

*This sample is an excerpt from my Global Literary Theory Honors Thesis, "Mirroring the Postcolonial Muse: A Study of Imbrication in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea and Derek Walcott's Omeros." This was written between August 2017 and April of 2018. This section is about "Omeros" specifically.*

"There are two journeys

In every odyssey, one on worried water,

The other crouched and motionless, without noise.

For both, the 'I' is a mast: a desk is a raft

For one, foaming with paper,

and dipping the beak of a pen in its foam, while in actual craft Carries the other to cities where people speak

A different language, or look at him differently" (Seven Seas, 291)

Several millennia later, Philoctetes remains in exile - his festering wound, odorous and open, has been unable to heal and harden with time. As Walcott argues in his essay *The Muse of History*, Philoctetes tastes the "tartness of experience" upon his arrival to the New World, a "second Eden" of sorts (41). Not even the sea that envelops him - its curative salts - or the colossal showers orchestrated by Zeus and Ogun, Lightning and his wife, Ma Rain, can mend the fracture of a figure perpetually on leave, "salted with the bitter memory of migration" (Walcott, 41). In *Omeros*, Philoctetes arrives in Saint Lucia, in the West Indies, by way of Lemnos and an elusive land in West Africa. Here, he encounters other phantoms of myth - classical, imperial, and ancestral - molded by History into flesh in the forms of Achilles, Hector, Maud, Dennis, Ma Kilman, and the island's namesake, Helen. Here, every name corresponds to a different shadow and every shadow corresponds to a different affliction, for affliction, as the narrator recalls, "is one theme of this work, this fiction, since every 'I' is a fiction finally" (28). In this fiction of afflictions, however, there is no determining, imperative 'I,' but rather, there's an island, whose name is Helen, and this is her story, and it is also the story of two fishermen's duel over a shadow, and the name of this shadow is Helen as well.

"That Helen must learn where she from," Ma Kilman says towards the end of Walcott's epic (318). Ma Kilman, the island's purveyor of spirits and spiritual knowledge, declares Helen's

imperative prior to the birth of her child. Ma Kilman, like Achille, wishes that Helen give her child an African name because, in Walcott's storyworld - a land in which Homer and Yoruba deities comfortably cohabitate with History - "people can live up to their given names, becoming the heroes after whom they are named" (Burnett, 114). Helen, like several or all characters around her, is imbricated in the shadow of her name, History, and literary memory. However, Helen, unlike her male counterparts, is ambivalent about her past and, as a result, she is also ambivalent about her future. Helen, also unlike her male counterparts, is depicted as a collection of shadows and reflections that confuse her individual subjectivity.

*Omeros*, like several other of Walcott's works, meditates on the nature of wounds and trauma through the language of metaphors. In *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Jahan Ramazani examines the configuration of wounds in *Omeros*. Ramazani is particularly concerned with Philoctetes as the bearer of the original wound in *Omeros* and as the first Caribbean transplant that opens Walcott's epic. To Ramazani, the figure of the wound in *Omeros*, as worn by Philoctetes, asks "how the postcolonial poet can grieve both the agonizing harm of British colonialism and celebrate the empire's literary bequest" (50). Further, Ramazani argues that the wound represents the "figurative site where concerns with imperial injury, literary archetype, and linguistic heritage most graphically intersect" (50). Though Ramazani uses Philoctete as the locus of his analysis, he recognizes that Walcott stitches wounds onto all of his characters to denounce and counter the trope of Third World suffering in literature. In "repudiating a separatist aesthetic of affliction," Ramazani argues, "Walcott turns the wound into a resonant site of interethnic connection... vivifying the the black Caribbean inheritance of colonial injury and at the same time deconstructing the uniqueness of suffering" (51). According to Ramazani, the hybrid literary subject in *Omeros* is a product of his and her wounds.

The variety of wounds that each character in *Omeros* bears, however, elucidates their imbricated nature. Walcott's subjects are imbricated by the historical, mythic, and textual fabric that the island and its inhabitants represent. I speculate that Ramazani's examination of wounds in *Omeros* focuses on Philoctete, not only because of the racial, mythic, and historical elements that inform his complex identity, but because Philoctete operates as a central metaphor for wounds. However, in a fiction of afflictions such as *Omeros*, several characters' parade their wounds, perhaps less explicitly than Philoctete, in an effort to "vivify" them. Characters such the "Phantom narrator" (Walcott, 28) and Achille also depict their wounds as a "site of interethnic

connection.” The “Phantom narrator,” as described by Walcott, communicates with revenants from his past. These ghosts assume the form of his father, his mother, Western and Caribbean metropolis, and literature. Achille comes into contact with his past by way of a sun-stroked journey that takes him to an elusive West African coast. Here, Achille dwells with his ancestors until he is ushered back to Saint Lucia during the advent of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Both the narrator’s and Achille’s respective journeys reveal the sources of their wounds and the ways in which these manifest themselves in the present.

*Omeros* also sits precariously in JanMohamed’s twofold Manichean allegory. *Omeros* is symbolic in that Walcott proposes a solution to Manichean opposition through relationships between the traditional white self, The Plunketts, and the island’s natives. It is also imaginary in that signifiers and signifieds are integrated and contained in each character. However, *Omeros*, unlike the colonialist literature JanMohamed discusses, is historically self-aware. The History of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the regionally specific narratives of Elizabeth Weldon and Sitting Bull contextualize the unique plights of each character. History and the “fracture of imperialism,” however, do not impede characters from articulating the colonized Other’s subjectivity nor do they prohibit the narrator from drawing parallels between characters and their literary precedents. In fact, an understanding and meditation of History and literary history, allows for the articulation of the imbricated subject. I suspect that the imbricated nature of characters in *Omeros* speaks to Walcott’s larger project of renaming. In his 1974 essay, *The Caribbean: Culture of Mimicry*, Walcott claims that “the amnesia of the races” has supplanted History, making imagination a limited but necessary tool “where there can only be simulations of self-discovery” (53). In this simulation of self-discovery, the colonized writer realizes that “maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor,” as Walcott argues in “The Muse of History” (37). This type of postcolonial subjectivity demands an understanding of the native, not as a monolith, but rather as a vessel containing history, memory, and story. Every character in *Omeros* bares the burdens of history and mythology. However, several male characters embark on journeys to rid themselves of these burdens. As previously mentioned, these burdens and afflictions are represented through wounds. In *Omeros*, wounds manifest themselves as historical and mythic shadows that threaten to eclipse characters’ identities. Contrary to her male counterparts, Helen does not embark on a loud journey on “worried waters”- such as Achille - or a silent odyssey on land - such as the Phantom narrator - but she

inspires the journeys of all the characters that are enraptured by “lost” history. In this way, Helen partly embodies Spivak’s condition of the third world woman, “caught between tradition and modernization” (102), as a result of her love affair between Achille and Hector. On one hand, Achille imagines and vivifies his ancestral past during his journey to West Africa, making him a symbol for the traditional and the ancestral. Hector, on the other hand, becomes a symbol of modernity when he decides to abandon the sea for a career as a bus driver and tour guide. Helen’s plight as a third-world woman is synonymous to the plight of the island. *Omeros* presents the many ways in which the island, like Helen, grapples with its third world afflictions, some of which include political fragmentation, economic exploitation, and a pervasive loss of history. Although Helen, like several other characters in *Omeros*, personifies the deep-seated wounds of History on the island, it is difficult to dissociate her from the island itself. The story in *Omeros* is Helen’s story, but Helen’s story is told at the expense of her exploitation as a mirror that dubs for national identity, history, and sexual desire. Walcott’s Helen is central to the narrative, but she is often rendered mute by other characters and Walcott himself.

Echoing the words of Dennis Plunkett, I am concerned with Walcott’s Helen and her story. I am not concerned with her metonymic associations to the island, but rather interested in the ways in which Helen deconstructs the manichean allegory by virtue, not only of the mirrors she holds up, but those that are also, more implicitly, held against her. Moving away from analyzing Helen as a trope for the land and as one who personifies Spivak’s struggle of “the third-world woman,” I will examine the mirroring, shadowing, and ghosting strategies to shed light on Helen’s imbricated nature. In doing so, I will discuss the ways in which Walcott attempts to lend Helen a language, but succeeds only in rendering her mute.