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Toward a New Poetics of Space in Derek Walcott's *Midsummer*

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Abstract

Toward a New Poetics of Space in Derek Walcott's *Midsummer*

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Caribbean self-formation is a project in constructing a new poetics that situates itself against imposed and fixed ideas about culture, language, and personhood. For places like the Caribbean, history is indexed by linguistic and bodily fragmentations, ecological upheavals and transformations, and diasporic wanderings to and from the islands. Literature can then be thought of as an aesthetic project in making sense of the present and visualizing alternatives for the future. Walcott's *Midsummer* opens up a space in which to consider the relationship between human beings, landscapes, and culture. Derek Walcott's *Midsummer* captures the cadences of life and time in the tropics: the time between a moment, a season, a life, or an era. This particular sequence of fifty-four poems records a full year, the period between one summer and the next. The liminal space of the in-between in *Midsummer* lends itself to reversals of time, the poems traverse back and forth between the then and now, taking time to linger and take pause in memory and imagination, but also in moments of lived experience. The aperture created between the past and future frees us to think about the multiple, uncertain temporalities of the present, and the position of the poet between two cultures mimes the central ambivalence of midsummer. In these poetic musings, Walcott considers his own positionality vis-à-vis the Caribbean and its colonial past, Europe, high literary culture, and poetry itself. It explores the extent to which place produces literature or that literature produces place and culture, leaving open a productive possibility of rearticulating the conceptual framework for the idea of culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Derek Walcott, in “Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory,” muses on the literary imaginary out of which ideas of culture are produced and normalized by troubling European conceptions of personhood that emerge from localized understandings of landscape and culture. Both the Caribbean and Europe, he writes, “are shaped by what we have read of them” (72). At stake in Walcott’s poetry is the emergence of a Caribbean literature that writes itself out of the margins of history and the periphery of human experience. Caribbean self-formation is a project in constructing a new poetics that situates itself against imposed and fixed ideas about culture, language, and personhood. For places like the Caribbean, history is indexed by linguistic and bodily fragmentations, ecological upheavals and transformations, and diasporic wanderings to and from the islands. Literature can then be thought of as an aesthetic project in making sense of the present and visualizing alternatives for the future. Walcott’s *Midsummer* also opens up a space in which to consider the relationship between human beings, landscapes, and culture. Derek Walcott’s *Midsummer* captures the cadences of life and time in the tropics: the time between a moment, a season, a life, or an era. This particular sequence of fifty-four poems records a full year, the period between one summer and the next. The liminal space of the in-between in *Midsummer* lends itself to reversals of time, the poems traverse back and forth between the then and now, taking time to linger and take pause in memory and imagination, but also in moments of lived experience. The aperture created between the past and future frees us to think about the multiple, uncertain temporalities of the present, and the position of the poet between two cultures mimes the central

ambivalence of midsummer. In these poetic musings, Walcott considers his own positionality vis-à-vis the Caribbean and its colonial past, Europe, high literary culture, and poetry itself. It explores the extent to which place produces literature or that literature produces place and culture, leaving open a productive possibility of rearticulating the conceptual framework for the idea of culture “in the true sense of the word” (“Antilles” 72).

For the purposes of this project, I am not interested in claiming that there is indeed a Caribbean culture. This assumption would elide the differences between subjectivities, experiences, localities, and histories that produce distinct cultural formations in the Caribbean; it would also be a self-evident claim. Instead, this project seeks to understand the ways in which Derek Walcott situates himself as an artist seeking to define a Caribbean culture in the early stages of its articulation through literature. We can trace Walcott in a longstanding legacy of Caribbean writers and artists who work to de-categorize our understandings of place and enact new relations among people and their environments. A poetics of possibility emerges in Walcott’s *Midsummer* in which the artist does not reject everything he knows but interrogates it. In this paper, I explore the interplay between a number of interconnected issues: the position of Walcott as an artist working in two literary traditions, the relationship between human beings and landscape, how ideas about place produce ideas about culture, and how Walcott’s poetics opens up a way to read the alliance between Caribbean literature and Western literature in productive ways.

Human beings' relationships to landscape is another other guiding concern of this paper. I take up Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* as a foundational text to understanding how geography is a social production through which identity is constituted. By geography, I align my self with McKittrick who defines it as "space, place, and location in [its] materiality and imaginative configurations" (x). I argue that in *Midsommer*, Walcott foregrounds an ecological reading of diasporic concerns about racial hierarchies and the body. What is at stake in rethinking geography is a de-categorization of the very hierarchies that reify the invisibility of social lives (x). The early geographers and cartographers in the Americas brought with them a certain set of cultural assumptions about space. Guided by the colonial logic of exploitation and domination, "white masculine European mappings" obscured and denied the relevance of "subaltern subjectivities, stories and lands" (x-xi). It is in the land, however, that violence, enslavement, and resistance is dealt with and negotiated. The social production of meaning manifests itself across the three dimensionalities of space in Walcott's poetry. These three dimensions of space constitute another way of talking about spatial materiality, in particular, the borders and boundaries that literally contain human experience. The material dimensionality of space is often taken for granted, when in fact it is predetermined by "color-lines, 'proper' places, fixed and settled infrastructures." In other words, they are borders and lines that signal a power differential between those who map boundaries and those who must negotiate them. That geographic stories have been undervalued suggests what McKittrick makes explicit in *Grounds*: "the idea that space 'just is,' and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and

social relations” (xii). According to McKittrick, we must contend with space as an ongoing process that contributes to the development of identity. Of particular interest in Derek Walcott’s poetry is the figure of the subaltern who is produced by colonial space: by the port, the ocean, streets and boulevards, the bush, and the jungle. All of these are spaces that have been violently mapped and contribute to the ongoing process of personhood. Walcott, in *Midsummer*, works to disrupt this process by interrogating some of those fixed boundaries that regulate space and produce subjects. What, then, does it mean then to take seriously the idea that geography constitutes identity? To put it another way, if human beings produce space and its meanings, how does geography inflect understandings of identity? It is through the imaginative space of poetry that Walcott is able to revise the invisible boundaries that regulate space and identity and creatively construct his own identity as a diasporic artist and intellectual. Walcott’s *Midsummer* suggests that there is a circular relation between human beings and geographies in which human activity produces different conceptualizations of space, which in turn affects and produces different identities. The process of meaning being produced through geography is unstable despite “geography’s discursive attachment to stasis and physicality” (McKittrick xii).

XII” begins like a treatise: “To betray philosophy is the gentle treason / of poets” (xii). The word betray gives the aphorism a double meaning since to betray means both to beguile and to reveal. The narrator, here, gestures towards a more sympathetic reading of the alliance between art and science by revealing the extent to which aesthetics can and

does pose philosophical questions. The question then becomes, why is poetry, in either its capacity to pose philosophical questions or reveal truth, inherently treasonous? The relationship between poetry and philosophy is both complex and contentious. We must ask at the outset, what can we trust poets to know? How does poetry allow us to marry together relationships, concepts and ideas that lie outside of the purview of rational language or science? More concretely, what does this new poetics look like? The narrator assumes the position of the philosopher who maintains a staunch skepticism about the value of poetry: “these lines will wilt like mayflies...to pile in a dust heap...singed in empirical radiance...scorched in the sight of reason” (xii). The light of reason has both the power to illuminate and destroy. Indeed, enlightenment takes its etymological origins from this very concept: to understand the nature of being and causes in light of reason. Imbuing science, philosophy, and reason with this kind of certainty is what the poet is skeptical about. The narrator presumably takes up the mantle of poet, who “smiles at all science” and asks why so much confidence is placed on this strategy for human knowledge: “How profound were they, anyway, those sheeted blighters...muttering in their beards what every kid knows” (xii). It is not that science is not necessary for human understanding nor that poetry offers us something better, but that Walcott suggests both are necessary. The narrator undermines the hierarchy between science and poetry by dismantling the pedestal upon which reason stands and interrogating the extent to which we ought to diametrically separate the questions, methods and purposes of science and poetry. Walcott’s project of formulating a Caribbean literature through exploring the relationship between landscape, personhood, and poetry offers a model for how to suture

the rift between science and poetry. We tend to think that poetry aestheticizes nature by deploying it as a metaphor or a conceptual prop so that we understand something about ourselves or some other cultural object. Walcott uses nature in its materiality because one cannot get at this conception of personhood without understanding the ways in which nature and human causes are embedded. Caribbean landscape is not only a produce of human history, but human history is guided by the islands themselves.

In *Tropic Zone/i*, Walcott mines the connection between ecological and human histories. The imaginary lines marking the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer yolk together the littoral zones of the American Tropics under the loose rubric of geography and climate. Here, space and time are charged with human and ecological history because the tropic zone is at once a geographical site that exists within colonial-regional imaginaries, while simultaneously existing as an ecology that lies outside of human history and language. Certainly, the fault lines that contain human experience in the tropics are contingent on colonial mappings of time and space, but the tropics also represent an “unstable confluence of race, nationality, sexuality and gender” (Tinsley). In other words, though modern mappings and a common history ties together much of the Caribbean, its diasporic history lays bare its cultural, economic, and political fragments that have both the power to generate new meaning and trouble other forms of knowledge.

The evacuated space of Cuba situates the narrator of *Tropic Zone/i* in a psychic limbo that reproduces the stasis between life and death. An abandoned boat bobs in the water, “its rusted keel staining/the hull, bleeds under the dawn leaves of an almond” (*i*). The pairing of ‘bleeds’ and ‘dawn’ indexes the biblical with the ecological. The

pronounced pairing of impending death (bleeds) with life (dawn) through the figure of the decaying ship foregrounds a kind of temporal ambivalence: the boat is neither here nor there, caught somewhere between the world of the living and the dead. This presages the state of uncertainty the narrator feels in a space that should be home, but is not. Originally, the almond is native to the Middle East and Mediterranean, but foreign to Cuba where our narrator finds the ship (Parsons). The Hebrew word for almond, *shakeid*, translates to “watch” or “wake” and figures in the Bible as a symbol for death and rebirth since it is among the first trees to bloom after a winter’s sleep (Parsons). Again, Walcott plays with and revises the biblical framework for understanding nature, bringing us into a world that is produced by a particular kind of history and operates according to different rhythms. To recall Tinsley, again, “the ‘geographic accident’ of the Antilles...beats out the rhythm of repeating histories, repeating islands” (195) Here, Tinsley refers to the extent to which the convergence of multiple, but similar cultures produces a rich diasporic site, but I argue that Walcott troubles this reparative reading if the Caribbean’s cultural fragments by engaging in temporal and spatial play. Just as the boat lies idle, so too does the diasporic artist among and within Caribbean islands

That Walcott situates us in the ocean also carries implications for his revision of the relationship between human beings and geography. Walcott’s description of the sea aligns with Tinsley’s understanding of ocean metaphors: where “elements or currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together” and are thus transformed (Tinsley). The narrator remarks, “this is my ocean, but it is speaking another language” (*i*). Though the narrator travels within the archipelago, Cuba presents itself as

alien geography. Language difference seeps into the landscape itself. The poet cannot translate the meaning of various spaces like boulevards, clouds, and especially the ocean: its “lines must be translated/into ‘*el mar*’ or ‘*la mar,*’ and death itself to ‘*la muerte*’” (i). Meaning itself changes depending on location. Walcott cleverly fragments the islands, but this time, based on the nuanced relationship between human beings and place. Encoded within the landscapes are multiple human meanings informed by language, time, race, gender, and history. The narrator-poet thinks and experiences in terms of writing. Throughout the poem, references to language and landscape abound. The formidable task of cultural, linguistic and epistemological translation confronts the writer attempting to generate Caribbean literature.

POSITIONALITIES

Derek Walcott is an artist that calls attention to the unique position of someone straddling many worlds and working through multiple traditions. In his essay, “Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory,” he references his own position as an intellectual who is versed in both the literary traditions of the West and as someone constructing a diasporic poetics grounded in his experiences in the Caribbean. St. Lucia, Walcott’s birth home, is a small Windward island in the Lesser Antilles nestled between Martinique and St. Vincent. Over the course of nearly two hundred years, the island has changed hands between the French and English, ultimately yielding under the control of the English Crown in 1814; only in 1979 did it gain independence (“History of St. Lucia” 1). Walcott’s formative years were spent at home with his mother, twin brother and sister. His father died when he was just a child, leaving him with an artistic legacy of sorts: a

collection of watercolors, poetry, books, and music records (Hirsch). Walcott says that his world consisted solely of his mother and siblings, but that those materials left behind by his father initiated his interest in the arts. An otherwise ordinary family, as practicing Methodists, the Walcotts stood out in predominantly Catholic St. Lucia. Writing of his experiences, Walcott recalls the prejudice he and his family experienced as Methodist minorities in the majority French Catholic St. Lucia (Hirsch): “we felt defensive about our position...It was good for me, too, to be able to ask questions as a Protestant...I think young writers ought to be heretical” (Hirsch). Walcott’s experiences as someone on the margins of a religious community open up a space in which we can think of him as someone, who from an early age, was a kind of outsider.

The ‘heretical’ tendencies in Walcott’s poetry manifest themselves through its incorporation of all of the Caribbean’s cultural fragments: European, African, and Asian cultural remnants. Though St. Lucia’s official language is English, patois, a kind of French Creole, is part of the vernacular; it is a feature that recurs in Walcott’s work, lending his poetry a texture and cadence that challenges the fixed boundaries of Standard English. Certainly these tendencies brush up against ideas about culture as a self-contained monolith. However, Walcott is a kind of literary heretic in another way: he does not wholesale reject the Western canon. Often, Walcott is asked to justify, make sense of, or reconcile his interest in Western classics and his status as a poet writing within a Caribbean context. Certainly there is dissonance between the Western canon and other literary traditions and some would argue the exclusivity and hegemony of the Western canon does violence to alternative voices and traditions. Indeed, I argue that

European ideas about landscape, history and the body obscure alternative epistemological traditions and perform epistemic violence. However, the insistence that Walcott justify his references to and admiration for the canon suggests something more about what it means to be a West Indian writer and more generally what demands are made of writers of color.

Daniel Alarcón, in his op-ed, “What Kind of Latino Am I?” suggests that writers of color are judged not only on the literary content of their work, but are also tasked with measuring up to readers’ assumptions about the writers’ cultural experience. Alarcón renounces the added expectations placed on authors of color and insists that “when we traffic in biography...it’s no longer art; it’s reportage and facsimile” (4). Here, Alarcon gestures toward a broader critique of the pressures all writers face, and those of which Walcott is hyper-aware: the pressures of pandering to critics’ expectations of an author’s writing, expectations based on his or her ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or socio-economic class. For Walcott and others, there is also the added burden of buffering the criticism that their work is derivative or inauthentic. European authors are celebrated for the referential nature of their work. The fetishistic orientalism in Keats’ “Kubla Khan,” the Sanskrit in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and the narrative structure of *The Odyssey* in Joyce’s *Ulysses* are celebrated features of these canonical texts. It would be unimaginable to think of these authors facing the same kind of scrutiny that a writer like Walcott does for publishing something so heavily indebted to other cultural traditions. The apparent power differential in Keats and Eliot’s cases differentiates the inter-textual quality of their work from that of Walcott. The kind of material from which they are appropriating is imagined

as a cultural spectacle. It also comes from places that have had violent encounters with European imperialism. Europe's literary tradition, by contrast, is enshrined as the epitome of high-culture. The double standard is painfully obvious when we examine the reception of Walcott's *Omeros*, a poem he must defend from those suggesting that it is a mere copy of Homer's *The Odyssey* (Simon). *Omeros*, Walcott's longest work, heavily alludes to Homer's *Illiad*. It is a new kind of epic that charts the elliptical narrative of history in the Caribbean, one marked by tragedy, exile, and return. Much to his credit, Walcott consistently emphasizes the productive and imaginative possibilities of thinking interculturally. His poetry suggests a poetics of possibility, a poetics that acknowledges "cultural meanings and identities always contain traces of other meanings and identities" (Tiffin). His poetry also works to deconstruct the hierarchies that come to define the Caribbean as a place without a culture and captures in literary form the cultural plurality that defines the Caribbean's histories, people, and landscapes. This unique poetics pushes us to reconsider cultural difference. Rather than thinking of cultural difference as incontestable or inherent differences between people or place, Walcott's poetry reveals that it is a process, one that is produced by constructing hierarchies through which knowledge is formed (Tiffin). Walcott is careful not to indiscriminately embrace arguments that the canon is Eurocentric or that these works are not useful in a Caribbean context. Instead of rejecting this kind of literature, there is an attempt made at interrogating the latent assumptions embedded in these texts.

"VII" is a meditation on the materiality of exile and disorder. Walcott describes a cluster of houses that are "one step from the gutter," whose doors are "no wider than

coffins” and whose “plastic curtains...hide what is dark behind windows.” The house is abyssal in its spatial dimensions. The entrances suggest death, the curtains foreclose light and shroud its interiors in darkness, and the house’s physical proximity to the gutter suggests disease. The ominous character of the neighborhood seems to seep into the natural world, producing a kind of wasteland. The extent to which the natural environment induces the same melancholy on its man-made structures is unclear at first. It may be the case that the house itself renders the landscape barren, something that is suggested by a reading of colonial mappings of space. The very “cracks on the sidewalk” were produced by “the primal fault of the first map of the world, its boundaries and powers.” The kind of despair evoked in the description of the house is connected to colonial mappings that shape the lived reality of those who inhabit the slum. I suggest, however, that Walcott does not write about the slum to suggest anything about the materiality of poverty, but rather uses the slum as a prop to gesture toward the experience of diaspora as one of exile. Predetermined lines and boundaries, ones made to enforce a dominant way of seeing the world, circumscribe the world of the exile. Perhaps, we can think of the exile as a kind of subaltern figure, who like the house is obscured or made invisible. The figure of the exile has great significance for a diasporic writer like Walcott and calls attention to the ways in which we can map this poem through Walcott’s experience as a someone who straddles multiple worlds. Ultimately, the narrator sighs; this is “the lot of all wonderers,” that “the more they wander, the more the world grows wide...your steps make more holes and the mesh is multiplied.” The mesh here harkens back to landscape and suggests the interwoven, multi-layered nature of diasporic

experience. Constant wanderings, overlapping boundaries, visible and invisible experiences all come to the fore as the narrator realizes, “exiles must make their own maps.”

In many ways Walcott sees value in the aesthetic possibilities of Western literature despite the oftentimes fraught and contentious debates about the canon. It is no secret that much of European literary history is intimately tied to discourses of colonialism and imperialism. Simon Gikandi, in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, argues that slavery “had a salient effect on what one may call the interiorized realm of the European experience – namely, the space of sense and sensibility” (367). High literary culture produced and reflected this racialized imaginary in which appeals to black difference was deployed for the sake of reifying a modern, civilized European self (367). Other issues that circulate in debates over the canon include questions about power and representation. The canon has been charged with embracing an essentialist concept of literature that produces false universalisms and obscures other literary traditions.

Within the last century, calls for decolonizing the canon have gained broader currency as scholars, artists, and writers have increasingly attacked the political and historical supremacy of the West and have called into question the aesthetic value of focusing solely on European and North American literature (Mao 737). One of the central critiques leveraged against the canon is the charge that it masquerades as universal when, as its origins reveal, it is a social construct that reflects localized politics and historically specific ideologies (39). This turn in canon critique reflects broader shifts in critical theory, which understands any kind of collection or assemblage as constitutive of a

particular ideological formation. Postcolonial criticism in particular interrogates the colonial logic of binary thinking that pits the “cultured” West against the “primitive” East. There has been extensive scholarship in the way of exploring the inherent contradictions between Enlightenment ideals of rationality, freedom, and equality and global mercantile capitalism, the transatlantic slave trade, and the violent encounters between Europe and its colonies. An interrogation of the kinds of struggles Walcott faces as a diasporic intellectual reveals something more nuanced: the extent to which Eurocentric ideas about culture delimit the boundaries between high-art and high literary culture, how those aesthetic values are disseminated globally, and how those values are intimately connected to a culture of imperialism. In other words, Walcott’s work and experiences as an artist suggest not that Enlightenment ideals stand in contradiction to imperialism; rather, they were mutually constitutive logics.

We can therefore position Walcott as someone who though he acknowledges those conversations, embraces the canon. As part of his colonial education, Walcott was trained at the University of the West Indies in Latin (Phillips 1). Among his influences Joyce, Eliot, Homer, Virgil, and Dante recur throughout his work, especially in his most well known poem, the epic *Omeros* (Hamner 1, Hirsch 2). In mining the poetic possibilities of cultural exchange, Walcott compares the contemporary Caribbean to ancient Greece: “the Atlantic has an archipelago called the Caribbean and ... the Aegean has an archipelago called the Aegean...any fisherman out at sea is an Odysseus” (Stanford). Here, Walcott is responding to a question about use of classical allusions, and his response gestures towards a way of reading transatlantic possibilities in the alliance

between two literary traditions. In reference to *Omeros*, Walcott maintains he wanted to write the epical experience of the Caribbean (Simon). He laments, however, the ways in which European writers mediate their understanding of the Caribbean through the “sigh” of History. Walcott’s skepticism about sigh of history suggests how documented or official history cannot be trusted to capture the kind of multifaceted lived experience that constitutes reality for Walcott in the Caribbean. The historical document has a longstanding legacy of omitting or marginalizing subaltern experiences and of characterizing Caribbean history as one in relation to Europe only. This is but one view or viewpoint that Walcott features in “Antilles.” Reflecting on his first day back to Trinidad after having been stateside, Walcott laments his own conflicted position: he “out of writer’s habit” searches for “some sense of elegy...even of degenerative mimicry” (Walcott 67). Walcott positions himself one who casts the culture in the shadow of its tragic past.

This idea of mimicry suggests an ambivalent relationship between Walcott and the West. In one respect, Walcott is someone who grew up with a colonial education and is well-versed in the classics. In another way, we can situate him as someone who was affected by a colonial discourse that denied his culture because it was perceived to be derivative, because nothing of value had ever been offered by Caribbean intellectuals. We see this anxiety play out in “Antilles” with Walcott’s multiple visions for the Caribbean. This moment of alienation from a place which one feels is familiar gestures toward Walcott’s double vision. On the one hand, he reads the Caribbean through a history of loss mediated by slavery and backwardness, a place without a culture of its own. In

another sense, Walcott sees the Caribbean as “shipwreck of fragments,” a resilient culture that “not decayed but strong” (70). Walcott’s poetics is one that mediates the culturally produced divide between the West and the Caribbean. Walcott suggests that one’s vision of the Caribbean is influenced by one’s viewpoint. The vision of the mapmaker, the historian, the engraver, the photographer, and the artist is refracted by the European definition of culture and humanity, which grounds itself in the autonomy of the individual. The way it is “described by the English, French, or some of [its] exiled writers...relates to a misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls” (76). This is perhaps the fault of the islands themselves: “the nature around it is so exultant so resolutely ecstatic” that a culture with depth cannot exist (72). Here, Walcott playfully gestures towards an understanding of culture that is deeply connected to place. A true culture is produced by a real place, one with “serious cities,” “grey, militant winter,” sharp chills, “short afternoons” (71). The climate in Europe or America produces not pleasure, but despair so that the author with furrowed brow transmutes his ennui onto the page, producing “a literature of winter” (72).

“IX” is a reflection on poetic ecologies and the idea of divine or natural inspiration becomes a new way to think about the natural phenomena and artistic inspiration. That “branched diviner’s rod,” the lightning, touches earth “like the note of a swallow on the staff of four electric wires” (ix). The staff of music created by the lightning is dynamic, alive, and breathing: “all synthesis in one heraldic stroke.” Divine music is created in a single spark as compared with the author’s own tone, “colloquial and stiff.” Walcott enmeshes the divine with the aesthetic, invoking allusions to classical

Greek poetry. The author does not call on his muses, instead nature and the artist seem frustratingly at odds with one another. Gestures towards Greece simultaneously suggest the familiar idea of divine inspiration and the unfamiliar kind of inspiration the narrator has access to. The “swift note” on the music staff’s “four electric wires” situates us in a modern era of technology. We are simultaneously reminded of the four lines of a musical staff, but also of cable and telephone wires. There is a new relationship to nature at work here. This may explain the author’s sense of alienation from the divine and his connection to a less certain kind of access to artistic creativity. Language, our narrator muses, “never fits geography...They never align, nature and your own nature.” Considering the fraught relationship between culture and place, the narrator gestures toward the futility of thinking of place as stable. Certainly it is not as able to inspire the diasporic artist whose connection to place is less secure. The sea, the wind, and the stones begin “tearing up paper...unraveling the same knot...crawling toward language every night.” Language cannot account for the chaos of the natural landscape; this is the artists’ frustration. Unable to write the landscape into poetry, the artist and the land are at odds with one another.

PLACE

In the last few hundred years, the Caribbean has been characterized as a kind of paradise, a place of unmediated pleasure, which Walcott refers to as “the delights of mindlessness, of brilliant vacuity” (72). We can trace this understanding of the Caribbean as far back as the fifteenth century in accounts made by Europeans working as natural historians and imperial explorers (Allewaert 103). Anglo-Europeans were especially

anxious to move from more temperate climates to the tropics, which many naturalists confirmed was “better suited to Africans” (110-112). The effects of the tropical warmth were thought to impede one’s rational faculties and change one’s temperament, making one inclined toward superstition (103). Building on Monique Allewaert’s conception of personhood, I will explore the European definition of the self and tie it to questions of culture to reveal an inherent link between an Enlightenment politics of exclusivity and a colonial logic of ecological and bodily imperialism. Allewaert in *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, grounds her study in seventeenth and eighteenth century European political thought. She suggests that the definition of personhood that emerges from this discourse promotes the self-reflexive and rational subject “that persists despite the diverse material things, temporalities, and places that press upon and pass through it” (66). This definition of personhood denies the importance of the materiality of the body and of the actions of said body (68). This definition of the self also works to obscure the ways in which the political, social and material economies of slavery transformed and produced the modern European subject. At its apex, European Enlightenment thought of itself as a project of modernity that could have only been facilitated by the rational subject, “unencumbered by immediate experience” (Gikandi 296). Non-European bodies, by virtue of their sub-human status were considered incapable of producing a culture. It is from this standpoint that we are better able to understand why alternative traditions, epistemologies, and experiences are deemed non-existent and excluded from the canon; however, Allewaert’s focus on the body and its relationship to ecologies also reveals latent anxieties that Europeans had

about the relationship between the materiality of the body and landscapes that produce them. Walcott does not dispute the idea that place produces culture. What he does attempt to articulate are the prejudiced assumptions about place that are embedded in Western epistemologies that render places like the Caribbean cultureless. The hegemony of Western discourses of culture does epistemic violence to Caribbean culture by denying its very existence. Walcott envisions not doing away with the idea that place creates culture, but reveals that by disentangling the bias and history of prejudice that mischaracterizes the Caribbean, it can be written about anew; this is where Walcott's poetics of possibility emerges.

What would happen, Walcott asks, if the islands write themselves? Emerging from a tradition of Caribbean writers writing about the Caribbean on their own terms, Walcott situates himself among authors like C.L.R. James, Aime Cesaire, Jean Rhys, V.S. Naipaul, and Perce. They are authors that "dictate their own proportions, their own definitions in particular places and in a prose equal to their detractors" (125). The poetics of possibility Walcott gestures towards, here, opens up the space for authors shunted to the margins to resituate the center so that their experiences are validated. He describes this new literature as one that is just budding open, like a flower just about to bloom "in the early morning of a culture, not timid, not derivative" (126). The idea of independence has not just nationalist overtones, but the culture that Walcott describes desires to renounce all claims that Western hegemony has on it. One cannot deny that French, English, and Spanish culture inflects Walcott's poetry and artistic sensibilities; however, Walcott is careful to distinguish his work being produced out of a unique milieu that

while it shares the fragments of a culture with Europe, by virtue of it being transplanted to a new place becomes something different.

Poem “IV” is a meditation on the symbolic power of Africa from the perspective of a colonizer from Europe. The narrator fixes our gaze on a “piratical” Spanish Port; a “one-eyed lighthouse” is anchored nearby “a damned” screeching sea that frames its shores; it is a port that “becomes more African hourly” (iv). The port itself undergoes a transformation into something monstrous, hybrid, Africanized it is literally ‘going native.’ The port in Walcott’s verse is a marker of degeneracy; it is no longer Spanish, and not quite African. It is something monstrous, and deformed, “One-eyed,” and perhaps demonic. Situating us spatially and temporally, Walcott suggests that our narrator is studying the port is from the landing of a ship with a “nineteenth-century view.” At once the reader is implicated in seeing from the schooner’s point of view: “You can watch it” (iv). These lines situate us in a particular context through which we are expected to bring a certain set of cultural assumptions to bare on the town’s landscape. The scene above, however reflects larger anxieties about cultural differences that have traditionally been played out on concerns about the intact body and mind. Monique Allewaert documents Anglo-European travelers “who worried that their vigor and morality were threatened by effects of tropical heat” (83). The colonial port invokes images of commerce and slavery, in particular, images of African bodies performing labor, being traded as goods, placed on the auctioning block, of bodies stepping on foreign soil, of bodies being resituated, displaced, and disembodied through their reconstitution as objects and not people. All of these transformations are mediated through and produced by global mercantilism. Ports

were integral to the economic, social, and political make-up of the colonies in the West Indies. Moreover, the industrial scale of commerce facilitated the global trade of bodies and goods. The triangular trade was maintained through a systemic structure: systems of timetables, navigation schedules, commodities lists, tallies of import and exports. The colonial regulatory apparatus, embodied in the port itself, extends into the very spaces that come to sustain life in the colonies.

As the scene develops, the port becomes infernal as the narrator approaches shore: “crusted roofs, hot as skillets peppered with cries” (iv). The cackling and hissing of a flame is audible in the repetition of the hard “c’s” and “s’s.” Eventually, Walcott lets us in on whose eyes we see through: “Mr. Kurtz on the landing” (iv). Mr. Kurtz, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, epitomizes the colonizer’s fears of ‘going native.’ Fears of cultural contamination pervade colonial discourse. Kurtz in particular embodies the threat and temptation posed by interracial sexual relationships, but also gets us thinking about larger discourses surrounding the idea of cultural contamination. In the tropics, just being around ‘degenerate’ races was thought to impede one’s rational faculties and weaken the physique. Implicit in fears of going native is an acute vulnerability of which the colonizer senses. The narrator cautions the schooner: “remain on the right bank in the imperial dream – the Thames, not the Congo,” alluding to Marlow’s description of the Thames in *Heart of Darkness*: “that river...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.” Although England maintained the largest global empire at the turn of the 19th century, darkness rarely visited the metropolis. The colonial center could distance itself from what was happening in the colonies through national mythmaking. The

Thames evoked in *Heart of Darkness* makes the nation virile and dominant. The commonwealth or colony, is invoked as a biological extension of the colonial center. The positionality of the narrator is clear from the beginning to the middle of the poem, but then quite suddenly, the poem undergoes a temporal shift in the span of a single line.

From the windows of the schooner, the world changes to the “plate-glass fronts of the Holiday Inn” (iv). The shift in time is uncanny; Walcott jars us out of the past into the present, yet it feels familiar. The world economic order is still dominated by global capital, but it is under a different name: consumerism instead of mercantilism. The land has shifted – no longer is the port the main hub of economic activity, but the hotel chain. The “world,” laments our narrator, “had no time to change to a doorman’s braid from the loincloths of Africa” (iv). The shift from freedom to slavery is characterized as a movement into paid servitude. Consumer capitalism is the specter that permeates all strata of social and political life in the Caribbean. The empire may have ended, but the same system that facilitated enslavement, facilitates the servitude of the neoliberal subject. In its final line, the narrator looks on the landscape and ponders what may have been: “the past’s vision of lampposts branching over streets of bush, the plazas cracked by the jungle’s furious seed” (iv). Walcott gestures again towards visions and viewpoints. Mr. Kurtz is replaced by the past itself looming large over the former Spanish port. Perhaps by past, Walcott means History itself; it is one that looks upon its subject with disdain. Urban topographies transplanted to foreign soil cannot hold up against the native, virulent vegetation of the land itself. Again, the anxieties of the colonizer are foregrounded in the lack of control he has in the tropical landscape. Fear is manifested as

a dread of being taken over by primitiveness and the wild itself. There is also the recurring refrain of devious or dangerous sexuality. The colonizer's virginal land is masculinized and the roles between colonized and colonizer are reversed. The land itself is dominant over an invading urban species.

CONCLUSION

Walcott plays with and troubles the spatial and temporal boundaries that contain human experience, which serve to facilitate the poet's negotiation of place, personhood, and culture. Certainly, more could be done in the way of historicizing these discourses of the body, personhood, and space, as Monique Allewaert does in *Ariel's Ecology*. Moreover, locating their antecedents European literature, and even tracing, as I have done with Walcott, the position of the poet in Europe vis-à-vis the global reach of Europe and its empire could foster a more nuanced way of understanding cultural exchange between the center and the periphery. A comparative reading between different sites, traditions, and subjectivities is beyond the scope of my paper, but it is a reading that is prompted by examining the transnational potential of Walcott's work. In his poetry, Derek Walcott reorients our understanding of the relationship between culture and place, and more narrowly constructs a poetics around the relationship between the diasporic artist and geography. What is at stake in his poetry is a refashioning of the epistemological frame that circumscribes the poet's relationship to his environment and forecloses other ways of reading the alliance between culture and place. In *Midsummer*, Walcott offers a way to suture the rifts among geography, history and the self. In particular, he offers a way to explore the possibility of Caribbean literature writing itself on its own terms. Central to

this project is a reformulation of our understanding of the relationship between nature and human beings. Instead of thinking about natural phenomena as separate from human subjectivity, Walcott urges us to consider the intimate ways in which human history, landscape and history are intimately bound up together.

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