

The Significance of History and Memory in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990)

'History [...] is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake' James Joyce, *Ulysses*

The legacy of the Caribbean's history of colonialism and enslavement, and the ongoing generational memory of this 'nightmare', are central components of Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott's postcolonial Caribbean epic poem *Omeros* (1990). This essay examines the 'wounds' of generational trauma and bodily memory of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Caribbeans' colonial history. In *Omeros* remembering and recentring the colonised people in history is depicted as an active process – by redefining history on their own terms, the colonised can reclaim their agency and attempt to 'wake' from the 'nightmare' that is history. Walcott claims he 'felt history to be the burden of others' but in *Omeros* shows how the Caribbean is 'burden[ed]' by the legacies and memories of its colonial history, and illustrates how the authority and dominance of the western historical tradition can be challenged.¹

The traumatic legacy, the 'nightmare' of the Caribbean's colonial history and of enslavement, manifests as physical wounds throughout *Omeros*. Both the landscape and its inhabitants suffer from this historical trauma. Soufriere, a tourist town in Saint Lucia, once a French colonial settlement, is described as a 'sulphur[ic]' Dantean hellscape 'malebolge', metaphorically wounded by its colonial history and contemporary exploitation with 'brittle scab[s]' on the 'volcanic sores' which represent the volcanic plugs, Pitons.² Likewise, 'the historical wound as it afflicts the descendants of slaves' can be seen in the characters, such as Philoctete, as Paul Breslin argues.³ Taking a similar approach to Breslin, Edward Baugh argues for the link between the traumatic history of Saint Lucia and the wound 'made by a rusted anchor' which 'will never heal' on Philoctete's leg, suggesting it is 'symbolic of the people's wound of history'.⁴ Philoctete is wounded and weighed down by history, the

¹ Walcott, D. 1998 (1974): 'The Muse of History', *What the Twilight Says*, 63.

² Walcott, D. 1990: *Omeros*, 289.

³ Breslin, P. 2001: 'Epic Amnesia: Healing and Memory in *Omeros*', *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, 252.

⁴ *Ibid.* 4,19, Baugh, E. 2011: 'Derek Walcott on Being a Caribbean Poet', *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, 96.

‘anchor’, tying him, like a ship, to the past, while it ‘rusts’, illustrating the damage that can occur over the course of history. Walcott reimagines the Homeric Philoctetes’ cursed snakebite wound as a manifestation of the trauma of enslavement. Philoctete believes his infected wound ‘came from the chained ankles/of his grandfathers’, his African ancestors who were enslaved, which, as Jahan Ramazani notes, ‘suggest that the inexpressible physical suffering of enslaved Africans is retained’ as a bodily memory of generational trauma ‘in the bodies of their descendants’.⁵ His body is damaged by the traumatic past of the Caribbean’s colonial history, and his ‘corrupted blood’, ‘blood’ being used here as both literally as infection, and also the sense of family connections, is only healed by a return to ancestral knowledge, a remembering of a cultural history which was erased by colonisation.⁶ As Baugh points out, it is a ‘lost medicinal root, heritage of Africa’ which ‘cure[s] Philoctete’s wound’, which Paul Breslin corroborates, arguing that it is ‘Ma Kilman’s ability to remember [...] the curative herb that enables Philoctete to be healed of his wound of history’.⁷ Ma Kilman, follows the path of ants ‘generations of silent black workers’, which evokes the generations of enslaved black people, to find this ‘curative herb’ and the ancestral memory of its medicinal properties which was erased by the colonial erasure of African culture.⁸ In remembering this forgotten knowledge, Ma Kilman transcends the boundaries of history and embodies matrilineal history, becoming ‘my mother, my grandmother, my great-great-grandmother’, and takes on a ‘mother’s rage’, an anger which brings together the past and present to heal the generational trauma caused by enslavement and colonisation.⁹ In her remembering of her African ancestors, Ma Kilman allows Philoctete to ‘awake’ from the ‘nightmare’ that is history, to move into the future, to ‘walk [...] very straight’, confident and forward-looking, instead of limping, weighed down by the ‘rusty anchor’ of the past.¹⁰ As Breslin writes, consciously remembering history, allows the ‘past’ to ‘fall away’, removing the ‘anchors’ tying the colonised to their generational trauma, to leave ‘the present as open, facing toward the future’ where they can reclaim their agency.¹¹ *Omeros* suggests by actively remembering their shared history and culture, overcoming the ‘amnesia’ established by their

⁵ Walcott 1990: 19, Ramazani, J. 1997: ‘The Wound of History: Walcott’s *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction’, *PMLA* 112, 406.

⁶ Walcott 1990: 19.

⁷ Baugh: 96, Breslin: 251.

⁸ Walcott 1990: 244.

⁹ *Ibid.* 245, 247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 274.

¹¹ Breslin: 251.

assimilation into colonial culture, the African diaspora in the Caribbean can redefine their generational trauma, and reclaim their agency.¹²

Curing Philoctete's physical wound cannot, however, alleviate the historical trauma of the Caribbean African diaspora. Philoctete continues to feel a phantom 'pain' and 'nausea' when remembering the past, the 'memory' of the experiences of enslaved people is 'still there although the pain was gone'.¹³ The generational passing on of a traumatic history of enslavement and colonialism causes a 'wound' that transcends history, affecting both Achille and Afolabe in the reflective, semi-palindromic, line 'the son's grief was the father's, the father's his sons', which shows how this traumatic history is internalised, becoming a bodily memory passed down through generations.¹⁴ The colonial history of the Caribbean remains an 'incurable [...] wound of time', which needs to be actively, consciously, remembered, in order to 'walk [...] straight' towards the future, while still remembering those who suffered in the past, actively returning control of their history to the colonised.¹⁵ In *Omeros*, the enslaved people of the past are given agency in their own writing of their history. When they become 'dismembered branches', objects and 'not men', dehumanised by colonisation the enslaved people are dislocated and taken out of their own history, the enslaved people enact their own remembrance by 'scratching a board/ they made signs for their fading names on the wood/and their former shapes returned absently'.¹⁶ By repeating and remembering their names, the enslaved people were literally carving out a space for their own identities, reinforcing their own sense of self, and recovering their identity. As Breslin points out they 'must be literally *re-membered*', put back together, in order to break 'through the amnesia of diaspora and enslavement'.¹⁷ Despite Achille's plea to 'make me forget the future', his assertion that he doesn't want to remember the traumatic history of his ancestors, doesn't want to know what will happen to them, *Omeros* asserts that history needs to be remembered and retold, to recentre the colonised peoples' experiences, and disrupt the ongoing narratorial hegemony of the coloniser.¹⁸

¹² Walcott 1990: 138.

¹³ *Ibid*: 277.

¹⁴ *Ibid*. 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid*. 319.

¹⁶ *Ibid*. 150.

¹⁷ Breslin: 251.

¹⁸ Walcott 1990: 141.

The conflicting images of the ‘sea swift’, a migratory bird which represents the African diaspora and the Atlantic Slave Trade in *Omeros*, is reminiscent of Saint Lucia’s complex relationship with the past.¹⁹ The swift can cross between historical and spatial moments with ease. This is emphasised by Walcott’s internal rhyming ‘crossbow [...] across’ to illustrate the quick and fluid back-and-forth movement of the swift over a river, where the image of the archaic weapon a ‘crossbow’ infers a historicity, and the rhyme evokes a sense of movement between moments.²⁰ The swift is also depicted as ‘circle[ing] [...] epochs’, moving between different periods of history, linking them, in the same way that Walcott links disparate parts of history.²¹ By attributing Achille’s hallucinatory ‘homecoming’ to the ‘pilot[ing] of the swift, Walcott reinforces the association between Achille and Homeric Achilles, whose epithet is ‘swift-footed’, further enhancing the swift’s role as a force linking all the disparate locations and histories of the poem together.²² The swift is both liberated, traversing the sea and history at will, and also trapped, ‘braceleted with Greek or Latin tags’ reminiscent of the shackled enslaved people, ‘the chain of men/linked by their wrists’.²³ It is ‘pin[ned] [...] to the silk’, as if a scientific specimen, trapped in the coloniser Maud Plunkett’s embroidered quilt, it’s identity attached to silk, a commodity associated with colonial trade and therefore reminiscent of the Atlantic Slave Trade.²⁴ The colonial history of saint Lucia constructs the swift, it is named in the colonial language, French, ‘*l’hirondelle des Antilles*’, as well as it’s ‘Greek or Latin’ labels, mapping the bird onto the colonially-constructed Western narrative of history.²⁵ Despite the way colonialism traps the swift within this embroidery, it is also shown to create or ‘embroider’ its own narrative, as it ‘sewed the Atlantic rift’, the swift is depicted as a needle sewing together disparate parts of history and the world.²⁶ The swift, as Breslin asserts, is ‘stitching the poem’s [...] scattered settings together’ which suggests that by piecing together the disparate histories of the African diaspora, in the aftermath of enslavement and colonialism, it is possible for the Caribbeans’ to reassert their agency, and dismantle the dominant Western narratives of colonialism.²⁷

¹⁹ Ibid. 125.

²⁰ Ibid. 145.

²¹ Ibid. 130.

²² Ibid. 135, 134, Homer *Iliad* 2.690.

²³ Ibid. 88, 145.

²⁴ Ibid. 88.

²⁵ Ibid. 126.

²⁶ Ibid. 319.

²⁷ Breslin: 244.

Despite Walcott's assertion that 'history is irrelevant' in the Caribbean, the allusive style of *Omeros*, which draws on the hybrid histories that makes up Saint Lucia's cultural identity, affirms the relevance of mythic and literary history to Caribbean postcolonial literature.²⁸ Walcott writes 'the ex-colonial world [has] no alternative but to imitate' the cultural 'systems offered to or forced on it', however the way in which Walcott 'imitates' or appropriates the Western literary heritage in effect dismantles the hegemony of the colonial literary infrastructure.²⁹ *Omeros* is based on the form of epic poetry, which, he argues, is 'not a literary project' because it exists as part of oral histories 'in the mouths of the tribe', as a collective memory which is 'already written'.³⁰ Walcott styled *Omeros* on Homeric and Vergilian epic, but undermines the Greco-Roman authority by utilising a 'loose approximation' of Dantean rhyming verse form *terza rima*, which illustrates the evolution of epic poetry through history, from 8th-century BCE Greece, to 13th-century Italy, to 20th-century Saint Lucia, epic can be remoulded and reused.³¹ Walcott disrupts the historical dominance of a western version of history by suggesting the malleability and universality of the epic form, but also by aligning enslaved people with the literary history of the Homeric canon, Walcott recentres the narrative on the 'othered' voices, those excluded from the dominant narrative of history. This acts as a response against what Albert Memmi describes as the 'mythical and degrading portrait' of the colonised which 'ends up being accepted and lived with', Walcott is instead using a 'mythic [...] portrait' which elevates the colonised to a position of a mythic hero.³² Walcott reframes the epic convention of *nostos*, by suggesting Achille is a 'warrior returning from battle [...] from the kingdom where he had been captured' likening the Caribbean characters' 'homecoming' to Africa with the 'homecoming' warriors of the Odyssey, but instead of the mythic heroes of Ancient Greece, Walcott is referring to those 'captured' or enslaved in colonial society.³³ *Omeros* maintains 'parallels' and 'associations [...] between the Caribbean experience and [...] Homer's Greece' by placing elements from Greek mythic literary heritage alongside African counterparts, and using them interchangeably, such as the storytellers Omeros and Seven Seas, the former Homeric and the latter African.³⁴ Neither mythic history is given precedence or authority, for example, both

²⁸ Walcott, D. 1974: 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 16, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid*: 5.

³⁰ Walcott 1998: 45.

³¹ Breslin: 245.

³² Memmi, A. 2010 (1965): *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, H. Greenfeld (tran.)131.

³³ Walcott 1990: 136.

³⁴ Walcott, D. 1997: 'Reflections on Omeros', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, 230.

the Greek and African gods of metalworking ‘Hephaestus [Greek god] or Ogun [African god]’ are represented as ‘grumbling’ and ‘indigna[nt]’, the ‘or’ suggesting that either god fits, there is no authority given to one mythic history over the other.³⁵ Likewise, both Greek and African histories are used to describe a breakdown in communication between Seven Seas and Ma Kilman, ‘his words were not clear./They were Greek to her. Or old African babble’, the English idiom that evokes Greek history, and the phrase about African language are divided by a caesura, illustrating the dislocation of the Caribbean from either of its literary heritages.³⁶ Breslin suggests Walcott’s ‘obsessive proliferation of Homeric comparisons’ in *Omeros*, is ‘motivated by an insecure longing to claim the founding authority of the European canon’, however an alternative interpretation could be that Walcott is instead dismantling the ‘authority’ of the western literary history by recentring African and Caribbean voices, giving them the same authority as the echoes of Greek history.³⁷ *Omeros* utilises the epic form to dismantle the dominant discourse surrounding the history of the Caribbean, suggesting that postcolonial histories can be told through a medium which has been ‘enshrined’ into Western literary canon.³⁸

Walcott’s undermining the authority of western literary history is illustrated by *Omeros*’ representation of empire collapse, and specifically the collapse of the classical pillars which were used to ‘enshrine’ imperial ideology. Plunkett, who is associated with colonial history, imagines undergoing an ‘odyssey through the Empire’, but his authority is undermined as he is presented as static and ageing, an ‘armchair admiral’, whereas Achille, who represents the colonized, is heroic and does undergo an odyssean *nostos* to reconnect with his ancestral history.³⁹ While Plunkett expresses colonial anger that in the process of decolonisation and the collapse of empire, ‘history will be revised’ by the colonised, ‘and we [the coloniser] will be its villains [sic], fading from the map’, Walcott is reversing the roles of coloniser and colonised, by suggesting the vilification of the colonised, and the erasure of their history, can be reversed.⁴⁰ Despite his fears about decolonisation, Plunkett is seemingly unconscious of imperialism’s collapse, and his authoritative ‘I’ being a Greek ‘column’ which has ‘no roof’ suggests his identity as a coloniser is no longer supporting institutional colonialism.⁴¹ The

³⁵ Walcott 1990: 289.

³⁶ Ibid. 18.

³⁷ Breslin: 266.

³⁸ Ibid. 269.

³⁹ Walcott 1990: 90.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 92

⁴¹ Ibid. 90.

demise of colonial rule, specifically British colonial rule, in *Omeros* is associated with the image of the setting sun, in response to the adage, the ‘empire on which the sun never sets’, which suggested the extent of British imperialism at its historical height. The process of the decolonisation of history is represented by the ‘dusk’ and the ‘declining sun’ on the institutions which upheld this western dominance of history ‘the Greek columns of the museum’ and the ‘false pillars of the Georgian library’, falling into shadow.⁴² In contrast the lost histories of the colonised, and the enslaved, are literally brought to light, rediscovered, as ‘the sun resumed its empire over this branch of the Congo’ and Helen is seen as ‘the sun saw her’ existing with her own agency and ‘with no Homeric shadow’ walking along the beach carefree, ‘swinging her plastic sandals’.⁴³ Despite her recurrent associations with figures from a colonial literary history, from Helen of Sparta who is attributed as the cause of the Trojan war, to the women of mythic and biblical history whose sexuality was deemed a threat to men, Circe, Eve, Judith, and Susana, this image of Helen illustrates her independence from a colonial literary heritage.⁴⁴

Thus, history and memory are integral components of Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros*. Walcott illustrates the generational trauma and ‘wound’ of the lasting effects of the Caribbean’s colonial history and enslavement, but also, I would argue, offers up a recentring and remembrance of the colonised by dismantling the authority of a western, colonial perspective of history to disrupt the ongoing narratorial hegemony of the coloniser.

⁴² Ibid. 184, 120.

⁴³ Ibid. 135, 271.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 96-97.

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