcott shortly thematizes by Philoctete's process of hacking his yams (ironically a non-native plant to the Caribbean but originating from Africa) (HuffPost), while yelling "You all see what it's like without roots in this world?" (Walcott, *Omeros* 21).

As Fenwick has argued, there are parallels between the history of the Caribbean flora and the inhabitants of the islands, and in addition, it has been argued that Walcott is of the opinion, that the Caribbean nature inhabits a painful history. An often-quoted passage (by e.g. Fenwick, and Mantellato) supporting this view, is from "The Antilles" in which Walcott writes:

> It is not that History is obliterated by this sunrise. It is there in Antillean geography, in the vegetation itself. The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory, or the lances of cane as a green prison where indentured Asians, the ancestors of Felicity, are still serving time. ("The Antilles")

From this passage, one gains the impression that the Caribbean nature carries the painful memories of colonial history. Furthermore, *Omeros* features a scene in which the flora of a garden reminds a group of St. Lucian workers of the past. Major Plunkett, the imperial representative in Walcott's epic poem, owns a pig farm on which this group works. There is a master-slave relationship underlining the importance of the colonial history in this scene, as Plunkett, although unwillingly, takes the role of their white benefactor: "He saw that their view of him would always remain / one of patronage; his roof was over their heads" (Walcott, *Omeros* 55). Playing with the word 'patronage' Walcott not only points to how Plunkett is viewed by the workers as their patron, but also to the condescending manner of how the workers patronize Plunkett's wish of becoming one of the 'native' inhabitants. Often inhabiting the imperial mentality, the Plunketts' arrival to St. Lucia is described by Maud and creates connotations to colonizers arriving to control the land and the vegetation: "I saw it when we first came. Unapproachable / cliff on one side, but its ledges a nesting place / for folding herons and gulls, and my teak table / with its lion-claw legs and its varnished surface" (Walcott, *Omeros* 66). Major Plunkett and Maud have, after living in St. Lucia for twenty years, managed to create an impressive garden for Maud. One which makes the St. Lucian workers cry – not because of the beauty of it, but because of the painful memories it contains:

> [the workers] sat disconsolately watching the rain / erode and dissolve the mounds of Maud's garden-beds, / their eyes glazed and clouded with some forgotten pain / from the white shambles of lilies, the dripping boards / of rope-twisted water blown from the leaking pen. (Walcott, *Omeros* 55)

Watching the flora of Maud's cultivated garden reminds the workers of the colonial administration of land. In addition, and with the risk of taking the analysis of the abovementioned passage too far, Walcott may be taking the colonial references even further than 'just' making the workers cry over a cultivated garden, as "white shambles", playing on the twofold meaning of ‘shambles’, are associated with slaughterhouses or scenes of destruction, perhaps referring to the violent actions of colonizers, while the “rope-twisted” bodies of the workers’ ancestors, who are the color of ink from a “leaking pen”, are in bondage and captivity in a colonial “pen”. Either way, Maud’s garden is a reminder of a “forgotten pain”.

While it is true that Walcott uses the St. Lucian nature as a reminder of the colonial past, it is questionable if he is truly of the opinion that nature is a painful reminder of history in the daily lives of Caribbean individuals. Fenwick notes how “Despite the fact that the ecologies of the West Indies have been transformed since the time of Columbus, many if not most West Indians would seem to be unaware of this fact” (Fenwick 16). Fenwick’s point thus supports the fact that Caribbean individuals in general do not spend their time contemplating over the link between history and the Caribbean nature. Furthermore, Fenwick indicates that even though he used the often quoted passage from Walcott’s “The Antilles” to support that argument, he, like the present paper, is of the conviction that Walcott does not intend to create a tale of a nature linked to historical suffering. It is possible that when research quotes the passage, it often disregards the real fact Walcott tries to shed light on – that there is no discomfort linked with the non-native of nature, nor with the buildings, of the Caribbean islands. The most important proof of this is perhaps the passage itself, which is immediately followed by the theatrical elaboration that: “That is what I have read around me from boyhood, from the beginnings of poetry, the grace of effort” (Walcott, “The Antilles”). It might therefore be that the Caribbean landscape does not, in fact, carry the pain of history as a daily reminder for the Caribbean individuals, but that the point Walcott wants to make is that this is how it is represented. As a poet, Walcott is aware that he plays a role in this (an issue that will be treated later in this paper), but nevertheless, Walcott notes how such representations are “the grace of effort” and not how real life is experienced in the Caribbean.

Furthermore, Walcott states that “The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts” (“The Antilles”). In *Omeros*, the presence of such ruins is seldom acknowledged, but there is one description of a decayed sugar estate near Philoctete’s yam field:

> …The logwoods were once / part of an estate with its windmill as old as / the village below it. The abandoned road runs / past huge rusted cauldrons, vats for boiling the sugar, / and blackened pillars. These are the only ruins / left here by history, if history is what they are. (Walcott, *Omeros* 20)

Walcott does not leave much space for descriptions of ruins. Perhaps the reason for this is that he was once trained as a painter (King). Because of his painting skills, he has brought his painting into his poetry, and a St. Lucian landscape filled with ruins might not be as good a ‘painting’ as the islands’ “green simplicities”. Another explanation could be that Walcott simply does not believe that “history is what they are”. To him, they might just be old buildings with no memories of suffering attached. To Walcott, buildings do not matter, but the nature does, as is expressed by the narrator upon his return to St. Lucia, when he indicates that buildings may change or disappear, but “not that river” because “*That* would make me a stranger” (Walcott, *Omeros* 228). To Walcott, the Caribbean nature is thus was makes him feel a belonging to St. Lucia and not an element which estranges him from the island.

It is possible, however, that Walcott’s cultural upbringing as well as his position in society influence his view on the links between ruins and a painful history. Víctor Figueroa points to the possibility that “while as a Caribbean poet [the narrator of *Omeros*] does share at least some cultural background with the subaltern (the identity link), he finds himself differently positioned in the spectrum of power” (Figueroa 26). Describing the old sugar estates as the “only ruins left there by history”, Walcott disregards houses which might remind people, who are placed lower in the spectrum of power, of the relationship between wealthy Europeans and poor Afro-Caribbean people. Moving from a description of the Plunketts' luxurious house to his parents' old house, now a "printery" (Walcott, *Omeros* 67), the narrator indicates that there is a link between the Plunketts' home and his parents'. Despite the similarities to the Plunketts' house, the narrator describes his childhood home almost as a ruin: "Our house with its bougainvillea trellises, / the front porch gone" (Walcott, *Omeros* 67). To Walcott, such houses seems a natural part of the landscape, it is his childhood home and a part of his life. However, standing in contrast to the simple lives of some of the poorer inhabitants, like Achille who lives in a small hut with a tin roof, Walcott might not realize that the ruin of his childhood home is one of those ruins which the sigh of history rises over, and that poor St. Lucians might look at such houses with some contempt for history.

Even though Walcott does not believe the Caribbean landscape to be a painful reminder of the colonial past, he admits that the Caribbean landscape is strange, while at the same time he encourages to embrace the familiarity of the strange. In his essay "What the Twilight Says", Walcott notes how the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands "were all strangers here" ("Twilight" 10). Fenwick points to this as well, and he elaborates on the meaning of 'strange':

> *Strange*: from the Latin *extraneus*, meaning external or foreign without implying distance or separation. The *extraneus* object or person is contained by or attached to the familiar and the native, not distanced from it. *Strange* is where the foreign and the familiar are joined to one another; it is the space where outside becomes inside, and in which "us" and "them" are estranged from one another. (Fenwick 10-11)

The importance of this definition lies in the possibility of the strange to merge with the "familiar". It is possible to live in a strange place without being estranged from it.

In *Omeros*, Walcott plays on the familiar as the essence of a 'true' home, and he uses Achille to show not only his people's, but also his own affiliation to St. Lucia. In interpreting Derek Walcott's *Omeros* with focus on "Achille and the Unhomely Pull of Atavistic Homeland", H. Zargarzadeh argues that Walcott "reconceptualises a model of home and homecoming for the hybrid New World inhabitants" through Achille (Zargarzadeh 825-826). Zargarzadeh applies Homi Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness which is described in terms of the sort of anxiety of "historical, racial and cultural dimensions" (Zargarzadeh 827) as well as the uncanny situation following the revelation of something that should have stayed undisclosed. Recollections of the past disturb Achille's notion of identity, as he becomes aware that he has forgotten the ancestral tradition of ascribing names meaning or idolizing trees as gods, and at the same time, he becomes aware of the distance between his Afro-Caribbean heritage and his African origin, making Africa feel unhomely to him. Zargarzadeh notes that this "unhomeliness results from the fact that Achille is not a "true" African but a hybrid Afro-Caribbean whose exile from Africa has developed a "double perspective" in him" (Zargarzadeh 833). Instead of feeling at home in Africa, his ancestral homeland, Achille is reminded of how he is different from his pre-colonial, African roots, and because of this, it becomes easier for him to embrace his Caribbean home. When arriving in St. Lucia after his sunstroke, Achille recognizes the familiar views of birds, canoes, and his friends greeting him on the beach, and he "becomes overwhelmed with happiness as he is going to embrace St. Lucia as his home" (Zargarzadeh 834). Having, upon his arrival in Africa, been celebrated as a warrior returning from war, Achille hears the sea swift mention his ancestral name "Afolabe" when he arrives at the coast of St. Lucia, after which Achille agrees: "The king going home" (Walcott, *Omeros* 159). Like Achille, Walcott is aware of the homely characteristics of St. Lucia: "…I'm homing with him, Homeros, my nigger", the narrator notes upon Achille's return (Walcott, *Omeros* 159). By this Walcott not only reveals that his sense of belonging is linked to the familiar Caribbean environment, but he also connects Homer, the inspiration for the title of his epic poem, to the hero-like fisherman who journeys on a quest for identity to find that his home had always been the little, Caribbean island on which he was born. In this way, Omeros is what Rachel Friedman calls an "*Odyssey*-like poem of homecoming" (Friedman 455), and with his descriptions of Achille's return, Walcott makes the Caribbean landscape the home of the Caribbean identities.

Through *Omeros*, Walcott indicates that there is a need for a collective rebirth to the Caribbean land, and the Caribbean landscape plays and important role in this process. In "The Muse of History", Walcott clarifies his view of the colonial past, as he critiques the practices of some Caribbean poets: "The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. This shame and awe of history possess poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia" (37). Instead, Walcott notes:

> The great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda, reject this sense of history [as incoherence or nostalgia]. Their vision of man in the New World is Adamic. In their exuberance he is still capable of enormous wonder. This is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as renewed… ("The Muse" 37-38)

Walcott proves an advocate of this view, as he cures Philoctete's wound and lets him be reborn as an Adam in the Garden of Eden – a rebirth which is discussed later in the present paper. Nature, even though it is not the focus of Philoctete's cure, plays an important role in his, and Ma Kilman's rebirth. Mattia Mantellato argues that Ma Kilman had to embrace the Caribbean nature in order to be transformed by it and find the curing flower for Philoctete's wound: “It is through a symbolical and holistic re-connection with the natural world that the priestess accomplishes her spiritual task” (Mantellato 199). Coming from Five o’clock Mass, Ma Kilman is dressed in her church clothes and a wig covering her curly and wild hair. When she gets rid of her wig and her mossy hair comes into sight (as described in Walcott, *Omeros* 243), the ants, representing her ancestors, begin to crawl all over her. Mantellato sees this process as a ceremony in which Ma Kilman reconnects with the land:

> In order to recover the powerful union connecting humanity to the environment, Ma Kilman has to undress and take off her fake ornaments. The ceremony could be read as a meaningful dropping of constructed values of ‘being’, a sort of ‘decolonisation’ of the body: the priestess needs to retrieve her primordial and uncorrupted ‘form’ to become ‘part of the land’.
> (Mantellato 199-200)

Ma Kilman’s reconnection to and embracement of the land is an essential step in finding the flower – a part of the Caribbean flora – that cures Philoctete’s wound and the trauma of the colonial past.

Not only the island vegetation, but the sea as well, plays a role in the process of establishing the Caribbean island as a place for Walcott’s St. Lucian characters. Walcott “has always professed the need for a “collective amnesia” in regard to colonial atrocities and their harmful consequences” (Mantellato 200), and Fenwick notes how Walcott has previously stated that “there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean” (Fenwick 19). One of the ways in which this erasure is seen is in the sea, “in the surf which continually wipes the sand clean” (Fenwick 16). In *Omeros*, the sea plays the role of the “amnesiac Atlantic” (Walcott, *Omeros* 61). Suggesting not only that the transatlantic slave trade brought about amnesia for the African diaspora when removing them from “the griot’s hymn”, the “amnesiac Atlantic” also creates possibilities of embracing the Caribbean island as a new home, by erasing memories of the colonial past. Exercising memories and a nostalgia of the past will prevent Caribbean individuals from coming to terms with their lot in the Caribbean geography, and at least three times in his epic poem, Walcott links the amnesiac qualities of the sea with the ability to give renewed life to objects or persons. First, Walcott introduces the sea's qualities in relation to the trees which had their roots cut by the fishermen. After being turned into canoes,

> …The logs gathered that thirst / for the sea which their own wined bodies were born with. / Now the trunks in eagerness to become canoes / ploughed into breakers of bushes, making raw holes / of boulders, feeling not death inside them, but use - / to roof the sea, to be hulls… / After Mass one sunrise the canoes entered the troughs / of the surplice shallows, and their nodding prows / agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees… (Walcott, *Omeros* 7-8)

The trunks, previously trees which had "… lasted for centuries" and experienced the Aruacs being replaced by "a new race" (Walcott, *Omeros* 5), now longs for the cleansing abilities of the sea – to forget history and be reborn to the sea which had given them life to begin with. Secondly, the life-giving powers of the sea becomes apparent in the survival of the African seed transported by a sea-swift to St. Lucia: "…the vine grew its own wings, out of the ocean" (Walcott, Omeros 239). Nestling in dry seaweed, the 'uprooted' seed gains strength and power from the sea to overcome its dispossession from the African land and arise as a phoenix in the new, Caribbean soil. Lastly, Philoctete too, is given a new life. Mantellato interestingly notes how Ma Kilman finds the healing flower and prepares "the redemptive and healing bath" for Philoctete in an "emblematic oval cauldron (that recalls the shape of a woman's womb)" (Mantellato 201). Furthermore, Mantellato points to how Walcott "using a powerful metaphor that connects the prepared concoction to the beneficial washing of the Caribbean Sea,… finally unchains Philoctete (and with him, allegorically, all his community) from the weight of his ‘hybrid identity’ and from his intricate relationship with the colonial past” (Mantellato 201). Philoctete’s rebirth is thus also linked with the amnesiac and healing powers of the sea. The sea has healing and life-giving powers to the existences in St. Lucia, because as the narrator of *Omeros* points out, “…*mer* was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois” (Walcott, *Omeros* 14). By using the sea as a means to make wounded and uprooted lives forget their traumatic and dispossessed pasts and be reborn to the Caribbean land, Walcott underlines the necessity of a collective amnesia in order to fully embrace a Caribbean life in the New World.

If Walcott had not already established St. Lucia as the ‘true’ home of his characters, and thus his people, through creating a belonging to the St. Lucian nature, he establishes an affiliation to the island through Helen. Taking into consideration their different cultural and geographical backgrounds, Walcott connects the inhabitants of St. Lucia to the island, creating a foundation for a collective identity:

> And those birds Maud Plunkett stitched into her green silk / with sibylline steadiness were what islands bred: / brown dove, black grackle, herons like ewers of milk, / pinned to a habitat many had adopted. / The lakes of the world have their own diaspora / of birds every winter, but these would not return. / The African swallow, the finch from India / now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern, / with the Chinese nightingales on a shantung screen, / while the Persian falcon… / …understudying the man-o’-war, / talking the marine dialect of the Caribbean / with nightjars, finches, and swallows, each origin / enriching the islands to which their cries were sewn. (Walcott, *Omeros* 313-314)

Despite having been “pinned to a habitat” and being forced to adopt it, Walcott notes how the different species, different origins, all enriches the islands. Furthermore, Walcott establishes a belonging to St. Lucia for his people through the pregnant Helen. Telling the reader how “…the island was once / named Helen” (Walcott, *Omeros* 31), Walcott establishes a connection between the woman and the island which allows him to comment on the island through the woman. When Helen becomes pregnant, Walcott plants a seed of doubt which makes the reader question the identity of the father: “…Helen said: “Girl, I pregnant, / but I don’t know for who””(Walcott, *Omeros* 34). Having all had a soft spot for Helen, the white Major Plunkett, the Afro-Caribbean fisherman Achille, and the Afro-Caribbean fisherman-turned-cabdriver Hector, are all possible candidates for the title when Helen admits to not knowing who the father is. It is, however, commonly accepted that Hector is the father, but by raising doubt towards the identity of the father, Walcott might suggest that even though Helen’s child, symbolizing the inhabitants of St. Lucia, might have any of those paternal backgrounds (their different origins), they all share the same island, as the child’s mother is, undoubtedly, Helen.

Besides slavery and dispossession from the ancestral lands, which are perhaps the most obvious causes for the broken identities of the Caribbean individuals, the many cultures of the Caribbean and the new geography have been proposed as causes for the fragmented Caribbean identities. How could dispossessed individuals possibly live amongst the many cultures (African, European, Asian etc.) in the Caribbean as one people, and in a geography which they have been forced into? To Walcott, this is not a problem. Instead, he views the Caribbean as a place of possibilities – the colonial history has created circumstances with opportunities of creating something new and original – of being reborn by, and to, the sea and the Caribbean landscape which are ever-present in St. Lucia. To Walcott, the multiculturality and the strangeness of the Caribbean geography ought not to be causes for broken identities, but instead they are what St. Lucians have in common, and therefore the multiculturality and the Caribbean landscape are the foundations on which a postcolonial, St. Lucian identity should be built.

Global developments: Marginalizing the St. Lucian people

A third context Walcott is forced to consider when negotiating a St. Lucian identity is the global developments following colonization, the "general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire" (Quayson), here amongst the heightened interest for the island among foreigners who see the island as a paradise, as well as the government which, highly critiqued by Walcott, continues a differential treatment reminiscent of the empire's treatment of its colonial subjects during colonialism.

Despite *Omeros* is a fictional story, one must assume that the critique of the government and tourism in the epic poem comes from a genuine concern with developments in Walcott's birthplace. "If a poet needs to define the speaking "I" whose way of experiencing the world will shape the poem, a poet (and still more a playwright) also needs to imagine … a society in which the poem or play can take place" (Breslin 2). With this statement, Breslin indicates that Walcott's success both as a poet and a playwright arises in part from his concern for the real world, as "The successful definition of an authorial "I" and the imagining of a society in which the poem can take place are part of the same process, informing and enriching each other. The imagined society need not literally exist, but it has to be derived from one that does, as a potential latent within it" (Breslin 2). *Omeros* must therefore be assumed to hold some truth regarding Walcott's thoughts on the conditions of the St. Lucian society.

In *Omeros*, Walcott reveals that the government of St. Lucia, despite having witnessed the St. Lucian people's history of being colonial subjects to the British empire, continues in a direction similar to that of the former colonizer. Even though Walcott does not mind the presence of the European cultures, and even though the government is not European, he criticizes the kind of 'Presence Europeenne' which, according to Hall, is characterized by being "about exclusion, imposition and expropriation" ("Cultural Identity" 233). The government described in *Omeros* extends the oppressive rule of the former empire over the St. Lucian people. In his epic poem, Walcott notes how the St. Lucian government acts like the empire, as "all colonies inherit their empire's sin" (Walcott, *Omeros* 208), suggesting not only that the empire's colonial past becomes part of the identities of the colonial subjects, but also that the persons who should steer the people out of oppression after colonialism, have become the oppressors themselves, having "no historical regret" (Walcott, *Omeros* 120).

Walcott's critique of the government in *Omeros* is primarily related to its accept and favorizing of tourists and foreigners, which undermines the lives of the natives, making them dependent on the tourist business. The most pronounced way in which the St. Lucian government in *Omeros* continues empire's sins is by maintaining a relationship, between white foreigners and the colored St. Lucians, which favors the whites like Major Plunkett and his wife Maud, over the 'native' inhabitants of St. Lucia such as Achille and Philoctete:

> Low over the mangoes, close over the hills, like fire / Under a tin, the sun went out, and the horizon / enclosed the schooners, the canoes, and an empire / faded with one last, spastic green flash, but so soon / they hardly noticed. The Plunketts quietly continued, / parades continued, cricket resumed… /… Everything that was once theirs / was given to us now to ruin it as we chose, / but in the bulge of twilight also, something unexpected. / A government that

> made no difference to Philoctete, / to Achille. That did not buy a bottle of white kerosene / from Ma Kilman, a dusk that had no historical regret / for the fishermen beating mackerel into their seine, / only for Plunkett, in the pale orange glow of the wharf / reddening the vendors' mangoes, alchemizing the bananas / near the coal market, this town he had come to love. (Walcott, *Omeros* 119-120)

As the sun sets over the former empire, St. Lucia gains independence. Walcott, however, seems to believe that not much changed for the better after political independence, as everything continued as before – "The Plunketts quietly continued". A government appeared which led its people through a "dusk that had no historical regret", a government which still favored white foreigners like the Plunketts, a government which did not support its marginalized individuals like Achille, Philoctete and Ma Kilman. The political rule of St. Lucia thus becomes a reminder of the empire's disregard of its colonial subjects.

Foreigners, too, are targets of criticism for Walcott, who believes the development of St. Lucia as a tourist destination to have similarities with colonialism as well. In 2008 Walcott scorned the government for "selling our land like whores to foreign investors" (Coates), indicating that the tourists and foreigners who buy the land through shady property deals act as colonizers who buy the land which they have no right to, and at the same time in a way dispossesses the St. Lucians of their land. Acting as a visitor in St. Lucia, the narrator of *Omeros* places himself in an intermediate position between the tourists and the inhabitants of the island, suggesting that he belongs to neither and might wish to act as an objective observer. When arriving to the island, the narrator is picked up in the airport by a taxi driver with whom he discusses the changes of the island: "The place changing, eh?", the driver says to the narrator while adding that it is "All to the good". "All to the good", the narrator agrees, "whoever they are" (Walcott, *Omeros* 228). Objectivity is long lost with this comment.

Through his narrator, Walcott signals his dissatisfaction with the foreigners about whom the narrator notes: “there was a plague of them now, worse than the insects / who, at least, were natives” (Walcott, *Omeros* 62).

Not only the government, but the tourists too, maintain the relationships of the colonial past, as tourists hold a view of St. Lucians as tropical ‘others’, according to Walcott. After gaining independence, St. Lucia has often been represented as a tropical place “…somewhere on the other / side of the world, somewhere, with its sunlit islands, / where what they called history could not happen” (Walcott, *Omeros* 28), as Major Plunkett describes St. Lucia in *Omeros*. St. Lucia has not been seen as a place where ‘real’ people live their normal lives, but instead it is a tourist destination to which people travel to escape from ‘real life’, and where the inhabitants are tropical ‘others’. Tropical others who, without a ‘true’ and ‘pure’ culture, have no future. Tourists see “African villages / [like] History saw them ... / Their past was flat as a postcard, and their future, / a brighter and flatter postcard” (Walcott, *Omeros* 57). Walcott himself has felt “diminished /… by a postcard” (Walcott, *Omeros* 87). In this tourist paradise, the inhabitants of the island depend on tourism which, replacing agriculture, has become “the economic driving force” of St. Lucia (Pattullo).

Walcott criticizes the tourists for acting as benefactors and exploiting people who rely on the tourist business for a living. In *Omeros*, the dependence on tourists (and other ‘non-natives’) is seen in the example of Helen, who must work like a slave on her own island, not only as a housemaid for the Plunketts, but also as a waiter in a restaurant visited mainly by tourists who sexually harass her and “snap [their] fingers” of her (Walcott, *Omeros* 322). Helen is too proud to work in such an environment, “her tongue too tart for a waitress to take orders” (Walcott, *Omeros* 36), so she changes occupation. Still depending on earning money from tourists like her fellow St. Lucians, Helen “set up shop” (Walcott, *Omeros* 36) – a table on the market from where she sells t-shirts and braids “the tourists’ flaxen hair with bright beads / cane-row style" (Walcott, *Omeros* 36). Interacting with Helen on the market, the narrator notices how Helen feels about foreigners like himself, having travelled so much, as he "saw the rage / of her measuring eyes" (Walcott, *Omeros* 36). Walcott indicates that Helen, carrying the pride of the people, does not approve of the development of the island. Tourism diminishes her and takes advantage of her, similar to how colonizers took advantage of the colonial subjects and made them rely on their goodwill. Noting how "the bill had never been paid" (Walcott, *Omeros* 31), Walcott suggests that the formerly colonized St. Lucians have not been treated rightfully - a point which he further underlines by making Helen weighing fruits on the market:

> The stalls of the market contained the Antilles' / history as well as Rome's, the fruit of an evil, / where the brass scales swung and were only made level / by the iron tear of the weight, each brass basin / balanced on a horizon, but never equal, / like the old world and new, as just as things might seem. (Walcott, *Omeros* 38)

Weighing the fruit of evil, colonialism and slavery, on a scale of justice, the reader is informed that the two sides will never be equal. Not with pride nor her good will is Helen, woman, and island, caught in a society where she must serve the temporary colonizers, who come and go without considering the consequences of their presence for the natives.

A part of Walcott's critique is also directed towards how the tourist/native relationships inform the identities of the St. Lucians. Linked to the reliance on the tourists' money is Walcott's critique that, as Achille also realizes, "Money will change [Helen]" (Walcott, *Omeros* 44). People change in the presence of tourists, especially because of the tourists' money. One of the first actions which the reader is introduced to in *Omeros*, besides the fishermen felling the trees, is Philoctete showing his wound to the tourists for money: "Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking / his soul with their cameras … / For some extra silver … / he shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor" (Walcott, *Omeros* 3-4). For a few coins, Philoctete is willing to sell his soul by letting the tourists turn him into a souvenir with their cameras. Philoctete thus conforms to how the tourists wishes to view the St. Lucian 'others'. The tourists are interested in Philoctete's wound, but not in how it was cured, and Philoctete does not explain how. Showing no interest in the hybrid cultures which are the 'true' cultures of the Caribbean and which healed Philoctete's wound, the tourists are primarily interested in an African past - and the St. Lucian inhabitants know this. Therefore, instead of showing off their multiculturality, the St. Lucians sell "fake African masks for a fake Achilles" (Walcott, *Omeros* 228). By hiding the hybrid cultures behind "fake African masks", culture seems to be a performance of a long gone African past. According to Walcott,

> The village was surrendering a life besieged / by the lances of yachts in the white marina, / … it had become a souvenir / of itself … /… Its life adjusted to the lenses / of cameras that, perniciously elegiac, / took shots of passing things … / The village imitated the hotel brochure / with photogenic poverty.
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 311)

Like the cameras, tourism has a pernicious influence on the island, but the changes St. Lucia undergoes are not something which Walcott's St. Lucian characters can avoid. Walcott does, however, indicate that there is a difference between how people handle it.

Achille and Hector are two characters who tackle the changes differently. While they both rely on the tourists' money, Achille only participates in the tourist business in times of serious need, and he never leaves his occupation as a fisherman for good. Hector, on the other hand, changes his profession. During a storm, Hector tries to save his canoe which had driven to seas, but gives up on the attempt because of the turbulent water: "… once he caught the beat, he could swim / with the crumbling surf, not against the sea's will, / letting it spin him if it chose, even if it chose / to treat him like its garbage; then he felt the swirl / of fine sand and staggered up straight in the shallows” (Walcott, *Omeros* 51). Hector finds himself in turbulent waters, literally as well as figuratively, but he gives up the fight for his canoe and with it his occupation as a fisherman, following the steam towards the tourist business. By following the stream and swimming with the seas will instead of against it, Hector believes that he saves his own life, so he changes his profession and becomes a cab driver. Hector does not make a new canoe. Instead he stays in the tourist business where he makes a large amount of money for Helen, who at that time is his girlfriend. Walcott disfavors Hectors change of occupation because Hector leaves the simple life like many of his fellow St. Lucians. Seeing Helen through the eyes of Achille, jealous and angry of her relationship with Hector, and disapproving of her life among the tourists, Walcott comments on the state of the island and its inhabitants:

> … he watched her high head moving through the tourists, / through flying stars from the coalpots, the painted mouth / still eagerly parted. Murder throbbed in his wrists / to the loudspeaker’s pelvic thud, her floating move. / She was selling herself like the island, without / any pain, and the village did not seem to care / that it was dying in its change, the way it whored / away a simple life that would soon disappear. (Walcott, *Omeros* 111)

The indignation Achille feels towards Helen is perhaps an indication of Walcott’s resentment towards the direction St. Lucia is taking. Having already strongly criticized the way the village and the island “whore[s] away simple life”, Walcott further shows how he believes the path of Hector, in contrast to Achille’s path, to be fatal. Upon the narrator’s return to the island, the cabdriver informs him how one of his cabdriver-friends drove off a cliff and died: ““His name was Hector” / … “A road-warrior. / He would drive like a madman when the power took. / He had a nice woman. Maybe he died for her.”” (Walcott, *Omeros* 229-230).

The narrator, acting as Walcott interfering in his own story, agrees and thinks to himself: "For her and tourism" (Walcott, *Omeros* 230), further underlining his point that souls like Hector's get lost due to the changes of the island, and because he surrendered blindly to serve the tourists.

Yet another of Walcott's critiques is directed towards how the presence of the tourists changes the landscape, threatening what makes the St. Lucian landscape special to Walcott. This critique is seen in the passage where Hector tries to save his canoe, and the sea "treat[s] him like its garbage". Not only do big white cruise ships bring the tourists to the island and disturb the view over the sea, but the sea is filled with garbage, and the beaches, to Walcott's regret, now looks like any other tourist destination: "…the gold sea / flat as a credit-card, extending its line / to a beach that now looked just like everywhere else, / Greece or Hawaii" (Walcott, *Omeros* 229). Viewing the island as a tourist paradise, the tourists are not aware that their presence ruins Walcott's idea of a paradise and the nature which Walcott has established as one of the foundations on which the St. Lucian identity is built. The island has changed with tourism, and Walcott seems to think that the changes have affected the 'soul' of the island, making it into a generic tourist destination.

Walcott displays an ambiguity towards the global developments of the island which is most clearly illustrated by Achille; on the one hand, Walcott scorns the effects the global developments have on the St. Lucian people, on the other hand, the developments must be accepted as a part of St. Lucia. Even though much of Walcott's epic poem describes a simple fishing society in which the characters go about their everyday tasks, the global world occasionally interrupts their St. Lucian existences. As an example, Achille's simple livelihood is threatened by large fishing boats and their overfishing:

> Achille altered the rudder / to keep sideways in the deep troughs without riding / the crests, then he looked up at an old man-o'-war / tracing the herring-gulls with that endless gliding / that made it the sea-king. / … Achille pointed. "Look at that son- / of-a-bitch stealing his fish for the whole fucking week!" / A herring-gull climbed with silver bent in its beak / and the black magnificent frigate met the gull / halfway with the tribute; the gull dropped the mackerel / but the frigate-bird caught it before it could break / the water and soared.
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 158)

In the paragraph above, frigate-birds, a tropical seabird, steals fish from the gulls. Walcott does, however, use the frigate-bird to disguise another kind of greedy frigate stealing fish from the gulls. Introducing the "old man-o'-war", Walcott cleverly changes the bird into a fishing boat, by creating connotations to old British warships or frigates. Even though the ship Walcott describes in the paragraph is most likely not a warship, it serves the purpose of turning the bird into a ship which Achille curses for "stealing … fish for the whole fucking week". That Walcott disguises the frigate in the St. Lucian landscape might have several possible explanations: it could be to maintain the simple-life aesthetics of the poem and emphasize that the poem is about the St. Lucian people rather than global forces intruding on the St. Lucian lives. It could also be because Walcott wishes to disregard the consequences globalization has on his St. Lucian home. But maybe it is a bit of all the above? By writing the frigate into his poem, Walcott admits that the larger fishing boats are a part of the St. Lucian landscape while at the same time, by disguising them in his poem, he indicates that he only reluctantly lets them be a part of his world.

Walcott's disapproval of the effects of globalism on St. Lucia is seen clearly when he celebrates Achille as the hero of his epic poem. Journeying on his quest for identity in his simple canoe, Achille arrives to a pre-colonial Africa in time to see the people of his village be captured and led away by another tribe. Hoping to save his ancestors, Achille searches for a weapon in the griot's hut in the village:

> Achille looked round the hut. But what he looked for / was not certain. A weapon. A lance with his stone leaf, / or a shield stretched from pigskin, the mane of a warrior, / or the earth-dyes whose streakings would mask his grief / in their fury. There was one spear only. An oar. (Walcott, *Omeros* 147)

Having proclaimed in an interview that "there's something very heroic in the occupation that Achille pursues" and that the fishermen are "heroic and their battlefield is [the sea]" (Bourne 7), Walcott emphasizes that Achille is the hero of his poem, in part because of his occupation as a fisherman. That Achille finds the oar (his spear in his quest for identity) in the griot's hut, is not coincidental. Being the keeper of ancestral traditions and being the one who reminds people of who they are (through oral narratives), the griot possesses the clue to a substantial part of Achille's identity. Achille must fight his battles with his oar, especially in a society which has changed and been affected by global forces, making it difficult to make a living as a simple fisherman. It is a financially insecure occupation to rely on, and sometimes Walcott's hero struggles with keeping to his path – he even occasionally relies on the tourists to make money:

> Lobsters was off-season, / or diving for coral; shells was not to be sold / to tourists, but he had done this before without / getting catch himself … / Then, one by one, he lifted the beautiful conchs, / weighed each in his palm, considering the deep pain / of their silence … / and as the fisherman drowned them he closed his eyes, / because they sank to the sand without any cries.
>
> (Walcott *Omeros* 39, 41)

Only by killing and selling conchs to tourists (or by working for Major Plunkett on his pig farm) can Achille make money besides from fishing. Neither working for the white expatriate nor relying on the tourists suits Achille, and he resists the movement away from his occupation as much as possible. So much, in fact, that he realizes towards the end of the poem that he might have to leave the village:

> was he the only fisherman left in the world / using the old ways, who believed his work was a prayer, / who caught only enough, since the sea had to live, / because it was life? … / … He might have to leave / the village for good, its hotels and marinas, / the ice-packed shrimps of pink tourists, and find someplace, / some cove he could settle like another Aeneas, / founding not Rome but home, to survive in its peace, / far from the discos, the transports, the greed, the noise. (Walcott, *Omeros* 301)

Achille and Philoctete decide to leave the village to look for a new place to settle, away from the pink tourists and the greed, and live a peaceful life. The two do not, however, get very far before the sea swift that had once brought Achille to (but more importantly home from) Africa, as well as had carried the healing seed for Philoctete's wound, once again returns the two to their true home in their little village. As much as tourism makes their lives difficult, it is a part of their home – a fact Walcott stresses when he makes Achille accept the greedy frigate upon his return from Africa:

> "The black bugger beautiful, / though!" … and Achille felt the phrase lift / his heart as high as the bird … / "The king going home," he said as he … / watched the frigate steer into that immensity / of seraphic space whose cumuli were a gate / dividing for a monarch entering his city. (Walcott, *Omeros* 159)

Through Achille, Walcott expresses his ambiguous feelings towards the global developments of the island, for whereas he does not believe them to be beneficial for the St. Lucian people, globalization and the tourism which follows are, however, facts that must be accepted. Only by accepting the changes of the island can the ‘strange’ frigate become one of the familiar aspects which opens the gates for Achille’s embracement of St. Lucia as his true home.

Walcott might find it difficult to accept the global developments affecting St. Lucia, especially tourism, because it influences the people in a way which does not support the identity which he tries to create for them. Considering Hall’s ‘identity in context’ theory, in which different and often changing contexts must be considered when negotiating an identity, the context of globalization and neocolonialism in the form of tourism is the most difficult context for Walcott to accept. Whereas the two other major contexts, the multiculturality of the Caribbean and the ‘strange’ landscape, were more easily accepted as Walcott did not consider them problems but opportunities of ‘rebirth’ as a new people, tourism is only accepted reluctantly. It is possible that Walcott only accepts tourism because he cannot change it, and because if he wants to live in St. Lucia, it is a question of ‘all or nothing’. Furthermore, the reluctance to accept tourism might be due to its clash with the identity Walcott has attempted to negotiate in the St. Lucian inhabitants’ behalves: the multiculturality, which the people ought to embrace, is not celebrated as tourists might, in *Omeros* at least, be more interested in the inhabitants’ African past and their historical wounds, while the ‘strange’ but familiar nature, which is an important foundation on which Walcott establishes his postcolonial Caribbean identity, is altered and destroyed by the tourists’ lack of respect for its beauty. Tourism not only changes the contexts in which Walcott tries to negotiate an identity, it also changes peoples’ identities as they try to conform to this new context. Having a government with its focus directed towards the tourist business and the white ‘Plunketts’, the ‘native’ inhabitants of St. Lucia in *Omeros* seem to have accepted that they are destined to serve white foreigners. This is an issue which is exemplified throughout the epic poem, but especially towards the end. After losing the

General election in St. Lucia in which he attempted to speak for the poor St. Lucians, the former politician, with the nickname Statics, leaves the island to work as an orange picker on a plantation in the American South, where he will “put the oranges in a sack / one by one, as if they is islands” and where “You do what the white man give you and shut your mouth” (Walcott, *Omeros* 317). At the same time in St. Lucia, Ma Kilman notes how her and Static’s niece “[is] very obedient. She will make a good maid” (Walcott, *Omeros* 316). Walcott’s characters, even the politician claiming to fight for the poor, seem to have accepted their roles as marginalized individuals not represented in government. Making his characters act as people who are not yet the financially and mentally independent individuals he would like them to be, Walcott indicates that, according to him, the neocolonial character of tourism holds them in a colonial relationship in which the ‘native’ inhabitants are victims of the global forces and the ‘new colonizers’ as well as their own government.

Walcott’s role as a poet

Contest representations of St. Lucians

Walcott’s occupation as a poet, whose works have been published around the world, is important for his attempt to negotiate a national, St. Lucian identity. Being a well-known poet places Walcott in a position from which he can contest and correct representations of his St. Lucian people through his literature, knowing that his message will be heard if people care to pay attention to it. Negotiating a postcolonial Caribbean identity requires a break with how St. Lucians have formerly been represented, and Walcott points to three areas in particular: how St. Lucians are represented in relation to tourism; how history has represented the colonial subjects; and how Caribbean literature depicts the Caribbean peoples.

Tourism

As mentioned previously, Walcott strongly disapproves of the global developments of St. Lucia, particularly tourism, which might be partly because of the effect they have on the relationships between the foreigners and the ‘native’ inhabitants. Walcott’s main purpose with writing *Omeros* is to negotiate a postcolonial, Caribbean identity which is not defined by a colonial wound, but considering the amount of sharp comments about the government and the tourists in *Omeros*, it is likely that an additional motive for writing the epic poem has been to reprimand the people involved, and inform the world about the effects tourism has on small islands like St. Lucia. Extending the colonial relationships between the colonizers and the colonial subjects, tourists act as new colonizers whose money the islands’ inhabitants rely on. Like Stuart Hall, whose work on the Caribbean diaspora is informed by his own experience of being a Caribbean individual living in Britain, so does Walcott have his reasons for touching upon the themes in his work. Living to please and wait on tourists, the St. Lucian inhabitants act as servants to people who view them as tropical ‘others’ without substance in their lives. That Walcott has felt included in this representation is seen in *Omeros*, when he reveals that he has felt diminished by a postcard, meaning that he has felt how foreigners view his people as insignificant. Sadly, Walcott indicates that the presence of the tourists has influenced the St. Lucian individuals, who seem to have accepted being marginalized; note, for example, that Ma Kilman’s niece ought to aim at becoming a maid because she is so obedient that she would be a perfect servant. In real life, however, unemployment rates are high, and most St. Lucians do not have a choice: they live in poverty, and the tourist sector seems to be one of the main places to earn money. Walcott surely knows this, but his hope is that his people do not lose their pride and forget who they are in the process. His critique is not placed with the poor St. Lucians, but with the tourists and the continuance of the colonial relationships which he believes, or at least hopes, can change. Walcott comments on this through the politician Statics who tried to win the election in favor of the poor and marginalized St. Lucians. Statics's name does not only refer to the mechanical sound of his voice coming from the cheap loudspeaker he used during his campaign, it also refers to the stasis of the marginalization of St. Lucians; a matter which Walcott might hope to reverse by placing focus on it in his literature; a hope he expresses by letting Ma Kilman, the healer of the colonial wound, proclaim that "Statics change" (Walcott, *Omeros* 316).

History

History as well, has represented Caribbean peoples as insignificant individuals who hold only a peripheral role in the greater history of the empire. During the era of slavery, the enslaved Africans were represented as uncivilized and without history – a view which helped justify the enslavement of these peoples. As a schoolboy, Walcott was aware that the Caribbean and its peoples were not a part of the empire's history, as "There were no texts for West Indian history" (King 25), and when Caribbean peoples were represented in post-slavery history, it was as colonial subjects represented only in the periphery as minor participants in the empire's history. Perhaps best describing the peripheral role of St. Lucia in the empire's history is the role of Helen, often described as a shadow which men fight over. In *Omeros*, the roles of the French and British empires take the form of Achille and Hector, who are both in love with Helen. Not only is Helen fought over as had she, and the island, no say in it all, but Walcott further comments on how the island is placed in the shadow of the empire's sight, as he lets the reader see Helen, the Plunketts' maid, through the eyes of Major Plunkett's wife, Maud: "Then, my tureen with thick handles / hefted by Helen, her cap white as my napkins / rolled in their crested holders. She'd set it in place, / and step back in shadow that blent with her fine skin's. / What a loss, that girl!" (Walcott, *Omeros* 66). Maud's view on Helen thus indicates that St. Lucia has only held a marginalized position in the history of empire.

In relation to being without history, Walcott touches upon the presumption that formerly colonized peoples cannot make a history of their own, and he contests the idea that history is created by wars. In *Omeros*, the white expatriate, Major Plunkett, decides to write a history for Helen. Having inflicted Plunkett with a head wound, Walcott indicates that he has a wounded mentality, an imperial mind in patronizing Helen and assuming that she needs someone to tell her about her history. When examining the island's history, Plunkett focuses on The Battle of the Saints, the last battle between France and Britain over St. Lucia, and he becomes bitter when he realizes how many British men had died in The Battle of the Saints: "How many young Redcoats had died / for her? How many leaves had caught yellow fever / from that lemon dress?" (Walcott, *Omeros* 93). Plunkett is only interested in the death toll of the British people and not in the enslaved inhabitants' deaths; his story thus portrays the St. Lucians as minor participants even in their own history. Through *Omeros*, however, Walcott shows how St. Lucia is not interested in Plunkett's white history. Noting how the island was formerly called Iouanalao, meaning something close to 'Island of the Iguanas', Walcott leaves it to a lizard to refuse Plunkett's history:

> One day, at high noon, he felt under observance / from very old eyes. He spun the binoculars / slowly, and saw the lizard, elbows akimbo, / … He climbed and crouched near the lizard. "Come to claim it?" / the Major asked. "Every spear of grass on this ground / is yours. Read the bloody pamphlet. Did they name it / Iounalo for you?" / The lizard spun around / to the inane Caribbean… / "Iounalo, twit! Where the iguana is found." / … It's all folk-malarkey!" / … History was fact, / History was a cannon, not a lizard. (Walcott, *Omeros* 91-92)

St. Lucia has a history of its own which the white Major Plunkett disregards because he is of the impression that “A few make History. The rest are witnesses” (Walcott, *Omeros* 104). Plunkett’s indifference towards the island’s (and its inhabitants’) history leads him to believe that he must create a ‘real’ history with focus on cannons and the strategies of the naval battles in The Battle of the Saints. Using Plunkett as an example, Walcott shows how “The Antillean archipelago was there to be written about, not to write itself…” (Walcott, “The Antilles”). Even though this has changed in the postcolonial era and formerly colonized peoples have emerged as what Edward Said calls “newly empowered voices asking for their narratives to be heard” (xxii), Walcott notes how St. Lucians are still misrepresented. Not only does the island have a history, visible in the archaeological finds from peoples living on St. Lucia before the colonial era, but the contemporary St. Lucians do also have a history.

By using Achille’s realization that his African past is already visible in the cultural traditions in St. Lucia, Walcott shows how history is visible in the daily lives of Caribbean peoples through their cultures. “All roots have their histories”, he claims in *Omeros* (Walcott, *Omeros* 63), rejecting Plunkett’s view that “History [is] written by a flag of smoke” (Walcott, *Omeros* 99). Walcott shows that history is not about wars and battles by making the Homeric epics of grand wars insignificant and instead focusing on the hero returning home. Providing Achille with an oar as his spear, Walcott sends him back to St. Lucia to discover that his battle and his history is as much in the present, if not more, than in the past.

Literature

An issue close to Walcott’s heart is that of how literature represents Caribbean identities in relation to their colonial history. In his work on postcolonial poetry in English, Jahan Ramazani suggests that the form of the empire and its colonial rule has informed themes in postcolonial literature. In the Caribbean, the form imperialism took was most visible in the "enslavement and deracination of Africans" which led to "the agonized quest for an ancestral home in many Caribbean texts" (Ramazani, "The Hybrid Muse" 9). In *Omeros*, this painful theme is visible in the wound trope and Philoctete's "tribal sorrow". In the literature of Edward Kamau Brathwaite, the Caribbean poet who is most often compared and contrasted to Walcott, the theme is also visible, amongst other places in his trilogy poem *The Arrivants,* where he poses the "agonized question, "Where then is the nigger's / home?"" (Ramazani, "The Hybrid Muse" 12). In much Caribbean literature, the consequences of institutionalized slavery and dispossession from the ancestral land are dealt with in terms of making Caribbean people victims of history. In that connection, it seems impossible for Walcott to examine Caribbean identities without examining the wound of the colonial past with which many postcolonial Caribbean poets have been occupied.

Even though Walcott usually stands in contrast to writers whom he believes make too much of the past, Walcott writes himself into the tradition of 'victim's literature', which he has been known to criticize. Walcott had a different relationship to the empire during his childhood than most St. Lucians, but he too, had to deal with questions relating to the colonial past. Having grandmothers who descended from enslaved Africans, Walcott had to deal with the consequences of the colonial past, and King notes that "It would take a decade to recover, learn to see that most people have at one time been conquered, sold, or enslaved…" (King 4). Because he was culturally closer linked to the British mother country than most St. Lucians during his upbringing, and because he did not feel a strong loss of the African culture, Walcott might have been more willing to try to forget the wrongs of empire than many other Afro-Caribbean people – an abandonment of the past which is also seen in his advocating for a collective amnesia for the St. Lucian people in relation to the colonial past. Brathwaite, on the other hand, is not willing to neither forgive nor forget empire's actions, and he writes himself into what Ramazani calls "resistance literature" (Ramazani, "The Hybrid Muse" 50) when he encourages Africans to stand up to the former empires by referring to the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya in the mid 1900s, when the Kikuyo people went against the British empire and its favoring of white landowners over black farmers: "and we rise / mushroom / cloud / mau mau" (Brathwaite). Like the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Brathwaite tries to rid himself of some of the empire's legacy through language. Whereas Thiong'o stopped writing in English, and Brathwaite adopted his own tidalectic writing style (inspired by the rhythm of the water) (Gargaillo 156), Walcott, on the contrary, views the European literature, with which he grew up, not as the empire's literary tradition, but as belonging to the whole world (Bourne 10). For this reason, Walcott does not try to avoid British literature and its poetical forms, but despite not directly resisting the former empire, he still condemns its actions and presents Achille and Philoctete temporarily as victims of those actions. However, whereas writing a 'victim's literature' might be expected of Brathwaite, Ramazani notes that it is not expected of Walcott:

> Of Afro-Caribbean poems in English, only Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1967-69) is a work of comparable scope, size, and aspiration [to *Omeros*]. Brathwaite's fragmentary trilogy also revisits the trauma of the Middle Passage and looks back to Africa, bases characters on inherited literary types and intermingles West Indian creole with literary English. But whereas an epic poem of Caribbean "wounds" or "hurts of history" might be expected of Brathwaite … , Walcott in the 1960s and 1970s [even as late as the 1980s] declared his hostility to African literature about "the suffering of the victim". ("The Hybrid Muse" 51, 53)

Even though Walcott is not known for representing Caribbean peoples as victims of the colonial past, Ramazani correctly points out that he does so by applying the wound trope to *Omeros*. However, by turning the agonized fishermen into murderers when they fell and wound the trees, and by inflicting the white expatriate Major Plunkett with a wound as well, Walcott makes suffering universal (Ramazani, “The Hybrid Muse” 64, 70). Furthermore, Walcott uses descriptions of empires dispossessing and/or enslaving e.g. Greek or Native American peoples to stress that Africans are not alone in what happened to them. Without making apologies for the heinous actions committed by whites under the institutionalized slavery, Walcott even reminds the reader, as was the case with Achille’s village people, that it was often African tribes that captured other Africans and sold them into slavery. Walcott is aware that he is victimizing his characters, and that he tries to reverse it suggests that there is a clash between his wishes for his people as a St. Lucian, which is to rid them of their wounded identities, and what he does as a poet in the process.

Because he is participating in a process of representing the Caribbean peoples in the postcolonial era, Walcott is aware of what his poetry says about postcolonial Caribbean identities. For this reason, Walcott warns the reader in the beginning of *Omeros* that everything that is read, everything which the poet shows the reader, is a fiction: “This wound I have stitched into Plunkett’s character. / He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme / of this work, this fiction, since every “I” is a / fiction finally” (Walcott, *Omeros* 28). Every I is a fiction, the poet warns, playing on the sound of “I” to suggest that not only every person (including the lyrical I; the narrator of the poem), but also every “eye”, everything he shows the reader, is not the ultimate truth. In fact, the quoted section above not only serves to make the reader aware that *Omeros* is a fiction, it also reveals what Walcott particularly has made a fiction of; the wounded identities of his St. Lucian characters. As already mentioned, Walcott suggests that the identities of Caribbean individuals are not broken by the colonial past, and despite having stitched wounds into all his characters, he makes a point of de-victimizing them and not representing Caribbean individuals as something which they are not. In fact, Walcott indicates that the pain of history has been passed on through generations, not as a pain-gene which anatomizes the bodies of the Philoctetes of the present, but as a learned wound. In “The Antilles”, Walcott (as mentioned above) touches upon the traumatic history of the Caribbean being present in its nature, but he then adds the comment: “That is what I have read around me from boyhood, from the beginnings of poetry…” (“The Antilles”). What Walcott might suggest with this comment is that the pain of the past has been acquired by, or almost imposed on, Caribbean peoples through literature, by, amongst others, the poets who are themselves from the Caribbean. Walcott further notes how he did not detect any sorrow or sense of brokenness with the individuals celebrating their Indian culture during his visit in Felicity (“The Antilles”). Instead, Walcott confesses, the wounded identities were something he as a poet searched for:

> They believed in what they were playing, in the sacredness of the text, the validity of India, while I, out of the writer’s habit, searched for some sense of elegy, of loss, even of degenerative mimicry in the happy faces of the boy-warriors or the heraldic profiles of the village princes. … I misread the event through a visual echo of History … all around me there was quite the opposite: elation, … a delight of conviction, not loss. The name Felicity made sense. (“The Antilles”)

Walcott is aware of his role as a poet in not only describing, and even initially misrepresenting, Caribbean identities, but he also knows, like Edward Said suggests, that he might participate in shaping Caribbean identities by passing on, what is to him, a fictional wound. This is not to say that Walcott does not acknowledge the painful past of slavery and the longing for a seemingly lost ancestral culture among some individuals of the African diaspora, but history should not be a hindrance in shaping a postcolonial Caribbean identity.

Walcott does not wish to be a poet who imposes a wound on Caribbean individuals through his literature: “Fishermen and peasant know who they are and what they are and where they are, and when we show them our wounded sensibilities we are, most of us, displaying self-inflicted wounds” (Walcott, “The Muse” 63). Walcott notes how he himself has inflicted his characters with such wounds, and in *Omeros*, the poet questions if he is not just paralleling Plunkett’s misrepresentation of St. Lucia’s history and the island’s inhabitants:

> I remembered that morning when Plunkett and I, / compelled by her 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. … [but] Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow… (Walcott, *Omeros* 270-271)

Walcott clearly suggests that there is a problem with making something of people which they are not. In an interview conducted by Louis Bourne in 1996, Walcott touches upon the problematics of writing an epic of the people of St. Lucia, amongst others, and how he is ultimately in no position to speak for others:

> … the book turns on the author and says, “What are you trying to do here? Are you trying to write something glorious? Are you enjoying that ambition? Don’t you realize this is just, you know, this is a fisherman? What are you trying to

> do? Aren't you doing the same thing that history does to these people?" So I have made a very strong accusation, by the book itself talking back to me and saying, "You know, I don't like what you're doing!". (Bourne 6)

Walcott thus knows that his poetic ambition does not fit with his moral obligation to free his St. Lucian people from literature's misrepresentations of their identities, which is why he attempts to mend the wounds he inflicts throughout *Omeros*, and why he makes the book itself turn on him and suggest to "see Helen / as the sun saw her" (Walcott, *Omeros* 271). Plunkett's head wound does not heal until he learns to see Helen as "only a name / for a local wonder" (Walcott, *Omeros* 309), and Walcott too, must shed his imperial ways of looking down on his people as fragmented and wounded individuals – he cannot write an epic for his St. Lucian people without informing the reader that they are not wounded, as he initially made them to be. In the case with 'victim's literature' Walcott's occupation stands in contrast to his identity as a Caribbean individual, which is why whenever the poet victimizes his characters, the St. Lucian part of Walcott attempts to mend those wounds.

Walcott's main purpose with *Omeros* is to contest views on St. Lucian individuals as wounded in order to rewrite the past and give St. Lucians, and other people, a new way to think about St. Lucian identities in the postcolonial world. Only after removing the mark of 'broken' from Caribbean individuals can Walcott begin to reverse the wound of history and propose a way to move forward as a renewed people.

A rebirth through Omeros: The Adamic potential of the Caribbean

Using *Omeros* as a vehicle, Walcott acts as a St. Lucian griot in the process of reminding his people of who they are. As Stuart Hall points out, “identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they came from” (“Negotiating” 5). In *Omeros*, the narrator is visited by his father’s ghost. Together they travel to Walcott’s childhood and watch Afro-Caribbean women carry coal on the wharf, and Warwick tells Walcott: “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” (Walcott, *Omeros* 75). Awareness of the ancestral past seems essential for Walcott’s attempt to “give those feet a voice” (Walcott, *Omeros* 76), but he must create a future for the St. Lucian people in which the past is not a paralyzing wound. Through *Omeros*, Walcott therefore creates a narrative which aspires to show not what Caribbean peoples have lost from their ancestral pasts, but what they have gained in the process of becoming a ‘new’ people.

Through *Omeros*, Walcott attempts to show that Caribbean peoples are not victims of the past but have a special opportunity to create a future postcolonial identity for themselves. In an essay on “The Search for Identity in Edward Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants*”, John Povey points out that “unlike other colonial territories, countries in this region did not, with independence, automatically re-acquire an indigenous culture that had tenaciously resisted imposed adaptation to European ways. There was a cultural void that needed to be filled with the construction of a specific Caribbean identity” (Povey 275). Filling such a void might be attempted in many ways, but instead of making Afro-Caribbean people victims of history and turning to black nationalism as a response, Walcott focuses on a multicultural Caribbean future. Ramazani notes that:

> While many Caribbean writers of this period chronicled the inherited devastation of European slavery and colonialism, Walcott, accusing Brathwaite among others of being absorbed in “self-pity,” “rage,” and “masochistic recollection,” called instead for an artistic celebration of the Adamic potential of the New World African: perpetual exile was, in his view, the condition for a new creativity. (“The Hybrid Muse” 51)

This “Adamic potential of the New World African” is visible in *Omeros* through Philoctete’s healing, which creates a ‘New World’ for Philoctete to start over in:

> A shame for the loss of words, and a language tired / of accepting that loss, and then all accepted … / But now, quite clearly the tears trickled down his face / like rainwater down a cracked carafe from Choiseul, / as he stood like a boy in his bath … / … So she threw Adam a towel. / And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day’s. (Walcott, *Omeros* 248)

Philoctete’s healing shows that a loss of the ancestral land does not prevent a peaceful life in the future. In *Omeros*, Walcott lets the seed of the healing flower take the same journey as Philoctete’s and Achille’s ancestors. Like the fishermen’s ancestors, the flower’s seed was brought from the Bight of Benin to St. Lucia by an African swift, but instead of never making the seed grow, the flower takes roots in St. Lucia. Despite being dispossessed from its true environment, and despite being “rooted in bitterness” because of its uprooting from Africa (Walcott, *Omeros* 237), it arises like a phoenix from the ashes: “She nestled in dry seaweed. / In a year she was bleached bone. All of that motion / a pile of fragile ash from the fire of her will, / but the vine grew its own wings, out of the ocean / it climbed like ants, the ancestors of Achille” (Walcott, *Omeros* 239).

In his analysis of *Omeros*, Thomas Austenfeld argues that Philoctete’s healing “poetically combines the resolution of postcolonial suffering through African wisdom with an

Edenic vision" and that Philoctete's healing signals Walcott's "wish to move beyond analyzing a condition to positing a new beginning" (Austenfeld 15). By envisioning the retired fisherman, previously the embodiment of the historical wound, as being reborn as Adam in the Garden of Eden, Walcott suggests that Afro-Caribbean individuals should rid themselves of the notion that they are a wounded race and instead embrace the opportunity of creating a new future and a new history in the Caribbean. Furthermore, Walcott places importance on making peace with history to move forward. Instead of being paralyzed by the wound like Philoctete, Walcott favors Achilles realization, when he saw the African village people being led away, that he cannot change history. According to Walcott, there is no reason to miss an unknown past. In relation to the ceremony he watched in Felicity, he poses the question: "Why should India be "lost" when none of these villagers ever really knew it"? ("The Antilles"). According to Walcott, Caribbean peoples should not dwell on the past, because "We make too much of that long groan which underlines the past" ("The Antilles"). Instead of dwelling on the past, Walcott therefore looks to the future.

Attempting to rid the St. Lucian people of their broken identities seems like a noble task attempted by Walcott, but as Hall reminds us; the heart has its reasons. In his biography, King noted that the illegitimacy in Walcott's family informed Walcott's later refusal of defining people by their pasts, and so might his European descent. Even though Walcott claimed (at the time of writing *Omeros*) to be Caribbean at heart, he still grew up closely tied to a European culture in a society where many people, like the corner barber, distanced themselves from the empire's culture and favored their African heritages. Being more white than black of descent (King 5), Walcott might have felt alienated from society. Rejecting a return to an African tradition which he did not feel an affiliation to, and advocating a national identity based on the St. Lucian people's multicultural origins and the Caribbean landscape instead, might thus solve a past longing for being included in the St. Lucian community, despite his European heritage and upbringing. *Omeros* poses the possibility of a fresh start for both Walcott and his Caribbean people.

Conclusion: Mending the vase

Taking the wounded Caribbean identities as his point of departure, Walcott uses his profession as a poet to negotiate an unbroken, national, St. Lucian identity through his epic poem *Omeros*. These supposed wounded identities are a result of the colonial history, the dispossession of enslaved Africans from the ancestral lands, and the traumatic experience of slavery. The wounds of history are often emphasized by political and cultural movements, as well as formerly colonized writers who write their peoples into roles as victims of the colonial history. Oftentimes, such movements and writers (in the Caribbean) focus on the Afro-Caribbean individuals whose descendants were enslaved, and they advocate a return to either the African continent or an African culture for the African diaspora around the world.

Because most of the St. Lucian population are Afro-Caribbean people, and because it is easier to define a contemporary Caribbean identity with knowledge of what people come from, Walcott uses his characters to examine what effects the traumatic uprooting from the ancestral land has had on St. Lucians. In *Omeros*, the wound of the colonial history is strongly felt by the retired fisherman, Philoctete, who carries a leg wound; a trope for the colonial suffering which colonizes his postcolonial body. Having established the painful past as a theme in his poem through Philoctete, and as a reason for the wounded Caribbean identities, Walcott goes on to comment on the possibility of a return through the fisherman Achille. Achille journeys on a sunstroke-induced quest for identity to a pre-colonial Africa, where he realizes that he is not like his forefathers, that Africa is too unhomely for him, and that his real home is in the familiar St. Lucia. A return to Africa is not a realistic possibility according to Walcott, which he stresses by the hallucinogenic characteristics of Achille's sunstroke-induced return. It is thus necessary to move away from the idea of a return to an 'ancestral identity' to define an identity as a people. Instead of proposing a return to an 'ancestral identity' tied to the desire of returning to a pre-colonial Africa, Walcott shows how Caribbean individuals are more than just fragments and echoes of their ancestral pasts by embracing that they are a new, hybrid, yet original, people. Applying Stuart Hall's theory on definitions of cultural identities, the present paper examined how Walcott negotiates a national, St. Lucian identity in the context of the circumstances surrounding and informing these identities.

The first context the paper discusses, besides the colonial past, is the multiculturality of the Caribbean. The many different cultures have been considered a reason for fragmented identities as they are pieces severed from their ancestral lands and cultures. Furthermore, when the empires relinquished their colonies, there was no superior culture to relate other cultures to. Walcott does not attempt to fill the cultural void left by the empire but instead he shows that the multiculturality of the Caribbean has become a defining trait of Caribbean identities. By comparing the many fragments of cultures and origins in the Caribbean to pieces of a broken vase, Walcott describes how the vase is glued together by the white glue of colonialism. Not only does Walcott in this way see colonialism as what has brought the many individuals together as Caribbean peoples, but he also stresses how the many fragments of the vase are brought together to create a vase even more beautiful than before it was broken.

The second context in which Walcott negotiates a Caribbean identity is the place in which the vase is reassembled; the Caribbean geography. Having been uprooted from ancestral lands and forced into slavery and the new geography of the Caribbean during colonialism, the Caribbean landscape has been posed as yet another reason for the wounded identities. Instead of making it a problem, however, Walcott gives the Caribbean nature an active role in leading the characters of *Omeros* on their way towards discovering their Caribbean identities. Not only is it the familiar St. Lucian landscape which reassures Achille, upon his return from his quest for identity in Africa, that St. Lucia is his true home, but the nature also guides the local obeah woman, Ma Kilman, through the forest to reclaim her ancestral abilities of medicine-making and find the healing flower. Bestowed with the sea's powers of amnesia and rebirth, the flower, itself a part of the Caribbean landscape's flora, ultimately heals Philoctete's colonial wound by helping him accept the past and be reborn into the new St. Lucian landscape.

The third context is that of the global changes of St. Lucia, tourism in particular. Whereas the multiculturality and Caribbean landscape are factors which Walcott uses to create a common foundation for St. Lucians on which to establish a national identity, tourism is an actuality which Walcott is not supportive of. Through *Omeros*, Walcott shows how most of his St. Lucian characters, as in the real world, rely on the tourist business to make a living. Walcott's St. Lucian characters have to drive the tourists around the island in cabs, wait on disrespectful tourists in restaurants, or braid their hair. In return, the tourists marginalize the St. Lucians and steal their souls by turning them into souvenirs with their cameras. Furthermore, tourism changes the landscape, threatening a part of the foundation of the St. Lucian identity by making the island look like any other tourist destination. Besides the main reason for writing *Omeros*, which is to contest the view of Caribbean identities as broken or wounded, a secondary reason might have been to remind the St. Lucian people of who they are in a time of global changes – that they are not a marginalized people, but a people with much to be proud of. Even though he criticizes the global changes of the island, it is, however, a context which informs the St. Lucian identities – a context which is reluctantly accepted as it is a part of the life on the island.

The fourth context which the present paper considers in relation to Walcott's negotiation of identity is the literary tradition of 'victim's literature' – a tradition much criticized by Walcott, as Caribbean writers represent their peoples as individuals with wounded identities because of the colonial past. Walcott too, writes himself into the tradition of 'victim's literature' when he inflicts Philoctete with the wound of history. Drawing on Edward Said's theory suggesting that literature's representations of people inform their identities, the present paper discusses Walcott's awareness of his role as a poet in shaping the identities of his St. Lucian people. Walcott is aware that his works might inform identities, which is why he contests that they are victims, and tries to mend the wounds he has inflicted on his characters.

When negotiating an unwounded national identity in his St. Lucian people's behalf, Walcott advocates a collective amnesia of the traumatic past and a rebirth as a multicultural people to the Caribbean landscape. Not as fragments and echoes of their descendants, but as a new, original people – like Philoctete whose historical wound is healed, allowing him to be reborn as Adam in the St. Lucian Garden of Eden.

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