National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics

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Midway through *The Prodigal* (2004), Derek Walcott, whose speaker in this book-length poem is almost a direct expression of Walcott himself as both an aging writer and a frequent transatlantic traveler, catches sight of the Caribbean islands as he moves through the coastal region of Colombia and responds with qualified joy, calling “the Caribbean, owned and exultant grinning and comforting,” a place that is “not a new coast, but home” (Chapter 7, Canto II, lines 28, 30). Walcott’s use of the adjective “owned” expresses not only his claim that the islands are his and he theirs but also the impoverishment and dependency of many Caribbean countries that are “owned” economically by European and American companies despite being sovereign nation-states. Walcott does not shy away from this grim reality, and it is not a stretch to say that a recurring concern in the Nobel laureate’s poetic vision is the marshaling of aesthetic and cultural resources to exult and comfort those who call the Caribbean “home” despite its obvious shortcomings, himself included. In this chapter, I argue that Derek Walcott reconfigures tropes of racial identity and hybridity dominant in discussions of literature and culture in the Caribbean to foreground a cosmopolitics that is not only rooted in the national consciousness of his home country of St. Lucia but also intertwined with sociocultural formations beyond its shores. Instead of thinking of the nation in terms of a determinate and homogeneous identity tied to a
notion of civilizational or racial purity and progress, Walcott envisions it as a social, political, and cultural formation wrought out of lateral connections both within and without the Caribbean, as can be seen from his remarks in a 1983 interview: “the Caribbean is both a new and an old society. Old in history, new in the experiment of multi-national concentration in small spaces. To look backwards is to think linearly, the fate of any concept of progress” (“An Interview with Derek Walcott by Leif Sjöberg” 79). When scholars of Caribbean literature and culture privilege its transnational and hybrid characteristics, they contend either implicitly or explicitly that Caribbean literature cannot be thought of in national terms. They habitually subsume the nation within a regional Caribbean consciousness that, by virtue of its heterogeneous mix of cultural and linguistic traditions, transcends the nation’s premises of purity and homogeneity. In short, because Caribbean subjectivity is considered to be historically, culturally, and linguistically heterogeneous, the literature produced by such subjects is correspondingly multifarious and trans- or postnational in form and content. Thus Caribbean literature can be thought of as an idealized model of the complex interweaving and cross-hatching of histories, cultures, and languages in a world where nation-states are increasingly obsolete, resulting in such valorizing statements as James Clifford’s “we are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos” (Predicament 173). Certainly Walcott himself has been celebrated as a Caribbean writer whose winning of the 1992 Nobel Prize for literature has, according to some critics, “demonstrated the ongoing vitality and growing global prominence of Anglophone Caribbean fiction” (Booker and Juraga 22).

However, Walcott’s meditations about culture and nationalism in his interviews and essays, together with his treatment of these topics in his poetry, point to a literary cosmopolitics redefining the idea of nationalism in the context of the anglophone Caribbean. Walcott shows us that a national consciousness committed to social justice and political liberation is still alive and well in the Caribbean, and he expresses this national consciousness through his cultural interventions as an artist and poet. Walcott departs from the dominant view of Caribbean cultural hybridity as exemplifying the opposition of nationalism and culture or the transcendence of cultural forms over national borders in current discourses of globalism, where culture—as lived experience, artistic expression, and intellectual production—opposes and transcends the limitations of the nation as a determining political institution. These conceptualizations of culture versus nation may have started out as local concerns, but they have taken on a global scale with the recent turn from postcolonial to globalizing paradigms of reading literature. But what is elided in this move from national and postcolonial frameworks to
transnational and global hermeneutics is a consideration of how Caribbean literature and discourse need to be appreciated as a form of literary cosmopolitics in which the dynamic connections between national consciousness and transnational cultural flows continue to be salient and visible. At one level, Walcott’s national consciousness accords with the aspirations of political independence and economic development advocated by political leaders such as the historian and statesman Eric Williams. Not long before he became prime minister of Trinidad in 1962, Williams, ever the skilled rhetorician, declared in a political address that “Massa Day Done.” Williams is certainly condemning the British colonial master who was “owner of a West Indian sugar plantation, frequently an absentee, deliberately stunting all the economic potential of the society, dominating his defenceless workers by the threat of punishment or imprisonment,” and at the same time he intends to chastise anyone in Trinidad who is “using his political power for the most selfish private ends” and who conducts himself as “an uncultured man with an illiberal outlook” (“Massa Day Done” 245–46). Williams stresses that “Massa is not a racial term” but is “the symbol of a bygone age,” and if “Massa Day is a social phenomenon,” then “Massa Day Done connotes a political awakening and a social revolution” (239). Like Walcott, Williams exhorts his audience to look beyond the racial ressentiment of white versus black and think about the nation’s future and its economic challenges along political and social lines. Yet despite his rhetorical flourishes against the masters of British colonialism and their neocolonial counterparts, Williams holds on to an important and hierarchical symbol of British imperial power by inviting Queen Elizabeth II of Britain to “inaugurate the first Parliament of the Independent West Indies” of which he is prime minister (263). Massa Day might be done, but hard on his heels comes Her Majesty the Queen. Furthermore, Williams’s anticolonial and nation-building rhetoric is steadily focused on the problem of economic development and productivity, such that the national “slogan” he bestows on Trinidad in his first Independence Day Address in 1962 is “Discipline, Production, Tolerance” (“Independence Day Address” 267). As Trinidad’s chief executive, Williams is primarily concerned with the economic stability and viability of his fledgling nation-state, but for someone who earlier berated “uncultured [men] with an illiberal outlook,” Williams seems to lack a cultural vision for his new nation. Where Williams stops short, Walcott steps in and contends that a revision—literally, a seeing-again—of Caribbean history and culture through poetry and aesthetics must be simultaneous with the struggle for economic and political freedom.

Both Walcott’s emphasis on the relative autonomy of art in relation to society and its power to negate and reconfigure the relationships between
society, culture, and politics through its own formal complexity are crucial to understanding his rethinking of nationalism in the Caribbean. His understanding of the relationship between art and lived reality recalls Theodor Adorno’s own accounts of the artwork as a monad, formed through its conditions of possibility but also exerting a force field that negates and reconnects these conditions into a different arrangement or constellation that has yet to be imagined. As Walcott, referring to Auden’s famous elegy to W. B. Yeats, avers in high modernist tones, “you want something to happen with poetry, but it doesn’t make anything happen”; yet at the same time, although poetry does not have any grand designs to make anything happen, things are changed or altered when they are touched and drawn into poetry’s formal design: “As a matter of fact, poetry does make something happen because in the flow of the river which [Auden] talks about, the river touches many things as it passes by” (“An Interview with Derek Walcott by William Baer” 202, 203, original emphasis). This double sense of poetry as a negation of the logic of cause and effect as well as a powerful current that rushes past or through and connects many things without determining their identity or nature accords with Adorno’s discussion of the artwork as both a negating and a (re)connecting force. In light of this conjunction between poetry and aesthetic theory, I examine Walcott’s literary cosmopolitics as expressed in his essays, lyric poetry, and three of his longer poems, tracing his critical engagement with both European and Caribbean literatures and theories of modernity and nationalism. This critical framework illuminates the literary cosmopolitics within Walcott’s apparently migrant and cosmopolitan texts as well as the interrelations between nationalism and culture against the backdrop of globalization’s administered world. Walcott rethinks, but does not reject, the legacy of the European Enlightenment by playing on the symbolic power and luminous connotations of his home country’s name—St. Lucia—as a new way of illuminating the possibilities of national consciousness in a geographical region historically marked by colonial violence and postcolonial exploitation.

“The Care and Pain of the Antilles”:
National Consciousness and the Reassembling of Fragments

As I discussed earlier in this book, Stuart Hall’s metaphorization of Caribbean hybridity into a cultural identity that exemplifies our globalized world both assumes that the diasporic condition is an already accomplished fact
and elides the national consciousness present in the diasporas he cites to support his argument. Hall’s field-defining idea of the Caribbean diaspora as a metaphor for global cultural identity has informed both postcolonial and Caribbean literary studies. Various critics have claimed that because “cultural clash and miscegenation formed the brutal texture of Caribbean life,” “those theories developed in the polydialectical communities of the Caribbean have been amongst the most complex and have displayed the greatest potential for abrogating Eurocentric concepts” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 146, 117); others have argued for the global significance of Caribbean writing as “a major canon of world literature” that “has contributed enormously to the strength of Caribbean culture against oppression and foreign appropriation” (Savory 746). Hall’s view, however, has not gone unchallenged. Shalini Puri is among those who argue that hybridity in the region does not always possess the postnational qualities Hall ascribes to it. Because “invocations of cultural hybridity have been crucial to Caribbean nationalisms,” Puri claims, they “undo the generalized claim that hybridity and the nation-state are opposed to one another and enable a broader questioning of invocations of a ‘global village’ and the death of the nation-state” (6). Puri counters such thinking by attending to historically specific instances of hybridity in Caribbean literary texts and social practices, showing their importance in political discourse and economic and cultural production. However, Puri enacts an unwarranted split between literary form and radical politics in her reading of Derek Walcott. In her view, lyrical and affective representations of people or groups that do not explicitly delineate social and political conflicts weaken these subjects’ historical and political import and gloss over the community’s social problems. In particular, Puri focuses on Derek Walcott’s 1992 Nobel lecture “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” and interrogates a moment where the poet describes the fragments of a broken vase being lovingly reassembled. She considers this piecing together “an act of love” that is problematic because of “the way that the sentiment becomes a ruse for silence on inequitable relations of power” (69). Puri concludes that “Walcott’s treatment of hybridity [in The Antilles] within Caribbean nation-states thus appears to be an aesthetically accomplished reinscription of official Caribbean national mottoes” and that therefore his lecture “attempts to forge a unity without attending to the unequal terms of inclusion in the national imaginary or the unequal access to the resources of the state; it posits in advance a unity and equality that has yet to be achieved” (69). Puri contrasts this aesthetic reinscription with Walcott’s earlier play, Pantomime, which seems to be a more successful and pointed interrogation of hybridity discourse. As a play within a play, Pantomime literally and metaphorically stages the tensions between Harry (an
Englishman) and Jackson (his Trinidadian employee) and becomes “a dramatization of a hybridity that deconstructs essential oppositions” based on race and skin color while emphasizing a more salient “opposition understood as arising out of one’s social location and relationship to material privilege” (Puri 135). From this perspective, Walcott’s art is complicit with national ideology unless it uses symbolic language to clearly mark the oppositions that arise out of social and material struggles. Moreover, such a critical perspective that prizes political resistance equates nationalism with authoritarian state ideology that must be opposed and transcended by deterritorialized and decentered culture. It passes over “the thinking through of a work of art [that] justly requires a concrete inquiry into social content” demanded by the aesthetics of Walcott’s own writing and reads “vague feelings of universality and inclusiveness” (Adorno, “Lyric Poetry” 156) as the sum and purpose of his meditations on poetry and history.

Rather than focus on the dramatization of political and social tensions, Walcott articulates a set of dynamic relations between culture and nationalism, language and history, and politics and literary form in a series of essays that shuttle between the particular national contexts of St. Lucia, Jamaica, and Trinidad and a larger transnational Caribbean framework. Although born in St. Lucia in 1930, Walcott is very familiar with the two other anglophone Caribbean countries as he obtained his university degree in Jamaica and founded a theater company in Trinidad. In a 1957 essay about Jamaica, “Society and the Artist,” Walcott argues that history in the Caribbean lies “not in the quick political achievements [. . .] but in the deepening stream of the way we are now learning to think. To see ourselves, not as others see us, but with all the possibilities of the new country we are making” (15). Walcott further elaborates that “the people of all these islands know that they must share their countries. [. . .] They are now a people who possess the land in thought and share it” (15). What is important here is that, even in this early theorization of nationalism and culture, Walcott locates the specific national consciousness of “the new country we are making”—namely Jamaica—within a larger transnational framework of the Caribbean, or “the people of all these islands [who] know that they must share their countries.” The national and the transnational are not opposed; in fact, what ties them together is a shared sense of the “new possibilities” of each country expressed through creative language and “possess[ing] the land in thought.” This is national consciousness expressed in cultural and artistic creativity more so than institutionalized political activity. Walcott develops this double sense of political consciousness and cultural politics in a later essay: “We have broken up the archipelago into nations, and in each nation we attempt to assert characteristics of the
national identity. Everyone knows that these are pretexts of power if such power is seen as political” (“The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” 3). Instead of thinking about nations as homogeneous identities created by state fiat, Walcott emphasizes the social and cultural work necessary for a politically engaged nationalism: “what energizes our society is the spiritual force of a culture shaping itself, and it can do this without the formula of politics” (4). The energizing, shaping force of a national consciousness is neither tied to “the formula of politics” with a definite ideology nor driven by a grand historical narrative that Walcott calls “the Muse of History” (“Muse” 36). The Muse of History is Walcott’s figure for a Eurocentric version of historical events in which Enlightenment Europe conquers, enslaves, and indentures the peoples of the New World, thereby portraying the diverse peoples of the Caribbean as perpetual victims of colonial and postcolonial violence and exploitation. Without downplaying the trauma of physical and symbolic violence suffered by those in the Caribbean, Walcott castigates the politicians and poets who are inspired by the Muse of History and who yearn for an authentic cultural identity expressed through “an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture” of Europe, Africa, or South Asia while simultaneously issuing “a rejection of the untamed landscape” of the Caribbean islands (42). The alternative Walcott proposes lies in seeing how “history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory,” and to be inspired by the muse of fitful memory as opposed to the muse of temporal continuity and world historical time is to become a “revolutionary” poet with a vision of Caribbean humanity as “a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past” (37). The presences that Walcott describes here are the cultural and historical memories both indigenous to the Caribbean and brought to the region from Africa, South and East Asia, and Europe. The figure of the writer inhabited by these presences recalls Walcott’s earlier discussion of national consciousness, described as “a people who possess the land in thought and share it”—a possession of the land not only in a physical form but also as a form of knowledge and culture. Not only do the people of Jamaica possess the land with their contemporaries, they also share it with their forebears: they are not “chained” to the ancestral “past” but are responsible for reworking the memories of dislocation and suffering into a promise of a better future, “in the deepening stream of the way we are now learning to think” (“Society and the Artist” 15).

By distinguishing memory from history, Walcott distances himself from those who believe in the myth of “elemental man” (“Muse” 37). Those “New World poets” who consider the traditions and forms of European literature as “historical degradation, rejecting it as the language of the [colonial] master” (39) are those who also see in the Caribbean only the ruin and “the shipwreck”
The Possibilities of the New Country

of colonialism, such that “the New World offers not elation but cynicism” (42). For Walcott, the veneration of elemental, mythic man and the fixation on the repetition of colonialism's mistakes prevents a clear understanding of the past as the lived experience of time and the corresponding symbolic expression of this experience as memory. This lived experience and symbolic expression is what Walter Benjamin, in another context, calls ruin and rune, out of which the historical relations of the postcolonial situation crystallize into poetry (176). In order to grasp these historical relations and their poetic crystallization, Walcott examines how poetic language “combines the natural and the marmoreal” and “conjugates both tenses [of past and present] simultaneously,” bringing together the vital rhythms of Caribbean vernaculars with the stentorian syntax of official speech in a way that does justice to them both (“Antilles” 70). The deeper one delves into the poetic form and history of the local, the larger one's historical and geographical consciousness must become, a paradox Walcott captures when he observes that “yet the older and more assured I grew, the stronger my isolation as a poet, the more I needed to become omnivorous about the art and literature of Europe to understand my own world” (“Muse” 63). But it is in his Nobel lecture “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” which Shalini Puri considers an apology for state multiculturalism, that Walcott offers his most thought-provoking elaboration of poetic thought in terms of the fragmented histories and cultures that make up the Caribbean. In this essay Walcott talks about watching a village in Trinidad prepare for a performance of the Indian epic The Ramayana. As he witnesses the excited and festive spirit of the performers, he begins “filtering the afternoon with evocations of a lost India” (“Antilles” 68). But then he checks himself and asks—“Why should India be ‘lost’ when none of these villagers ever really knew it” (68)? He then reflects that he is “entitled like any Trinidadian to the ecstasies of their claim,” this claim being the villagers’ performance of The Ramayana that brings their community together, but the performance is not limited to those of Indian descent, for Walcott himself is of mixed parentage. In fact, Walcott realizes that though he is an accomplished poet, he is “only one-eighth the writer [he] might have been had [he] contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad;” but even so, he is still “entitled to the mirrors and crepe-paper temples of the Muslim epic, to the Chinese Dragon Dance, to the rites of the Sephardic Jewish synagogue” (69). The various fragments, languages, cultures, and histories in Trinidad are distinct but cannot be sealed off from one another. They do not disseminate or dissolve the nation into diaspora. On the contrary, these aspects and fragments of several diaporic cultures come together to form the critical national consciousness of the Caribbean artist:
Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked 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. ("Antilles" 69)

For Walcott, Trinidad’s national consciousness and culture cannot be deduced from a set formula of politics; they are not a pretext of power, but rather a loving labor of “care and pain” that reassembles a fitful past into a livable present. Walcott sees nationalism not as a native identity but as a crystallization of “broken pieces” into “cracked heirlooms,” and this is (to use his earlier term) “revolutionary.” The cultural politics of nationalism in Trinidad become evident when we recall that Walcott is rebutting another Trinidadian Nobel laureate, V. S. Naipaul. Naipaul claims that “nothing has ever been made in the Caribbean” because there is no originality in its culture, only imitation (“Culture or Mimicry?” 8–9). But we can see from this passage about the broken vase that Walcott is making a political claim in a cultural register, turning Naipaul’s own “nothingness” against him—as Walcott says: “Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, [. . .] because what will come out of there is like nothing [any]one has ever seen before” (“Culture or Mimicry?” 8–9). The idea of “nothing,” for Walcott, does not mean an emptiness or a vacuum. Instead, it is, at one level, the negation of a discourse of civilizational backwardness and inferiority propagated both by Caribbean intellectuals such as Naipaul and Caribbean political leaders who continuously emphasize the trauma and victimization of their people under Europe’s colonial regimes in order to make them compliant. At another level, this nothingness is also the condition of possibility out of which a cultural politics and a political consciousness of nationalism can emerge within a larger cosmopolitical framework. The solitary work undertaken by Walcott paradoxically requires a relational understanding of the historical forces that make up his “own world.” Furthermore, in the context of the passage from “The Antilles,” the poetic function of being a “filter and purifier” becomes the “glue that fits the pieces” of the broken vase, the “love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments.” This “care and pain” of Caribbean poetry connects the African and Asiatic fragments, the Caribbean present and its colonial and postcolonial past, and out of this connection crystallizes the living element of poetry. While the reassembling of broken fragments into
a coherent whole might seem to recall liberal multiculturalism as it is promoted by the United States or other European countries to deal with ethnic and racial differences, it is significant that Walcott stresses how the fragments are “disparate, ill-fitting,” and therefore not homogeneous like the smoothly contoured pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that can be assembled and reconciled into a neat whole. Furthermore, while Euro-American liberal multiculturalism is often promoted by state governments, it is unclear in the passage from Walcott’s speech who is the actual agent or active subject reassembling these fragments. By eschewing a direct subject, Walcott focuses our attention on the process—“the gathering of broken pieces”—and the indelible “white scars” of the imperfectly reassembled sculpture, rather than the “ancestral places” where the different peoples of the Caribbean originally came from. In this arresting analogy, Walcott envisions national culture in the Caribbean as predicated upon a critical national consciousness that takes “care and pain” to reassemble “African and Asiatic fragments” rather than affirming an already accomplished “symmetry” or “whole.”

Walcott’s poetic representations of a critical national consciousness is a literary rejoinder both to the British colonial imagination of the Caribbean as a backward and primitive region and to the contemporary image of the Caribbean as a primarily tourist-driven economy marginalized by and dependent on the First World. My reading of Walcott’s literary cosmopolitics places him alongside scholars who argue that Caribbean literature both is modernist and makes aesthetic and political claims to modernity—that is, it employs stylistic techniques associated with European modernist writing to claim a contemporaneous rather than belated historical and epistemological position in the world-system along with Europe and America. Simon Gikandi, for instance, discusses anglophone Caribbean literature within the literary problematic of modernism because “Caribbean writing is not so much motivated by the desire to recover an ‘original’ model […] as by the need to inscribe Caribbean selves and voices within an economy of representation whose institutional and symbolic structures have been established since the ‘discovery’” of the region by Christopher Columbus (*Limbo* 10). For Gikandi, Caribbean writing is more than an expression or manifestation of an already existing historical and cultural hybridity. The aesthetic register—inscription and production of “selves and voices” through writing—becomes an important intervention into the “economy of representation” of the “Caribbean imagination” that has set up “institutional and symbolic structures” made up of “its imposed metropolitan identity [Europe] and its desired ancestral image [Africa],” neither of which can be wholly realized or rejected (10). Gikandi tracks in “Caribbean fiction” a “shift from a dramatization of the power of the self
and the uniqueness of its utterance” all the way to “a moment of a closure [in texts such as Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*] marked by silence and emptiness” (251).

Thus, the images of lyrical polyvocality or representations of mythopoetic figures in Caribbean writing do not necessarily denote or refer to a fullness of hybrid histories and irrepressible identities that already exist or are coming into existence. Nor do the closures and reconciliations of the literary text “marked by silence and emptiness” point to a tidy summation or an ineffable void. Instead, in Gikandi’s formulation, writing becomes one of “the contending discourses” in which “the existence of a gap in language affirms the continuing need for a narrative form that will take into account the contradictory impulses of Caribbean culture” and where “the underprivileged Caribbean subject will find and affirm its voice” (251). For Maria Cristina Fumagalli, a search for a suitable narrative form for Caribbean subjectivity is already moot, because “the Caribbean ‘non-modern others’ whom North Atlantic modernity creates and then petrifies, objectifies, abjectifies, and subalternizes do not desire to exist in its gaze but actually have and always have had a character and a purpose of their own as well as their own views on what it means to be modern” (9). Fumagalli implicitly revises Gikandi’s argument about Caribbean literature by reading the modernist strategies of Caribbean writers not as a search for modernity but as an articulation of a modernity that already exists and is actively negotiating with local and Euro-American culture. If Caribbean writers such as Derek Walcott “foreground the mutual permeability between cultures” as part of a larger artistic project of “exchanging glances and unstitching the fixed viewpoints at the basis of North Atlantic narratives of modernity, which depend on the exploitation of non-modern ‘others’” (Fumagalli 11), then we can apprehend Caribbean heterogeneity and hybridity valorized by critics such as Stuart Hall as part of a literary cosmopolitics rather than as an expression of postnational cultural subjectivity.

In fact, a cosmopolitical register is already present in the heterogeneous and polyvocal texture of Caribbean writing and interwoven with a critical national consciousness, because “since their inception, anglophone Caribbean literature and literary criticism have been the products of nationalist discourses designed to extend the political rights of Caribbeans,” and that “after independence, the ability to produce national literature became a basis for claiming the right to determine national culture” (Rosenberg 3). Even critics who take a multilingual view of Caribbean literary production across the region as a whole concur that there has been a “recurrence of ideological propositions of national identity in the region from as far back as the nineteenth century” (Torres-Saillant 65). If, as Silvio Torres-Saillant argues, “European languages [. . .] are rendered new in the Caribbean, particularly in
the hands of Caribbean writers who are in touch with the sociocultural specificity of their world” (82), the same can be said for European conceptualizations of the nation as a sociopolitical formation and of literature’s imbrication with nationalism. For Derek Walcott, there is “no nation now but the imagination” (“The Schooner Flight,” Canto 3, line 1), which suggests that European concepts of the nation must undergo a sea change; nationalism must be reconfigured anew in the Caribbean imagination rather than dismissed as an outdated legacy of European colonialism.

A Crystallization of Fragments: Walcott’s Lyric Poems

European colonialism and the neocolonial state of the nation immediately after decolonization must be interrogated by a negating and critical national consciousness to prevent a slide into nativist identity, as Frantz Fanon reminds us. With a Caribbean context, Walcott examines the relationship between colonialism’s aftermath and critical nationality in a poetic idiom similar to what Theodor Adorno elsewhere describes as the characteristics of the modern artwork: a carefully crafted artifact that is always in a productive tension with its historical and political conditions of possibility. Consider this passage from Minima Moralia, in which Adorno likens literary texts to “spiders’ webs” that are “tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm”:

They draw into themselves all the creatures of the air. Metaphors flitting hastily through them become their nourishing prey. Subject matter comes winging toward them. The soundness of a conception can be judged by whether it causes one quotation to summon another. Where thought has opened up one cell of reality, it should, without violence by the subject, penetrate the next. It proves its relation to the object as soon as other objects crystallize around it. In the light that it casts on its chosen substance, others begin to glow. (Minima Moralia 87)

Here, the emphasis is on the tautness and yet openness of the form and structure of the artwork, like a spider’s web; the artworks’ capacity to “draw into themselves all the creatures of air” depends upon their “tight, concentric,” and “firm” construction. For Adorno, productive artwork does two things: first, it negates the apparent wholeness and identity of those historical and political forces within which it finds itself. This explains the violent, predatory image of the artwork trapping “metaphors” (literary devices that rely
upon the identification of a vehicle with a tenor) as “nourishing prey” for its own meaning-making. This recalls moments of similar negation and violence in Aesthetic Theory, where Adorno treats a work of art as “a thing that negates the world of things” (119); artworks are “a priori negative” because “they kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life. Their own life preys on death” (133). But this symbolic violence neither abjures nor obliterates the represented objects (whether they are individuals, collectives, or political and historical events) because of the second important aspect of the artwork. Negation for Adorno means displacing or tearing objects from their contextual “immediacy” through representation and foregrounding the text’s own status as a form of mediation. This framing medium is what catalyzes and motivates critical thought, and (looking back at the passage from Minima Moralia) it is not the artwork or the literary text itself that executes the penetration or the crystallization. Rather, it is “thought” that is activated once the immediacy of the object is torn away and put to death (i.e., once it becomes represented by the artwork), and thought that forms the nexus around which other objects (things that are represented in art) crystallize. Adorno develops this idea further in Aesthetic Theory, where the artwork is understood as a monad that is “both the result of the [dialectical] process and the process itself at a standstill,” or, more concisely, “at once a force field and a thing” (179). In this way, “the monadological constitution of artworks in themselves points beyond itself” (Aesthetic Theory 180) and does not leave the artwork as a hermetic or self-enclosed, self-referential entity. Using the analogy of a spider’s web, within the context of the Caribbean, Walcott’s artwork draws the “subject matters” of national consciousness, historical events, cultural particularities, and radical politics into relational and penetrative articulation.

By arguing for a critical nationalist approach and connecting his aesthetics with modernist theories about art, my reading of Walcott’s poetry takes issue with biographical interpretations of his work that focus on their transnational significance by tracing the poet’s own transatlantic peregrinations from the 1970s to the 1990s. Bruce King, for example, suggests that Walcott traveled extensively in the United States and Europe because of marital problems and extramarital affairs. Paul Breslin argues that the 1981 publication of The Fortunate Traveller marks “a restless decade of shuttling between the Caribbean and North America, with increasingly frequent trips to Europe as well” (216), and that the increase in poetic self-reflexiveness in Walcott’s

1. See Bruce King, Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life, chapters 19–23, for an exhaustive account of Walcott’s personal life and career during this time period.
poetry from this period can be understood in terms of his “increased contact with U.S. writing and its intellectual ambience” as well as his “attenuated relation to the Caribbean, which deprived him of the naturalizing trope of an Antaeus-like power derived from place” (217). While such studies of Walcott’s life history and career trajectory are informative, my own reading of his work focuses on the elaborations and reconfigurations of literary figures that are both naturalizing and exilic. In his shorter lyric poems, Walcott develops an understanding of the artwork as a physical and a temporal moment in which historical and political forces are crystallized and initiated as forceful thought by what he calls “the toil that is balance” (43). Using Walcott’s conceptualization of artwork in the two shorter poems “Sea Grapes” and “To Return to Trees” as a key to reading his longer works Another Life, “The Schooner Flight,” and Omeros, I argue that these two poems illuminate the interrelationship of art and life within the context of the postcolonial Caribbean, recasting nationalism as a critical consciousness against the authority of the neocolonial state and of global capital.

In the title poem of Sea Grapes, Walcott’s speaker identifies the Caribbean with the Aegean of classical Greek literature and mythology. The first two stanzas of the poem take up the familiar, wandering figure of Odysseus on his journey back to Ithaca:

That sail which leans on light,
tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean

for home, could be Odysseus,
home-bound on the Aegean;
that father and husband’s

longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is
like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa’s name
in every gull’s outcry (“Sea Grapes” 1–9)

The alliteration of “L” sounds in the first line gives us an impression of movement that is “light” in the physical sense of fleet-footedness. But the opening image qualifies that movement as “tired” and leaning, unable to stand upright or lacking strength; furthermore, the schooner’s tiredness robs it of fleetness and becomes ominous when we are told that the schooner is “beating up the Caribbean.” This phrase might suggest a plodding trudge, the pulsing of a heart strained with tension and worry, but could also mean
physical assault and violence on the numerous “islands” of which it has grown weary. A further tension is introduced in the next two stanzas with the explicit evocation of Odysseus—the schooner, which began the poem as a vessel bearing the poetic force of the Caribbean, now becomes coded with the ambivalence associated with the famous Greek hero. The purposiveness of the schooner’s homeward journey is now undermined by an Odyssean “longing” which is not “for home” but rather for “Nausicaa’s name” and the detour of infidelity and illicit liaison. The formal breaks in the stanzas also disrupt the smooth flow of the sense of two important lines, namely “a schooner beating up the Caribbean // for home” (3–4) and “that father and husband’s // longing” (6–7), heightening the uneasiness and disconnection of the initial identification between the Caribbean and the Aegean. The second half of the poem expands on the tension and violence implied in line 3 by evoking the Trojan War as a framework to discuss the purpose of literature and art:

This brings nobody peace. The ancient war
between obsession and responsibility
will never finish and has been the same

for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore
now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,
since Troy sighed its last flame,

and the blind giant’s boulder heaved the trough
from whose groundswell the great hexameters come
to the conclusions of exhausted surf.

The classics can console. But not enough. (“Sea Grapes” 10–19)

Here Walcott’s speaker argues that the evocation of a classical frame (that of the Trojan War) to discuss the Caribbean and its poetics is inadequate. “This brings nobody peace,” he asserts, because the “age-old” question of art for art’s sake (the “obsession” of the “adulterer”) and that of social purpose and “responsibility” (the “father and husband’s” duty) cannot be resolved. This irresolvable situation stems from the sheer enervation and loss of vitality in the form and content of the classical references themselves, or what the poem calls “the conclusions of exhausted surf.” But the last line, made up of two short declarative sentences, stands as both a statement and a challenge: “The classics can console. But not enough” (18). If the classics offer
“not enough” consolation regarding the purpose and meaningfulness of art because of their sheer enervation, then Walcott’s poem suggests two possibilities: first, rephrase the question in a way other than the “ancient war / between obsession and responsibility”; second, find a different framework for conceptualizing a Caribbean poetics besides the identification with the Aegean and classical Greek verse evoked in this poem.

Both possibilities are illuminated and elaborated in another poem in this collection, “To Return to the Trees.” Here, Walcott’s speaker begins his conceptualization of the work of art by observing “not only the sea” (marking a departure from the maritime milieu of “Sea Grapes”) but also “the changes on Morne Coco Mountain” (18) in Trinidad: “from flagrant sunrise / to its ashen end; / grey has grown strong to me, // it’s no longer neutral, / no longer the dirty flag / of courage going under” (“To Return to the Trees” 19–24). On the one hand, the “flagrant sunrise” and the “ashen end” of Morne Coco Mountain parallel the rise and fall of Troy and classical Greek verse with their “last flame” and “exhausted surf,” but in this poem, the “ashen end” of the twilight mountainscape becomes an inspiration: “grey has grown strong to me.” Walcott’s speaker’s affirmation of this newfound sense of “grey” rejects the ambivalence of the “ancient war” between art for art’s sake and art as responsibility that “brings nobody peace” in “Sea Grapes.” Here, the artistic impulse is not rendered in terms of a “war” at all, as it “no longer” involves acts of martial valor or “courage going under.” Instead, Walcott’s poem envisions the “grey”ness of the work of art as “an immanent, crystallized process at a standstill” or “both the result of the process and the process itself at a standstill” (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 180, 179). By process, Adorno refers to “the relation of [the artwork’s] whole and parts” but “without [the whole and parts] being reducible to one side or the other” (178), and this is borne out in Walcott’s lyric:

it is speckled with hues
like quartz, it’s as
various as boredom,

grey now is a crystal
haze, a dull diamond,
stone-dusted and stoic,

grey is the heart at peace,
tougher than the warrior
as it bestrides factions (“To Return to the Trees” 25–33)
Formally speaking, the tercets of this poem contrast with those of “Sea Grapes” in that the sense of each unit is not broken or confounded by the stanza breaks. Moreover, each tercet bears an aphoristic quality that builds on the associations offered by the previous one: for example, “grey now is a crystal / haze, a dull diamond, / stone-dusted and stoic” draws on the description of “speckled” quartz in the previous stanza, and the adjective “stoic” in the last line prepares us for a shift in register from minerals to emotions in the next stanza, where grey becomes “the heart at peace.” In other words, it is as if each stanza illustrates the crystalline quality both Walcott and Adorno ascribe to the work of art: for the poet, art is “a crystal / haze, a dull diamond,” and for the philosopher, it is a “crystallized process at a standstill.”

This sense of the work of art as a process at a delicate standstill is complemented by the poem’s deft rendering of the enormous forces immanent to such a crystalline framework. An emphasis on the “crystalline” aspect of the artwork risks falling into an autotelic concept of art as self-sufficient and self-referential. But “To Return to the Trees” does not stop there, for it describes the “force field” aspect of the artwork just as well in the next three stanzas:

it is the great pause
when the pillars of the temple
rest on Samson’s palms

and are held, held,
that moment
when the heavy rock of the world

like a child sleeps
on the trembling shoulders of Atlas
and his own eyes close,

the toil that is balance. (“To Return to the Trees” 34–43)

Here, Walcott’s poem draws on biblical as well as Greek mythological references, but unlike the story of Odysseus in “Sea Grapes,” these references are incorporated into the poem’s relational scheme rather than forming a larger interpretive framework for the lyric. The biblical allusion to how “the pillars of the temple / rest on Samson’s palms” recalls the crystalline structure of the artwork in the image of a man standing with his palms supporting two pillars, but our thoughts, set in motion by the Old Testament allusion, cannot miss the cataclysmic force of Samson’s strength that is deferred and yet
heightened by “the great pause” of the poem. Similarly, the childlike sleep of the “the heavy rock of the world” upon “the trembling shoulders of Atlas” belies the mythical giant’s own impending slumber and possible release of his burden. The “grey”ness of art, which has grown strong in both Walcott’s mind and verse, becomes that moment where such a catastrophic release can be figured and comprehended in thought, deferred but also precipitous. To put it another way, Walcott’s speaker expounds on the color grey—by this point in his lyric standing both for the crafting of poetry and for the form of poetry itself—to give us a breathtaking analogy of how historical, political, and social forces (represented by the pillars in Samson’s palms and the world on Atlas’s shoulders) are immanent to the artwork. Thought itself is catalyzed once we recognize in the apparent harmony and fullness of the whole artwork the laborious relations and telling gaps between the work’s constitutive parts, or, “the toil that is balance.”

“The Fervour and Intelligence of a Whole Country”:

Another Life

The balance between nationalism and cosmopolitics that Walcott strives to achieve is expressed in autobiographical and aesthetic terms in his first long narrative poem, Another Life (1972). Walcott focuses on his home country of St. Lucia and emphasizes the important role that artists and writers play in forming a national consciousness vis-à-vis the island nation’s colonial history, its neocolonial state, and global capital. This can be seen from the metaphors he uses to describe both his artistic mission and his vision of St. Lucia at the opening of the poem: “Verandahs, where the pages of the sea / are a book left open by an absent master / in the middle of another life— / I begin here again” (AL 1–4). The physical space of the “verandahs,” which are threshold spaces between the inside and outside areas of houses in tropical regions, and the rustling waves sounding like open “pages of the sea” that surround St. Lucia become metaphors for the writing of poetry, and this writing will offer “another life” that Walcott must “begin here again.” By “here” Walcott refers not only to the beginning of the poem itself but also to his home country of St. Lucia with its colonial history and postcolonial present. This double significance is borne out in the next stanza, where Walcott’s gaze moves from the sea onto the landscape of the island marked by British colonialism: “as a sun, tired of empire, declined. / It mesmerized like fire without wind, / and as its amber climbed / the beer-stein ovals of the British fort / above the promontory, the sky / grew drunk with light”
Walcott plays on the common saying that “the sun never sets on the British empire” by personifying the sun itself as growing “tired” of British colonialism. Instead of being a symbol associated with colonialism, the sun’s “amber” light becomes part of the elemental forces of the island, “mesmeriz[ing]” and inspiring Walcott the poet “like fire,” and it finally makes the sky itself “drunk with light.” The reference to light here is not only a visual image but a reminder of the luminous connotations of the island’s name, St. Lucia. Walcott portrays St. Lucia’s natural landscape as a fiery and illuminating inspiration for his poetry that will rise above European colonialism, with “the British fort” and its rotund, “beer-stein ovals” suggesting a colonial lifestyle of military conquest and excessive luxury. The economic exploitation of St. Lucia is compared to a physical dismemberment of the land itself, as Walcott observes later in the poem: “the island quartered / into baronial estates, gone, gone, / their golden bugled epoch. / Aubrey Smith characters in khaki helmets, / Victorian flourish of oratorical moustaches” (AL 902–6). The repetition and alliteration of “gone, gone” and “their golden bugled epoch” emphasizes the swift demise of the British colonial aristocracy with their “baronial” land and monetary holdings. Walcott also mocks this aristocracy with his reference to Charles Aubrey Smith, a British actor famous for playing military and aristocratic characters in early twentieth-century films. He makes the British colonizers seem larger than life, out of time and place with their “Victorian flourish[es],” and ridiculously pompous and self-important, such that it is their bristling “moustaches” rather than their voices that are “oratorical.” However, Walcott also depicts how colonialism has imprinted itself onto the patriotic identity of St. Lucia sponsored by the postcolonial state in a classroom exchange between a schoolmaster and his students:

“Boy! Name the great harbours of the world!”
“Sydney! Sir.”
“San Francesco!”
“Naples, sah!”
“And what about Castries?”
“Sah, Castries ees a coaling station and
der twenty-seventh best harba in der worl’!
In eet the entire Breetesh Navy can be heeden!”
“What is the motto of St. Lucia, boy?”
“Statio haud malefida carinis.”
“Sir!”
Walcott’s satirical humor is evident in the contrast between the schoolmaster’s stentorian questions and the students’ answers, rendered in vernacular speech. Furthermore, national and colonial authority are ironically undermined by the students’ sincere and enthusiastic responses. Not only is Castries, the port capital of St. Lucia, a “coaling station,” but it can hide “the entire Breetesh Navy,” which, rendered in a student’s voice, becomes a cowardly herd of “sheeps” instead of a mighty fleet of ships. Walcott satirizes the idea of a national identity expressed as a motto given by colonial authority, or what he calls in an earlier essay the formula of politics.

But the most pernicious effect of colonialism for Walcott is the creation of an instrumental nationality in the hands of Caribbean politicians and intellectuals. They become enamored with the Muse of History and instill in the people they govern a sense of constant suffering and victimization as perpetually colonized subjects, while at the same time lining their own pockets with the power and wealth of political office. In Another Life, Walcott expands on the criticism of the Muse of History he advanced in his earlier essay of the same name, arguing that in St. Lucia art itself has become an excuse for a collective fixation on colonialism and slavery, because there are “Too many penitential histories passing / for poems” (AL 3444–45). Walcott warily observes “the process of history machined through fact / for the poet’s cheap alcohol, / lines like the sugarcane factory’s mechanization of myth / ground into rubbish” (AL 3447–50), a sentiment that reminds us of Theodor Adorno’s cautions regarding the instrumentalization of culture and the transformation of Enlightenment thought into a myth that it was supposed to overcome. Walcott provides a specific Caribbean context for the instrumental rationalization of thought and culture Adorno was concerned about by using an analogy of one of the primary industries associated with the colonial and neocolonial economy in St. Lucia, namely the “sugarcane factory” and its “mechanization of” not only sugarcane but “myth” itself. St. Lucia’s postindependence government, like Trinidad’s under Eric Williams and his national slogan of “Discipline, Production, Tolerance,” becomes a highly efficient economic apparatus that manufactures sugar, alcohol, and—on a cultural register—a persistent myth of social and national marginalization. This stands in contrast to the efforts of Walcott’s teacher and friend, Harry Simmons, a local painter who tries to portray the everyday life, struggles, and survival of
ordinary St. Lucians. Toward the end of Another Life, however, Walcott learns that Simmons committed suicide out of despair, and the poet criticizes the St. Lucian state's economic opportunism as opposed to his mentor's artistic attempts to create a national consciousness among the St. Lucian people.

all o’dem big boys, so, dem ministers,
ministers of culture, ministers of development,
the green blacks, and their old toms,
and all the syntactical apologists of the Third World
explaining why their artists die,
by their own hands, Magicians of the New Vision.
Screaming the same shit.
Those who peel, from their own leprous flesh, their names,
who chafe and nurture the scars of rusted chains,
like primates favouring scabs, those who charge tickets
for another free ride on the middle-passage,
those who explain to the peasant why he is African (AL 2946–57)

Walcott sees “dem ministers” of St. Lucia as “syntactical apologists” who rhetorically and economically position his country into the category of the “Third World,” thus turning St. Lucia into a marginalized Third World country dependent on Europe and America for its economic sustenance. Walcott emphasizes that these politicians are cunning persuaders or “Magicians,” who try to “explain to the peasant why he is African” rather than St. Lucian by deciding to “chafe and nurture the scars of rusted chains” that metaphorically recall the physical and psychic violence of slavery and colonialism, thus binding the people of St. Lucia to historical bondage even after independence. This emphasis on a specific identity of African abjection in the form of perpetually recalled slavery is part of the state’s economic exploitation of its people, such that the state “charge[s] tickets for another free ride on the middle-passage.” In short, instead of promoting “development” and “culture,” St. Lucia’s state ministers regress the island and its people back into colonial enslavement while they line their own pockets, as seen from the phrase “green blacks” that plays off the slang term for U.S. currency “greenback.” Moreover, these ministers wish to create a “New Vision” for St. Lucia, “a new art” that will result in their local “artists” such as Harry Simmons “dying in the old way” (AL 2966–67) through official rejection and dismissal. The “new art” these ministers demand transforms St. Lucian national culture into commodities to be readily consumed and circulated in the culture industry of globalization:
They had not changed, they knew only
the autumnal hint of hotel rooms
the sea’s engine of air-conditioners,
and the waitress in national costume
and the horsemen galloping past the single wave
across the line of Martinique, the horse or la mer
out of Gauguin by the Tourist Board.
Hotel, hotel, hotel, hotel, and a club: The Bitter End. (3572–79)

Here, St. Lucia’s national culture is reduced to “the waitress in national costume,” an object of a thriving tourist industry in St. Lucia, an industry whose proliferation is signified by the monotonous repetition of “hotel, hotel, hotel” as well as the objectification of St. Lucia’s neighboring country Martinique as a replica of Gauguin’s painting, possibly commissioned by St. Lucia’s own “Tourist Board.” In the hands of neocolonial politicians, gripped by instrumental nationality, Walcott’s home country of St. Lucia is threatened with the “Bitter End” of becoming a series of hotels and a club for foreign tourists instead of building a progressive and liberating society with the goal of improving the lot of its people.

Faced with such instrumental nationality expressed through the state’s formula of politics, artists such as Harry Simmons, and his students Derek Walcott and Dunstan St. Omer, offer an aesthetic counterpoint of national consciousness that is always intimately connected with the lives of the St. Lucians whom they live among and represent in their paintings and poetry. Yet given the marginalization of local art in favor of the beautification of St. Lucia for the tourist economy, this artistic practice is fraught and fragile, as Walcott reveals in his description of Simmons’s predicament:

    Now, where he had beheld
    a community of graceful spirits
    irradiating from his own control and centre,
    through botany, history, lepidoptery, stamps,
    his mind was cracking like the friable earth,
    and in each chasm,
    sprung nettles like the hands of certain friendships. (AL 2771–77)

Walcott describes Simmons’s artistic methods in terms that recall the luminous symbolism of St. Lucia’s name. Like the sun that grew tired of the British Empire at the beginning of the poem, Simmons’s paintings conjure the people around him as “a community of graceful spirits / irradiating” or emanating
from and inspired by his artwork. Simmons’s paintings represent St. Lucians through his meticulous observation of their lives and their surroundings, as can be seen from his studies in “botany, history, lepidoptery, stamps,” rather than being compelled by the edicts of economic and cultural development issued by the state ministers and the Tourist Board. But, despite the illumination of his paintings, Simmons and the radiating national consciousness he represents are infected by the “leprous flesh” and “scabs” of the ministers of culture and development, false friends whose handshakes are as stinging as “nettles,” such that Simmons’s mind begins “cracking like the friable earth,” unable to nurture the spirit of his people as it crumbles. The simile Walcott uses here to compare Simmons’s despair to crumbling earth is significant, as it serves as a contrast to the vivifying and inclusive national consciousness that Simmons represents in his paintings, expressed here through the metaphor of a commonplace earthenware bowl or jug:

People entered his understanding
like a wayside country church,
they had built him themselves.
It was they who had smoothed the wall
of his clay-coloured forehead,
who made of his rotundity an earthy
useful object
holding the clear water of their simple troubles, (AL 3135–42)

But Harry Simmons’s death is not in vain; it paradoxically allows him to live on in the hearts and minds of St. Lucians, for Walcott avers that “he is a man no more / but the fervour and intelligence / of a whole country” (AL 3150–52). Walcott elaborates what he learned from Harry Simmons, namely an “understanding” that artists bear a responsibility to the “people” of their community, and that this responsibility can be understood in national terms: “They had built him themselves,” Walcott says, and Simmons’s life and work becomes “the fervour and intelligence of a whole country.” Harry Simmons’s art does not resolve the “simple troubles” of the people, unlike the ministers of culture and development who want to resolve social and cultural issues by enforcing a St. Lucian national identity centered on Africa. Instead, the metaphor of Simmons himself as a “clay-coloured” and “earthy useful object” that nonetheless embodies the “fervour and intelligence” of St. Lucia itself reminds us of the broken vase that is lovingly reassembled in Walcott’s Nobel Prize speech, itself an analogy of the care and pain of national consciousness taking shape in each Caribbean country. Walcott’s comparison of the people’s
troubles as clear water carried by the earthenware vessel of Simmons's art, and of broken fragments reassembled into a scarred and battered vase, suggests the artists' belief in the power of poetry to reconfigure or form a constellation of culture, politics, and history that make up the nation of St. Lucia.

Although Harry Simmons might be dead, his two students inherit his mantle of a critical national consciousness that is represented through painting and poetry and that draws on the vibrant and vivid particularities of St. Lucia's landscape and society. Dunstan St. Omer, Walcott's fellow student and friend whom he christens Gregorias in Another Life, “possessed / aboriginal force and it came / as the carver comes out of the wood. / Now, every landscape we entered / was already signed with his name” (1380–84). St. Omer's art is at once “aboriginal” and autochthonous in his robust renditions of St. Lucia's landscapes, and, “as the carver comes out of the wood,” these landscapes also shape St. Omer himself in a fashion similar to the ordinary people who had built Harry Simmons's artistic vision like a wayside church. Walcott, who “lived in a different gift, / its element metaphor” (AL 1355–56), describes his gift in terms that recall the idea of poetry as a crystallization of different elements in his own lyric poem “To Return to the Trees” as well as in Theodor Adorno's aesthetic musings: “in every surface I sought / the paradoxical flash of an instant / in which every facet was caught / in a crystal of ambiguities” (AL 1348–51). If St. Omer’s paintings express the muscular and aboriginal power of St. Lucia's natural landscape, Walcott's poetry evinces the crystallizing and relational constellation of St. Lucia's society, history, and culture in which precolonial, colonial, and postindependence St. Lucia are drawn together and crafted anew through Walcott's poetic vision. As he avers in a passage that combines Christian belief that is prevalent in present-day St. Lucia and the memory of an older, pre-Columbus native culture: “The Church upheld the Word, but this new Word / was here, attainable / to my own hand, / in the deep country it found the natural man, / generous, rooted” (AL 979–83). The “new Word” Walcott has attained by his own hand is not a divine command from the mouth of the Christian God but a poetic language that can challenge the “New Vision” foisted on St. Lucians by their ministers of culture and development by seeking out and finding a “generous, rooted” past obscured by colonialism, slavery, and now neocolonialism. The “natural man” refers, on the one hand, to the original Arawak and Carib inhabitants of St. Lucia, but, on the other, it also recalls the generous and rooted nature of Harry Simmons's art and his dedication to the people living in present-day St. Lucia. Certainly, Walcott is not replacing the Afrocentric identity promoted by the state ministers in favor of one centered on resurrecting an authentic Arawak or Carib past, as we see here:
here was a life older than geography,
as the leaves of edible roots opened their pages
at the child’s last lesson, Africa, heart-shaped,

and the lost Arawak hieroglyphs and signs
were razed from slates by sponges of the rain,
their symbols mixed with lichen,

the archipelago like a broken root
divided among tribes, while trees and men
laboured assiduously, silently to become

whatever their given sounds resembled, (1233–42)

Walcott’s image of Africa as an “edible root” and a “heart-shaped” lesson for the St. Lucian child may at first glance suggest a diasporic longing for Africa. Similarly, the evocation of “lost Arawak hieroglyphs and signs” could be read as a recovery of a native identity before colonialism, “a life older than geography.” But Walcott reminds us that the “symbols” of Arawak culture have been “razed from slates by sponges of rain,” while the memory of Africa is “like a broken root / divided among tribes.” Neither image suggests the possibility of recovering or reestablishing either an African or an Arawak identity for the nation, although both remain, like “opened pages” and “mixed” patches of “lichen,” as part of St. Lucia’s collective history and cultural dispensation. What is more important for Walcott in this passage is the idea of “trees and men” who “laboured assiduously” to create a new life and identity from the given conditions on the ground, or “whatever their given sounds resembled.” The visual, static images of leaves, pages, and hieroglyphs early in the passage are no longer “silently” suffering, but, through Walcott’s assiduous poetic and cultural labor, become “given sounds” as they are given a voice and an utterance. Finally, without forgetting the aboriginal inhabitants or the history of slavery and indentured servitude, Walcott brings the renewal of St. Lucia’s natural landscape and its culture and society to an apotheosis: “Gregorias, listen, lit, / we were the light of the world! / We were blest with a virginal, unpainted world / with Adam’s task of giving things their names” (AL 3624–27). In this concluding passage Walcott plays again on the name of his nation—St. Lucia—and its symbolic associations with brightness and illumination as well as the spiritual task of the Caribbean artist to rejuvenate the world around him by naming things afresh. The island’s appellation connotes both the European Enlightenment and the divine light of European Christianity, which Walcott acknowledges when he exclaims that he and Gregorias
"The Possibilities of the New Country"

St. Omer “were the light of the world.” But this gesture toward Europe is qualified by the next two lines, in which Walcott reminds himself and his readers that the figure of Adam he invokes is a “new” figure entirely, not simply the first man of biblical provenance. Walcott’s is not a religious or evangelical but an aesthetic and epistemological “task of giving things their names,” of redefining through painting and poetry the objective reality of the Caribbean nature and culture that was hypostasized through colonialism’s instrumental rationality and neocolonialism’s determinative identity. In Another Life Walcott reenvisions the island as a nation not determined by an Afrocentric racial identity or social and economic marginalization promoted by the state for the benefit of the tourist industry. Walcott draws inspiration for his national consciousness from the poetic craft of local artists such as his mentor Harry Simmons instead of the political vision of state ministers such as Trinidad’s Eric Williams. In so doing he is able to recognize how St. Lucia is a community made up of multiple peoples, histories, and cultures that are indigenous and hail from other lands, and to reveal the unevenness and the problems facing the nation as a social formation and a political collective.

Walcott does not resolve these difficulties by dissolving or deterritorializing the nation into diaspora; instead, he sounds a cautiously optimistic note, or what he calls “teetering and tough in unabashed unhope” (AL 3594), similar to that raised in his earlier essay “Society and the Artist”: nationalism does not revolve around “quick political achievements” but involves “the deepening stream of the way we are now learning to think,” to think about “the possibilities of the new country we are making” (15). In Another Life, Walcott works out a poetic practice drawn explicitly from his mentor Harry Simmons’s and implicitly from Theodor Adorno’s ideas about the modernist artwork. In so doing, he articulates a critical St. Lucian national consciousness, laying the ground for a literary cosmopolitics in his later work that moves beyond the shores of St. Lucia onto the regional space of the Caribbean in “The Schooner Flight,” and the black Atlantic as a historical and a cultural expanse connecting Europe and the Caribbean in both Omeros and The Prodigal.

“Either I’m Nobody, or I’m a Nation”:
Caribbean Literary Cosmopolitics in “The Schooner Flight”

The national and historical significance of these figures is further elaborated in Walcott’s long poem “The Schooner Flight,” which begins his collection The Star-Apple Kingdom (1979). The poem tracks its speaker, Shabine, a sailor
of mixed European and African ancestry, as he journeys on the schooner *Flight* from various islands and places in the Caribbean, and marks Shabine’s encounters and engagements with the history of colonial conquest, slavery, and revolutionary independence throughout these islands. The poem ends with the *Flight* engulfed in a sudden storm, and a transfigured Shabine delivering his benediction to the islands “from the depths of the sea” (Canto 11, line 51). Paul Breslin connects the poem’s genesis closely with the poet’s personal difficulties with his marriage as well as the Trinidad Theatre Company, such that “knowing the circumstances, one can hardly help reading the poem as grounded in autobiography, preoccupied as it is with the sundering of ties to marriage and nation and with a quest for self-transformation” (11.189). While “The Schooner *Flight*” does distance itself from any explicit national identification, nonetheless the self-transformation that Breslin suggests may be thought of as a rearticulation of nationalism, or the relationships between self, culture, and politics within a transnational framework, rather than a complete sundering of the self through poetic disavowal. I suggest “The Schooner *Flight*” illustrates a literary cosmopolitics, first, by reiterating the aesthetic ideas that I inferred from in Walcott’s earlier poems, and second, by invoking figures who represent the dominant concepts of diasporic hybridity and then reconfiguring them to reveal the continued salience of nationalism as political consciousness and cultural critique rather than as a determinate ethnic or racial identity.

In formal terms, the poem begins with an image of the departing Shabine standing in the yard of his lover’s house that recalls Walcott’s elaboration of “grey” as a simultaneously crystalline and motive structure in “To Return to the Trees”:

> Out in the yard turning grey in the dawn,  
> I stood like a stone and nothing else move  
> but the cold sea rippling like galvanize  
> and the nail holes of stars in the sky roof,  
> till the wind start to interfere with the trees. (1.6–10)

Shabine and his surroundings are caught in a frozen instant, poised on the verge of portentous movement. Even the sea and stars have their apparent motions described in ways that reinforce their solidity and stillness in physical terms: the sea is “rippling” like “galvanize[d]” metal, while the stars are like “nail holes” pierced in “the sky roof.” This description of Shabine standing “like a stone” in the yard “turning grey in the dawn” immediately signals to us that we are not in the presence of an autobiographical self; in other
words, Shabine is a figure who is part of the poem’s aesthetic force, “stone-dusted and stoic” (to use a phrase from “To Return to the Trees”) rather than a stand-in for Walcott himself. Furthermore, the “wind” that snaps the stillness of this passage and sets the poem in motion is the same wind that will have an important part to play in Shabine’s role as both a sailor and a poet, as he says at the end of canto 1: “my common language go be the wind” (75). For Shabine, poetry is an act of imagination and articulation immanently associated with his own vocation as a sailor rather than a transcendental vision that lifts him out of the lifeworld of the poem. Toward the end of the first canto of the poem Shabine adopts the register of shipboard labor to describe his own poetic craft:

[. . .] Well, when I write
each phrase go be soaked in salt;
I go draw and knot every line as tight
as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
my common language go be the wind,
my pages the sails of the schooner Flight. (1.71–76)

The image or conceptual metaphor of the ship has become important in postcolonial and cultural studies ever since Paul Gilroy introduced it as a Bakhtinian chronotope in his groundbreaking transnational project The Black Atlantic. However, the eponymous schooner in Walcott’s text does not serve as such a chronotope, and in fact challenges some of Gilroy’s premises. Although Gilroy offers an important transnational perspective that challenges what he calls the “cultural insiderism” of nationalizing narratives (3), Walcott’s poem questions the claim that “the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean” forms “a central organising principle for this enterprise” which is “the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation” Gilroy terms “the black Atlantic” (4). “The Schooner Flight” does not “focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland” (Gilroy 4). As we shall see later in the poem, Shabine’s own encounter with the Middle Passage in canto 5 is not one of remembrance or commemoration. For now, what is important in the lines from canto 1 cited earlier is the artistic conjunction of two figures—sailor and ship—through the deceptively “simple speech” of poetic structure. This conjunction, however, stops short of identifying or reducing the craft of the poet to the work of a sailor, because it does not reduce the poem as artwork to life or the circumstances that allow the creation of art. In other words, while sailing becomes
an analogy for elaborating the work of poetic art (seen, for example, in the simile “draw and knot every line as tight / as ropes in this rigging”) Shabine does not employ the ship as an overarching metaphor for the poem; thus there is no identification between the tenor of the poem and the vehicle of the ship. Instead, the comparison of Shabine’s working out of a poem to his working onboard a ship recalls the descriptions of Samson and Atlas in “To Return to the Trees”: all three figures are intimately connected with physical objects, and the conjunction of the figure with the object generates a motive force. For Shabine, unlike Samson and Atlas, this force is more explicit in its purpose, for it is Shabine’s “common language” that will propel the Flight and the poem along, for this language will be the “wind” that blows “the sails of the schooner.”

Thematically, canto 1 also challenges the focus on Caribbean identity as hybrid or creolized. In a well-known passage from the middle of canto 1, Shabine narrates the origin of his name and his background:

a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patois
for any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw
when these slums of empire was paradise.
I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation. (1.36–43)

Shabine turns out to be a local appellation for “any red nigger,” and this description may suggest that he stands for the mixed-race inhabitants of the Caribbean. But this can be refuted on two counts. First, the poem emphasizes that Shabine is a figure of poiesis (like Samson and Atlas in “The Return to Trees”) rather than an identity position who corresponds to Walcott himself or to any actually existing individual or collective subjects. Second, a formal analysis of lines 39 through 43 challenges the claim that the sea-loving Shabine is representative of Caribbean hybridity because he has “Dutch, nigger, and English” in him and that this makes him, if not a “nobody,” then someone who stands for “a nation” of racial and cultural heterogeneity. Rhetorically, the first three lines are marked by asyndeton: no conjunctions join them in a causal or subordinating relationship, thus the fourth line “and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation,” does not necessarily follow as a result of the mixing of “Dutch, nigger, and English” in the preceding line. Moreover, the ABAB rhyme scheme points us to the feminine rhyme of “education”
with “I’m a nation” that suggests Shabine’s national consciousness emerges not because of the mixing of European and African ancestry, but rather from the “sound colonial education” he received. From this perspective, national consciousness becomes more a matter of knowledge, learning, and art rather than ancestry and race, and this point is emphasized later in the canto where Shabine avers that “I loved them, my children, my wife, my home; / I loved them as poets love the poetry / that kills them, as drowned sailors the sea” (1.67–69). Shabine’s love and affection for his family and home are expressed not in patriotic sentiments, but instead in artistic terms of death and violence that recall Theodor Adorno’s discussion of how the “life” of artworks “preys on death” and how “they kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life” (Aesthetic Theory 133). The schooner Flight (with its name suggesting the release or “flight” of thought), together with Shabine (himself a figurative poet participating in the elaborative process of Walcott’s poem), eventually succumbs to this predatory aspect of the artwork that objectifies aspects of reality and sets in motion a process of thought that “opens up one cell of reality” and then “penetrate[s] the next” (Adorno, Minima Moralia 87). Moreover, Walcott’s poem does not espouse a transnational identification or subject position premised on the history of transatlantic slavery. This is illustrated most clearly in Shabine’s refusal to sympathize with or lament the suffering of the multitudes of slaves he and the Flight encounter in canto 5.

Contrary to Paul Gilroy’s use of the chronotope of ships in The Black Atlantic, Walcott’s Shabine’s identification with the African slaves brought across the Middle Passage is not as strong or pronounced as his affinity for the sailors working on board the ships commanded by famous historical admirals. In this canto the Flight encounters two fleets of ghostly ships, the first being “a rustling forest of ships / with sails dry like paper” (5.9–10), setting up an auditory as well as thematic resonance with the schooner Flight, which has as its sails the pages of Shabine’s own poetry. Shabine sees “great admirals” on the deck such as “Rodney, Nelson, de Grasse,” but more importantly focuses on “the hoarse orders / they gave those Shabines” (5.16–18) under their command. But when Shabine sees the next fleet of “slave ships” flying “flags of all nations” with “our fathers below deck too deep [. . .] / to hear us shouting” (5.29–30), his response is muted, pensive, even noncommittal. Shabine supposes that their ancestral fathers cannot hear the shouting of their present-day descendants since they are physically and temporally “too deep,” and his response is to “stop shouting” entirely (5.31). The poet-sailor then shrugs off the entire encounter with a dismissive question: “Who knows / who his grandfather is, much less his name?” (5.31–32). Here, Shabine cuts
off any nostalgia or diasporic longing for a real or imagined Africa as the land of “our fathers” with his refusal to search for or ponder his genealogical roots. More important is the poem’s questioning of the routed form of transnationalism implicit in Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic with its “flags of all nations.” In other words, Shabine is part of the poem’s literary cosmopolitics that takes up and extends Gilroy’s chronotope of being “rooted in and routed through the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once” (3). This may become clearer when we remember that Shabine focuses on “those Shabines,” his predecessors who work on board naval vessels rather than the slaves held captive in the holds of slaving vessels. At one level, Shabine may represent the actual, hybrid peoples of the Caribbean and the actual descendants of these slaves from Africa. But what is important here is that his “memory revolve[s] / on all sailors before [him]” (5.26–27). The poem foregrounds, through Shabine’s memory, the vocational expertise of those sailors “before” or preceding Shabine, extending a diasporic identity into a professional camaraderie and also (given the structural intertwining of Shabine’s poetic craft and his maritime skills) emphasizing the importance of such craft and skills over any rooting in or routing through the Middle Passage.

“The Schooner Flight” thus offers an artistic rendering of Shabine and the schooner as figures of poetic thought rather than representational subjects, and it is the movement of these two figures in the time and space of the poem that enacts the work’s intertwining of national consciousness and cosmopolitics. The poem expresses a clear disappointment with and disapproval of the authority figures who govern the various Caribbean nation-states by linking oppressive nationalism and corrupt government with the only explicitly hybrid figure: Shabine’s former employer O’Hara. O’Hara is a “big government man” (2.1) and is described as a “minister-monster who smuggled the booze” (2.24) and “a half-Syrian saurian” (2.25). The alliteration of “minister” and “monster” and the sibilance of “half-Syrian saurian” emphasize how O’Hara’s hybridity becomes a savage and bestial bastardization rather than a liberating or emancipative mixing of races and roles. Furthermore, in canto 9, as the Flight approaches Dominica, Shabine and his shipmate Vince have a conversation about modernization and “Progress,” in which Vince delightfully exclaims that “One day go be planes only, no more boat” (9.5), to which Shabine retorts that “Progress leaving all we small islands behind” (9.8) and that if they were to ask the original Carib inhabitants of the Dominica they would find that Progress had “kill[ed] them by millions, some in war, / some by forced labour dying in the mines” (9.12–13). “Progress” does not lead to any tangible improvement, but becomes “history’s dirty joke”
it becomes a euphemism for the history of conquest, massacre, and subjugation of the Caribbean peoples, and an obscene and “dirty” reminder of the regression (as opposed to progression) of neocolonial regimes where ministers such as O’Hara have not been “guardians of the poor” (2.21) but instead “smuggled the booze” for their own pleasure. Despite this express hostility toward the governments of these Caribbean countries, the poem nonetheless Cherishes national consciousness and the liberating promise of nationalism, and this critical consciousness and political promise are presented in artistically evocative language rather than rousing political speech. Canto 3, “Shabine Leaves the Republic,” seems to suggest a departure from the political and national community of Trinidad, identified earlier as “The Limer’s Republic” (2.34). The canto begins with Shabine’s famous declaration that “I had no nation now but the imagination” (3.1), which may be read not as a refutation of nationalism but rather as a reconfiguring of nationalism as a problematic in aesthetic and imaginative terms. In other words, Walcott’s poem critiques the either-or dilemma in which progress and neocolonial regimes have trapped popular nationalism “between / the Police Marine Branch and Hotel Venezuela” (3.23–24), and therefore no political solution presents itself unless the terms of the dilemma are recast. Although Walcott’s poem does not explicitly schematize such a revision, the poetic and visionary rendering of both Maria Concepcion and the young men in canto 3 might point to certain pertinent aspects. Even though Shabine declares “I no longer believed in the revolution” (3.20), his lack of political conviction is immediately linked with another, personal loss in the next line: “I was losing faith in the love of my woman” (3.21). The political inflection of love and romance in canto 3 affects the resolution of the relationship between Shabine and Maria Concepcion at the end of the poem, where, after the storm, Shabine sees “the veiled face of Maria Concepcion / marrying the ocean, then drifting away” (11.360). Shabine’s relationship with Maria is transformed from anxiety and doubt into acceptance and release, as the focus of his amorous problems becomes part of “the ocean”; we might infer that the acceptance and release of Maria will allow for a corresponding acceptance and release of the political dilemma that led Shabine to lose faith in “the revolution” in canto 3.

In fact, the “young men” who mobilize against the state police and the Hotel Venezuela are described in terms similar to Maria Concepcion at the end of the poem:

Young men without flags
using shirts, their chests waiting for holes.
They kept marching into the mountains, and
their noise ceased as foam sinks into sand.
They sank in the bright hills like rain, every one
in his own nimbus, leaving shirts in the street,
and the echo of power at the end of the street. (3.25–31)

At the most obvious level, this can be read as a lament for the utter defeat of mass political mobilization, emphasizing Shabine’s loss of faith in organized revolution mentioned above. Also, the poetic transformation of the “young men” who (it is implied) are killed or otherwise neutralized by the government into a gentle shower of “rain” that “sank in the bright hills” or as “foam” that “sinks into sand” may be read as evading or romanticizing the pressing issues of oppression and state violence. However, in these passages Maria and the young men are not beautified so that readers may affirm or exhort their dignity or passion in the face of implacable violence. Rather, their affective transformation into a visionary or mythopoetic condition points out a glaring lack and inadequacy of both alternatives in the either-or dilemma of Trinidad society caught between the Police Marine Branch and Hotel Venezuela. Certainly the young men seem to have been chastened and routed by the repressive state apparatus, but the poem represents their “shirts in the street” and “the echo of power at the end of the street” as a legacy that haunts and disturbs the neocolonial regime, such that in “the Senate,” “the judges, they say, still sweat in carmine” (3.32, 33). It is the authority figures in the repressive state who suffer, sweat, and bleed, whereas the young men have each turned into a “nimbus,” an aura or glow that represents the diffusion of national consciousness, like rain falling on “the bright hills.” This metaphor of rain is taken up once more at the end of the poem, where the transformed Shabine finds that “across [his] own face, like the face of the sun / a light rain was falling” (11.8–9) and invokes a similar benediction upon the Caribbean islands: “Fall gently, rain, on the sea’s upturned face / like a girl showering; make these islands fresh / as Shabine once knew them!” (11.10–12). Maria, the young men, and ultimately Shabine himself are poetically rendered into motive forces: Maria is “drifting away” with her marriage to the ocean, the young men sink like foam but fall like rain over the countryside, and Shabine, after his benediction of rainfall “from this bowsprit” of the Flight (11.26), settles down into a state of work and rest that again recalls artwork’s crystallization and field of force. This can be seen from the way Shabine ends the poem in a state of physical work and intellectual learning while blending and “cotching” (propping up against something) with the schooner’s armature: “I stop talking now. I work, then I read, / cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast” (11.43–44). Walcott, in “The Schooner
“The Possibilities of the New Country”

**Flight,** renders historical and political forces into artistic and transformative figures such as Shabine and the schooner itself. In doing so, he shows us an aesthetic mode of critical nationality that does not alight upon an identity position for ethnic absolutism or cultural insiderism. Instead, it enables a literary cosmopolitics that eschews identity thinking in favor of an imagination that is not tied to any one nation but is at the same time politically and culturally engaged with the various nations Shabine encounters as he traverses the Caribbean. In *Omeros,* to which I now turn, Walcott’s literary cosmopolitics shifts into a different gear, forming connections between the St. Lucian national consciousness developed in *Another Life* and North America, Europe, and Africa.

**“Repeating the X of an Hourglass”: The Chiasmus of Nationalism and Cosmopolitics in Omeros**

Despite its apparent associations with and invocations of Homer’s *Odyssey,* I argue that *Omeros* is a tragic poem containing some elements of a *Kunstlerroman* enabling us to see the combination of national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics in Walcott’s longest work. That *Omeros* has elements of an artist novel is evident in the figures of the British expatriate Major Plunkett and Walcott himself as he narrates parts of the poem. Both Plunkett and the narrator-Walcott are fascinated with a St. Lucian woman named Helen and are inspired by her to write, respectively, a history of St. Lucia and a poem comparing her and the island to the legendary Helen of Troy. However, these attempts to identify St. Lucia with Helen as a historically or classically accurate poetic icon come to naught. *Omeros* instead offers counterpoints to this iconification through other characters who illustrate a critical national consciousness in St. Lucia itself, and through a literary cosmopolitics expressed in the journeys of Achille the fisherman and the narrator-Walcott to Africa, North America, and Europe. At the same time, Walcott extends and revises his earlier aesthetic theories; he realizes the touch of artistic arrogance or hubris implicit in his earlier notions of the transfigured or solitary artist as well as in Plunkett’s attempts to iconize Helen as St. Lucia. As part of *Omeros’s* tragic form, Walcott’s narrator-self must undergo a sea change of a different sort from Shabine’s. Instead of the transfiguration of the artist into the light of world (in *Another Life*) or as a solitary sailor-poet (in “The Schooner Flight”), the narrator-Walcott in *Omeros* becomes a character at the same level as the other figures in his poem, and it is through his transnational peregrinations
that he gradually forms a commitment both to art and to his home country of St. Lucia, to which he returns at the end of the poem.

By suggesting that *Omeros* is generically more a tragedy than an epic, I am drawing on Walcott’s own comments about his work as well as David Scott’s discussion of romance and tragedy in anticolonial and postcolonial narratives. Although *Omeros* is written in hexametrical tercets that mostly follow the rhyme scheme of classical epic verse, the poem cleaves toward the characteristics of tragedy described by Scott, such as recursivity, temporal and historical revision, and an openness or indeterminacy in its thematic treatment of St. Lucia’s culture and society. Walcott comes up against the historical contingencies and circumstances that pose limitations on his art and, in the end, departs from the anticolonial, romantic narrative of nation-building and its corresponding formation of a national identity (exemplified by Eric Williams’s political rhetoric), focusing instead on the dynamic and contrapuntal relationship between a St. Lucian national consciousness and a transnational literary cosmopolitics. Most extended studies of *Omeros* treat the work as an appropriation or extension of the classical, Homeric epic in a Caribbean context (Terada; Hamner; Breslin). However, as Walcott himself observes not long after the poem was published, “It’s not like a heroic epic. [. . .] since I am in the book, I certainly don’t see myself as a hero of an epic, when an epic generally has a hero of action and decision and destiny” (“The Man Who Keeps the English Language Alive: An Interview with Derek Walcott by Rebekah Presson” 189). Moving from an individual and personal level to that of form and genre, Walcott later avers that he “did not plan this book so it would be a template of the Homeric original because that would be an absurdity” (“Reflections on *Omeros*” 230–31). The absurdity Walcott has in mind here is the claims by critics that *Omeros* is “a reinvention of the Odyssey, but this time in the Caribbean,” because “what this implies is that geologically, geographically, the Caribbean is secondary to the Aegean” (“Reflections on *Omeros*” 232). Walcott clearly wants to avoid any sense of belatedness or derivativeness implicit in a reading of his poem as a successor to or facsimile of Homer’s Greek epic, or in the idea that the Caribbean has only in the late twentieth century become capable of producing a literary work of epic length and quality. In fact, Walcott’s narrator-self observes toward the end of *Omeros* that the accepted form of Greek heroic epic cannot do justice to the natural and cultural rhythms of the Caribbean, because there

\[
\ldots \text{The ocean had}
\]

no memory of the wanderings of Gilgamesh,
or whose sword severed whose head in the Iliad.
It was an epic where every line was erased

yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf
in that blind violence with which one crest replaced
another with a trench and that heart-heaving sough

begun in Guinea to fountain exhaustion here,
however one read it, not as our defeat or
our victory; it drenched every survivor

with blessing. (LIX.I.33–43)

Walcott’s description of the Caribbean Sea as an epic of erasure and rejuvenation, of the “blind violence” of “exploding surf” leading not to “defeat” or “victory” but to a cathartic “blessing” for “every survivor,” highlights a formal rhythm and a set of generic qualities associated more with tragedy than the epic. Furthermore, his comments that the presence of his narrator-self in Omeros qualifies the poem’s epic nature bring to mind David Scott’s contrast between the romantic and tragic narrative forms:

where the anticolonial narrative is cast as an epic Romance, as the great progressive story of an oppressed and victimized people’s struggle from Bondage to Freedom, from Despair to Triumph under heroic leadership, the tragic narrative is cast as a dramatic confrontation between contingency and freedom, between human will and its conditioning limits. Where the epic revolutionary narrative charts a steadily rising curve in which the end is already foreclosed by a horizon available through an act of rational, self-transparent will, in the tragic narrative the rhythm is more tentative, its direction less determinative, more recursive, and its meaning less transparent. (135)

Eric Williams’s speech about “Massa Day Done” and his account of Trinidad’s independence from Britain is an example of an epic and romantic struggle of the oppressed under heroic leadership, for Williams casts himself as (in Walcott’s words) a hero of action and decision and destiny. Both Another Life and “The Schooner Flight” also contain elements of romantic struggle and liberation, as evinced by the transfiguration of Gregorias and Walcott into the light of the world after the death of Harold Simmons, and the amalgamation of physical labor and artistic craftsmanship in Shabine as he travels through
the Caribbean. But, as Scott argues, a tragic mode of thinking and feeling is more appropriate for postcolonial times, because “the critical languages in which we wagered our moral vision and political hope [. . .] are no longer commensurate with the world they were meant to understand, engage, and overcome”; tragedy is “not driven by the confident hubris of teleologies that extract the future seamlessly from the past” and it therefore “recasts our historical temporalities in significant ways” (210).

Walcott uses a bird—the sea swift—as the central motif in *Omeros* to recast the historical temporality of Caribbean culture and St. Lucian national consciousness. In contrast to the tropes of illumination and poetic seaman-ship in *Another Life* and “The Schooner Flight,” the sea swift is a symbol of the natural landscape of St. Lucia and its maritime culture. Furthermore, it is a poetic figure that suggests the intertwining of national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics as well as the inversion or chiasmus that occurs in Walcott’s assessments of politics, history, and culture in the Caribbean’s relationship with Europe and America. This sea bird appears in every major section of *Omeros*, and “the straightened X of the soaring swift” (LXII.III.13) reminds us of Walcott’s investment in the modernist aesthetic articulated by Theodor Adorno. As Gillian Rose observes, chiasmus, often represented by the letter or symbol X, is both a figure of speech and a strategy of critical thinking Adorno uses “in order to avoid turning processes into entities,” and it “shows how he moves from criticism of intellectual and artistic products to criticism of society,” borne out by a key example of categorical inversion such as “science misrepresents society as static and invariant; society has produced the static and invariant features which science describes” (13). As a philosophical and poetic figure of speech, chiasmus can “indicate the unresolved and unsublated relationship between two elements that nonetheless are inextricably intertwined” (Jay, “Adorno in America” 181). This relationship can be seen at the beginning of *Omeros*, where one its main characters, Achille the fisherman, sees “the swift // crossing the cloud-surf” and “with his cutlass he made / a swift sign of the cross” (I.II.3–4, 9–10) right before he hews a tree trunk for his new canoe. The pun here on the sea swift’s cross-shaped body and Achille’s quick (“swift”) action in drawing a cross with his cutlass plays on the contrast between the “crossing” movement of the bird as the poem begins its literary journey and Achille’s rooted and stationary figure on the shores of St. Lucia. The transnational and cosmopolitical movement of the poem is thereby connected with the grounded figure of Achille the fisherman and the soil of St. Lucia itself. Furthermore, the Christian sign of the cross is juxtaposed with Achille’s prayer to the spirit of the tree he has just cut down for his canoe—“Tree! You can be a canoe, or else you cannot!”
(I.II.12)—thereby placing the legacy of European religious conversion alongside the indigenous belief in natural spirits inhabiting the very landscape of the island.

Walcott’s intertwining of the transnational and cosmopolitical with the national and the local, as well as the entangled histories and cultures of Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean, can be traced through the motif of the sea swift, which appears repeatedly as the poem unfolds and moves through different geographical regions and time periods. When the fisherman Achille embarks on his dream journey across time and space to his ancestral home in Africa and meets his spiritual father, Afolabe, it is the swift, “this frail dancer / leaping the breakers, this dart of the meridian,” who prepares his oneiric path because “she could loop the stars with a fishline” and “circled epochs with her outstretched span” (XXIV.III.8–9, 10–11). In the middle of the poem, when Walcott’s narrating self is living in the United States, he invokes Catherine Weldon, a white American woman who advocated for Native American rights in the nineteenth century, and her own experiences as a writer, for “like a swift over water, her pen’s shadows raced” (XXXV.III.42). Through Weldon and the swift, Walcott connects the history of internal colonialism and exploitation of Native Americans in the United States with the virtual annihilation of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean. The European section of Omeros begins with a scene of swifts in “flight, in reverse, // repeating the X of an hourglass, every twitter an aeon / from which a horizon climbed in the upturned vase” (XXXVII.I.6–8). The emphasis Walcott places on reversal and repetition in these opening lines makes us rethink the idea of Europe as the Old World from which civilization and Enlightenment were disseminated into the New World regions of Africa and the Americas. History repeats itself, but this time in reverse like an upturned hourglass as Walcott’s poetic journey turns toward a Europe that is no longer the cradle of civilization but is now (in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s felicitous phrase) provincialized as the cultures of the New World climb upward like the horizons once envisioned by European seafarers in centuries past. Finally, as a coda to his poem Walcott explicitly invokes the sea swift as the motif that connects the various characters and cultures of his poem into a constellation: “I followed the sea-swift to both sides of this text; / her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking / basins of a globe in which one half fits the next” and “Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa, / she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle’s line, / the rift in the soul” (LXIII.III.1–3, 10–12). The terms Walcott uses here echo the broken, reassembled, but still scarred and battered vase featured in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, for the swift stitches the two halves (New and Old, East and West) of the Atlantic world.
together without resolving them into a third, determinate whole. The metaphors of needlework and sewing draw our attention to the conjunction and relatedness of disparate parts but do not offer a formula for consolidating these parts into a reconciled entirety, because to do so would turn the poem into a tool of instrumentality rationality “defined as the unity of the features of what it subsumes” (Horkheimer and Adorno 11).

Despite Walcott’s shift from romantic anticolonialism to a tragic sensibility of chiasmus in Omeros, Walcott’s poetic vision (developed earlier in Another Life) for a liberating national consciousness as opposed to a state-sponsored national identity for St. Lucia is nonetheless still present in the longer work. Tourists and the disruption they cause to everyday life in St. Lucia are as ubiquitous in Omeros as they are in Another Life, as the poem opens with the wounded fisherman Philoctete explaining the island’s customs to a group of “tourists, who try taking / his soul with their cameras” (I.1.2–3). These same “crouching photographers” trying “to capture the scene / like gulls fighting over a catch” with “their clacking cameras” also surround Achilles after he returns from a day’s fishing (LIX.III.16, 19–21), and the alliteration of “clacking cameras” coupled with the simile of gulls fighting over fish highlights the tourists’ predatory and exoticizing gaze upon the locals of St. Lucia. The “waitress in national costume” who serves these tourists in Another Life (3575) is replaced by a male waiter “in a black bow-tie” who is “bouncing to discotheque // music from the speakers,” and “determined to meet the // beach’s demands,” but “like any born loser // he soon kicked the bucket” (IV.III.2, 10, 3–4, 9–10, 12–13). Walcott’s satire of the service industry that caters to Western tourists is clear from the mock-heroic characterization of this waiter as a “Lawrence of St. Lucia” (IV.III.10) as determined as his namesake (Lawrence of Arabia) to fulfill his mission. However, the difference is that the St. Lucian waiter is not exploring the sands of the Arab world but merely serving champagne with such incompetence that “he soon kicked the bucket”—an idiomatic phrase that highlights his physical clumsiness and his impending demise at the hands of angry tourists.

Walcott also extends his satirical pen to politicians who promise change without offering a different vision of culture and society for St. Lucia. Maljo, a candidate in a local election, promises that “a new age would begin” (XX.I.27), but his political catchphrases and slogans are as incoherent as they are ridiculous:

“Bananas shall raise their hands at the oppressor, 
through all our valleys!” he screamed, forgetting to press
the megaphone button. They name him “Professor
Static,” or “Statics,” for short, the short-circuit prose
of his electrical syntax in which he mixed
Yankee and patois [. . .] (XX.I.34–39)

The ludic anthropomorphizing of bananas raising their hands in defiance is paralleled by Maljo’s inept clumsiness at forgetting to press the megaphone button, and the rhyme of “oppressor” with “Professor” in the first tercet suggests that Maljo has more in common with Euro-American governments and local neocolonial officials (such as the ministers of culture and development in Another Life) who exploit St. Lucia for their own profit. This connection between Maljo and foreign and neocolonial oppressors is also echoed by his mixture of “Yankee” phrases and accent with local “patois” in his political rhetoric. Just as Eric Williams’s vision of discipline, production, and tolerance for his new nation of Trinidad seems to offer little by way of a cultural vision for a whole society, through the figure of Maljo Walcott argues that a politics based primarily on protest and resistance may not be sufficient for radical change, for Maljo’s candidacy fails miserably and “he left as a migrant-worker for Florida,” thus becoming another cog in the vast machine of economic exploitation he railed against (XX.III.27).

Maljo represents what Walcott in an earlier essay calls the “formula of politics” of the newly decolonized intellectuals and government officials, a politics of ressentiment in an antithetical and antagonistic relationship with the politics of exploitation practiced by the European colonizers. The other side of the coin in this formula of politics is the attempt to forge an authentic racial identity for the new nation, which, as we saw in Another Life, in the St. Lucian context often takes the form of an Afrocentric identity. Walcott differs with this coercive hypostatization of race and culture by engaging in a literary cosmopolitics instead, as we can see from the two sections in the middle of Omeros concerning Achille’s dream journey to Africa. Through Achille’s spiritual visit to his ancestral home in Africa and his conversation with his spiritual father Afolabe, Walcott argues that the African aspect of St. Lucian’s cultural identity must be negotiated in terms of a social and historical context located in St. Lucia and the Caribbean rather than a diasporic longing for a physical or symbolic return to Africa itself. Upon Achille’s arrival in his ancestral village, Afolabe challenges him to explain the meaning of his name, to which Achille replies, “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 were given. Men, trees, water” (XXV.III.34–36). Angered by Achille’s response, Afolabe voices the unbridgeable gulf between the African ancestor and his Afro-Caribbean descendant: “I am not Afolabe,
your father, and you look through / my body as the light looks through a
leaf. I am not here / or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost
// of a name. Why did I never miss you until you returned?” (XXV.III.55–
58). That Afolabe never missed Achille until the latter’s sudden reappearance
implies a refusal of the nostalgia and sentimental longing implicit in a
diasporic desire to return to the home- or fatherland, since the father himself
never realized he ever had or missed his departed offspring at all. Further-
more, the exchange between the two men recalls Walcott’s passage about “a
life older than geography” in Another Life (1233) discussed earlier. Achille’s
comment that in the Caribbean “we accept the sounds we were given” rather
than eschewing them and seeking a more authentic cultural identity reaff-
irms Walcott’s prior description of “trees and men [who] / laboured assid-
uously, silently to become // whatever their given sounds resembled” (AL
1240–42). Afolabe’s pronouncement that his body has become translucent
(“as the light looks through a leaf”) also brings to mind the double metaphor
of plant and schoolbook used to describe “Africa, heart-shaped” as “the leaves
of edible roots” that “opened their pages” (1234–35), with a further doubling
of “leaves” as a botanical appendage as well as printed pages. Achille cannot
return to an originary or primal Africa or assume such an identity symbol-
ized by his ancestor Afolabe; the St. Lucian fisherman can only approach it as
another life, not his own, through foodways and intellectual study.

Walcott’s acknowledgment of St. Lucia’s African heritage and his insis-
tence that this Africanness needs to be seen as relocated in the Caribbean
rather than dislocated from its wellspring can be seen in the closing sections
of Achille’s oneiric sojourn. After witnessing a raid on Afolabe’s village and
being helpless to stop the inhabitants from being enslaved, Achille observes
how, as the people of each tribe are borne across the Middle Passage to the
Americas, “now each man was a nation / in himself, without mother, father,
brother” (XXVII.I.32–33). The term “nation” here still bears the sense of
tribe or race, but immediately on the next page Walcott redefines the word,
describing how the African slaves “felt the sea-wind tying them into one
nation / of eyes and shadows and groans” (XXVIII.III.10–11). While this line
may be read as reinforcing an Afrocentric identity marked by the suffering of
the Middle Passage, the idea of “nation” here may be read as a counterpoint
to the earlier use of nation in its tribal and racial sense. Moreover, we may
understand the “eyes and shadows and groans” not only within the framework
of slavery but also within the specific context of Walcott’s discussions
of nationalism in the Caribbean as a profound sense of a people learning to
see themselves, and the care and pain inherent in the formation of national
consciousness and cultures in the Antilles. Finally, Achille’s entire dream
journey to Africa culminates in a joyous return to St. Lucia that is marked by a figurative and an epistemological chiasmus. Achille gives a shout upon seeing the shores of his home island, “the shout on which each odyssey pivots” (XXX.II.7), and as he crosses the imaginary meridian that separates Africa from the Caribbean, Walcott reflects that “once that parallel / is crossed,” it then “cancels the line of master and slave” (XXX.II.11–12). Achille's journey to Africa inverts and negates the colonial relationship between European master and African slave as well as the neocolonial relationship between the ministers of culture and development and the people of St. Lucia whom they wish to keep in perpetual servitude with another free ride on the Middle Passage. Achille realizes his sense of home and nation is grounded in St. Lucia, but in order to achieve this realization he must make a transnational journey across history and geography. In a similar fashion, in Omeros Walcott's literary cosmopolitics takes us across Africa, North America, and Europe, but returns ultimately to the Caribbean and St. Lucia. In following the “swift sign of the cross,” Walcott locates his home country of St. Lucia at the intersection or pivotal point of the poetic “X” or chiasmus, securing Achille’s and his narrator-self’s peregrinations and homeward journey as a figure for the Caribbean's reimagining of national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics, departing from the established chronotope of ships in motion to describe the triangular connections between Europe, the Americas, and Africa in a transnational, black Atlantic circuit of colonialism, slavery, and migration.

The understanding that what makes up the nation is intimately linked to and informed by what lies outside the geographical and cultural boundaries of the nation has been a key element of Walcott's thinking as a poet and critic throughout his career. My analysis of Walcott's poetry thus accords with recent work in Caribbean literary studies that, contrary to the valorization of the region and its culture as inherently deterritorialized and transnational, argues that “within a Caribbean context being in one location by no means implies cultural homogeneity or stasis,” because “the kinds of transcultural and intercultural work that [Paul] Gilroy locates as somehow exceeding and even deconstructing the nation can actually be located within the Caribbean nation, city or even village” (Donnell 87). Even though Walcott's verse may not always explicitly dramatize the Caribbean's “neo-colonial dependency, cyclical and mass migrations of population, environmental degradation, saturation by an international tourist culture, and economies that concentrate wealth in the hands of a tiny elite” (Puri 12), this does not take away from his commitment to the region and to St. Lucia as a home and an island nation. For if we concur with Alison Donnell's observation that “the particular style
in which Caribbean nationalism imagined itself into being was often not narrow but already inclusive and plural, and significantly often voiced within the context of global anti-colonialism” (87), then we must also consider that a national consciousness such as Walcott’s can be expressed in inclusive and plural forms that devise a new, provocative vocabulary and an aesthetic vision not confined to a narrow “formula of politics” (“Culture or Mimicry?” 4) to represent “a people who possess the land in thought and share it” (“Society and the Artist” 15).