

A COUNTRY OF OTHER COUNTRIES:

Possession in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

by
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At its heart, Derek Walcott's long poem *Omeros* is not about dispossession; rather, it is about possession. In *Epic of the Dispossessed*, Robert Hamner foregrounds the various characters' estrangements from their native lands. (Missouri) But a keener observation is that in their dispossession, these characters have actually become possessed by other cultures. *Omeros* is about the struggle to erase these unsolicited cultural influences in order to finally see what one's true and absolute origin is - and, by extension, what one's identity could have been.

The pivotal passage in the poem that most clearly illustrates this central theme is when Achille travels back in time to Africa and visits his father, Afolabe. They discuss the meaning of Achille's name:

"Achille. What does the name mean? I have forgotten the one that I gave you. But it was, it seems, many years ago." (137)

Achille cannot answer this question because his name actually has no meaning - or if it does, the meaning belongs to another culture entirely. One might say that it is meant to associate him with heroic qualities by echoing Greek warrior Achilles, but if he is not even aware of this meaning, then this explanation seems to lose footing. In fact, Achille is an Ellis Island-like name, probably ascribed to him by a French or British colonialist during their rule over St. Lucia. In this sense, Achille was originally constructed and therefore possessed by a culture other than his own. The name that his father gave him - his more authentic African self - has been lost in time, forever.

Achille says, *"In the world I come from we accept the sounds we were given."* (138) For him, there is no choice. He accepts his influences. At Ellis Island, when you get your new name you are supposed to forget the person who you used to be. The common

African experience is to be made to forget your home, your origins. Is Achille, then, really content with forgetting? In the narrator's eyes, he is not - otherwise, he would not have felt compelled to journey to Africa in the first place.

Omeros is about the desire to get back to pure originality to the point of not being possessed by or based on anybody else's culture, however impossible that may seem. It is about wanting to get back to one's "roots." There is the overriding question of who these people would have been without all these outside influences, and there is the desire to escape that to see what one's purely original self would have been. An important passage in Book Six reveals how the narrator wonders what kind of writer he would have been - or could be - without continually carrying the burden of history on his shoulders.

“When would the sails drop from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop? When would my head shake off its echoes like a horse shaking off a wreath of flies?” (271)

The narrator has become possessed by history, by the past, and this is beginning to frustrate him as it continually interrupts his creative thought processes. Specifically, this is the history of Greek mythology that reminds him of his contemporary situations. And these “echoes” of the past in his head seem to be involuntary, as here he writes about them as if they are an unwanted pest, attributing them to flies bothering a horse. As the narrator is widely accepted to be a stand-in for Walcott himself, here we can see the author writing directly to us in a self-reflexive manner about his struggle to elegantly merge this ancient history with his own personal history. It seems to strike Walcott as an appropriate endeavor for this work, but at the same time his frustration at the difficulty of

it is quite evident. Perhaps, then, one could surmise that Walcott would actually prefer to erase this cultural influence from his mind so as to not feel burdened by it.

Walcott reinforces this theme of unsolicited cultural possession by creating a parallel thread that essentially expresses the same woes. This thread explores the suffering that the American Indians had to endure in the 19th Century during their strife with the U.S. government. Here Walcott uses an actual figure from history - Catherine Weldon - in a fictional guise. (Wikipedia) Using Weldon as a kind of basic foundation, the narrator guides us through the major historical tragedies from this time, namely the Trail of Tears. A clear parallel between this event and Achille's situation is that it also represents an encroachment of one culture on another.

The American Indians certainly had their own way of life and their own way of doing things for many years before the U.S. government and the "white man" came along. The same could be said of the people of St. Lucia. When this kind of invasion occurs, the indigenous people cannot avoid the eventual influence of the invading culture, despite how strongly they might resist it at first. Two passages from Book Four shed light on this issue:

"Men take their colours as the trees do from the native soil of their birth, and once they are moved elsewhere, entire cultures lose the art of mimicry..." (208)

Walcott feels that men are defined by their origins and once they stray from that, they somehow lose the ability to reflect their provenance, they "lose the art of mimicry." This is certainly true for Achille, who even forgets the name that he was originally given. We can only assume the same for the American Indians, who must have lost a significant portion of their native identity as they were possessed by the U.S. government and

forcibly relocated during the Trail of Tears. (Wikipedia) And on the same page, Walcott writes “...*all colonies inherit their empire’s sin...*” (208) Here he shows additional cynicism toward colonization by expressing that these usurped individuals will eventually develop the same kind of destructive tendencies that their rulers possess; for Walcott, this is an unremitting Mobius strip of misery.

Canada is absolutely a country that has become possessed by other countries, and so Walcott aptly uses it in Book Five as part of his narrator’s trek around the world. The narrator arrives in Toronto and, unsurprisingly, has nothing much to say about Toronto itself. However, he has a lot to say about Poland. He notices a waitress of Polish descent working in a Toronto hotel. This provokes the narrator into ruminations on oppression in Poland and reminds him of his favorite poets from that country: “*Zagajewski. Herbert. Milosz.*” (212) But where is the original history of Toronto, of Canada? What about Canadian poets? Who are the native people of this city? Rampant immigration has caused these questions to become all but unanswerable, and Canada has become a country that is inevitably defined by other countries, other cultures.

Then again, who is to say what Canada’s original culture was or would have been if it had not been for all this immigration? That cannot be objectively determined. It is the same kind of intricate mystery that vexes our protagonist, Achille, as he wonders who he would have been had the colonization never occurred. Just like Walcott, when most people around the world think of Toronto, they think of Poland, Italy, Portugal, China, Russia. Nobody thinks of Canada as Canada, as a culture in and of itself, because nobody knows what that is anymore, if they ever did. Just like St. Lucia, then, Canada is a country of other countries.

As a highly literate and intelligent black man, Derek Walcott is possessed by another unsolicited cultural influence aside from the Homeric one. While the Homeric influence may or may not be unsolicited, this one certainly is: the black stereotype. Walcott (as the narrator) leaves the museum where he was admiring Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* and attempts to catch a cab outside, but he cannot:

"...I looked for a cab, but cabs, like the fall, were a matter of colour, and several passed, empty." (184)

Additionally - for no apparent reason - he seems to frighten a woman at a bus stop who notices him. Walcott explains his interpretations of this event in the following passage:

"...I saw the alarmed pale look, when I stepped out of a streetlight, that a woman gave me at a bus-stop, (sic) straight out of Melville's book; then the consoling smile, like a shark's, all the fear that had widened between us was incurable..." (185)

The irony of this is amusing, as Derek Walcott is quite possibly the least likely black man in America to be packing a gat. But by entering America, Walcott also inevitably enters - and therefore becomes possessed by - the black stereotype. Walcott is unaccustomed to such extreme stereotyping, as his native St. Lucia contains a predominantly black population. It is likely that the cabbie and the white woman both suspect Walcott of criminality and therefore fear him simply due to the colour of his skin. Walcott seems to long for a different history as he ponders the reasons for this discrimination, one that would allow him to traverse the sidewalks of any American city at nighttime without receiving suspicious stares.

But as the history is now, long-standing American culture and literature have propagated this default negative mindset toward blacks. Walcott mentions Herman Melville specifically, and here he is perhaps referring to Melville's work *Benito Cereno*, which has long been acknowledged as a racist and pro-slavery text. (Wikipedia) It is cultural products such as this that have aided in the development of the black stereotype that prevails throughout America, and Walcott clearly desires to escape from this history. What would the black experience be in American if this history had never developed in the first place? Walcott can only wonder.

With *Omeros*, Walcott seems to express the common human desire to vanquish certain parts of one's self. Ultimately, the work seems to suggest that maintaining one's authentic self is an extremely difficult task, as is it easy for one's identity to become enmeshed in an imitation of another culture in either a colonial or post-colonial world.

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