Tangled Routes, Translation, and Adulteration in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

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While attempts to preserve a sense of linear continuity are baffled in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, the book-long poem is rife with alternative modes of cultural transmission which run along lines that are anything but straight. Time appears to be irreducible to a smooth onward progression, as the solidarity between past, present, and future, is constantly called into question. Zigzags, leaps and bounds provide more relevant ways to conceive of transmission than the organic accretion of genealogical, linear time. Legacies, whether personal or communal, are refracted, rather than merely passed on. Paul Breslin has explored the tension between remembering and forgetting which informs much of Walcott's writing (251), and Edward Baugh has called Walcott's work "a complex, sometimes paradoxical negotiation with the past" (10). Just as in optics, light travels in different directions depending on the medium it encounters; likewise, in *Omeros,* legacies are liable to undergo all kinds of "dialectical continuities", as John Thieme writes (1999, 23). Although language is weighed down with history, it does not appear as a stable vehicle, unaltered as it progresses safely through time. Words and names are appropriated and recast in unpredictable ways.

That sense of mobility chimes in with Paul Gilroy's call for a re-evaluation of the cultures of the Black Atlantic, which would decentre the notion of *roots* and privilege its homonym *routes* (Gilroy 19). While the former relies on stable, organic growth, the latter suggests freer, potentially unpredictable displacements, creating more complex models of continuity. Such a shift might yield a better understanding of the Black Atlantic, "where movement, relocation, displacement, and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions" (133). This would suggest that there are no such things as straight, unswerving trajectories; instead, cultural objects migrate, sometimes erratically, across transformative spaces, sprouting rhizomatic offshoots along the way. Continuity and transmission, therefore, may not be abolished altogether, but recast in ways that emphasise instability and displacement. Conversely, Édouard Glissant criticises the notions of origin, purity, and filiation, in favour of *métissage* (429).[1] These strategies tend to privilege

[1] The reference is to the French edition of Édouard Glissant's *Le Discours antillais*.

migration over fixity; thus, they make it possible to apprehend the complex trajectories of cultural transmission in Walcott's Caribbean, which defy expectations of a stable heritage.

Paradoxically, however, Walcott famously wrote that he "saw [himself] legitimately prolonging the mighty line of Marlowe, Milton, but [his] sense of inheritance was stronger because it came from estrangement" (Walcott 1998, 28). This representation of cultural tradition, relying on a conception of linear time, is nonetheless refracted by Walcott's sense of estrangement. The appropriation of culture in a colonial context cannot but highlight the strangeness that accompanies any experience of belonging. It would seem, therefore, that transmission is caught in a dialectical relation with the experience of peripherality. It may be possible, then, to question Charles Pollard's contention that "Walcott develops his theory of mimicry on the absence of origins and the contingency of identity" (33), or Paul Breslin's view that *Omeros* "achieves its resolution by erasures and undoings" (269). Rather than doing away with origins and continuity altogether, Derek Walcott works through "a sprawling tangle of influences that creates something distinctly new through a response to tangible sites" (Thieme 2016, 52). In this article, I explore the ways in which acts of transmission are disturbed and refracted, resulting in alternative modes of cultural continuity, such as translation and adulteration. I argue that the urge to emphasise severance and disruption is permanently threatened by the encroachment of cultural tradition.

Native Forest, Impossible "Ances-tree"

As Walcott provocatively puts it in his essay "The Muse of History", "the Caribbean sensibility is not marinated in the past" (*What the Twilight Says* 54). Thus, he warns against the nostalgia that accompanies the quest for allegedly authentic roots and origins, oblivious as it is to the "miracle of possibility" afforded by the historical conditions of the New World. The predicament of the Caribbean poet, which, for Walcott, is also a blessing, is to face "the archipelago like a broken root" (*Another Life* 54). Estranged from the dominant cultural traditions of the Old World, the Caribbean poet confronts a broken history and a multiplicity of cultures which are thereby radically defamiliarised.

Omeros opens with a scene that dramatises the experience of loss and erasure caused by colonial conquest. While political epics such as Virgil's *Aeneid* are typically associated with legitimising origins and foundational moments (Roy 2018), *Omeros* is placed under the sign of a radical disruption, which makes it impossible to conceive of history as a seamless fabric. Instead of providing access to a tangible past, the poem suggests that any historical narrative ought to question the urge to establish lines of descent and stable continuities. The first line of the poem is

uttered by Philoctete, explaining to tourists how the fishermen's canoes came into existence: "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes" (3). The verse narrative relates how the men went about felling the trees and turning the trunks into canoes. The whole scene resonates with the wider history of the Caribbean, and the fate of the trees is tied to the violence of colonial conquest: "the trees have to die" at the hands of the fishermen turned "murderers" (3). The wood cutting takes on the dimensions of a national allegory, and the forest becomes one of the "recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography" identified by DeLoughrey and Handley (8):

> Now, over the pastures
>
> of bananas, the island lifted its horns. Sunrise
>
> trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars,
>
>
> and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice. (*Omeros* 5)

The scene is made to echo the annihilation of the Caribs and the Aruacs, who inhabited the region before the arrival of Christopher Columbus, and the subsequent history of colonial rule. This bloodshed recalls the carnage wrought by the first colonists, as related for instance in Bartolomé de Las Casas's classic *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. The Spanish conquest, as told by Las Casas, resulted in the devastation and depopulation of the islands, with the settlers

> [drenching] the Americas in human blood and [dispossessing] the people who are the natural masters and dwellers in those vast and marvellous kingdoms, killing a thousand million of them, and stealing treasures beyond compare. (49)

The opening of *Omeros* is reminiscent of such graphic evocations, as the trees, with their trunks materialising the accretion of historical time, are brought down in a way that conjures up scenes of genocide. The laying waste of entire regions by the first colonists marked the forceful integration of the "New World" into the web of European commercial circuits. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues, colonisation in the Caribbean ushered in an "ecological revolution", which took a heavy toll on the native forests as well as their inhabitants; mangroves and forests were cleared at first for timber, then to make way for sugar plantations (102). *Omeros* draws a similar parallel between environmental and human destructions, conflating the native inhabitants and the vegetation of the islands. This moment, then, is both traumatic and foundational; like the subsequent history of the Caribbean, the poem is predicated on an act of erasure.

That is precisely what Major Plunkett, the retired English army veteran, fails to understand. Later in the poem, we see him obsessed with his own genealogical tree. The conceit deployed at the beginning of the poem, identifying people and trees, is thus rearticulated on an individual level. While the St Lucian forest was taken as a repository for a sense of national history, in Plunkett's case the tree functions as a metaphor for lineage and continuity. It materialises the transmission of a name, asserting the order of the family. It is also intended as a legitimising record, bearing witness to the family's credentials, sanctioning the validity of filial links, and ensuring the rightful claims of property as well as propriety. The genealogical tree is the consecration of the patriarchal family, which is predicated on monogamy–at least on the part of the wife–to ascertain the rightful descent of the *paterfamilias,* and the transmission of heritage. In Engels's classic account of the origin of the family, "[monogamy's] express aim is the procreation of children of undisputed paternity, this paternity being required in order that these children may in due time inherit their father's wealth as his natural heirs" (170). In Plunkett's case, military prestige is also a crucial element, adding yet more value to the symbolic capital running through his ancestry. The construction of family as a web of "ties", such as marital "bonds", testifies to the centrality of transmission. The monogamous family is indeed a legal institution, aimed to pass on an unchallengeable name and heritage. The obvious consequence is that women's bodies are under stringent scrutiny, subjected to practices of control.

Yet in Plunkett's case, it is not so easy to establish reliable lines of descent. His "ances-tree" begins in a "dubious cloud", its branches dotted over with "flowers for battles, buds for a campaign", recording the deaths of his forebears at war. His fascination for his own ascendants is matched only by his dejection at not having a son: "No heir: the end of the line. / No More Plunketts" (87-88). With the *line* metaphorising the temporal continuity of generations, Plunkett's effort can be read as a desperate attempt to project a linear conception of time on a history that keeps evading those requirements. While the beginning of the line emerges out of a dubious haze, the only certainty is the abrupt termination due to lack of an heir. As a matter of fact, it is possible to understand Plunkett's obsession with the genealogical as a perversion of his thwarted paternal ambitions, and a symptom of his struggle to articulate his own place in history. Having failed to give birth to the son he had promised his wife, Maud, he becomes desperately engrossed in the past, looking for a namesake in the history of the island. Plunkett, therefore, embodies a form of temporal irrelevance, unable as he is to accept the impossibility of a stable transmission. As Paula Burnett argues,

> Representations of both miscegenation and creolization (the bodily and linguistic hybridizations) are central to Walcott's creative project. […] The locus of "between" is, for

> him (in cultural just as in bodily terms), the site of fertility, product of interactive desire, where the generation of the new holds out the endless possibility of hope. Patriarchal Western preoccupations with origin, with retrospective lineage, are, in Walcott's aesthetic, countered with the privileging of originality, here and now. (20)

Plunkett can be seen as embodying just such "preoccupations with origin" which prove inadequate to the Caribbean context. His search for a verifiable, authenticated ancestry, is thrown off kilter by the instability of historical time in the New World. Eventually though, Plunkett's effort to authenticate filial links proves successful, albeit in a way that eludes the standards of conventional genealogy.

Driven by a form of post-imperial guilt, Plunkett tries to give the island its true place in history by immersing himself in the study of the 1782 Battle of the Saintes, which was fought by France and Britain; at stake was naval hegemony in the Caribbean. Through his research, Plunkett encounters his namesake in the historical accounts, a nineteen-year-old midshipman who found his death in the battle (93). The uncanny encounter with a distant relative, older by two centuries, but at the same time younger at the time of his death, is disconcerting. This young man offers Plunkett the image of the son he never had, but only at the price of unsettling genealogical temporality. The eighteenth-century Plunkett can no more be the Major's ancestor than his son; he can only be inscribed on the chart as a genealogical aberration, an unproductive branch of the family. Whatever connection exists between him and the Major is necessarily refracted, anachronistically, the homonym providing only a tentative point of contact. Plunkett's delusion is characteristic of what Sneharika Roy calls the "teleology of imperial anachronism" (28), borrowed from the Virgilian epic, but distorted so as to expose its productive irrelevance. The fate of the Plunketts in the Caribbean, therefore, contradicts the plausibility of uninterrupted transmission. Whatever links can be established are indeed products of "interactive desire" (Burnett 20), imaginative engagements, discontinuous affiliations. Much like the New World poet, the Major too encounters "a broken root" (*Another Life* 54).

Plunkett goes on to engage in metahistorical reflection on the "factual fiction [...] flattening an ocean to paper diagrams" (95), written by native historians about the island:

> If she
>
> hid in their net of myths, knotted entanglements
>
> of figures and dates, she was not a fantasy

but a webbed connection (95)

The "knotted entanglements" and "webbed connection" convey at once his bafflement at, and understanding of, the intricate ways of New World history. If the dry accounts of military historians merely flatten the rough materiality of history, the Caribbean calls for a specific approach which does not reduce everything to the simplified outlines of diagrams. Imaginative reconstructions, drawing on all the possibilities afforded by the Caribbean vortex, may prove just as fertile to envision one's own sense of place.

Eventually, Plunkett is satisfied by the outcome of his research: "he had given her a son" (103), thus paying his "debt" to the island-Helen. Once again, however, it is unclear who the recipient of the son is. He had promised one to *Maud*, but the context would suggest that here he is thinking of *Helen* as an allegory of the island. The meaning is, at the very least, ambivalent, and the direction of Plunkett's imagined lineage is once again undecidable.

The temporality of *Omeros* is replete with similar instances of nonlinear temporality (Seeger); the most spectacular probably being Achille's submarine reversal of the Middle Passage, which takes him to Africa. There, he encounters his own ancestors, only to measure the distance that separates them from him. Instead of reuniting with his roots, he is faced with an experience of estrangement, in a way that questions the relevance of origins. Although it seems possible to retrace lines of descent, the outcome of the journey falls short of the expected fulfilment. Achille's time-travel, then, suggests that even though roots may be unearthed, the operation can prove disconcerting. It would seem that origins are not necessarily the fittest vectors of transmission. Nonetheless, in *Omeros* the concern for uncovering roots is reconfigured, rather than dismissed altogether.

From Transmission to Adulteration

The predicament of Philoctete, dramatised with great intensity in the fourth section of the poem, bears witness to the painful urgency of rootedness, as well as to the unachievable recovery of a stable place in the world. The scene takes place in Philoctete's yam garden, next to a rundown sugar estate, with its

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. (20)

Those images of dereliction prompt a questioning of the relevance of history itself, as a category which may be unfit for this Caribbean landscape. We encounter "pillars", redolent of foregone monumental grandeur, now threatened in their turn with disappearance. Philoctete's garden becomes textualised, with the leaves evoking the pages of a book: "The wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa, / their veins bled white" (20). The vegetation is depicted with severed veins, pointing back to an exhausted, colourless Africa. The vision sends Philoctete into a fit of murderous rage:

> 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?" (21)

Here Philoctete seems to take revenge on the plants for his own sense of rootlessness. He thus shows that obsession with roots is not the exclusive preserve of Plunkett, and that new modes of thinking about time and transmission must be engaged with and actively elaborated, regardless of origin.

These examples point to the need to contrive alternative modes of envisioning the relation between past and present. While Plunkett, frustrated by the lack of an heir, loses himself in genealogical fantasies, we learn that Helen is pregnant. The local servant, out of work for refusing to put up with the tourists' ways, is expecting a child, but the identity of the father is anything but clear: "I pregnant, / but I don't know for who" (34). Helen, who embodies the island of St Lucia throughout the poem, becomes a locus of uncertainty. Her pregnancy frustrates the search for a single father, and thereby subverts the order of patriarchal transmission. Although we later find out that the child is Hector's, the uncertainty surrounding the father has wider implications for the history of the island as a whole. It may be necessary at this point to establish a parallel with another postcolonial situation, across the Atlantic, a rapprochement suggested by the poem itself, as it travels to Ireland in section 39. The concern over paternity and filiation was shared by Joyce–"our age's Omeros" (200). In *Ulysses*, the legitimation of fatherhood is shown to be an inherently dubious affair, as the threat of adultery is ever present. Therefore, Joyce favours the notion of adulteration, whose political implications David Lloyd analyses in the following terms:

> Adulteration as a stylistic principle institutes a multiplication of possibility in place of an order of probability and as such appears as the exact aesthetic correlative of adultery in the social sphere. For if adultery is forbidden under patriarchal law, it is precisely because of the potential multiplication of possibilities for identity that it implies as against the paternal fiction, which is based on no more than legal verisimilitude. If the spectre of adultery must be exorcized by nationalism, it is in turn because adulteration undermines the stable formation of legitimate and authentic identities. (109)

Fatherhood is exposed in *Ulysses* as a "legal fiction" (266), in a way that anticipates Plunkett's characterisation of history as "factual fiction". The uncertainty which surrounds the identity of Helen's baby thematises the poetics of adulteration which informs the text as a whole. While fatherhood is always suspicious, *Omeros* shifts the focus toward the proliferation of possibilities and the infinite creolisation of identities. In the Irish section of the poem, the vegetation and the landscape again hint at the national imaginary, with its "century-ringed oaks" and its brook "[talking] the old language of Ireland" (198). Yet, the breakdown of filiation is evoked in a typically Joycean pun, as the violence of the Troubles is "still splitting heirs" (199). The sectarian strife evoked in this line is another sign of the fragility of communal legacies. Such a discourse can only undermine the nationalistic claims of purity and the mythological construction of essentialised identities.

Crucially, the locus of that destabilisation is the female body, whether Joyce's Molly or Walcott's Helen. This would suggest that the misapprehension of history stems from patriarchal delusions focussed on genealogy, while alternative modes of thinking may be afforded by women. Thus, the poet-narrator of *Omeros* brands himself as an unreliable father, in agony over "the fatherless wanderings of [his] own sons" (241). Fatherlessness, then, is tied up with wandering, errancy; the severance of filial links is ambivalent, as it opens up endless, but unsettling, possibilities. While questioning patriarchal models, the poem emphasises matrilinear descent, as a more fluid scheme for identification. Thus, the poetic voice exclaims: "See her there, my mother, my grandmother, my great-great-/grandmother. See the black ants of their sons, their coal-carrying mothers" (245), in a celebration of motherhood which subverts traditional genealogies based on father right, as the cumulative effect of the lengthening compounds straddles the line-juncture, with the enjambment "great-great-/grandmother", in a forceful assertion of matrilinear continuity. The coal-carrying women, besides, appear as the true inspirators of the poet's vocation, looming larger than even his father in this respect. The rhythm of their work exemplifies the "unending line" and "ancestral rhyme" to which the young artist should aspire (74-75). Therefore, *Omeros* deploys strategies that undermine conventional models of transmission. The discontinuous history of the Caribbean unsettles the delusion of linear time and straightforward transmission. The certainties of

patriarchal genealogy are exposed as irrelevant, in favour of adulteration, which challenges the claims of authenticity. Yet, the celebration of erasure, discrepancy, and uncertainty which underlies much of the poem does not mean that no transmission occurs. Rather, *Omeros* navigates the tension between "the miracle of possibility" and the haunting presence of inherited models and historical allusions.

Tradition Nonetheless

In the opening scene of *Omeros*, the trees are likened to "dead gods", symbolic representatives of the first inhabitants of the island:

> The bearded elders endured the decimation
>
> of their tribe without uttering a syllable
>
> of that language they had uttered as one nation,
>
> the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble
>
> of the cedar to green vowels of *bois-campêche*.
>
> The *bois-flot* held its tongue with the *laurier-cannelle*,
>
> the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,
>
> while the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell
>
> of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown
>
> with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost. (6)

These lines hark back to a pre-Columbian past, conflating the trees and the islands' indigenous populations. And yet, this nostalgic evocation is rendered through a language and a set of references that are themselves overdetermined by the terms of a culture that was instrumental in the colonial enterprise, as the potentially racialised epithet "red-skinned logwood" makes only too clear. The tension between trauma and expression, between the unspeakable history of destruction

and its enforced linguistic concretion, can be read in the light of Édouard Glissant's notion of a "forced poetics'" ("*poétique forcée*"). Such a poetics occurs, he writes, "where a necessity for expression confronts what it is impossible to express [...] in an opposition between the expressible content and the suggested or imposed language" ([translation mine] 402).[2] Such is the Creole predicament evinced in these lines. The original language goes up in smoke, meaning that history will be distorted, alienated, told in another language (Fanon 201).

However, this opening scene draws on a fraught ideological background, which upsets the binary opposition between pre-Columbian authenticity and colonial degradation. The original state of the forest is retrospectively construed as a time when a unified "nation" spoke the same language, and transmitted it from one generation to the next, as the trees to their saplings. The very concept of "one nation", viewed as an organic whole, united notably by a common language, is indebted to a specifically European intellectual tradition, which accompanied the emergence of modern nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The saplings, growing in the same soil as their "elders", seem to epitomise the ideal of rootedness which is characteristic of the mythology of Romantic nationalism, with its valuation of cultural transmission and its emphasis on the native *land*. Those views rely to various degrees on assumptions of cultural essentialism, underpinned by notions of origin or descent (Hobsbawm 15). Walcott, then, inscribes his narrative of severance within a familiar framework, one already appropriated by earlier Caribbean writers, who drew on "Romantic sensibilities and the adaptation of European models that turned the forests into highly symbolic spaces" (Paravisini-Gebert 108). As embodiments of a putatively authentic, pre-colonial nature, forests became sites of political as well as affective investment. Thus, they contributed to shape a national imagination which drew on the history of the islands' indigenous peoples. Significantly, however, here the destruction is wrought not by foreign settlers, but by fishermen native to the island. As a result, the re-enactment of a familiar historical scene takes on new, unsettling proportions. This makes for at least two possible readings: the fishermen may be trapped in a repeating history, where they now play the unflattering parts of the executioners–but it is also possible to interpret the whole scene as one which exposes the fallacy of the allegorical framework inherited from that very history, as the conceit is so blatantly at odds with the object of representation. In either case, the disjunction between the allegory and the underlying stark reality produces a disturbing contrast.

[2] « [L]à où une nécessité d'expression confronte un impossible à exprimer [...] dans une opposition entre le contenu exprimable et la langue suggérée ou imposée » (Glissant 402).

Besides, the narrative of the cutting relies on biblical imagery, which was part and parcel of the "civilising mission" which served as a justification for the colonial endeavour (Fanon 46). Thus, the annihilation of the trees evokes well-known episodes, as with the "towering babble of the cedar", or the thorns in the flesh of the Christ-like logwood. As a result, the pre-Columbian past of the island is epistemologically colonised, as though it could only be glimpsed through a prism which itself bears the stamp of the colonial enterprise. The radical break of conquest and genocide, then, is rendered in such a way as to assert notions of temporal continuity and cultural transmission. Just as the conquest meant the integration of the "New World" into the world market dominated by European powers, the story is told in a language whose roots stem from the same centre. The trope of wood cutting may also echo Caliban's wood-gathering for Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. While the text stages a moment of rupture, it does so in a way that inexorably performs the transmission of cultural models.

Finally, the original language of the forest, "the Aruacs' patois", loses its natural precedence amidst the poem's alternation of English and French denominations for trees. However, the process is ambivalent. As in the biblical episode of the Tower of Babel, the language of trees is replaced, or displaced, by a plurality of discrepant tongues, with intimations of endless conflict. This would reinforce the disruptive dimension of the passage, read as a re-enactment of the island's original trauma, involving linguistic erasure as well as physical destruction. Indeed, the derogatory "patois" may refer to any regional dialect regarded as non-standard, especially when set against the supposedly superior, official languages of empire, such as English or French. Yet, in the Caribbean context, the reference to a "patois" may also refer to a variety of Creoles–whether French or English–that is to say, languages which exemplify dynamics of hybridisation. This would imply that the allegedly homogenous original, pre-Columbian language spoken by the trees was already plural, made up of various components, thus belying the nostalgic illusion of authenticity also evinced by the text. This would be consistent with other Caribbean writers' ecological engagements; Jamaica Kincaid and Olive Senior, for instance, recast the garden as "a space of recreation, transmutation and cross-pollination" (Moïse 42). As a result, the text cannot be read simply as an indictment of the settlers' crimes and a vindication of the decimated tribes. Indeed, the passage uneasily conflates discrepant levels of reference, as the impoverished fishermen replicate the violence once wrought by the colonists, while the forest appears as always already creolised, in a way that runs counter to narratives of uncontaminated origins espoused by nationalist mythologies. The scene, therefore, exposes the discrepancy which is at the heart of the political epic as "a narrative of national integration at odds with the proliferation of cultural sources that is the pre-condition of its production" (Roy 19).

Translation: Dislocating Transmission

With its "pillars" and "bearded elders", the architecture of the forest stands with hieratic verticality. But the fate of the trees is to be cut down, hollowed out, and turned into canoes. Those floating vessels are bound for the horizontal realm of the sea, they are christened with new names, contingent and erratic, such as Achille's "In God We Troust". This act of baptism, of naming anew, can be read as a subversion of the vertical order of *transmission*, in favour of a horizontal act of *translation*. The collision of various languages, which characterises the process of creolisation**,** is foregrounded in the bilingual enumeration of the trees quoted above, but also in Achille's heteroglossic punning:

> He swayed back the blade,
>
> and hacked the limbs from the dead god, knot after knot,
>
> wrenching the severed veins from the trunk as he prayed:
>
> "Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!" (6)

Here, the tree is being literally dismembered at the same time as it is turned into a canoe. The alternative between *can* and *cannot* is deceptive; it leaves the tree with no real choice, as *cannot* is a virtual homonym of the French *canot,* which would not be lost on speakers of St Lucian French creole. One may even be tempted to overhear another layer of linguistic playfulness, as the war-like evocation of arms and men, which hinges on a "*canot*", echoes the Latin "*Arma virumque cano*" of the first line of the *Aeneid*. Thus, the opening scene of the poem hints at the linguistics of empire-building, be it modern colonial ventures in the Caribbean, or the genesis of the Roman empire sung by Virgil. By virtue of the linguistic discrepancy resulting from centuries of imperial rivalry between France and England over the island of St Lucia, Achille is in a position to play a kind of "Heads I win, tails you lose" trick on the tree. The apparent alternative between *can* and *cannot* merely conceals the inevitable transformation into either *canoe* or *canot*. The tree initially appeared as the receptacle of the island's pre-Columbian past, but it becomes entrapped in the performative webs of imperial languages, which spell only one possible fate. Achille's Creole bilingualism enables him to "do things with words" (Austin), and to upset the temporality of the tree, but also its positioning in space. Leaving the terrestrial fixity of the forest, the trunks are to undergo multiple levels of trans-lation–physical navigation as well as verbal alteration. That

moment of severance inaugurates a radically different order of being, opening a void bearing the ghostly imprint of the past, "by constructing absence as an uninscribed but writeable space in which self-delineation may occur" (Callahan xi). Significantly, the cutting of the tree involves severing its "veins", a term used in woodworking, but borrowed from the human veins which channel blood, the typical metaphor of ancestry and filiation.

The disruptive erasure, however traumatic, is no occasion for lamentation or recrimination. Rather, it is invested with an exhilarating potential:

> The logs gathered that thirst
>
> For the sea which their own vined 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. (7)

In keeping with Walcott's consistent avoidance of pathos, the gruesome decimation of the trees is recast as a moment of elation and a beginning rather than an end. The text shifts the focus from an elusive, irretrievable past, to a vision of the New World as a potential new Eden. There, it seems, the violence of history affords a release from the past. The process carries intimations of redemption for the slaughtered trees, eager to enter a new life in a new shape, and to be (re-)*borne* on the sea. While the poem seemed at first to mourn a belated sense of rootedness and fixity, it moves on to embrace displacement and renewal. If *Omeros* can be said to open with a scene of primal loss and erasure, then, that is no cause for elegy. While Philoctete complacently exhibits his festering wound to the voyeuristic tourists, relishing his own victimisation as a slave descendent, the canoes embrace the amnesia which, for Walcott, is "the true history of the New World" (*What the Twilight Says* 39):

> the canoes entered the troughs

of the surpliced shallows, and their nodding prows

agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees (*Omeros* 8)

Nonetheless, the liturgical imagery evident in the "surpliced shallows" hints once more at the pervasiveness of age-old motifs, which keep asserting themselves even when the text celebrates a moment of rebirth. This may be an indication that the *routes* travelled by the Caribbean text, however fresh and transformative, cannot but recall their points of origin.

A Reconciliation Without Synthesis

The poem, finally, tries to articulate the discrepancy between a potentially spurious past and the tangible "here and now". The recurrent metaphor pointing to this articulation is that of *stitching,* an activity which occupies Maud Plunkett throughout *Omeros,* but also the poet's own dementia-stricken mother (168). Stitching does not abolish the disjunction between the various parts, but brings them together in an original, incongruent arrangement. Thus, the swift, which runs through the poem like a thread, appears again at the end, connecting the eastern and western hemispheres:

Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa,

she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line,

the rift in the soul. (319)

The swift, which guides Achille on his journey to Africa, is also a metapoetic reflection, with its "wing-beat" and "line". Its migrations are evidence of the rift which is geographic–between Old World and New–as well as existential, "in the soul", irremediably divided from its delusive origins. It renders possible a reconciliation, which does not obliterate the fundamental discrepancy at the heart of the Caribbean experience, a syncretism rather than a synthesis. The resulting patchwork may be read as a materialisation of the matrilinear paradigm, bringing together possibilities that are at once discrepant and simultaneous.

The poem comes back to the forest towards the end, when Ma Kilman looks for the cure for Philoctete's wound. She goes through all the plants she knows, but is unable to find the right one, "the plant keeps its secret/when her memory reaches, shuttering in its fronds" (237). The forest appears as the locus of a problematic, irretrievable past, beyond memory. Yet, Ma Kilman finds the healing flower eventually, and the poem retraces the history of its travel. It appears that the

flower itself is not indigenous–it is a transplant from Africa, carried across the Atlantic by the swift, "centuries ago from its antipodal shore" (238). The swift died, but

> the vine grew its own wings, out of the ocean
>
> it climbed like the ants, the ancestors of Achille,
>
> the women carrying coals after the dark door
>
> slid over the hold. As the weed grew in odour
>
> so did its strength at the damp root of the cedar,
>
> where the flower was anchored at the mottled root (239)

The flower, therefore, is indeed "anchored" at the root of a cedar, but it pertains at least as much to the fluid realm of the ocean which it has crossed. Besides, it grows wings, as if to assert that its primary element is migrancy, flight–blurring the horizon which separates sea and sky. Similar emphasis is laid elsewhere on the tension between *roots* and *routes,* for which the transplanted flower provides an apt symbol. This alternative conception of rootedness is again linked with femininity, under the motherly patronage of Ma Kilman, as Achille's ancestors appear in the guise of the coal-carrying women, rather than male forebears.

The plants confront Ma Kilman in their materiality, challenging her to find the right names for them. As in the earlier scene of wood-cutting, the forest reveals the instability of denominations, and the fragility of beings without names: the trees "had lost their names / and, therefore, considerable presence" (242). Here, instead of linking back to a pre-conquest era, the trees themselves have been displaced, losing their names in the process:

> 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 [...]

waiting to be known by name; but she

had never learnt them, though their sounds were within her,

subdued in the rivers of her blood. (242)

The trees are compared to the swift, and appear as migrants in their own right, "swifter" even than birds. Thus, they evade the fixity of rootedness, in favour of a volatile condition. Yet, their trajectories are not entirely free, superimposed as they are on the Middle Passage, the seasonal, pre-ordained migration of birds, or the circular flights of bats around cotton-trees. The very tropes which evoke the displacement of the trees also serve, precisely, to circumscribe it. The disjunction of displacement is therefore mitigated by the overarching sense of circulation which keeps things flowing in a seemingly continuous loop, whose metaphoric conclusion is reached in the "rivers of [Ma Kilman's] blood", once again asserting the female body as a locus of recuperative memory. Here, the genealogical imagination is conjured up again, as blood appears as the vector of an atavistic memory which binds people and land together. The text goes on with the evocation of the trees:

their outlines fading, thinner

as belief in them thinned, so that all their power,

their roots, and their rituals were concentrated

in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower.

All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead,

but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots,

her arms ululated, uplifting the branches

of a tree carried across the Atlantic that shoots

fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows in our beaches (242-243)

The description takes on cosmic dimensions, as the flower's "*whorled* corolla" (my emphasis) miniaturises the *world* traversed by the manifold currents of historical displacement. The relation of trees and bloodlines is again asserted, but the two are no longer metaphorically conflated, as in the opening scene of wood cutting. While the simile brings together Ma Kilman's veins and the tree's roots, it is introduced by "as if", in such a way as to underscore the artificiality of the conceit. The redemptive conclusion, from dead trunk to fresh leaves, from "roots" to "[off-]shoots", is therefore destabilised as much as it is celebrated.

In *Omeros*, Walcott's writing evinces a clear concern over the process of transmission. The foundational erasure caused by colonisation dramatises the radical discontinuity which besets Caribbean culture; but in doing so, it also sheds light on the precarious temporality of culture as a whole. If history occasions such traumatic events as the genocide and deracination of entire populations, any claims to a "national" culture, passed on along smooth genealogical lines, are severely threatened. Under such conditions, the fiction of linear continuity is irremediably dismissed. The predicament of loss and amnesia can be resolved, Walcott suggests, in imaginative appropriation and (re)creation. As opposed to the seemingly natural coalescence of time embodied by the island's vegetation, Walcott elaborates a poetics of severance. Thus, he exposes an incongruent temporality, which defeats the authoritative genealogy of the patriarchal imagination. By severing *roots* in order to recast them as proliferating *routes*, the poem explores the dialectics of transmission. It foregrounds the artificiality of cultural processes, as they undergo various forms of displacement, translation, and adulteration. In doing so, Walcott does not so much negate the idea of transmission as complicate it in such a way as to multiply the possibilities for affiliation *ad infinitum,* privileging a sense of matrilinear possibility over patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, the "miracle of possibility" is not without its own limitations. While recasting the violence of erasure as an occasion for renewal, the text resonates with echoes of a past that will not be written away. The celebration of migration and errancy is couched in a language that flaunts its own mythic origins. Caught between the deception of origins and the embrace of a redemptive amnesia, the resulting temporality of transmission remains unresolved, a proliferating entanglement.

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