A GIFT FROM MISTRESS TO SLAVE WITH AN EMPIRE'S TAG: LANGUAGE OF THE LAW IN THE POST-COLONIAL MATRICES OF DEREK WALCOTT'S ŒMEROS

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by

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ABSTRACT

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The text focuses on the language of the law in *Omeros*, which is defined as "the representation and expression of social order, principles, morality, conscience, and conduct of a community or nation." The language of the law is inherent in the dynamics of the Caribbean's hybrid, cultural community and is revealed through Walcott's characters. Walcott attempts to resolve how the colonial cultural system has maintained cultural and socio-economic authority in a politically independent West Indies. Walcott's characters view the language of the law and each other according to their cultural matrices. Helen is Walcott's key. Helen is the West Indian people, her yellow dress the language of the law, and the Empire's tag is the colonial cultural system. How Helen, in her yellow dress, is perceived by each character gives insight into that character's cultural system. The sum of these cultural matrices is Helen and defines "Caribbeanness."

DEDICATION

To my family and friends, who continued to remind me over the years that there was something I needed to complete. I love you all.

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Gift from Mistress to Slave with an Empire's Tag:
Language of the Law in the Post-Colonial Matrices of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

I. INTRODUCTION

This was the distress / of the pale yellow frock, which Helen claimed Maud gave / her but forgot. He stayed out of it, but that dress / had an empire's tag on it, mistress to slave.[1]

Omeros is Derek Walcott's tribute to his home, St. Lucia. "Omeros is the Greek word for Homer and a pun for the English word for home; and at the end of the poem Walcott comes full circle, back to the way in which literature embodies the differences and the similarities between experiences [and language.]"[2] *Omeros* is not just a poem, but a cultural anthology of the Caribbean.

In this text, I focus on the language of the law in *Omeros*. Generally, "language" is the method a community or nation uses to communicate, and includes any means of conveying or expressing ideas.[3] For purposes of this text, "law" is: (1) a rule of conduct

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[1] Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 64 (all subsequent references are to this edition).

[2] J. Edward Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 6.

[3] *See* Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "language" ("language" is defined as "the whole body of words and or methods of a combination of words used by a nation, people, or race" and "[w]ords and methods of combining them for the expression of thought"); The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed., 2000, s.v. "language" ("language" defined as "[c]ommunication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals, such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols[;]" "[s]uch a system including its rules for combining its components, such as words[;]" "[s]uch a system as used by a nation, people, or other distinct community; [and] often contrasted with dialect."); Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1996, s.v. "language" ("language" defined as "[a]ny means of conveying or communicating ideas; specifically, human speech; the expression of ideas by the voice; [and] sounds, expressive of thought, articulated by the organs of the throat and mouth.").

or procedure established by custom, agreement, or authority; (2) the body of rules and principles governing the affairs of a community; (3) a code of principles based on morality, conscience, or nature; and (4) a rule of being or of conduct.[4] Thus, the "language of the law" is defined as the representation and expression of social order, principles, morality, conscience, and conduct of a community or nation.

Walcott uses the epic form[5] in *Omeros* to explore the consequences of five hundred years of colonialism and slavery in the West Indies that led to the formation of the Caribbean culture. The colonial cultural system has circumscribed and controlled the Caribbean for centuries and has yet to relinquish its grasp or influence. Caribbean socio-economic and cultural self-determination is crucial to dissolving this parasitic union. The difficulty in this process is both an internal and external struggle for Walcott's characters,

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[4] *See* Black's Law Dictionary, 6th ed., 1990, s.v. "law" ("'law' is derived from judicial precedents, from legislation, or custom."); The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed., 2000, s.v. "law" ("law" defined as "[a] rule of conduct or procedure established by custom, agreement, or authority[;]" "[t]he body of rules and principles governing the affairs of a community and enforced by a political authority; a legal system[;]" and "a code of principles based on morality, conscience, or nature."); Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1996, s.v. "law" ("law" is defined as "a rule of being or of conduct, established by an authority able to enforce its will; a controlling regulation; [and] the mode or order according to which an agent or a power acts.").

[5] An epic is a long narrative poem that focuses on heroic figures and events contributing to the formation of a people, society, or nation. *See* Edward Quinn, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999) 104. *Omeros* is written in "terza rima," the verse form used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. *See* Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry* (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1992) 47. "Terza rima" literally means "third rhyme" in Italian. In "terza rima," three-line stanzas are interlinked by a regular rhyme scheme, the second line of each stanza rhymes with the first and third line of the next stanza "aba bcb cdc, etc." *See* The New Oxford American Dictionary, 2001, s.v. "terza rima." By using the epic form and terza rima, Walcott acknowledges the cultural internationalism in literature. Walcott, however, does not use these devises in the classical style. In *Omeros*, fisherman are heroes and the rhyme scheme comes from the creolized words and the sounds of the Caribbean's Nation Language. The poetic meter is not Dante's, Elizabethan, or an echo of "the general sound of English verse." Walcott is striving for something beyond the echo of the familiar for what is Caribbeanness. *See* Luis Martínez-Dueñas Espejo, "An Interview with Derek Walcott" in *Approaches to the Poetics of Derek Walcott*, edited by José Luis Martínez-Dueñas Espejo and José María Pérez Fernández (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001) 180.

including Walcott as narrator. Walcott is attempting to resolve how an Empireless England has maintained cultural and socio-economic authority in a politically independent West Indies.

Central to the text of *Omeros* is the juxtaposition of the colonial cultural system's grasp on the West Indies with "the collective right [of the West Indian people] to exist as distinct peoples with their own cultural identities."[6] Walcott demonstrates how the colonial cultural system is a part of the current racial and culturally based patterns of stratification, and the reason for the underlying sense of loss of identity, history, religion, culture, and language, found throughout the West Indies. Specifically, Walcott writes about the colonial cultural system's use of language as an instrument of power and its enduring force as a means of subordination in the West Indies.[7] The text of *Omeros* reflects the influence, power, and order of the colonizers; however, Walcott's primary focus is the resistance culture in the post-colonial Caribbean and its Nation Language.[8]

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[6] Ana Sljivic, "Why Do You Think It's Yours? An Exposition of the Jurisprudence Underlying the Debate Between Cultural Naturalism and Cultural Internationalism," 31 Geo. Wash. J. Int'l L. & Econ. 393 (1998) 434.

[7] Margaret E. Montoya, "Law and Language(s): Image, Integration and Innovation," 7 La Raza L.J. 147 (1994) 148.

[8] "In their classic discussion of post-colonial literary theory and practice, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin use the term 'post-colonial' in a manner which has now become widely accepted in literary studies 'to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.'" John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999) 30 citing Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) 2.

The language of the law is inherent in the dynamics of Caribbean's hybrid, cultural community. This is reflected in the relationships of Walcott's characters. I suggest that in *Omeros*, Walcott's characters view the language of the law and each other according to their cultural matrices. The constant, and Walcott's key to deciphering each character's cultural system, or systems, is the character of Helen. Helen is Helen of Troy, seductress, African Queen, the African goddess Oshun, the Plunketts' arrogant untamed maid, historyless islander, mother, and St. Lucia.[9] Above all Helen is the people of the West Indies. How the other characters perceive and describe Helen reveals their cultural matrices. The sum of these cultural matrices is Helen and defines "Caribbeanness."

The title of this text comes from Walcott's description of Helen's yellow dress. The pale yellow frock is a recurrent motif in *Omeros*. While the pale yellow frock's symbolic meaning is multi-faceted, I propose that Helen's yellow dress symbolizes the language of the law and, more specifically, independence. This independence, however, bears the "empire's tag." Helen, as the embodiment of the West Indian people and its "Nation Language," wears the altered yellow dress as an act of proud defiance of the imposed colonial cultural system. The characters' wavering opinions as to Helen's "appropriation" or "entitlement" to the dress mirrors the question of the West Indian people's right to cultural and socio-economic self-determination.

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[9] Elsa Luciano Feal, "Helen: History that Heals in *Omeros*" viewed at <http:www.ars-rhetorica.net/Queen/Volume31/Articles/Luciano.html>.

II. WALCOTT'S WEST INDIES

The new possibilities in the West Indies depended on three things: land, labor, and laws to regulate them.[10]

Omeros is set in Walcott's native country, St. Lucia, a mountainous and volcanic island nation located in the West Indies about 240 miles north of Venezuela.[11] St. Lucia, named after the virgin saint of Sicily, has also been called "[t]he Helen of the West Indies," for its tumultuous history of switching between French and British hands.[12] Throughout the text, Walcott refers to St. Lucia and its many landmarks, including: the town of Soufrière with its nearby sulphur springs, and the Gos Piton and Petit Piton, the twin volcanic mountains in the southwest area of the island.[13]

St. Lucia is but one of many islands that make up the modern day Caribbean. The West Indies, or Caribbean, is commonly defined as an area of 24 islands and 4 mainland countries[14] that maintain close ties with the Caribbean archipelago. These 28 countries represent a total population of over 38 million people covering a total area of

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[10] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 10.

[11] Dorling Kindersley, *Concise Atlas of the World* (New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, Inc., 2001) 44.

[12] Walcott, *Omeros*, 31; Karl Luntta, *The Rough Guide to St. Lucia* (London: Penguin Group, 2003) xiii.

[13] Luntta, *The Rough Guide to St. Lucia*, xiii-xv.

[14] Guyana, Belize, Surinam, and French Guyane.

727,000km2.[15] The Caribbean population is comprised of fragmented communities that have developed a sense of cultural cohesiveness from a common geography and climate; colonial history (French, Spanish, British, French, and Dutch); large forced migration from Africa due to the slave trade; similar natural migrations; and shared cultural background.[16]

"Slavery shaped the West Indies."[17] Colonialism, which may be considered as little more than an incident in the history of Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, or Uganda, is the whole history of the West Indies.[18] The Caribbean people emerged as the unintentional byproduct of imperialism. In the name of Empire, European colonizers came to the West Indies, decimated the Amerindian population, enslaved, and displaced millions of Africans, and then instituted a cultural system that justified and enforced their actions. Slavery was the primary source of labor and the ideological underpinning of colonial Caribbean life. The post-colonial era has introduced independence to the Caribbean. The Caribbean people, however, are fragmented and still subject to the colonial cultural system's legacy.

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[15] Giselle Reid, "The Legacy of Colonialism: A Hindrance to Self-determination." 10 Touro International L. Rev. 277 (Spring 2000) 281; *The Rough Guide to the Caribbean* (The Penguin Group, October 2002).

[16] See Caribbean Integration Through Information Infrastructure. <http://funredes.org/gopher/c/5/5.2/5.2.3/lb.html> viewed on July 1, 2003; *The Rough Guide to the Caribbean* (The Penguin Group, October 2002).

[17] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 1.

[18] Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000) 23, citing Philip Sherlock, *West Indies*, 13-14, quoted in Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions* (Australia, Denmark, and U.K.: Dungaroo, 1993) 37.

The colonial cultural system, created to administer and control slavery, is reflected in the current racially and culturally based patterns of stratification in the West Indies. In *Omeros*, Walcott demonstrates the predominance of the social order, principles, morality, conscience, and conduct of the colonial cultural system; and he contrasts this with the cultural system of resistance that has emerged in a post-colonial Caribbean. In between these two ends of the cultural spectrum are the various cultural matrices that comprise the hybrid cultural system of the Caribbean. Walcott's characters, like the West Indian people, fall both at the extremes as well as any point in between. Taken as a collective, these cultural matrices define "Caribbeanness."

A. A Culture Beyond Metaphor

Omeros is Walcott's tribute to St. Lucia and "[his] wide country, the Caribbean Sea."[19] In keeping with this, Walcott's characters are not just St. Lucian but Caribbean. The epic form allows Walcott to present the historical events that led to the formation of the Caribbean culture and West Indian people. Walcott's characters Helen, Achille, Hector, Major Plunkett, Maud, Ma Kilman, Philoctete, Statics, Seven Seas, and Walcott, as narrator, each represent a cultural identity found in the West Indies. Many of these names have an obvious historical or literary counterpart in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

[19] Walcott, *Omeros*, 320.

However, *Omeros* is not a Caribbean adaptation of these works.[20] Instead, *Omeros* is its own epic describing the formation of a new nation and culture, the Caribbean people.

By using Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as a familiar comparative framework, Walcott is able (1) to resolve the conflict between "cultural nationalism" and "cultural internationalism" in Caribbean Literature, and (2) to demonstrate how literature embodies both the differences and the similarities between experiences and language. Both are essential to Walcott's larger project and aim. As Paula Burnett states, in Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics, "Everything [Walcott] has written can be regarded as part of his ongoing epic project to name Caribbeanness to the world[.]"[21]

Rei Terada asserts in his book, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, that Walcott "rejects the idea of literature as cultural property in favor of that of an international community of poets who are all borrowers and thieves...[Walcott understands] poetry is always a mimicry of the past."[22] However, I argue that Walcott seeks acceptance of Caribbean Literature as a part of the international literary community, but with acknowledgement that Caribbean Literature is comprised of something beyond mere mimicry. Terada's label of mimicry undermines the key qualities that define Caribbean Literature and Walcott's intentions in *Omeros*. To say a literary work mimics

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[20] "Walcott creates a Caribbean world of parallel status and originality with comparatively little sense of vicarious independence on Homer. Although characters' names point to the *Iliad* as an intertext, few of the episodes are closely patterned on the earlier epic; and the names mentioned above [Achille, Philoctete, and Helen] are not at all extraordinary in St. Lucia[.]" John Thieme, *Derek Walcott*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999) 153.

[21] Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, x.

[22] Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992) 4.

is to limit the writer's work to imitation, or simulation of the past, and denies the original components that set the writer's work apart from its influences. This is particularly important to a discussion of *Omeros* because the writer's words are intended as a reflection of a cultural identity and not merely the writer's stylistic choices. Every poem has echoes of a familiar voice, but West Indian poetry clearly resonates with its own distinct differences. Difference and resistance to the colonial cultural system is a recurring theme and in part defines Caribbean Literature and Caribbeanness. In *Omeros*, as in so many of his other works, Walcott demonstrates that Caribbean Literature is as much about influences as it is differences. The hybrid Caribbean culture, which is heir to both foreign and autochthonous cultures, has its own nascent, unified voice in the world of literature.

1. Building a collective consciousness

Homer, or by his Greek name *Omeros*, wrote from an oral tradition and a polycultural heritage similar to that of the West Indies. The Greeks share with the West Indian people a heritage of slavery, dislocation, and life along the sea. The Ancient Greeks handed down myths, stories, legends, and beliefs orally through story-tellers and poets until they could be written. This method of oral preservation is similar to the way in which the African slaves preserved their history, religion, and language in the West Indies. For Walcott "[s]torytelling serves to create and conform identity, both individual

and collective."[23] Storytelling "helps build new communities" and is essential to what many term "consciousness raising."[24]

In the post-colonial era, the Caribbean's resistance culture is still forging its own identity and defining itself as a collective consciousness. "Myth making" and "creation of a new collective subject with a history from which individuals can draw to shape their own identities" is crucial to building a cultural identity in the Caribbean.[25] Toni Morrison and her contemporaries have done this in the context of African-American Literature. Morrison has transformed the reader's understanding of American Literature by calling attention to the African-American social and political culture.[26] Likewise, Walcott and his contemporaries raise the question of what is "Caribbeanness" and "Caribbean Literature" or "West Indian Literature" within the broad spectrum of English Literature. To define "Caribbeanness," one must determine the social order, principles, morality, conscience, and conduct of the collective Caribbean community. To define "Caribbeanness" is to define the Caribbean culture's language of the law.

The language of the law plays a crucial role within the Homeric tales. This is another reason the Homeric stories are a fitting reference for Walcott. The Homeric counterpart to the colonial cultural system is the cultural system established by the

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[23] Angela P. Harris, "Foreword: The Jurisprudence of Reconstruction, Symposium: Critical Race Theory," 82 Cal. L. Rev. 741 (July 1994) 764.

[24] Harris, "The Jurisprudence of Reconstruction," 764.

[25] Harris, "The Jurisprudence of Reconstruction," 764.

[26] Harris, "The Jurisprudence of Reconstruction," 764.

Greeks gods of Olympus. The Greek gods imposed Olympic law on mankind, placing the gods above man. Resistance to this stratified system is a reoccurring theme in the Homeric tales and Greek mythology. Similarly, in *Omeros* and Caribbean Literature, resistance to the colonial cultural system is a powerful and reoccurring theme. While Walcott does not elevate the colonizers to deities, their role in shaping the West Indies and establishing the disparity of power is a striking metaphor.[27]

2. The English and American hegemonic shadow

Some writers are quick to compare Walcott's *Omeros* with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which uses the structure of the Homeric *Odyssey* as a contrast to the lives of the Dublin working class. However, unlike Joyce's *Ulysses*, "*Omeros* gradually frustrates one's hope of defining the connections between St. Lucian and Greek characters."[28] Walcott's tenuous analogies are part of his attempt to enter the literary realm beyond metaphor or adaptation. Walcott uses allusions, inferences, and associations to Homer's works and Joyce's *Ulysses,* as well as a multitude of other literary, historical, and cultural influences to create a paradigm for what is uniquely West Indian. By juxtaposing the accepted and classical paradigm with the West Indian difference, Walcott is able to show what belongs to the Caribbean paradigm and not the "foreign machinery known as Literature."[29]

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[27] "Epic draws an equation between power and narrative. The epic victors both project their present power prophetically into the future and trace its legitimizing origins back into the past…[T]he ability to construct narratives that join beginnings purposefully to ends is already the sign and dispensation of power." David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993) 45.

[28] Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry*, 185.

[29] Walcott, *Omeros,* 68-69.

Homer's stories began as the Greeks' cultural property but over time became part of the collective cultural heritage of mankind. In an interview, Walcott commented to Burnett, "The English think Homer belongs to them...the attitude will be, yes, basically it's an English poem that has been translated into Greek."[30] Walcott seeks roughly the inverse with *Omeros*. West Indian or Caribbean Literature[31] is still largely considered a subcategory of African-American Literature, Post-colonial Literature, or English Literature. The English, and the rest of the world, may first look at *Omeros*, or another Caribbean poem, and think it's an English poem written in dialect. This is the Imperial perspective of literature. Walcott seeks recognition of Caribbeanness not the universality of the English language.

In writing *Omeros*, Walcott seeks "to enter that light beyond metaphor[.]"[32] Walcott is looking to the light beyond the English and American hegemonic shadow. With *Omeros*, Walcott is not rewriting the Homeric myth but creating a Caribbean one. Walcott is defining what is the intrinsic cultural property of the West Indies and not merely a remnant of the colonial cultural system or mankind's collective cultural heritage. *Omeros* is not the story of some small archipelago that became a nation which

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[30] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics*, 168, quoting Derek Walcott, interview by Burnett, Statford-on-Avon, July 1, 1992.

[31] Laurence A. Breiner points to a 1933 article in the pages of *The Beacon* as the first time the term "West Indian Literature" was used. "[T]he point of the article is that such a thing does not yet exist, and cannot be wished into existence[.]" Breiner's book discusses the emergence of West Indian Literature in the years that have followed. Laurence A. Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 89.

[32] Walcott, *Omeros,* 271.

Walcott adapted and set in the Caribbean; *Omeros* tells the story of the Caribbean culture and nation. *Omeros* is the story of the Caribbean's language of the law: its pulse, morality, and consciousness.

Walcott's literary and historical comparative framework also serves as a backdrop for his characters' struggle with their relationship to the colonial cultural system and to their own cultural matrices. In order to understand the current cultural systems in the West Indies and the cultural matrices of each of Walcott's characters, one must first understand colonialism. For purposes of this text, I will limit the discussion to English/British colonialism. This discussion, however, can be applied more broadly to European colonialism in the West Indies.

B. Displaced and Enslaved

The Europeans discovered the West Indies in the late 1400's, and the race for power and profit began short thereafter. Just like the French, Spanish, and Dutch during this time period, "[t]he English aimed at creating an empire"[33] and "Empires were swinish."[34] The European colonizers knew success "depended on three things: land, labor, and laws to regulate them."[35] More importantly, success in the West Indies depended on slavery.

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[33] Reid, "The Legacy of Colonialism," 280 - 281.

[34] Walcott, *Omeros*, 63.

[35] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 10.

Slavery, as an institution, was predicated on slaves being chattel or "pigs," property to be used as the primary source of labor. To the colonizers "these" were not a nation or a people, but a means to reach an economic objective. The European colonizers put in place laws creating economic, social, and cultural systems that would serve to legitimize, justify, and administer the institution of slavery in the West Indies.[36] The English colonizers reinforced slavery not only through laws but social and religious policy. As Walcott writes in *Omeros*, they "[e]ncouraged [their slaves] to screw like rabbits" in order to increase their labor force, then reinforced this economic policy with "a Church that damned them to hell for contraceptives[.]"[37] Law and policy, religious or otherwise, were used not only to regulate but to control the slave population. This disparity of power is part of the colonial cultural system and part of the language of the law in *Omeros*.

Walcott's characters modern-day colonialists Maud and Major Dennis Plunkett rationalize the use of slavery. In Major Plunkett's words "...My thoughts are pure. / They're meant to help her people, ignorant and poor. / But these...are the vows of empire."[38] Perhaps to assuage their own guilt, colonialists like the Plunketts assert slavery benefited the natives and African slaves because it introduced civilization and religion.[39] In fact, colonialism did exactly the opposite. Colonialism in the Caribbean

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[36] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language.*

[37] Walcott, *Omeros,* 63.

[38] Walcott, *Omeros,* 97.

[39] The religious benefit is also a myth since the slaves were not literate and, therefore, could not read the bible. Further, the plantocracy did not allow slaves to attend their white Christian church service.

began by murdering native peoples, destroying families, dehumanizing entire civilizations based on their skin color, and prohibiting practice of any non-Christian religion.[40] The result is a post-colonial West Indian culture that is unable to fully appreciate or remember its own identity, history, religion, and culture beyond colonialism and slavery.

Unfortunately, many West Indians have internalized the colonial cultural system's racist values and believe, on at least an unconscious level, that black is inferior to white and that as a community they are something less than a people.[41] Burnett offers that in the Caribbean's culturally hybrid society "[t]he person of mixed race, like Walcott, therefore has a special authority to speak of race. Empire had a horror of the hybrid, because in the mixed-race person it recognized the destruction of its system of racial classification, the trampling of boundaries, as its even more hysterical devising of new terms of classification exhibits." [42] In the West Indies, the mixed-race individual is not entirely black, white, Indian, slave, or colonizer, but is fully West Indian. In a place where people have traditionally been stratified according to their pedigree, and the color of their skin, a mixed race and hybrid society threatens to undermine the dominant

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Reid, "The Legacy of Colonialism."

[40] Aime Cesaire, translated by Joan Pinkham, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) 76.

[41] Reid, "The Legacy of Colonialism," 305, citing *Eric E. Williams, Speaks: Essays on Colonialism and Independence*, Selwyn R. Cudjoe ed., (Calaloux Publications, 1993). "[I]mperialism rewarded passivity and encouraged dependence. It required citizens to live by the rules of a distant elite. It demanded people be docile in the face of a system that they could not change."

[42] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics*, 19-20.

society's basic tenets. Coming to terms with hybrid identity is an internal struggle for many West Indians, as well as a personal struggle for Walcott.

III. CARIBBEAN INDEPENDENCE

All peoples have the right of self-determination.
By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status
and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.[43]

Over the past five centuries, slavery has been abolished and most of the Caribbean has gained independence from its colonial parents. However, the West Indian struggle for true freedom and independence continues.[44] Independence is a matter of fact but not a reality in the West Indies. "The problem with imperialism was not just its economic exploitation. It was its influence on culture. It undermined traditional ways and institutions. It was inconsistent with human dignity."[45] The imperialistic colonial cultural system is still undermining the traditional way of life and cultural development of the West Indies. Economic dependence and a colonial-created social structure continue to be an everyday reality for most of the Caribbean. The difficulty in exercising self-

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[43] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

[44] Reid, "The Legacy of Colonialism," 281.

[45] Ediberto Roman, "Empire Forgotten: The United States's Colonization of Puerto Rico" 42 Vill. L. Rev. 1119 (1997) quoting 141 Cong. Rec. S7245 (daily ed. May 23, 1995) (statement of Sen. Ashcroft).

determination[46] and overcoming the influence of the colonial cultural system is central to understanding the social dynamics in *Omeros*.

In *Omeros*, Walcott asks how the Caribbean became economically dependent. He questions,

> Where did it start? The iron roar of the market,
> with its crescent moons of Mohammedan melons,
> with hands of bananas from a Pharoah's casket,
>
> 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.[47]

The "roar of the market" is as old as the idea of imperialism itself. To Walcott the stalls of the Antilles' market hold the same evil as the market of Rome, an imbalance of power. The stalls of the Roman market were filled with the fruits and products of people that were conquered and controlled by the Roman Empire. Similarly, the West Indies and its people were controlled and used as resources by the colonizers. The image of the scales is the symbol of justice. In *Omeros*, the scales represent the absence of justice and unequal balance of power. The allusions to Rome and Egypt are a reminder that history

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[46] Self-determination is the universal human right of all peoples to be independent and free from all forms of foreign control, including their own political, cultural, and socio-economic future. See Roman, "Empire Forgotten," 1127, citing Ruth E. Gordon, "Some Legal Problems with Trusteeship," 28 Cornell Int'l L.J. 301, 320-23 (1995). In the post-colonial era, self-determination is more broadly applied to a peoples' right to determine their cultural and socio-economic future free from the colonial cultural system's influence. Developing, independent nations find they are still not free from their colonial economic and cultural ties. In the West Indies, self-determination is a political fact, but not a cultural or socio-economic reality.

[47] Walcott, *Omeros*, 37-38.

repeats itself, and we would be wise to look back to learn the lessons of Empire. The horizon separates the old world from the new, England from its colonies, and the Caribbean from Africa. However, Walcott reminds us that "as just as things might seem," things are "never equal." The mask of economic progress conceals the economic dependence and exploitation of the Antilles. The language of the law Walcott depicts here is one of imbalance: an economic model based on colonial principles and sustained by a colonial cultural system.

Achieving economic independence is part of the struggle for self-determination and necessary to eradicate the colonial cultural system. Today, the colonial plantocracy has been replaced but the face has not changed. Like the plantation system, the tourist industry is dominated by foreign entities. These entities control the majority of hotels, airlines, cruise ships, and tours that operate in the Caribbean.[48] Further, foreign corporations continue to own, operate, and control most of the banking, construction, manufacturing, and communications in the Caribbean. Similar to the colonial plantation system, these foreign companies exploit the labor force and expatriate the profits.[49]

This exploitation of the Caribbean's natural resources continues to contribute to the European and the American economy, but has not contributed significantly to the Caribbean's economic development.[50] "[T]he bill [for reparations and slavery has] never

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[48] Reid, *The Legacy of Colonialism*, 281.

[49] Reid, *The Legacy of Colonialism,* citing Alvin O. Thompson, *The Haunting Past Politics, Economics and Race in Caribbean Life* (1997).

[50] While colonialism has led to development, most of the development of the Caribbean has not been developed for the benefit of the people. The latest developments, for example, are within tourist areas,

been paid" to the Caribbean people.[51] Instead, the bill grows and continues to weaken the Caribbean people's ability to achieve success and economic self-determination.

For Walcott, and his alter ego Achille, the modernization and commercialization of the West Indies is linked with the colonial cultural system, which prizes money over everything else. In *Omeros*, Achille's struggle with Hector for the possession of Helen symbolizes the battle between the traditional and modern Caribbean. Helen, the embodiment of the island and the West Indian people, is torn between the two. Inside her is the life and the future which is yet to be determined.

Hector leaves his seafaring life to engage in commercialism. He buys "[t]he Comet, a sixteen-seater passenger van" to haul around tourists. Walcott contrasts Hector with his character Achille. Achille embodies Walcott's vision of the traditional ideal, a young Caribbean fisherman leading a simple life. He is the stereotypical image of the primitive native who rejects modernization and does not depend on technology or colonial economics for his livelihood. Achille lives off the bounty of the Caribbean for his economic survival. He embraces his African heritage and the history of the island natives. Further, like Walcott, Achille's struggle is with his hybrid identity. He is pulled toward a past he cannot remember and is reluctant to create a new identity with roots that

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while in other parts of the island there may be a need for running water, electricity or other modern facilities. Needless to say, colonialism exploited and depleted natural resources for the benefit of the metropolis and underdeveloped the colonized country.

[51] Walcott, *Omeros*, 31.

celebrate his hybrid cultural inheritance. This difficulty mirrors Walcott's own struggle with identity and progress.

Achille and Walcott see Helen (St. Lucia and the West Indian people) as taken in by the colonial cultural system. When Helen leaves Achille for Hector his fears are confirmed that "[e]verything is money."[52] Achille seems to ignore that Helen is never given an option that would allow her to progress with Achille. Likewise, the island has been slow to progress and dismantle the colonial cultural system in lieu of a viable option for economic and social progression.

Achille vents his frustration that

> ...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
> while its children writhed in the sidewalks to the sounds
>
> of the DJ's fresh-water-Yankee-cool-Creole.
> He sat on In *God We Troust* under black almonds,
> listening to Soul Brothers losing their soul;
>
> the sandy alleys would go and their simple stores,
> the smell of fresh bread drawn from its Creole oven,
> its flour turned into cocaine, its daughters to whores,
>
> while the DJs screamed,
> "WE MOVIN', MAN! WE MOVIN'!"
> but towards what?[53]

[52] Walcott, *Omeros*, 44.

[53] Walcott, *Omeros*, 112.

Achille's words echo feelings of loss and anger. Achille sees American music as another influence threatening the Caribbean and its people, which has begun to take "their souls" and turn their "daughters into whores[.]" Achille fears the Caribbean's "simple life[,]" "simple stores," and "Creole" will soon disappear. Achille hears the familiar phrase "We Movin'" shouted from the jukebox but wants to know "towards what?" *Omeros* is the story leading up to this question, Helen's child is the answer.

Achille's words echo Walcott's own fears. Walcott has referred to tourism as a "benign blight," which "can infect all of those island nations, not gradually, but with imperceptible speed, until each rock is whitened by the guano of the white-winged hotels, the arc and the descent of progress."[54] Walcott has analogized the development of a hundred tourist bungalows placed between the Pitons of St. Lucia to "building a McDonald's next to Stonehenge"[55] or "writing 'Fuck you' on a wall in Mecca[.]"[56] On a local phone-in program, Walcott restated his opposition to the Pitons development: "Everybody knows there are other places where hotels can be built. Why there? ... you don't put any obscenity in the Grand Canyon...because you would be laughed at...How can it happen here unless people have such contempt for you that they wanted to do it, or the government has such self-contempt that they can even think of doing it?"[57]

[54] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics,* 53, quoting Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*, (London: Faber, 1993) 82.

[55] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics,* 53, quoting Derek Walcott interview in "Walcott Blasts Baron for Tourist Resort 'Greed,'" Voice, London, October 27, 1992.

[56] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics,* 53, quoting Derek Walcott, interview with Maya Jaggi, "Paradise Fights Back," *Guardian*, December 13, 1997, 70.

[57] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics,* 56, quoting Derek Walcott, interview "And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon," *Developing Stories* (Banyan Port of Spain), BBC2, London, May 21, 1992.

Walcott demonstrates his frustration in Chapter LVIII, when he speaks of hearing the "deep indignation / of Hephaestus or Ogun grumbling at the sins/of souls who had sold out their race[.]"[58] Walcott is referring to Ogun, the African god of warfare, and Hephaestus, the Greek god of volcanoes, fire, and metal working. Both the Greek and African god are grumbling at the sins of their respective races, as well as the West Indian "race" which is heir to both. He states "[t]hese were the traitors / who, in elected office, saw the land as views / for hotels and elevated into waiters / the sons of others, while their own learnt something else."[59] Walcott is angered at the West Indians, who in the name of commercialism sell the land (the West Indies) at the expense of its people. Walcott sees this as a perpetuation of the colonial cultural system, where economic objectives are given a higher priority than the progress of a people. Walcott refers to "[o]ne [that] had rented the sea[.]"[60] Walcott is clearly pointing out that the sea cannot be owned or sold, just as the island and its people cannot, and should not, be sold.

In *Omeros*, Achille and Walcott are searching for a Caribbean independent of the colonial cultural system's cultural and socio-economic influence. Achille does not see a balance and cannot accept what is happening to his island. Walcott's vision of hope is Helen. In Helen's child we see the possibility for Caribbean cultural and socio-economic self-determination. The independent Helen (St. Lucia) carries Hector's child, who will be

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[58] Walcott, *Omeros*, 289.

[59] Walcott, *Omeros*, 289.

[60] Walcott, *Omeros*, 290.

raised with Achille's influence. Walcott suggests a child born in an independent West Indies and raised in a commercial world with a strong sense of his heritage may be able to overcome the colonial cultural system's influence.

IV. INSTITUTING COLONIAL LAW THROUGH LANGUAGE

Language is utterance exchanged between speaker and listener, conqueror and conquered, who together create speech according to given social and political contexts.[61]

"Language" is an integral part of the colonial cultural system. The imposition of law and "the colonial process itself begins in language."[62] In the colonial West Indies, European colonizers separated slaves who spoke the same language and suppressed non-European language to effectively impose European languages. "[T]he Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch – insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command and conception should be English, French, Spanish, or Dutch. They did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of these Congolese languages [belonging to the slave.]"[63]

Language is the most potent instrument of power and cultural control.[64] Language provides the terms and names by which reality and the world is "known." "Language defines identities, cements relations, circumscribes communities, and encodes

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[61] Michael Dash, introduction to Edourd Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) xxi.

[62] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Editors, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 283.

[63] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1984); *Post-Colonial Reader*, 309.

[64] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 148; *The Post-Colonial Reader* 283.

and decodes cultural messages."[65] For many, language is how they are introduced to the law.[66] Rules, regulations, and prohibitions, whether official or unofficial come through language.[67] The English displaced native languages and installed the colonial language as the "standard," by which all other language variants were to be measured. Through the imposed English language, the colonial system's values, geography, concept of history, definition of difference, and measurements became the system by which all social, economic, and political discourses were evaluated.

A. Imposition of Imperial Language

As the Bishop of Avila told Queen Isabella of Castille in 1492, "Language is the perfect instrument of empire."[68] "Law" and "language" have been imposed on "barbarians" and those "who are different" by colonizers in the name of civilization, throughout history. "Barbarian" has always meant and continues to be applied to those "who are different" and "are not like us."[69] In Greek, the word "barbarian" originally meant "one who does not speak Greek."[70] Just as the ancient Greeks viewed "[those] who [do] not speak Greek," the European colonists perceived "those who do not speak English (Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Dutch)" as the "other" and a "barbarian." The

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[65] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 147.

[66] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 148.

[67] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 148.

[68] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics,* 126.

[69] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 159.

[70] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 6.

colonizers viewed the West Indian natives and the African slaves as barbarians. The colonizer does not, and cannot view, the "barbarians" as possessing civilization or a culture equal to the colonizer, because there would be no justification for the exploitation or domination of these "barbarians." This misguided belief gave the colonizers great moral latitude to introduce civilization to what they perceived to be a primitive and savage people.

The "bearded elders" of the Aruac tribe "endured the decimation/of their tribe without uttering a syllable / of that language they had uttered as one nation...their language was lost."[71] This is Walcott's poetic description of the brutal annihilation of the Aruac tribe, and its language, in the name of Empire. The colonizers "decimated" an already existing civilization of "barbarians" in order to institute colonial order and civilization in the West Indies. This is the arrogance of Empire and the foundation of the language of the law in the West Indies: a cultural and socio-economic system created in the Imperial voice and given its lexicon with its meanings and associations.

Walcott's modern day "barbarians"[72] are the St. Lucian fishermen. They are the descendants of the West Indian natives and the African slaves brought to the islands by the colonizers. Despite Caribbean independence, these fishermen remain in the role of "other," or "barbarians," to the colonial culture system. In the post-colonial context of *Omeros*, the fishermen's internal struggle is a metaphor for the Caribbean struggle for

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[71] Walcott, *Omeros*, 6.

[72] Walcott, *Omeros*, 6.

self-determination. The fisherman, like many of Walcott's other characters, are pulled between the colonial culture system and its resistance. This resistance is demonstrated most clearly in language.

The European colonizers imposed their language on the "barbarians" in order to preserve the colonial culture and its beliefs. The colonial culture's beliefs are imbedded in its language. While law and language are powerful means to legitimize and enforce a colonial culture system, they are also part of the resistance and critique. The maintenance of the colonial culture system relies on the retention of its cultural meanings within the language. Resistance to this power is found in the West Indian redefinition of these cultural meanings.[73]

B. Language Appropriation in the West Indies

English can be heard throughout the Caribbean. The language of the Caribbean people, however, differs in many ways from what is commonly referred to as standard English.[74] This natural language, the Caribbean dialect, or patois,[75] has become an "outlaw" language.[76] Recognition of this "outlaw" language serves to displace the firm

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[73] There are more direct forms of cultural resistance such as non-cooperation, sabatoge, and petty thievery (such as Helen's taking of Maud's items). These forms of resistance can also be found throughout the text of *Omeros*.

[74] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice.*

[75] "Patois" is defined as "[a] regional dialect, especially one without a literary tradition[;] [a] creole; [n]onstandard speech[;] [and] [t]he jargon of a group.") The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed., 2000, s.v. "patois."

[76] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 149.

foundation of the colonial cultural system, which is based on the beliefs imbedded in the colonizer's language.

Walcott once commented, "we are deprived of what we cannot remember."[77] The slaves preserved their history and language through oral preservation. Over time, the colonial imposed language combined with the language retentions of the slaves' languages resulting in pidgins and creoles.[78] Creolized language is often in conflict with the standard form of language from which it is derived. The standard language often has the status that is associated with social prestige, education, and wealth. The creole has no such status and often retains its associations with slavery and colonization. This is reflected in the cultural stratification of the West Indies.

Colonial law impacted the West Indian subjects by constraining behavior, molding values, and creating a preference for the standard form of English.[79] Non-English speakers have been taught to value the syntax, cadence, and accent of standard English speech.[80] They find themselves under great pressure to adapt their communication to the standard and more accepted form. Writers are not immune to this pressure. In *Omeros*, Walcott's father comments that he "preferred verse to fame[.]"[81] He suggests that writing in Caribbean verse was unacceptable and "It's that Will you

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[77] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 159.

[78] Chamberlain, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 111.

[79] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 148.

[80] Montoya, *Law and Language(s)*, 148.

[81] Walcott, *Omeros*, 68.

inherit."[82] Walcott like many Caribbean writers recalls that he grew up speaking in one language and writing in another. The natural language used in conversation is patois, but academic discourse is still conducted in standard English.

Today, many in the Caribbean view this "outlaw" language or patois as their "Nation Language." The importance in gaining recognition of this "Nation Language" is to establish a cultural identity separate from the colonial imposed one. However, how language should be used as a form of resistance to imperial dominance is debated in post-colonial discourse. In post-colonial discourse, there are several suggested forms of resistance to the dominance of imperial language.

C. Rejection and Subversion

"Rejection" is based on the idea that national or ethnic identity is embedded in the imperial language. Rejection assumes the language of the colonizer has displaced the identity of the country and the only way of revoking political dominance is through complete rejection of the imperial language. A complete rejection is necessary to show refusal (1) to accede to the imperial world and the reality it appears to name, and (2) to submit to the political dominance its use implies.[83] Rejection writers, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, believe only through this complete rejection can cultural identity be regained and the imposed identity of the colonizer eradicated. Walcott, however, believes a poet rejecting "classical style" and "the language of the master" is "engaging in a form

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[82] Walcott, *Omeros*, 68.

[83] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 283.

of self-torture" that "limits his memory to the suffering of the victim."[84] "The language of the torturer mastered by the victim. This is [mistakenly] viewed as servitude, not a victory."[85] In *Omeros*, Walcott as narrator speaks of "the wound of a language [he'd] no longer wish to remove."[86] Walcott accepts the influence of the Imperial language as a part of his own identity and what is Caribbeanness. For Walcott, English is the scar that cannot be removed and should be acknowledged as such, a linguistic scar that is a reminder of a past which cannot be altered and should never be forgotten.

"Subversion" is a far more subtle form of resistance. Writers, such as W. H. New, Chinua Achebe, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Walcott demonstrate that subversion can be linguistically profound in its resistance to the standard language's political power and should be viewed as a "victory." They see language as an instrument of revolution: "it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions."[87] One form of "subversion" is the appropriation of the language. In appropriation, the "standard" language is adapted to the demands and requirements of the place and society into which it has been appropriated.[88] "In Chinua Achebe's words," through this process language "is made to bear the weight and the texture of a different experience.[89] In doing

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[84] Walcott, *The Muse of History*, 371.

[85] Walcott, *The Muse of History*, 371.

[86] Walcott, *Omeros*, 270.

[87] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 13.

[88] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 284.

[89] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 284.

so, the language becomes a new language with differences in grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. Further, the language that results has a different voice and power of its own. In *Omeros,* Walcott demonstrates that "language appropriation" is the best way to describe the linguistic dynamics in the Caribbean. "For while the West Indians lived the extreme of language-as-power, they also generated the opposite pole of language-as-creative-survival, and of language-as-subversion."[90] What has emerged in the Caribbean is a linguistic model far different from the colonial one.

[90] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics*, 23.

V. NATION LANGUAGE

The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word.[91]

Nation Language has a crucial role in Caribbean self-determination and the dismantling of the colonial cultural system. As discussed earlier, the Caribbean identity is a hybrid cultural system influenced by the European colonial culture system, native Amerindian culture, and the imported culture of the African slaves. From these influences has emerged a cultural identity unique to the Caribbean. A significant part of this cultural identity is Nation Language.

The Caribbean is "one of the most dynamic linguistic communities in the world."[92] There are "around 30 English-based creoles found throughout the islands of the Caribbean,"[93] as well as Spanish, French, Dutch, and Portuguese based creoles. Although Caribbean Literature cannot be confined to just literature written in English, many of the linguistic differences found in the Caribbean Creole English are shared by the other creoles found in the West Indies. In these similarities we find what Brathwaite calls "Nation Language."[94] The importance of identifying a common linguistic pattern in West

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[91] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 17.

[92] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 284.

[93] David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 338.

[94] Chamberlin, *Come Back To Me My Language*, 95.

Indian poetry and Brathwaite's Nation Language "is to further solidify the social solidarity of those who speak the language."[95]

Brathwaite's Nation Language is a form of revolution against the colonial cultural system. Brathwaite defines Nation Language as "the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timber, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree."[96] Edouard Glissant, a Caribbean writer from Martinique, defines nation language as "forced poetics" due to its emergence from slavery. According to Brathwaite, "[f]or [Glissant], nation language is a kind of strategy: the slave is forced to use a certain kind of language in order to disguise himself, to disguise his personality and to retain his culture. And he defines that language as a 'forced poetics' because it is a kind of prison language."[97] Both definitions call attention to the power inherent in the formation of language and its use.

In the decades since the writings of Glissant and Brathwaite, Caribbean Writers have embraced writing in Nation Language as a form of expressing cultural identity. However, the view of Nation Language as inferior or dialectal has not changed

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[95] David G. Mandelbaum, Editor, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1943) 16.

[96] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice, 13.*

[97] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice,* 13 citing Edouard Glissant, *Alcheringa*, New Series 2:2 (1976).

significantly. This is due in large part to the bias of the colonial cultural system's values placed on literature and speech.

A. Identifying Nation Language

Walcott once commented the best Caribbean poet he ever knew was Chinese. The ethnicity of poet is unimportant: if a poet is culturally West Indian the language they use will be shaped along those lines. The polyphony of sounds and voices in the Caribbean (African, English, French, Dutch, Indian, Arab, Asian, Greek) can be heard in Caribbean's Nation Language and *Omeros*. The melodic rhythm of the islands can be found in the sensuous description of the landscape. The West Indian relationship to the sea is imbedded in the fluidity of the linguistic structure, the casualness of space and time.

Slavery, colonialism, and the Middle Passage shape the thoughts, feelings, and language of those who live in the Caribbean. The structures of the plantocracy live in the language's words and their meaning. Words like "plantation," "sugar," and "sugar mill" take on a particular meaning in the West Indian Nation Language. These are the words of the colonizer, but their meanings have been appropriated, subverted, and redefined in the Caribbean. For instance, in the West Indies the word "sugar" is associated with such things as the slave trade, imperialism, and loss. Thus, "sugar" has a much richer and profoundly different meaning when used in Caribbean poetry than the meaning implied in standard English poetry. Words have the power and meaning ascribed by the consciousness of the people who use and hear them. Further, language is more than

words but the meaning the words imply and their associations. In the West Indies, standard English words have been redefined and have become part of its Nation Language.

Omeros begins with the line, "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes"[98] and ends with the lines "A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion. / When he left the beach the sea was still going on."[99] Both lines are indicative of the language of *Omeros* and the Caribbean. There are obvious differences from standard English in sound, grammar, and vocabulary. Walcott's depiction of the tree cutting as an act of murder is a retention of African religious beliefs, which can often be found within the West Indian language. Further, the image of a tree as a canoe, or the moon as a slice of raw onion, is not just poetic but uniquely West Indian. The fact that these phrases may be common in the West Indies gives more power to the language.

B. A Name Means Something

Naming is an integral part of language and Nation Language. As Walcott tells us "[a] name means something."[100] There is a power in naming and language manifests itself in names. The Amerindian cultures called St. Lucia, "Iouanalao" meaning "where the iguana is found."[101] The colonizers gave the island its European name St. Lucia,

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[98] Walcott, *Omeros*, 3.

[99] Walcott, *Omeros*, 325.

[100] Walcott, *Omeros*, 137.

[101] Walcott, *Omeros*, 92.

changing its identity and associations. Likewise, Walcott demonstrates the importance of names in choosing his poem's title, "Omeros."

A given name denotes belonging and a sense of roots, which is often an underlying theme in West Indian literature. In choosing the name "Omeros," Walcott resists the English spelling in order to show there are stronger roots and ties to the meaning implied by the Greek name. He then makes the name, "Omeros," West Indian through his descriptive words of its components, "and O was the conch-shell's invocation, mer was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes."[102] The Greek names and Homeric allusions are part of the collective cultural heritage of mankind. Walcott's unique interpretation and use of the allusions are, however, a part of the West Indian cultural property and Nation Language. "In short, Walcott uses the play of the signifier to suggest that words have multiple origins and in so doing frustrates the attempt to assign them to a single culture."[103]

The resistance of colonial imposed language is repeated in the name of Achille's canoe, "In God We Troust." When the priests christening the boat smiles at the misspelling, Achille snaps in patois, "Leave it! Is God's spelling and mine."[104] This demonstrates how the resistance to the colonially imposed language can be significant

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[102] Walcott, *Omeros*, 14.

[103] Thieme, *Derek Walcott,* 154. "[T]he title operates in this way: on the one hand it reclaims Homer from his assigned role at the headwaters of *Western* European culture by reassigning his *Greek* name to him; on another level it propounds an altogether different entomology for 'Omeros'.....So, at the same time as Homer is reclaimed as Greek 'Omeros' he is also reinvented as a Caribbean poet."

[104] Walcott, *Omeros*, 8.

even in the slightest linguistic infraction. More significantly, the phrase "In God We Trust" can be associated with the American currency, which Achille sees as a threat to Caribbean economic self-determination. Achille rejects the standard and accepted English spelling of the familiar American phrase, as well as its associations. Achille instead chooses, or rather insists on, a patois spelling. This new spelling is a rejection of English and American influence, not just on language but on the Caribbean economy.

Language was imposed on the West Indian people by the colonizers. When Achille is asked by Afolabe the meaning of his own name, he answers:

> I do not know what the name means. It means something.
> maybe. What's the difference? In the world I come from
> we accept the sounds we are given. Men, trees, water.[105]

These are the words of the colonizer and the colonial cultural system. The West Indian people have accepted the Imperial language and its words without regard to their meaning. For the West Indian people, accepting this imposed language has meant oppression and subjugation. The West Indians have lost their native languages, the names of their ancestors, and more importantly, the meaning their words implied. Later, Achille says "[t]heir whole world was moving, / or a large part of the world, and what began dissolving / was the fading sound of their tribal name for the rain, / the bright sound for the sun, hissing sound for the river, / and always the word 'never,' and the word 'again.'"[106] Achille sees the loss in accepting the language given to them by the

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[105] Walcott, *Omeros*, 138.

[106] Walcott, *Omeros*, 152.

colonizer. Walcott implies that to accept the language of another, at the loss of your own, is to lose one's world and identity.

VI. HELEN OF THE WEST INDIES

[W]hen would I enter that light beyond metaphor?[107]

As stated earlier, "[a] name means something."[108] The choice of name for Walcott's character "Helen" is particularly important. Helen is St. Lucia, the West Indian people, and the embodiment of their "Nation Language." "She" needed a name synonymous with her role as both catalyst and constant.

We are first introduced to Helen through Walcott's eyes as narrator. Helen is described as "a woman with a madras head tie, / but the head proud, although it was looking for work / I felt like standing in homage to a beauty[.]"[109] Walcott provides the reader with a simple picture, Helen: a proud African beauty in need of work. The waitress tells us that "[Helen] is too proud" and sneers her name when asked.[110] Just like the island and the West Indies, Helen is defined by its inhabitants, Walcott's characters. Walcott chooses to control the reader's perception of Helen by keeping her silent throughout most of the text and not giving voice to her feelings or perspective.[111] Helen's

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[107] Walcott, *Omeros*, 271

[108] Walcott, *Omeros*, 137.

[109] Walcott, *Omeros*, 23.

[110] Walcott, *Omeros*, 25.

[111] Feal, "Helen: A History that Heals in *Omeros*."

identity emerges through the author's associations and Walcott's characters' biased descriptions of her.

First, there is Helen's literary and "Homeric association"[112] to Helen of Troy, the betrayer of Menelaus, the face that launched a thousand ships, and catalyst to the fall of Troy. The Greek allusions give the struggle between Achille and Hector over Helen its full epic dimension. Helen's beauty and fertility are symbolic of the island of St. Lucia, where in the village of Troy Achille and Hector struggle for her. Their "war," however, is not just a struggle over something much larger than Helen's affections. "And in the shadow of her name lies the ghost of other battles, of another Helen, who throughout the poem haunts the figure of the servant girl loved by two fishermen."[113] Helen represents not only the West Indies' history, but also its future of a cultural nation.

Second, Helen is the St. Lucian island, the former Iouanalao, with its history linked to the Amerindian natives, the African slaves that were brought to its shores, and colonization. She is linked to the Amerindian and African cultural system. Helen is both historyless islander and the African goddess Oshun.[114]

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[112] Walcott, *Omeros*, 29.

[113] Isabella Maria Zoppi, "Omeros, Derek Walcott and the Contemporary Epic Poem" *Callaloo.* 22.2 (1999) 520.

[114] There is a correlation between the Greek and African (Yoruba) gods. For example, the Yoruba pantheon Oshun is recounted by the West India slaves as: "Oshun Yeye Moro, the perfumed whore; Oshun Kayode, the gay dancer; Oshun Aña, the lover of the drum; Oshun Akuara, she who mixes love potions; Oshun Ede, the grande dame; Oshun Fumike, she who gives children to sterile women; Oshun Funke, the wise one; Oshun Kole-Kole, the wicked sorceress." Antonio Benítez-Rojo, translated by James E. Maraniss, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Second Edition (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

Lastly, Helen is defined through Walcott's characters. I will show that each character views the language of the law and Helen according to their cultural matrices. Their perception and description of Helen is based on their view of social order, principles, and proper life conduct in the West Indies. Their "testimony," as to Helen's "appropriation" or "entitlement" to the dress, mirrors the myriad of perspectives on the West Indian right to independence, socio-economic self-determination, and recognition as a cultural identity.

VII. THE PALE YELLOW FROCK

To declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence.[115]

Helen holds her head proudly as she wears the pale yellow frock, the "lemon dress [is] her sign."[116] The yellow dress is the language of the law. The yellow dress once belonged to Maud Plunkett. Maud is an older white English woman who sits on the verandah, tends to her garden, and embroiders birds on a quilt. She represents the Victorian era, the height of the English Empire, and the colonial cultural system.

Maud envies Helen's beauty, youth, and fertility. Helen holds inside her a new generation and the promise of an end to the colonial cultural system. Maud sees Helen as "our trouble[.]" The "Empire was ebbing" and Helen is the cause. Maud's view of Helen is the colonizer's distrustful eye on the young and fertile independent Caribbean.

Maud had the yellow dress altered and gave it to Helen. Likewise, the language of the law was altered when the West Indian people were given independence. It is important that the structure of the dress itself is not changed but merely altered. This reflects how West Indian independence is merely a modification in the structure of the

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[115] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 169.

[116] Walcott, *Omeros*, 153.

language of the law. The current language of the law is not significantly different in overall appearance or form from the language of the law established by the colonizers.

Maud gives the dress to Helen but still views the dress as her own. Moreover, Maud often claims Helen stole the dress. This denial of Helen's rightful entitlement to the dress mirrors the colonial cultural system's grasp on the West Indies.

Walcott summarizes the colonial view of West Indian independence through Major Plunkett's description of Helen's yellow dress:

> and that's when it all begins;
> when the maid turns into the mistress and destroys
> her own possibilities. They start to behave
>
> as if they owned you, Maud said. This was the distress
> of the pale yellow frock, which Helen claimed Maud gave
> her but forgot. He stayed out of it, but that dress
>
> had an empire's tag on it, mistress to slave.
> The price was envy and cunning. The big church, the
> middens by cloudy lagoons, kids racing like piglets.
>
> If History saw them as pigs, History was Circe[.][117]

Major Plunkett views Caribbean independence as an imperial gift to its former slaves. This gift still has the "empire's tag." The colonial cultural system is the tag that cannot be removed, that is the "distress/of the pale yellow frock[.]" Walcott's "distress," and the "distress" of the language of the law in the West Indies, is in the Caribbean finding independence from its colonial ties.

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[117] Walcott, *Omeros*, 63.

Major Plunkett says the price Helen paid for the dress was "envy and cunning" alluding to her possible theft of the dress from Maud. However, Helen did not steal the yellow dress. The dress is the same "yellow frock Maud had altered for her[.]"[118] Elsa Feal, in her text "Helen: History that Heals in *Omeros*" asserts that Helen's appropriation of the dress is significant because both Maud and Major Plunkett feel threatened by their former maid. Further, she asserts Walcott never really lets the reader know how Helen becomes the owner of the dress. However, I argue we know quite clearly that Maud gave her the dress, just as we know the Caribbean was given independence.

The fact that Walcott allows his characters to oscillate as to how Helen acquired the dress is a reflection of their wavering opinion of Caribbean independence: Was it given or taken? The answer may be that West Indian independence was both given and taken. The West Indies has not fully realized cultural or socio-economic independence from the colonial cultural system. A dissolution of these ties has been a slow process in the West Indies. What strides are taken towards complete West Indian self-determination are taken in resistance to the structure created by the colonizers. A colonial structure that is predicated upon the West Indian people being inferior and unable to realize socio-economic self-determination. Thus, the Caribbean was given political independence but cultural and socio-economic independence must still be taken.

Helen struggles against the colonial cultural system to embrace independence throughout the text. An independent but pregnant Helen, canvases the island looking for

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[118] Walcott, *Omeros*, 29.

work. The restaurant managers seem unwilling to hire her "'caus she dint take no shit / from white people and some of them tourist[.]"[119] Helen is tired of "tourist[s]—the men / only out to touch local girls; every minute— / was brushing their hand from her backside[.]"[120] Helen relates a previous incident that occurred at an island restaurant, where

> she get fed up with all their nastiness so she tell
>
> tell the cashier that wasn't part of her focking pay,
> take off her costume, and walk straight out of the hotel
> naked as God make [her] ...[121]

This is the naked Helen that adorned herself in the yellow banner of defiance. Moreover, this is the point where Helen decides to change. Unable to find work, Helen walks down the beach carrying her sandals in hand. She walks into the smoke where "[c]hange burns at the beach's end."[122] Helen is seeking change. There, the Helen that adhered to the colonial cultural system, "white Helen died."[123] Helen is choosing to live on her own terms, in resistance of the code of conduct set by the colonial cultural system. Helen begins to embrace Caribbean independence and looks to realizing self-determination.

The new independent Helen is enterprising. Walcott sees her

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[119] Walcott, *Omeros*, 33.

[120] Walcott, *Omeros*, 33.

[121] Walcott, *Omeros*, 33-34.

[122] Walcott, *Omeros*, 34.

[123] Walcott, *Omeros*, 34.

> when because they thought her moods uncontrollable,
> her tongue too tart for a waitress to take orders,
> she set up shop: beads, hair-pick, and trestle table.[124]

Helen has set up shop in the market braiding hair. The independent Helen is declaring her own identity just as the West Indies is seeking to establish its own cultural and socio-economic identity, separate and apart from the colonial cultural system. She is not taking orders; she is working on her own terms. Helen's chosen enterprise is commercial, but is a trade associated with the West Indian culture. Braided and beaded hair brings images of the islands and its people, an image that contrasts with the colonial image of the West Indies. Helen has chosen an enterprise that is on her own terms and in the tradition of her people. Helen is striving towards self-determination.

After Hector's death, however, we see a very different Helen. As a widow, Helen no longer wears her yellow banner of defiance. She has abandon her new enterprise and her quest for self-determination. She has begun working at the Halcyon and is living with Achille again. Walcott is not entirely clear whether Helen's living with Achille is a progression or regression for Helen. We are told that Achille wants to impose an African name on Helen's unborn child. We assume that Achille will have his way. Helen seems doomed to become a vessel and her child's future. Helen's future, like the future of the Caribbean, remains unclear. I propose that Helen's possible regression mirrors the West Indian people's slow progress toward self-determination and its frequent setbacks in the

[124] Walcott, *Omeros,* 36.

face of loss and hardships, which occur too often in the economically challenged Caribbean.

By Chapter LV, Helen has abandoned her independence and given her dress to Achille. Achille wants to wear the dress for the Boxing Day celebrations. Achille's performance is his tribute to his African ancestors and his attempt to claim his roots.

> Achille explained that he and Philo had done this
> every Boxing Day, and not because of Christmas,
>
> but for something older; something that he had seen
> in Africa when his name had followed the swift
> where he had been his own father and his own son.[125]

Achille explains that today he is "someone else."[126] Achille adorns himself in the pale yellow frock. But Achille is not Helen, an independent Caribbean, or the embodiment of the West Indies and its people. Achille represents a return to African tradition and values, a resurrection of what has been lost.[127] He wants Helen's child to have an African name and the island to return to the traditional way of life. Achille wants the language of the law to return to the African tradition and values.

At work at the Halcyon, "[Helen] is dressed / in the national costume: white, low-cut bodice, / with frilled lace at the collar, just a cleft of a breast/for the customers[.]" [128] But Helen's resistance remains in her watchful panther-like stare. Walcott gives the

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[125] Walcott, *Omeros*, 275.

[126] Walcott, *Omeros*, 273.

[127] Walcott, *Omeros*, 273

[128] Walcott, *Omeros*, 322.

reader the image of Achille, wearing the yellow frock in homage to his African ancestors, in contrast to the image of the pregnant Helen as a panther lying in wait. The struggle for cultural and socio-economic self-determination is left within Helen and her unborn child who swells beneath the Halcyon's costume.

VIII. POST-COLONIAL MATRICES IN THE WEST INDIES

The Caribbean identity is actually a plural identity composed of "fragments tightly knit into a new whole, each individual bearing the pluralism of ancestral presences at the heart of her or his uniqueness and bringing the riches of that diverse self to share with the community."[129] In *Omeros*, Walcott allows the reader to learn about a character's identity, or plural identity, through their perception of Helen. Each character represents a separate identity or plural identity found in the Caribbean. The Caribbean national identity, however, is a composite of these various identities and cultural matrices. Walcott is showing us the fragments in order to demonstrate how they are richer as a whole.

A. Major Plunkett's Helen

Major Plunkett sees Helen as a butterfly[130] and the butterfly dress as hers.[131] The image of the butterfly is one of delicate beauty and independence, but a butterfly can also be captured and controlled. Major Plunkett's perception of Helen as a butterfly indicates that he sees her as independent, yet something he can watch and is still within his grasp.

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[129] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics*, 27. Further, Burnett offers that "this is not a condition unique to the Caribbean; that we are all plural in this way, bearing many selves within us, functioning with hybrid cultures, using languages that continually creolize."

[130] Walcott, *Omeros*, 29.

[131] Walcott, *Omeros*, 64.

Major Plunkett's arrogance in believing he should write a History for Helen is also indicative of his perception of Helen. Major Plunkett sees Helen, and the West Indian people, as needing him—or rather, needing the Empire. The Empire is unable to release its grasp on its colony. Major Plunkett says "he suffered for her and the lemon frock."[132] The Empire, and Major Plunkett, had suffered for the island and its independence. Major Plunkett believes this island owes him for his suffering, the debt to be repaid is theirs (the West Indian people) for the Empire introducing civilization.

Often, Major Plunkett describes the West Indians in terms of 'pigs" and "these." These are words that dehumanize the Caribbean people and place them in the category of "other." He states that "These had splendid habits/of cleanliness,/compulsively sweeping yards dry/with their brooms[.]"[133] "[T]hey learnt quickly, good repairers of engines/and fanatical maids."[134] Even in a "post-colonial" context, Major Plunkett speaks of "These" only in terms of their service abilities and limitations. This is the arrogance of the colonizer and the colonial cultural system. Major Plunkett's language reveals his allegiance to the colonial cultural system and his perpetuation of its ideology.

At other times, Major Plunkett feels a colonizer's remorse and "crave[s] her pardon[.]"[135] Major Plunkett's "her" is not just Helen, but St. Lucia and the Caribbean people. Major Plunkett is looking beyond his colonial spectacles, which viewed the West

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[132] Walcott, *Omeros*, 103.

[133] Walcott, *Omeros*, 63-64.

[134] Walcott, *Omeros*, 64.

[135] Walcott, *Omeros*, 62.

Indian "barbarians" and Helen as "pigs."[136] Major Plunkett looks at the island and laments that

> [a]fter a while the happiness grew oppressive.
> Only the dead can endure it in paradise,
> And it felt selfish for so long. He felt as if
>
> the still, lemon panels were painted with her eyes.
> There's too much poverty below us. Every leaf
> defines its limits. All roots have their histories.[137]

Major Plunkett feels the colonizer's guilt of "being selfish for so long." He is bothered by the images of poverty he sees around him. He begins to see Helen's eyes in the lemon colored panels of a butterfly's wings and wonders if he "is condemned to see her" everywhere.[138] Major Plunkett realizes all roots have their histories and that his colonial revisionist History can be seen as Circe (the "swinish" Empire), magically dehumanizing the "other" at its whim.[139] Major Plunkett decides that what Helen and the West Indies "needed / was its true place in history, that he'd spend hours / for Helen's sake on research[.]"[140]

Later, however, Major Plunkett fears History "will be rewritten/by black pamphleteers[.]"[141] "History will be revise[d], / and [his countrymen will] be its villains,

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[136] Walcott, *Omeros*, 62.

[137] Walcott, *Omeros*, 63.

[138] Walcott, *Omeros*, 62.

[139] Walcott, *Omeros*, 62.

[140] Walcott, *Omeros*, 63.

[141] Walcott, *Omeros*, 92.

fading from the map" and that "when it's over / we'll be the bastards."[142] The colonizer is debating which version of history is best. Major Plunkett's guilt is twofold: (1) the colonizer's exploitation of the island, its inhabitants, and the slaves, and (2) his allegiance to Maud (England) and the colonial way of life.

History is at its most basic a question of language, more specifically the language of the law. The language of the law is the representation or expression of ideas, social order, principles, conscience, morality and conduct. The writer of a history will be influenced by his language of the law and will endeavor to describe and prescribe the subject history in its terms. Walcott is mocking Major Plunkett's pretensions at writing Helen's story. Can Major Plunkett, who represents the colonial forces that claimed nothing existed in the Caribbean prior to colonization, rewrite history? Empire has already written one version of history and its revision would still bear the mark of the colonial cultural system. A History written by the colonizer would still have the colonial cultural system's structure, voice, perspective, words, and editing. This history, like the language of the law, would still be the colonizer's version.

B. Maud's Helen

Walcott places Maud in contrast with Helen. Maud is the white colonial mistress and the English Empire, while Helen is the young ebony beauty and the West Indian people. Maud fears "the future [of the island] will be as sinister as that of the ebony girl

[142] Walcott, *Omeros*, 92.

in her yellow dress[.]"[143] For Maud, the island's problems are linked to Helen and not its colonial past. Unlike Major Plunkett, Maud looks past any colonial swinishness[144] and sees only West Indian "pigs." Helen is that ebony girl, pig, thief, seductress, and the inevitable downfall of the colonial cultural system.

Maud is the embodiment of the colonial cultural system and Mother England. Maud recognizes that "[Helen] looks better in [the dress]"[145] she gave her. For a moment, Maud, as Empire, appears to recognize that the colony is better for its independence. But like a watchful Imperial parent, Maud still questions, "What'll happen to [Helen's] life?"[146] Maud's concern is not genuine. She distrusts Helen and only shows concern when Helen is in need. Even then, Maud's offer of help is only money.[147] Here, the colonizer is providing what is asked but nothing more, despite the obvious need. Maud lends Helen the money, but only because Helen asked. Maud makes no offer to help Helen, even after Helen announces she is pregnant and cannot find work. Maud is the colonizer and Empire unwilling to open its purse to help the independent and proud. Maud had to be asked for money, even begged. As Helen waits for Maud to fetch her

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[143] Walcott, *Omeros*, 29.

[144] Walcott, *Omeros*, 63.

[145] Walcott, *Omeros*, 29.

[146] Walcott, *Omeros*, 29.

[147] Walcott, *Omeros,* 125.

purse, Walcott writes "[t]his is how all beauty ends[.]"[148] The beauty of Helen's independence ends with the servant's return to the master.

Maud still views the language of the law as that of the colonizer and Empire. Maud sees the language of the law as a stratified cultural system based on race and class. Helen, the ebony girl in her yellow dress, threatens this system but is still unable to thrive independently. As a colonial master Maud holds the purse strings and societal role over her former servant Helen, just as an Empireless England maintains its economic and cultural authority in a politically independent West Indies.

C. Achille's Helen

Achille sees Helen as seduced by the colonial cultural system, which values money over everything else. He believes "[Helen is] selling herself like the island[.]"[149] Achille's illegal fishing expedition is motivated by the hope that if he earns enough money he will be able to buy Helen back. He believes "[m]oney will change her. Is this bad living that make her come wicked."[150] Helen oscillates between Achille and Hector, paralleling the Caribbean's movements between the tradition and commercialism. Helen deserts Achille for Hector, which confirms Achille's belief that "Everything is money."[151]

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[148] Walcott, *Omeros*, 125.

[149] Walcott, *Omeros*, 111.

[150] Walcott, *Omeros*, 44.

[151] Walcott, *Omeros*, 44.

Achille associates Africa with the spiritual. He sees the imperial culture as superficial and focused primarily on commercialism and materialism. Achille views the current language of the law in the West Indies as that of capitalism and a part of the colonial cultural system. Achille wants the West Indies to adhere to the language of the law that belonged to his ancestors, a code of conduct in line with African traditions and beliefs.

Although Helen "still love[s] Achille," her continued allegiance to Hector confirms her own desire to retain some of the colonial cultural system's values. The African culture that Achille seeks does not have the sophistication necessary for survival in a modern urbanized society. Achille, "from his heart's depth knew [Helen] was never coming back."[152] Helen like the West Indies can not return to the simpler time Achille desires. Achille realizes Helen like the island will not return to the African language of the law.

D. Hector's Helen

Walcott chooses to have Hector remain silent through most of the text, like Helen. How Helen is perceived by Hector, therefore, must be inferred. Hector and Helen both try to embrace change and progress in the Caribbean. Hector abandons fishing and the traditional way of life for a commercial enterprise, transporting tourists around in his van the Comet. Hector wants progress and money for Helen. He believes this is what Helen wants and needs. Hector sees Helen as needs a life sustained through embracing the

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[152] Walcott, *Omeros*, 125.

tourist industry and other commercial enterprises. Unfortunately, Hector's choice leads to his death. Walcott implies that the pursuit of money over the traditional ways of life will lead to a tragic end.

Shortly before Hector's dies in the Comet, Hector speaks to Major Plunkett. The conversation stems from an early morning incident on an island road. Hector drives impatiently and aggressively behind Major Plunkett's Rover and eventually passes the vehicle, yelling, "Move your ass, honkey."[153] Major Plunkett catches up with the Comet further down the road. Major Plunkett reprimands the Comet's occupants for their expletives and reckless driving. Hector then recognized Major Plunkett and says, "Pardon, Major, I didn't know it was you."[154] Major Plunkett recognizes the speaker as Hector and steers the conversation to Helen, asking if she was happy. Walcott does not write that Hector replied. The conversation simply ends with "[Major Plunkett] shook Hector's hand again, but with a warning / about his new responsibility."[155] Although Hector's "new responsibility" is not defined within the text, we can infer Hector's "new responsibility" is much more than just driving the Comet. Hector's new responsibility is Helen and their unborn child, which are symbolic of the responsibility of West Indian independence and the Caribbean's socio-economic future. This is Hector's new responsibility. Major Plunkett's warning is the Empire cautioning its former colony.

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[153] Walcott, *Omeros*, 255.

[154] Walcott, *Omeros*, 256.

[155] Walcott, *Omeros*, 257.

Interestingly, one of the few phrases Hector speaks in the text is "Pardon, Major, I didn't know it was you."[156] Hector is asking pardon from the Major, as if his trespass was far greater since done against Major Plunkett. This is Walcott indicating that Hector, even in his independence, does not seek to cross or offend Major Plunkett. Likewise, the former Caribbean colonies act with same caution. Instead of rejecting and acting in defiance to the colonial cultural system, the West Indian people have retained its structure and formalities. Hector's sees the language of the law as one that embraces commercialism and retains the structure and formalities of the colonial cultural system.

E. Walcott's Helen

Throughout the text but specifically in Chapter LIV, II, Walcott as narrator places himself in contrast to Major Plunkett. In defining their differences, Walcott writes in terms of how each viewed Helen as she sauntered up the beach and into the smoke in her yellow dress, the day "white Helen died."[157] Their views of Helen translate into how each view the language of the law.

Walcott writes that he proceeds in the "shallows of native speech" and Major Plunkett in the" khaki / grass round the redoubt[.]"[158] The "shallows of native speech" refers to the newly formed culture with its fresh language. The "khaki / grass round the redoubt" implies Major Plunkett proceeds from a life built upon or within the colonial

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[156] Walcott, *Omeros*, 256.

[157] Walcott, *Omeros*, 34.

[158] Walcott, *Omeros*, 270.

cultural system. Each move "like enemy ships of the line," moving in parallel, each convinced his course is right.[159] Walcott says his course is based on impulse and Major Plunkett's zeal; this is the difference between the new regime and the old. Major Plunkett wishes to make Helen "the pride of the Battle of Saints, / [with] her yellow dress on its flagship."[160] Walcott admits this is an ideal no different from his own. Both desired to make Helen (the language of the law) their own and the pride of their nation and culture. Major Plunkett "had tried to change History to a metaphor, / in the name of a housemaid" and Walcott "in self-defence, / altered her opposite."[161] But yet both using opposing strategies did it for Helen's sake, for "her and the island[.]"[162]

Walcott writes that in Helen,

> in the head of ebony,
> there was no real need for the historian's
> remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen
>
> as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
> swinging her plastic sandals on the beach alone,
> as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make smoke a door?[163]

Helen is not Helen of Troy, but the Helen of the West Indies. Helen and the people of the West Indies do not need a colonizer's remorse, or history or literature to make Helen into something she is not. Helen is already something more than a shadow or a figure molded

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[159] Walcott, *Omeros*, 270.

[160] Walcott, *Omeros*, 270.

[161] Walcott, *Omeros*, 270.

[162] Walcott, *Omeros*, 270.

[163] Walcott, *Omeros*, 271.

in the image of another. Walcott wants Helen, like the West Indies, to be viewed without the hegemonic shadow of the colonial cultural system.

F. Philoctete's Helen

Philoctete[164] sees Helen as he sees the island, something to be loved in "good and bad weather[.]"[165] Like his Homeric counterpart, Philoctete tries to end the war over Helen. Philoctete sees Achille and Hector "had a common bond/between them: the sea."[166] A common bond also shared by the Caribbean people. He asks

> Why couldn't they love the place, same way, together,
> the way he always loved her, even with his sore?
> Love Helen like a wife in good and bad weather,
>
> in sickness and health, its beauty in being poor?
> The way the leaves loved her, not like a pink leaflet
> printed with slogans of black people fighting war?[167]

The language of the law to Philoctete is one of compromise between the traditional way of life and the commercialism of the colonial cultural system, which means learning to accept both past and the present in order to progress.

Philoctete suffers from a wound that will not heal, symbolic of the wounds of slavery. Philoctete's wound does not heal until the end of *Omeros,* but it does heal. The

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[164] In Greek mythology, Philoctetes was a prince who had Hercules' bow and arrows. On the way to Troy, Philoctetes was bitten by a snake and was left on the island of Lemons. After Achilles and Ajax were dead, a prophet told the Greeks that to win the Trojan War they would need the bow and arrows of Hercules. Odysseus and Dimmed went to Lemons for the bow and arrows bringing Philoctetes back with them to Troy, where Philoctetes wound was cured.

[165] Walcott, *Omeros*, 108.

[166] Walcott, *Omeros*, 47.

[167] Walcott, *Omeros*, 108.

wound's cure is found on the island by Ma Kilman. In order to find the cure Ma Kilman turns to her knowledge of African practices, remedies, and beliefs. Thus, the cure lies in the present West Indies, but can only be found with knowledge of the past. Likewise, Philoctete believes the language of the law must be found within the present West Indies but the West Indian people should look to the past for guidance.

Walcott tells the reader that "[l]ike Philoctete's wound, this language [the Nation Language] carries its cure" as well as its "radiant affliction."[168] The radiant affliction is the English language and colonial cultural system. Paula Burnett likens this paradox to Shakespeare's Prospero/Caliban dynamic. Burnett offers that "Walcott refuses the hierarchy that Prospero's discourse parades, which postulates the inferiority of Caliban."[169] She notes that Joseph Brodsky said admiringly of Walcott, "He acts out of the belief that language is greater than its master or its servants, that poetry, being its supreme version is therefore an instrument for both, i.e., that is a way to gain an identity superior to the confines of class, race, or ego. This is just plain common sense; this is also the most sound program for social change there is."[170] Walcott is able to see language as something that can be used by both master and servant, and as both curse and cure. For Walcott, just as language is the perfect instrument of empire, language is the greatest instrument for social change.

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[168] Walcott, *Omeros*, 323.

[169] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics*, 129.

[170] Burnett, *Politics and Poetics*, 129, quoting Brodsky, "The Sound of the Tide," In Less Than One (London: Penguin Press, 1987) 166.

G. Ma Kilman's Helen

Ma Kilman sees the language of the law in the West Indies as still influenced by the spiritual language of her ancestors and the language of the ants.[171] Ma Kilman is the connection to the African gods and beliefs. She sees the shame and self-hate of the West Indian people.[172] She turns to the language of the ants for its cure.

Ma Kilman as the obeah woman and local oracle sees within Helen the future as well as the past. The reader is told that the grief of Hector's death heightened Helen's beauty.[173] "It was the child, Ma Kilman told them, that made her more beautiful."[174] As oracle, Ma Kilman tells the reader about the great beauty the future of the West Indies holds for its people.

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[171] Walcott, *Omeros*, 244.

[172] Walcott, *Omeros*, 247.

[173] Walcott, *Omeros*, 233.

[174] Walcott, *Omeros*, 234.

IX. CONCLUSION

I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I am nobody, or I am a nation.[175]

The term "post-colonial" as applied to the present-day West Indies is a misnomer. The colonial cultural system remains very much a part of the kaleidoscope of cultural matrices in the Caribbean. The presence of this colonial influence has hindered Caribbean cultural and socio-economic self-determination. Despite this, a more cohesive Caribbean identity has emerged from the fragments created by colonization in the West Indies. Walcott offers that these fragments collectively offer a Caribbean cultural synthesis:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took symmetry for granted when it was whole....It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the crackled heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is the restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.[176]

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[175] Walcott, *The Schooner Flight* (1979).

[176] Walcott, *Antilles*, 69.

The Caribbean culture, and specifically Caribbean Literature, is all the greater for having embraced the similarities and differences that are part of the cultural matrices of the West Indies.

Walcott's epic concludes that "[t]hese Helens are different creatures, / one marble, one ebony[.]"[177] From one Helen we arrive at another, just like "those birds Maud Plunkett stitched into her green silk."[178] The African swallow, the finch from India, the tea-sipping tern, Chinese nightingales, the Persian falcon, finches, all originate someplace else but now can be found speaking the marine dialect of the Caribbean. This is Caribbeanness. From out of many come one people.

Walcott ends *Omeros* with the knowledge that "When he left the beach the sea was still going on"[179] and "the deep hymn/of the Caribbean [will] continue [his] epilogue[.]"[180] Walcott has written only the story of formation of the Caribbean Nation and its language of the law. The language of the law continues to evolve and will continue to be rewritten through the collective consciousness and literature of the Caribbean people. Helen, the embodiment of the West Indian people, carries within her the nation's future. Walcott implies this child holds the promise of being the quilt, the vase, the sum of all the fragments that may realize a future beyond the Empire's tag.

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[177] Walcott, *Omeros*, 313.

[178] Walcott, *Omeros*, 313.

[179] Walcott, *Omeros*, 325.

[180] Walcott, *Omeros*, 321.

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