THE POETICS OF CULTURAL HEALING

Derek Walcott’s Omeros and the Modernist Epic

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the complex intersections between Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* and modernist versions of the epic. Critics generally acknowledge the pervasive presence of modernist allusions in Walcott’s early work, but see the relevance of modernism diminishing as Walcott develops his “mature” poetic strategies of mimicry and hybridity. I challenge this reading of Walcott, arguing that the modernist practices of Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, and Hart Crane in *The Bridge* are crucial to illuminating the central theme of cultural healing in Walcott’s most ambitious work, *Omeros*. These four authors share the goal of creating an epic poem that encapsulates the experiences of modernity (the modern epic). Walcott adopts and transforms elements from *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land* and *The Bridge* in order to articulate the complex relations among self, tradition, land, and language that can allow the postcolonial subject to overcome the traumatic legacy of imperialism in the Caribbean. I define the relation between *Omeros* and its modernist intertexts according to this pattern of imitation and divergence (which Joseph Farrell calls the pattern of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* in the epic tradition).

I organize my dissertation into four chapters, each focused on a particular issue: the process of redefining the epic, the construction of indigenous status by means of myth and imperialism, the search for alternative modes of understanding the past that would resist the hegemony of chronological history, and the mystical process of cultural healing that synthesizes the human, the divine, and the natural world. This study demonstrates the tremendous utility and ideological ambiguities generated by the specific practices of
literary modernism when Walcott deploys them to articulate his cultural vision. My approach to *Omeros* provides a corrective to the critical tendency to view modernism in the postcolonial milieu as either the postcolonial artist’s response to the conditions of modernity or as a tradition whose form and meaning is radically transformed by a postcolonial vision. Walcott’s relation to modernism suggests that this postcolonial cultural vision is itself shaped by modernist poetics in ways that both empower and constrain.
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Chapter I – *Omeros, Cultural Healing, and the Epic*

If *Omeros* (1990) is not Derek Walcott’s masterpiece, it is certainly his most ambitious work. A poem that is simultaneously a Caribbean epic and a critique of the epic, it weaves together the narrator’s quest to write a poem celebrating a St. Lucian woman’s beauty with intersecting stories of the inhabitants of Gros Îlet, a village in Walcott’s native St. Lucia. Through the course of the poem, the various characters, including a version of Walcott who narrates the poem, must come to terms with the legacy of colonialism and the various pressures of a tourist-based economy that challenge the island’s cultural identity. Following publication, *Omeros* was critically hailed as poetic triumph and arguably provided the final impetus for the Swedish Academy to award Walcott the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. ¹ Part of the poem’s claim as a seminal work in Caribbean literature results from the manner in which it addresses the issue of cultural wounds and cultural healing. Walcott touches on both these issues in his Noble Prize acceptance speech, published as “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” (1992):

> 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 a 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

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¹ In his biography *Derek Walcott: a Caribbean Life*, Bruce King observes that when *Omeros* won the W.H. Smith prize in March 1991, “the judges were said to have made side bets as to how long it would take for Walcott to win the Nobel Prize” (522). King also quotes from the Swedish Academy who declared “In [Walcott] West Indian Culture has found its great poet,” and that *Omeros* “is a work of incomparable ambitiousness … deriving from the poet’s wide-ranging contacts with literature, history, and reality” (538).
Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. (Essays 69)

_Omeros_ is a poetic exploration of this quest to synthesize the fragmented existence resulting from the trauma of the colonial legacy. Significantly, _Omeros_ not only diagnoses the social ills in the Caribbean, but through both form and content seeks to envision cultural healing. The theme of wounding and recovery has been addressed in much of the criticism on _Omeros_, but I would argue that key elements of Walcott’s ideas about cultural healing have been overlooked because they have been addressed primarily within a postcolonial framework. In this study, I explore the concept of cultural healing in _Omeros_ through Walcott’s engagement with modernist epic poetry.

1992 also marked the beginning of extensive critical commentary on _Omeros_ that continues to the present day. Rei Terada’s _Derek Walcott’s Poetry: American Mimicry_ (1992), was one of the first studies to provide detailed thematic analysis of _Omeros_, and remains a seminal work in Walcott scholarship. It is also a key point of departure for this current study since Terada aptly summarizes a recurring theme in amongst Walcott’s

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^2 In particular, see Jahan Ramazani’s chapter on Walcott in his book _The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English_, in which he explores the genealogy of Philoctete’s simultaneously psychical and physical wound which becomes “a resonant site of interethnic connection within _Omeros_, vivifying the black Caribbean inheritance of colonial injury and at the same time deconstructing the uniqueness of suffering” (50). Walcott, according to Ramazani, deconstructs the boundary between “victim’s literature” and cosmopolitanism by invoking hybrid metaphors to explore the theme of wounding. Similarly, Paul Breslin’s chapter, “Healing and Memory in _Omeros_,” in his study _Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott_, argues that despite Walcott’s continued investment in the concept of Adamic renewal, in which the artist attains creative energy by disregarding the sins of the past, complex forms of communal memory are necessary to attain healing.
critics when she notes that he is “unusually open to influence” (4), an acknowledgement of the frequent literary echoes in his poetry. For Terada, this openness to influence results in a poetics based on “American mimicry,” a concept which is rooted in Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as simultaneous imitation and parody that creates a third space between colonizer and colonized. For Bhabha, mimicry leads to the hybrid condition of postcolonial culture that is “a partial and double force that is more than the mimetic but less than the symbolic, that disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic” (153-54). By blurring the difference between adherence to and rejection of colonial forms, mimicry/ hybridity “unsettles the mimetic or

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3 In a 1990 interview with David Montenegro Walcott comments, “I think that that openness is what I’ve always had. I have been very flattered, as opposed to being insulted, when I’ve been told that I sound like someone else who was great. I always considered that to be an honor and not an accusation. You see – and maybe I have a medieval mind – I’m really part of a guild. I don’t consider myself to be an individual” (213).

4 Throughout this work I make use of the term “poetics.” I assign the word a meaning that varies from what is probably regarded as its conventional definition. Roman Jakobson, Tzvetan Todorov, and Jonathan Culler offer closely aligned definitions of the term. According to Jakobson, “Poetics deals primarily with the question, What makes a verbal message a work of art?” (Newton 119, Jakobson’s emphasis). Todorov notes that within the study of literature, poetics “aims at a knowledge of the general laws that preside over the birth of each work” (Newton 134). Culler is perhaps the most explicit of the three, declaring that poetics “strives to define the conditions of meaning” (viii), and noting that the task of structuralist poetics is “to make explicit the underlying system which makes literary effects possible” (Culler 118). The main understanding between the three writers seems to be that poetics is the study of the underlying system that makes literary expression possible. Although, this is the most authoritative definition of the terms, it is not exclusive. Caribbean theorists Edouard Glissant and J. Michael Dash use the term not in reference to the study of the underlying system, but to the underlying system itself enabling a particular form of expression. To give some examples, In Caribbean Discourse, Glissant writes, “I define as a free or natural poetics any collective yearning for expression that is not opposed to itself either at the level of what it wishes to express or at the level of the language that it puts into practice” (120, my emphasis). In The Other America, Dash notes, “Modern technology, in particular, and the spirit of rationality, in general, became so closely and negatively associated with the horrors of World War I and North American expansionism that Caribbean modernism invented a radical poetics based on an integration with a lost organic totality (62, my emphasis). Antonio Benítez-Rojo makes a similar uses of the term “poetic” in The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective when he declares, “Of course, as the codes of Nature are neither limited nor fixed, nor even intelligible, the culture of the Peoples of the Sea expresses the desire to sublimate social violence through the poetic, since it always puts forth an area of chaos” (17, my emphasis). These examples are my preferred use of the term. Thus, my title The Poetics of Cultural Healing refers to the network of intersecting narratives, ideologies, and metaphors that enable a particular expression of cultural healing. I prefer the term “poetics” to “discourse” because the former suggests more strongly the plurality of the subsystems that must interconnect to form the primary system that enables expression. Poetics also underscores the literary nature of the expression, which seems appropriate given that the focus of this study is epic poetry.
narcissistic demands of colonial power” (154) and becomes a strategy of subversion. According to Terada, Walcott’s poetics of mimicry follow this subversive pattern as they collapse the categories of imitative, derivative, and original, enabling artistic freedom from the concept of aesthetic purity. This approach results in the hybrid nature of “Walcott’s best poetry” in which he demonstrates a “willingness to mix languages and genres” (25). Unsurprisingly, given Terada’s emphasis on mimicry and hybridity, she classifies Walcott as a postmodern poet (6) who challenges “readers to rethink Modernist genealogical, generic, and linguistic categories” (2).³

By casting Walcott as the postmodern critic of modernist epistemology, Terada suggests an evolutionary model in which the postmodern perspective is the superior critical perspective to its modernist ancestor. Such a position dovetails with the critical pattern that identifies Walcott’s links to literary modernism with his early poetry, a period in his career that is commonly categorized as “apprentice” work. In particular, critics frequently stress the modernist echoes in Walcott’s early long poem, Epitaph for the Young (1949), and additionally comment on the immaturity of the poem.⁶ In The Flight

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³ Even as she classifies Walcott as postmodern, Terada acknowledges the divergence between Walcott’s approach to language and that of conventional postmodernism: “the difficult relation of rhetoric to principle in Walcott’s work points up limitations in definitions of Postmodernism which themselves conflate rhetoric with principle. Indeed, Walcott feels no need to emphasize or estrange rhetoric as some other Postmodern poets do, but only because rhetorical estrangement can be taken for granted in all language” (6-7). Later Terada notes that Walcott does not accept the postmodern separation of signifier and signified. She sums up Walcott’s approach to language by noting, “The world and its representations thus share something – it is hard to know whether to call it a common root, a common aim, both, or neither – and the poet’s consciousness of this something-shared keeps poetry alive to reality’s linguistic structure on the one hand and the physical structure of words themselves on the other” (167-68). Breslin makes a similar point when he states that Walcott’s beliefs, “his religious faith, his insistence that poetry at its highest moments attains to the universal and transcendent – are hard to square with the antifoundational skepticism of postmodern thought and aesthetics” (293).

⁶ Walcott contributes to the viewpoint that the literary echoes in his early work signal a period of imitation out of which he will eventually evolve. He tells Edward Hirsch, “The whole course of imitation and adaptation is simply a method of apprenticeship. I knew I was copying and imitating and learning, and when I was criticized for writing like Dylan Thomas, it didn’t bother me at all because I knew what I was doing. I knew I had to absorb everything in order to be able to discover what I was eventually trying to sound like” (Conversations 53, my emphasis).
Christina Fumagalli discusses the poem’s allusions to Eliot’s *The Four Quartets* (43) in a chapter she subtitles “Walcott’s apprentice years.” Similarly, John Thieme calls *Epitaph for the Young* a “Modernist poem in the tradition of Eliot and Pound” (30) and also classifies it as a work of Walcott’s “poetic apprenticeship,” noting that “the extent and nature of the numerous literary borrowings suggest a greater degree of unassimilated derivativeness than is to be found in Walcott’s later verse” (30). In *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, Paul Breslin contrasts *Epitaph for the Young* with Walcott’s “mature” long poems *Another Life* and *Omeros* (to the detriment of the early poem) in the same paragraph that he notes the pervasive influence of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce on the early poem (63). While I have no quarrel with linking the language of *Epitaph for the Young* to modernist literature, or to classifying the poem as an apprentice work within Walcott’s oeuvre, by making these two assertions in conjunction, critics, particularly Breslin and Thieme, imply that Walcott’s close relation to modernist literature belongs to his early period, and diminishes as he reaches poetic maturity.  

For Breslin and Thieme, and for other critics such as Paula Burnett in her study *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, the “mature” poetic voice of Walcott is interesting for its polyvocal nature, particularly as it invokes European voices and Caribbean oral

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7 The exception is Charles Pollard’s study *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (2004), which charts the influence of Eliot on Walcott’s entire career. Pollard has also written about the role of Joyce in *Omeros*: “Travelling with Joyce: Derek Walcott’s discrepant cosmopolitan modernism.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 47 (2001): 197-216. Reed Way Dasenbrock also briefly discusses the modernist elements of *Omeros* in “Why the Post in Post-Colonial is Not the Post in Post-Modern: Homer-Dante-Pound-Walcott.” *Paideuma* 29 (2000): 111-22. Additionally, despite the fact that Breslin focuses on how Walcott’s early poetry reveals modernist influence, he does acknowledge that Walcott’s affinities with Hart Crane extend beyond his juvenilia: “Walcott’s greatest weakness, his tendency to pile metaphor upon metaphor, image upon image, is inseparable from his greatest strength: his curiously fluid, metamorphic handling of figurative language. He is much like Hart Crane in this respect” (293).
folk idioms without holding these multiple styles in a hierarchical pattern. Breslin regards “The Schooner Flight” (1979), a poem distinguished by the narrator’s highly literary and simultaneously Creole-inflected English, as “one of Walcott’s finest poems” (1).

Ironically, Breslin identifies the constitutive features of Walcott maturity when discussing the early poem “Prelude” (1948): “It would be foolish to claim too much for this early lyric. Nonetheless, it develops a step farther than other poems in the first book toward the interplay of voices characteristic of his later work” (58). This interplay transcends the Bloomian anxiety of influence, a feature that Breslin sees as an unacknowledged undercurrent of Walcott’s early poetry, and allows Walcott to operate as circus master to his own multicultural background: “Rather than seeing himself as the overshadowed son of a giant precursor, unable to claim his place except by a Promethean act of misreading or denial, Walcott invites various ancestors to the house, sets them arguing among themselves, and turns them into voices for his own internal symposium, each bearing one line of a polyphony that is more than the sum of its parts” (58-59). In a similar vein, Burnett links Walcott’s poetic langue to Bakhtin’s polyglossia and declares that Walcott “ranges [linguistically speaking] across all worlds available to him” (133). Thieme actually links Walcott’s polyglossic practices to his early interest in Eliot and Pound who, according to Thieme, “were committed internationalists who attempted to arrive at a cross-cultural aesthetic practice” even if this practice remained “conservative and ethnocentric” (33). In Thieme’s view, Walcott transcends the limitations of Eliot’s and Pound’s internationalism while adhering to its spirit:

As Walcott matures, his view of what constitutes an appropriate body of influences for a Caribbean writer will prove even more diverse [than Eliot and
Pound], operating along a discursive continuum which elides the boundaries between high art and popular culture, engaging with Caribbean folk forms at one pole and at an opposite extreme attempting to forge a world-based tradition, in which Asian, African and pan-American elements are fused with European. (33) Thieme’s phrase, “even more” suggests that despite the affinity between Walcott and Eliot and Pound, the postcolonial poet has overcome the limitations of his modernist predecessors in his maturity.

By identifying Walcott’s cross-cultural practices as evolving from his early modernist influences, Thieme ironically underscores the link between Walcott’s mature poetics and his modernist precursors, even while arguing that Walcott moves away from Eliot and Pound in maturity. In fact, in New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite, Charles Pollard sees Walcott’s attempt to “forge a world-based tradition,” as the very thing that links Walcott to modernist literature. Pollard uses Walcott’s polyglossia to argue against Terada’s classification of Walcott as postmodernist:

Attributes of Eliot’s, Brathwaite’s, and Walcott’s work, such as contingency of identity, the emphasis on cultural absence, and making language visible, could fairly be characterized as postmodern, but the general thrust of their work is best described as modernist because it still aspires to create a provisional sense of cultural order or wholeness out of a multiplicity of cultural sources. These writers recognize difference and fragmentation, but they seek to shape these differences and fragments into larger patterns of cultural meaning. (39)
Pollard is unique in regarding Walcott’s relation to literary modernism (mediated through the figure of Eliot) as central to his poetry. In order to argue for this link, Pollard does not define modernism as a static practice rooted in Europe and America, but calls it an evolving set of practices that constitute a “discrepant cosmopolitan literary movement” (9). Pollard goes on to summarize his own study as illustrating “how modernism has migrated as a cultural ideal and how it has been changed through this migration” (9). This concept of modernist literary practices originating with figures like Eliot and evolving as Walcott deploys them in a postcolonial context is crucial to my own study, as I will discuss subsequently. In fact, this pattern of transforming European ideas and images runs throughout Walcott’s work. He consistently critiques, recontextualizes, and transforms artistic traditions as he assimilates them. One prominent example of this pattern in Walcott’s work is the figure of Crusoe. Walcott takes this figure associated with capitalism, Puritanism, and slavery and transforms him into the image of the Caribbean artist. In such Walcott poems as “The Castaway,” “Crusoe’s Island,” and “Crusoe’s Journal,” the figure is an inhabitant of the new world who must build a home with only his imagination and the debris from the old world.

**Notions of Modernism in a Postcolonial Context**

In linking Walcott to Eliot through their shared “discrepant cosmopolitan” modernism, Pollard remains the critical exception and it is not hard to understand why. The prevailing critical position has been that the “high” literary modernism of Eliot and Pound is incompatible with postcolonial projects.8 Reed Way Dasenbrock does align

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8 By the rather monolithic term “postcolonial projects” I refer to literature that seeks, among its other cultural effects, to give voice to those dispossessed economically and culturally by imperialist practices; to
Walcott’s poetry with that of modernism in his article “Why the Post in Post-Colonial is the Post in Post-Modern: Homer · Dante · Pound · Walcott.” The scope of the article is limited, however, and Dasenbrock does not amplify on the specific modernist qualities of Walcott’s writing. Aside from Dasenbrock, critics do allow high modernists Joyce and Yeats to bridge this gap because of their Irish colonial background. With regard to the more prevalent position of apparent incompatibility between “high” modernism and postcolonialism, critics articulate this gap in a variety of ways. Edward Said implies that literary modernism is incapable of responding constructively to the traumas of colonialism because its historical response to Otherness in general was ironic paralysis. Stephen Slemon argues that the armed version of modernism is colonialism (3), and he implicitly critiques modernism when he attacks postmodern critical theory for being like modernism in “continuing a politics of colonialist control” by way of its “universalizing, assimilative impulse” (14). Similarly, though less polemically, Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts that the post in postcolonialism and postmodernism indicates the need for a “space-clearing gesture” (149) and that both should reject “the master narratives of modernism” (155).

construct histories that do not cast colonized people as ignorant and without culture; to narrate individual and communal efforts to overcome the colonial legacy of suffering; and to envision cultural practices that promote a positive sense of identity, community, and tradition.

9 See the essays collected in Semicolonial Joyce. Yeats is discussed as a colonial/postcolonial writer in both Edward Said’s Culture and Imperialism and Ramazani’s The Hybrid Muse.

10 In “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” Said writes, “In the works of Eliot, Conrad, Mann, Proust, Woolf, Pound, Lawrence, Joyce, Forster, alterity and difference are systematically associated with strangers, who, whether women, natives, or sexual eccentrics, erupt into vision, there to challenge and resist settled metropolitan histories, forms, modes of thought. To this challenge modernism responded with the formal irony of a culture unable either to yes, we should up control, or no, we shall hold regardless: a self-conscious contemplative passivity forms itself, as Georg Lukács noted perspicaciously, into paralyzed gestures of aestheticized powerlessness, for example, the ending of A Passage to India, in which Forster notes, and confirms the history behind, a political conflict between Dr. Aziz and Fielding – Britain’s subjugation of India – and yet can neither recommend decolonization, nor continued colonization. ‘No, not yet, not here,’ is all Forster can muster by way of resolution” (“222-23).
Other critics are willing to deploy literary modernism as a useful category in postcolonial studies, but only after separating the term from the Anglo-American artists associated with its development. One such definition of modernism arose in African-American studies, specifically Houston A. Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987). In this work, Baker contends that turn of the century African-American writers employed two complementary strategies that constituted a modernist poetics. One was the mastery of standard artistic forms (connected in part to the pattern of minstrelsy) and the other was the opposing deformation of mastery (an assertion of difference). Baker distinguishes these African-American practices from Anglo-American modernism, declaring,

> It seems to me that Africans and Afro-Americans – through conscious and unconscious designs of various Western “modernisms” – have little in common with Joycean or Eliotic projects. Further, it seems to me that the very histories that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism, especially the discursive history of such modernism. (xvi)

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11 Baker’s primary example of the mastery of standard forms is Booker T. Washington’s autobiography *Up From Slavery*. Baker notes that for Washington’s contemporary white audience the book was conciliatory, emphasizing the individual responsibility of African Americans to better themselves in the face of hardship and political opposition, while refusing to be overcome by anger and/or despair. Because Washington urges African-Americans to become respectable by the standards of white America, Baker contends that the rhetoric parallels the minstrel show. According to Baker, minstrelsy offers dual signification: a white audience perceives the performer to be fulfilling their stereotypes, while the black audience recognizes it as a mask that assists survival in a hostile environment, concealing feelings of rage and rebellion. Conversely, the deformation of mastery manifests itself in the work of W.E.B. Dubois, who, according to Baker, refuses the conciliatory rhetoric of Washington and instead asserts the difference, but central importance, of African-American culture within the United States.
The definition enabling Baker’s concept of Afro-American modernism is that modernism is the cultural practice developed in response to the African-American community’s engagement with modernity: the “grand narratives of truth, reason, science, progress and universal emancipation” (Eagleton 200). In *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (1992), Simon Gikandi applies this formulation of modernism to the Caribbean, suggesting that European modernism is inseparable from the hegemonic practices of normalizing European values of language, history, and politics at the expense of colonized peoples. Caribbean writers, according to Gikandi, must look to a new, specifically Caribbean, form of modernism:

My basic premise, then, is that Caribbean writers cannot adopt the history and culture of European modernism, especially as defined by the colonizing structures, but neither can they escape from it because it has overdetermined Caribbean cultures in many ways. Moreover, for people of African and Asian descent, the central categories of European modernity, history, national language, subjectivity – have value only when they are fertilized by figures of the ‘other’ imagination which colonialism has sought to repress. In this sense, Caribbean modernism is highly revisionary. (3-4, my emphasis)

While Baker invokes a separatist outlook for African-American modernism (Joycean and Eliotic projects are inapplicable), Gikandi takes a more evolutionary approach, conceiving Caribbean modernism as something that cannot escape its European influence, but that must transform it in order to create a liberating, specifically Caribbean poetics. According to Gikandi, “Only by subverting colonial modernism could these writers become modernists” (256). As with Baker, modernism for Gikandi is not the
artistic practices of specific Anglo-American artists, but is instead the cultural response to what Edouard Glissant calls in *Caribbean Discourse* the Caribbean’s “irruption into modernity” (146).

This understanding of modernism in postcolonial contexts continues to be influential. J. Michael Dash makes similar use of the term “modernism” in his study *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (1998). Dash identifies Haitian modernism as “the Haitian experiment with the modern at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (19). More recently, Susan Stanford Friedman declares as part of her intent to make modernist studies “go global in a new way” (40) that modernism is “the representational and expressive aspect of modernity” (41). According to Friedman, “each location on the globe has a geographically specific engagement with modernity that results in distinct forms of cultural expression that may or may not occur at the same time as Modernism in the West” (42). In the case of the Caribbean, “Coercive forms of enslavement, migration, and colonialism create the conditions of epistemological, spiritual, and physical rupture that are hallmarks of western modernity – and often do so before or alongside such dislocations in the West, rather than as the result of a later diffusion” (51). As with Baker, Glissant, and Dash, for Friedman modernism is a cultural practice that need not be connected to Eliot, Pound, and their contemporaries.

While these definitions of discrepant modernisms can be critically useful, applying them to Walcott’s poetry overlooks the importance of his relation to the “high” literary modernist practices excluded by these definitions. With regard to *Omeros*, Walcott’s relations to Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane are crucial to our understanding of the poem, and particularly to the ideas of cultural healing that Walcott
develops. Consequently, I find Appiah’s call for space-clearing gestures that reject the master narratives of modernism ill-suited for *Omeros*: these gestures overlook an intertextual relation of vital importance to the poem. Similarly, the supposed complicity between “high” modernism and imperialism that Slemon and Gikandi identify drastically simplifies the effect, both realized and potential, of modernist poetics in a postcolonial milieu. Certainly, slavish imitation of Eliot and Pound by a postcolonial writer would not result in productive cultural work, but this does not describe Walcott’s poetic practice. Walcott shapes his vision of cultural healing by deploying and transforming formal and thematic elements of the modern epic as written by the modernist poets Pound, Eliot and Crane. The patterns of adoption and transformation from *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge* are the focus of this study. As this focus suggests, I disagree with Breslin’s and Thieme’s narrative of Walcott’s poetic development in which he outgrows his early devotion to modernist writing to achieve a mature polyglossic poetry. There is certainly nothing of the “apprentice” poet in *Omeros*, but at the same time Walcott has not outgrown his relation to literary modernism. Instead, the strategies and themes of Pound’s, Eliot’s, and Crane’s version of the epic form complex and crucial intertexts to the cultural work of Walcott’s epic poem.

My study, then, is most closely aligned with Pollard’s *New World Modernisms* in which he explores the central role of Eliot’s writing to Walcott’s poetics. There are, however, some key differences between our approaches. In his discussion of Walcott’s and Brathwaite’s relation to modernism, Pollard has chosen to focus exclusively on Eliot as his example of the modernist writer. While I certainly agree with Pollard on the importance of Eliot to Walcott’s poetry, key ideas in *Omeros* emerge from its dialogue
with a nexus of modernist texts. By narrowing Walcott’s modernist influence to the figure of Eliot, we limit our understanding of Walcott’s poetry, particularly since a poem on such a large scale as *Omeros* contains intertexts with multiple sources. Terada, Breslin, and Thieme are quite right to foreground the polyglossia when discussing Walcott’s poetry, and Pollard’s approach can constrain our awareness of this aspect of Walcott’s work. Additionally, by considering the different approaches to the epic by Pound, Eliot, Crane, and Walcott, we can see how questions of the cultural work of epic add complexity to the intersections of modernist literature and postcolonial concepts of cultural healing. I also feel that examining these different versions of cultural healing in epic poetry provides a better framework to address the very important concept that Pollard introduces, but to my mind does not explore fully, of “migratory” modernism.

Before proceeding to discuss these issues in detail, however, it is necessary that I first define some key terms that will facilitate my exploration of *Omeros* and modernism.

First, I must explain what I mean by the “modernist” attributes of Eliot, Pound, and Crane (as well as James Joyce who is also an important modernist figure in Chapter One). Since I am primarily interested in how aspirations for cultural renewal shape poetic practice, the attributes that concern me pertain to cultural function. “High” literary, Anglo-American modernism, to which I will refer subsequently simply as “modernism,” has been defined and redefined by numerous critics. I make no authoritative claims for my own definition. Indeed, what follows is a provisional sketch of modernism in which I articulate elements that are relevant to my study. First, modernism attempts to create a cultural synthesis out of a multiplicity of cultural fragments (Pollard 39). Indeed, the attraction of the epic form for Pound, Crane, and Eliot is partly based on the genre’s
capacity to yoke disparate materials within an overarching narrative. Though this process of synthesis draws on pre-existing cultural concepts and traditions, modernism represents it as a new vision. As Peter Nicholls notes in *Modernisms: a Literary Guide* (1995), “The ‘new’ was a highly equivocal category, since cultural renovation was frequently projected as a return to the values of a previous age” (166, Nicholls’ emphasis). Pound’s imperative to “make it new” indicates the utopian gesture of renewal, while at the same time his essays directed readers to revive the past in order to achieve this newness. The need for this vision arises because, as Jeremy Hawthorn notes, the prevailing modernist belief is that contemporary culture is fragmented and decayed as a result of the commercialism embedded in modernity (152-53). This commercial crassness is intrinsically bound up in the chaotic nature of contemporary society. For all three writers, “modernity is anarchic and lacking in any direction” (Nicholls 254-55).

For the purposes of this study, I want to sketch briefly two modernist strategies for challenging this commercialism and disorder of the modern world: one is the celebration of what Sanford Schwartz terms “the essential reality that is revealed in immediate experience” (6), and the other is the use of non-linear forms of history to “correct the apparently amnesiac tendencies of modernity by reconnecting it to a valued cultural tradition” (Nicholls 167). For modernist writers, “immediate experience” manifests itself in various forms from the workings of the unconscious, to sensory perception, to non-rational interactions between individuals and the natural world. For Pound, Eliot, and Crane, these experiences are masked, distorted, and/or marginalized by social abstractions and the accepted language of everyday life.12 This need for alternate

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12 Eliot famously asserts in “The Metaphysical Poets,” “Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and
forms of representation extends to the modernist use of history. Eliot’s famous “juxtaposition of myth and contemporaneity” (SP 177) is one form of modernist disruptions of linear history, disruptions motivated by belief in the interpenetration of the past and the present. In *The Modernist Poetics of History* (1987), James Longenbach identifies two key models of the modernist understanding of history. One is that the experiences of the present are a palimpsest that overlays the experiences of the past (36). The notion of the palimpsest suggests the simultaneity of different eras of the past and the present time. The other model of history is that of particular cultural expressions of eternal forms (Longenbach 70). The concept of eternal forms invokes a slightly different model of surfaces and depths from the palimpsest. While the palimpsest, by virtue of the image of overlaying experiences, emphasizes simultaneity and back forth movement between perception of past and present, eternal forms suggests a more subterranean model, in which the artist must go digging to uncover an archetypal pattern to experience.

All of these key elements of modernist writing contribute substantially to the poetics Walcott deploys in *Omeros*. As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, Walcott engages directly with modernist poetics that shape a vision of cultural healing. He assembles cultural fragments in order to shape moments of cultural wholeness. He shares the modernist disdain for commercialism, though in Walcott’s case, his disdain is more specifically directed at tourism. Walcott also seeks to oppose commercialism and tourism complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (SP 65)

13 Longenbach draws on Ezra Pound’s “Pavanes and Divisions” (1918) in which Pound asserts that “A god is an eternal state of mind” (SP 47), and that a god is manifest “When the states of mind of take form” (47). Consequently art, such as the troubadour tradition in Provence can represent eternal forms, creating a method for individuals to know the divine
with a metaphoric language that accurately represents the indigenous population’s relation to nature, particularly seemingly irrational aspects such as metamorphosis. With regard to history, Walcott draws strongly on Eliot’s ideas of juxtaposing myth and contemporaneity to disrupt linear narratives of the past. For Walcott, challenging linear history is an important gesture in disrupting imperial control of the Caribbean’s cultural tradition. As with Pound, Eliot, and Crane, Walcott deploys both the concept of the palimpsest and that of eternal forms to construct his vision of the past.

**Culture and Cultural Renewal**

In the introduction to her book *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture*, Susan Hegeman nicely encapsulates the dual meaning of the term used during the modernist era. “Culture” notes Hegeman, “refers to the distinctive ‘genius’ of a particular group of people, and yet also describes a common condition of all people, all of whom have their own form of a ‘culture’” (6, Hegeman’s emphasis). With this phrase, Hegeman deliberately echoes Edward Sapir, the modernist anthropologist, who in “Culture, Genuine and Spurious” defines culture as “civilization in so far as it embodies the national genius” (qtd. in Hegeman 5). Culture, according to this usage, encompasses the entirety of a community and yet is simultaneously a phenomenon, “the distinctive genius,” that can be cultivated by people within the community.14 Eliot comments similarly on the symbiotic relationship between the whole and the component parts of a culture in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948):

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14 Marc Manganaro observes that the modernist belief in a culture that could be “cultivated” can be traced back to Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (26). In the opening of that work, Arnold defines cultures as “The pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (LION).
According to the account which I have given, a ‘culture’ is conceived as the
creation of the society as a whole: being, from another aspect, that which makes it
a society. It is not from the creation of any one part of that society. The function
of what Dr. Mannheim would call the culture-creating groups, according to my
account, would be rather to bring about a further development of the culture in
organic complexity: culture at a more conscious level, but still the same culture.
This higher level of culture must be thought of both as valuable in itself, and as
enriching of the lower levels: thus the movement of culture would proceed in a
kind of cycle, each class nourishing the others. (37)

Culture, according to Eliot, is a feedback loop in which the state of the whole has an
impact on various social stratifications, but also where the efforts of individuals and
groups can enrich the whole.

A similar belief underlies Pound’s theories of culture in Guide to Kulchur (1938).
The discerning individual must shape culture since the uncontrolled totality of
information is without value until carefully parsed. He states that the purpose of his guide
is to “provide the average reader with a few tools for dealing with the heteroclite mass of
undigested information hurled at him daily and monthly and set to entangle his feet in
volumes of reference” (23). This individual effort is not sufficient, however, since “the
history of a culture is the history of ideas going into action” (44). For Pound, ideas
become action when the efforts of individuals begin to shape the everyday life within a
community. Consequently, culture in full bloom describes the entire life of the
community as when Pound discusses the Renaissance: “It is or has been said that the
Florentines of the renaissance had the sense to let Raphael choose designs for a new town
gate despite his youth (aetat 16). If true this indicates a *high state of culture*” (133, my emphasis). The feedback loop occurs more slowly than in Eliot’s understanding of culture. Implicit in Pound’s history of culture is a pattern where the individual shapes the culture around him through teaching his or her ideas, and the resulting “high state of culture” will provide a model for the individual of a later generation who seeks to revive his or her contemporary culture. Consequently, over the history of culture, the cultural feedback loop cycles continuously.

Walcott shares with Eliot and Pound this dual understanding of culture. In his essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry” (1974), he declares, “To talk about the contribution of the black to American culture or civilization is absurd, because it is the black who energized that culture, who styles it, just as it is the black who preserved and energized its faith” (Hammer 52). As with Eliot’s description, culture is both a whole way of life and something within life that can be energized. Walcott emphasizes a community’s power to cultivate culture when he notes, somewhat ironically, in “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” that “a culture, we all know, is made by its cities” (*Essays* 71). Even as it is continually being made by the city, culture also describes a city’s “commercial and human proportions” (*Essays* 74) and a people’s “condition of life as well as of imagination” (*Essays* 72). In *Omeros*, Walcott links this cyclical movement of culture from part to whole and back to part to the migratory patterns that constitute the history of the Caribbean, an issue I discuss in Chapters Two and Three.

This dual understanding of “culture” shapes the parameters of what I will call “cultural renewal.” As with the term “culture,” Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* provides a touchstone for Walcott’s ideas of cultural renewal. The previous
quotation from Eliot emphasizes that culture is the product of an entire society. Nonetheless, “culture-creating groups” can stimulate the process of renewal by bringing about “a further development of the culture in organic complexity: culture at a more conscious level, but still the same culture.” Cultural renewal, according to Eliot, requires a heightened awareness amongst the community of what constitutes culture and also an increasing complexity that remains “organic.” The emphasis on “organic” complexity suggests a natural interchange between the constituent parts of culture and also stresses the need for a collective sense of cultural wholeness. Eliot’s praise of the interlocking cultural activities of “primitive” tribes emphasizes the natural intersections that forge a cultural whole: “It is obvious that among the more primitive communities the several activities of culture are inextricably interwoven. The Dyak who spends the better part of a season in shaping, carving and painting his barque of the peculiar design required for the annual ritual of head-hunting, is exercising several cultural activities at once – of art and religion, as well as of amphibious warfare” (NTDC 24). These interwoven activities provide a lesson for the “modern” world since Eliot goes on to decry the “cultural disintegration” that can result from the “occupational specialisation” of the more complex civilization (26).

Cultural renewal resolves fragmentation and alienation, forging links between all members and activities of a community. Georg Lukács’ comments on the relation between epic and cultural wholeness provide a useful context for Eliot’s association of cultural wholeness with renewal, despite the ideological disparities between the two authors. In The Theory of the Novel (1920), Georg Lukács describes this cultural

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15 Michael North has commented on the surprising points of connection in the early writings of Eliot and Lukács. He observes, “Culture, the goal for both critics, means the reintegration of individual and society,
wholeness, or “totality,” as a quality intrinsic to the epic genre. The genre, according to Lukács, reflects a unified consciousness, in which “the adequacy of the deeds to the soul’s inner demand for greatness, for unfolding, for wholeness” (30) arises from the poetry. For Lukács, the true epic exists only in the Ancient Greece of Homer. Consequently, the unity of spirit that he describes is no longer accessible in the modern world. It is something that manifests itself as a permanent experience only in visions of the beyond. Only in the beyond can one achieve “the perfect immanence of the transcendent”; “The world of distances lies sprawling and chaotic beneath the radiant celestial rose of sense made sensuous; it is visible and undisguised at every moment. Every inhabitant of that home in the beyond has come from this world, each is bound to it by the indissoluble forces of destiny” (59). Coincidentally, Lukács’ metaphor of the “rose of sense made sensuous” parallels Eliot’s language in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921). Eliot also uses the image of the rose to explain his concept of cultural wholeness when he famously asserts, “Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility” (SP 64). Unsurprisingly, Eliot locates this complete sensibility, with its conflation of intellectual and affective response, in the seventeenth century, far removed from the twentieth century.

particular and general” (Bush 175). While I think North’s use of the term “culture” overlooks its descriptive element as Eliot uses it, North’s point of comparison highlights both writers’ drive towards wholeness. Lukács’ use of the term derives from Hegel and his belief in totality as what Adam Roberts calls “the working out of the dialectic of spirit” (24). Lukács first uses the term in The Theory of the Novel in the “Preface” when he notes, “The first, general part of the book is essentially determined by Hegel, e.g. the comparison of modes of totality in epic and dramatic art” (15, my emphasis). What Lukács means by totality becomes clear in his chapter “Integrated Civilisations” when he praises Greek culture for its unified state: “Being and destiny, adventure and accomplishment, life and essence are then identical concepts” (30). In modern times, “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56).
Both Eliot and Lukács advocate for the dissolution of the boundaries that we use to categorize experience. In hoping for the possibility of this dissolution, both writers assume an interconnectedness among all things, which Lukács identifies in relation to Dante’s apprehension of Paradise: “the great experience of Dante the traveler – envelops everything in the unity of its meaning, now revealed. Dante’s insight transforms the individual into a component of the whole” (60). This description of Dante’s Paradiso is Eliot’s Dyak transplanted into the tradition of Christianity. Cultural renewal, then, requires harmony between the individual and the collective whole, and between intellectual and sensory experience. Additionally, as Eliot notes, renewed culture is occasioned, in part, by a heightened awareness of the state of culture within the community and the increasing complexity of the community’s activities.

In Omeros, Walcott represents cultural fragmentation as the legacy of colonialism and the neo-imperialist practices of a tourist economy. In particular, the psychic wounds of the three fishermen named after characters in The Iliad, Philoctete, Hector, and Achille, highlight the need for cultural synthesis as a form of healing. Philoctete suffers from a seemingly incurable sore on his shin, a wound that he believes results from the gap in cultural tradition created by the Middle Passage. The legacy of slavery has ruptured his link to past African cultural traditions and language. Hector trades his canoe for a transport van in order to make money and feels severed from the natural world, particularly the sea. His despair leads to his reckless driving, which ultimately leads to his death late in the poem. Achille stubbornly adheres to traditional fishing methods and consequently feels at odds with the encroaching urban development spurred by the tourist industry. Also, like Philoctete, he struggles with a sense of disconnection to his ancestry.
Walcott structures these problems and others represented in *Omeros* as conflicts between individuals and larger cultural forces. He implies that individuals cannot fully heal themselves without addressing larger communal problems. Healing requires a synthesis of the natural and urban world as well as the past and the present. The more specific projects that contribute to this cultural renewal and the increased sense of cultural wholeness – the construction of indigenous status, the assimilation of the past without nostalgia, and the interchange between urban dwellers and the natural world – will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

**The Modern Epic**

Walcott chooses to structure his vision of cultural healing through the conventions of the epic genre. In order to explicate this link between content and literary form, we need an applicable definition of epic for *Omeros* and its modernist intertexts. For the purposes of this study, I define *Omeros* as a modern epic poem. Walcott’s engagement with the Homeric epics, which begins in the very title of his poem, has been the subject of considerable critical discussion and there has been frequent debate, but little consensus, on whether *Omeros* constitutes a modern/postmodern/postcolonial version of the epic or

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a work that challenges the validity of the epic genre altogether.¹⁸ A critic’s position in these discussions depends largely on how he or she defines epic. All too frequently, the definition being employed is one that applies accurately only to *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*: a grand poem that begins in *medias res* and proceeds to narrate in “high” poetic diction (with recourse to epic similes and catalogues) the tale of a protagonist of exceptional status who, with the aid and/or hindrance of supernatural agents, undertakes a heroic task that will affect the well-being of an entire community.¹⁹ This definition is already problematic when applied to self-proclaimed epics of the nineteenth century,²⁰ and certainly does not adequately define the twentieth-century poems that are the focus of this study. Nonetheless, I find “modern epic” a useful label for discussing *Omeros* because of the poem’s ambition to offer a large-scale vision of cultural healing. I propose to follow the lead of Michael André Bernstein, who in *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (1980) bases his definition of the epic chiefly upon its *desired cultural function*. Here, the epic poem is one that aspires to be read as a culturally authoritative text that produces and/or determines cultural

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¹⁸ Joseph Farrell summarizes the issues surrounding this debate in his article “Walcott’s *Omeros*: The Classical Epic in a Postmodern World,” *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community* (1999).

¹⁹ A good example of this definition occurs in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams: “In its strict sense the term *epic* or *heroic poem* is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or (in the instance of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) the human race” (76, Abrams emphasis). To these features, Abrams subsequently adds the large scale setting of the poem, the performance of superhuman deeds, and the presence of supernatural beings (77). He also notes that the epic begins in *medias res* with the address to the muse, and that the poem will include catalogues (78).

²⁰ For an interesting analysis of the epic genre in the Romantic era, see Stuart Curran’s discussion of the Wordsworth’s engagement with the genre (183-85) and Byron’s attack on all generic categories (197-98) in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (1986).
value. By defining modern epic according to its desired cultural function, we can see how the genre’s various features work towards fulfilling this ambition. The shared characteristics of *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge* that make these poems important intertexts for Walcott can also usefully be classified as constitutive features of “modern epic.” In fact, Walcott follows the pattern established by Pound, Eliot, and Crane in the manner in which he engages with the epic tradition and envisions cultural healing through epic poetry. As Bernstein notes, “for Ezra Pound as well as for his literary ancestors, the nature of an ‘epic’ was a question, a problem to be explored through specific texts, rather than an established poetic form with a generally acknowledged set of conventions” (11). This statement aptly describes Pound’s contemporaries, Eliot and Crane, as well their successor in the modern epic tradition, Walcott.

Although this study focuses on Walcott’s relation to literary modernism in *Omeros*, I do not classify Walcott as a modernist writer, nor do I consider *Omeros* to be a modernist poem. The historical and cultural conditions that form the context of *Omeros* differ significantly from those in which Pound, Eliot, and Crane wrote their poetry. *Omeros* shares structural properties, rhetorical strategies, and thematic concerns with modernist examples of epic, but the poem, and Walcott’s work in general, can be approached from a myriad of reading strategies, so to label *Omeros* as a “modernist” epic poem seems to oversimplify its multiple identities. Consequently, I use the term “modern epic” as opposed to “modernist epic” to classify the shared cultural project of *Omeros*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge*. In these terms, the modern epic is a poem

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21 This is not to imply that an epic poem has a single cultural purpose. Indeed, as the following discussion indicates, I argue that there are multiple cultural functions that operate in tandem to serve the overall cultural function of the epic poem: to offer a vision of cultural renewal.
that can be written by modernists. It is not, however, exclusively the production of modernism, nor even of the twentieth century. Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, for example, with its attack on the soul-destroying nature of urban life in London, its equation between the narrator’s spiritual crisis and a larger national crisis, its quest requiring an exploration of past rural life now threatened by encroaching urbanization, and its forward-looking gesture at the end to a great work still to be done could be classified as a “modern epic” according to the criteria that I outline below.

I derive two key features of the modern epic from more general definitions of the entire genre. One is Brian Wilkie’s assertion that an epic must attempt to be a great poem (6), which I divide into two more specific ambitions: to tell a story, wide-ranging in scope, that is of cultural significance, and to demonstrate masterful use of poetic language and form. I do not attempt to evaluate systematically the *success* of these ambitions; instead, I consider how these ambitions manifest themselves through the formal and thematic features of *Omeros*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge*. In addition to its ambitious scope, the modern epic self-consciously engages with the epic tradition. This engagement frequently takes the form of competing and simultaneous tendencies towards imitation and repudiation. In *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (1993), David Quint declares that the epic genre tends to be conservative, perpetuating formal structures of narrative and diction, as well as motifs and plot points (8). Conversely, Joseph Farrell focuses on the epic’s “capacity to reinvent itself through inversion, opposition to epic predecessors, and ironic self-reflexion” (283). Van Kelly makes a similar point, noting that in the quest to outdo past models of the epic, artists borrow characteristics from non-epic sources (4). For Kelly, these non-epic
characteristics provide "regenerative" effects on the genre, while the continuous links to epic devices create a poetics of allusion and citation (4). The combined gestures of imitation (noted by Quint) and repudiation (noted by Farrell and Kelly) underscore the poets’ ambitions for their poems to be received as culturally significant. Epic poets link their work to a genre already associated with “great” works of literature while seeking to attain exceptional status within the tradition by opposing the works of their literary predecessors.

Additionally, the modern epic displays several distinctive features that contribute to its claim as a culturally authoritative text. The following assertion from Bernstein’s general definition of the epic, which he derives from Pound who developed it from Kipling, is applicable. The epic is a “tale of the tribe” (8): it presents models of exemplary behaviour to a national or nationalistic cultural group. Bernstein highlights the didactic nature of the genre, observing that “The element of instruction arguably present, if only by implication, in all poetry, is deliberately foregrounded in an epic which offers its audience lessons presumed necessary to their individual and social survival” (14).

Consequently, the epic poet implicitly defines his or her proper audience as “the citizen” who is a “participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus” (14). Unlike the solitary individual who feels alienated from the world, the citizen sees him or herself as an active participant of the community and will recognize the instructional elements as applicable to him or herself in that capacity. Bernstein’s formulation omits mention of the fact that this tribe of politically conscious readers often does not actually exist. The epic poem seeks, however, to forge this collective readership with its instructional elements.
The following is a brief example of these instructional elements in Walcott’s *Omeros*. Philoctete’s deeply symbolic shin wound is finally cured near the end of the poem by the local obeah woman, Ma Kilman. At the end of her quest, as she bathes Philoctete in water infused with a root from an African flower, the narrator, who is clearly identified as a version of Walcott himself, directly asks his readers “What else did it cure?” (247). This rhetorical question follows an earlier passage where Walcott observes that the healing process applies not only to Philoctete, but to the larger community that includes the reader:

> Feel the shame, the self-hate

> draining from all our bodies in the exhausted sleeping

> of a rumshop closed Sunday. There was no difference

> between me and Philoctete. (245)

The first person plural address is an inclusive gesture, defining the collective identity as wounded and in need of healing. For Walcott’s Caribbean readers, this passage implicitly demands that they consider the common historical and cultural context that puts them in this position of needing healing. Walcott seeks to initiate contemplation on the question of how individual and communities relate to the legacy of slavery (Philoctete’s primary cause of pain). Additionally, the rhetorical question “What else did it cure?” invites the reader to consider whether wounds extend beyond the obvious trauma intrinsic to the history of slavery to other cultural and historical narratives that make us feel less than
whole. By pushing the reader to ask these questions, Walcott seeks to form a collective political consciousness out of his community of readers.22

Much like the genre of romance, the modern epic employs the motif of the quest,23 which, in the modern epic, centres on the goal of cultural renewal. George de Forest Lord observes that in the epic poem the protagonist may have a more personal goal as well, but it becomes part of this greater quest for cultural renewal (1). I would qualify this statement, by suggesting that in the modern epic no gap exists between the individual quest and the greater cultural movement. The protagonist’s source of dissatisfaction arises from general cultural conditions rather than a single, specific impediment.24 As the protagonist moves towards self-discovery, he or she observes and praises small-scale versions of revitalized culture. All four of the poems under discussion include this feature. In *The Cantos*, Pound provides snapshot descriptions of flourishing Italian

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22 Not all of Walcott’s instructional elements demand that the community of readers be directly linked to the Caribbean. Ramazani notes that though Walcott’s never occludes the primacy of Philoctete’s suffering in the poem, he also deconstructs “the uniqueness of suffering” (50), highlighting the relevance of this theme to multiple cultural communities across the globe.

23 The quest is a feature the epic shares with the genre of romance. In fact, David Quint blurs the distinction between epic and romance, identifying the latter as a sub-category within the epic tradition. Quint argues that true epic forms a narrative structure that depicts the establishment of permanent political structures (45-46). Romance on the other hand emphasizes the impermanence of any given political situation. For Quint, *The Aeneid* becomes the representative true epic since its hero overcomes the episodic wandering prominent in the first part of the poem to establish the beginnings of the Roman Empire. According to Quint, Virgil rewrites Homer, with the episodic first half imitating *The Odyssey* (the example par excellence of the romance epic because its hero is capriciously blown along by the winds of fate) and the second half imitating *The Iliad*. Virgil transcends his predecessor by ending his poem with the end of the war of settlement. My own feeling is that the epic and the romance both employ the motif of the quest because in their original forms they were both genres of heroic literature. I would distinguish the romance quest from the epic by its slightly greater emphasis on mystery, deploying elements of the fantastic and the uncanny. The epic quest, while sometimes involving the supernatural or the fantastic seems less concerned with mystery and more with familiar cultural elements and how to invest them with new energy. In the case of the four poems under consideration, the epic quest seems the more appropriate description since Pound, Eliot, Crane, and Walcott seek to imbue familiar objects, settings, etc. with the energy necessary to a vital culture.

24 Some examples of specific impediments in the epic tradition are the following: Odysseus struggling to return home despite the wrath of Poseidon in *The Odyssey*, Christ facing the temptations of Satan in *Paradise Regained*, and Beowulf confronting three different monsters in *Beowulf*.
Renaissance cities in which commerce encourages the arts. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot highlights the ceremonious beauty of Elizabeth’s and Leicester’s courtship that is part of the history of the Thames. Crane emphasizes the utopian possibility of technology with rapturous praise of Brooklyn Bridge at the opening and closing of *The Bridge*. Throughout *Omeros*, Walcott celebrates the humility, courage, and moderation of the fishing culture centred on Achille. These examples function in each poem as a constitutive element of a vital, larger, yet still unrealized culture.

One of the questing figures in the modern epic is the authorial/narrative voice, which seeks to assemble a hopelessly fragmented culture into a coherent form. In fact, the primary heroic role in the modern epic belongs to the narrator, who must gather the necessary fragments among the debris of a broken culture and construct a vision of renewal that will facilitate cultural healing. As with Walcott, who uses rhetorical devices to stimulate reader response to his representation of fragmentation, Pound, Eliot, and Crane seek a participating reader to facilitate their authorial quest for cultural renewal. As part of this effort, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge* make extensive use of parataxis, which I define with reference to Patricia Rae’s characterization of parataxis as “the method of ‘presenting’ materials, side-by-side, without commenting definitively on their relation to one another” (146). The collage form of these poems brings together cultural fragments, but because the juxtapositions within

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25 I would suggest that we identify the quest in *The Waste Land* with the epic genre rather than follow the prevailing critical pattern of linking the poem’s quest with the genre of romance. As I argue in Chapter One, Eliot’s praise of Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* in the footnotes of *The Waste Land* has led to this widespread assumption, but this assumption overlooks the distinctions between the romance and epic forms of the quest.

26 Both Pound and Crane embed stories of heroes within their epics. Pound uses Confucius, Odysseus, Sigismundo Malatesta, and others; Crane uses Columbus, Maquokeeta, and Walt Whitman. This multiplicity of heroes in both *The Cantos* and *The Bridge* indicates that no one figure can be the guide to cultural renewal. Instead, the unifying force is the narrator who recognizes the necessary qualities in each of these figures and brings them together in one text.
the collage occur without commentary, the final synthesis must occur in the minds of the readers. Because Walcott deploys more sustained narrative passages than Pound, Eliot, and Crane, his use of parataxis is not so obvious. Nonetheless, *Omeros* jumps through different points in time and from one character’s perspective to another in part to generate connections in the mind of the reader outside of the conventional, linear, realist narrative. The paratactic form of the modern epic implies that the act of reading and appreciating the poem transforms readers into citizens, thus enabling them to become heroes in the quest for cultural renewal. They carry crucial responsibility since the step of making the vision part of the practice of everyday life can only be carried out by a community of readers.

By identifying their own act of writing and the citizen’s act of reading as key steps toward cultural renewal, all four writers invoke the rhetoric of the jeremiad. Sacvan Bercovitch defines the jeremiad as a political sermon that generally occurs in a three-part progression: “First, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that ensure success); and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal” (16). Brian Wilkie links this pattern to the epic genre, declaring that its “progressivism” follows the Old Testament prophetic pattern of rejecting the immediate past in favour of the "true" orthodoxy of culture that exists in the more distant past (10-11).²⁷ Pound, Eliot, Crane, and Walcott assume the role of prophets crying out in a cultural wasteland, urging their readers to take on the task of reforming modernity with

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²⁷ Wilkie never identifies this pattern as the jeremiad, but he clearly has in mind the pattern so named by Bercovitch.
elements of past cultural vitality represented in *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *The Bridge*, and *Omeros*. Deploying the rhetoric of the jeremiad intensifies the relationship between poet and reader, which is already central to the modern epic because of its use of parataxis.

Elements of the jeremiad are clearly detectable in the four epic poems. For the three modernist poets, the modern city is the Hell against which they set themselves (most ambiguously in *The Bridge* because Crane also sees redemptive aspects in urban technology). They point to the “true” orthodoxy when they urge the reader to value past cultural structures and/or artifacts. To give some examples, Pound celebrates the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece as the preferred religious form, the Monte dei Paschi Bank of Sienna during the Renaissance for responsible economic policy, and the Tempio commissioned by Sigismundo Malatesta as the artistic result of the life affirming spirit. Eliot praises the architecture of Christopher Wren as an example of public art and invokes the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* from ancient India as the mean to reform the modern spiritual attitude. Crane celebrates Columbus’ attitude of wonder and the harmony and vitality of the Indians represented in the mythical figures of Pocahontas and Maquokeeta. Along with these communal norms from the past and condemnation of the present, the modernist epic poems include a vision of redemption for the community. Pound describes moments of beauty and harmony associated with the Greek gods in *The Cantos*; in *The Bridge*, Crane celebrates the Brooklyn Bridge as a transcendent experience. Eliot does not explicitly articulate redemption in *The Waste Land*, but the quest motif, references to spring, and images of beauty (Wren’s architecture, the Thames during the Renaissance) imply that redemption is possible. None of the three poems
offers a complete vision of redeemed culture. Instead, they provide glimpses and hints intended to spur their readers to action. In a similar manner, Walcott decries the commercialism intrinsic to tourism and the attendant problems of greed and exploitation, although like Crane he associates the metropolitan centre with redemptive aspects (for him it is the gathering of art into one location). In *Omeros*, the orthodoxy held in opposition to commercial tourism is the rural fishing community and its reliance on and harmony with nature, although as I will discuss in Chapter Three, Walcott recognizes the problematic nostalgia intrinsic to celebrating the fishing community at the expense of more urban locations. For Walcott, the transcendent experience to which the community should aspire takes place on the beach and centres on a feeling of wonder at the beauty of the everyday natural setting. As with his modernist predecessors, for Walcott this vision of redemption is incomplete since, in the case of *Omeros*, this transcendent moment does not extend to the larger community and its tourist economy. Indeed, the pervasive threat in *Omeros* is that the crass commercial aspects of tourism that already debilitate the spirit of Gros Îlet – the fishing village in St. Lucia where most of the narrative of *Omeros* occurs – will eradicate the possibility of these transcendent moments.

Because the epic aspires to initiate cultural renewal, it presumes an existing crisis within society. To address this problem, the epic narrative turns to root causes in the past and to previous models of exemplary conduct that can help guide its culture out of contemporary problems. In this respect, the epic is a largely conservative genre. Though it consistently gestures towards a utopian future, the basis of this renewed culture exists in models from the past. As part of the quest represented in the epic, both individuals and communities must reject the conventional notion of history as a linear progression of
events and instead recognize a more fluid and integrated relation between past and present in which aspects of both states may be understood as simultaneous. This seeming paradox creates a cyclical narrative movement in which, to quote Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” “the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (240-42). This cyclical movement does not, however, imply endless repetition. The modern epic displays a strong teleological drive, in which the poet/prophet cries out for progress towards the ideal of vital, cultural wholeness. As Wilkie notes, the epic displays both a dedication to the past and a desire to reject and transcend it (11). Of the poems under consideration, the one in which the necessity of reconfiguring the relation between past and present is strongest is *Omeros*. For Walcott, the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean demands an alternate view of history from that imposed on the Caribbean by outsiders, who construct its past as a narrative centred on the colonizers and see the post-independence histories of various Caribbean nations as narratives of economic and cultural failure. Two central concerns for all the major characters in *Omeros* are how to accept the legacy of colonialism without succumbing to despair and how to find value in the past without succumbing to nostalgia.

In the modern epic, the central crises of cultural sterility and fragmentation originate in the conditions of the urban world. The problems of modernity are city problems, where too powerful technology, consumerist culture, mass production, a rootless population living in crowded conditions, and other factors contribute to cultural conditions that the modern epic characterizes as sterile, loveless, mechanical, sordid, and soul-destroying. Each of the epics in this study creates a vision of Hell linked to the modern city. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses the allusion to Dante to link the morning
pedestrian traffic over London Bridge to the crowd outside the gates of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*. In Pound’s “Hell Cantos” (14 and 15) the damned are all city dwellers: war profiteers, press gangs, agents provocateurs, and politicians. The moment of intense despair in *The Bridge* corresponds with the narrator’s descent into the subways of Manhattan. Walcott reenacts Dante’s *Inferno* near the end of *Omeros*. In a dream sequence, Walcott the narrator follows the figure of Omeros into the volcano, La Soufrière, where he sees the elected officials of the capital, Castries, who “saw the land as views / for hotels and elevated into waiters / the sons of others” (289). These souls now reside in molten lava as punishment. Equating aspects of the modern city with Hell emphasizes the gap between modern culture of the urban space and traditions of artistic and communal vitality.

This state of affairs is represented as a deviation from positive cultural practices in the past which are now either forgotten or held in contempt. In conjunction with this process of loss is the absence of a developed sense of the sacred, which enables a community to regard both the city and the natural world as sources of wonder and joy. In order to recover this sense of wonder, the modern epic turns to mythological figures who facilitate a reconnection between the urban community and the sense of the sacred inherent in the landscape. In *The Waste Land*, these figures are Tiresias and the unnamed, but constantly invoked, Fisher King. In *The Bridge*, the key mythological figures are Pocahontas and Maquokeeta. In *The Cantos*, Pound repeatedly invokes the

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28 Patrick Cook declares the epic to be grounded in the idea of the sacred city as the centre of the world. The walled city functions as an originating centre and dividing point between cosmos and chaos (chaos being outside the walls while the cosmos is within) (1). Cook is thinking mainly of the role of Troy in both *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, but the more general idea of the sacred city seems relevant to the modern epic; however, the boundaries of the city are not the dividing point between order and chaos. Instead, in the modern epic, the city itself usually engenders chaos, and only when the strict division between urban and natural worlds breaks down can a sense of universal order be attained.
Greek gods, especially Dionysus, Artemis, and Aphrodite. Walcott uses African religion and the literary figure of Homer as guides towards the sacred in *Omeros*. Ma Kilman must rediscover her ancestral links to Erzulie, Shango, and Ogun before she can heal Philoctete. Similarly, Walcott the narrator needs Omeros, a composite figure of Homer, a local blind poet Seven Seas, and an African griot, in order to overcome his misguided obsession with the poetics of allusion and his artistic vanity. These mythical figures in all four epics frequently either initiate or signal the culmination of some form of transcendent experience in which the protagonist moves beyond corporeal limitations to gain necessary wisdom and/or experience for initiating cultural renewal.

As part of the process of engaging the past, the modern epic includes a broad range of cultural references as well historical and/or mythic heritage. By declaring that “the epic is a poem containing history” (LE 86), Pound provides an apt example of the genre’s ambition to represent cultural totality. The modern epic assumes what Northrop Frye and Franco Moretti call the “encyclopedic” form. As Frye notes, “The epic differs from the narrative in the encyclopaedic range of its theme, from heaven to the underworld, and over an enormous mass of traditional knowledge” (318). Moretti, focusing on the “modern” (nineteenth and twentieth century in his study) epic, places less emphasis than Frye on the cosmic range of the narrative and more on the attempt to cram sufficient cultural knowledge into the work to create a “unitary world-view” (38). *The Cantos, The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge* follow this trend, deploying a wide range of...

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29 Moretti draws on Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, which equates the epic with a representation of totality: “[I]n this [epic] totality the unity holding the parts together, and the real centre is not provided by a purely lyrical mood or a dramatic action but by a specific and real sphere of life, the essential nature of which is to be brought home to our minds both in its general character and also in its particular trends, aspects, occurrences, duties, etc. Conformably with this whole stage of epic, which exhibits the permanent and the universal as such the chiefly ethic aim of warning, teaching, and summoning to an inherently sterling moral life, productions of this kind acquire a didactic tone” (1041-42).
cultural references. The encyclopedic form appeals to Pound, Crane, and Eliot because its wide-ranging allusions fit well with the collage technique so frequently employed by modernist writers. Collage technique signals both the fragmented nature of modernity and the artists’ power to synthesize these fragments. In its encyclopedic form, the epic offers aesthetic compensation for the absent cultural wholeness. The culture of modernity does not offer an experience of totality, but the use of collage in the encyclopedic epic promises that wholeness can be created out of the existing culture. Thus, the text is not only proscriptive of the current state of culture, but also prescriptive, gesturing towards a future cultural state, that has revived lost practices and forms of knowledge.

As I noted earlier, Walcott is less overt in using parataxis than his modernist precursors. Similarly, although he employs collage intermittently in *Omeros*, the appeal for him of the encyclopedic form has less to do with its affinity for collage than its relevance to postcolonial subjectivity. Through the course of *Omeros*, Walcott the narrator travels widely across Europe and North America before returning to St. Lucia. The resulting commentary provides the encyclopedic context to the narrative strand.

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30 Both *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* are famous for their use of multiple languages and allusions to literature and history from Greek, French, Italian, German, Indian, and Chinese traditions. Crane limits his scope of allusions to American sources, but within this limitation he invokes Columbus, De Soto, Rip Van Winkle, Pocahontas, Walt Whitman and the Wright brothers to emphasize the vastness of American history.

31 In *Signatures of the Visible* (1990), Fredric Jameson declares that the modernist belief in “autonomy of the aesthetic experience,” and of the artistic work, is intertwined with the aspiration to totality: “What seems to happen is that the individual work comes, in the modernist period, as it were to act out symbolically the autonomous vocation of culture as a whole: above and beyond its own specific content, to ‘reflect’ and connote this last as well, but on the mode of shamanistic mimicry and of producing itself as the symbolic surrogate, the substitute or replacement part-object: the cultural part now offering itself as the allegory of the new historical whole of autonomous culture. The Book of the World wants to be a good deal more than one mere book among others in the world” (204, Jameson’s emphasis).

32 Idealizing cultural totality fits with the modern’s epic rhetoric of the jeremiad. The vision of totality is the promise of the better future, and the recovery of devalued cultural fragments from the past parallels the jeremiad’s call for a return to orthodoxy as the path to the better future. Both the rhetoric of the jeremiad and the encyclopedic form support the notion of the modern epic as the central cultural text, highlighting how the modern epic internalizes gestures of self-promotion into the very structural elements of the poem.
centred in Gros Îlet, St. Lucia. This encyclopedic form has three main functions in the poem. First, it highlights the wide range of influences on Caribbean culture resulting from the intersecting histories of migration, diaspora, and colonialism in the region.\(^{33}\) Second, as with *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Bridge*, the encyclopedic form in *Omeros* gestures towards the necessarily open and dynamic state of the revitalized future culture in which it influences and is influenced by multiple sources. The encyclopedic form reflects the cosmopolitanism of Walcott’s perspective and the general state of global conditions in which information and ideas moves rapidly across spatial and national boundaries. Finally, Walcott deploys the encyclopedic form for his epic because, as a postcolonial writer, his sense of cultural legacy ranges geographically and temporally to encompass the history of imperialism. The cultural history of Europe, the imagined ancestry of Africa,\(^{34}\) and the economics of the United States are all large presences in shaping Caribbean culture and individual sense of identity. The characters in *Omeros* must confront these presences in order to define their identities. The implied message is that in confronting the cultural problems of the Caribbean, one situates one’s identity within a global context. For Walcott, this project requires that a poem be both epic and encyclopedic.

**Overview**

\(^{33}\) This multicultural lineage has a personal dimension for Walcott, who is of mixed racial descent. In his early poem, “A Far Cry from Africa” (1962), he speaks of being “divided to the vein” (18) because of his African and European ancestry when contemplating the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya.

\(^{34}\) By imagined, I do mean to imply that the links between Caribbean culture and Africa are false. Rather, because of the historical rupture of the Middle Passage, there is no continuity between the languages and cultures of Africa and those of the Caribbean. Instead, those individuals and communities that look to Africa as an integral part of their identity must forge the links through imagination rather than relying on a received tradition.
The first of the four chapters that follow examines Pound’s, Eliot’s, Crane’s, and Walcott’s engagement with the idea of epic. Collectively, the works of these four poets emphasize that, despite the significant shared characteristics of their poems, the epic is a particularly malleable genre for modern writers. Pound invokes it to teach history and economics. Crane identifies the epic as the literary vehicle for conveying a mythic consciousness. Eliot links producing a successful epic to a future state of cultural wholeness. All three authors associate epic form with cultural authority. They use the epic form in part to invest their ideas with cultural capital. For the purposes of this chapter, I shall follow Pierre Bourdieu’s lead in defining cultural capital as value assigned to a mode of expression by a combination of its expressive utility and its political associations (often shaped by perceptions about the originating author or authors). Walcott differs from the modernist writers on this point since he explicitly denies the cultural authority of the epic, declaring it to be a genre too focused on military forms of heroism and too often the product of soapbox didacticism on the part of its authors. Consequently, he denies his own desire to have the *Omeros* read as an epic poem and a culturally authoritative text (Walcott is somewhat more ambiguous on whether *Omeros* is in fact an epic). Yet at the same time, by creating dialogue in the poem between the narrator and Omeros, Walcott affirms the importance of epic to his cultural

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35 I derive this term from Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of linguistic capital, which he defines in “The economics of linguistic exchanges.”

36 The name “Omeros” is a derivation of the modern Greek pronunciation of Homer, but Walcott gives the name a specific Caribbean meaning:

    I said “Omeros,”

and *O* was the conch-shell’s invocation, *mer* was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, *os* a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore. Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
project. The dialogue implicitly analyzes the phenomenon of having an ambivalent relationship with the epic tradition and reveals Walcott’s desire to use the cultural capital of the epic to celebrate the beauty of small moments from everyday life.

Chapter Two focuses on the construction of indigenous status in *The Waste Land*, *The Bridge*, and *Omeros* and the role of myth and imperialist ideology in shaping indigeneity (the quality of being indigenous). All three poems suggest that a key component of cultural healing is cultivating both an individual’s and a community’s indigenous status. Eliot, Crane, and Walcott use different concepts of myth to develop this sense of belonging. Eliot and Crane follow the imperialist pattern of indigenization in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*. Walcott, by contrast, displays awareness of the imperialist pitfalls in mythic encounters with origins. He seeks to use myth to promote his vision of cultural healing while simultaneously disavowing the reactionary elements of myth as deployed by Virgil, Eliot, and Crane.

Chapter Three considers Walcott’s multifaceted approach to history in *Omeros* in conjunction with Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and his prose works *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* and “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Walcott is particularly concerned to disrupt historical narratives of linear progression and Eliot’s poem provides a model for representing the landscape as a palimpsest and understanding tradition as a simultaneous order. As a result of their approach to the past, both *The Waste Land* and *Omeros* tend towards nostalgia in articulating their desire for cultural wholeness. Walcott attempts to transcend this limitation through self-interrogation, and these efforts signal the drawbacks of Eliot’s poetics of history: they provide a means of resisting the

that echoes from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed. (14)

Within the poem, this character is a composite figure of Homer, a blind St. Lucian named Seven Seas, and an African griot. The significance of this character is discussed in Chapter One.
hegemony of linear history, but they inscribe additional hierarchies in the ensuing vision of cultural wholeness. For Walcott, in order to escape fully the constraints of linear history, the Caribbean artist must identify with the power of the sea.

Chapter Four examines the process of cultural healing and the inherent mystical elements in its mechanisms. I argue that Walcott draws on the concept of healing as articulated in *The Cantos* and *The Bridge*, where it is an inexplicable synthesis of the human, the natural world, and the divine. Despite this close intertextual relation, Walcott’s definition of cultural wounding is more closely aligned with that of Virgil’s *The Aeneid*. I draw on trauma studies to help clarify this distinction. Walcott ultimately diverges from both modern and ancient epic models in asserting that overcoming cultural trauma requires a ritual substitution for lost memory. While this process addresses the legacy of imperialism, I argue that Walcott’s pattern of cultural healing does not engage with the cultural wounds continually generated in the Caribbean by the tourist industry.

In my conclusion, I return to the idea that *Omeros* is a large scale test case for the role of modernist poetics in a postcolonial milieu. *Omeros* highlights that modernism, as a specific literary tradition, and not merely as a term for describing localized responses to the conditions of modernity, has a dynamic and complex role within Caribbean literature. By adopting and transforming patterns from modernist versions of the epic, Walcott uses modernism to define the constitutive elements of postcolonial culture in both its wounded and healed states. This practice in *Omeros* suggests the importance of exploring modernism’s shaping influence on various postcolonial cultural visions.
In declaring *Omeros* to be a modern epic, I realize that I place myself in the midst of a critical quagmire regarding the generic affinities of the poem. While classicists such as Mary Lefkowitz, Oliver Taplin, and Bernard Knox have identified the poem as epic, postcolonial critics John Figueroa, Patricia Ismond, and in fact, Walcott himself, have denied its epic status. Interestingly, Joseph Farrell sees those critics who deny the epic nature of *Omeros* as relying on a postcolonial definition of the epic as the genre which “speaks with the voice of the accumulated authority of generations of white imperialist culture” (273). As a classicist scholar, Farrell is, unsurprisingly, eager to generate a deeper understanding of the epic tradition. After briefly discussing the tradition of oral epic in African literature, which extends the genre well beyond the canonized line of Homer to Milton, Farrell gets to his central argument: though *Omeros* may seem to diverge from the epic tradition by transforming traditional epic features into something new, this pattern in fact continues “the epic tradition of questioning and self-questioning engagement on the part of the poet with his predecessors” (284). For an explanation of this pattern, Farrell refers back to his study *Vergil’s Georgics and the Tradition of Ancient Epic* in which he identifies the dual nature of literary allusions according to classical theory. Literary allusions in the epic tradition have aspects of *imitatio*, in which the poet seeks to copy the best features of his or her predecessors, and of *aemulatio*, in

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1 See Farrell (272) for a summary of the divided opinions regarding the epic status of *Omeros*.
2 Farrell’s primary example is the lines that open the final chapter in *Omeros*: “I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe’s son, / who never ascended an elevator, / who had no passport, since the horizon needs none” (320). By placing this passage at the end of the poem, Walcott inverts the opening lines of *The Iliad*: “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’s son Achilleus” (1). He has changed the verb tense, the identity of the singer, and even the location of the name of the father in relation to the son.
which the poet establishes his or her worthiness by attempting to surpass the model from preceding epics in some manner (Farrell 5). In sum, Farrell is at pains to emphasize the constantly evolving nature of the epic in an effort to dismantle the image of the genre as a monolithic unchanging celebration of imperialist authority.

I bring up Farrell in such detail because his emphasis on imitation and transformation in epic allusion is important to my subsequent discussion of Walcott’s engagement with the idea of epic, and because his general point about the dynamic nature of the epic underscores a key link between Omeros and The Cantos, The Bridge, and The Waste Land. The modern epic does not seek simply to recast the rhetorical tropes of the epic tradition, as is the focus in Farrell’s work, but redefines the very idea of epic itself in order to claim cultural authority for its vision of cultural healing. The modernist era inherited the notion of the epic as a genre suited for conveying moral criticism, heroism, and totality, but as far as Pound’s, Crane’s, and Eliot’s contemporaries were concerned, any attempts to continue writing in the genre would be anachronistic. According to critics at the start of the twentieth century, the problems of modernity defeated the capacities of the epic. Pound, Crane, and Eliot had to redefine the form or emphasize select aspects of pre-existing definitions in order to make the epic relevant for the modern world.

Walcott’s redefinition is even more extensive. He dismisses the value of an epic defined in conventional terms for the contemporary Caribbean; at the same time, he produces in Omeros a new version of the genre: the intimate epic.

Of the four writers, Pound and Crane are most explicit in defining their works as epic and in offering new definitions for the genre. In his correspondence about The Cantos, Pound demonstrates his desire to speak with a bardic voice – that of the
spokesperson for an entire cultural tradition. He envisions his role of prophet extending beyond the realm of artistic production to the study of national politics and economics. Pound’s growing sense of urgency to be recognized as a legitimate thinker on these subjects leads him to increasingly specific definitions of *The Cantos* as epic since this was the poetic genre that he argued had historically included discussions of economics.³ Crane also aspires to use the bardic voice, but his definition of the epic is as national myth. With *The Bridge*, Crane aims to articulate the collective unconscious of America, which he sees as being suppressed by the materialist trappings of modernity. *The Bridge*, Crane implies, will reconcile a mythic representation of American history, in which the origins of the nation unfold in terms of supernatural action, with the urban, technological experience of modernity. Crane was successful in linking the idea of epic to national myth for two of his influential critics, Yvor Winters and Allan Tate. Ironically, claiming epic status to invoke cultural authority generated high expectations that led Winters and Tate to reject the mythic qualities of *The Bridge* and with them the authority of Crane’s cultural vision.

Eliot does not explicitly link *The Waste Land* to the epic tradition. Indeed, the poem itself offers little of the direct instructional elements present in *The Cantos* and *The Bridge*. Eliot’s prose writings, however, are another matter. The literary essays of the twenties demand a specific reading of *The Waste Land* and suggest that a collective, “proper” reading of the poem will direct its audience towards integrating the fragmented state of modern culture. Eliot uses references to Dante to imply that a true epic will only be possible in an era of cultural wholeness. For Eliot, the production of an epic signals

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³ “If you have Polite Essays, you will see note to effect that economics always has been in the best large poetry” (SL 386, Pound’s emphasis). For Pound, the “best large poetry” belonged to Homer and Dante and their respective epics.
the arrival of a desired state of cultural integration. In the interim, *The Waste Land* acts a proto-epic, demonstrating some of the constitutive elements of this utopian epic.

Walcott would seem to differ from these three modernist writers since he denies that the epic is a necessary form of cultural authority, both in discussions about *Omeros* and within the narrative of the poem. Yet *Omeros* is closely aligned with the epic tradition and its attendant associations of beauty, heroism, and grandeur. In denying the epic status of his poem, Walcott seems intent on dissociating himself from the idea of epic as part of a militaristic and elitist mindset. Walcott’s struggles with the epic identity of the poem are a more extensive version of the pattern in modern epic established by Pound, Crane, and Eliot of redefining the meaning of the genre. Walcott, in fact, implicitly turns to another modernist, James Joyce, for a model of how to create an *intimate* epic, which celebrates the beauty of daily experience and makes it the basis for cultural renewal. This reshaping of the epic form culminates in the encounter between the autobiographical narrator and the figure of Omeros, a meeting that indicates that while Walcott seeks to transcend the limitations of the epic genre, like Pound, Crane, and Eliot, he relies on its associations of cultural authority to give credence to his vision of cultural renewal.

**Conventional Notions of Epic in the Modernist Era**

At the beginning of the twentieth century the epic would have seemed the logical choice of a poetic form for didactic purposes. ⁴ Critics tended to emphasize the moral nature of the epic tradition. W.P. Trent in 1899 and Irving Babbitt in 1908 both identified

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⁴ I am indebted to the excellent work of Donald Foerster whose study *The Fortunes of Epic Poetry: A Study in English and American Criticism 1750-1950* charts the changing critical attitudes to heroic poetry.
epic writers as educators of mankind (Foerster 173-74). Similarly, T.S. Perry in 1890 asserted that Homer “teaches great lessons without preaching” (qtd. in Foerster 188), and in 1899 Andrew Lang declared, “the Homeric poems are the best training for life. There is no good quality that they lack” (84). For both Leslie Stephen and Paul Elmer More, much of the beauty of the Homeric epics resulted from their “criticism of life” (Foerster 189). More also suggests in his 1905 lecture that the form of the epic, its grand scale of action, creates a moral effect in the reader: “There lay the greatness of the heroic epos for readers of old, - in the sense of human littleness, the melancholy of broken aspirations, swallowed up in the transcending sublimity of man’s endurance and daring” (qtd. in Foerster 189). Particularly for critics like Babbitt, the moral nature of the ancient epic offered an example with which to critique the decadence and sloppiness of both the romantic tradition and the aestheticism of late Victorian art.

If the epic was a moral form of poetry, however, as far as critics of the early twentieth century were concerned it was also a dead one. The lyric tradition was the vital poetic form of the contemporary world. Arthur Symons propagated Edgar Allan Poe’s denigrations of the long poem from “The Poetic Principle” when he declared in The Symbolist Movement (1919) that Poe had proved that the best epics were only collections of lyric poems strung together: “We have no longer the mental attitude of those to whom a story was but a story, and all stories good; we have realised since it was proved to us by Poe, not merely that the age of epics is past, but that no long poem was ever written; the finest long poem in the world being but a series of short poems linked together by prose” (202). Symons position promoted the idea that the epic had no place in twentieth century poetics. Similarly, Walter Pater’s influential comments in The Renaissance (1893),
praising the unity of form and content in lyric poetry, also had the effect amongst a
number of poets and critics of elevating the lyric above the epic or other forms of
narrative verse:

Lyrical poetry, precisely because in it we are least able to detach the matter from
the form, without a deduction of something from that matter itself, is, at least
artistically, the highest and most complete form of poetry. And the very perfection
of such poetry often appears to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or
vagueness of mere subject, so that the meaning reaches us through ways not
distinctly traceable by the understanding. (108)\(^5\)

In celebrating meaning that develops through an unconscious assimilation of the sound
and sense of a poem, Pater implicitly denigrates narrative poetry (not the highest or most
complete), which must necessarily operate on a more conscious level.

Despite the pertinence of his concept of totality to the goals of the modern epic,
Georg Lukács reinforces Pater’s equation of “high poetry” with the lyric form by
asserting that narrative in the modern age is the domain of prose, not poetry. In The
Theory of the Novel (originally published in 1920), Lukács argues that the novel had
made the epic an obsolete genre:

\(^5\) This passage corresponds closely to the Henri Bergson’s highly influential theories of “duration,” the
immediate form of experience that as he explains in The Introduction to Metaphysics (translated 1912) is
never directly accessible by the individual: “There is, beneath these sharply cut crystals and this frozen
surface, a continuous flux which is not comparable to any flux I have ever seen. There is a succession of
states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it. They can, properly
speaking, only be said to form multiple states when I have already passed them and turn back to observe
their track” (11). For Bergson, we can only perceive this duration/continuous flux through intuition, and to
become aware of intuition we must break down conventional barriers of thought. Art can be a formative
influence in this process by creating the conception idéale: “a certain intermediary image between the
simplicity of the concrete intuition and the complexity of the abstractions that translate it, a receding and
vanishing image, which haunts, unperceived perhaps, the mind of the philosopher” (qtd. in Rae 40).
The epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature differ from one another not by their author’s fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted. The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality. (56)

Interestingly, the concept of totality, which Lukács develops from Marx, also provides a much more conservative critic, Ford Madox Ford, with the basis for declaring the impossibility of the modern epic. In *The Critical Attitude* (1911), Ford asserts that Dante could assimilate all knowledge into a poetic form, thus serving as philosopher and counselor, but that modern man knows too much altogether for any poet to presume to represent an entire culture in a poem. According to Ford, “until all the sciences have been so crystallized by specialists that one poet may be able to take them all in, and until we have that one poet, we cannot have any more poetry of the grand manner” (179-80).

In rejecting the possibility of epic in the modern age, Ford crystallized doubts about the genre that already existed in the late nineteenth century. Even Charles Swinburne, who declared that no literary genre of the past “is obsolete yet, or ever can be; there is nothing in the past extinct” (*CW*, XIII, 248) indirectly drew attention to the prevailing attitude against a modern verse epic when he noted, “the man who attempts in an age of idyllic poetry to write a heroic poem, or to write a dramatic poem in an age of analytic verse, deserves at least the credit due to him who sees and knows the best and highest, and strives to follow after it with all his heart and might” (*CW*, XV, 463). The verbs “attempts” and “strives,” and the phrase “deserves at least” imply the man has
begun a process that cannot be completed and therefore should be applauded for the effort rather than the result. Thus, when Ezra Pound began writing *The Cantos* around 1917 (the first of the four writers of this study to begin his epic) the prevailing attitude was that while the ancient epics were a source of knowledge and moral guidance, the epic tradition had been supplanted by the novel as the form for representing the totality of modern life.

**Pound and the Poem Including Economics**

Early in his career, Pound tentatively belonged to the nay-sayers who saw the modern epic as an impossible goal. In approximately October of 1909, in response to his mother’s suggestion that he write an epic, Pound replied:

Epic to the West?? my Gawd!! What has the west done to deserve it…

Whitman expressed America as Dante did medieval Europe & america is too stupid to see it. (Of course the result is somewhat appaling [*sic*], but then…)

Kindly consider what an epic needs for a foundation:

1. a beautiful tradition
2. a unity in the outline of that tradition. Vid. the Odyssey
3. a Hero, mythical or historical
4. a dam [*sic*] long time for the story to loose [*sic*] its gharish detail and get encrusted with a bunch of beautiful lies.
Dante in a way escapes these necessities. In reality he dips into a multitude of traditions & unifies them by their connection with himself. (qtd. in Dickie 106-07)

Even as Pound implies that the modern world cannot provide the four things listed, he qualifies his dismissal of the modern epic by noting the exception of the heterogeneous model of *The Divine Comedy*. Dante draws on multiple traditions for his epic presumably because the late-medieval world of Italy has already become too cosmopolitan and multifaceted to be represented by a single tradition. By highlighting Dante’s heterogeneity, Pound echoes the sentiment of Ford’s belief that while Dante could encompass all knowledge into poetic form, the modern world had become too complex. Pound does not follow Ford, however, in dismissing Dante’s model for the modern world; his comments leave open the possibility of yoking together multiple cultural traditions, which became the strategy of *The Cantos*.6

In praising Dante’s heterogeneity, Pound implicitly sets himself against the Paterian pattern of demanding a unity of form and content in poetry. The examples of Homer and Dante (who remain Pound’s role models throughout his career) underscore the validity of the heterogeneous form in contrast to the insipid nature of unified works of literature: “I suspect neither Dante nor Homer had the kind of boring ‘unity’ of surface that we take to be characteristic of Pope, Racine, Corneille. The Nekuia shouts aloud that

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6 The general critical opinion against a modern epic nevertheless weighed clearly on Pound. In the early stages of *The Cantos*, he was reluctant to refer to it as an epic. In a 1922 letter, he echoes Swinburne’s suggestion that writing heroic poetry is itself heroic because it is against the grain of contemporary opinion: “Having the crust to attempt a poem in 100 or 120 cantos long after all mankind has been commanded never again to attempt a poem of any length, I have to stagger as I can” (SL 247). Pound refers to his work as a “long poem,” in keeping with his earlier comment to Joyce that he had “begun an endless poem, of no known category” (P/J 102). This ambiguous classification briefly hardened into a denial of the poem as epic when Pound told William Bird in 1924 that *A Draft of 16 Cantos for a poem of some length* “ain’t an epic. It’s part of a long poem” (SL 259).
it is older than the rest, all that island, Cretan, etc., hinter-time, that is not Praxiteles, not Athens of Pericles, but Odysseus” (SL 363, Pound’s emphasis). In fact, Homer’s heterogeneity is only one manifestation of his general lack of concern with the niceties of literary form, an aspect of Homer that Pound praises in comparison to other epic writers: “Virgil is a man on a perch. All these writers of pseudo épépée are people on perches. Homer and the author of the Poema del Cid are keen on their stories. Milton and Virgil are concerned with decorations and trappings, and they muck about with a moral” (LE 217, Pound’s emphasis). These two quotations suggest that the true epic will draw on any tradition necessary to convey its story.

This notion of the heterogeneous epic is crucial to Pound’s grandiose cultural ambition to instigate a total cultural renaissance, particularly in the United States. Pound tells Harriet Monroe, “Any agonizing that tends to hurry what I believe in the end to be inevitable, our American Risorgimento, is dear to me. That awakening will make the Italian Renaissance look like a tempest in a teapot! The force we have, and the impulse, but the guiding sense, the discrimination in applying the force, we must wait and strive for” (SL 44). In order to create this Renaissance, the artist must transcend national boundaries and draw on knowledge from all sources. In “The Renaissance” (1914), Pound emphasizes that a national culture requires this global input: “The same crime [of upholding mediocrity] is perpetrated in American schools by courses in ‘American literature’. You might as well give courses in ‘American chemistry’, neglecting all foreign discoveries. This is not patriotism” (LE 218). Twenty-four years later, Pound is less concerned with pursuing knowledge globally then he is with ensuring that the artist assembles useful knowledge from the past: “FOR A NATIONAL CULTURE the first
step is stocktaking: what is there of it solid. The second step is to make this available and to facilitate access to it” (SP 136, Pound’s emphasis). Nonetheless, the comments from early in his writing career suggest that for Pound, stocktaking is more a matter of assembling useful cultural fragments from multiple traditions than following a single line of artistic development. The “tale of the tribe” (GK 194), as Pound would eventually call The Cantos, extends beyond national boundaries, particularly when the tribe is a modern, immigration-based, American society. Consequently, the heterogeneous nature of the epic form is necessary for Pound to assemble relevant information for a cultural renaissance.

The major setback towards initiating this cultural renaissance was, according to Pound, the economic system of early twentieth-century capitalism. In The ABC of Economics (1933) Pound declares, “Probably the only economic problem needing emergency solution in our time is the problem of distribution. There are enough goods, there is superabundant capacity to produce goods in superabundance. Why should anyone starve?” (SP 204). For Pound, this problem of distribution is largely the result of ill will. He comments, “No economic system is worth a hoot without ‘good will’. No intellectual system of economics will function unless people are prepared to act on their understanding” (SP 208). Such failings of “good will” lead to the systematization of greed and exploitation in the form of usury, which Pound equates in Canto 45 with total cultural failure. The practice of usury prevents humanity from envisioning paradise: “with usura / hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall” (229), and equally importantly, usury hinders the work of artists, artisans, and farmers:

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7 Pound makes a similar point in a 1937 letter when he says of The Cantos,” I don’t expect, in the end, to have introduced ethical novelties or notions, though I hope to light up a few antient [sic] ones” (SL 385).
no picture is made to endure nor to live with
but it is made to sell and sell quick

... Stonecutter is kept from his stone
weaver is kept from his loom
WITH USURA
wool comes not to market
sheep bringeth no gain with usura (229)

This passage reflects Pound’s earlier statement in “The Renaissance” that “The artist is one of the few producers. He, the farmer and the artisan create wealth; the rest shift and consume it” (LE 222). The concept of producers and production remains important to all of Pound’s economic thinking and he defines usury in relation to production: “Usury: a charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production; often without regard to the possibilities of production. (Hence the failure of the Medici bank.)” (The Cantos 230).

Pound’s proposed solutions to the economic difficulties arising from “the age of usury” – which he defines as the nineteenth century in Guide to Kulchur and links closely to the twentieth century by the continued tradition of “loose waftiness of demoliberal ideology” (26) – are based on reconnecting economics with existing production. In The ABC of Economics, this connection manifests itself in Pound’s vague suggestion for currency reform. According to Pound, the current forms of money have no basis on actual goods produced and labour performed and must be redefined and redistributed as “certificates of goods in existence” (SP 206). Presumably, Pound envisions a system
similar to the Monte dei Paschi di Siena, a bank he celebrates in *The Cantos*, for guaranteeing its funding on the income produced from agriculture in the grasslands south of Siena (Terrell 171). The bank also serves as an example of economic good will as Pound makes clear in narrating the bank’s charter:

> that the Magistrate
give his chief care that the specie
be lent to whomso can best use it USE IT
*(id est, piú utilmente)*
to the good their house, to benefit of their business
as of weaving, the wool trade, the silk trade
And that (7thly) the overabundance every five years shall the Bailey
distribute to the workers of the contrade (the wards) holding in reserve a prudent proportion as against unforeseen losses. (209-10)

The guidelines for lending practices specifically promote the work of artisans and framers (weaving and wool trade) and also emphasize that the bank exists for the good of the community since extra profits will be redistributed to the workers.\(^8\) Money lent by the bank is not for the purpose of ensuring the wealth of the lender, but for ensuring a vital circulation of goods and labour.

Interestingly, Pound becomes much more explicit about identifying *The Cantos* as an epic in the years immediately following the publication of *ABC of Economics* (1933). In *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), Pound states, “There is no mystery about the Cantos, they

\(^8\) In *Guide to Kulchur* Pound notes the following of the Monte die Paschi: “There we find the discovery, or at any rate the establishment, of the true bases of credit, to wit the abundance of nature and the responsibility of the whole people” (194).
are the tale of the tribe” (194). He defines the epic in *ABC of Reading* (1934) as “a poem including history” (46). Taken together, these statements affirm *The Cantos* as an epic in Pound’s mind, supporting a letter he wrote to Harriet Monroe in 1933, “I know you hate like hell to print me, and that an *epic* includes history and history ain’t all slush and babies’ pink toes. I admit that economics are *in themselves* uninteresting, but heroism is poetic, I mean it is fit subject for poesy” (SL 330, Pound’s emphasis). The epic is not just a poem including history, but a poem including economics.

Pound’s anxiety about being taken seriously as an economic critic seems to be the core reason behind his new definition of the epic and his own willingness to identify *The Cantos* as one following his major economic treatise. Part One of *ABC of Economics* articulates this anxiety when Pound declares, “I shall have no peace until I get the subject off my chest, and there is no other way of protecting myself against charges of unsystematized, uncorrelated thought, dilettantism, idle eclecticism, etc., than to write a brief formal treatise” (SP 203). While a formal treatise would serve to legitimize Pound’s economic pronouncements in 1933, in 1944 when he writes “An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States,” he invokes the cultural authority of the epic to legitimate his concern with economics:

> This is not a short History of the Economy of the United States. For forty years I have schooled myself, not to write an economic history of the U.S. or any other country, but to write an epic poem which begins ‘In the Dark Forest’ crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light, and ‘fra I maestri di color che sanno.’ For this reason I have had to understand the NATURE of error. But I don’t think it necessary to refer to each particular case of error. (SP 137)
Although Pound seems reluctant to spell out his rationale in this passage, the implied logic is that since his training to write the epic has led to an understanding of the nature of error in general, he can apply that understanding to the specific nature of error in economics. Instead of negating his amateur status by means of a formal treatise as in *ABC of Economics*, Pound now invokes his artistic training, particularly in epic, as his *authority* for discussing economics.⁹

This process of redefining the epic highlights Pound’s anxiety over the idea of epic. He wants the associations of greatness, moral instruction, and wisdom that his contemporaries attributed to the genre in order to validate the economic insights in *The Cantos*. At the same time, he implicitly recognizes the critical attitude that the epic was a genre of the past, and that modern social issues, such as economics, if they were to be represented in literature, belonged to the novel — as Lukács also suggests. Consequently, while defining his poem as epic, Pound seeks to *redefine* the epic as the poetic genre of economics in order to empower *The Cantos* with the cultural authority to act as a template for his modern day Renaissance.¹⁰ He wants the poem to be a “reading matter, singing matter, shouting matter, tale of the tribe” (SL 386). In other words, the poem should extend beyond the coterie of literati to become a cultural event that influences all

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⁹ More generally, Pound seeks to validate the work of the non-specialist in “The Jefferson-Adams Letters as a Shrine and Monument” (1937) when he blames WWI on specialized study: “But Europe went blind into that war because mankind had not digested Jefferson’s knowledge. They went into that war because the canon law had been buried, because all general knowledge had been split up into useless or incompetent fragments. Because literature no longer bothered about the language ‘of law and of the state’ because the state and plutocracy cared less than a damn about letters” (SP 123). Here, Pound appeals both for an integrated cultural vision and literature that includes general knowledge. He asserts the poet’s cultural role more specifically in “The Wisdom of Poetry” (1912) when he notes, “Poets in former ages were of certain uses to the community; i.e., as historians, genealogists, religious functionaries” (SP 330-31).

¹⁰ Pound’s own comments on the publishing of *The Cantos* indicate this ambition to have the poem function as guide for understanding contemporary events. He tells T.C. Wilson in 1934, “Farrar is doing 31/41 [Cantos], but holding it back, God blast it, till autumn. Ought to have been in print last Nov. or at any rate before Roose took over the Fed. Res. Deposits” (SL 338).
facets (especially economic ones) of modern life. Pound’s large scale ambitions for The Cantos lead him to identify his poem as epic while redefining the genre in order to make it a vital commentary on the modern world.

Crane and the Epic of the Modern Consciousness

In September 1927, while working on The Bridge, Crane wrote to his patron, Otto Kahn, to request additional funds and to provide a progress report on the poem. The letter is a fascinating window into both Crane’s intentions and the manner in which he markets his poem to the most financially important member of his reading public. As part of his outline for the poem, Crane describes the section “The Dance” in the following terms:

Here one is on the pure mythical and smoky soil at last! Not only do I describe the conflict between the two races in this dance – I also become identified with the Indian and his world before it is over, which is the only method possible of every[sic] really possessing the Indian and his world as a cultural factor. I think I really succeed in getting under the skin of this glorious and dying animal, in terms of expression, in symbols, which he himself would comprehend. (L 307)

Setting aside the disturbing imperialist assumptions in this passage, which I will address in the next chapter, one might ask why Crane sounds so excited to be dealing with previous racial conflict in mythical terms. Why does he not want to represent the past as history? The answer to this question highlights the difference between Crane’s and Pound’s conception of the modern epic. Crane had little interest in shaping the economic policies of America. Instead, The Bridge aims to be a spiritually rich symbol of the uncollected unconscious of modern America. Crane defines The Bridge as an epic in
order to signal its cultural significance, and he defines the epic as a modern myth in order to promote his poem’s capacity to revitalize the American spirit. Ironically, Crane’s definitions raised the expectations of his influential contemporary critics Allan Tate and Yvor Winters, who subsequently declared the poem a failure as a significant cultural text, thus undermining the purpose behind conflating the epic with myth in the first place.

Crane’s belief in myth as a social unifying force stems from Walt Whitman’s call in Democratic Vistas for the religious vitality that emanates from literature:

> Our fundamental want today in the United States, with closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatuses, far different, far higher in grade, than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage … accomplishing (what neither the schools nor the churches and their clergy have hitherto accomplish’d, and without which this nation will no more stand, permanently, soundly, than a house will stand without a sub-stratum), a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States. (457, my emphasis)

In the section of The Bridge entitled “Cape Hatteras,” Crane fully accepts Whitman’s synthesis of literature and spiritual mission, invoking his predecessor as both muse and “joyous seer” (224). In his letters he uses Whitman’s language of religion as a unifying force to describe his poem: “The very idea of a bridge, or course, is a form peculiarly
dependent on such spiritual convictions. It is an act of faith besides being a communication” (L 261).

For Crane, this spiritual conviction does not manifest itself through conventional religions, but rather through myths generated by the visionary artist. The final two lines of the opening section “To Brooklyn Bridge” signal the need for myth when Crane addresses the Bridge itself: “Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend / And of the curveship lend a myth to God” (43-33). Though Brooklyn Bridge will provide the myth to the already religious spirit, it is the visionary artist, Crane, who must recognize this quality in the Bridge and direct the nation to see the myth in the architecture. According to a letter Crane sent to Gorham Munson, the myth will contain the essence of the entire nation:

Very roughly, [The Bridge] concerns a mystical synthesis of “America.” History and fact, location, etc., all have to be transfigured into abstract form that would almost function independently of its subject matter. The initial impulses of “our people” will have to be gathered up toward the climax of the bridge, symbol of our constructive future, our unique identity, in which is included also our scientific hopes and achievements of the future. (L 124)

While the “mystical synthesis of America” might seem different from the “Myth of America,” as Crane would refer to the poem in his letter to Otto Kahn (L 305), Crane’s description of his synthesis indicates the equivalence of the two terms. Mystical synthesis is the transfiguration of history and the symbol that gathers up the impulses of the American people. Both of these definitions function equally well as definitions for myth, given their similarity to the traditional definition: “A traditional story, typically involving
supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon” (*OED Online*). According to Crane, myth will link the past and present and provide meaning to present day chaos. Though Crane bases his essay “General Aims and Theories,” (1925) on his poetic practice in “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” (1922), his treatise applies equally well to *The Bridge*, when Crane writes, “I found that I was really building a bridge between so-called classic experience and many divergent realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today, which has no formulated mythology yet for classic poetic reference or for religious exploitation” (*CPSLP* 217). He goes on to note, “I feel persuaded that here [in America] are destined to be discovered certain as yet undefined spiritual quantities, perhaps a new hierarchy of faith not to be developed so completely elsewhere” (*CPSLP* 219). Brooklyn Bridge becomes the organizing symbol that enables Crane, as visionary poet, to formulate this mythology, which will organize the chaos of the present, link it to past, and make possible “scientific hopes and achievements of the future.”

Crane chooses to link past and present through myth because he regards history as a sterile exercise that fails to get at the essence of either temporal state. In his 1927 letter to Kahn, Crane explains his reasons for representing the origins of the nation as “The Myth of America”:

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11 This passage strongly echoes Eliot’s “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923) in which Eliot explains “the continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” of the mythic method in the following terms: “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, or giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (SP 177). The connection between the two discussions of myth is not surprising, given that for Crane, Eliot was a source of constant vexed inspiration. Crane admired his poetic technique and critical acumen and at the same he decried Eliot’s negativity as both misleading and destructive for modern culture.
It seemed altogether ineffective from the poetic standpoint, to approach this material from the purely chronological historic angle – beginning with, say the landing of *The Mayflower*, continuing with a resumé of the Revolution through the conquest of the West, etc. One can get that viewpoint in any history primer. What I am after is an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present. (L 305)

The implied flaws with chronological history are that it cannot account for the simultaneity of the past with the present, “the continuous and living evidence of the past,” and that it is an account of surfaces, failing to penetrate to “the inmost vital substance.”

Crane’s phrase “organic panorama” suggests that myth has a more vital and intrinsic relation to past and present than chronological history. In an earlier letter to Waldo Frank, Crane also emphasizes the vital nature of myth: “To handle the beautiful skeins of this myth of America – to realize suddenly, as I seem to, how much of the past is living under only slightly altered forms, even in machinery and such-like, is extremely exciting” (L 274). Here, Crane suggests that myth is the narrative through which we access the living past. The “slightly altered forms” presumably mask, but do not change, the fundamental essence of the past, enabling Crane to uncover this essence in the modern world.

For Crane, writing “The Myth of America” is synonymous with writing an epic poem. In “Cape Hatteras,” Crane invokes Whitman as his muse and echoes Virgil’s opening line of *The Aeneid*, “Arms and the man, I sing”:

> Our Mesitersing, thou set breath in steel;
> And it was thou who on the boldest heel
Stood up and flung the span on even wing
Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing! (204-07)

Through a process that Crane never fully elucidates, Whitman has made the myth of Brooklyn Bridge possible, but it still remains for Crane to sing the myth; as the allusions in this passage suggest, Crane packages the myth in epic form. Crane is more direct in identifying the poem’s genre when addressing Otto Kahn. In the same letter in which he calls *The Bridge* “The Myth of America,” Crane states, “I am really writing an epic of the modern consciousness, and indescribably complicated factors have to be resolved and blended” (L 308). This definition echoes Crane description of *The Bridge* as a “mystical synthesis” that will gather up “the initial impulses of ‘our people’” as well as transfigure history, fact, and location. Mystical synthesis, myth, and epic are for Crane synonyms for the project of revitalizing modern culture through poetry.

Indeed, Crane sees this project as articulating a latent positive energy in the modern world. He tells Waldo Frank in 1923, “It is a consciousness of something more than stylistic questions and ‘taste,’ it is vision, and a vision alone that not only America needs, but the whole world. We are not sure where this will lead, but after the complete renunciation symbolised in *The Wasteland* [sic] and, though less, in *Ulysses* we have sensed some new vitality” (L 127). Later, Crane would say of *The Bridge*, “The poem as a whole is, I think, an affirmation of experience, and to that extent is “positive” rather than “negative” in the sense that *The Waste Land* is negative” (L 351). This statement implies that the modern world contains within it the potential for vitality. Crane will not turn away from modernity in despair as he suggests Eliot has done in *The Waste Land*.12

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12 In an earlier letter, Crane criticizes Eliot for his negativity: “Eliot and others have announced that happiness and beauty dwell only in memory” (L 117).
Instead, the epic will unlock the potential of modernity by providing a symbol (the Brooklyn Bridge) that will unify “divergent realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today” and provide a myth that will reinforce its readers’ spiritual faith in America by uncovering the living past contained within the present. The “epic of the modern consciousness” will link the collective awareness of the present to vital and affirming past through the power of myth.

By packaging myth in the form of an epic, Crane very self-consciously seeks to identify his poem as a major cultural event. The epic nature of *The Bridge* becomes explicit when Crane asks Otto Kahn for additional funds so that he can complete *The Bridge* by spring while residing in Mexico or Mallorca:

I am still assured of a definite inheritance, previously mentioned in my first letter to you; and if you care to consider advancing me say 800 or 1,000 dollars, on the same basis of insurance security as your previous assistance I should be glad to come into New York and talk it over. There is no monetary standard of evaluation for works of art, I know, but I cannot help feeling that a great poem may well be worth at least the expenditure necessary for merely the scenery and costumes of many a flashy and ephemeral play, or for a motor car. *The Aeneid* was not written in two years – nor in four, and in more than one sense I feel justified in comparing the historic and cultural scope of *The Bridge* to this great work. It is at least a symphony with an epic theme, and a work of considerable profundity and inspiration. (L 309)

Here, the epic quality of the poem functions to establish the artistic merit of his work and thus reassure Kahn of the validity of bestowing money on the project. Though Crane is
not entirely comfortable calling his work an epic (his description of the poem as at least a symphony with epic themes allows for alternate classification), he still wants the association between The Bridge and the epic tradition. Crane clearly assumes Kahn will see the completion of an epic as an achievement far superior to expensive forms of popular entertainment (the flashy and ephemeral play). By declaring his poem to be both myth and epic, Crane seeks to generate high expectations and high seriousness in the reception of The Bridge with the reading public.

Ironically, these high expectations were easier to generate than critical acclaim in Crane’s contemporary readership. Two of his more influential contemporaries, Yvor Winters and Allan Tate (key figures in the founding of New Criticism), understood his intentions perfectly well, but concluded that he had failed to live up to them. Winters judges The Bridge a failure due to Crane’s inability to meet the formal requirements of the epic genre: “The book cannot be called an epic, in spite of its endeavor to create and embody a national myth, because it has no narrative framework and so lacks the formal unity of an epic. It is not didactic, because there is no logical exposition of ideas; neither Homer nor Dante will supply a standard of comparison” (153). Winters then faults the concreteness of Crane’s vision, noting, “The ‘destiny’ of a nation is hard to get at in the abstract, since it is a vague generality, like ‘the French temperament’ or ‘the average American’” (157). Similarly, Tate identifies Crane’s subject matter as “The Greatness of

13 This comparison between The Bridge and The Aeneid reinforces the cultural work of Crane’s poem as epic. The Aeneid, out of all the canonical epics, is most explicitly concerned with the fusion of individual and national destinies and the assertion of positive national values. In fact, Virgil’s origin narrative of Rome establishes the state as a divinely sanctified entity and reveals, to an audience shaken by the uncertainty of recent civil wars, the inevitably and immortality of the Roman Empire. The Aeneid thus provides a myth that will revitalize the civic faith of Virgil’s contemporary readers.
14 It is important to note that Crane’s invocations to Whitman as a guiding muse did not endear The Bridge with Winters and Tate, who both shared a strong anti-Whitman sentiment. James E. Miller Jr. goes so far as to declare that “Whitman’s appearance in ‘Cape Hatteras’ as a kind of Virgil-guide to Crane-as-Dante was to prove the poem’s critical undoing” (169).
America, which is capable of elucidation neither on the logical plane nor in terms of a generally known idea of America” (231). On the subject of myth, Tate is even harsher in his evaluation than Winters, whose comments indicate that Crane fails in the execution of producing a national myth. Tate comments that even the intent to create a national myth is misguided:

> If anthropology has helped to destroy the credibility of myths, it has shown us how they rise: their growth is mysterious from the people as a whole. It is probable that no one man ever put myth into history …. Crane was a myth-maker, and in an age favorable to myths he would have written a mythical poem in the act of writing an historical one. (232)

Both Winters and Tate praise lyric passages in *The Bridge*, but the aspects of the poem intrinsic to Crane’s cultural ambitions (its structure as myth and epic) they dismiss as out of step with the cultural milieu and poorly executed.

Winters’ and Tate’s criticisms highlight the dangers for modern poets such as Crane and Pound who are explicit both in identifying the epic status of their poems and in explaining the cultural purpose of their epics. Attempting to write a modern epic raises readers’ expectations and invites comparison to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton. While Pound’s and Crane’s detractors might have been willing to forgive their failure to achieve their impossible ideal of total cultural renaissance instigated by a single text, their expectations with regards to epic poetry led to intense skepticism about questions of poetic vision, coherence, and the ability of any modern poet to speak for an entire culture.\(^{15}\) The difficulty of meeting such reader expectations explains why the other poets in this study, Eliot and Walcott, who were and are consistently savvy about marketing

\(^{15}\) Franco Moretti, for instance, declares the modern (1800 to present) epic to be almost unreadable (4-5).
their work, are more circumspect than Pound and Crane in the manner with which they engage with the idea of epic.

**Eliot and the Absent Epic**

*The Waste Land* might seem out place in a study of how modern poets redefine the epic tradition given that Eliot never identified the poem as an epic and that he denied that the poem possessed the large scale ambitions typically associated with the genre. Eliot dismisses the apparent social commentary embedded in the poem when he states, “Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (Waste Land Facsimile 1).

Similarly, Eliot warns against reading the poem as the voice of his generation: “I dislike the word ‘generation,’ which has been a talisman for the last ten years; when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the ‘disillusionment of a generation’, which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention” (SE 324). Despite such statements, Eliot’s concern with the details of the poem’s publication suggests that he intended the poem to be a major cultural event. *The Waste Land* is the central text within Eliot’s cultural project of the twenties, which was to critique liberal humanism and direct readers to the vague outlines for a vision of a renewed “community of persons.” In his criticism on Dante, Eliot suggests that one sign of this renewed community is the appearance of epic poetry. *The Waste Land* thus acts as a proto-epic,
since Eliot implies that a true epic is impossible in the current fragmented culture. The poem takes on some of the cultural work of the epic, instigating the quest for cultural renewal, but leaving the true epic of the indeterminate future to herald a coherent and vital culture.

Eliot’s laissez-faire attitude towards his poem’s critical fortunes manifested itself only after the poem became a major commercial and critical success. Prior to the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot was involved in a protracted argument with Scofield Thayer, the editor of the *Dial*, over payment for having the poem published. At first, Eliot refused to let the *Dial* have the poem since he felt Thayer’s initial offer of £30, which was twenty-five percent higher than the normal payment for an original submission, denigrated its literary worth (Rainey 285). Eliot informed Thayer:

I also took some days to think about your offer, during which time I happened to hear on good authority that you had paid £100 to George Moore for a short story, and I must confess that this influenced me in declining $150\(^{16}\) for a poem which has taken me a year to write and which is my biggest work. To have it published in a journal was not in any case the way I should choose for bringing it out; and certainly if I am to be offered only thirty to thirty-five pounds for such a publication it is out of the question. (SL 515)

At this stage Eliot saw the poem as much more than “rhythmical grumbling” and certainly did not contradict Pound’s claim that “Eliot’s *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the ‘movement’ of our modern experiment, since 1900” (SL 248). Though it was Pound who, along with John Quinn, succeeded in getting *The Waste Land* published in both book and journal form, and also succeeded in ensuring that Eliot would

\(^{16}\) In 1922 the exchange rate was approximately five US dollars to one pound.
receive the annual Dial Award for contribution to letters, Eliot’s anxiety over payment and publication venue indicates that he was equally invested in having the poem appear in publication as a significant cultural event.17

Eliot’s contemporaries certainly saw *The Waste Land* as aspiring to cultural significance. Despite the relatively short length of the poem and its fragmented style, readers viewed the poem as encompassing an entire culture. In a letter to Eliot prior to the poem’s publication Pound states “The thing now runs from ‘April…’ to ‘shantih’ without a break. That is 19 pages, and let us say the longest poem in the English langwidge” (SLP 234). The review in the *Times Literary Supplement* on October 26, 1922 described the poem as “the complete expression of this poet’s vision of modern life” (Grant 134-35). In the same year, Edmund Wilson, editor of *Vanity Fair*, declared the poetic voice “exists not only upon these two planes [contemporary London and medieval legend], but as if throughout the whole of human history” (Grant 140). Most readers also recognized that the poem critiques modern life. In 1923, Helen McAfee, editor of the *Yale Review*, argued the poem was the response of a man, “facing a world devastated by a war for a peace without ideals” (Grant 183). Even Louis Untermeyer and J.C. Squire, who judged the poem to be an artistic failure, acknowledged that Eliot was attempting an ambitious cultural project intended to highlight the failure of modernity. Untermeyer calls the poem “a pompous parade of erudition,” but immediately notes, “As an echo of contemporary despair, as a picture of dissolution of the breaking-down of the very structures on which life has modeled itself, ‘The Waste Land’ has a definite authenticity” (Grant 151). Squire

17 In fact, despite his rhetoric of disinterestedness, Eliot’s concern with the fate of *The Waste Land* did not diminish with time. In 1952 John Peter’s attempted to publish an article arguing that the poem was a dramatic monologue in which the speaker lamented the death of a male friend. Eliot had his solicitors invoke libel law “to suppress Peter’s interpretation as soon as it appeared” (Froula 279). Eliot never attempted to suppress interpretations of the poem as “an important bit of social criticism.”
declares, “The printing of the book is scarcely worthy of the Hogarth Press” (Grant 192), but also observes, “Mr. Eliot believes the poem to be about the decay of Western civilization” (Grant 191-92).

In much of his writing, Eliot identifies the source of this social decay as the tradition of liberalism and its attendant political structures. In his essay, “Literature and the Modern World” (1935), he attacks liberal democracy as damaging both the person and the community:

When society is conceived as merely a sum of individuals, you get the chaos of liberal democracy. When the person is wholly subordinated to society, you get the dehumanization of fascism or communism. These extremes, however, may meet. For what liberal democracy really recognizes is a sum, not of persons, but of individuals: that is to say, not the variety and uniqueness of persons, but the purely material individuation of the old-fashioned or Democritean atom. And this is a disrespect to the person. For the person is no longer a person if wholly isolated from community; and the community is no longer a community if it does not consist of persons. (20)

*The Waste Land* highlights both this loss of personality and community in contemporary London. The isolation of each person takes on destructive consequences in Eliot’s example of pedestrian commuter traffic over London Bridge. Eliot conflates this image of everyday London morning with Dante’s vision of the gates of Hell, indicating that this particular social isolation among the crowd, where “each man fixed his eyes before his feet” (65), is a form of damnation. Later in the poem, both the typist and the carbuncular
clerk exemplify Eliot’s “purely material individuation” since they are without names or histories.

Such instances in *The Waste Land* contribute to the overall negative portrayal of modern society, prompting critic A. D. Moody to declare, “There is no impulse towards a renewal of human love, and no energy is generated for that. Even less is there a movement toward a human city or civilization” (111). This statement, though accurately reflecting the tone of the encounter between the clerk and the typist, does not account for the elements of quest within the poem, which transform Eliot’s negativity from mere lament to a call for reform. Eliot’s allusions to Arthurian romance are frequently read as ironic, as in Frank Lentricchia’s *Modernist Quartet*, where he observes, “With the aid of Frazer and Weston, *The Waste Land* reads as an ironic quest-romance, filtered through a modernist aesthetic of collage whose effect is to deny narrative progression and change and to insist on a nightmare of temporal simultaneity” (269). Certainly the quest for cultural renewal remains unfulfilled by the end of the poem. In “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot does not present a fulfilled form of the Grail quest. The Perilous chapel contains nothing: “There is an empty chapel, only the wind’s home” (389). Nonetheless, the poem contains signs that though the quest is incomplete, it is not futile. The “damp gust / Bringing rain” (393-94) promises relief from the agonizing dryness of the rocky terrain described at the beginning of the section. The foreignness of the words Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyata suggest not only the absence of giving, sympathizing, and controlling in Eliot’s portrait of modern London, but also that such values do exist in other cultural communities. When Eliot notes in the final stanza, “The fragments I have shored against my ruins” (430), he points to *The Waste Land* as a temporary and unstable
mode of cultural salvage, but he also indicates that the poem *is* an act of cultural salvage, and as such, should be read as the first, halting step towards revitalizing the community.

For Eliot, this renewed sense of community arises in part from a positive collective approach to reading. In some respects, Eliot’s ideas of collective reading parallel his prescribed method for understanding literature as a collective whole. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot asserts that for the reader, the works of a particular artist acquire meaning only in relation to a community of writers: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism” (SP 38). Along with contextualizing the artist among the dead, in “The Function of Criticism” (1923), Eliot argues for the necessity of links between living artists: “Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe an unconscious community. And, as our instincts of tidiness imperatively command us not to leave the haphazard of unconsciousness what we can attempt to do consciously, we are forced to conclude that what happens unconsciously we could bring about, and form into a purpose, if we made a conscious attempt” (SP 68-9). This community of living artists is of course different in kind from the pantheon of dead writers that constitute tradition. Both of Eliot’s essays suggest, however, the necessity of transcending isolation. Artists should not be *perceived* in isolation and living artists should not pursue their cultural purposes in isolation, but instead as a community. The general pattern of Eliot’s criticism would suggest that this conscious community of artists
requires a conscious community of readers. By emphasizing ideas of the community in conjunction with reading and writing, Eliot invites readers to perceive themselves as a part of a larger community. According to Eliot, personhood, as opposed to the material individuation of liberal democracy, results from submission to a tradition. The community of readers implied in these essays anticipates “the community of Christians” that Eliot envisions in Idea of a Christian Society. Both groups help shape culture by acting with the force of a focused group within a larger community, bringing their concentrated intellect to bear on cultural problems.

According to Frank Lentricchia the footnotes at the end of The Waste Land are “Eliot’s tacit admission that he would need to introduce and train his readers in his curriculum of cultural literacy in order to make them ready to grasp his diagnosis of cultural disease” (Lentricchia 266). But in fact, readers of the poem, from Eliot’s initial reviewers to present day scholars, have had little difficulty in identifying Eliot’s critique of cultural problems. The ambiguity in reading The Waste Land lies in discerning what Eliot expected his readers to do once they had identified the problems of modernity. The

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18 Eliot implies a community of readers with similar interests, a condition that parallels Fredric Jameson’s explanation of seriality: “[A] type of relationship with other people that is neither of an individual face-to-face nature, that which we experience in genuine group actions: indeed, the serial relationship looks at first glance very much like solitude, and our solitude is itself criss-crossed and mined, corroded, by hosts of serial relationships without our knowing it. In seriality, what I happen to be doing, reading a newspaper, waiting for a bus, opening a can, pausing for a red light, is characterized primarily by its identity with the acts of other people in those situations; thus, in such activities the uniqueness of my own experience is undermined by a secret anonymity, a statistical quality. Somehow I feel that I am no longer central, that I am merely doing just what everybody else is doing, that the center of my being is elsewhere, outside me, in other people” (76). What Jameson describes would seem to be the condition Eliot associates with liberal democracy: a dehumanized sum of individuals without personality. But in fact, Eliot’s concept of reading redeems this simultaneous sameness.

19 Leonard Diepeveen argues that this appeal to inclusion in a collective identity is one of Eliot’s strategies in his criticism for shaping his reading public. While publishing in venues that would be read mostly by people with a professional interest in literature, Eliot maintains the fiction that he is writing to and the critiquing the reading habits of a general audience. This misdirection enables his actual readers (the literary professionals) to think of themselves as qualified readers of literature that are separate from the merely literate by virtue of adopting Eliot’s reading strategies (Diepeveen 48-49). This shared sense of elitism serves to reinforce the communal identity.
footnotes are a signal of the pedagogic structure within the poem,20 but Eliot’s “curriculum of cultural literacy” is necessary for envisioning the positive alternative to the social ills of the modern world, not in diagnosing the social ills themselves.

The short answer to the question of what the readers should do after diagnosing social problems is develop a unified sensibility. Eliot articulates one aspect of this sensibility in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921). In the mind of the ideal poet, “experiences are always forming new wholes,” (SP 64) out of the disparate elements of life: the emotional (falling in love), the intellectual (reading Spinoza), and the purely sensory (the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking). In “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923), Eliot suggests that Joyce has provided a model for beginning the process of generating this unified sensibility in our general cultural context. According to Eliot, Joyce’s mythic method in Ulysses offers “a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (SP 177) through its “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (SP 177). Myth and tradition provide two means of healing the sense of disconnection between past and present, a theme I explore in Chapters Two and Three.

In The Waste Land, the negativity of the modern condition defeats the unifying forces of either concept, but their presence still promises potential vitality in the future. The myth of the Fisher King suggests that the landscape clotted with garbage, bones, and rats around the Thames River may one day achieve new growth, especially since Eliot

20 One should not take Eliot’s claims in later life that the footnotes were merely to fill up space at face value. As Michael North observes in the Norton critical edition of the poem, the correspondence of The Dial editors indicates that the footnotes existed well before the poem was being set for publication (North 21).
equates the Thames with patterns of beauty and ceremony in the romance of Elizabeth and Leicester (279-89). These associations with the river anticipate Eliot’s meditation in “What the Thunder Said” on thunder in the Himalayas, the supposed source of the river Ganges. Here, the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* provides the imperative Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata (give, sympathize, control). Invoking the Hindu spiritual tradition does not provide the narrative voice with a resolution to the problems of *The Waste Land*, but it does offer hope that exploring links between myth and tradition (in this case through Hindu religion) will lead to cultural healing.

For Eliot, the unified sensibility and its corresponding vital cultural context manifest themselves in unified epic poetry. In particular, Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* is for Eliot the epic masterpiece and the best example of what can result from a unified culture. Eliot establishes the poem’s epic credentials by underscoring its astonishing scope: “take the *Comedy* as a whole, you can compare it to nothing but the entire dramatic work of Shakespeare … Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third” (SP 227, Eliot’s emphasis). Eliot also praises Dante for his ability to maintain unity of vision even as he articulates the entire scope of human emotion: “the *Divine Comedy* is a complete scale of the depths and heights of human emotion; that the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are to be read as extensions of the ordinarily very limited human range. Every degree of the feeling of humanity, from lowest to highest, has, moreover, an intimate relation to the next above and below, and all fit together according to the logic of sensibility…” (SP 230, Eliot’s emphasis). According to Eliot, this unity stems from the unified cultural context in which Dante writes: “in Dante’s time Europe, with all its dissensions and dirtiness, was mentally more united than
we can now conceive. It is not particularly the Treaty of Versailles that has separated
nation from nation; nationalism was born long before; and the process of disintegration
which for our generation culminates in that treaty began soon after Dante’s time” (SP
207). The unified culture of thirteenth-century Italy also contributes to the accessibility of
Dante’s epic, even to those unskilled in medieval Italian. Eliot’s assessment of Dante’s
comprehensibility also functions as praise of his literary value when we consider Eliot’s
comments on Milton: “His style is not a classic style, in that it is not the elevation of a
common style, by the final touch of genius, to greatness. It is, from the foundation, and in
every particular, a personal style, not based upon common speech, or common prose, or
direct communication of meaning” (SP 267-68). Conversely, Dante achieves classic
status by virtue of his closer ties to the vulgar tongue (Italian instead of Latin) and from
the closer links, in comparison to Milton, between his “personal style” and the culture in
which he lived.

In his essay “What is a Classic?” (1944), Eliot argues that with regard to English
poetry, “since Milton, we have had no great epic poem, though there have been great long
poems” (SP 125). His comments on Dante suggest that an epic poem is only possible in
an era of cultural unity, something that, according to Eliot, has not existed since the
“dissociation of sensibility” set in the seventeenth century.\(^\text{21}\) *The Waste Land* with its
wide-ranging references to myth and history anticipates the epic. Additionally, Eliot
embeds the poem with quest motifs that conform to the epic pattern. While Eliot’s praise
of Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* in the footnotes of *The Waste Land* has led to

\(^{21}\) In “The Metaphysical Poets” Eliot criticizes Milton for disregarding the soul even while he displays
mastery of language (SP 66). We can infer that Milton was still able to write an epic since though he lacked
Donne’s unified sensibility, he lived in an era in which the dissociation of sensibility had not set in as
deply as it would in future centuries.
the widespread assumption that the quest motif in the poem links it to the genre of romance, I would argue that the quest in *The Waste Land* should in fact be identified with the epic genre. The wasteland of the poem is not a landscape of the supernatural or the fantastic. Instead, the reader confronts the debris of ordinary life made uncanny by the fact that all objects seem devoid of value, linking them to the pervasive mood of decay and sterility in the poem. While Eliot alludes to Arthurian romance in the poem, the recurrent images of realist, urban London suggest that the quest in *The Waste Land* fits the pattern from the epic genre of investing the familiar cultural setting with new energy. Despite these links to the genre, for Eliot, the culture from which *The Waste Land* arises is too fragmented for the poem to be a *true* epic. In his literary essays, Eliot implicitly redefines the epic as a poem that is only possible within a unified culture. *The Waste Land* is a proto-epic that anticipates the future of cultural unity. In a world of cultural fragmentation, Eliot’s poem is the “longest poem in the English langwidge” currently possible, but if we model our reading according to Eliot’s essays and *The Waste Land*, Eliot implies that our culture will be capable of producing a true modern epic to rival *The Divine Comedy*.

**Walcott and the Intimate Epic**

In a note on the screenplay to his television show *Hart Crane*, Walcott writes, “An epic succeeds in proportion to its impossibility. All epics fail from the epic poetry of Virgil and *The Aeneid*, etc. *The Cantos*, but the immensity of the attempt is what makes the epic succeed. *The Bridge* doesn’t fail in scope, it fails in symmetry (Perhaps) but mimetically it is what Crane saw: a broken arc … an unfinished arc, but the apex of the
arc is achieved” (Hart Crane 1-2). Walcott articulates the nature of this impossible ambition in the screenplay itself, when he observes, “Like Blake, Crane conceived of the poet as revolutionary whose task was not canonizing the self, but challenging and condemning the faulty values of established society that are frequently rationalized as immutable laws, when in fact they are expedient social arrangements. The poet articulates a new social idea that might bring a more human and reasonable order into being” (26). Crane’s ambition, and by implication that of any epic poet, is nothing less than a reconstruction of the values of established society. The key phrase in Walcott’s quotation is “established society.” The epic writer desires not simply to be heard by an individual, but by the collective citizenry. For Pound, Crane, and Eliot, this wish to generate mainstream cultural impact motivates their efforts to wrestle the genre conventions of the epic into a new form. The process of writing the modern becomes the “impossible” task of yoking the acceptable traditional elements of the genre (moral authority, total vision, grandeur, and beauty) with new elements pertinent to the problems to modernity. The struggle with the imitatio and aemulatio aspects of epic writing becomes a process of redefinition for these modern epic poets. Pound uses the idea of a “poem including history” to argue that the epic is also a poem including economics. Crane argues the epic is the myth that redeems modernity. Eliot indicates that epic is the product of a unified and vital culture. In these three different, but equally ambitious, visions of the genre, we can see why Walcott argues for evaluating the success of the epic according to “the immensity of the attempt;” none of these ambitions are likely to be realized. In fact, Walcott denies the epic status of his poem in part to avoid this appearance of doomed ambition.
Despite the “impossibility” of the epic, *Omeros* incorporates innovations from its modernist predecessors in the genre. Walcott’s poem is deeply concerned with the intertwined economic and cultural exploitation of the tourist industry in the Caribbean. Walcott employs myth as a necessary component of cultural healing, and his vision of vital culture emphasizes a hard-won coherence over fragmentation. More importantly, however, *Omeros* is informed by the same strategies to redefine the genre with which Pound, Crane, and Eliot engage. As noted earlier, Walcott is a savvy marketer of his work and his status within the canonical hierarchies of English literature. He chooses to follow Eliot’s circumspect approach to linking his own work with the idea of epic rather than declaring explicitly his epic ambition in the manner of Pound and Crane. Additionally, Walcott follows the example of Pound, Crane, and Eliot in using commentary outside the text (essays and interviews in Walcott’s case) to shape the reader reception of his work. Walcott breaks from his modernist predecessors by incorporating self-critique into *Omeros* as a strategy for deflecting accusations of vanity and by dramatizing the tension between the epic writer and the tradition of the genre.

As with the poems discussed so far, *Omeros* is deeply connected to the epic tradition. Walcott names his characters after the principal figures in *The Iliad* and makes several allusions to *The Odyssey*. He also invokes Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, structuring the poem in a loose terza rima and embedding a dream narrative in which the figure of Omeros appears and guides Walcott the narrator through the hellish interior of La Soufrière, St. Lucia’s active volcano, in which he witnesses various betrayers of the island and false poets drowning in lava. Omeros then guides him to safety, leaving Walcott in the morning light to reflect on the lessons learned.
Given these obvious connections to the epic tradition, readers and critics have found Walcott’s denials of the epic status of his poem something of a critical conundrum. While Walcott’s declaration in a 1997 lecture “Reflections on Omeros” that “nobody looks at the point where my book pivots on itself and accuses itself of vanity, of the vanity of poetry, of the vanity of the narrator” (233) is hardly accurate, it would be fair to say that many readers are uncertain about the value of that renunciation. The point occurs near the end of the poem, when Walcott, contemplating the manner in which he has represented Helen through myth and allusion, asks,

Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,

swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,

as fresh as the sea wind? Why make the smoke a door? (271)

Ironically, Walcott reinforces this point with an allusion to Dante’s Paradiso, asking, “when would I enter the light beyond metaphor?” (271)22 and then introduces the figure of Omeros in the wake of this moment of self-criticism. The difficulty of this situation can be summed up in Paul Breslin’s question: “Why does [Omeros] lavish so much tortured ingenuity, so much grandiose rhetoric, on analogies it ultimately condemns as pointless or even pernicious?” (244).23

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22 In “Reflections on Omeros” Walcott observes, “When you get to Dante, to the Paradiso, the poet is saying that this is a world without shadows, a timeless world – because shadows regulate time … In the last few cantos of the Paradiso, however, you come to a place in where there is light: light without heat, light without shadows, a steady radiance that consumes. But this consumption in not the devouring heat of, say, the sun but of a light that is, as Dante writes about it, beyond art. To get beyond is the ideal of the artist, for anonymity is there” (234, Walcott’s emphasis).

23 Gregson Davis reads Walcott’s refutation of epic allusion so late in the work as a strategy of recusatio, “allowing him to have his cake and eat it too by an oblique denigration of a pseudo-historian’s use of Homeric names as a stratagem of praise without any apparent consciousness that the epicizing of St. Lucia and the ennobling of an actual maid are inherently specious” (327).
When Walcott denies the epic status of his own poem, he defines the genre in imperialist terms and links it to the dangers of commodifying the Caribbean, a concern that preoccupies Walcott’s narrative persona at various points in *Omeros*. In order to invoke the grandeur of the epic tradition without its disturbing imperialist associations, Walcott follows the model of James Joyce and *redefines* the epic as a domestic and intimate work. Ironically, Walcott authorizes this new definition of epic through his encounter with the figure of Omeros. By constructing a dialogue between himself and Omeros, Walcott makes explicit the implicit tension between *imitatio* and *aemulatio* that runs through the modern epics of Pound, Crane, and Eliot.

Walcott denies *Omeros’* epic status in part to avoid the associations between the genre and artistic vanity. In a 1990 interview he observes, “One reason I don’t like talking about an epic is that I think it is wrong to try to ennoble people” (Hamner 397). In “Reflections on *Omeros*,” Walcott elaborates on this statement, asserting that by attempting to dignify Helen by comparing her to Helen of Troy, the two characters who make this comparison are unintentionally adopting racist attitudes. One of these characters is Dennis Plunkett, the retired Sergeant-Major, British expatriate who wants to make Helen a symbol for the island’s place in imperial history. The other is Walcott’s narrative self, who tries to shape his poem around the analogy. Walcott observes that both characters are inadvertently telling the woman the following:

“Look, you know, don’t be bothered about being Black’ (which is presumptuous and an oblique insult); ‘you mustn’t worry about being Black, you know – you really are as good as.’ Now, however well-meant that is, in saying – as is often said to the Black person in this country – ‘You mustn’t worry about being Black,’
there is a presumption that the Black person should be worried about it, but should ignore it” (Reflections 233, his emphasis).

These comments indicate that, for Walcott, identifying his poem as epic would elevate himself to the position in which he would be able to validate the Caribbean people as being as good as Europeans.

Ironically, Walcott incorporates a self-critique of this artistic arrogance through a familiar epic topos. Within the narrative of Omeros, the Walcott persona ponders whether his artistic gaze may have become indistinguishable from that of the tourist, arising from a similar desire to commodify the island. During the taxi ride to his hotel, the narrator reflects that by representing the rural conditions of island life in aesthetic terms he fetishizes an impoverished existence and blurs the boundary between his identity as an artist and a tourist:

Didn’t I want the poor
to stay in the same light so that I could transfix
them in amber, the afterglow of an empire,

preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks
to that blue bus-stop? (227).

Walcott returns to this question during his dream in which the figure of Omeros leads him into the pit of volcano/ Inferno. In the manner of Virgil, Omeros guides Walcott along a treacherous path in which he is in constant danger of slipping into the lava containing the poets who take pride in their work while only seeing the “surfaces in nature and men”
(293). At the moment that Walcott thinks he has escaped, an ice-covered figure pulls him into the pit and declares,

You tried to render

their lives as you could, but that is never enough;

now in the sulphur’s stench ask yourself this question,

whether a love of poverty helped you

to use other eyes, like those of that sightless stone? (294)

At this point, Walcott awakes from his dream to stare at the bust of Homer that inspired the vision. In linking Walcott’s poetic vision to the eyes of the “sightless stone” on the bust of Homer, the damned poet suggests Walcott’s love of poverty enables his use of Homeric allusions. Walcott displaces his self-doubts to this Dantean figure, creating an accuser who can question whether artistic vanity, from which all the damned suffer in Walcott’s vision of Hell, in conjunction with Walcott’s cosmopolitan status, has led him to view the island with a distant sense of superiority.

By ostensibly refusing to adopt the bardic voice, Walcott distinguishes his understanding of the epic from that of Pound and Crane. While their definitions of the epic, as the “poem including history” and the poem as myth of the modern age, seek to authorize their role as cultural spokespersons, Walcott returns repeatedly in interviews to the importance of not speaking for others. According to Walcott, Omeros may have affinities with the epic tradition, but since the poem does not presume to speak for others, it cannot be labeled as such: “It has elements of epic. It has widths. It has a variety of subjects, and — I suppose — you can say it has heroes, in a way. But there is not a sort of
label outside that says: I will now undertake to — you know — to justify, or condemn, or redeem history” (Sampietro). For Walcott, the classical epic tradition of Homer and Virgil presumes the right to speak for a culture, and consequently the bardic poet envisions a future destiny for his tribe (Sampietro). It also celebrates the militaristic elements of culture, providing further motivation for Walcott to avoid the label “epic”:

“But ‘epic’ makes people think of great wars and great warriors. That isn’t the Homer I was thinking of; I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas” (Hamner 396).

According to Walcott, neither this sense of destiny, nor the veneration of war, can be constructive in the twentieth century because they have been the driving forces behind the ideology of Fascism. In fact, Walcott extends this critique of epic intentions to any art linked to political power, telling David Montenegro that a poet cannot adopt a committed political position without weakening his art:

One can then move into being a bard, spokesman, martyr, even coward as a role.

And all of these are roles offered by the regime, by the exterior regime, and the poet can be tempted, without knowing that he has been tempted, to become any one of those. I think a lot of great poets at some point move into that kind of high flatulence in which they may be believing at the time that they are absolutely necessary. (Montenegro 209, his emphasis)

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24 Walcott is always contemptuous of uncritical attempts to write history, noting “History makes similes of people, but these people [St. Lucians] are their own nouns” (Hamner 397).

25 I think that the presumption of that, on the part of a Virgil, or a Homer, or anyone speaking on behalf of a culture, on behalf of a race, or on behalf of a civilization — even Dante, except in a religious sense — is someone who has an idea of a future, of a direction. And that is, in a way, linked with power — the idea of the bard of the race, the bard of a culture — Virgil and Augustus — or something prophetic. A gleeman, or someone who knows the chants of the tribe. Or the Bible — or whatever. That is associated with power. In the sense that there’s destiny. A sense of destiny. But I think that the sense of destiny, in the 20th century, is very dangerous. Because the sense or destiny exists in Nazism, in Fascism (Sampietro).
For Walcott, the closest thing to a politically responsible epic is *Leaves of Grass* because though Whitman creates epic scope he eschews narrative poetry to avoid explicitly pronouncing the American destiny: “But he doesn’t do what we know to be epic, in terms of a narrator propelling — in sequence — the events that are related to the destiny of the tribe. Whitman is a *democratic* poet — I think” (Sampietro). By identifying the epic poet as a spokesperson for a tribe, observing the potential fascist impulses in the concept of destiny, and associating epic poetry with warfare, Walcott suggests that imperialist ideology shapes the genre. While this potential aspect of epic writing does not seem to concern Pound or Crane, for Walcott, the postcolonial poet, such an association is an anathema.

By steadfastly refusing to accept the identity of epic for *Omeros*, Walcott brings us back to the question Breslin and other readers have raised: Why devote so much energy and space to Homeric analogies and manipulation of epic topoi if the poem is not an epic? Despite protestations to the contrary, Walcott’s poetic practice in *Omeros* redefines the idea of epic to suit his cultural purposes. His repeated denials of the poem’s epic status function to separate the poem from the imperialist elements of the epic tradition, but Walcott does not want to dissociate *Omeros* from all epic qualities. The

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26 In “Reflections on *Omeros*” Walcott changes his position and associates Whitman’s writing with the “municipal responsibility” of the Virgilian epic: “That’s manifest destiny. In a sense, it’s even there in Whitman, as the future of America, et cetera, et cetera. Not explicitly, not in terms of political conquest, although he doesn’t have a lot about the Indians, does Mr. Whitman. You have to leave that part of the story out” (243).

27 Walcott hints at the imperialism inherent in the genre when he notes in “Reflections on *Omeros*,” “a particular epic, any epic, has a kind of political destiny – conspicuously in an epic like *Idylls of the King*, in which Tennyson is saying, now listen, you people have been as great as some of those Roman guys, and here’s what I’m doing to prove it. Then he goes on to use Arthurian legend to elevate the myth into great poetry. That’s a kind of onerous responsibility, an almost municipal responsibility, rather than a source of inspiration. Or take Virgil’s epic, where you get the founding of Rome in terms of ‘Aeneas does this, and you Romans, x or y’” (243).

28 Almost inadvertently, he ends up acknowledging the heroism of his character, the fisherman Achille, in epic terms: “So in relation to *Omeros*, you couldn’t say that I’ve written an epic on this guy, Achille, who
clue to Walcott’s process of redefining the genre comes in one of his denials of the epic status of the poem: “Then there was the idea of my undertaking something they call epic, which I don’t call an epic; I call it a very intimate work” (Reflections 240). Omeros redefines the epic to incorporate elements of intimacy and domesticity into the genre’s characteristics.

While intimacy may not be a prevalent feature of the epic, this quality is not antithetical to all epic poems. Walcott implies that The Odyssey possesses a quality of intimacy when he discusses the scale of the poem:

It’s not on the scale of the twentieth-century epic, which has more to do with size than spiritual width. To me, the Odyssey is not an epic in that sense; the Odyssey is a very domestic poem. It is a very small poem in idea. It’s simply, obviously, the story of a man having a hard time getting home. (Reflections 230)

Walcott does not deny the heroic status of Odysseus so much as he subsumes the more exotic elements of his heroic actions to this domestic narrative. Similarly, even when Walcott acknowledges the presence of heroism in Omeros he insists that it is “the day-to-day heroism” (Sampietro) of life in the Caribbean. Taken together, these comments suggest that Omeros fuses the idea of domestic heroism and the quality of intimacy into the epic form, which can capture “the whole experience of the people of the Caribbean” (Hamner 396). This strategy aligns Omeros with Joyce’s Ulysses, which acts as a model for the intimate and domestic epic.

In turning to Joyce, Walcott in fact adheres to some key elements in Eliot’s poetics, notably his concepts of the “mythic method” and of simultaneous tradition. For
Eliot, Joyce is the pioneer whose juxatpositions of “contemporaneity and antiquity” have begun the process of “making the modern world possible for art” (SP178) by providing the form that can organize and make meaningful the chaos of contemporary history. Though Walcott critiques his own process of literary allusion late in Omeros, he informs much of his narrative with Homeric analogies. He borrows the names and his love triangle from The Iliad and he rewrites several episodes of the The Odyssey: Circe transforming men into swine (154-55), the questing figure encountering shades of the dead (137), and the crew disobeying the orders of Odysseus (202-03). Joyce provides the model of this concept that is articulated by Eliot. Similarly, Walcott uses Joyce as an example of his version of the simultaneous tradition of art, an idea taken directly from Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In “Reflections on Omeros,” Walcott critiques the tendency to evaluate art according to the supposed chronology of the original version and its subsequent imitations: “If you think of art merely in terms of chronology, you are going to be patronizing to certain cultures. But if you think of art as a simultaneity that is inevitable in terms of certain people, then Joyce is a contemporary of Homer (which Joyce knew)” (Reflections 241). For Walcott, Joyce acts as a mediating figure for incorporating Eliot’s ideas into Omeros. The mythic method provides much of the impetus for the framing devices in the poem, and the simultaneity of art enables Walcott’s conversation with the figure of Omeros, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

29 Why not see Helen as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow, swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door? (271)
The appeal of Joyce for this mediating role results from his dual position as canonical high modernist and colonial writer who has mastered the English literary tradition from a position outside the cultural centre. Walcott’s admiration for Joyce stems in part from a shared sense of triumphing over colonial oppression:

I’ve always felt some kind of intimacy with the Irish poets because one realized that they were also colonials with the same kind of problems that existed in the Caribbean. They were the niggers of Britain. Now, with all that, to have those astounding achievements of genius, whether by Joyce or Yeats or Beckett, illustrated that one could come out of a depressed, deprived, oppressed situation and be defiant and creative at the same time. (Hirsch 59)

Joyce’s colonial background points to an important aspect of his mythic method, which Eliot does not see, but which is crucial to Walcott’s poem. In *Ulysses*, the juxtapositions between “contemporaneity and antiquity” help shape an epic which avoids those imperialist facets of the genre that prompt Walcott’s denials of *Omeros*’ epic status: the great wars and warriors and the patrician assumption to speak for an entire people. Joyce provides Walcott with a model of the anti-imperialist epic.

On a thematic level, *Ulysses* combines domestic and intimate qualities with the “spiritual width” of the epic tradition. The events and motifs from *The Odyssey* that Joyce uses to structure *Ulysses* associate his work with the epic tradition; the presentation of the entire scope of Dublin society within the course of a single day suggests epic breadth. And yet, Leopold Bloom’s wanderings are not part of a conscious quest, and the actions he undergoes are decidedly ordinary, only made extraordinary by their all occurring during a single day: he attends a funeral, goes to the library, argues with racists in a bar,
attends a birth, rescues a drunken intellectual from brawl outside a brothel, takes him home for a mug of cocoa, and arranges for him to give language lessons to their wife all in less than twenty-four hours. While each of these events seem too ordinary to be appropriate for the realm of epic, which usually celebrates some form of exceptional heroism (even if that heroism is not militaristic), the sum of these events is greater than the parts. The seemingly random events of the day coalesce in a moment of friendship. Bloom and Stephen’s wanderings have led to their interaction after several instances in the narrative marked by their almost meeting. For the “Ithaca” chapter Joyce eschews his many parodic styles, and also his stream of consciousness format, in favour of a catechistic narrative, which emphasizes both the ritualistic and the sacred elements of the interaction between Stephen and Bloom. By sharing a cup of cocoa and making plans for further meetings, they form the embryonic beginnings of a friendship. Having presented the movement of these two characters within the continually shifting nexus of Dublin society, Joyce makes the reader aware of how many small, seemingly random, events had to align in the appropriate sequence in order for Bloom and Stephen to share a moment of potential friendship, a moment that holds the promise of alleviating the different forms of isolation from which both characters suffer. By presenting the minutia of daily interaction in such detail, Joyce suggests that the extraordinariness of ordinary encounters results from their potential to be life-altering. Though the characters are not consciously aware of questing for this encounter, the structure of *Ulysses* represents it as fulfilling an epic quest. *Ulysses* celebrates the possibility of the transcendent in small encounters that make up the quotidian. Walcott alludes to Joyce’s transformation of the epic genre when he notes, “*Ulysses* is an epic because it breathes. It’s an urban epic, which is remarkable in a
small city. It’s a wonderful epic in the sense that the subject is lyrical and not heroic. The
subject is a matter of a reflective man, not a man of action, but a sort of wandering Jew.
That’s the width of that epic, that Bloom is the wandering Jew” (White 161).

Walcott follows Joyce’s example by emphasizing the potential wonder resident in
small moments of daily existence in Omeros. He experiences transcendence in the
ordinary morning when he awakes from his journey through Hell. The rich metaphoric
language of this passage represents the morning in terms of attaining religious grace:30

In the blessed space

It was so quiet that I could hear the splutter

Philoctete made with his ablutions, and that deep “Ah!”

for the New Year’s benediction. Then Philoctete

waved “Morning” to me from far, and I waved back;

we shared the one wound, the same cure. I felt the wet
sand under my soles, and the beach close like a book

behind me with every footmark. The morning’s gift

was enough, but holier than that was the crab’s lift-
ed pincer with its pen like the sea-dipping swift. (295)

30 According to Walcott, the very act of representing experience in poetry is to recognize within that
experience certain divine elements: “I think a poem is a commemorative act, and an act of gratitude. It may
be an act of bewilderment, too. But it’s also that. I think the greatest poetry is beyond the idea of mortality.
I think it’s beyond the idea of the ephemeral. Certainly, it’s beyond the idea of the writer’s own life. So
that, by its very nature, because it is rhythmic, it is incantatory. And because it is incantatory, it is
celebratory. And what does it celebrate? It may celebrate mystery. It may celebrate bewilderment, even.
But, ultimately, what it does celebrate is astonishment, I think — however quietly. I think it celebrates
astonishment” (Sampietro).
This moment of transcendence takes place on a quiet beach with only Philoctete present (and far enough away that he must wave to greet Walcott). As with the shared, late-night drink in *Ulysses*, which Joyce represents as potentially life-altering, the conditions of Walcott’s transcendence are intimate and part of his daily routine. Though morning on the beach carries the sublime associations of sea and sky, Walcott also links it to the outhouse, the angry roosters, and the odour of nets and fish-guts that are part of the daily routine for Achille, Hector, and Philoctete (8-9). Both the sublime elements of the sea, which “drenched every survivor with blessing” (296), and the mundane smells and sounds of the beach constitute the characters’ daily routine. This dual aspect of the everyday provides grace and fulfillment in *Omeros* and frees Walcott from the artistic vanity that torments him in his dream journey through the volcano.

Walcott acknowledges that his ability to praise the more mundane details of a St. Lucian morning in a humble manner arises from the purging effect of his encounter with Omeros. He states, “My light was clear. It defined the fallen schism / of a starfish, its asterisk printed on sand, / its homage to Omeros my exorcism” (294). Though the outcome is positive, Walcott’s choice of the word exorcism highlights the sense of struggle in his dream vision, and in fact, the meeting between the two poets dramatizes Walcott’s agon with the epic tradition. At the beginning of their encounter, Walcott establishes his distance from Omeros, noting with regard to *The Odyssey*, “I never read it … Not all the way through” and “The gods and the demi-gods aren’t much use to us”

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31 This awareness of astonishment is not to be mistaken for the perception of something extraordinary, because, as Walcott notes in “Reflections on *Omeros,*” “the astonishment exists in the profound appreciation of the quotidian: “The conceit behind history, the conceit behind art, its presumption to be able to elevate the ordinary, the common, and therefore the phenomenon. That’s the sequence: the ordinary and therefore the phenomenon, not the phenomenon and therefore its cause. But that’s what life is really like – and I think the best poets say that. It’s there in Wordsworth; it’s there in everyone: it is the ordinariness, not the astonishment, that is the miracle, that is worth recalling” (233).
This assertion prompts Omeros to tell Walcott, “Forget the gods … and read the rest” (283). Walcott then appears to contradict himself by positioning himself as the dutiful apprentice:

I have always heard

your voice in that sea, master, it was the same song

of the desert shaman, and when I was a boy

your name was as wide as a bay, as I walked along

the curled brow of the surf; the word ‘Homer’ meant joy,

joy in battle, in work, in death, then the numbered peace

of the surf’s benedictions, it rose in the cedars,

in the laurier-cannelles, pages of rustling trees.

Master I was the freshest of all your readers. (283)

Walcott is not contradicting himself so much as he is dividing the Homeric legacy into two parts: the one associated with the gods and bombast, and other associated with a joy intrinsic to the natural world. In “Reflections on Omeros,” Walcott notes that this duality in Homer manifests itself in the style of The Odyssey:

I myself have felt that you get a certain distance in the Odyssey, and you say to yourself, something is wrong here. In the second part of the Odyssey, the “prose” takes over, and this is not even recited; it is continuous, it doesn’t end on a bar. And the rhythm of thudding on a beat – if you’re thudding on a beat, don’t go to a conjunction because that’s not a stress. Perhaps you could say, oh well, that’s just
the translation, but I feel a distinct difference in style between, say, the naturalistic
description of the sea or the rocks or whatever in the first part and those in the
second part of the *Odyssey*. (235)

Walcott’s comments suggest that he views *The Odyssey* as ultimately a flawed example
of the “domestic poem.” In constructing his own poem as an “intimate” epic, Walcott
implies that *Omeros* has achieved the *aemulatio* that Farrell discusses. He has discarded
the imperialist elements of Homer that interfere with the sense of Homer as the voice of
the sea and extended the range of intimacy to an entire epic.

Ironically, by telling Walcott to forget the gods, Omeros authorizes Walcott’s
divergence from the epic tradition. Of course Omeros is Walcott’s own creation, but
his very presence in the poem highlights the fact, that despite Walcott’s emphasis on
the *uniqueness* of his own epic (which in interviews takes the form of denying that
*Omeros* is an epic), he still needs to align his poem with the canonical status of the
epic tradition. By exploring this tension through a conversation between characters,
Walcott creates a mini-allegory about the ambivalent relation between the modern
epic and its predecessors. Tradition empowers speech as when Omeros assists
Walcott to praise the island. Though Walcott is filled with love for his homeland, his
“tongue was a stone” (286) and he can only continue the poem Omeros begins. At the
same time, Walcott dismisses the Homeric mythology as irrelevant, highlighting the
necessity of reshaping tradition to suits the needs of a particular milieu. In a similar
manner, Walcott incorporates into *Omeros* the modifications that Pound, Crane, and
Eliot bring to the epic tradition. Economics, myth, and cultural unity are central issues
in Walcott’s meditation on Caribbean life and I will return to these themes in
subsequent chapters. *The Cantos, The Bridge*, and *The Waste Land* provide the intertextual dialogue that enables Walcott to articulate these issues in his cultural vision. However, a productive dialogue with these texts can only emerge after struggle. We have already seen hints of this struggle in the fact that Walcott mediates part of his relation to Eliot through the figure of Joyce. To extend Breslin’s apt metaphor, that “Walcott invites various ancestors to the house” and “sets them arguing among themselves,” I would add that he wrestles them at the doorway until they drop some of their cultural baggage. As a postcolonial writer, Walcott is acutely aware of the debilitating effects of cultural hierarchies, something Pound, Crane, and Eliot either take for granted or reinforce to serve their own cultural visions. As Walcott manipulates and redefines the idea of epic to articulate cultural healing while avoiding aggrandizing postures, he also wrestles with the poetics of his modernist predecessors. The rest of this study focuses on the process by which Walcott makes productive use of Pound’s, Crane’s, and Eliot’s poetics while attempting to distance himself from the imperialist assumptions embedded in their versions of indigenization, tradition, and figurative language.
Chapter III – Building a Home with Mythic Methods

In the now famous passage from his review, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923), Eliot argues for the centrality of myth in the production of modernist art: “Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art” (SP 178). While Eliot’s “mythic method” refers to the practice of “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (SP 178), his reference points of psychology, ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* reveal a cultural nexus that encompasses much more than just a juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient. The modernist fascination with myth manifests itself in Pound’s veneration of the Eleusinian mysteries, H.D.’s poems about figures from Greek mythology, and D.H. Lawrence’s understanding of Native-American religion as an intuitive sense of cosmic forces, to name just a few examples. Myth occupies a central role in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Crane’s *The Bridge*. The means by which Eliot and Crane link myth to modernity provide a template for Walcott who both echoes and transforms it in *Omeros*, where myth reinforces the indigenous status of the current St. Lucian community. All three writers suggest that cultural healing requires a sense of harmony and interconnectedness between the individual, community, and their locale. For them, a healthy and positive culture (which I define as the pursuit of customs, intellectual achievements, and artistic developments within a given community, be it national, regional, or municipal) must be indigenous. I use the term indigenous because
of its dual and partially contradictory definitions as that which is “born or produced naturally in a land or region; native or belonging naturally to” (OED my emphasis), and “pertaining to, or intended for the natives” (OED). Interestingly, twentieth-century anthropology and missionary writings have established the verb indigenize (OED), suggesting that things can be made indigenous through conscious effort. Eliot’s, Crane’s, and Walcott’s cultural visions partake of this paradoxical idea of cultivating a natural link to the land. For all three poets, the organic unity between land and people that makes a culture indigenous results from individual and collective effort. Their own contribution to this effort is to deploy various uses of myth in their poetry in order to construct a vision of indigenous culture.

By deploying this strategy, The Waste Land, The Bridge, and Omeros perform a variation on the familiar theme from the epic tradition of the nostos, or return to home. The presentation of this theme varies from Odysseus’s physical return to Ithaca in The Odyssey to Wordsworth’s imaginative return to childhood that begins his epic poem The Prelude. The precursor to the pattern in the modern epic is Virgil’s Aeneid, which deploys the narrative of the nostos with a twist. Aeneas and the Trojans are returning to a home they never knew, but which prophecy assures them was the original home of their ancestors. The narrative of The Aeneid creates a rationale for a war of foreign conquest as a means of establishing an indigenous Roman culture. For Eliot, Crane, and Walcott, indigeneity (the quality of being indigenous), imperialism, and myth are intertwined. The precise definition of myth varies among the three poets, but I use the term broadly to indicate their common interest in experiences involving the natural world that are both spiritual and inexplicable. For all three poets, rediscovering and reconfiguring the
indigenous nature of culture requires exploring non-rational modes of being. The desired result of these experiences is a sense of unity between the natural world, the cultural past, and the present society.

Both Eliot’s and Crane’s constructions of indigeneity are based on imperialist assumptions similar to the ones that underlie the narrative of indigenization in *The Aeneid*. For Eliot, the fragmented myth in *The Waste Land* highlights the need to reconnect culture to locale, a concept that he explicitly develops in his essays. He seeks to efface the imperialist nature of his indigenizing process by arguing that the subordinate position of Ireland, Wales, Scotland as “satellite” cultures of England facilitates a symbiotic relationship. In contrast to Eliot’s relatively restrained version of colonialism, Crane’s poem celebrates the extinction of Native-American culture. He represents his narrator as both the lover and rival of mythic Native-American figures in order to configure modern American culture as rooted in the essence of America. This primal encounter between Europeans and Native-Americans in *The Bridge* actually effaces the violence of American race relations.

In contrast to Eliot and Crane, Walcott self-consciously manipulates the imperialist dynamic inherent in retroactively constructing indigenous identity. Because he conceives indigenization as a necessary component of his project of cultural healing, Walcott engages in a similar process to Eliot and Crane: in Walcott’s case, the non-rational mode of being occurs when characters encounter spirits or gods in the landscape. But Walcott is determined not to be complicit in imperialist attitudes and so he foregrounds the repetition of colonial violence in some of these encounters in the hopes that acknowledging this repetition allows for its redemption. Additionally, the power to
become indigenous is not exclusive to particular racial/national identities, but is available to characters in *Omeros* irrespective of race. In sum, I want to suggest that Walcott uses myth in a parallel manner to his use of the idea of epic. He imitates certain elements from the works of Eliot and Crane, but he seeks to transcend the limitations of their constructions that are linked to imperialism.

In focusing on how Walcott’s conception of indigeneity can be illuminated by comparison with Eliot’s and Crane’s versions, I attempt to address a specific need in Walcott criticism articulated by Jahan Ramazani in *The Hybrid Muse* (2001). As part of discussing the theme of wounding in *Omeros*, which centres on the figure of Philoctete, Ramazani explores in nuanced detail the complex cultural genealogy of Philoctete, noting that Walcott forges the character’s identity from Philoctetes of Greek myth, Caliban, Robinson Crusoe, the Fisher King, and African slaves. All of these identities are ones that Walcott also substantially reshapes in his poetry. While discussing how these cultural models interact, Ramazani notes that the traditional postcolonial binary of Eurocentric (bad) versus indigenous (good) is inapplicable to this character (50). This situation leads Ramazani to declare, “We need a more flexible language to describe how a poet like Walcott can put into dialectical interrelation literary and cultural influences that may seem incompatible” (63).¹ What I seek to demonstrate in this chapter is that with regard to indigenization in *Omeros*, we can understand Walcott’s “dialectical interrelation” by linking his poem with modernist texts through the epic tradition of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*.

¹ Ramazani does not ultimately identify or define this “flexible language,” but his chapter on Walcott seems to indicate it will be modeled on the concept of hybridity. This approach certainly makes sense if we approach Walcott’s poetry from a postcolonial perspective, but as I argue in this chapter and indeed throughout this project, if we only approach Walcott through a postcolonial framework, we overlook key aspects of his poetics.
Virgil’s Anxiety about the Indigenous roots of Empire

In his seminal work, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, David Quint provides a concise summary of one of the key ideological ironies in *The Aeneid*. Aeneas’ shield depicts scenes from Roman history including the future battle of Actium between Augustus and Antony, which, Quint notes, transforms the losing side into foreigners:

The construction of an apologetic propaganda for the winning side of Augustus brings into play a whole ideology that transforms the recent history of the civil strife into a war of foreign conquest. There is a fine irony in the fact that epic’s most influential statement of the imperialist project should disguise a reality of internecine conflict. But this irony points precisely to the function of the imperial ideology to which the *Aeneid* resorts: its capacity to project a foreign “otherness” upon the vanquished enemies of Augustus and of a Rome identified exclusively with her new master. (23)

Quint observes that Virgil stamps Antony with the taint of “otherness” by representing him in conjunction with the feminine Cleopatra and her Eastern army, composed of a motley and plentiful conglomerate of races. In the poem’s primary narrative of nation formation, Virgil’s play on the concepts of native and foreigner reverses the above pattern. According to Virgil, the origins of Rome, and particularly the family line leading to Augustus, can be traced to the Trojans, a race who should be equated historically with the Asian side of the Mediterranean, and thus the very foreign races against whom Augustus fights. Virgil seems aware of this irony since the *Aeneid* invokes the forces of myth, in this case encounters with various deities, to sanction transforming the foreign
Trojans into the indigenous people of Italy. Although *The Aeneid* offers indictments of the Trojans’ foreignness, Virgil undermines these indictments with divine pronouncements by Apollo in Book three, Tiberinus the river god in Book eight, and Jupiter in Book twelve, all of which link the Trojans to Italian soil. This pattern suggests a self-conscious attempt to mask what is actually an imperial conquest as the reestablishment of the Trojans’ indigenous home.

Before the Trojans arrive in Italy, Virgil establishes the importance of a harmonious connection between settlement and locale through the encounter between Aeneas and the spirit of Polydorus. At the opening of Book Three of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas arrives on the coast of Thrace and plans to build a colony. In the process of tearing up saplings to construct an altar, he discovers that the roots of the trees drip blood. He hears a voice from the ground informing him that the spirit of Polydorus, an ambassador from Troy, is now part of the earth as a result of his murder by the Thracian king. The saplings Aeneas pulls up are in fact the shafts of spears that have become rooted to the ground. Every time Aeneas tears one from the ground, he rends the body of Polydorus. Full of dread at the thought of remaining on soil, “with guesthood so profaned” (3.87), Aeneas and the Trojans depart. Polydorus has achieved a perverse form of indigenous status: his murder has made him literally part of the earth, but this event prevents the larger Trojan community from achieving indigeneity, since a place where Trojans have been murdered can never be a site of harmony and peace.

The resolution to this problem comes in the form of a prophecy from Apollo, who locates their new homeland by virtue of its link to their ancestry, a bond he emphasizes with familial metaphors:
Tough sons of Dardanus, the self-same land
That bore you from your primal parent stock
Will take you to her fertile breast again.
Look for your mother of old. Aeneas’ house
In her will rule the world’s shores down the years,
Through generations of his children’s children. (3.130-35)

Apollo uses the metaphor of earth as mother to promise the Trojans rebirth: in this case, the mother of the Trojans is Italy, the place in which Dardanus was born. By finding Italy they will return to their mother’s breast and then grow to rule the world. Apollo’s prophecy indicates that their journey home ends when they find the place that welcomes them as a child. This notion of reconnecting with the motherland contrasts sharply with the alienating experience of Polydorus in Thrace. By invoking ideas of nature, growth, and family, which are inherently associated with the image of the mother, Virgil establishes a natural connection between the Trojans and Italy.

Apollo’s prophecy suggests the Trojans are indigenous to Italy before they have even arrived, but on their arrival the Trojans find themselves fighting a local population who regard them as foreign invaders. While Latinus, king of Latium, is interested in marrying his daughter to Aeneas, his wife, Amata, goaded by Juno, accuses him of handing his daughter over to pirates:

These Trojan refugees,
Father, are they to take away Lavinia
In marriage? Have you no pity for your daughter,
None for yourself? No pity for her mother,
Who will be left alone by the faithless man,
The rover, going to sea at the first north wind
With a girl for booty? Was that not the way
The Phrygian shepherd entered Lacedaemon
And carried Helen off to Troy’s far city?
What of your solemn word, your years of love
For your own people, your right hand so often
Given to Turnus, our blood-kin? (7.495-506)

Amata calls Aeneas “faithless” and “rover” and reminds Latinus of the geographic
distance between Italy and Troy, noting that Helen was carried away to “Troy’s far city.”
These points emphasize Aeneas’ “otherness” and stress his opposition to the native
Turnus, who is “blood-kin”² to the Latins. The Fury Allecto makes a similar argument to
Turnus for why he should wage war against the Trojans:

Turnus can you bear to see
So many efforts wasted, spilt like water,
And our own rule made over to the Dardan
Colonists? The king withholds your bride
Withholds the dowry that you fought and bled for. (7.580-85)

In Allecto’s speech, the Trojans are colonists, and, as the pirate imagery in Amata’s
speech also suggests, they will gain rewards that the truly indigenous figure (Turnus)
merits. Significantly, in both cases, Virgil ensures that the accusers who attack the

² Aeneas uses the concept of blood-kin to mitigate his foreignness when approaching the local Arcadians,
enemies of the Latins, for allies. He notes that Dardanus’ mother was Elektra, who was the child of Atlas.
The Arcadians descend from Mercury, who was the child of Maia, who was the daughter of Atlas (8.181-
91). In this case, mythic origins provide a common ancestry when historical circumstances would suggest
otherwise.
Trojans’ foreignness are either irrational or self-interested. Amata has been goaded into madness by Allecto and Allecto is a servant to Juno’s irrational fury. Though Virgil makes clear that their viewpoint will not prevail, the direct articulation of the Trojans’ foreign status suggests his anxiety about the counterintuitive attempt to make the Trojans indigenous to Italy.

In order to legitimize his construction of the indigenous status of the Trojans, Virgil bases it on a series of divine prophecies. The first is Apollo’s declaration that the Trojans must find the homeland of Dardanus in order to establish a new empire. Subsequently, when Aeneas arrives in Italy, he receives a vision from the river god Tiberinus, who tells him:

    you whom Laurentine soil

    And Latin countryside have long awaited,

    Here is your home, your hearth gods, fixed and sure.

    Now is no time to let go, or give way

    To fear at threats of war. (8.51-55)

By asserting that the landscape has been waiting for Aeneas, Tiberinus suggests a bond between the Trojans and Italy that trumps the more rational conception of the Trojans as foreigners. Jupiter presents a slightly different perspective on the Trojan bond to Italy when he tells Juno that though the Trojans are not yet natives of Italy they are destined to become indigenous:

    Ausonian [Latin] folk will keep

    Their father’s language and their way of life,

    And, that being so, their name. The Teucrians [Trojans]
Will mingle and be submerged, incorporated.

Rituals and observances of theirs
I’ll add, but make them Latin, one in speech.

The race to come, mixed with Ausonian blood,
Will outdo men and gods in its devotion. (12.1131-38)

Trojan culture will be grafted on to the indigenous Latin culture, making them part of the Italian valor that Juno requests will be the “the strength / of Rome in after times” (12.1121-22).

*The Aeneid* presents contrary indications regarding the benefit of this grafting for the original Latin population. King Latinus receives a prophecy from Faunus that he should marry his daughter to foreigners since,

Blood so mingled

Lifts our name starward. Children of that stock

Will see all earth turned Latin at their feet,

Governed by them. (7.128-31).

This vision suggests enormous material benefits for the Latins in uniting with the Trojans. As Jane Tylus notes, however, Trojan actions in the final battle suggest Latin culture will remain secondary. They cut down the grove of olive trees sacred to Faunus to ensure they have a clear battle field (12.1036-44). This contempt towards local culture suggests that the Latins, rather than merging as equals with the Trojans, provide Aeneas with a connection to the land so that he can become Italy’s legitimate ruler (Tylus 114). This pattern receives affirmation from Anchises’ prophecy in Elysium, when he foresees that Augustus descends directly from Iulus (Aeneas’ Trojan son) rather than from any of
his children with Lavinia (his Latin bride). Virgil’s ideology represents Augustus as synonymous with Rome. His dominion will be a world empire. Consequently, the promise made to King Latinus that children of mixed foreign and Latin heritage will “see all earth turned Latin at their feet” is somewhat misleading. While these descendants will see (in the sense of witnessing) the world speak Latin, the man who will ultimately rule the Roman world will be of Trojan heritage. In this case, the strength of a local culture assists the demands of empire rather than its own ends. Juno’s plea for the preeminence of Latin roots in Roman culture fully influences the language of the Roman empire, and partially influence the religious practices, but ultimately political control of the empire belongs to the Trojan lineage.

The exchange between Juno and Jupiter suggests that indigenous status is not necessarily a condition of birth. Aeneas’ right to rule Italy is based on divine prophecy, highlighting the fact that indigeneity can be made. In The Aeneid, the authority of the divine eclipses the more rational perception of the Trojans as foreigners. Paradoxically, for Virgil, this appeal to a non-rational basis for indigeneity serves to rationalize how the Trojans are the founding fathers of Rome and its empire. In highly individual ways, the twentieth-century poems The Waste Land, The Bridge, and Omeros develop more explicitly the implicit idea in The Aeneid that indigeneity is a state of mind rather than a genealogical pedigree. For Eliot, Crane, and Walcott, developing an indigenous state of mind is crucial to effecting cultural healing.
Eliot and the Absence of Indigenous Modern Culture

Eliot’s idea about indigenous culture and its necessity in the modern world, like his conception of the epic, is only partly expressed in his poetry. *The Waste Land* laments a lost indigenous culture, anticipating the direction of Eliot’s later cultural writings, such as *The Idea of Christian Society* (1940) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), in which he advocates methods for reinventing this absent indigenous culture. These works propose a method of cultural revitalization that echoes the imperialist ideology presented in *The Aeneid*. In fact, Virgil provides Eliot with a model for one of his cultural ideals: classicism defined by the absence of provinciality. In his essay “What is a Classic?” (1945), Eliot praises Virgil for his complete absence of provinciality (SP 123-24) and defines provincialism as a concept that extends beyond the usual definitions of “wanting in the culture or polish of the capital” and “narrow in thought, in culture, in creed”: “I mean also a distortion of values, the exclusion of some, the exaggeration of others, which springs, not from lack of wide geographical perambulation, but from applying standards acquired within a limited area, to the whole of human experience; which confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent” (SP 129). This desire for a classical form of culture leads Eliot to advocate for an English culture that assimilates “satellite” cultures in order to create a cosmopolitan version of Englishness, in which the national community can enjoy indigenous status without becoming provincial.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923) promote an artistic ideal in which the artist simultaneously recognizes the past and its shaping force on the present. Eliot’s mythic method, set out in the latter essay, offers
a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” by means of manipulating a “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (SP 177). Though Eliot is clear on the results of the mythic method (control, order, significance), he is vague as to how the mythic method achieves these goals. In Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism (1994), Jewel Spears Brooker directly addresses this question and concludes that the mythic method consists of following the anthropological methods in Frazer’s The Golden Bough, in which the author selects an abstract myth which then acts as an interpretive key for moments from the past and present. According to Brooker, the unity that results from the myth, or archetypal pattern, is not preexistent in either the past or present culture, but is an interpretive pattern the artist brings to what are apparently incoherent fragments (120). Brooker points to the need for a unifying reference point in any comparative study, when she notes, “Without the legend of the golden bough, or some other reference point, Frazer could not have shaped and controlled his materials, the immense panorama of futility and superstition that is human history” (117). Brooker’s deliberate echo of Eliot’s phrasing points to the key limitation of her otherwise useful explanation of the mythic method. She replaces “contemporary history” with “human history,” and the two phrases cannot be considered synonymous in Eliot’s thinking. “Tradition and the Individual Talent” makes clear that the past is not automatically a panorama of futility and anarchy. According to Eliot, the artist who develops a proper “historical sense” will write “with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (SP 38). The
past constitutes a preexisting tradition that provides the artist with examples of control, order, and significance. Eliot makes it clear that a new work of art is valuable in so much as it reflects and gives back these qualities to the literary tradition:

> What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (SP 38-39, Eliot’s emphasis)

While Eliot is speaking specifically about the history of art and literature, this passage is relevant to the mythic method and its concerns with a more general concept of history. By equating futility and anarchy with contemporary history, Eliot suggests the prevalence of qualities of order and control in antiquity. By juxtaposing this past with contemporaneity, the artist seeks to give order to the present by fitting small fragments of it to moments from an already unified tradition. The archetypal pattern is not imposed artificially on both past and present, as Brooker suggests, but arises organically from the past and can absorb fragments from the present into its pattern, thus giving some order to what is otherwise a chaotic contemporary world.

In *The Waste Land*, the juxtaposition of contemporaneity and antiquity does not create a harmonious pattern, but rather highlights the degradation of archetypal patterns in the present day. This format starts in “The Burial of the Dead,” in which the reference
to Mylae in the final lines (a victory over Carthage by the expanding Roman empire) by the World War I veteran compares the successful war in ancient times with the psychological damage to the contemporary soldier; his reference to the Punic War is immediately followed by the shell-shocked speech about burying corpses in the garden (70-73). In “A Game of Chess” and “The Fire Sermon,” this pattern of degraded archetypes centres on the motif of romance. The description of the furniture at the opening of “The Game of Chess” alludes to the famous lovers Cleopatra (77) and Dido (92), but the occupant of the room lacks both figures’ charisma and power; instead, she repeatedly asks plaintive questions of her lover and receives no answer. Her lover’s reference to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (125) immediately precedes “that Shakespeherian Rag” (128), again highlighting the contrast between beauty in the past and the degraded present. In “The Fire Sermon,” the typist’s sexual encounter with the carbuncular clerk echoes the rape of Philomel, but the tragedy and its high emotion has been reduced to the banal observation of the typist who reflects, “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (252). This degradation applies not only to characters, but also to the city of London and its famous river. Eliot juxtaposes the Rhine river from Wagner’s *The Twilight of the Gods* and the image of ceremonious flirtation between Elizabeth I and the Earl of Leicester with the modern Thames, which “sweats / Oil and tar” (266-67) and is home to rats who crawl along the banks and rattle the bones of the dead. The continual failure of the present to embody the energy of the past culminates in the religious sterility presented in “What the Thunder Said.” In the modern version of the Grail quest the Perilous chapel is empty: “only the wind’s home” (389). The mythic method in *The Waste Land* does not give shape and significance to contemporary history, but reinforces
its disorder and futility by juxtaposing it with fragments from the past. The poem presents the modern world as a cultural problem that must be solved.  

Eliot’s mythic method would appear to have to little do with actual myth in the sense of communal stories from the past concerning the supernatural. Indeed, the method centres on comparisons between past and present, which do not necessarily include creation stories, interactions between the divine and the human, or other narratives that we would normally classify as mythic material. The term “mythic” does, however, point to the importance of primitivism in Eliot’s cultural thinking. Indeed, the proposed solutions to the cultural problems of *The Waste Land* are closely linked to ideas of “primitive” culture associated with the term “mythic.” As Brooker notes, despite the fact there is nothing intrinsically linking the “mythic method” to stories of magic, mystery, and the divine, Eliot probably coined the phrase because his model, *The Golden Bough*, deals specifically with narratives of magic and the supernatural (114). In Frazer’s work, the adjective “mythic” is synonymous with “primitive.” Myths, according to Frazer, are the narratives that provide justification for uncivilized rituals still practiced in the

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3 David Spurr claims that Eliot’s allusion to ancient fertility rites and vegetation ceremonies does impose meaning on contemporary history: “It does not matter that the meaning imposed is a negative one, that the poet’s commanding view is precisely one of disorder; the redemptive power of myth, its order outside history, remains intact” (271-72). This seems largely tautological: myth gives shape to the anarchy of contemporaneity by asserting its disorder. The purpose of juxtaposing past and present is to suggest the possibility of recovering lost order and significance, rather than simply acting as a formal affirmation of contemporary chaos.

4 In *Culture 1922*, Marc Manganaro argues persuasively that Eliot’s cultural thinking, and particularly his conception of the primitive, borrows from both the evolutionary anthropological theory of culture, associated with Sir James Frazer, and the modernist anthropological theory of culture associated with Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Evolutionary anthropology held that “primitive” cultures had not advanced to the state of civilization present in Europe and therefore carried the pejorative associations of simplicity, backwardness, and savagery. Modernist anthropology refused to classify cultures within a gradation of values (at least officially), asserting that cultures are different not superior or inferior. As Manganaro notes, Eliot’s explicit use of the term “primitive communities” (See Chapter 1 of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* 24) indicates his engagement with evolutionary models of culture, but his association of this “primitive” community with wholeness and integration is anathema to Frazer’s evolutionary thinking (21).
civilized world. Indeed, for Frazer, “primitive” mentality was a latent force in the modern world. By focusing on mythic archetypes in a variety of religious practices, Frazer’s work implied that the mentality behind myth endured even as civilization evolved.

For Eliot, unlike Frazer, “primitive” societies possessed attitudes he felt were missing, but necessary, in the modern world. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940), for example, he suggests that “primitive” society can serve as a model for revitalizing modern culture:

> I mean only that a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God, and that the consequence is an inevitable doom. For a long enough time we have believed in nothing but the values arising in a mechanised, commercialised, urbanised way of life: it would be as well for us to face the permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this planet. And without sentimentalising the life of the savage, we might practise the humility to observe, in some of the societies upon which we look down as primitive or backward, the operation of a social-religious-artistic complex which we should emulate on a higher plane. (62-63)

For Eliot, the admirable aspect of “primitive” culture is its integrated state, both in combining spiritual and environmental devotion and in contrasting the diffuse, highly

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5 When speaking of violent religious practices persisting in the Roman Empire, for example, Frazer declares, “But we cannot suppose that so barbarous a rule as that of the Arician priesthood was deliberately instituted by a league of civilized communities, such as the Latin cities undoubtedly were. It must have been handed down from a time beyond the memory of man, when Italy was still in a far ruder state than any known to us in the historical period” (6).
specialized, set of activities that constitute modern European society. The very characteristics that define society as “modern” threaten self-destruction: “Cultural disintegration may ensue upon cultural specialisation: and it is the most radical disintegration that a society can suffer” (NTDC 26). This celebration of “primitive” integration stems from the popularity of anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl, who argued for the “multipresence” of “primitive thought.” According to David Spurr, in Lévy-Bruhl’s writings, this multipresence “collapses a number of distinctions essential to rational Western thought: between sensible reality and beyond, or the dream; between present and past or future; between the sign and the cause of the event” (268).

In advocating cultural reintegration, Eliot promotes a renewed sense of indigeneity. For Eliot, the nature of one’s indigenous status arises from two intertwined concepts: defining identity through links to a specific geographic locale, and defining identity through a person’s emotional and intellectual relation to the past. In After Strange Gods (1933), Eliot defines the challenge of cultural renewal as the need to discover “what is the best life for us not as a political abstraction, but as a particular people in a particular place; what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire” (19).

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6 “It is obvious that among the more primitive communities the several activities of culture are inextricably interwoven. The Dyak who spends the better part of a season in shaping, carving and painting his barque of the peculiar design required for the annual ritual of head-hunting, is exercising several cultural activities at once – of art and religion, as well as of amphibious warfare” (NTDC 24).


8 Manganaro makes the point that Eliot frequently and deftly uses the premise that “a ‘culture’ [here synonymous with society/tribe/etc.] is essentially something rooted in a soil” (35 Manganaro’s emphasis). Manganaro goes on to note, “This trope, profitably borrowed from Frazer’s renditions of mythic-primitive alliances of earth and tribe, assumes, as the anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson note, ‘solidarity and identity’ do indeed depend upon, work, through, a social life in which on-the-ground ‘contiguity and face to face contact…are paramount’” (35).
The cultural past worth preserving is what Eliot calls “tradition.” For Eliot, the concept of tradition is dependant upon the idea of a particular people in a particular place:

 Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place.’ It involves a good deal which can be called taboo: that this word is used in our time in an exclusively derogatory sense is to me a curiosity of some significance. (ASG 18)

In his later work, *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* (1948), Eliot continues to emphasize the necessity of emotional bonds to place and to blood kin: “It is important that a man should feel himself to be, not merely a citizen of a particular nation, but a citizen of a particular part of his country, with local loyalties. These, like loyalty to class, arise out of loyalty to the family” (NTDC 52). Family helps preserve tradition since it involves: “a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote. Unless this reverence for past and future is cultivated in the home, it can never be more than a verbal convention in the community” (NTDC 44). This emphasis on blood, local custom, and connection to past and future generations functions as an effective model for the indigenous life in which place and tradition are intrinsically bound to individual identity. By linking place and identity, Eliot also suggests that a strong sense of indigeneity, or rootedness, depends on harmonious interactions between the individual and his or her cultural surroundings.
Taken collectively, *After Strange Gods*, *The Idea of Christian Society*, and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* advocate a renewed indigeneity in order to combat the sterility and fragmentation outlined in *The Waste Land*. In essence, they explore solutions to the problem that Eliot articulated early in his writing career. In light of Eliot’s emphasis on regional, family, and class loyalties in these latter essays, *The Waste Land* provides recurring examples of people who lack a sense of rootedness. Marie, who speaks at the opening of the poem, equates being Lithuanian with being a good German (12), suggesting a confused sense of regional identity. Tiresias is another figure of dislocation: his identity belongs to the mythology of ancient Greece, but he wanders through the world of twentieth century, working class London. More importantly, Tiresias guides the reader through a cityscape replete with rootless individuals. The clerk and the typist cannot establish harmonious activity in the limited space of the typist’s apartment. The typist opens food from tins rather than attempting to cook, and the clerk exits by groping his way down the unlit stair, suggesting his unfamiliarity with the surroundings. The sterility of their sexual encounter also stands in contrast to the emphasis on continuity from generation to generation in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. This emphasis on tradition in Eliot’s essay requires fertile sexuality closely linked to creating a family. Conversely, the clerk and the typist produce nothing from sex characterized by “vanity” and “indifference.” The typist indicates the finite physical and emotional nature of the encounter when she says, “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad its over” (252). Mr. Eugenides is another figure whose sterile form of sexuality indicates his rootlessness. He proposes a homosexual liaison (again non-generative sexuality) at a foreign hotel. Despite Eliot’s emphasis on cosmopolitan poetics, in *The Waste Land* foreignness and its
accompanying nomadic movement are generally negative. The demotic French, which is foreign to Mr. Eugenides’ Smyrna roots, highlights the absence of any shared cultural tradition between himself and the English-speaking narrator. Another nomad figure, Phlebas the Phoenician, serves as a warning of the inherent danger of travel to foreign places. In recounting Phlebas’ death, the narrator states, “O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and / tall as you” (320-22).

In *The Waste Land*, the failed grail quest suggests a world in which no one is indigenous. Frazer’s narratives of the dying and reborn priest kings in *The Golden Bough* assume a direct connection between the people and the soil: the vitality of the king mirrors that of the land. When the narrator of *The Waste Land* declares, “There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home” (389), he is implying that the ritual necessary to restore both king and land no longer functions properly. The impotence of the ritual indicates that the quester is alienated from the landscape. Even the syntactic ambiguity of the sentence suggests a separation between the chapel (the home of the supernatural potency necessary to complete the quest) and the quester. The apostrophe in “wind’s” has been read as denoting a contraction for “wind is,” thus making the phrase, “only the wind is home.” The apostrophe can be also be read, however, as denoting possession, thus indicating that the chapel is the home of the wind, and by implication, not the home or proper place of the quester. In conjunction with the description of the other rootless figures in the poem, the failed grail quest forces the reader to consider individual, nomadic existence as without hope. Consequently, the poem implicitly valorizes the alternate possibility of a life rooted in one region and possessing a strong sense of cultural
tradition. *The Waste Land* suggests that only when individuals unite into a community to reintroduce these qualities into the modern world can cultural healing take place.

Eliot’s emphasis on rootedness would seem to preclude the imperialist ideology present in Virgil’s construction of indigeneity since, in Eliot’s ideal world, people live in the same place all their lives. However, this perspective is not entirely insular; Eliot attacks provinciality and emphasizes “the mind of Europe,” rhetorical strategies that ultimately tie his concept of indigenous culture to an imperialist ideology as I will discuss subsequently. 9 Eliot’s definition of provincialism as a “distortion of values” enables him to celebrate indigeneity without endorsing provincialism. One can remain tied to a particular geographic region and still be cosmopolitan in thought, provided one attains maturity. For Eliot, maturity of mind requires both universalism and “the consciousness of history”: “Consciousness of history cannot be fully awake, except where there is other history than the history of the poet’s own people: we need this in order to see our own place in history. There must be the knowledge of the history of at least one other highly civilized people, and of a people whose civilization is sufficiently cognate to have influenced and entered into our own” (SP 122). This historical consciousness depends on the cosmopolitan viewpoint. Eliot points to the necessity of this viewpoint for the production of art when he states that, “European literature is a whole, the several members of which cannot survive if the same blood-stream does not circulate throughout the whole body” (SP 130). Artistic maturity arises from cultivating universalism, which results from looking outward to other cultures and understanding their significance to one’s own.

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9 In this context, I define imperialism as the cultural domination and exploitation of one nation, or culturally distinct group, by another.
Eliot hints at the necessity of sacrificing individuality to the collective whole with his metaphor of the limbs of European literature depending on circulation through the entire body.\(^{10}\) When he applies this idea of self-sacrifice to issues of cultural wholeness in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, it emerges within an imperialist framework. In “What is a Classic?,” the metaphor of the limbs of the body suggests equality between the constituent nations that compose Europe. This implied equality breaks down in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* when Eliot introduces the idea of a satellite culture: “one which, for geographical and other reasons, has a permanent relation to a stronger one” (NTDC 54). Eliot declares England necessary for Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, who would be cut off from Europe if they were independent. Because of their subordinate relation to English culture, these regions receive access to the greater European tradition, of which England is a part.\(^{11}\) These areas also need to exist as satellite cultures, however, for the benefit of England:

> It would be no gain whatever for English culture, for the Welsh, Scots and Irish to become indistinguishable from Englishmen – what *would* happen, of course, is that we should all become indistinguishable featureless ‘Britons,’ at a lower level of culture than that of any of the separate regions. On the contrary, it is of great

\(^{10}\) Eliot had already introduced self-sacrifice into the discussion of literature with “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In this essay, Eliot asserts that in order for the artist to develop his “consciousness of the past,” he should engage in “a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a *continual self-sacrifice*, a continual extinction of personality” (SP 40, my emphasis).

\(^{11}\) “The other reason for the preservation of local culture is one which is also a reason for the satellite culture continuing to be satellite, and not going so far as to try to cut itself off completely. It is that the satellite exercises a considerable influence upon the stronger culture; and so plays a larger part in the world at large than it could in isolation. For Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to cut themselves off completely from England would be to cut themselves off from Europe and the world, and no talk of auld alliances would help matters” (NTDC 55).
advantage for English culture to be constantly influenced from Scotland, Ireland and Wales. (NTDC 59)

Eliot represents the relation between satellite and central culture as mutually beneficial, but the hierarchical, and in fact colonial, relation provides greater benefit to England than to Ireland, Scotland, or Wales. Eliot attempts to counter the charge of exploitation when he says in a somewhat defensive tone:

I am not concerned, in an essay which aims at least at the merit of brevity, to defend the thesis, that it is desirable that the English should continue to be English. I am obliged to take that for granted: and if this assumption is called into question, I must defend it on another occasion. But if I can defend with any success the thesis, that it is to the advantage of England that the Welsh should continue to be Welsh, the Scots Scots and the Irish Irish, then the reader should be disposed to agree that there may be some advantage to other peoples in the English continuing to be English. (NTDC 57)

Ostensibly, this passage promises benefits to the satellite culture. If we consider it closely, however, we note that these benefits are defined in exceptionally vague terms: “some advantage to other peoples.” Eliot does not even state explicitly whether the undefined advantage will be for the Welsh, Scots, or Irish, only that “other peoples” will benefit from the English remaining English. Eliot speaks more clearly of the benefits of the Welsh remaining Welsh for the English, noting, “The direct contribution to poetry by Welshmen and men of Welsh extraction, writing in English, is very considerable; and considerable also is the influence of their poetry upon poets of different racial origins” (NTDC 56). Welsh poetry and poets, with their unique racial character, infuse the English
tradition with cultural vitality. For Eliot, this uniqueness provides justification for the Welsh to continue to speak and write in Welsh:

The literature written in that language [Welsh] will not, of course, make any direct impact upon the world at large; but if it is no longer cultivated, the people to whom it belongs (we are considering particularly the Welsh) will tend to lose their racial character. The Welsh will be less Welsh; and their poets will cease to have any contribution to make to English literature, beyond their individual genius. And I am of opinion, that the benefits which Scottisht, Welsh and Irish writers have conferred upon English literature are far in excess of what the contribution of these individual men of genius would have been had they, let us say, all been adopted in early infancy by English foster-parents. (NTDC 57)

By presuming to judge the validity of the Welsh language, Eliot inadvertently highlights the colonial nature of the relation between England and its satellite cultures.12

Despite the evident imperial nature of these cultural relations, Eliot does not recognize Wales, Scotland, and Ireland as cultural colonies of England in part because to do so would be to define these cultural groups as foreign and thus exclude them from the tradition of English literature. Wales, Scotland, and Ireland must be different enough from England to ensure that they bring unique qualities to the greater British cultural tradition, but they cannot be entirely separate or else Eliot might be called on to justify the merits of the English remaining English. One of the contradictions in Eliot’s thinking is that England is both a part and the whole, a dual identity from which Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are excluded. Eliot’s cultural hierarchy provides the English with maximum

12 Eliot seems willfully oblivious to the connections between satellite cultures and colonization since he subsequently critiques the results of colonialism in India: “The benefits of British rule will soon be lost, but the ill effects of the disturbance of a native culture by an alien one will remain” (NTDC 65).
flexibility: they can partake of the cosmopolitan identity as a member of the European
tradition, but they can also remain rooted in their own tradition, and simultaneously
access the cultures of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales as part of their own tradition. By
advocating an imperial structure for cultural relations, Eliot ensures that the English
cultivation of indigenous identity will still allow for the flexibility to appropriate other
cultural traditions.

Eliot positions the English in a larger cultural context in a parallel manner to the
way Virgil positions the Trojans within Italian culture. The Trojans fuse their cultural
identity with the Latins and the gods promise that both groups will share in the glory of a
future Roman identity. Similarly, Eliot defines the relation between satellite and central
culture as symbiotic, creating a greater whole than the sum of its parts. In both cases,
however, the hierarchical nature of the cultural relations ensures continual exploitation.
The Trojans receive indigenous status from the Latins but ultimately never share their
political power: Augustus, the ruler of the world, according to Virgil, descends directly
from the Trojans rather than the Latins. England gains cultural vitality from Wales,
Scotland, and Ireland (a quality that for Eliot is intertwined with a strong sense of
indigeneity), but does not confer vitality on these “satellite” cultures since, as far as Eliot
was concerned, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland had no independent literary tradition to be
revitalized.13

Crane, Pocahontas and the Origins of American Culture

13 See Eliot’s 1919 essay in Athenaeum, “Was There a Scottish Literature?” in which Eliot declares that
there is no real distinction between English and Scottish literature.
Like Eliot, Crane combines the quest for indigeneity with imperialist cultural relations. In fact, in *The Bridge*, Crane constructs a narrative in which the culture of the metropolitan centre (in this case white, modern America) does not simply control the terms of cultural relations with indigenous groups, but actually replaces them entirely. Within Crane’s larger project of creating the “myth of America” (L 274), one of the key steps is to present modern urban America as an organic outgrowth of the natural world. In order to create this indigenous identity, the section of *The Bridge* entitled “Powhatan’s Daughter” explores a mythical past that represents the primal origin of American culture. In Crane’s “myth of America” the bond between the white, modern narrator and the earth supersedes the one between the continent and Native-Americans. Crane uses the image of Pocahontas and the metaphor of the dying and reborn fertility god to consume the vitality of the dying Indian and replaces him with his narrative persona as the essential American.

Crane shares Eliot’s belief in the value of “primitive” qualities in the modern world. He is less concerned than Eliot with the popular notion of “multipresence” that offers a model for cultural integration. Instead, Crane values the “primitive” aspect of past Native-American culture for its vitality and indigeneity. For Crane, more so than Eliot, the important aspect of primitivism was Frazer’s belief in “primitive” mentality as a latent force in the modern world. In *The Bridge*, Crane endorses this representation of “primitive” mentality and suggests that it is accessible to the white, modern individual. In his quest for American origins in the section entitled “Powhatan’s Daughter,” the narrator uses visionary powers to move across space and time and identify with different mythological figures. When Crane writes, “To handle the beautiful skeins of this myth of

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14 Though not a student of anthropology, Crane was at least familiar with Frazer through Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and his letters indicate that he read Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (L 314), which follows a similar methodology to Frazer.
America – to realize suddenly, as I seem to, how much of the past is living under only slightly altered forms, even in machinery and such-like” (L 274), he indicates that through a specifically American mythology, this “primitive” world will be made available to the present.

This myth of America seeks to link urban American identity to primal origins in a manner that will enable new cultural vitality and cohesiveness. Accessing this primal origin requires the white, modern narrator to replace the Indian as the sexual partner of Pocahontas, the mythic representation of the American continent. Crane divests Pocahontas of historical specificity to make her a symbol of primal, American essence.15 White Americans gain access to their primal origins through the Indian brave Maquokeeta, who becomes associated with the seasonal cycle of the fertility gods in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Crane first identifies him in “The Dance” as the mate of Pocahontas:

The swift red flesh, a winter king –
Who squired the glacier woman down the sky?
She ran the neighing canyons all the spring;
She spouted arms; she rose with maize – to die. (1-4)

Though Pocahontas is the one whose life and death patterns are explicitly linked to the seasons in this passage, Crane makes it clear that Maquokeeta is also fated to die: “Know, Maquokeeta, greeting; know death’s best; / - Fall, Sachem, strictly as the tamarack!” (47-48). This death is just one step in a cyclical pattern of existence:

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15 Rebecca Blevins Faery aptly summarizes the constraints Crane imposes on Pocahontas as his symbol of America when she declares, “Crane’s Pocahontas is, because of her gender, apparently neither an Indian (that status is reserved for the Native male who ‘possessed’ her) nor even a real historical human being, but is instead pure symbol, the ‘soil’ of the continent that first the Indian male and the Euro-American male must possess in order to claim his status as American” (129).
Dance, Maquokeeta! snake that lives before,
That casts his pelt, and lives beyond! Sprout, horn!
Spark, tooth! Medicine-man, relent, restore –
Lie to us, - dance us back the tribal morn! (57-60)

The metaphor of the snake shedding its skin suggests that Maquokeeta follows the pattern of death and rebirth that Crane associates with Pocahontas. Crane’s various commands, “restore -/ Lie to us, - dance us back the tribal morn,” leave ambiguous the exact actions to be taken by Maquokeeta, but they indicate clearly that he has a crucial role in the narrator’s quest for cultural healing by virtue of the imperative tense. Presumably, the narrator’s interactions with Maquokeeta provide the imaginative link necessary for this process. Certainly the imperative “restore” suggests that this primal origin is a latent force that has merely to be uncovered.16

By constructing encounters between his narrator and the mythic Indian brave, Crane appropriates Maquokeeta’s vitality for the narrator as a representative of modern America. In his letter to Kahn, Crane indicates that he appropriates “Indian” qualities:

Here one is on the pure mythical and smoky soil at last! Not only do I describe the conflict between the two races in this dance – I also become identified with the Indian and his world before it is over, which is the only method possible of every [sic] really possessing the Indian and his world as a cultural factor. I think I really

16 This suggestion of a latent connection to primal origins echoes Williams Carlos Williams from In the American Grain (1925): “I do believe the average American to be an Indian, but an Indian robbed of his world – unless we call machines a forest in themselves” (128).
succeed in getting under the skin of this glorious and dying animal, in terms of expression, in symbols, which he himself would comprehend. (L 307)\(^\text{17}\)

The key idea in this passage is that by identifying with the Indian, Crane can “possess” him and his world as a “cultural factor.” The meaning of Crane’s phrase “cultural factor” is ambiguous, but we can infer a definition from an earlier section of Crane’s letter to Kahn. With regard to his presentation of history, Crane tells Kahn, “What I am after is an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present” (L 305). This statement implies that the past not only resides in the present, but also infuses the present with vitality. Crane goes on to note that this pattern transcends rational explanation: “The form of my poem rises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I’m at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future destiny worth of it” (L 261).

In *The Bridge*, Maquokeeta possesses two important qualities: unity with the earth and vitality. His link to the earth results from his marriage to Pocahontas, who represents the spirit of the continent, according to Crane’s letter to Kahn:

> Powhatan’s daughter, or Pocahontas, is the mythological nature-symbol chose to represent the physical body of the continent, or the soil. She here takes on much the same role as the traditional Hertha of ancient Teutonic mythology. The five

\(^\text{17}\) As Walter Benn Michaels observes in *Our America*, the perception of the Indian as disappearing was essential to conceiving Indians as representatives of indigenous American culture that could be assimilated by white Americans (38). Crane suggests the important elements of Indian identity can be absorbed by contact with Pocahontas, the symbol of the continent, even without the presence of actual Indians when he writes, “Pocahontas (the continent) is the common basis of our meeting, she survives the extinction of the Indian, who finally, after being assumed into the elements of nature (as he understood them), persists only as a kind of “eye” in the sky, or as a star that hangs between day and night – “the twilight’s dim perpetual throne”” (L 307).
sub-section of Part II are mainly concerned with the gradual exploration of this “body” whose first possessor was the Indian. (L 305)

After Maquokeeta’s death, he looks down upon the earth and sees “[his] bride immortal in the maize!” (84), indicating not only his connection in life to the earth, but also his connection to the sky in death. Crane anticipates this transition by conveying Maquokeeta’s vitality through metaphors of lightning. The narrator declares, “every tendon scurries toward the twangs / Of lightning deltaed down your [Maquokeeta’s] sable hair” (53-54).

In order to appropriate these qualities for the degraded present, the narrator embarks on a visionary journey through the past, adopting the identity of various figures as he goes. In the first stage of this journey, he aligns himself with the hobos who traverse the American landscape. He represents their contact with the American continent in sexual terms. Though the narrator points to the limitations of their contact as a result of their ignorance – he characterizes the hobos in the marginal gloss as those, “who have touched her, knowing her without name” (59) – he acknowledges the importance of their link to the American essence and the similarity between their movement and his own quest:

Yet they touch something like a key perhaps.
From pole to pole across the hills, the states
– They know a body under the wide rain;
Youngsters with eyes like fjords, old reprobates
With racetrack jargon, - dotting immensity
They lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast
Snow-silvered, sumac-stained or smoky blue –

Is past the valley-sleepers, south or west.

– As I have trod the rumorous midnights, too. (“The River” 63-71)

While the hobos lack any sense of mythic origins, and thus remain ignorant of the identity and significance of the feminized landscape they touch, the narrator’s visionary quest will lead him to embrace Pocahontas. In order to reach Pocahontas, the narrator must identify with the world of Native-Americans. He begins this process by positioning himself in historical proximity with, but in violent antipathy to Native-Americans, identifying with the white settlers during the Indian wars:

    Spears and assemblies: black drums thrusting on –
    O yelling battlements, - I, too, was liege
    To rainbows currying each pulsant bone:
    Surpassed the circumstance, danced out the siege!

    And buzzard-circleted, screamed from the stake;
    I could not pick the arrows from my side.
    Wrapped in that fire, I saw more escorts wake –
    Flickering, sprint up the hill groins like a tide. (61-68)

While suffering from an Indian arrow attack might seem to contradict the overall purpose of Appropriating Native-American qualities, for Crane, the violence of this war has a positive result. The narrator seems to be absorbing the energy released from the fighting. Though the source of this energy is violence, Crane suggests the energy itself has
redemptive power when the narrator states that he “Surpassed the circumstance, danced out the siege!”

The narrator then shifts into a more direct mode of appropriating Maquokeeta’s qualities; in the closing lines of “The Dance,” he takes Maquokeeta for a lover:

We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms,

In cobalt desert closures made our vows …

Now is the strong prayer folded in thine arms,

The serpent with the eagle in the boughs. (101-04)

“Possessing” the Indian as a “cultural factor” resembles sexual union with him. The final image of the intertwined serpent and eagle suggests that this sexual union provides a moment of cultural fusion. Maquokeeta, previously called “the snake that lives before,” is the serpent, while the narrator as the eagle, the national bird of the United States, represents a modern, white, American culture.

The union between the narrator and Maquokeeta is a homosexual one, and this has led to the misconception that Crane posits a homosexual origin to a culturally vital American identity. Both Walter Benn Michaels and Jared Gardner assert that Crane starts the genealogy of American identity with a homosexual act. Michaels asserts that homosexuality functions “as a way of carrying on The Bridge’s ‘redskin dynasties’ without recourse to women” (49). For Gardner, a homosexual bond allows Crane to absorb Indian qualities without the miscegenation that would automatically result from a

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18 Crane urges the reader to follow his example and imaginatively form a sexual union with both Pocahontas and Maquokeeta. In the marginal gloss in “The Dance” Crane writes, “Then you shall her truly – your blood remembering its first invasion of her secrecy, its first encounters with her kin, her chieftain lover … his shade that haunts the lakes and hills” (62). Crane makes this imaginative connection more concrete by locating the memory of this sexual encounter in the blood, suggesting Americans are genealogically connected to these mythic figures.
heterosexual union between the white narrator and an Indian woman (26). While both Michaels and Gardner are correct to identify the homosexual encounter with Maquokeeta as part of Crane’s exploration of primal origins, they mistake this encounter as the origin of Crane’s revitalized American identity. In fact, the narrator’s union with Maquokeeta is only an intermediate step on his journey towards establishing an origin for American identity. He is in competition with Maquokeeta for possessing Pocahontas, a heterosexual union that supersedes the homosexual bond with Maquokeeta. The narrator can only celebrate his love for Maquokeeta after the latter’s death and transformation into a star (77-80) has eliminated his role as sexual competitor.

Following this sequence, in which Maquokeeta dies and the narrator appropriates his vitality as his former lover, the narrator displaces him as the possessor of American essence by displacing him as the lover of Pocahontas. In the letter to Kahn, Crane identifies the Indian in general as the first possessor of the continent (L 305). Throughout “Powhatan’s daughter” he represents this possession in sexual metaphors. In the marginal gloss that runs throughout “Powhatan’s Daughter,” for example, he narrates a dream quest that “recalls you to your love, there in a waking dream to merge your seed” (marginal gloss 53), and leads to the blood memory of first invading her secrecy (marginal gloss 62). In “The Dance” the narrator celebrates Pocahontas’ virginity by calling her, “Princess whose brown lap was virgin May” (15). He makes Pocahontas’ virginity an eternal quality, declaring, “She is the torrent and the singing tree; / And she is virgin to the last of men” (“The Dance” 91-92). Pocahontas’ eternal virginity leaves her

Both Michaels and Gardner argue persuasively that The Bridge invokes the nativist discourse of the twenties, which seeks to marginalize the “Americaness” of various ethnicities. Paradoxically, to ensure the indigenous nature of white America, writers from this period often created links between Native Americans and mainstream white culture.
open to rediscovery by an American culture that thought it had no relation to either Indians or the land. Crane’s sexual imagery, particularly his choice of the word “invasion” and his emphasis on her virginity, promises the white, modern American both possession of and intimacy with the essence of America. Taking Pocahontas’ virginity symbolizes contact with the origin of American identity in the narrator’s visionary quest.

In the terms of the sexual symbolism of “The Dance,” to possess Pocahontas is to possess the continent. For Crane, the Indians were the first possessors of the continent and were therefore indigenous. If he can retroactively make modern white Americans the possessors of the continent during the primal past, then they too will be indigenous. In this formulation, the Indians serve the same function as the Latins did for Virgil: both groups provide recent immigrants, whether white Americans or Trojans, with a direct connection to the earth. Crane also draws on the anthropological story of the death and rebirth of the fertility god made popular by Frazer, Weston, and Eliot: Maquokeeta dies and is replaced by his former lover (the narrator), who absorbs his vitality and takes his bride (the spirit of the earth). In *The Bridge*, the sense of unity with the earth and resulting indigeneity are qualities that can be transferred from one race (so long as it dies out) to another. This myth enables modern white Americans to feel that spiritually they are as indigenous as Indians.

This process of indigenization in *The Bridge* links Crane to Virgil and Eliot. All three authors suggest that to be rootless is to be sick, wounded, or incomplete. A vital culture, on the other hand, results from a harmonious and total identification with the immediate locale. For all three poets, healing is directed towards the state of mind of the citizens of their respective nations: Rome, England, and America. Transforming the
actual material conditions of their society is of less concern. Virgil’s ideological purpose in *The Aeneid* is to convince the Romans that Augustus’ reign is a triumph of native Roman values. In *The Bridge*, Crane does not critique the material conditions of modernity; instead, he seeks to replace the sense of alienation and fragmentation associated with the industrial landscape with feelings of harmony and inspiration. Similarly, Eliot is concerned with cultural attitudes in *The Waste Land* and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*.

For all three authors, constructing indigenous status for an alienated culture requires the use of imperialist discourse. In *The Aeneid*, The Trojans become indigenous through Virgil’s two-fold strategy of narrating political assimilation with an existing indigenous culture and constructing divine prophecies that authorize their ancestral links to Italy. In *The Bridge*, Crane shapes a narrative that indigenizes modern America by linking it to mythological Native-Americans, who are so closely bound to the earth that they are sometimes indistinguishable from nature itself. Unlike Crane and Virgil, Eliot does not construct a narrative that indigenizes modern England. Instead, after identifying the urgent need for a greater sense of indigeneity in *The Waste Land*, he lays out a program of cultural development in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that will lead to renewed indigeneity in the future. Eliot’s assumption is that his readership will construct a narrative of indigenization as they change their cultural practices. Eliot and Virgil seek to mask their willingness to exploit one culture to indigenize another. Eliot appropriates the cultural vitality of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland for the English tradition while insisting on the *mutual* necessity of these cultures remaining subordinate to England. Similarly, Virgil uses the authority of Jupiter to rationalize the assimilation of
the Latins into the Trojan reign of Italy. Conversely, Crane does not bother to rationalize
the ascendancy of white American over Native-Americans, assuming the process to be
natural.

This imperialist dynamic recurs in *Omeros*. By following the pattern in the earlier
epics of constructing indigenous status, Walcott must confront the genocide of the Aruacs
and St. Lucia’s brutal colonial history. While Virgil, Eliot, and Crane are either accepting
(Virgil and Eliot) or oblivious (Crane) to the imperialist nature of indigenization, Walcott
acknowledges these historical injustices as an inherent feature of the landscape. The
current inhabitants cannot escape guilt by association. Walcott suggests, however, that
redemption is possible irrespective of race. Walcott attempts to transcend the imperialist
dynamic in the poems of Virgil, Eliot, and Crane, but his success is intermittent. The
attempt indicates, however, that Walcott engages with the idea of indigeneity through the
process of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* we see operating in his relation to the modern epic.

**The Mythical Origin of Indigenous Identity in *Omeros***

*Omeros* follows Walcott’s essay “The Muse of History” (1974) in representing
myth as an alternative to the debilitating colonial narrative that is conventional history.
In the poem, mythic experience is an encounter with divine or supernatural forces. This
encounter occurs in two, often simultaneous, forms: apprehending a spiritual presence in
nature, and suddenly becoming aware of the past as a living force within the experience
of the present. Walcott uses this conception of myth to define indigenous status as a
spiritual relation to the land and community rather than an actual fact of ancestry:
indigeneity is a state of mind. Walcott emphasizes this individual state of mind in
exploring this link between the human and natural world, but he also uses this link to critique the social impact of the tourist industry. His form of practicing indigeneity also provides a model for resisting the debilitating cultural effects of tourist commodification.

Walcott’s “The Muse of History” is a conservative reaction against the “literature of recrimination and despair” (*Essays* 37) that Walcott argued was the result of the black power movement of the sixties and early seventies. Though Walcott’s attitude towards black consciousness changes by the time he writes *Omeros*, his essay establishes an attitude towards the past and towards the landscape that informs his conception of myth in the poem. “The Muse of History” can be a confusing essay at times because Walcott uses “history,” “myth,” and “tradition” as synonyms, and at other times the terms seem to convey distinct meanings. Walcott’s attitude to the past becomes clear when we understand that in this essay he defines history as the understanding of the past as a chronological sequence of events. For black or mixed race persons in the Caribbean, this chronology constitutes a narrative of despair and oppression because the legacy of slavery and colonialism suggests that the trauma of the past must necessarily limit the potential for cultural vitality in the present. Conversely, to perceive the past as myth, which Walcott defines as “the partial recall of the race” (*Essays* 37), releases one from the strict cause and effect sequence implied in chronological history. For Walcott, a mythic understanding of the past means perceiving past and present as existing simultaneously. As I will emphasize in Chapter Three, Walcott’s concept of simultaneity is heavily indebted to “Tradition and Individual Talent,” in which Eliot declares that the artist must write “with a feeling that the whole of the literature of literature of Europe

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20 See Isidore Okpewho’s article “Walcott, Homer, and the Black Atlantic” for a useful summary of Walcott’s changing attitude towards ideas initially expressed as part of black radicalism. By the time of *Omeros*, racial memory is a source of strength, for both the artist and the community.
from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a
simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (SP 38). For Walcott, the
mature artist’s vision of man “is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature
chained to his past” (Essays 37), in contrast to the despairing artists, who lament the
historical sequence that leads to the present. Walcott’s choice of the term “presences”
suggests the past is a living influence within the artist, existing on equal footing with the
present.

According to Walcott, seeing past and present as simultaneous frees one from the
sense that recurring patterns in culture are the opposite of progress: “This [attitude] is not
the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees
everything as renewed” (38). Walcott sees this understanding of the past as evident in the
work of St. John Perse, the Nobel laureate, French poet who was born in the Guadeloupe.
Perse, according to Walcott, conceives of man as always already coming to the present
with an experience of wonder:

[T]he possibility of a man, African, European, and Asian in ancestry, the
evernous, gently opening morning of his possibility, his body touched with dew,
his nerves as subtilized to sensation as the mimosa, his memory, whether of
grandeur or of pain, gradually erasing itself as recurrent drizzles cleanse the
ancestral or tribal markings from the coral skull, the possibility of man and his
language waking to wonder here. (Essays 53)

Despite the metaphor of erasing memory, Walcott does not advocate historical ignorance.
The Caribbean artist has a past, but according to Walcott, he or she must consciously
ignore the historical narratives of shame and recrimination. The Caribbean artist sees the
wonder of the landscape and does not need to define it as the setting for a narrative of loss and oppression resulting from the legacy of slavery.

For Walcott, this sense of wonder is unavailable to the overly self-conscious black artists who alienate themselves from their environment. By setting themselves in opposition to the European literary tradition, and cultivating a poetics based exclusively on African traditions, these artists ignore the multicultural realities of the Caribbean. According to Walcott, such artists are “epic” poets, a term he uses in a derogatory manner at this early stage in his career.\[21\] Because the African past cannot be a living presence for these poets, given that they do not speak the language or practice the religion, the result is a morose obsession with what has been lost: “the ‘epic’ poet in the islands looks to anthropology, to a catalogue of forgotten gods, to midden fragments, artifacts, and the unfinished phrases of a dead speech. These engage in masochistic recollection” (\textit{Essays} 44).\[22\] These artistic practices contrast sharply with the people who live in the Caribbean and are fully engaged with their surroundings, the natural world in particular. Walcott declares, “Fisherman and peasant know who they are and what they are and where they are, and when we show them our wounded sensibilities we are, most of us, displaying self-inflicted wounds” (\textit{Essays} 63).

\[21\] In the seventies, Walcott equates the epic with an inauthentic gesture of grandeur. In his long poem \textit{Another Life} (1973), Walcott sees the epic gesture in the Caribbean as stemming from an inferiority complex that he associates with immaturity:

\begin{quote}
Provincialism loves the pseudo-epic,  
so if these heroes have been given a stature  
disproportionate to their cramped lives,  
remember I beheld them at knee-height,  
and that their thunderous exchanges  
rumbled like gods about another life (CP 183)
\end{quote}

\[22\] This list of features bears a remarkable similarity to those of \textit{The Waste Land}. While, Walcott’s “The Muse of History” is overall strongly influenced by Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” this specific passage implicitly critiques Eliot’s early approaches to cultural revitalization.
This passage anticipates the key role fishermen play in *Omeros* as part of Walcott’s cultural thinking. As workers who make their living from natural resources, they forge links between culture and the natural world. They approximate Walcott’s “elemental man” as “beings inhabited by presences.” Specifically, when the fishermen build canoes, an episode that forms the opening of *Omeros*, they reenact the historical trauma of the colonial world while simultaneously making the spirits of the trees part of their canoes and thus part of their own everyday lives. The fishermen reenact the extermination of the Aruac Indians that followed the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean. Walcott represents the trees as the bodies of the Aruac spirits, calling the fallen cedar a “dead god” and declaring:

> the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,
> while the Aruacs’ patois crackled in the smell
> of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown
> with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost.
> Like barbarians striding columns they have brought down,
> the fishermen shouted. The gods were down at last. (6)

By invading the forest and cutting down the trees, the black fishermen are completing the genocide initiated by white colonists. The trees contain the language of the lost tribe, but the fishermen burn it up. Philoctete, who is telling this story to tourists, is aware of his own role in repeating colonial violence:

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23 Such links are, according to Walcott, also central to the poet’s vocation. In “The Muse of History” Walcott praises Perse because of his quest for links with the natural world: “His are poems of massive or solitary migrations through the elements. They are the same in spirit as the poems of Whitman or Neruda, for they seek spaces where praise of the earth is ancestral” (*Essays* 38).
So, fists jam in our jacket,

cause the heights was cold and our breath making feather
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.

I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands
to wound the first cedar. (3)

While Philoctete represents himself as complicit with colonial violence, Walcott
redeems the murder of the trees by depicting their transformation into canoes as a rebirth.
The trees / Aruac spirits possess an innate desire for the sea:

The logs gathered that thirst

for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with.
Now the trunks in eagerness to become canoes
ploughed into breakers of bushes, making raw holes

of boulders, feeling not death inside them, but use –
to roof the sea, to be hulls. (7)

In portraying canoe-building as the death and rebirth of a god, Walcott uses the archetype
both Crane and Eliot borrow from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. By ritualizing the
violence of tree cutting, Walcott channels its disruptive force into the positive energy
behind building canoes. Indeed, the thirst for the sea suggests that becoming a canoe is natural for the trees, a situation that implicitly gives approval to the fishermen’s actions. Walcott identifies the murder of trees with the murder of the Aruac tribe in order to show how colonial violence saturates the island landscape, but he also suggests that the repetition of this violence by people with positive intentions partially redeems it. The violence performed by the fishermen is now creative as well as destructive, and for Walcott this creativity integrates the fishermen into the natural cycle of island life.

The mythical resonance of the canoe-building invests the black fishermen with indigenous status. Since the Aruac spirits reside in the trees, their existence is fused with the landscape. When the trees are transformed into canoes, both they and their resident spirits are implicitly linked to the fishermen. Walcott suggests this link is spiritual: a priest baptizes the canoes (8) and Achille declares that the name of his canoe, In God We Trust, “Is God’s spelling and mine” (8). Furthermore, Walcott’s figurative language implies a paternal relation between the fishermen and their canoes: “Under his tapping chisel Achille felt [the cedars’] hollows / exhaling to touch the sea, lunging towards the haze / of bird-printed islet, the beaks of the parted bows” (7). The canoe is both a work of art that Achille completes and a living creature that is brought to life by Achille’s efforts. The sequence that culminates in the launch of the canoes suggests an intimate bond between the fisherman and the natural world through the spirit of the Aruacs. When

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24 The usefulness of this transformation contrasts with Philoctete’s fit of rage in his garden when he pointlessly hacks at the yams out of a desire to make other living things feel the pain he suffers from the legacy of slavery (22).

25 The symbolism of this opening resonates throughout the poem. Achille, who persists in the face of hardship to adhere to the traditional form of fishing, receives protection from the natural world. Though he is lost at sea when he experiences his vision of Africa, he does not drown, but returns safely to the island. Conversely, Hector, who sells his canoe to buy a taxi van, is killed by the intrusion of the natural world on to the urban world. Hector dies in a car crash prompted by a pig crossing the highway (225).

26 In keeping with the nexus of Greek mythological references in the poem, the image of the “hollows exhaling to touch the sea” alludes to the myth of Prometheus creating men from water and clay.
Walcott notes that the trees feel the desire “to roof the sea” (7), he calls attention to the function of the sea as a home for the fisherman. In sum, Achille, Hector and the other black fisherman increase their indigeneity by integrating the tools of their livelihood with the already indigenous Aruac spirits.

Walcott reinforces the indigenous status of the black community in St. Lucia, by means of recurring (and highly problematic) metaphors comparing them to ants. He describes the fishermen who cut down the trees, for example, as “working with the same concentration as an army of fire-ants” (7). Later on, Warwick, the ghost of Walcott’s father, provides his son with a vision of the local women who loaded coal onto British ships during Warwick’s childhood: “he had seen women climb / like ants up a white flower-pot, baskets of coal / balanced on their torchoned heads” (73, my emphasis). Their work, which is depicted as the march of ants, is continuous, moreover, with Walcott’s craft as a poet.27 Warwick tells his son:

They walk, you write;

keep to that narrow causeway without looking down,

climbing in their footsteps, that slow, ancestral beat

of those used to climbing roads; your own work owes them

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27 By representing these women as silent and previously unsung, Walcott invests his poem with the moral authority of decolonization. In fact, there is a strong element of self promotion in this assignment. In representing the silenced colonial subject, Walcott follows a pattern that Benedict Anderson identifies with second-generation nationalists in *Imagined Communities*: “In this vein, more and more ‘second-generation’ nationalist, in the Americas and elsewhere, learned to speak ‘for’ dead people with whom is was impossible or undesirable to establish a linguistic connection. This reversed ventriloquism helped to open the way for a selfconscious *indigenismo*, especially in the southern Americas” (198 Anderson’s emphasis). Applying Anderson’s analysis to *Omeros*, we can see that the coal women serve Walcott as much as he serves them.
because the couplet of those multiplying feet
made your first rhymes. (75)

During Achille’s dream vision of his African heritage, Walcott once again uses the metaphor of ants to describe the oppressed black community. While envisioning himself back in Africa, Achille witnesses a raid on his ancestral tribe that makes them slaves: “He counted the chain of men / linked by their wrists with vines, he watched until / the line was a line of ants” (145). Ants also guide Ma Kilman, the local obeah woman, through the forest to the African root that cures Philoctete’s wound. As she takes off her Sunday Mass clothes and starts to rediscover her ties with the natural world, she hears the message of the ants who scurry through her hair. The ants talk “the language of her great-grandmother, / the gossip of a distant market” (244). Ma Kilman’s moment of communion with the ants blends with the image of the black coal workers that Warwick celebrates:

Ma Kilman, her hair wild, followed the vine

of the generations of silent black workers, their hands

passing stones so quickly against the white line

of breakers, with coal-baskets, with invisible sounds,

and the cries of the insects led her where she bowed

her bare head and unbuttoned the small bone buttons

of her church dress. (244)
In this passage, Walcott’s metaphoric language blurs distinctions between the woman in the present (Ma Kilman) and past (the coal women) and the natural world (the ants). Both Ma Kilman and the coal women are implicitly identified by their metaphoric association with the natural world. In fact, the line of ants seems to be the conduit linking the past and present, implying that part of what makes past and present simultaneous in the Caribbean is the continual presence of nature.

In popular imagination, ants are perceived as close to the earth because of their status as ground-dwelling insects. Additionally, people represent them as tireless workers who participate in a harmonious community. All these associations play into key themes in Omeros, but Walcott’s metaphor for the black community also risks demeaning the people he intends to praise. Ants occupy the role of household pests and their intellectual credentials are low at best: most people associate them with a mindless swarm. Walcott’s metaphor potentially reaffirms slave-era racial stereotypes of black people as hard working automatons who are fine in their place, but apt to become a menace if allowed to run wild.

I suspect Walcott deliberately chooses a metaphor that borders on racial stereotyping since this fits the pattern of previous risky metaphors in his poetic career. In The Castaway and Other Poems (1965), Walcott reconfigures Crusoe, the archetypal colonialist, as the New World artist who must build a culture from the fragments washed ashore from the old world. Paradoxically, Walcott makes Crusoe’s imperialist gesture, claiming the island as his own, a necessary part of decolonization for the Caribbean artist who must approach his or her world as undiscovered country. Walcott invokes the idea that the colonially educated artists cannot know their home since they have been taught
contempt for their place of birth, but feel out of place in Europe, the venerable “home” of
the colonial imagination, because of racial and cultural barriers. Consequently, Crusoe
becomes a symbol for embracing the New World on one’s own terms, while recognizing
the continual influence of European influence as fragments that initiate the building
process.

Walcott’s does not achieve the same degree of effectiveness in representing
indigeneity through his ant metaphors. This imagery suggests that indigeneity arises from
the apparent naturalness of the black population generated by their likeness to the animal
kingdom. This series of metaphors seems to privilege nature over culture, and this binary
thinking becomes highly problematic when applied to people. By suggesting the black
population is “close to nature,” Walcott potentially identifies them as simple-minded, pre-
modern figures. This association links them to the Aruac spirits in the forest who are so
close to nature that their identities are intertwined with the trees. It also likens them to the
Aruacs as victims of the imperialist forces of Europe. This result runs counter to
Walcott’s agenda in “The Muse of History” and Omeros to overcome victimhood and
find, through indigeneity, the means to empower Caribbean subjectivity and culture.
Additionally, the images of ants suggest a hierarchy privileging those who can identify
with nature (the rural, subsistence level populace) over the urban based population. This
is highly problematic given that other parts of Omeros emphasize the need for a sense of
community and a dynamic interchange between nature and culture. Walcott overcomes
this division by stressing the importance of how individuals perceive and respond to the
natural world irrespective of their rural/ urban identities. Nonetheless, by equating the
black population with ants Walcott inadvertently weakens the drives towards cultural
unity that is one of his goals for indigenization.

Walcott’s double-edged metaphor (both potentially celebratory and demeaning) does fit, however, with his determination to celebrate the heroism of the black community in situations where other contemporary black artists might see only degradation.28 In particular, Omeros recognizes the heroism of the black population forced to participate in the machinery of imperialism. The ghost of Walcott’s father, Warwick, appears to remind him that the coal-bearing women, who served the British Empire, helped shape his rhymes with their moving feet. Warwick then tells him to commemorate their struggle for survival in his poetry:

Look, they climb, and no one knows them;
they take their copper pittances, and your duty

from the time you watched them from your grandmother’s house
as a child wounded by their power and beauty
is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice. (75-76)

Part of the reason why these women need a poetic champion stems from their participation in the colonial economy rather than in armed revolution; they remain obscure to the collective imagination of the contemporary Caribbean artists whom

28 In “The Muse of History” Walcott provides an example of this division between himself and what he calls the “radical” black artist with regard to the historical conversion of the slaves to Christianity: “A new generation looks back on such conversion with contempt, for where are the song of triumph, the defiance of the captured warrior, where are the nostalgic battle chants and the seasonal songs of harvest, the seeding of the great African pastoral? This generation sees in the epic poetry of the work song and the early blues self-contempt and inertia, but the deep truth is that pinioned and humiliated in body as the slave was, there is, beyond simple fortitude, a note of aggression, and what a later generation sees as defeat is really the willing of spiritual victory, for the captured warrior and the tribal poet had chosen the very battleground which the captor proposed, the soul” (Essays 46).
Walcott critiques in “The Muse of History.” His position is that the women deserve praise for their endurance, irrespective of the political ends their efforts served. Similarly, in Walcott’s narrative of the eighteenth century Battle of the Saintes between Britain and France, Achille’s ancestor, Afolabe, a slave of the British army, leads a group of slaves pulling a cannon up a cliff face. Afolabe inspires the other slaves by transforming their cries of pain into an African work song (83). The fact that Afolabe uses an African worksong to accomplish an almost impossible task signals the presence of a vital black culture enduring within the nexus of imperial British culture. For Walcott, Afolabe merits praise for this act, despite the fact that ostensibly all of his efforts serve British imperialism.

I now want to return to a key aspect of Walcott’s ant imagery: namely, that it promotes the indigeneity of the black community by linking them to the earth. Despite its problematic implications, this association does enable Walcott to articulate a process of cultural healing. According to Walcott, the sense of indigenous status enables one to experience moments of divinity in the natural world (the mythic experience) that will assist the process of cultural renewal. The primary example of this encounter in Omeros is Ma Kilman’s quest to cure Philoctete’s physical and cultural wound. Aside from the physical pain from the sore on his shin, Philoctete suffers from an absence of roots (21) and mourns the loss of a language he never knew (248). His sense of cultural dispossession mirrors that which Walcott identifies as prevalent among black Caribbean writers in “The Muse of History.” While Philoctete does not see the world around him as ugly and fragmented, as do Eliot’s characters in The Waste Land, he does share their

29 This passage is another example of Walcott using the metaphor of black workers as ants. He describes the slaves as “warrior ants” (83).
sense of alienation brought on by the absence of a strong and continuous cultural
tradition. Philoctete can see the beauty and power of the Caribbean natural world, but like
Crane’s narrator in the early part of The Bridge, he does not feel connected to it. Since
Philoctete can no longer perceive the landscape with a sense of new possibility, the quest
for his cure must be undertaken by a character with stronger connections to the natural
world. Late in the poem, Ma Kilman enters the forest for the purpose of healing
Philoctete. She has fragmented memories of a root her grandmother spoke of that would
heal similar wounds. As she climbs the forest paths, she momentarily sets aside her
Catholicism, a move that enables her to see the gods of the forest who have lost their
names since they traveled to the Caribbean from Africa (242). The gods provide Ma
Kilman with a connection both between herself and the natural world (they have human
qualities, but also blend with the forest and the animals) and between her present self and
the past (the gods were brought to the Caribbean by her African ancestors). Walcott notes
that Ma Kilman “thrashed herself for the sin / of doubting their names before the cure
could begin” (243), indicating that the main challenge is rediscovering something once
known that was lost rather than searching for something new. Ma Kilman finds the plant
root that was part of grandmother’s medicine, but more importantly, while in the forest
and absorbing the language of ants, she discovers the roots of obeah by repeating the cry
of the original sibyl:

She rubbed dirt in her hair, she prayed
in the language of ants and her grandmother, to lift

the sore from its roots in Philoctete’s rotting shin
from the flower on his shin blade, puckering inwards;

she scraped the earth with her nails and the sun

put the clouds to its ears as her screech reeled backwards
to its beginning, from the black original cave
of the sibyl’s mouth, her howl made the emerald lizard

lift one clawed leg, remembering the sound.

Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave,
and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand. (244-45).

This return to spiritual origins is the act that enables Philoctete’s cure. By reconnecting with the gods in the forest, Ma Kilman imbues her obeah with the divine powers\textsuperscript{30} necessary to overcome Philoctete’s pain. Subsequently, she bathes him “in the brew of the root” (246). Significantly, the basin is a cauldron from the old sugar mill, an institution associated with the legacy of slavery and colonialism. This gesture seems to disable the wounding power of history for Philoctete. As his physical wound closes he is freed from the “shame for the loss of words” (248) and sees the Caribbean as new and shining rather than weighed down by the history of colonialism.

One might argue that Walcott, in his portrait of Ma Kilman, concurs with the cultural assumptions that he castigates in “The Muse of History.” After all, Ma Kilman rejuvenates her healing power by rediscovering Erzulie, Shango, and Ogun, three African

\textsuperscript{30} Though Ma Kilman’s cure seems to be the result of recovering her African identity, Walcott complicates the situation by noting that the original sibyl who empowers Ma Kilman is the sibyl at Cumae (245) from Virgil’s \textit{The Aeneid}. While the gods of the forest are African, the ultimate origin of this moment of cultural healing comes from the European epic tradition.
gods from disparate religious traditions. Additionally, Ma Kilman’s ability to access this knowledge results from her genealogical inheritance. She has never learnt the names of these gods, but they reside in her blood: “their sounds were within her, / subdued in the rivers of her blood. Erzulie, / Shango, and Ogun” (242). The gods can move Ma Kilman because of this blood based connection: “All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead, / but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots / her arms undulated” (242-43). By empowering Ma Kilman in this manner, Walcott seems to contradict his position in “The Muse of History,” in which he attacks Afrocentrism as leading to racially based notions of authenticity (Essays 57).

Despite its apparent increase in sympathy for African-based cultural identity, however, Omeros does not contradict the principles for mature artistry that Walcott advocates in “The Muse of History.” The roots of the healing plant are the result of combining the African seed and St. Lucian soil. The swift, whose seasonal migration between Africa and the Caribbean provides Walcott with a metaphor for the imaginative pull of Africa, carries the seed from Africa. The swift dies and the seed takes root in St. Lucia:

the vine grew its own wings, out of the ocean

it climbed like the ants, the ancestors of Achille,

the women carrying coals after the dark door

slide over the hold. As the weed grew in odour

so did its strength at the damp root of the cedar
where the flower was anchored at the mottled root

as a lizard crawled upwards, foot by sallow foot. (239)

The St. Lucian landscape, particularly the damp cedar roots, proves to be a nourishing environment for the seed. Notably, as the vine grows it moves like the ants, which Walcott once again explicitly aligns with the black community. Thus, as it grows, the plant parallels the evolving history of the black community. While the seed may be African, the plant itself arises from the specific conditions of St. Lucia, as does the cultural community that Walcott celebrates. In fact, Ma Kilman’s powers to heal only manifest themselves when she explores the St. Lucian landscape and uses the language of the indigenous ants to form her prayers. Philoctete’s cure owes as much to St. Lucia as it does to Africa. This mixed heritage of the plant carries over to the ritual of healing, which requires bathing Philoctete in “the brew of the root” (246). The basin Ma Kilman fills with sea water is an emblem of the nineteenth century British slave plantations. Ma Kilman feeds the fires with palm and banana leaves that are characteristic of Caribbean foliage. Significantly, the healing bath combines the sea, the St. Lucian forest, African heritage, and the machinations of British colonialism to heal cultural trauma.

Philoctete’s cure concurs with the injunction in “The Muse of History” that Caribbean artists should not mourn the loss of African culture. Philoctete does not gain back the language that he never knew; instead, he finally accepts the absence of this tribal language (248). As Walcott declares in “The Muse of History,” “The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force” (Essays 37). By reconciling himself to his condition, Philoctete can achieve the Adamic perspective that Walcott celebrates in his prose and
poetry, in which the artist does not mourn what was lost but delights in what is present, even if it is in fragmented form. After the restorative bath, Walcott represents Philoctete in these Adamic terms: “So [Ma Kilman] threw Adam a towel. / And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day’s” (248).

In experiencing the Caribbean as Eden, Philoctete does not forget the source of his wound. When he and Achille celebrate Boxing Day by reenacting the dance of the androgynous warriors, which Achille saw in his visionary trip to Africa, the pain returns to him and he weeps (277). This episode illustrates Walcott’s distinction between the mythic understanding of the past, in which past and present exist simultaneously, and the despairing view in which the past is deterministic history. The pain Philoctete experiences is cathartic rather than disabling. Because he no longer perceives racial trauma as a historical condition that limits all future events – it is now as one of several experiences that exist simultaneously – the pain of history ceases to determine Philoctete. Before collective racial suffering ensured his wound would not heal, but following the bath, the wound has lost this power: Philoctete can dance. The pain associated with the history of slavery has become an experience from which Philoctete can draw creative power, rather than a force that inhibits his activity.

Philoctete’s wound functions as an emblem for the psychological dislocation experienced by the entire black community in the Caribbean. Members of this community speak a language and practice a religion that originated with the slave owners. They were forcibly transported to a New World, and their history is a record of oppression and suffering. While Omeros represents the process of identifying with Africa as necessary

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31 Philoctete’s wound closes and becomes a scar, anticipating the link Walcott makes in “The Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory” between the scars in the rebuilt vase and the love required to reassemble the fragments. Philoctete’s scar becomes a visible emblem of the effort required for cultural healing.
for coming to terms with this history, Philoctete’s cure ultimately centres on identifying with the island. By accepting the loss of African language, Philoctete sees the island in Edenic terms: he is situated at a new beginning and all things are possible in the future. At the moment of this epiphany, Walcott draws attention to the link between character and place: “But now, quite clearly the tears trickled down his face / like rainwater down a cracked carafe of Choiseul”32 (248). Similarly, at the opening of the poem, when Philoctete refuses to explain the source of his cure, the narrator reveals that the waterfall, La Sorcière, knows his secret and pours it out with the falling water.33 By linking Philoctete with the natural world, Walcott implies that Philoctete’s sense of cultural healing results from a new sense of his indigenous status. Walcott equates cultural healing and indigeneity, motivating his efforts to represent the fishermen and Ma Kilman as intrinsically bound to the land. Just as Philoctete finds healing from his historical dislocation by identifying himself as native to St. Lucia, so too will the entire black community find healing in recognizing themselves as linked to the natural world.

In “The Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory,” Walcott declares that the literature of the Caribbean stems from the careful observation of indigenous life:

That is what I have read around me from boyhood, from the beginning of poetry, the grace of effort. In the hard mahogany of woodcutters: faces, resinous men, charcoal burners; in a man with a cutlass cradled across his forearm … all fragments of Africa originally but shaped and hardened and *rooted* now in the island’s life, illiterate in the way leaves are illiterate; they do not read, but they are

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32 Choiseul is a village in St. Lucia noted for its crafts.
33 The opening of the poem is the chronological end point of Walcott’s narrative, so this bond between Philoctete and the waterfall follows his cure.
there to be read, and if they are properly read, they create their own literature. 

(*Essays* 81, my emphasis)

He then goes on to contrast this respectful representation of indigenous life with the grotesque version of the Caribbean in the tourist industry:

But in our tourist brochures the Caribbean is a blue pool into which the republic dangles the extended foot of Florida as inflated rubber islands bob and drinks with umbrellas float towards her on a raft. This is how the islands from the shame of necessity sell themselves; this is the seasonal erosion of their identity, that high-pitched repetition of the same images of service that cannot distinguish one island from the other, with a future of polluted marinas, land deals negotiated by ministers, and all of this conducted to the music of Happy Hour and the rictus of a smile. (*Essays* 81)

In *Omeros*, Walcott equates complicity with this deforming version of the Caribbean to damnation. The inferno inside the volcano holds various figures who have betrayed the island:

These were the traitors

who, in elected office, saw the land as views

for hotels and elevated into waiters

the sons of others, while their own learnt something else. (289)

Tourism becomes the vehicle through which the sins of St. Lucians are fully realized. The reference to waiters recalls an earlier, comic, passage in the poem in which, while fawning over tourists, Lawrence the waiter stumbles in the sand because of his leather
shoes (23). On a small scale, the waiter cannot move in harmony with his natural environment because he insists on wearing footwear that tourists would deem suitable for a servant. The friction between the waiter and his environment results from the commercial attitude that defines the figures in Hell and that contributes to the “seasonal erosion” of the identity of the islands (Essays 81). For Walcott, the tourist industry replaces the individuality of persons with the sterile, repeated image of the servant, eroding the identity of the island’s inhabitants.

In Omeros, indigenous status is a spiritual condition because it is based on a sense of kinship to the natural world, rather than on genealogy. All of the characters in the poem are conscious of the role of migration in their lives, whether it is the forced ancestral migration associated with the black characters, or the voluntary migration of British expatriates like Maud and Dennis Plunkett. For Walcott, paradoxically, migration can be the beginning of indigenous culture, since, as the following passage indicates, fragments from other cultures develop in combination with each other and through contact with local conditions:

Why waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea-floor?
Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor,

deeper than it seems on the surface; slowly but sure, it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time. (296)
The pun on culture suggests that a whole and cohesive culture can grow from the fragments of the past. Coral acts as a metaphor for cultural growth, in which the start of process appears fragmented, but over time the entity becomes an organic whole.

Because Walcott bases indigeneity on the interaction between the individual and the island, this sense of rootedness is available to all regardless of race. Plunkett, who is white, British, and feels nostalgia for the British Empire, can hear the voices of the forest, leading him to realize that St. Lucia has become his true home:

England seemed to him merely the place of his birth.
How odd to prefer, over its pastoral sites –
reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth –

these loud-mouthed forests on their illiterate heights,
these springs speaking a dialect that cooled his mind
more than pastures with castles! (61)

Plunkett feels in tune with a world he has been raised to believe inferior to the English countryside. His sense of Englishness never disappears, but like the coral, he develops an indigenous identity based on his interaction with the St. Lucian locale.  

In granting indigenous status to both black and white characters, Walcott’s concept of indigeneity is distinct from that of Eliot and Crane. As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, we can understand indigenization in *Omeros* by comparison

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34 In granting Plunkett indigenous status, Walcott seems willing to distinguish between tourists, who participate in exploiting the island, and other visitors who eventually become indigenous. In Plunkett’s case, the process is possible because he appreciates the natural world, runs a farm that draws him into the local economy, and recognizes the artificial class distinctions between the British expatriates and the black community. These traits provide the foundation for Plunkett to view himself as part of the St. Lucian community, rather than as separate from it.
with its modernist intertexts, and we can organize this comparison according to the epic tradition of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. All three poets represent indigenous status as an identity that results from cultural activity rather than from strict genealogy. For Eliot, however, simultaneous access to both local culture and the great European tradition is the sole privilege of the English. Satellite cultures such as the Irish, the Scottish, and the Welsh must mediate through the English before they can be part of Europe. Similarly for Crane, indigeneity is a quality that must be taken from Indians and appropriated by white Americans. While Crane espouses a spiritual connection to the natural world, the choice is not one between gardens and empires as Maud Plunkett suggests in *Omeros* (254). Instead, paradoxically, the imperial conquest of the New World, in which Europeans supersede the Indians, is necessary for unmediated access to the garden. Crane’s myth of the origins of culture also becomes a myth about the extinction of the Indian, in which the race blends with the stars after transferring their vitality to the narrator. *Omeros* follows a similar pattern to *The Bridge*, using the extinct Aruac tribe (now spirits in the trees) to bless and indigenize the black fishermen. This attempt to reconcile the memory of genocide in the landscape with the present day use of the forest is intriguing, but the implications are ultimately ambiguous. The event is positive in so far as Walcott refuses to naturalize the historical trauma of colonial violence to the Aruac tribe and the fishermen unleash the creative energy attendant on canoe-building by their initial act of violence. But creativity cannot redeem genocide. By linking the process of genocide with the fishermen’s limited form of logging, Walcott generates a comparison and possibly an ambiguous equation between two acts of violence radically disparate in magnitude and intent. Walcott does not shy away from the topos of imperialism because he is

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35 Paul Breslin makes a similar criticism of *Omeros* with reference to passages concerning Walcott’s travels.
determined not to react simply against imperialism. In Omeros, Walcott seems to aspire to make use of imperialist images and rhetoric while twisting them to his own purposes in a display of mastery. The result is not always successful, as in the canoe-building episode or the metaphoric links between the black population and the ants. Walcott’s struggle to control imperialist topoi suggests the difficulty in decontextualizing images from the patterns of self-denigration that imperialism seeks to impose on the colonized world.

Walcott is successful, however, at transcending the imperialist limitations of Eliot’s and Crane’s versions of indigenization by desegregating access to the process. Whereas Eliot and Crane envision the process as moving to benefit one national (and in Crane’s case racial) community, Walcott indicates that indigeneity is available potentially to all. British expatriate Dennis Plunkett can become indigenous on an island in which he unwillingly carries the stigma of the colonizer. Omeros suggests that the indigenous person should never cease to appreciate the mystery and terrible beauty that is essential to the natural world. Achille and Philoctete experience this dual quality of nature during an ocean voyage when a whale lifts the canoe completely out of the water and then sets it back down:

He [Achille] has seen the shut face of thunder,
he has known the frightening trough dividing the soul
from this life and the other, he has seen the pod
burst into spray. The bilge was bailed out, the sail

in North America and the juxtaposed narrative of Catherine Weldon and United States oppression of the Sioux. Breslin notes, “The moral parallelisms grow ever larger and vaguer” (262). These flaws seem to me to be moments where Walcott has lost control of what Ramazani calls “Walcott’s free riding of the wound trope across moral and historical divisions” in order to recognize “the culturally webbed history of the Caribbean, of his ancestors, and of his imagination” (71).
turned home, their wet, salted faces shining with God. (303)

For Achille and Philoctete, the whale is the living example of the fear and awe associated with God. Throughout *Omeros*, Walcott uses symbols derived from mythic concepts to represent the divine in nature. The ghosts of the Aruacs, the incurable wound, the African gods in the forest, the voices among the leaves, and the vision of Hell all function to mediate between the concrete, material world of the St. Lucian landscape and the abstract conception of cultural vitality that Walcott argues can only be realized by our interactions with the natural world.

The ambitious nature of *Omeros* manifests itself in Walcott’s strategy of both imitating and seeking to transcend the strategies used by Crane and Eliot to represent indigeneity. Walcott cannot fully escape the imperialist implications of indigenizing a population through myth, but these implications do not drown out the reverence for nature and the emphasis on creativity in his cultural vision. Walcott articulates these life-affirming qualities in part by deploying a poetics of indigeneity that adheres to patterns established by Crane and Eliot. This process suggests an inherent ambiguity in utilizing modernist poetics in a postcolonial milieu, creating in *Omeros* a narrative that simultaneously affirms of the beauty of St. Lucian culture and yet falls short of achieving the Adamic perspective in which imperialism ceases to constrain the artistic vision.
“History,” declares Stephen Dedalus, “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” This quotation from the second chapter of *Ulysses* is the epigraph for Walcott’s 1974 essay, “The Muse of History,” and sixteen years later it still effectively summarizes Walcott’s understanding of history in *Omeros* (1990). That history - both as an abstract concept and shorthand for narratives from the past - is crucial to Walcott’s idea of cultural healing should not come as a surprise. As I discussed in the introduction, one of the defining features of the modern epic is to engage with the past by reviving important but forgotten cultural knowledge. Additionally, the epic retells narratives that constitute key legacies for the modern world. Achille’s visionary return to his African ancestors, Philoctete’s agony over the trauma of the middle passage, Plunkett’s obsession with eighteenth-century naval wars, and the narrator’s world tour of the cities of empire are all different manifestations of the poem’s attempt to encapsulate the legacy of the past in St. Lucia. It is important to distinguish the past and history, which for Walcott are entirely separate entities. In *Omeros*, Walcott implicitly argues what he explicitly declared in “The Muse of History”: that History (which for Walcott is usually capitalized) is not truth, but a hegemonic narrative originating from metropolitan centres that debilitating the postcolonial subject and does not offer a productive means of confronting the pain and sorrow inherent in the legacy of imperialism. As is the case with Stephen Dedalus, Walcott sees history as a malevolent construct of oppression rather than an objective record of past events.\footnote{\textit{Omeros} still partakes in the epic tradition of narrating key segments of the past, but he rejects the language of equating history with cultural tradition, legacy, or any other positive facet of the past as in}
By denying the validity of history as a means of understanding the past, Walcott must find an alternate model for engaging with preceding time so that the postcolonial subject can find cultural healing. Though Walcott toys with metaphors of amnesia in “The Muse of History,” his ultimate strategy for confronting the legacy of imperialism centres on perceiving the past as embedded in the landscape and as a tradition of cultural practices that exist simultaneously in the present moment. These two strategies are both key components of the project of cultural healing in Omeros. As with the other aspects of cultural healing discussed in previous chapters, Walcott develops these strategies by both imitating and seeking to transcend the limitations of various modernist intertexts. In this case, the key modernist predecessor to Walcott’s thinking on the past is T.S. Eliot. The Waste Land, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and Notes Towards a Definition of Culture in particular offer a model for representing the landscape as a palimpsest and for understanding tradition as a simultaneous order that exists in the present moment. While these strategies endow the characters in Omeros with empowering forms of tradition and a sense of cultural wholeness, they also lead them, especially Walcott’s narrating persona, towards forms of nostalgia implicated in imperialist mindsets. Walcott explicitly represents the struggle with nostalgia in the characters’ simultaneous desire to make the past part of their lives and to overcome its limitations. By interrogating his own alternative to history, Walcott signals his break with Eliot, whose own approach to the past is much less critical of inherent nostalgia and the resulting hierarchies in articulating a vision of cultural wholeness. By examining how Eliot’s writing functions as an intertext

Pound’s definition: “the epic is a poem containing history” (LE 86). In fact, part of Walcott’s rejection of the epic label for Omeros stems from his perception that the genre is synonymous with the patronizing power of History: “One reason I don’t like talking about an epic is that I think it is wrong to try to ennable people … And just to write history is wrong. History makes similes of people, but these people are their own nouns” (Hamner 397).
for Walcott’s approach to the past, we can see again, as with the pattern of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* that was the focus of the preceding chapters, both the utility and the limitations of modernist poetics in the postcolonial milieu of *Omeros*.

**What is History?**

In “The Muse of History,” Walcott explicitly attacks linear narratives of the past. According to Walcott, envisioning each successive moment as progressing inexorably towards a better state of existence cannot be anything other than a monstrous falsehood. For Walcott, this mode of representing the relation between past and present is “History,” a hegemonic construct originating from Europe. It locates European civilization as the reference point and defines time according to the evolving changes in European life. The advent of industrialization, modernization, and finally, a global economy signal the inevitable development of “civilization.”

Within this narrative, the history of the “New” world is defined according to a European agenda. It is a place Europeans explore, conquer, civilize, and ultimately relinquish to their former slaves when their own evolving sense of human rights has reached a critical juncture. This pattern forms the narrative of progress, which for Walcott, in the context of the Caribbean, is, quite literally, a form of insanity:

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2 These notions of linear history and progress are closely linked to the epic tradition. In his discussion of imperial ideology and epic form, David Quint notes that the imperial narrative constructs a linear form of history in which each step moves closer to the ultimate goal of an empire that transcends time. In the case of the Portuguese epic *Os Lusiadas*, the empire will circumnavigate the globe; it will be an empire on which the sun never sets (33). Quint goes on to note, “The completion of this circle implies, in fact, a kind of timeless cessation of history itself, the ultimate dream of imperial power. With this goal, epic linearity – the sequential linking of events – becomes a teleology: all events are led, or dictated, by an end that is their cause” (33). Quint’s imperial teleology posits a direct correspondence between the expanding spatial territory of empire and the linear progression of time. A chronological understanding of time facilitates ideas of progress, evolution, and destiny all of which combine in images of imperial mastery of the globe.
The vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time, of a dominated future. Its imagery is absurd. In the history books the discoverer sets a shod foot on virgin sand, kneels, and the savage also kneels from his bushes in awe. Such images are stamped on the colonial memory, such heresy as the world’s becoming holy from Crusoe’s footprint or the imprint of Columbus’s knee. (*Essays* 41)

Walcott’s phrase, “dominated future,” indicates that progress masks strategies of mastery and oppression, strategies that were once employed by the overt imperialist machinery of colonialism and have now been adopted by the partially masked imperialist forces of the tourist industry (and its consumers in North America and Europe).¹ Progress privileges the viewpoint of these consumers, an idea Anne McClintock supports when she declares that, within imperialist discourse, the term “progress” frequently suggests the following temporal logic: “from primitive pre-history, bereft of language and light, through the epic stages of colonialism, post-colonialism and enlightened hybridity” (85). This sequence privileges both colonizers and metropolitan centres as the inherent standard by which “third-world” progress is measured. Moreover, in order to be “progressing,” a nation must be imitating the economic models of the United States:

The first seismic shift in the idea of ‘progress’ came with the abrupt shift in the US Third World policy in the 1980’s. Emboldened in the 1950’s by its economic ‘great leap forward’ (space, again, is time) the US was empowered to insist globally that other countries could ‘progress’ only if they followed the US road to mass-consumption prosperity. W.W. Rostow’s ‘Non-Communist Manifesto’

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¹ Svetlana Boym defines progress as “not only a narrative of temporal progression but also of spatial expansion” (10). This definition aligns closely with Quint’s understanding of imperial teleology in which spatial expansion directly corresponds to the movement towards the future.
envisaged the so-called ‘developing’ nations as passing through similar stages of development, out of tradition-bound poverty, through an industrialized modernization overseen by the US, the World Bank and the IMF, to mass-consumer prosperity. (McClintock 93)

This pattern in the globalized vision of progress continues the patronizing social hierarchies endemic to colonialism in the form of tourist-based economies. The reference points for determining “progress” remain outside the Caribbean in the same manner as “History.”

Walcott shares McClintock’s recognition of the pervasive influence of the United States in the global economy. In his essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry” (1974), his particular concern is the influence on cultural identity: “We live in the shadow of an America that is economically benign yet politically malevolent. The malevolence, because of its size, threatens an eclipse of identity, but the shadow is as inescapable as that of any previous empire. But we were American even while we were British, if only in the geographical sense, and now that the shadow of the British Empire has passed through and over us in the Caribbean, we ask ourselves if, in the spiritual or cultural sense, we must become American” (Hamner 51). In Omeros this economic imitation of the United States initiates a cultural imitation that degrades the Caribbean. Achille sees Helen and his village of Gros Îlet becoming cheaper because of their assimilation into US mass-culture:

She was selling herself like the island, without any pain, and the village did not seem to care
that is was dying in its change, the way it whored
away a simple life that would disappear
while its children writhed on the sidewalks to the sounds
of the DJ’s fresh-water-Yankee-cool-Creole. (111)

For Achille, the “simple life,” linked to traditional fishing practices, ensures the vitality
of the village community. Once these practices disappear under pressure from the
encroaching “progress” of American culture, the life of the village will die as well.

In addition to the neo-imperialist thinking behind “progress,” the other problem
with the concept for Caribbean culture is that progress, along with history, assumes
continuity from one historical moment to the next. As Edouard Glissant observes,
however, such an assumption only exacerbates the problem of cultural alienation in the
Caribbean. For Glissant, the French Caribbean is “the site of a history characterized by
ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade” (61). Consequently, the
daily reality does not form a continuum but highlights the discontinuity between nature
and culture. As Glissant goes on to note, “Methodologies passively assimilated, far from
reinforcing a global consciousness or permitting the historical process to be established
beyond the ruptures experienced, will simply contribute to worsening the problem” (61).
Historical consciousness could not gradually evolve as it does in Europe, enabling,
according to Glissant, “a totalitarian philosophy of history.” Instead, historical
consciousness in the Caribbean “came together in the context of shock, contradiction,
painful negation, and explosive forces” (62).
Walcott uses the figure of Philoctete to articulate such an understanding of Caribbean history as rupture and painful negation. Within the poem, Philoctete links the individual psychological problem of post-traumatic-stress disorder to the wider scope of cultural legacy. The incurable sore on Philoctete’s shin is a combination of a physical wound, literary inheritance from his namesake in *The Iliad*, and legacy of the collective suffering of his slave ancestors, whose lost language and culture he mourns. At one point, Philoctete attacks the yams in his garden, crying, “*Salope!* You all see what it’s like without roots in the world” (21, Walcott’s emphasis). His irrational rage is doubled back on himself as he falls to the ground racked with pain, suggesting that he is punished by God for striking against the bounty of nature and that he undergoes a traumatic cycle of rage and pain. In fact, Philoctete’s painful relation to his cultural past closely parallels what Cathy Caruth describes as the psychological process of trauma. According to Caruth, trauma is defined not as the recognition of the threat of death, but “precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact, that not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known” (62, Caruth’s emphasis). Consequently, the repeated experience of the traumatic event through dream and flashback is “the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life.” As Caruth goes on to note, for the victim of trauma, survival becomes “an endless testimony to the impossibility of living” (62).

Caruth applies this description to individuals who suffer from a traumatic *event*, but her description works well for Philoctete’s response to traumatic *absence*. The loss of language and cultural practices cannot be felt fully until after the fact. In fact, the awareness of a missing legacy arises fully only in contrast to an existing one with which
the individual cannot identify. In the English Caribbean, the de facto model of coherent culture is the English literature and history taught in the schools. But, as Kamau Brathwaite points out, this cultural model actively dislocates children from their immediate environment. The pervasive model of History, seamless linear progress, cannot make Philoctete’s sense of rupture comprehensible: he desires continuity with his African ancestors but can find no linguistic or cultural bridge to make them seem anything other than alien and himself other than isolated. “History,” as Walcott defines it, serves only to shame Philoctete, reminding him that his own legacy lacks the linguistic continuity, narrative of economic expansion, and entrenched cultural practices that the “European” metropolitan centres define as the norm.

In “The Muse of History,” Walcott summarily rejects History as carrying the potential to heal wounds such as what Philoctete suffers in *Omeros*. “In the New World,” Walcott comments, “servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair” (*Essays* 37). He goes on to note that “The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force” (*Essays* 37). In particular, Walcott repudiates the narrative of redemption associated with progress. Walter Benjamin asserts in “Theses on the

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4 In *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984), Brathwaite asserts, “We are more excited by [the English] literary models, by the concept, of, say, Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood than we are by Nanny of the Maroons, a name some of us didn’t even know until a few years ago. And in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow, for instance – the models are all there for the falling of the snow – than of the force of the hurricanes which take place every year. In other words, we haven’t got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of snow” (8-9).

5 Glissant also makes this link between the individual psyche and history, describing history as a mental disease for the Caribbean subject: “Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, “emancipation” in 1848 as reactivation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of ‘returning to those things of the past’ as a possible manifestation of the neurotic fear of this past? Would it not be useful and revealing to investigate such a parallel?” (66).
Philosophy of History” that “our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption” (254). Consequently, the past holds a claim on the present for what Benjamin calls its “weak Messianic power” to redeem potentially that which has come before. In both “The Muse of History” and Omeros, Walcott implies, however, that the legacy of slavery is irredeemable. For Walcott, as for Benjamin, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 256). Rather than resolve this paradox, Walcott argues that it must simply be accepted. At the end of “The Muse of History,” Walcott announces that he has neither the inclination nor the power to pardon those who participated in the slave trade. Instead, Walcott makes an address “to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me” in addition to the ancestor “in the filth-ridden gut of the slave ship,” in which he gives “the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seemed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift” (Essays 64). Yet, as Philoctete’s suffering demonstrates, accepting the inherent wonder in this composite of two worlds is not easily done. While “The Muse of History” celebrates the inherent otherness of the “New” World for the Caribbean artist, albeit with bitter recognition of its attendant pain, in Omeros, Walcott posits the need to overcome this otherness. In Walcott’s epic poem, to be at home in the world, both geographically and temporally, constitutes cultural healing.
Eliot’s Tradition and the Landscape as Palimpsest

According to Michel de Certeau, the fact that historiography separates “its present time from a past” is not a self-evident aspect of time, but a uniquely Western cultural construct, part of a more general pattern in which “intelligibility is established through a relation with the other” (25). For Walcott, part of finding a productive alternative to History means overcoming this pattern of objectifying the past as other and recognizing its existence in the present day. His model for doing so comes from Eliot’s definition of tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and in the intersections of the past and present in *The Waste Land*. In order to understand tradition in *Omeros*, we need to consider Eliot’s definition of the proper historical sense: the artist writes “with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (SP 38). Tradition, as defined by Eliot, circumvents the linear constraints of time, enabling the artist to overcome the alienation between past and present that Certeau identifies as endemic to Western historiography. For Walcott, the simultaneous nature of tradition liberates the artist to use concepts from the past without obsessing about notions of imitation and originality. Indeed, liberating oneself from chronology is also a means of resisting the racist attitudes towards black artists, an issue Walcott discusses at the beginning of his lecture “Reflections on *Omeros*.” Romare Bearden, an African-American painter, is the starting point for Walcott’s lecture, and an example of the artist who recognizes the simultaneity of tradition. Bearden’s use of cutout collages prompts critics to compare his work to ancient Greek design, a comparison that Walcott notes
carries with it a patronizing sense of Bearden’s imitative status. This is, Walcott argues, a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of art:

Yes, they may be like Greek vases, but they are *simultaneous* concepts, not *chronological* concepts. The black cutout of a diving figure is no more historical than the silhouette of a Greek athlete on a vase. It’s not a question of where you stop, since you then have to go from the Greek silhouette back to the Egyptian profile, et cetera. If you think of art merely in terms of chronology, you are going to be patronizing to certain cultures. But if you think of art as a simultaneity that is inevitable in terms of certain people, then Joyce is a contemporary of Homer (which Joyce knew). (240-41 Walcott’s emphasis)

By linking Joyce and Homer as artistic contemporaries in dialogue with each other, Walcott echoes “*Ulysses, Order and Myth,*” in which Eliot observes that Joyce manipulates “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (SP 177). The simultaneous nature of tradition makes such manipulations possible as when Omeros, who is simultaneously an African griot, local blind poet Seven Seas, and Homer, leads Walcott through the volcano, which is at once his own personal Hell and the Inferno from Dante’s *Divine Comedy.* By asserting the simultaneity of tradition, Walcott dismisses the notion that he is trying to make St. Lucia *as good as* ancient Grecian or Fourteenth-century Italian culture, and instead indicates that these literary models facilitate his sense of the joy and pain of St. Lucia with its intersecting cultural traditions.

Because it disrupts chronological schema, Eliotic tradition facilitates Walcott’s inclination in *Omeros* to make place a more fixed reference point than time. In *Omeros* the landscape contains time: it becomes a repository for cultural memory. This topos of
the landscape retaining memory occurs in *The Aeneid* and *The Prelude*, which along with *The Waste Land* and *Omeros*, establishes a pattern within the epic tradition.\(^6\) *Omeros* seems most closely modeled on *The Waste Land*, in which landscape retains cultural history, effectively functioning as a palimpsest. Though the term palimpsest originally referred to a manuscript in which the initial script had been effaced to make room for new writing, the meaning extends to the way the landscape functions as the repository of traces of past culture: “a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multi-layered record” (*OED*). For Eliot, the Thames carries fragments of history, which he associates alternately with beauty and death. The river carries images of courtship between Elizabeth and Leicester (279-89), the architecture of Christopher Wren (263-65), *The Tempest* (191), the violent death of Pia de Tolomei from Dante’s *Purgatorio* (292-94), the Rhinemaidens of Wagner (277-78), and the waste and sterility of the present represented in the figure of the slimy rat crawling across the bones on the river bank (187-88). The beauty and civilization of Elizabeth and Leicester’s courtship and Wren’s architecture stand in sharp contrast to Pia’s violent death and the rats on the shore, suggesting the continuous possibility of cultural renewal that exists simultaneously with the garbage on its banks and the polluting oil and tar excreted by the modern industrial landscape.

Walcott also represents water in *Omeros* as a reservoir of memory in order to emphasize the fragmented history of the Caribbean. Achille absorbs a series of memories

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\(^6\) In *The Aeneid*, when the voice of Polydorus speaks to Aeneas as he pulls up the roots of the trees, the distinction between landscape and text disappears. In this passage, the earth narrates history to Aeneas. In *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth narrates his travels across Salisbury Plain, he suddenly has a vision of the “dim Ancestral Past” (13.329) in which he sees “A single Briton clothed in Wolf-skin vest, / With shield and stone-axe, stride across the wold” (13.321-22), which seems dependent on his proximity to Stonehenge.
concerning the violent imperialism in the Caribbean as he returns from his vision of ancestral Africa. He reaches his canoe by first walking along the sea bed and then slowly rising from the depths. Walcott makes the palimpsestic nature of the sea explicit when he notes, “the parchment overhead / of crinkling water recorded three centuries / of the submerged archipelago” (155). As part of his vision Achille witnesses the Sephardic Jews fleeing the inquisition in Portugal, the prison of Toussaint L’Ouverture, the first boat to bring indentured labour from India to Trinidad, and the Battle of the Saints between Britain and France (155-56). These events unfold as a series of historical fragments. Each image functions as a metonym for a complex narrative of imperialist oppression and the subsequent flight and/or resistance of its victims. History in the Caribbean arises from repeated ruptures of everyday life. Walcott’s use of fragmented images highlights this sense of rupture and suggests that narratives of pain and suffering cannot form a coherent and enabling history of the Caribbean.

Throughout *Omeros*, when Walcott ties specific historical narratives to parts of the land or Caribbean sea, he engages in a process of imaginatively remapping the St. Lucian topography. The dominant forces in conceptualizing the landscape are imperialist History and tourism. Both privilege the evolving understanding of land from the perspective of the colonizer/tourist rather than the colonized/native. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said notes that imperialism is “an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control” (225). In effect, the colonial enterprise requires the mapping of both imaginative and physical space according to the industries and cultural practices of the
colonizer. In order to achieve liberation, according to Said, the colonial artist must deterritorialize the imaginative landscape created by colonial mapping:

One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land. And with that came a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, and identifications, all of them quite literally grounded on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths, and religions – these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people. (226)

While Said situates this project in the early stages of nationalist resistance against political oppression, the process of reclaiming, renaming, and reinhabiting both land and history carries on after political liberation. In *Omeros*, Walcott engages in simultaneous and interrelated acts of deterritorializing St. Lucia’s landscape and protecting its past from the neo-imperialist forces of tourism.

One of the key landscapes that must be imaginatively remapped in Walcott’s writing is the beach. As he makes clear in “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” coastal space no longer belongs to the inhabitants of the Caribbean, but to the tourist industry that transforms the Caribbean into a swimming pool (*Essays* 81). The polemical language of this passage echoes Jamaica Kincaid’s essay *A Small Place* (1988), in which she discusses a similar shameful tourist economy in her native Antigua.7 For Edouard

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7 Kincaid is even more explicit than Walcott in linking the current economy to the power dynamics of imperialism: “The word ‘emancipation’ is used so frequently, it is as if it, emancipation, were a contemporary occurrence, something everybody is familiar with. And perhaps there is something in that, for an institution that is often celebrated in Antigua is the Hotel Training School, a school that teaches Antiguans how to be good servants, how to be a good nobody, which is what a servant is. In Antigua, people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and their celebration of the Hotel Training School … people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with
Glissant, the problems that both Walcott and Kincaid attribute to the tourist industry necessitate new explorations of the history present in the Caribbean landscape. While conducting a panoramic description of Martinique reminiscent of the cultural interpretation of natural features in John Ruskin’s *The Nature of Gothic*, Glissant observes, “These beaches are up for grabs. The tourists say they own them. They are the ultimate frontier, visible evidence of our past wandering and our present distress” (11). Glissant then ends his description of the landscape by declaring, “Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history” (11). This description implies that the task facing Martinicans is to articulate the link between history and landscape in order to supplant the arrogant claims of ownership offered by the tourist industry. In *Omeros*, Walcott adopts a similarly combative stance towards tourism, with the additional emphasis that narratives involving the past and the landscape must never be a commodity. Though Philoctete will display his scar to tourists when he meets them on the beach he will not explain how he was healed, noting, “It have some things … worth more than a dollar” (4). Since Philoctete’s cure is intimately bound up in the St. Lucian forest, his reticence is a gesture of preserving the sacred status of the natural world.

The contrasting perspectives of the beach as sacred place and tourist playground appear in the opening pages of *Omeros* and continue through the rest of poem. Philoctete speaks the poem’s first words, pandering to tourists by recounting an earlier time on the beach when he and several other fishermen hollowed out logs to make canoes (7-8). The exploitive nature of the encounter becomes clear when the narrator notes sardonically that slavery and emancipation and the fact that they are governed by corrupt men, or that these corrupt men have given their country away to corrupt foreigners” (Kincaid 55).
the tourists, “try taking [Philoctete’s] soul with their cameras” (3), and that Philoctete offers to display his healed scar for “extra silver” (4). Yet, the story Philoctete tells is the complex account of repeating colonial violence to produce canoes, objects of utility and beauty. It emphasizes the effort and craftsmanship required for canoe building, and contrasts sharply with the subsequent scene on the hotel beach where Walcott represents Lawrence the waiter in both comic and pathetic terms as he struggles to maintain his balance in his leather-soled shoes before stopping to ogle the breasts of a tourist (23).

Conversely, Philoctete maintains a greater degree of dignity by refusing to reveal how his sore was cured. Philoctete may be a source of local colour to the tourists, but the story he tells them carries significant import for the relation between past and present on the island. The result is that Walcott makes us aware of two audiences to Philoctete’s story: ourselves as sensitive readers who recognize its sacred qualities through Walcott’s poetry, and the ignorant, pleasure-loving tourists, who see it as a backdrop to their tanning session. At the end of the poem this struggle to determine who will imaginatively map the beach remains unresolved. Achille does not find a solution to the increasing encroachments of tourism on his traditional fishing practices, but the final image emphasizes the practices of the local inhabitants. Achille returns from fishing at sunset. Walcott ends the poem with an indication of the eternal role of the sea in the life of Caribbean people, declaring, “When [Achille] left the beach the sea was still going on” (325).

In Omeros, this struggle to establish imaginative control of the seashore is partly determined by whether it will be perceived as an ahistorical backdrop or a point of

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8 See Chapter Three for an extended discussion of this passage.
9 The implicit instructional element of this passage is for us to live up to our own ideals about our sensitive literary nature and not devolve into contemptible tourists.
convergence between past and present. The tourist spots, such as the hotels on the beach, seek to efface the history of the landscape by developing the illusion that the surroundings exist primarily for material gratification. Landscape becomes an object that provides warmth and relaxation. This perspective entails a different form of exploitation from colonialism, as Natalie Melas observes when she notes that determining the meaning of history is not important for tourism:

History, for one thing is irrelevant to tourism, not because it is not manipulable or marketable, but because, to echo Walcott’s sentence, it is not what matters. There is no cultural necessity involved in tourism’s domination and economic exploitation, for these require neither the alibi of civilization’s superiority and its arch and banal commensuration nor the ethical accountability of injury and guilt. Necessary continuities are alien to tourists, for their incursions are eminently transitory, and their relation to the people who inhabit their destinations are, to use Dean MacCannell’s words ‘temporary and unequal.’ (148)

Unlike colonialism, which seeks to control the narrative of history, tourism empties the landscape of significance except as it pertains to the immediate pleasure of the individual tourist. Achille decries this objectification of nature. At the end of the poem he laments the profit motivated rapacity of other fishermen, who fail to recognize the sacred nature of their interaction with the sea:

[W]as he the only fisherman left in the world
using the old ways, who believed his work was prayer,
who caught only enough, since the sea had to live,
because it was life? (301)\textsuperscript{10}

Walcott links this greed to the vacationer when he uses the metaphor of “ice packed shrimps of pink tourists,” comparing the tourists to the fisherman’s catch. The shrimp also remind the reader of the alternate perspective: the natural world as repository of the past. Achille compares the depleted stock of shrimp in the sea to the “exhausted Caribs in the deep silver mines” (301). This link between economic servitude to the Spanish, the genocide of the Caribs, and present-day tourism serves as a reminder that modern usage of the natural world repeats the patterns of violent exploitation in the past, if now in a more mediated fashion.

These scenes also serve as a positive alternative to the mindless ahistorical perspective on nature encouraged by tourism. The palimpsestic landscape provides a twofold resistance to tourist exploitation facilitated by this ahistoricity. First, Achille, and ultimately the readers of \textit{Omeros}, are able to identify the landscape as a palimpsest, a state of mind in which the vacationers refuse to participate. The idea of multiple cultural imprints is alien to a resort or hotel space, where tourists understand their environment exclusively according to their immediate material desires. Consequently, attaining awareness of the past through the landscape becomes a means of distinguishing those who are genuinely engaged with Caribbean culture, from those who exploit it. Second, a palimpsest implicitly denies the ability of any individual or community in a limited epoch to master the natural world. The history embedded in landscape encompasses and extends

\textsuperscript{10} Walcott also gives voice to this lament for disappearing traditional fishing practices when Achille offers a silent eulogy at the funeral of his arch-rival Hector, who exemplifies the dangers of the tourist industry for the local inhabitants since he trades in his canoe for a transport van. Hector cannot forgive himself for this betrayal of the sea (118, 231), and dies in an accident brought on by his suicidal mode of driving. In his eulogy, Achille praises the fisherman Hector, declaring “no African ever hurled his wide seine at the bay by which he was born with such beauty” (233). This comparison suggests a continuity of practice between the African ancestors and the present day Hector.
well beyond the lifespan of any generation. Walcott highlights this distinction between
the limited individual and the scope of the natural world when he compares the tree-
cutting fishermen to “pygmies” who hacked “the trunks of wrinkled giants for paddles
and oars” (7). Achille also recognizes this distinction when he observes that not only does
the sea have to live, but that it is life (301). Achille’s belief in the holiness of the sea
arises from a network of observations: as a living entity the sea possess agency distinct
from any individual or community; it contains the history of the lives of the Caribbean
and links them together; and it sustains the community, both economically by providing
fish, and culturally, by providing links to the past and to the spiritual realm of God.11
Thus, recognizing the past embedded in landscape and seascape is part of what motivates
Achille’s reverence for the natural world and motivates his efforts to live in sustainable
harmony with nature.

In representing the landscape as palimpsest, Walcott and Eliot follow the
modernist anthropological assumption that land is culture. In The Waste Land, Eliot
transposes directly from his anthropological readings the concept that cultures are
“characterized by, defined by, bounded within, limited to, a stretch of territory”
(Manganaro 35). As Marc Manganaro observes of Eliot’s poem, “The intimate
association of wasted land and wasted people in the poem is figured, as in Eliot’s later
poem ‘The Hollow Men,’ through a landscape that intimately blends nature and culture: a
land of ‘stony rubbish’ (line 20), where April nonetheless is ‘breeding lilacs out of the
dead land, mixing / Memory and desire’ (lines 1-3)” (35-36). Indeed, this understanding
of land as culture highlights the suspense in the poem regarding whether renewal will

11 As I point out in Chapter 2, the sea provides Achille and Philoctete with an immediate experience of the
terror and wonder of the divine presence in nature when a whale nearly capsizes their canoe (Omeros 303).
ultimately occur. While *The Waste Land* expresses ambivalence about the potential for regrowth, Walcott sees the Caribbean as a landscape of strong roots (as embodied in Ma Kilman’s healing flower), which can potentially cure the cultural ailments of characters like Philoctete if they respond to the landscape with reverence and sensitivity.

Philoctete’s cure resides in the landscape, which holds both the medicinal flower that helps cure his sore and the transplanted African gods who empower Ma Kilman’s obeah. As Ma Kilman goes searching in the forest for the healing flower, her own identity merges with the forest as do her memories with the gods present in the landscape. Walcott declares that the gods who “swarmed in the thicket of the grove” also reside in Ma Kilman:

[T]heir sounds were within
subdued in the rivers of her blood. Erzulie,

Shango, and Ogun; their outlines fading, thinner
as belief in them thinned, so that all their power,
their roots, and their rituals were concentrated

in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower.
All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead,
but from whose lineage, as if their veins were their roots,

her arms ululated, uplifting the branches
of a tree carried across the Atlantic that shoots
fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows on our beaches. (242-43)

Walcott’s image of Ma Kilman uplifting the branches of a tree by the power of her ululating (howling) arms suggests that the distinct boundaries between subject and landscape have dissolved. Consequently, the memories in her blood and in the flower merge. Though Walcott leaves gaps in his explanation of the healing process, the key moment, in which Ma Kilman howls in the voice of the original sibyl (245), occurs only after the gods present in the forest awaken her memories of them, enabling her to access the divine source of obeah magic.

By dramatizing how cultural memory can heal the characters in Omeros, Walcott follows the model of The Waste Land in using the past to resist the chaos of the contemporary world. In The Waste Land, Eliot contrasts the traditions of the past with the present to the detriment of contemporary life. The final lines of the poem, in which the narrator makes reference to the “fragments,” which he has “shored against [his] ruins” (431), suggest that moments of beauty from the past function as what Marc Manganaro calls “nuggets of cultural verities representing the minimal stand of certitude against the onslaught of cultural, and interpretive, chaos” (Myth 78). By contrast, the coarse and degrading fragments in the poem arise from contemporary London, a city inhabited by such depressing figures as the typist, the carbuncular clerk, Mr. Eugenides, and Madame Sosostris. Furthermore, the images of chaos and revolution, “hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only” (368-70), suggest that the present cannot provide harmony or stability.

For Eliot, this contrast between past and present takes on a sense of urgency since what is valuable in the past seems to be disappearing rapidly. When the poetic narrator
asks at the end of the poem “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (426), and refers to “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (431), he signals that the poem itself functions as an act of cultural “salvage.” As Manganaro observes, the concept of salvage presumes that what is being retrieved would otherwise be lost: “Eliot, following Frazer, marched out the pure minimal authentic, the cultural ‘facts’… which apparently first emerged from the cultural fount and are just now receding from our grasp into extinction. Those cultural nuggets – myths, poems, gods, holy books, cathedrals – accumulate to form a last-chance purview of World Culture” (Myth 78). Eliot establishes this pattern of articulating what is disappearing at the opening of the poem. The phrase, “mixing memory and desire” (2-3), in the opening lines of the poem, suggests that we long for what has been consigned to the past. Eliot’s footnotes also warn of the disappearing past: “The interior of St. Magnus Martyr is to my mind one of the finest among Wren’s interiors. See The Proposed Demolition of Nineteen City Churches: (P.S. King &Son, Ltd)” (CP 53). The title of Eliot’s source book implies ominously that Wren’s interior will soon exist only in memory. Such gestures emphasize the necessity of salvage and thus valorize Eliot’s poem: The Waste Land identifies itself as an act of heroic memory in response to cultural crisis. By positioning cultural value in a past preserved in the pages of the poem, Eliot establishes his writing as necessary cultural work.

The necessity of cultural “salvage” in The Waste Land suggests a contrasting perspective to the one offered in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” While the poem emphasizes the constant peril of losing aspects of the past which are beautiful, inspiring, and edifying, Eliot’s essay takes the opposite tack, emphasizing that tradition is a process…

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12 This presupposition of culture disappearing even as it is articulated has roots in the field of ethnography, which James Clifford notes in “On Ethnographic Allegory,” presumes “the persistent and repetitious ‘disappearance’ of social forms at the moment of their ethnographic representation” (112-13)
of accumulation. Eliot imagines a collective “mind of Europe,” to which every artist contributes, that determines the evolving nature of tradition. According to Eliot, contemporary artists must be aware that “the mind of Europe” is one, “which changes and this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen” (SP 39, Eliot’s emphasis). If tradition abandons nothing en route, whence springs the anxiety in The Waste Land to salvage a disappearing culture? The resolution to this potential contradiction seems to be the difference between tradition and culture in Eliot’s thinking, a distinction I examine in the Introduction. Eliot conceives of culture as both the entirety of a community and its “distinctive genius” (the practices and traditions that make it unique). Consequently, culture may improve or decline, cohere or fragment, but it never disappears because it is an inherent feature of human society. Additionally, the evolution of culture is beyond the influence of the individual, requiring a collective effort to effect change for the better. Tradition, by contrast, is dependent on individual effort and can potentially disappear from the cultural landscape. Eliot notes that it “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (SP 38). It is the responsibility of the artists to make possible through their creative projects a nexus of great art from the past and the present conditions. The gestures of salvage in The Waste Land imply that as contemporary culture degrades, tradition becomes less accessible to the community and may disappear, further depressing the level of culture (defined as the distinctive genius) in activities practiced by the community. Eliot assumes the role of Jeremiah, crying in the wilderness for the nation to repent and return to cultural practices (defined as activities of the entire community) that will facilitate greater access to
tradition and consequently lead to a flourishing of the “creative genius” (SP 37) of the national community.

In Walcott’s writing, the “distinctive genius” of the Caribbean manifests itself in the polyglossic nature of Caribbean culture, which Walcott articulates through a specifically Caribbean conception of tradition. The manner in which this version of tradition diverges from Eliot’s reveals the limitations of Eliot’s approach to the past in a postcolonial milieu. For Eliot, with his concept of “the mind of Europe” that discards nothing as it evolves, tradition is an organic whole. It stands in opposition to the fragmented state of contemporary culture and promises to initiate the utopian project of reintegrating individual and society into a coherent and vital culture. While Eliot first articulates tradition with regard to literature, he extends the notion in *After Strange Gods* and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* to family, religion, and indigenous community (see Chapter Two). Tradition promises cohesion and meaning in Eliot’s vision for cultural renewal.

Walcott certainly shares Eliot’s frustration with cultural fragmentation and similarly desires new cultural synthesis. Indeed, Charles Pollard observes that both writers aim “to create a provisional sense of cultural order or wholeness out of a multiplicity of cultural sources” (39). While Pollard is certainly correct about the general pattern in both writers’ work, he seems unaware that his qualifying term “provisional,” which accurately describes Walcott’s aims, actually marks a key divergence between the two writers. For Walcott, the fragmented condition of Caribbean culture does not result from the degradation of a previous state of cultural wholeness, but arises from the historical conditions of slavery, indentured labour, diaspora, and the encompassing
practices of colonialism. Consequently, a seamless synthesis of these cultural traditions is not possible because they have been brought to the Caribbean through historical ruptures, violence, and exploitation. In “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” Walcott uses the conceit of a broken vase to describe the artist’s task of assembling a whole out of these fragments: “Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent” (Essays 69). Walcott emphasizes that the “restoration shows its white scars” (Essays 69), and indeed Omeros implies that these scars are not only inevitable, but necessary. The fishermen feel the presence of Aruac spirits when they cut down trees; Philoctete recovers from his wound, but retains a scar. To generate a synthesized Caribbean as a flawless whole would silence the lived experience of generations of ancestors and silence various voices within the Caribbean that inevitably conflict.¹³ In a 1977 interview Walcott challenges Eliot’s notion of the “unbroken arc” of European art, noting that such a concept ignores historical reality:

I can’t say that this [unbrokeness] applies to the Americas. The whole of Western civilization does not share one sensibility … What we have, obviously, is a broken arc; we only know half the arc, and anything beyond that half arc has been torn from our memory. I don’t think that there is anything ‘pure’ on this side of the world; the whole feel of it is multitudinous, several races with various ancestral ties….A sensibility that has been broken and re-created is, I think, a

¹³ One basic example of this continuing cultural conflict in Omeros occurs when Dennis and Maud Plunkett are nearly run off the road by Hector’s transport van. In the ensuing confrontation, Dennis Plunkett takes particular umbrage with being called a honky and states, “I haven’t spent / damned near twenty years on this godforsaken rock / to be cursed like a tourist” (256).
more accurate description of our present situation. (Conversations 41-42 Walcott’s emphasis)

As with the image of the scars, Walcott dismisses any vision of wholeness that masks the pain and rupture of the Caribbean past.

Perhaps most importantly, in order to conceal the ruptures and figurative scars in Caribbean culture, Walcott would have to subsume the varied cultural practices under some master narrative that would replicate the hierarchy of imperialism. By acknowledging the imperfect and provisional nature of cultural synthesis in the Caribbean, Walcott attempts to keep his vision of cultural wholeness free of hegemonic structures. Indeed, the utopian goal implied in “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” is one of free and equal interchange between all cultural influences: I was entitled like any Trinidadian to the ecstasies of their [the Hindu’s] claim, because ecstasy was the pitch of sinuous drumming in the loudspeakers. I was entitled to the feast of Husein, to the mirrors and crêpe-paper of the Muslim epic, to the Chinese Dragon Dance, to the rites of the Sephardic Jewish synagogue that was once on Something Street. I am only one-eighth the writer I might have been had I contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad. (Essays 69)

In Walcott’s ideal polyglossia, all participants share in the ecstasies of varying cultural streams without a sense of loss for a seamless cultural milieu.

Conversely, Eliot is willing to sacrifice egalitarian principles to ensure the coherence of his cultural vision. The section on satellite culture in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture highlights the fact that cultural energy arising from “regional” traditions comes at the cost of political tensions between England and Ireland, Scotland,
and Wales. As I note in Chapter Two, these “regions” energize the English tradition because they are contained within it, and, according to Eliot, pursuing political independence will lower the cosmopolitan nature of these parts of Great Britain. By arguing for the *necessity* of England as the mediating force between these satellites and the rest of Europe, Eliot attempts to deny that consumption and exploitation are inherent to the carefully controlled and hierarchical cultural circulation he deems to be inevitable. This denial is only possible, however, because of Eliot’s assumption that England is *naturally* the mediating and organizing culture to which Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are colourful additions.

This imperialist mindset is also present, in a more implicit form, in *The Waste Land*. As critics such as Paul Douglass have observed, the fragmented form of the poem mimics the ahistorical approach to collecting cultural artifacts that was prevalent in modernist era museums and anthropological collections: “Archaeologists and collectors imported fragments of other cultures to set up in museums and drawing rooms; the poem also ‘exhibits’ objects that, like the Elgin Marbles, were torn from context” (8). Eliot imports Buddhist and Hindu texts as means of propping up the decaying London world, thus textually adhering to the imperialist pattern of bringing resources from the edges of empire to the metropolitan centre.

Many of the sources of chaos and decay in *The Waste Land* originate in foreign sources. The “murmur of maternal lamentation” (368) from the “hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth” (369-70) refers, according to Eliot’s notes to communist uprisings in Easter Europe. But as Douglass suggests, the lines also evoke “swarthy men and women in open desert, kaffiyehs on their heads;
women keening in mourning” (8). Indeed, with the exception of London, the list of falling towers “Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna” reflects the expanding military conquests of the Ottoman Empire that culminated in the siege of Vienna in 1529. By adding London to this list, Eliot suggests that the spreading communist menace may exceed the Ottoman Empire in crossing all of Europe to infect London. Before the appearance of these hordes in the final section of *The Waste Land*, Eliot has already linked much of the self-destructive behaviour of the London residents to foreign sources. The description of Mr. Eugenides – the Grecian, homosexual merchant – and his proposal for a homosexual liaison immediately precedes the grim sexual encounter between the clerk and the typist. This juxtaposition suggests that sterile forms of sexuality originate in foreign climes before being absorbed into London life. Additionally, the narrator opens the description of the neurotic, upper class woman of “A Game of Chess” by comparing her to Cleopatra from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, suggesting again the association of decadence with the Middle East.

**Nostalgia: seduction and resistance**

For Walcott, utilizing Eliot’s strategies in the postcolonial milieu necessitates self-conscious interrogation of these strategies, lest he become complicit in Eliot’s patronizing, metropolitan-driven belief in inevitable cultural hierarchies. In particular, Eliot’s approach to the past easily lends itself to nostalgia, which, for Walcott, is a condition that debilitates the postcolonial artist. In this context I use Svetlana Boym’s definition of nostalgia, “from nostos – return home, and algia – longing;” it is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and
displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii Boym’s emphasis). As a specific example of this romance, Boym cites Georg Lukács who longed for “a totality of existence hopelessly fragmented in the modern age” (25). 14 These definitions are relevant to the postcolonial subject in general, and in particular, they pertain to Philoctete’s position in Omeros. At the start of the poem, he longs for a home and culture (Africa) that never existed for him. His sense of rootlessness is a variation on Lukács’ longing for wholeness of experience; in Philoctete’s case, he seeks continuity between past and present.

In “The Muse of History,” Walcott attacks these forms of nostalgia whether they are directed towards Europe or Africa:

[Most writers’] malaise is an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture and a melancholy at the new, and this can go as deep as a rejection of the untamed landscape, a yearning for ruins. To such writers the death of civilizations is architectural, not spiritual; seeded in their memories is an imagery of vines ascending broken columns, of dead terraces, of Europe as a nourishing museum. They believe in the responsibility of tradition, but what they are in awe of is not tradition, which is alert, alive, simultaneous, but history, and the same is true of the new magnifiers of Africa. For these their deepest loss is of the old gods, the fear that it is worship which has enslaved progress. (Essays 42-43)

Walcott further notes that the writer who fetishizes Africa relies on fragments of speech, gods, and artifacts to construct his cosmology, while the writer who fetishizes Europe despairs of the absence of architectural ruins in the Caribbean and thus turns to celebrate

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14 As I note in the Introduction, Lukács’ model of civilization that embraces totality is Ancient Greece (see The Theory of the Novel 30).
“the rusted slave wheel of the sugar factory, cannon, chains, the crusted amphora of cutthroats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history, not as masochism, as if the ovens of Auschwitz and Hiroshima were the temples of the race” (Essays 44). In both cases, “Morbidity is the inevitable result” (Essays 44) of constructing a fantasy to justify the longing for a lost world.15

Walcott’s recommended solution to this debilitating mindset arises from his definition of “tradition” in the above passage, where he calls it “alert, alive, simultaneous.” As I note earlier, Walcott’s notion of tradition, which enables the postcolonial writer to engage with the past without succumbing to nostalgia, closely follows Eliot’s “historical sense,” in which tradition comprises a simultaneous order with the present moment. In the postcolonial environment, this idea of the simultaneous order eschews the nostalgia in the chronological approach to art and culture that Walcott discusses in “Reflections on Omeros.” Instead of classifying art with a hierarchy based on antiquity, Walcott urges his audience to see tradition as a form of dialogue between the present and the past. Consequently, the traditions of the past become a resource rather than an impossible ideal which contemporary artists cannot achieve.

In Omeros, the Plunketts demonstrate the seductive power of nostalgia in the postcolonial milieu. On their Sunday drive through the mountains, Maud celebrates the undeveloped countryside declaring, “It’s so still. It’s like Adam and Eve all over…Before the snake. Without all the sin” (63). Dennis is aware, however, that the beauty of the

15 Walcott’s contempt for those who fetishize what has been lost is akin to Benjamin’s attack on historians “who wish to relive an era” in “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” According to Benjamin, the sadness necessary to motivate this project is “a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, acedia, which despairs of grasping of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly” (256, Benjamin’s emphasis). The despair of a lost era clouds the judgement, rendering useless their understanding of the past.
landscape depends in part on the subsistence level economy of much of the island. He reflects, “There’s too much poverty below us. Every leaf / defines its limits. All roots have their histories” (63). While Dennis is less inclined than Maud to equate St. Lucia with a prelapsarian world, he contemplates the British Empire with fervent nostalgia. After the war he makes a plan to walk across the British Empire “to watch it go in the dusk” (90). He thinks of himself as “a secular pilgrim to the battles of boyhood” (90), indicating that he identifies with the military exploits of empire. Indeed, for Plunkett the past only carries value in relation to military glory. As a schoolboy, he was taught history by a “crypto-Fascist master” who revered German culture and inspired Plunkett to win an essay-writing contest by declaring, “A few make History. The rest are witnesses” (104).16 This great-man theory of history fuels Plunkett’s admiration for figures like Admiral Rodney (commander of the British forces during the Battle of the Saintes) and leads him to write the history of this battle as a means of honouring St. Lucia.17 For Plunkett, the history of the island is only legitimate if it includes wars significant to European politics.

Walcott, however, undercuts Plunkett’s perspective. Plunkett’s faith in the heroic service of Empire leads him into a comic argument with an iguana, whose presence reminds him of the revisionary historical research of postcolonial academics. Before European colonization, St. Lucia was named Iounalo, by the Aruacs, meaning home of the iguana. The idea of privileging this name over the European one enrages Plunkett:

   Was the greatest battle

16 Whenever he is narrating Plunkett’s story, Walcott capitalizes the term “History” in order to indicate that for Plunkett “History” is not a descriptive term for a field of study, but a force that exists in and of itself.  
17 Plunkett equates Helen with the island, drawing on the former name for St. Lucia of Helen of the West Indies (31). When Plunkett decides, “Helen needed a history” (30), he is referring to both the woman and the island. The two are intrinsically bound together in his imagination as becomes clear from the highly sexual imagery Plunkett uses to describe the island’s geography (103).
in naval history, which put the French to rout,

fought for a creature with a disposable tail

and elbows like a goalie? For this a redoubt

was built? And his countrymen died? For a lizard

with an Aruac name? It will be rewritten

by black pamphleteers, History will be revised,

and we’ll be its villains, fading from the map. (92)

When he rages at the iguana as a representative of the “black pamphleteers” who will rewrite history so that “we’ll be its villains” (92), Plunkett’s “we” refers to the soldiers who fought for the British Empire since he views World War II as a defense of the Empire. This imagined community of warriors highlights both the degree to which Plunkett’s identity is bound up in the glory of Empire and the general absurdity of imperialist egotism, which views the history of colonization as the defining feature of the Caribbean past.

Through the example of Plunkett, Walcott makes the failings of nostalgia clear. By identifying with the British Empire and obsessing about an honourable place in “History,” Plunkett blinds himself to the damage wrought by these ideas on the black population of St. Lucia. He cannot separate the individual acts of heroism done by soldiers in service of the British Empire from the policies and practices of the Empire. Walcott describes Plunkett’s obsession with “History” as a fever (102). Only after Maud’s death does Plunkett fully recover from this obsession:
he forgot the war’s

history that had cost him a son and wife. He read
calmly, and he began to speak to the workmen

not as boys who worked with him, till every name

somehow sounded different. (309)

It takes the death of his wife to shake Plunkett sufficiently from the imagined community
of British warriors so that he can recognize fully the black workmen as equals and
individuals. “History,” as Plunkett understands it, is inextricably bound to nostalgia. It
serves to create barriers between people and reinforces the imperialist mindset that
degrades the black St. Lucian community.

In constructing an imagined community of warriors of empire, Plunkett engages
in a process akin to what Boym calls “restorative nostalgia.” This type of nostalgia
focuses on rebuilding a lost home, usually by way of reviving and codifying traditions
(Boym 41-42). According to Boym, one of the paradoxes of this process is that “the
stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional
values, the more selectively the past is presented” (42). Plunkett’s ideal of heroic service
does not allow him to reflect on any of the less honourable military campaigns in places
like Kenya, New Zealand, and Ireland in which British soldiers shot unarmed civilians.
Nor, for that matter, does Plunkett reflect on how the British government used their
military resources to enforce the unequal economics of colonialism that are one of the
causes for the poverty he can recognize on the island. Instead, when he does think of the
links between imperialism and St. Lucia, he focuses on the beauty of the island, “The
Helen of the West Indies,” a title that makes it the appropriate prize for the long running naval war between Britain and France.

In contrast to the Plunketts, Achille does not let nostalgia guide his engagement with his past, although the prelude to his vision of ancestral Africa suggests he will. After Helen leaves him, Achille begins fishing further off shore, and while on the open sea he suffers from sunstroke and subsequently experiences a hallucination in which all the sailors who drowned in the Caribbean Sea are rising from its depths. This moment of horror sparks “the tribal sorrow that Philoctete could not drown in alcohol” (129). Achille then sees the ghost of his father rise up to the surface, and “for the first time, he asked himself who he was” (130). The sudden link to Philoctete’s “tribal sorrow” implies that Achille’s vision will follow Susan Stewart’s definition of nostalgia: “the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition’s capacity to form identity” (23). The mindset of “tribal sorrow” renders present existence as inauthentic because it lacks continuity with African ancestral origins.

Philoctete, in particular, highlights the danger of this nostalgia. His physical wound symbolizes the paralysis induced by nostalgia: he cannot pursue his livelihood as a fisherman and spends his time in a static routine drinking rum. The temptation for the postcolonial subject towards nostalgia is powerful even for the pragmatic Achille. Yet in his encounter with his ancestral past, Achille’s sorrow does not lead him to value the past more highly than the present, as is the case for Philoctete and Dennis Plunkett. Almost immediately after meeting his ancestor, Afolabe, Achille engages in a debate over the meaning of his ignorance of Africa. Achille does not know the meaning of his own name,
which Afolabe suggests denies Achille a proper identity. Afolabe then castigates Achille for accepting for his generation’s ignorance of “the sounds they were given”:

And therefore, Achille, if I pointed and I said, There
is the name of that man, that tree, and this father,
would every sound be a shadow that crossed your ear

without the shape of a man or a tree? What would it be?

(And just as branches sway in the dusk from their fear
of amnesia, of oblivion, the tribe began to grieve). (138)

This speech reflects both the source of Philoctete’s shame, the loss of language, and Plunkett’s frustration with the process of renaming. Both fear to have the world described in a language with which they feel no personal link. In this case, the ghosts of the past have come to haunt the present and articulate this sense of loss. Achille, however, takes a different perspective in his answer to Afolabe’s questions:

What would it be? I can only tell you what I believe
or had to believe. It was prediction, and memory,
to bear myself back, to be carried here by a swift,

or the shadow of a swift making its cross on water,

with the same sign I was blessed with, with the gift

of this sound whose meaning I still do not care to know. (138)

By asserting that he still does not care to know the meaning of the sound (from Africa), Achille declares his refusal to accept the cultural rupture of the middle passage as
debilitating in the present day. Indeed, this conversation between Achille and Afolabe signals the power of the imagination to overcome this sense of loss. Achille projects part of his psyche, manifesting as his ancestor Afolabe, into the past as a substitute for the lost ancestors. By using this strategy of imaginative projection, Achille prevents his fleeting experience of “tribal sorrow” from becoming the long-term debilitating state of mind from which Philoctete suffers. Instead, Achille emphasizes the blessedness of the imagination that can draw him to Africa by following the flight of the swift. By declaring that “prediction and memory” drew him to Africa, he implies that his vision results from his fragmented knowledge of Africa and his imaginative efforts to assemble these fragments into a whole. His response to Afolabe deemphasizes the importance of authenticity and instead privileges the creative efforts of postcolonial artists to construct an imaginative past.

Though his African heritage remains important to Achille, it is subordinate to his engagement with his Caribbean home. During his vision, Achille feels displaced from his true home, even as he lives among his ancestors:

There was peace

on the waveless river, but the surf roared in his head.

So loaded with his thoughts, like a net with the clear

and tasteless to him river-fish, was Achille (141).

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18 Many of the images from Achille’s stay in Africa echo those in the poem “Heritage” by Countee Cullen. The refrain of the poem, “What is Africa to me?” hints at the speaker’s sense of divided self between his “civilized” identity as an educated African-American and his barely acknowledged sense of kinship with a place he initially characterizes as savage. Achille also implicitly asks what Africa means to him, although his own approach to his ancestry is less conflicted.
Achille continues his livelihood of fishing in his vision, but it yields only “tasteless” river-fish. By diminishing the imaginative power of the past in contrast to the lived experience of the present, Walcott signals that nostalgia draws one away from the vitality of the present moment and that, more specifically, while the imaginative pull of Africa in Caribbean culture has an important role, African culture cannot substitute for the vitality of Caribbean culture based on responses to its unique environment (in the case of Achille, he misses the saltiness of the Caribbean Sea). When Achille returns and begins to reenact the tribal dance he witnessed in his vision, his disinterest in the particulars of the dance’s origins point to how African traditions enhance his Caribbean identity rather than functioning as his primary identity:

Achille explained that he and Philo had done this every Boxing day, and not because of Christmas,

but for something older; something that he had seen in Africa, when his name had followed a swift,

where he had been his own father and his own son. (275)

The repeated term *something* indicates that while Achille recognizes the importance of maintaining African cultural practices, the original meaning of the dance is less important than the fact that Achille performs it of his own volition. Throughout *Omeros*, Achille broods on the pressures created by tourism and American culture in his village. He rages at tourist cameras for simplifying him into a picturesque aspect of the landscape (298-99). The ritual dance provides personal reassurance to Achille and his audience that part of
their past remains independent of these neo-imperialist forces, stemming as it does from a visionary return to Africa.

Despite Walcott’s proscription against nostalgia, however, he and Eliot both share a longing for a pre-mass market culture. Walcott and Eliot both fear what Chris Bongie identifies, with reference to Joseph Conrad’s nostalgia, as the undifferentiated oneness of modernity: “Within the (global) space of this ‘monotonous, undifferentiated oneness’ goods take the form of commodities, mechanically reproducible; value is present only as that which has already been lost; and we ourselves seem no more than the interchangeable parts of a mass society whose fate is inseparable from the impersonalized machinations of the bureaucratic State” (269). Bongie indicates that a homogenized modernity prompts considerable nostalgia: “value is present only as that which has already been lost” (269). This idea is supported by Fred Davis who, in Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia, observes that nostalgia prizes what was “offbeat, marginal, odd, different, secret, and privatized about our former selves” (41). Davis speculates that the reason for this affinity for the eccentric past lies in the fact that what was eccentric remains memorable within the evolving memories of our “life cycle” and thus provides a partial solution to the “existential problem of sustaining continuity of identity” (41) in the face of constant change.

Eliot’s fear of homogenized modernity comes through most clearly in his portrait of the carbuncular clerk and the typist in The Waste Land. As Michael North observes in The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, “The typist who appears next in the passage is a worker named metonymically for the machine she tends, so merged with it, in fact, that she is called a ‘typist’ even at home” (98). North connects this particular
representation to a larger pattern of social critique: “Here the figure of metonymy is used polemically to depict a metonymized society in which individuals are both dismembered and standardized” (98). Eliot similarly describes the young man in synecdochic terms: he is identified only as “carbuncular” (231) and as a “small house agent’s clerk” (232). The sexual encounter, which involves no displayed emotion on the part of either figure, highlights the mechanized quality of both. This mechanization also links them to the factory origins of the products they consume, blurring the distinction between the products and the individuals consuming those products. The typist does not cook, but instead “lays out food in tins” (223), and her divan is covered by a variety of undergarments “stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays” (227), indicating how mass-market products appear in abundance within the sordid and constrained dimensions of her living space. The clerk affects assurance “as a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire” (234), indicating that his mannerisms function as a commodity, but, like the silk hat, fail to conceal the underlying coarseness of the person.

This passage contrasts the sordid realm of modern industrial capitalism and the mythological figure of Tiresias, who originates from a pre-mass market culture. Tiresias notes that he has “foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed” (243-44) and then reflects nostalgically on his previous role as prophet to Oedipus and Creon: “I who have sat by Thebes below the wall” (245). He implies that his prophetic role in the modern world degrades his former importance. Similarly, the clerk and typist stand in stark contrast to the other lovers to whom Eliot alludes in The Waste Land. Tristan and Isolde, Antony and Cleopatra, and Elizabeth and Leicester all appear in the poem and carry associations of passion, beauty, ceremony, and individuality. Their origins in myths and
literature of the past suggest Eliot’s nostalgia for a world and grace and beauty that he locates outside the boundaries of modernity.

Walcott shares this nostalgia for pre-modern life, but differs from Eliot by subjecting his nostalgia to criticism. His nostalgia exists simultaneously with his awareness that it arises from a position of privilege. As he travels on the highway in St. Lucia, he reflects that life independent of the tourist economy of hotels and resorts is disappearing:

that other life going in its “change for the best,”
its peace paralyzed in a postcard, a concrete
future of it all, in the cinder-blocks

of hotel development with the obsolete
craft of the carpenter, as I sensed, in the neat
marinas, the fisherman’s phantom. (227)

Achille’s disgust for the disco\textsuperscript{19} and Walcott’s contempt for Lawrence the waiter indicate that Walcott does not see changes occurring on St. Lucia as “for the best.” He associates development with tourism and tourism with the denigration of the local community as they enter into servitude for tourists, a position that parallels their status under the British Empire. Walcott can recognize, however, that his longing for traditional fishing culture is self-interested:

Didn’t I want the poor
to stay in the same light so that I could transfix

\textsuperscript{19} In two separate passages (111, 301) Achille views the disco as the manifestation of American cultural hegemony which is slowly destroying the life of the village.
them in amber, the afterglow of an empire

preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks
to that blue bus-stop? (227)

Even as he despises the mass-culture associated with tourist development, Walcott indicates that this development may be inseparable from necessary infrastructure such as public transportation. The palm-thatch remains more aesthetically pleasing, but the fact that Walcott engages in this line of thought while identifying himself as a tourist (he is traveling to a hotel) suggests that his preference for the “pre-modern” simplicity of village life is simply a more refined version of tourism. His implicit desire to “transfix [the poor] in amber”\(^20\) indicates that he commodifies the very people he wishes could avoid commodification. Ultimately, \textit{Omeros} never resolves this tension between Walcott’s nostalgia and his pragmatic critique of longing for a simple life. Following Walcott’s trip to the hotel, the narrative cuts to Hector’s funeral, announcing the penalty he paid for renouncing the sea and his craft as a fishermen to run a transport and be part of the tourist industry. Walcott’s self-criticism is a brief moment that does not negate the general pattern in \textit{Omeros} of privileging traditional fishing culture over modern development.

\textbf{Cultural Renewal}

\(^20\) This phrase possibly alludes to the “Envoi” in Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” when he declares the following:

\begin{verbatim}
I would bid them live
As roses might in magic amber laid
Red overwrought with orange and all made
One substance and one colour
Braving time. (229-33)
\end{verbatim}
By representing modernity in terms of sterility and paralysis, Eliot implies the need for cultural transformation, but he fears the unknown changes being wrought by revolution. His allusions to revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe in “What the Thunder Said” express disgust with the manner in which change, however necessary, is occurring. When Eliot describes the atmosphere of revolution as “Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air” (373), he echoes the language of the encounter between the clerk and the typist, which occurs “at the violet hour” (220). The repetition of “Violet” to describe the atmosphere links the world about to be destroyed by revolution with the emotionless sterility and mechanized identity of the clerk and typist, suggesting that what will be destroyed is not worth preserving. In contrast to this overtly negative association, “Cracks,” “reforms,” and “bursts” link the revolution with an approaching thunderstorm, which anticipates the thunder associated with the Upanishads and the message of give, sympathize, and control (399-400). All this sounds positive, but Eliot prefaces these associations with the following lines:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains (367-70)

By using the adjective “swarming,” Eliot invokes the image of infestation, which, when coupled with “maternal lamentation” suggests that this form of change will be tragic.

This passage implies that while change is necessary, the necessary reforms of giving,

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21 Examples of sterility are the repeated comments on the absence of water from the landscape (22-24, 331-59), the abortion undertaken by Lil (159-64), the loveless encounter between the typist and the clerk (238-58), and the proposed homosexual liaison of Mr. Eugenides (206-14). Paralysis manifests itself in the inability of the Hyacinth girl to speak (35-41) and the anonymous figure whose heart will not respond as readily as the boat (419-22).
sympathizing, and controlling will only be found in pre-modern examples, not in revolutionary creed or practice.

While Walcott shares Eliot’s skepticism of political revolution, he is more receptive to the idea of radical cultural change, and, consequently, more critical of his own forays into nostalgia. *Omeros* adheres to the implication in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that useful innovation can only arise in dialogue with the past, but it does not follow the pattern of *The Waste Land* in constructing that dialogue as one between a superior past and a debased present. Though the past is an important resource for Walcott’s project of cultural renewal, the legacy of imperialism with which he must engage overshadows the more positive aspects. The joy that Achille feels in performing an African dance cannot be separated from the history of the slave trade. Indeed, Philoctete weeps anew while performing the dance as he experiences the pain of slavery.

For the postcolonial subject, the fact that the past remains a mixed blessing necessitates a conception of the present that Benjamin calls “the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (261). In other words, the Caribbean artist must allow for the possibility of rupture in the continuity of history, much as it has been ruptured before by the middle passage. The past is an insufficient resource for cultural renewal. The hope for a better future includes the mystery of the unanticipated, uncalculated cultural practice.

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22 Walcott is generally critical of all forms of politics within his poetry, and *Omeros* is no exception. Chapter Twenty of Book Two represents the local election and the rhetoric of change as a complete farce (104-09). Walcott attacks revolution more directly in his poem “The Schooner Flight,” which represents the attempted black power revolution in Trinidad as a misguided waste of youth.

23 “We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (SP 38).
Walcott represents his own willingness to celebrate the mysterious possibility of change through his version of the figure of Adam. For Walcott, Adam is the man without “History;” he is not the figure who eats the forbidden fruit, but is the man who sees a world without echoes of an older culture and undertakes the task of naming the world around him. Consequently, the Adamic perspective in the Caribbean may generate art unlike anything that has come before. In Omeros, Walcott makes use of the Adamic topos, both in reference to Philoctete’s cure, which makes the yard into “Eden. And its light the first day’s “(248), and to his own desire to write poetry without echoes to previous literature (271): a variation on Walcott’s earlier idea of the necessity of amnesia in Caribbean art. Though writing without echoes is manifestly impossible, Walcott identifies what he sees as the continued goal of distinctive Caribbean art, which is to be fresh, new, and free of resentment for the cultural forms attendant in the legacy of imperialism. Instead, this distinctive art will respond to the immediacy of the Caribbean context and not concern itself with its relation to past cultural forms.

Walcott articulates this possibility of renewal for the entire Caribbean through an image of the ocean:

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 blessings. (295-96)

Walcott’s description of the ocean as “an epic where every line was erased” adds a layer
of complexity to his representation of the sea as a palimpsest. The sea functions as more
than a repository of historical moments. Michael Dash provides a summary of Edouard
Glissant’s theories of the Caribbean Sea that helps us understand Walcott’s imagery:

Given its origins, Glissant sees it as pointless to conceive of the Caribbean as a
diachronic model, it must rather be seen in terms of synchronic “transversality.”
Consequently, he focuses on the transformative power of the Caribbean Sea and
its capacity to reveal a ‘subterranean convergence of histories’ and not a single
linear history ... Glissant would later further emphasize the paradigmatic function
of the Caribbean Sea by declaring … that it should not be seen as a tropical
Mediterranean. The Caribbean Sea is not an inland, centralizing body of water but
one that explodes outward, thereby dissolving all systems of centering or
totalizing thought. (14)

In assessing the sea as being without a “single linear history,” Glissant implies that the
Caribbean lacks teleology and thus resists any efforts to impose a master narrative on the
region. The image of a body of water that explodes outward suggests continual change.

Consequently, the ideal of imperialism, which David Quint identifies as transcending time itself to establish a permanent condition of empire (33), will fail when confronted by the force of the sea. By following Glissant’s emphasis on the sea’s protean nature, Walcott indicates that people in the Caribbean are themselves renewed by this state of flux. The sea retains historical moments, but it deconstructs all linear narratives, enabling people in the Caribbean to reconstruct the past in new narrative forms.

Walcott exemplifies this power of the sea to make new art from the past with the meeting between his narrating persona and Omeros. Walcott directly equates the power of Homer’s poetry with the ocean when praising his poetic mentor:

> I have always heard
> your voice in that sea, master, it was the same song
> of the desert shaman, and when I was a boy
>
> your name was as wide as a bay, as I walked along
> the curled brow of the surf; the word ‘Homer’ meant joy,
> joy in battle, in work, in death. (283)

By equating Homer’s voice in the sea with the same song “of the desert shaman,” Walcott indicates that the power of the poetry is not historically or text specific, but a force of nature that comes to the Caribbean artist through the ocean. In fact, Walcott’s mode of introducing Omeros links his identity closely with the sea. Omeros is a protean figure who appears as a vision to Walcott from the combination of a coconut shell in the water that reminds him of the bust of Homer and the figure of the local, blind poet Seven
Seas who is walking on the beach with his dog. After Walcott hears the surf hiss, “Omeros,” the figure appears for the first time: “the marble head arose, / fringed with its surf curls and beard, the hollow shoulders / of a man waist-high in water” (280). By fusing Omeros with the sea, Walcott suggests that he is not the apprentice of a literary figure so much as he is the student of the creative force latent in the ocean. In effect, this meeting between the narrator and Omeros exorcises Walcott’s obsession with allusions to Homer – the “echo in the throat” (271) – because Walcott now suggests that he has not really been framing his work according to the literary Homer, but rather according to the spirit of creativity embedded in his works. By implication, the literary echoes of Homer in Walcott’s work are not signs of his subservience to particular literary traditions, but merely useful mediating strategies to tap into the greater spirit of the imagination, which, in Omeros, resides most strongly in the Caribbean Sea. This spirit enables Omeros and Walcott (the narrator) to compose a poem together, praising the beauty of St. Lucia and concluding with a declaration of the healing power of the island’s natural landscape:

   Her mountains tinkle with springs
   among moss-bearded forests, and the screeching of birds
   stitches its tapestry. The white egret makes rings
   stalking its pools. African fishermen rake boards
   from trees as tall as their gods with their echoing
   axes and a volcano stinking with sulphur
has made it a healing place. (286-87)

Following his brief Dantean journey with Omeros through the volcano, Walcott declares himself free to create new poetry without recourse to his obsession with literary allusions: “My light was clear. It defined the fallen schism / of a starfish, its asterisk printed on sand, / its homage to Omeros my exorcism” (294).

As part of describing his resulting “exorcism” from the demons of literary allusion, Walcott notes that his poetic light defines the starfish, a creature of the sea. The image fits well with Walcott’s new found poetic freedom and power, which he associates with the ocean itself. He models his poetry on the sea and its power to simultaneously create and erase images. At the end of the poem, this link becomes explicit when Walcott envisions his own death and funeral and, in the imperative voice of someone writing a last will, declares, “let the deep hymn / of the Caribbean continue my epilogue; / may waves remove their shawls as my mourners walk home” (321). In suggesting that one will be able to hear his poetry in the sound of the sea, Walcott implies that he will have achieved the status for others that Homer had for him when he heard the voice of the Greek bard in the water. He will be the voice of creativity to inspire his poetic successors. Walcott hints at this possibility when he envisions that his mourners will pass a boy “who walked through the ignorant foam, / and saw a sail going out or else coming in, / and watched asterisks of rain puckering the sand” (321). Given the echo to Warwick’s injunction to Walcott to “simplify / your life to one emblem, a sail leaving harbour / and a sail coming in” (72), it seems likely that Walcott envisions the boy playing in the foam as a future poet who will begin his own apprenticeship under the tutelage of Walcott’s poetry. The gesture is one of transcendence. Walcott is no longer the student but the
master, whose voice cannot be contained or defined by literary models, but instead moves freely on the currents of the ocean. 24 This model captures Walcott’s sense that tradition must empower, but not constrain the artist from developing new vision.

The power both to remember and to erase makes the Caribbean Sea a body of water in constant flux and differentiates it from Eliot’s version of the Thames, which acts as a repository of memory, but becomes the site of lamentation for its polluted and stagnant state rather than an agent of change. For Walcott, the dual nature of the sea makes it the ultimate defense against the teleological narrative of History. The ocean, with its vast physical presence, cannot be contained within the narratives of imperialism or tourism, and its continual movement symbolizes defiance to fixed relations between past and present. The cycle of building and destroying narratives, and transcending previous literary models, makes colonial notions of victory and defeat irrelevant.

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24 Ironically, in implying that he has transcended the constraints of his literary predecessors and fused with the creative power of the sea, Walcott follows a model that, in Omeros, he explicitly attributes to James Joyce. Midway through the poem, the narrator travels to Ireland and looks for the spirit of Joyce. Before he fulfills this plan, the narrator offers a rhapsodic address to the River Liffey, which he identifies by means of the character in Finnegans Wake who symbolizes the river, Anna Livia Plurabelle: “Anna Livia! / Muse of our age’s Omeros, undimmed Master / and true tenor of the place!” (200). In this instance, Walcott uses the term “tenor” as the “character” of the place and also its voice, an appropriate pun given Joyce’s lifelong interest in music and his own status as an amateur tenor. The implication is that the waterway contains and defines the essential spirit of Dublin, much in the same manner that the Caribbean Sea defines the lives of the characters in Omeros.
In his essay “Arnold Dolmetsch” (1918), Pound equates art with the magic power of witchcraft, declaring, “When any man is able, by a pattern of notes or by an arrangement of planes or colours, to throw us back into the age of truth, everyone who has been cast back into that age of truth for one instant gives honour to the spell which has worked, to the witch-work or the art-work, or to whatever you like to call it” (LE 432). This passage provides an interesting variation on Pound’s earlier statement in the same essay equating art with myth:

The first myths arose when a man walked sheer into ‘nonsense,’ that is to say, when some very vivid and undeniable adventure befell him, and he told someone else who called him a liar. Thereupon, after bitter experience, perceiving that no one could understand what he meant when he said that he ‘turned into a tree’ he made a myth – a work of art that is – an impersonal or objective story woven out of his own emotion, as the nearest equation that he was capable of putting into words. (LE 431)

The difference between these two definitions of art lies in what constitutes the inexplicable factor in the process. In the latter passage, art approximates the enigmatic nature of mythic experience. In the former passage, the art itself becomes inexplicable as Pound ambiguously defines it as either “witch-work” or “art-work.” This emphasis on the mysterious signals that for Pound, art is inextricably bound up with “mysticism,” which Demetres Tryphonopoulos defines in relation to The Cantos as “a belief in the possibility of gnostics, or direct awareness of the Divine attained through myesis, or ritual initiation”
(xii, Tryphonopoulos’ emphasis). To this definition I will add that both gnosis and myesis must remain at least partly inexplicable for the process to be mystical. Mysticism, according to Michel de Certeau, “is the anti-Babel. It is the search for common language, after language has been shattered. It is the invention of a ‘language of the Angels’ because that of man has been disseminated” (88). In other words, mysticism is discourse of the spiritually defined Other: the transcendent totality that stands outside the realm of everyday language and experience. Accessing this experience requires a ritual that draws on extraordinary power. The “direct awareness of the Divine” cannot be fully represented, and the ritual itself must contain exceptional elements that defy representation in “disseminated” language.

The inexplicable nature of both the mystical ritual and the power on which it seeks to draw informs the process of cultural healing in Omeros and will be the focus of this chapter. I began with the example of the close links between poetry and mysticism for Pound because we can better understand both the form and implication of Walcott’s ritual of cultural healing by comparing it to the mystical rituals of healing in Crane’s The Bridge and Pound’s The Cantos. As with Chapters Two through Four, this chapter considers how Walcott adheres to certain patterns in modernist versions of the epic, but diverges to create his own vision. Walcott borrows poetic language from both poets, specifically Crane’s mixed figures along with Pound’s emphasis on the intrinsic link between action and material body, in order to represent a similar mystical synthesis of the divine, the natural world, and the individual. The implications of this synthesis are considerably different between Walcott and his modernist predecessors, however, because of their divergent approaches to cultural memory. In Omeros, Walcott’s links
between mysticism and memory and healing are more closely aligned with Virgil’s *The Aeneid* because of their shared struggle to address the trauma associated with imperialism.

Healing constitutes the main theme of several key narrative threads in *Omeros*. As Walcott observes in a self-reflexive moment early in the poem, “affliction is one theme of this work” (28). Of particular importance is the sequence I examine in both Chapters Three and Four, in which Ma Kilman undergoes a quest in the St. Lucian rainforest to find the healing root that will cure the sore on Philoctete’s shin. Walcott makes clear the centrality of this quest to the overall work when he notes that in healing Philoctete, Ma Kilman effectively heals an entire community: “Feel the shame, the self-hate / draining from all our bodies in the exhausted sleeping / of a rumshop closed Sunday. There was no difference / between me and Philoctete” (245). This narrative draws on several familiar postcolonial topoi. Philoctete’s sore reflects the pain of the Middle Passage and its attendant loss of language and culture. Ma Kilman’s ritual arises from the local tradition of obeah practiced by her slave ancestors. The healing root is a hybrid plant growing from an African seed in St. Lucian soil. The seed was carried by a migrating sea swift who died after arriving in St. Lucia. Thus Philoctete’s cure invokes the postcolonial subject’s alienation from the past as a result of imperialism, the sacrifice in historical migrations, the importance of local traditions and also hybrid identities to a sense of wholeness, and the imaginative pull of both the landscape and the idea of Africa to the black population of the Caribbean.

Unsurprisingly, given both its centrality in *Omeros* and its familiar postcolonial imagery, this narrative strand has received extensive critical commentary. Despite useful
commentary by Jahan Ramazani and Paula Burnett, the familiarity of Walcott’s images leads many critics to take too many aspects of the healing ritual at face value. Loretta Collins, for instance, correctly identifies Ma Kilman’s howl in the woods as part of an obeah ritual in which the practitioner’s body enacts the cure (158). However, identifying Ma Kilman as an obeah practitioner, which is the main focus of Collins’ article, does not provide insight into Walcott’s vision of healing in large part because obeah is, for Walcott, only a convenient frame to link his mysticism with the Caribbean locale.¹ Indeed, Collins is representative of the general critical trend of discussing the images Walcott deploys without considering how the process he describes actually generates healing.² Collins declares that “Ma Kilman's possessed body provides a creative site where new Caribbean relationships among body, culture, history, ancestral memory, politics, medicine, and religion can be asserted” (157), but her article, like much of the criticism on Walcott, does not explain how these relationships get asserted.

Ramazani’s and Burnett’s offer accounts of Philoctete’s cure are incomplete because they do not consider the implications of the process’s inexplicability. Ramazani, for instance, emphasizes the homeopathic nature of the healing flower, which must stink worse than the wound and which signals that Omeros “cannot contribute to healing the wounds of Afro-Caribbean history without reproducing their pain” (67). In noting Walcott uses “metaphor to leap the gap between destruction and healing” in order to

¹ Walcott bases his mysticism on literary models, not the local Caribbean practices of obeah and myal, a distinction that becomes clear when we consider his repeated comparisons between Ma Kilman and the sibyl at Cumae, who assists Aeneas to find the golden bough and enter the underworld.
² In Derek Walcott, John Thieme notes that the subsequent bath that Ma Kilman provides Philoctete “cures [him] of his sense of ancestral wound, by reversing the trauma of the Middle Passage through an African-derived remedy” (186). Thieme does not elaborate on this point, assuming that the African quality of the remedy explains fully its capacity to reverse the trauma of the Middle Passage. In Flight of the Vernacular, Maria Christina Fumagalli traces the similarities between Philoctete’s cure and Dante’s process of purification in The Divine Comedy, but never explains what this similarity tells us about Philoctete’s healing process.
performatively convert “injury into remedy” (67), he hints at the inexplicability of the process, but does not develop this hint into sustained analysis. Probably the best account of Philoctete’s cure appears in Burnett’s monograph *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*. Burnett offers the following account of Ma Kilman’s howl in the forest:

> This initial stage of healing signals its ultimate stage, although the narration of the healing ritual as drama is still to come. It is placed in the context of the centuries of pain, looking back to an ancestral past but forward to a relieved future for the race … The legacy of the history, the trauma of self-loathing, which is still real, can be cured by a perception that the history was not one of shame – that any shame belongs to the oppressor – but that, on the contrary, it is a history of heroic survival through that moral and spiritual strength without which the physical strength collapses. (167)

Burnett identifies specifically what constitutes the healing process: a shift in perception that undoes the trauma created by the initial debilitating perception. This analysis is an important insight into Walcott’s version of healing, but it overlooks the fact that the trauma Walcott seeks to cure is not only a shameful *presence* in history that must be reassessed, but also a shameful *absence* in history that must be supplemented by a ritual that substitutes for impossible memory. This second aspect becomes clear when we consider Walcott’s healing in light of the similar processes in *The Bridge* and *The Cantos*. Walcott’s narrative of healing is a deliberate foray into mysticism that converges

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3 The focus of Ramazani’s chapter in *The Hybrid Muse* is on Philoctete’s *wound*, not on his cure. Interestingly, Ramazani uses the image of the golden bough to link Walcott’s topos of wounding to that of modernism. He compares Philoctete to the Fisher King in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, noting that both are “synechdochic figure[s] for a general loss, injury, and impotence that must be healed for the (is)lands to be set in order” (58). This “modernist metamyth,” as Ramazani calls it, goes back from Eliot to Sir James Frazer, who uses Aeneas’ encounter with the sibyl at Cumae as the organizing narrative of his anthropological text *The Golden Bough*. 
with both modernist and epic ideas of cultural healing at crucial points. Ultimately, however, Walcott does not sustain this convergence because the modern and ancient epics are insufficient models for completely addressing the problems of the postcolonial Caribbean.

My chapter will proceed according to the following argumentative structure. I begin by explicating how Crane, Pound, and Walcott perceive cultural wounds, a point of general similarity between the three authors. These wounds result from the fragmented state of modernity and the gaps between the present and legacies embedded in the past. Crane, Pound, and Walcott use the same conceptual frame to envision cultural healing: they represent it as a mystical synthesis of humanity with the natural world and the divine. In fact, Walcott deploys the poetic language of *The Bridge* and *The Cantos* to represent this mystical synthesis. I will then discuss how, despite the similar approaches to healing, the cultural wounds that Walcott wishes to heal are different both in degree and kind from those represented by Crane and Pound. The theoretical discourse shaping trauma studies will help me to clarify these differences. In fact, in attempting to heal trauma through mystical ritual, Walcott diverges from Crane and Pound and more closely resembles an older epic tradition, paralleling Virgil’s concern with memory and cultural trauma in Book Six of *The Aeneid*. Ultimately, despite the shared mysticism, the healing process that Virgil and Walcott advocate is significantly different. Virgil advocates a strategy of forgetting with regard to the trauma of the Roman civil war, while Walcott uses ritual as a substitution for a non-existent, but necessary, cultural memory. Only with this substitution can characters like Philoctete accept loss. I will conclude this chapter by considering the political implications of Walcott’s strategy of healing in light of the other
three writers. Crane, Pound, and Virgil all perceive cultural wounds as arising internally and thus within the scope of self-healing. Walcott achieves a different, problematic contradiction in *Omeros*. The healing process is psychical, outside the realm of political and economic spheres, both of which are mocked mercilessly in the poem. Yet, Walcott identifies the current problems of the region as centred on the destructive force of the tourist industry, an entity that extends beyond the individual and his or her relation to nature, and into the very political and economic spheres that Walcott dismisses.

**Cultural Wounds**

As part of the definition for the modern epic that I posit in the Introduction, I note that the genre intermittently adopts the rhetoric of the jeremiad, positioning its narrator(s) as prophets crying in the wilderness. The perils against which Crane, Pound, and Walcott warn their respective audiences are closely tied to modern, corporate, commercial enterprise. In the case of *The Bridge*, the hellish landscape of Manhattan that Crane describes in “The Tunnel” culminates in a sequence that adheres to the jeremiad’s combination of condemnation with the promise of redemption:

O caught like pennies beneath soot and steam

Kiss of our agony thou gatherest;

Condensed, thou takest all – shrill ganglia

Impassioned with some song we fail to keep.

And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope,

The sod and billow breaking, - lifting ground,

- A sound of waters bending astride the sky
Unceasing with some Word that will not die … ! (115-22)

The oppressive forces in the first line are soot and steam, metonymic for the general powers of industrialism in modern America. The fact that people are caught like “pennies” suggests not only their insignificant nature in contrast to the giant malevolent forces entrapping them, but that their lives have become equivalent to currency. They are destroyed to serve the accumulation of wealth through industrialism. The American people contain within themselves, however, the possibility of redemption: “some Word that will not die.” The narrator compares the collective population to Lazarus, who was resurrected when infused with the divine power of Christ’s Word. Notably, Crane emphasizes the natural world in his description of the process: the sod breaking and “the waters bending astride the sky.” The breaking sod suggests a process of resurrection akin to Lazarus, while the waters anticipate the waves lapping at the foundations of Crane’s redeeming symbol: Brooklyn Bridge. The natural imagery following the description of the concrete hell links the image of Lazarus to the modernist archetype of the vegetation god, whose rebirth signals the beginnings of natural and cultural renewal. Crane opens “The Tunnel” with images of the quest to renew the blighted landscape:

Mysterious kitchens … You shall search them all.
Someday by heart you’ll learn each famous sight
And watch the curtain lift in hell’s despite;
You’ll find the garden in the third act dead. (5-8)

Here, the garden alludes to both the Garden of Eden and the general landscape, which does not offer the fertile basis for a vital culture. This present blight arises in part from an alienation from the past. In a frustrated letter to Waldo Frank in 1926, Crane comments,
“The form of my poem rises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I’m at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future worthy of it” (L 261). This dilemma informs Crane’s mystical ritual of healing, which attempts to reconcile the past and present in order to create the possibility of a “worthy” future.

For Pound, the failing modern commercial economy stems from two main problems: the absence of good will manifesting itself in the practice of usury and the abstraction of currency to the point that it no longer bears a direct relation to production or land, the true basis of wealth. Usury, Pound notes in the *The ABC of Economics*, is a failure of good will that destroys the possibility of a rational economic system: “No economic system is worth a hoot without ‘good will’. No intellectual system of economics will function unless people are prepared to act on their understanding” (SP 208). This failing not only distorts the economic system, but also drains the vitality from a culture. In Canto 45, Pound sums up the pernicious effect of usury on a culture with images of death, sickness, impotence, and blasphemy:

Usura slayeth the child in the womb
It stayeth the young man’s courting
It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth
between the young bride and her bridegroom

CONTRA NATURUM

They have brought whores for Eleusis
Corpses are set to banquet
at behest of usura. (230)
The connecting thread through these lines is that usura disrupts all forms of vital sexuality, whether they be procreation, nuptials, or the sacred mysteries at Eleusis. The end result is a grim imitation of celebration, in which corpses sit at a banquet. In Canto 15, Pound employs a different set of metaphors to condemn usury. Usura is the “beast with a hundred legs” (64) who dominates the Hell that is simultaneously Dante’s *Inferno* and contemporary London inhabited by financiers and war profiteers. Pound vilifies these figures in Canto 14 (61). He then makes usury’s connection to death more literal in Canto 16, when he proceeds to list those who have been wounded or killed during service in WWI, a war Pound regarded as the result of the corrupt financiers who make up the modern commercial economy.

By describing usury as “contra naturum,” Pound links the economic failings of modernity with failing in the relation between humanity and the natural world. Usury contributes to the other significant problem of modern economics: the separation of money from production. In Canto 45, Pound defines usury in terms of production: “A charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production; often without regard to the possibilities of production” (230). “Naturum” in Pound’s usage refers specifically to the agrarian basis for a sound economy. In *The Cantos*, the Monte bank in Siena, which is a “damn good bank” (*Cantos* 209), bases its lending power on the Grand Duke’s cattle (212). As Pound would note in further discussion of the Monte bank in his work *Social Credit: An Impact* (1935), by insuring its capital against livestock, by lending at low rates, and by contributing excess profits to public works in

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4 Pound’s metaphors reinforce this agrarian basis for society. In describing the history of the Monte bank in Siena, which is an admirable institution since it keeps low interest rates on borrowing, Pound repeatedly refers to the interest accrued on deposits as “fruit.” The use of an agricultural image highlights the connection between economic wealth and agriculture.
Siena, the bank has remained open for over three hundred years. For Pound, this history is a lesson in “the very basis of solid banking. The CREDIT rests in ultimate on the ABUNDANCE OF NATURE, on the growing grass that can nourish the living sheep” (SP 240, Pound’s emphasis). One can replace the word “credit” with “culture” and still be accurate to Pound’s thought. Michael Bernstein observes that Pound’s proliferation of essays on economics in the thirties corresponded to an increasing idealization of agriculture as the basis of cultural values: “In the cantos written after 1930, Pound regularly drew upon the central beliefs of Confucianism and his Jeffersonian faith in the virtues of an agrarian society to see nature as the true “ground” of all human culture and religious worship” (82). But in fact, Pound’s emphasis on the human relation to nature goes back at least as far as The Spirit of Romance (1910) in which he writes, “Our kinship to the ox we have constantly thrust upon us; but beneath this is our kinship to the vital universe, to the tree and the living rock, and, because this is less obvious – and possibly more interesting – we forget it” (“Psychology and Troubadours” SR 92). Here, agrarian activity (represented by the ox) is emblematic of a deeper connection to nature that moves beyond the explicable phenomenon of farming to a mysterious link to the divine aspect of the natural world. While Pound’s essays advocate developing specific economic reforms to combat the dreaded practice of usury, The Cantos contains more esoteric material aimed at healing the severed link between humanity and the “vital universe” of the natural world.

In Omeros, Walcott’s attacks on modern commercialism focus on the tourist economy, which extends and replicates the debilitating legacies of colonialism. Although Natalie Melas is correct to distinguish the exploitation of colonialism and tourism, the
latter being unconcerned with history (148), the two forces share a similar strategy for controlling and defining the landscape, a strategy that I discuss in detail in Chapter Three. The central point of conflict between locals and tourists, which mirrors the conflict between locals and colonizers, is who controls the land. Whether the exploitation takes the form of an exclusive beach resort that hires the black population to denigrate themselves by working as low-paid waiters, or of coal ships paying black women low wages for back-breaking physical labour, the racial divide, and the cultural wounds inflicted are the same. Walcott speaks to the universalist strategy of imperialism (which underlies both colonialism and tourism) when he laments the displacement of the Plains Indians from their homelands in the nineteenth-century United States: “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” (207-08). Walcott goes on to note that this displacement “is the first wisdom of Caesar / to change the ground under the bare souls of a race” (208). “The art of mimicry” alludes to Walcott’s essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” in which Walcott defines mimicry as an act of imagination and compares cultural mimicry to defensive camouflage in the animal world: “What if the man in the New World needs mimicry as design, both as defense and as lure. We take as long as other fellow creatures in the natural world to adapt and then blend into your habits, whether we possess these environments by forced migration or by instinct”

5 In the essay, Walcott asserts that all forms of culture begin with mimicry and evolve into a distinctive form. His model and imagery is evolutionary: “The absurdity of pursuing the anthropological ideal of mimicry then [the inevitable imitation of the Old World by the Americas], if we are to believe science, would lead us to the image of the first ape applauding the gestures of what we must call the first man. Here the contention crumbles because there is no scientific distinction possible between the last ape and the first man, there is no memory or history of the moment when man stopped imitating the ape, his ancestor, and became human” (53-54). Walcott then links this analogy to the immigrant journey to the Caribbean, concluding, “There was no line in the sea which said, this is new, this is the frontier, the boundary of endeavor, and henceforth everything can only be mimicry” (54).
(Hamner 55). Consequently, the wisdom of Caesar (the archetypal imperial ruler) is to prevent the oppressed community from adapting to and integrating with the natural world. This critique of imperialist strategies of displacement is made possible by the shared presumption of Walcott and the modernist epic writers that land is culture. By alienating the inhabitants of St. Lucia from the landscape, colonialism and tourism generate many of the cultural wounds represented in *Omeros*.

Philoctete’s wound arises from two forms of displacement from the landscape. In *Omeros*, we first encounter Philoctete’s wounded state as he watches his fellow fishermen undertake their daily journey, while he remains on the beach, unable to participate in his livelihood because of the open sore on his shin. Afterwards, he hobbles to Ma Kilman’s bar, the aptly named *No Pain Café* to dull the pain with rum. Philoctete then reflects on the origins of his pain, which gives his wound its symbolic resonance beyond the literal explanation that it results from a rusty anchor:

> He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles
> of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?
> That the cross he carried was not only the anchor’s
>
> but that of his race, for a village black and poor
> as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage,
> then were hooked on the anchors of the abattoir. (19)

Philoctete symbolizes the collective pain of slavery and the Middle Passage, which is in part the pain of living “without roots in the world” (21), a phrase Philoctete uses after cursing the yams that he randomly hacks in his garden. The legacy of slavery has
displaced him and the black population of the Caribbean from Africa, and made the
culture-building mimicry that Walcott celebrates impossible: what memories do they
possess on which they can base their imitation? Philoctete’s wound also displaces him
from his interactions with the sea, which is an almost equal pain to that created by
colonialism. Throughout his poetry, and *Omeros* in particular, Walcott adheres to the idea
articulated by Antonio Benitez-Rojo that the Caribbean communities are “peoples of the
sea”. Thus, Philoctete’s wound prevents him from participating in either a historical
identity based on the land of Africa or a contemporary one based on the Caribbean Sea.
In either case, as with the different cultural wounds articulated in *The Bridge* and *The
Cantos*, healing must bridge the gap between the individual and the natural world.

**The Mystical Synthesis**

Mysticism, as I noted earlier, is the direct awareness of the divine attained through
ritual initiation. For all three poets, this is the starting point of cultural healing. The
mystical ritual differs from magic in that no material end is desired or attained. Instead,
*The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, and *Omeros* focus on healing the spiritual aspects of culture that
have been wounded by the commercialist enterprises of modernity. The modern industrial
world has effaced crucial aspects of knowledge necessary for a vital culture. Mysticism
can recover that knowledge because Crane, Pound, and Walcott subscribe in various
forms to the idea of “eternal memory,” a divinely sanctioned body of knowledge
accessible through the unconscious mind.  

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6 James Longenbach notes in *Stone Cottage* that Pound derived his belief in “eternal memory” from his
reading in Platonic texts (228-29).
only assimilate the explicable and, as William James observes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the mystical experience moves beyond the explicable: “it defies expression” and “no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced” (242). This direct experience is also at the moment of revelation the total experience of culture. In *The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, and *Omeros*, cultural healing makes whole that which was previously fragmented. To these three examples of the modern epic we can apply the description Hent DeVries offers of Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the mystical nature of language: “And it is here [Eden] that the adamistic giving of names is thought as the process in which the divine creation completes (*vollendet*, GS, II.1, 144) – supplements and redeems – itself” (456).

In the case of *The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, and *Omeros* it is the ritual of healing, not language, that is mystical, but it also acts to supplement and redeem. The mystical ritual is the missing piece that completes culture and in the process redeems its fragmented and alienated state. The revelatory moment can be defined in all three poems as the point where boundaries between individual, ritual action, and culture dissolve and all become part of a totality that transcends complete representation.

Although Crane, Pound, and Walcott do not discuss the limitations of their mystical ritual, the narratives of their poems suggest that the transcendent experience associated with mysticism is transient. William James rather amusingly declares that an hour or two is the outside limit for mystical states (242) and certainly in *Omeros*, at least, the duration of inexplicable totality is much shorter: more accurately defined as a moment. The key for all three poets is whether the moment, or a sufficient number of
repeated moments, can gather the necessary force to alter the quotidian. The format for these life-altering moments in each poem is what I wish to discuss next.

Crane’s mystical synthesis takes the form of a dream vision in Part II of *The Bridge*, “Powhatan’s Daughter.” The narrator and the reader, who is invoked in the second person address in the marginal glosses throughout this section, travel across the geographic expanse of America and back in time to reunite with the essence of the continent and thus (re)establish the basis for a vital American culture. The key moment in this process of transcending space and time is the idealized sexual union between the narrator/reader and the earth mother figure of Pocahontas. Crane anticipates this encounter with examples of how the wandering figures of American hobos unwittingly caress her body as they traverse the American landscape:

- They know a body under the wide rain;

  Youngsters with eyes like fjords, old reprobates

  With racetrack jargon, - dotting immensity

  They lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast

  Snow-silvered, sumac-stained or smoky blue – (65-69)

Although the narrator refers to “knowing” Pocahontas, punning on the Biblical language of sex, Crane’s marginal gloss suggests that at some level she remains unknown to these wanderers. He describes them as “those whose addresses are never near but who have touched her, knowing her without name nor the myths of her fathers” (marginal gloss 57-59). The dispossessed of modern America have some sense of the spirit of the landscape, but their knowledge remains incomplete because they lack her name and narrative. When the narrator combines this knowledge with their “knowledge,” the result is a far more
meaningful encounter, as he indicates in the marginal gloss: “Then you shall see her truly – your blood remembering its first invasion of her secrecy” (62). This process of “remembering” can be understood as part of Crane’s drive towards indigenous status for modern America (the focus of Chapter Two). Crane suggests modern Americans become indigenous by supplanting the Indian lover of Pocahontas. Consequently, the reader sees her “truly” when he has become the Indian lover, and the initial encounter between Indian and earth mother has become a memory rather than a narrative outside himself. For Crane, this moment of assuming Indian identity is the inexplicable process made possible by the unconscious world of the dream vision.

By fusing the narrative of Pocahontas with the mysterious ideal of sexual union with the earth, Crane’s narrator achieves a moment of renewal, indicated by the transcendent language with which he describes the sexual encounter with Pocahontas:

West, west, and south! Winds over Cumberland
And winds across the Ilano grass resume
Her hair’s warm sibilance. Her breasts are fanned
O stream by slope and vineyard – into bloom! (93-96)

At this point, not only is the earth/Pocahontas in bloom, but so, Crane implies, is the American culture: reborn and renewed by the power of this encounter with the landscape. Crane follows the rhetoric of the jeremiad, in which the current state of sinfulness can always be called back to the path towards the New Jerusalem. For Crane, as I note in Chapter One, Whitman acts as the prophetic guide who leads America towards the basis of nation that will “stand, permanently, soundly” (*Democratic Vistas* 457). But while Whitman urges the nation to embrace a native literature as a means of making this goal
possible, Crane assumes the path to redemption has already been established, and what remains is to fulfill the promise of time that modernity will embrace the body of Pocahontas:

that deep wonderment, our native clay

Whose depth of red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas –

Those continental folded aeons, surcharged

With sweetness below derricks, chimneys, tunnels –

Is veined by all that time has really pledged us (“Cape Hatteras” 18-22)

The subterranean nature of Pocahontas signals the alienation between modernity, identified by the “derricks, chimney, tunnels,” and the sweetness of her “eternal flesh.” Yet, the underlying sweetness persists despite this surface desecration. By representing the flesh of America as eternal, Crane makes possible a reconciliation between the alienated spirit of modernity and the essence of the nation. Time pledges that sweetness to the narrator and the modern American nation. In fact, what time has pledged constitutes the veins of Pocahontas, suggesting that what animates the landscape, what brings life to the “red, eternal flesh,” is the promise of national destiny.

Compared to Crane, Pound engages with mysticism through wider variety of ideas about history and art. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I wish to focus on Pound’s conception of metamorphosis, which is the central mystical experience of The Cantos. For Pound, metamorphosis reintegrates the modern individual with the natural world and thus initiates the process of cultural healing. In a letter to his father, outlining the main schemata for The Cantos, Pound equates metamorphosis with the process of accessing the “permanent world”: 
A. A. Live man goes down into the world of Dead

C. B. The ‘repeat in history’

B. C. The ‘magic moment’ or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidiensic] into ‘divine or permanent world.’ Gods, etc. (SL 285).

Metamorphosis is the process by which our understanding of the world around us changes with the sudden apprehension of the beauty of the divine (arising from the “permanent world” or “eternal memory”). The result of this experience is one of transcendence. When Pound elaborates on his definition of the image as an “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” he could equally be describing the effect of metamorphosis on the reader: “It is the presentation … which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art” (LE 4).

For Pound, this sense of transcendence should help the reader to perceive the sacred in the natural world. Certainly, for the actual human characters in The Cantos, the experience of metamorphosis comes at too high a price to be a productive form of enlightenment. In Canto Two, Poseidon transforms himself into the shape of Tyro’s lover Enipeus and screens himself with the waves of the ocean in order to rape her. The pirates who kidnap Dionysus are transformed into porpoises while their ship suddenly sprouts ivy, grapes and houses wildcats. In Canto Four, Diana transforms the hunter Actaeon into

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7 In his essay “Arnold Dolmetsch,” Pound asserts, “Our only measure of truth, is however, our own perception of truth. The undeniable tradition of metamorphoses teaches us that things do not remain always the same. They become other things by swift unanalysable process” (LE 431). This emphasis on perception indicates that the ideal subject of metamorphosis is not the mythological figures presented in The Cantos, but the reader of the poem. As Patricia Rae usefully notes in a discussion of Pound’s metaphors, we can best understand Pound’s “truth” if we translate the concept in “the Jamesian pragmatic sense: that is to say, as truth, not in the sense of correspondence to a pre-existing reality, but of correspondence to an as yet unmade reality. Pragmatic truth is something that ‘happens to’ propositions when their makers attempt to live by them” (Rae 151).
a stag so that he will be torn apart by his own dogs as punishment for witnessing her bathing. Despite the litany of destruction associated with metamorphosis, Pound represents these “magic moments” in poetry of extraordinary lyric beauty, perhaps best exemplified in his description of the death of Actaeon:

The dogs leap on Actaeon

“Hither, hither, Actaeon,”

Spotted stag of the wood;

Gold, gold, a sheaf of hair,

Thick like a wheat swath,

Blaze, blaze in the sun,

The dogs leap on Actaeon. (14)

Metamorphosis, in these lyric moments, exists for the benefit of the reader of The Cantos. The benefit conferred, I would argue, is an increased association of the natural world with the beauty of the divine. In The Cantos, metamorphosis takes place in the natural world, and in the above passage, Pound focuses on the play of sunlight in woods as Actaeon flees the hounds, comparing it to golden hair and fields of wheat. The link between beauty and the natural world serves the cultural ambitions of Pound’s epic. The ideal modern economy in Pound’s mind would be based on the tangible production of agriculture, and one strategy for generating sympathy towards an agrarian lifestyle is to align the natural world with qualities of the sacred. Metamorphosis is the mystical process by which the reader begins to apprehend this sacred element of the land.

In Omeros, Walcott represents Ma Kilman’s mystical ritual of healing as akin to Pound’s metamorphosis, which requires the breakdown of a stable and distinct identity in
order to fuse with the natural world and the divine. For Walcott, one experiences transcendence through the “continual extinction of personality,” to borrow Eliot’s phrase, as Walcott makes clear from his comments on Dante in “Reflections on Omeros”: “In the last few cantos of the Paradiso, however, you come to a place in where there is light: light without heat, light without shadows, a steady radiance that consumes. But this consumption is not the devouring heat of, say, the sun, but of a light that is, as Dante writes about it, beyond art. To get beyond art is the ideal of the artists, for anonymity is there” (234, Walcott’s emphasis). This emphasis on consumption of the individual appears in the direct parallels in Omeros between the mystical aspects of Catholic communion and Ma Kilman’s healing ritual. Before embarking on her quest in the forest, Ma Kilman takes communion during which her sense of finite identity disappears: “the wafer dissolved her with tenderness / the way a raindrop melts on the tongue of a breeze” (236). Walcott highlights the inexplicability of the religious experience, in which the wafer becomes the body of Christ and the receiver receives his spirit, by suggesting the power of the wafer to dissolve Ma Kilman, rather than her tongue dissolving the wafer. This paradox then becomes equated with the further paradox of the liquid melting in the breeze, which is equated with a tongue. The sequence of metaphors links religious experience with the anthropomorphized wind, signaling that Ma Kilman’s link to God is mediated through the natural world. Indeed, at the moment of communion, Ma Kilman loses her distinct identity, the metaphor suggesting that her soul is scattered across the landscape the way that a raindrop is scattered by the wind. In this passage, religious surrender is also surrender to nature; the landscape has the equivalent power of organized religious ritual to heal the soul.
As Ma Kilman moves from communion to questing in the forest, she continues this process of merging herself with the natural world. She removes her hat and wig, her designated “Sunday-best” uniform, unbuttons her dress, rubs dirt in her hair, and prays in the language of ants (*Omeros* 243-44). These gestures combine to remove her “civilized” identity and link her “elemental” self with the natural world. As she proceeds into the forest, Ma Kilman discovers the presence of the African gods, “subdued in the rivers of her blood” (242). By combining her new consciousness of her links to the divine with her physical efforts to merge with nature, Ma Kilman empowers her voice so that

her screech reeled backwards
to its beginning, from the black original cave
of the sibyl’s mouth, her howl made the emerald lizard

lift one clawed leg, remembering the sound. (245)

The healing power of this howl arises from that fact that Ma Kilman is not the origin of the voice, but merely the conduit for the Sibyl of Cumae, who links *Omeros* to *The Aeneid*. Ma Kilman has momentarily submerged her distinct identity to the archetypal priestess of mysteries. This progress begins the cure of Philoctete, who, in response to her howl, feels “the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand” (245). The crux of this healing process is the mysterious link between Philoctete and Africa that relieves the pain of both the lost language and the absence of cultural roots. By attaining awareness of the gods that reside in her blood, howling in the voice of the sibyl, and bathing Philoctete in the bath of an African/St. Lucian root, Ma Kilman establishes a substitute connection to Africa that stands in for the missing memories, language, and traditions.
The Poetic Language of Synthesis

While the similarity of mystical healing between *Omeros* and its modernist predecessors in the epic tradition seems to arise from parallel diagnoses of cultural wounds, the language with which Walcott represents this healing is deliberately modernist. Crane’s and Pound’s distinctive poetic language enables Walcott to articulate synthesis. Crane uses mixed figures to represent the union of the narrator with the vital spirit of Brooklyn Bridge. Pound, following Ernest Fenollosa’s elision between noun and action, creates a poetic of compound words to highlight the transformative and simultaneously inexplicable nature of metamorphosis. Walcott deploys both Crane’s and Pound’s strategies throughout *Omeros*, but especially at the central moment of healing when Ma Kilman discovers the healing flower and becomes one with the natural world.

For Crane, Brooklyn Bridge is the symbol of a “mystical synthesis” that reconciles modernity with the “essence” of the nation located in the past. In order to gather up “the initial impulses of ‘our people’” (L 124) into the symbolic nexus of Brooklyn Bridge, Crane employs what he calls the “logic of metaphor,” which he defines in his essay “General Aims and Theories” as a condensed metaphoric language.8 John Irwin usefully defines this “logic of metaphor” as *mixed figures*. In typical poetic figures, regardless of the form (metaphor, synecdoche, oxymoron, metonymy, etc.), the effect is generated by an underlying affirmation that A is B. Irwin notes that these typical poetic figures balance between the impulse to separate and link two images: “Between the tenor and vehicle of a metaphor there must be one or more incompatible features. This

8 Crane offers the following by way of example for the “logic of metaphor”: “when in ‘Voyages’ (II), I speak of ‘adagios of islands,’ the reference is to the motion of a boat through islands clustered thickly, the rhythm of the motion, etc. And it seems a much more direct and creative statement than any more logical employment of words such as ‘coasting slowly through the islands,’ besides ushering in a whole world of music.” (CPSLP 221).
incompatibility keeps the affirmation ‘A is B’ from being literal. But there must also be one or more compatible features between the tenor and vehicle to justify, make appropriate, or at least make understandable the calling of A by the name of B” (286).

Crane frequently diverges from this pattern by generating a complex phrase AB and then making it part of a further metaphoric relationship, a pattern that Irwin describes as “C is AB, and so on, with mounting complexity” (286).

These mixed figures come into play at several points in The Bridge, but most importantly, when Crane focuses on the specifics of Brooklyn Bridge in the final section of the poem, “Atlantis.” In a complex figurative sequence, Crane suggests Brooklyn Bridge transcends its identity as a mechanical and historically specific construct:

So to thine Everpresence, beyond time,
Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star
That bleeds infinity – the orphic strings,
Sidereal phalanxes, leap and converge:
- One Song, one Bridge of Fire! (89-93)

In this passage, Crane links the bridge by means of a simile to a complex metamorphic structure. The Bridge is like a group of spears; the spears are stained with the blood of a

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9 For example, in the opening section, “To Brooklyn Bridge,” Crane uses a mixed figure to suggest that the Bridge dictates the motion of the sun:

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride, -
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee! (13-16)

“Silver-paced” describes the play of sunlight across the surface of the Bridge. Yet, Crane’s next image reverses the movement of light from the sun to the Bridge by declaring that the sun takes step of the Bridge, an image that implies that the sun is the reflective body. The sun, however, cannot absorb all the energy of Brooklyn Bridge, leaving “some motion ever unspent.” Crane then shifts the image so that the “silver-paced” movement of the light indicates the Bridge moves continually: it strides. In acknowledging the paradox of this image, “Implicitly thy freedom staying thee,” Crane suggests that Brooklyn Bridge stays in one place because it dictates the motion of the sun, rather than acting as a reflector of the sun’s movement; it is free to remain rooted while the sun rotates around it to continually reflect its light.
tolling star; the star is announcing its death like a bell. The star’s blood is infinity; therefore, the Bridge is stained with infinity. This complex mixed figure maintains a thin connection between the Bridge and organic existence (the bridge is stained with blood), but it transcends the limits of organic life, by making the blood belong to the stars. Crane then suggests the Bridge transcends even the limits of cosmic time by making it the object on which infinity is only a stain. The final two lines, in which orphic strings converge into a unified structure, echo Crane’s desire to gather up the nation’s impulses and articulate them in one symbol (L 124). The above passage suggests that the perception of the bridge will function as a vision of totality in which the mechanical, urban world of modernity (represented by the bridge) becomes reconciled with the cosmos. Cranes urges a perception of the bridge in which it controls the movement of the sun and endures beyond time.10 Though he acknowledges with the phrase “as though” in “To Brooklyn Bridge” that such cosmic associations must originate in human perception rather than objective reality, Crane seems to be urging readers to believe in this transcendence. Despite its counterintuitive nature, such a belief will enable readers to mentally reconcile modernity with the cosmos and time.

For Pound, the language of mystical synthesis is the language of metamorphosis. For the purposes of describing a process in which the essential shape of a thing is transformed, Pound draws heavily on the ideas in Ernest Fenollosa’s essay “The Chinese

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10 Crane’s response to the metropolitan landscape is in direct opposition to Georg Simmel’s understanding of the modern metropolis. In “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), Simmel argues that the metropolis pushes the consciousness of the individual towards a state of hyperstimulation (175). As a result, the individual’s nerves shut down as a form of self-preservation. This blasé attitude is intensified by the metropolitan economy, which “favor[s] the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without” (177-78). Conversely, though Crane’s loaded signification of the Brooklyn Bridge can be seen as a form of hyperstimulation, this awareness is redemptive to the consciousness of the individual rather than destructive.
Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (1918). Fenollosa declares that primitive Chinese characters are “shorthand pictures of actions or processes” (9) and that this initial state of Chinese language is a much more accurate reflection of the natural world than Western languages: “A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature” (10). Fenollosa goes on to celebrate the Chinese ideogram for ensuring that language correlates closely with reality and does not become an abstract system. This emphasis on concreteness appealed to Pound. In particular, he praised Fenollosa’s conflation of verbs and nouns in a letter to Iris Barry in 1916:

> You should have a chance to see Fenollosa’s big essay on verbs, mostly on verbs. Heaven knows when I shall get it printed. He inveighs against ‘is,’ wants transitive verbs. ‘Become’ is as weak as ‘is.’ Let the grime do something to the leaves. ‘All nouns come from verbs.’ To primitive man, a thing only IS what it does. That is Fenollosa, but I think the theory is a very good one for poets to go by. (SL 131-32, Pound’s emphasis)

This emphasis on the thing being defined by its action manifests itself in the early mythic portions of The Cantos.

In particular, Pound’s figurative language in Canto Two corresponds directly to the processes of metamorphosis. A large portion of this Canto tells the story of Dionysus, when, disguised as a human boy, he is captured by pirates. When they refuse to release him, he makes vines grow from the deck, fills the ship with wild beasts, and transforms
the pirates into dolphins. Describing the presence of the wild cats that signal the power of Dionysus, the narrator of Canto Two states:

Lynx-purr, and heathery smell of beasts,  
where tar smell had been,  
Sniff and pad-foot of beasts,  
eye-glitter out of black air.  
The sky overshot, dry, with no tempest,  
Sniff and pad-foot of beasts,  
fur brushing my knee-skin. (8)

“Lynx-purr,” “pad-foot,” and “eye-glitter” are all compound terms which function as possessive noun phrases that condense the ordinary possessive phrase (the purr of the lynx, the pad of the foot, and the glitter of the eye). At the same time, the object that is being possessed (lynx, pad, and glitter) is defined by the process in which it is engaged (purring, padding, glittering). This elision between the thing and the action the thing performs is part of a pattern of grammatical ambiguity that extends beyond compound words in Canto Two. For instance, in the above passage, “Sniff” occupies a parallel position to “pad-foot.” This position suggests that sniff is used as a noun (since pad-foot is a noun), but at the same time, one must consider that “sniff” is frequently used as a verb. Pound calls attention to the process inherent in the thing by employing, as a noun, a word that is ordinarily used to denote action.

The compound nouns and adjectives that evoke action in Canto Two also contribute to the simultaneous immediacy and indeterminacy of the divine experience.

\[11\] Herbert Schneidau observes that the compound term usually denotes a process along with its other grammatical function (17).
Indeed, Pound refers to metamorphosis as the “swift and unanalysable process” (LE 431). He emphasizes this inexplicable quality with descriptions of the divine moments such as, “Beasts like shadows in glass, / a furred tail upon nothingness,” in which divinity is both intense and present (the furred tail) and yet as intangible as a shadow. The compound words in Canto Two create a formal parallel to this indeterminate aspect. Despite the heavily nominalized style of Canto Two, Pound’s compound nouns and adjectives, by implying process, help reflect the idea of a world constantly moving. 12 As the pirate ship becomes transformed into jungle playground of wild cats, Pound’s poetic language represents this inexplicable process in a kind of freeze-frame in which the grammatical ambiguity of the compound word reflects the mysterious intermediate state between the initial and final forms.13

Walcott draws on both Crane’s mixed figures and Pound’s elision between noun and process throughout Omeros, particularly at moments when he wishes to emphasize the enigmatic nature of synthesis. Ma Kilman’s communion, which I quoted earlier, is an example of a mixed figure. The image of her dissolving like melting raindrops links to the personification of the wind, so that she melts the way rain melts on the tongue of the breeze (236). Walcott again describes a process of communion with a mixed figure when his narrating person visits an abbey in Ireland:

Silence was in flower

12 Hugh Kenner argues that the poetics in Canto 2 highlight the dynamic nature of imagism: “The brevity of Imagist notation seized phenomena just on the point of mutating, as in the most famous example an apparition of faces turns into petals. Misrepresented as a poetic of stasis, it had been a poetic of darting change; for a whole, in the Canto, perception succeeds perception like frames of film” (367).
13 This uncertainty in the mind of the reader mirrors that in the actual process of metamorphosis, which Sylvia Söderlind in Margin/Alias identifies as comprising two stages: “the downward movement toward undifferentiation and the subsequent restoration of a new distribution of identity and difference” (30).
It widened the furrows like a gap between hymns,
if that pause were protracted hour after hour
...
by wafers of snowdrops from the day webbed mortar
had cinched the stone to the whisk of a sorrel horse. (198)

In this passage, the flakes of mortar whisked by a horse tail seem to slow time because of
their comparison to snowdrops (suggesting the seasonal passage of time), which are also
wafers, suggesting the ritual of communion associated with the abbey, and thereby
suggesting the eternal time of God. This complex interplay of multiple images is part of
Walcott’s technique for emphasizing the interconnectedness of things at moments of
cultural synthesis.14

Similar to Pound, Walcott emphasizes the link between action and material
bodies. His approach to nouns becomes a postcolonial strategy of liberation. In a 1990
interview about *Omeros*, he castigates History for rigidly imposing a fixed identity on
people in the Caribbean: “History makes similes of people, but these people are their own
nouns” (Hamner 397). Walcott continues by noting, “I learned what a noun is, writing

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14 Paul Breslin offers a thorough analysis of another instance of a mixed figure used to suggest synthesis,
which I will quote at length. Breslin focuses on the moment when Walcott links Hector’s fishing and his
transport driving with the following description of the natural world: “The wind changed gear like a
transport with the throttle / of the racing sea” (*Omeros* 49). He describes the technique behind these two
lines in the following manner: “The figurative progression of this passage is typical of Walcott’s logic of
metaphor: the wind is the tenor of a simile, whose vehicle is a transport; then the transport’s throttle is the
tenor of another analogy in which the vehicle is the sea. So nature is like machinery, which in turn is like
nature. This circular figure suggests that Hector remains with the sea, or the sea with him, even though he
has left it [to pursue transport driving]. One might also connect it to the “self-healing” powers of the island,
which, as the poem would have it, can absorb the discord of modernity into its organic wholeness” (265).
Interestingly, Breslin uses the phrase “logic of metaphor” to describe Walcott’s poetry, but only links
Walcott and Crane through their poetic flaws: “Walcott’s greatest weakness, his tendency to pile metaphor
upon metaphor, image upon image, is inseparable from his greatest strength: his curiously fluid,
metamorphic handling of figurative language. *He is much like Hart Crane in this respect*: Crane, like
Walcott, wrote many dreadful lines, which no amount of cultural contextualization or theoretical ingenuity
can palliate. And yet, it is hard to imagine Crane writing his best poems without having enough courage in
his convictions to write his worst” (293-94, my emphasis).
this book … No one is Adam. A noun is not a name you give something. It is something you watch becoming itself, and have to have the patience to find out what it is” (Hamner 397). This self-defining power of the noun arises in part from the possibility of change, of the noun “becoming itself.” Similes fix people in relation to some object, thereby constraining their potential growth to the limits of their “other.” At various points in Omeros, Walcott emphasizes nouns “becoming” themselves by describing them in terms of process, in a manner reminiscent of Pound’s early cantos. As Achille submerges to fish illegally for conches, the “fast foam-flowers circling his head with a wreath” call attention to the mental turmoil generated by his actions. The power of the natural beauty of the Caribbean to transform the mundane details of everyday life comes through in Walcott’s description of Maud Plunkett’s garden pots and flowers: “Dusk darkened the pots, an allamanda’s bell / bronzed in the sky-fire, then melted into night” (65). Walcott also uses these compound terms to describe the space circumscribed by imperialism. While visiting London, the narrator observes the movement of British ships on the Thames, “whose oars spidered soundlessly over the sun-webbed calm” (194). Moments later, he describes the “spear-railed” park by London Tower. In the first example, the predatory image of the spider suggests that the ocean itself becomes a trap laid by imperialist forces with its “sun-webbed calm.” In the second example, the “spear-railed” boundaries of the park signal the empire’s willingness to use war as a means of defining its borders and of limiting access to its space.

Walcott deploys both Crane’s mixed figures and Pound’s process-driven nouns at the central moment of cultural healing when Ma Kilman searches for the flower in the
forest. He uses a mixed figure to describe the interaction between Ma Kilman, the gods, and the natural world:

All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead,
but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots,

her arms ululated, uplifting the branches
of a tree carried across the Atlantic that shoots
fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows on our beaches. (242-43)

Walcott’s phrase “as if” gives this passage a speculative quality to indicate that even poetry cannot fully explain the synthesis that is occurring. The passage suggests, however, that the gods drive Ma Kilman to flail her arms in a manner that converges with her subsequent howl in the voice of the sibyl (howl is synonymous with “ululate”). At this point, Ma Kilman is the conduit for the healing power of the African gods. However, Walcott describes her veins as being like the roots of the gods, suggesting that that the dead tree carried across the Atlantic, which suddenly springs forth into bloom is an image of the gods themselves. Ma Kilman reverses the process of decline of Erzulie, Shango, and Ogun whose “outlines” were “fading, thinner / as belief in them thinned” (242). The image of the gods as the tree contrasts with a preceding image of the gods as airborne forest creatures, who “swarmed in the thicket of the grove, waiting to be known by name” (242). Ma Kilman seemingly transforms the gods into beings rooted in the soil of St. Lucia even as they empower her ritual of healing. By conflating Ma Kilman’s blood with images of roots (both cultural and horticultural), the howl of the sibyl, and the newly
flowering tree, Walcott suggests a merged identity at this moment of healing between humanity, the natural world, and the divine.

The quest in the woods ends with a compound word reminiscent of Pound when Philoctete awakes to feel “the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through the sand” (245). This compound term links images of healing with Walcott’s metapoetic comments on the power of language. The surf-flowers echo the “stinking flower” that will heal Philoctete and the “flower on his shin-blade” (which is the unclosed wound). Additionally, the surf-flowers share an affinity with the dead tree carried across the Atlantic to “flower” on the shores of St. Lucia by virtue of the fact that both appear on the surface of the sea. Walcott’s compound term brings together the healing action with the healing thing, while highlighting the link between cultural wounds and the rituals that heal them. With the images of the flower as both the wound and the cure, Walcott anticipates his latter comparison between “Philoctete’s wound” and the language that “carries its cure, its radiant affliction” (Omeros 323). The radiance of the wound echoes the “light beyond metaphor” (271) to which Walcott’s aspires and suggests that one arrives at healing/transcendence via negativity. Philoctete and Walcott must heal their cultural wounds through a colonial language that constantly reminds them of the process of displacement endemic to Caribbean history. Similarly, the flower that heals Philoctete stinks worse than his wound, and the sea that causes pain by reminding him of the trauma of the Middle Passage also carries the poetic language that enables Walcott to represent healing for both himself and his characters. When speaking to Omeros, Walcott comments, “I have always heard / your voice in the sea, master, it was the same song / as

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15 Jahan Ramazani sums up this aspect of the healing process when he notes that “In fashioning a mirror relation between injury and remedy, Walcott represents within Omeros, the poem’s homeopathic relation to the traumatic history of the West Indies” (67).
the desert shaman” (283). The reference to the shaman points to the connection between poetry and mysticism in *Omeros* as images of wounding inexplicably transform into images of healing through the series of echoes emanating from Walcott’s use of the term “flower.”

**Trauma, The Aeneid, and rituals of memory**

While Walcott uses the figurative strategies of Crane and Pound to represent the process of healing “traumatic history,” the fact that he conceptualizes the cultural wounds as *ongoing trauma* signals his divergence from his modernist predecessors in the epic tradition. Before discussing these differences, I need to clarify some of the concepts of memory in trauma theory that I use to make these distinctions. According to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), trauma is defined by its unknowability at the time of the original violent event in the individual’s past: “its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4, Caruth’s emphasis). Caruth goes on to declare, “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is experienced in the first place” (17). Along with this initial forgetting, the other defining feature of trauma mentioned in this quotation is its persistent repetition: the way in which through flashbacks, nightmares, or less direct symptoms, trauma continues to wound the survivor after the event.

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16 It should be noted that Caruth’s definition of trauma falls into the category of what Ruth Leys in *Trauma: A Genealogy* calls the “mimetic” paradigm. In this theoretical spectrum, victims of trauma are compelled to relive the event in some format. In “anti-mimetic” paradigms of trauma, the experience damages the psyche of the victim, but does not interfere with their recall process. For the purposes discussing *Omeros*, I will stick to Caruth’s “mimetic” theory.

17 In the introduction to *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (2003), Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler sum up the general impact of post-traumatic stress in the following manner: “trauma can indeed
The other element of memory in trauma theory that I wish to employ is the distinction between what Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler in *Witness and Memory* call “common memory” and “deep memory.” The former “tends towards restoration of coherence, closure, redemptive posture,” whereas “deep memory” is “inaarticulate, without meaning, unrepresentable” (15). For Douglass and Vogler, “deep memory” is associated with the experience of trauma and its persistent return “undermines the possibility of a coherent self founded on ‘common memory’” (15). For the purpose of discussing trauma in *Omeros*, *The Bridge*, and *The Cantos*, I find the distinction between coherent and inarticulate memory useful, but I want to redefine the concept of deep memory so that it is neither without meaning nor automatically equated with trauma. Instead I will define deep memory as the intuitive sense of connection to past events and traditions that creates an inexplicable emotional bond, in contrast to explicable links to the past that constitute common memory.

According to these terms, for all three poets, the absence of certain deep memories constitutes a cultural wound. In *The Bridge* the absent deep memory is the sense of indigenous connection to the essence of the nation located in the land itself. In *The Cantos*, the absence of a close bond between modernity and historical communities that revered the land as sacred has led to sterility and contempt for the artists, artisans, and farmers. In *Omeros*, the modern community in St. Lucia suffers from the discontinuity created by the Middle Passage so that a sense of connection to ancestral language, religion, and culture has been lost. Cultural vitality requires not only the
tradition, beauty, and knowledge located in the past, but also the sense of intuitive connection and ownership over these things, constituting the “deep memory” of a culture.

Despite the parallel cultural wounds in *The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, and *Omeros*, only Walcott’s poem addresses the cultural experience of *trauma*. While the absence of links to the past constitutes the central problem in *The Bridge* and *The Cantos*, this absence is only part of the cultural wound for characters in *Omeros*. However debilitating these absences may be to cultural vitality, in *The Bridge* and *The Cantos*, they are not the result of violent rupture, nor do they recur as symptoms of reliving this rupture. The recovery of deep memory is not complicated by the inability to comprehend and assimilate past events at the time of their occurrence. For Walcott, on the other hand, the absence created by the Middle Passage is trauma. It results from the violent rupture that Edouard Glissant argues defines Caribbean history (*Caribbean Discourses* 62). The pain persists in the emblem of Philoctete’s wound, which refuses to heal for much of the poem.18

In *Omeros*, the absence of continuous memory and tradition is also a violent *presence* because it reminds the present community of torment inflicted on ancestors who cannot be remembered. There is no Platonic “eternal memory” to access, except that which belongs to the oppressive colonial regime. Written records and “legitimate” history belong to the colonizers, who inscribed the black community as abject and Other. Crane

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18 Even after Ma Kilman finally closes the wound, the pain still returns intermittently to Philoctete, though it no longer disables him. In the Boxing Day dance, when he and Achille transform themselves into androgynous warriors in memory of Africa, Philoctete once again feels the pain of the Middle Passage:

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All the pain
re-entered Philoctete, of the hacked yams, the hold
closing over their heads, the bolt-closing iron,
over eyes that never saw the light of this world,
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their memory still there although all the pain was gone. (277)

This repetition of the trauma seem therapeutic, given that leaves behind memory and not pain, but Walcott refers to the earlier episode when Philoctete hacked apart his yam garden in a traumatic repetition of the cultural rupture in the history of the Afro-Caribbean population.
and Pound, writing from the perspective of well-documented cultural centres, have the luxury of regarding memory as a matter of choosing to discover what is valuable in the past: according to Pound “FOR A NATIONAL CULTURE the first step is stocktaking: what is there of it solid. The second step is to make this available and to facilitate access to it” (SP 136, Pound’s emphasis). Underlying this declaration is the assumption that the knowledge is there for those who will take the trouble to find it. For the black population of the Caribbean, however, this assumption cannot work. Cultural memory is an impossible goal, except in the debilitating form of imperial records. For Philoctete, and for the Afro-Caribbean community in general, the past is either a legacy of oppression or an absence that conceals tradition but reveals the suffering endemic to the slave trade.

Prior to Ma Kilman’s assistance, Philoctete is unable to overcome the self-hatred created by the combination of the “eternal memory” of imperialism and the absent alternative, a combination that continually reminds him of the power of the imperial legacy to efface his own African heritage. Paralyzed by the dilemma, Philoctete compulsively attempts “to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (Caruth 62) with such destructive gestures as attacking the yams in his own garden (a symbol of self-destruction by destroying the environment that nourishes him). Consequently, in order for Omeros to generate cultural healing, Walcott must address the question of what to do about memory, both painfully present and painfully absent, a dilemma that does not concern Crane or Pound.

In struggling with the relation between memory and trauma, Walcott’s situation has certain parallels to the struggle with traumatic memory in Virgil’s The Aeneid. Book Six of the epic recounts Aeneas’ descent into the underworld upon arrival in Italy. After
consulting with the Sibyl at Cumae, Aeneas, aided by his divine mother Venus, goes on a successful search for the golden bough (that will protect him in the underworld), and, with the Sibyl as a guide, he descends into the realm of the dead with the express purpose of seeing his father, Anchises. After some initial emotional exclamations, Aeneas proceeds to inquire about the crowd of souls thronging the banks of the river. Anchises informs him that these are the souls of heroes who are preparing to drink from the river Lethe in order to forget their past lives and be reborn as Roman heroes. This narrative device enables Virgil to tell a highly selective history of Rome in the form of a prophecy, ending with an elegy to Augustus’ heir, Marcellus, who died in 23 BC. By configuring the future history of Rome as based on a pantheon of heroes who choose to forget their past lives, Virgil uses Book Six to instruct Roman citizens on the necessity of forgetting past grievances resulting from Rome’s civil war. The mystical ritual of forgetting in Book Six anticipates the pact made between Jupiter and Juno at the end of Book Twelve. Juno agrees to cease tormenting Aeneas and permit him to establish the Roman Empire provided that the Trojans merge totally with the Latin population to the point where the warring factions not only forget their differences, but the original language and culture of Troy: “Once and for all / Troy fell, and with her name let her lie fallen” (12.1122-23).

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19 When Virgil composed *The Aeneid*, the civil wars were still a fresh memory; they had only recently ended with Augustus consolidating power as Consul of the Roman Republic. Interestingly, Augustus had a possible shaping influence on Virgil’s representation of the underworld. James Zetzel notes that Aeneas’ offerings to Apollo to begin his descent directly allude to the festival of Ludi Saeculares (279). In previous years, the festival was intended as expiation for past sins by means of “purifactory offerings to the gods of the underworld.” When Augustus reformed the rite, the focus shifted to “the celestial divinities and to the gods of fate and childbirth, and the accompanying prayer was not one of expiation, but of hope for future assistance” (280). In Book Six, Aeneas moves quickly past the paths that lead to the condemned souls who are punished for heinous crimes to come to his father who will offer guidance on waging successful war in Italy. The emphasis of his underworld encounter is on the future rather than the past.
David Quint persuasively argues that these two passages form an argument on the necessity of forgetting for cultural survival:

Forgetting is the prerequisite for the very continuity of the species, and the juxtaposition of the two moments of forgetting, each at the climax of its respective half of the *Aeneid*, suggests that the need for the survivors of the Trojan war and later of the poem’s Italian wars – and for the survivors of Rome’s civil wars – to forget the tragic memories of their past is as deep-seated as life itself, part of the basic process of the psyche. Both a fresh start in Italy under Aeneas and the national revival fostered by Augustus require the same collective act of oblivion that the souls undergo in order to be reborn [transmigration of souls] (64, my emphasis).

Quint’s analysis of forgetting also applies to overcoming alienation by means of constructing indigeneity (the focus of Chapter Two). The agreement between Jupiter and Juno serves double duty: it enables the indigenous status of the Trojans and also enables peace by means of removing the dynamic of continual resentment towards a foreign occupier. The growth of the Roman Empire is dependent on forgetting, since resentful memory consigns the community to a stagnant pattern of repetition. As Quint notes, “It is only when the past has been successfully repressed – when it ceases to repeat itself in its former version – that it can be repeated with a difference in order to be reversed and undone. The Trojans now become winners, and so Augustan Rome is restored to national health after the years of internal strife” (65, Quint’s emphasis). For Virgil, the ritual of forgetting assures that a community can overcome the compulsion to repeat the violence
of initial trauma and, in the case of Rome, resume its progress towards the manifest destiny of ruling the world.

Significantly, Aeneas learns of the ritual of forgetting in the mystical realm of the underworld. Virgil must resort to mysticism to fulfill his ideological purposes because the ritual promises to reconcile the mutually exclusive desires to forget the strife entirely and to remind readers to keep forgetting. The prolonged period of civil strife that made up the Roman Civil War demonstrates the impossibility of entirely forgetting past grievances. In particular, the various broken alliances between Antony and Octavian (later Augustus) testified to the fact that symbolic gestures of harmony – such as the marriage of Octavian’s sister, Octavia, to Antony – could not stem the combination of ambition and past resentment. True forgiveness, by means of oblivion, must therefore take place in the realm of the dead in *The Aeneid*. Virgil must rely on mysticism to resolve the conundrum of continually reminding his readers to forget the animosities from the civil wars. Part of Augustus’ authority resides in the fact that he ended the civil wars, and thus Virgil seeks to remind his readers of the event itself, if not the particular factions that comprised it. *The Aeneid* not only valorizes the ritual of forgetting, but also memorializes the end of the civil war by way of the figures on Aeneas’ shield. The shield includes an image of the battle of Actium, which Virgil describes in considerable detail. Augustus leads both determined Italian soldiers and household gods against Antony who, along with Cleopatra, leads a barbaric, wealthy, and motley crew of foreigners. The implication of this image is clear: those who opposed Augustus in the civil wars were not true Romans, but foreigners, and those who might contemplate opposing his reign are aligned with all that is foreign, uncivilized, and chaotic. Yet at the same time, Virgil wants Augustus’
potential enemies to think of themselves as part of a collective Roman body because such an attitude would mean that further martial strife is war on the self. The only effective healing available to the collective Roman identity is through the ritual of forgetting. The ritual aspects enable Romans to memorialize the event without reliving its violence, while the mysterious otherworldly nature of the river Lethe posits a power beyond the human to remove painful memories and thus bring coherence to the State.

Both Virgil’s and Walcott’s mystical healing conforms to Derrida’s “logic of the supplement,” which Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler define in relation to the witness of a traumatic event: “[The logic of the supplement] is a double logic, in which the witness as supplement is considered both as something foreign or extra to the essential nature of that to which it is added (the event itself), and as something necessary to complete an inherent lack or absence within that to which it is added – an essential condition of that which it supplements” (36). In *The Aeneid*, the ritual of forgetting is so foreign that it takes place on another plane of existence (the underworld), but it is also essential for breaking the cycle of violence. The ritual makes whole the wounded Roman political body, although it achieves this wholeness by removing the wounding memory and declaring the Roman legacy complete without it. In *Omeros*, Ma Kilman’s howl in the voice of the Sibyl of Cumae is the extraordinary foreign event that addresses the trauma of forgetting African language and culture. Although, Walcott does not offer an explanation for why he articulates a postcolonial healing process with reference to a European imperialist epic, we can discern a potential reason in his lecture “Reflections on *Omeros*.” As part of explaining how he developed *Omeros* without becoming
uncomfortable with the prolific literary allusions, Walcott observes that there are few emblems in all of literature and they are necessarily repeated in different stories:

One of is, of course, somebody shouting at God … This is the source of all rebellious figures…What we have because of Homer, *permanently* because of Homer (and without even having to read the book, already knowing that there is such a figure), are two emblems at least. One is the Most Beautiful Woman in the World: Helen … The other emblem, of course, is the moving sail, alone on the ocean … the image of the wanderer (call him Odysseus) made emblematic by the great poet. (235-36, Walcott’s emphasis)

Walcott’s comments on literary emblems suggest that the Sibyl at Cumae, as represented by *The Aeneid*, becomes an icon of the mysterious interaction between the human and the divine. She represents the power to overcome the limitations of death and loss by bringing Aeneas to the ghost of his father. Walcott needs this archetype of the power to transcend the gap between the living and the dead because Ma Kilman’s howl is a substitute for the impossible, yet necessary memory of Philoctete’s ancestors. The iconic status with which Walcott invests Ma Kilman’s ritual rationalizes its power to overcome the impossible. The ritual howl cannot manufacture memory, but it somehow enables Philoctete to accept the absence of memory and see the world in terms of Adamic possibility for new creativity. This ability to generate acceptance indicates that Ma Kilman’s ritual adheres to the logic of the supplement. It may be foreign to everyday life, but it completes the inherent gap generated by the trauma of the Middle Passage by making it irrelevant that trauma Philoctete. Because the gap no longer torments his psyche, it ceases to be the site of incompleteness: it simply becomes one experience
among many in Philoctete’s existence. The wound on his shin closes, leaving a scar as a reminder of the experience of suffering, but unlike the open wound, whose pain overwhelms all other aspects of life, the scar ceases to dominate his life.

By transforming Philoctete’s wound into one experience among many, Ma Kilman enables the necessary acceptance of the past that precedes constructing a vital culture. Philoctete’s acceptance corresponds to the “mature” artistic vision that Walcott discusses in “The Muse of History”. In that essay, Walcott declares that the artist must reject the defining power of history: “[The mature artists’] philosophy, based on contempt for historic time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old. Their vision of man is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past” (Essays 37). As I point out in Chapter Two, Walcott’s choice of the term presences suggests that that the past exists on equal footing with experiences in the present, deemphasizing the power of history. Walcott’s use of the term “chained” also indicates that adopting this attitude is a process of liberation. Philoctete is free of his wound and free of the “tribal burden” (Omeros 248) of history. He is ready to begin the process of invention that Walcott identifies as necessary in response to Caribbean history. In “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” Walcott comments, “In the Caribbean, history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what becomes necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention” (Hamner 53). This mandate parallels the implied message in The Aeneid: to let go of the past and build anew. But while Virgil advocates a ritual of forgetting to initiate this process, Ma Kilman uses ritual as a substitute for that which
cannot be remembered. Philoctete can only accept “the amnesia of the races” after Ma Kilman uses her body to link the African gods to the St. Lucian forest. This link functions as the equivalent of “deep memory.” It offers an intuitive connection to the past in the form of the African gods that enables Philoctete to accept the lack of “common memory”: the knowledge of African language and tradition erased by the Middle Passage.

**Conclusion – Problems of Efficacy**

*Omeros* represents an attempt to use patterns of cultural healing from the epic tradition, both modern and ancient, to address the problems of the contemporary Caribbean. Walcott draws directly on the poetic language of Crane and Pound to articulate a mystical synthesis that is similarly structured to their own moments of interaction between humanity, the natural world, and the divine. Walcott’s understanding of cultural wounds as repeating trauma is different from Crane’s and Pound’s versions of cultural wounding, but does adhere to the conception of trauma articulated in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*. Though Walcott rejects Virgil’s therapeutic amnesia, instead identifying the loss of memory as inextricable from the experience of trauma, he does utilize the mystical ritual of healing as a supplement to the wounded political body in a similar pattern to that expressed in *The Aeneid*. In sum, Walcott articulates cultural healing by responding, both through imitation and divergence, to the epics *The Bridge, The Cantos*, and *The Aeneid*.

The success of this strategy is ambiguous, however, because of the different nature of the cultural wounds in the postcolonial Caribbean from those identified in the other epics. Both Crane and Pound regard the cultural wounds of modern America as self-inflected. Similarly, Virgil is at pains to emphasize that the wounds of the civil war
were inflicted on the collective Roman political body by itself. All three writers locate the sources of cultural wounds in the immediate past, and suggest that a proper appreciation of the ancient past (Crane’s pre-national contact with Pocahontas, Pound’s agrarian-based bank of the Renaissance, and Virgil’s myth of the foundation of Rome) can enable the present to be a time of healing. In *Omeros*, by contrast, trauma is *visited* on the inhabitants of St. Lucia by external forces: historically, by colonial oppression, and in the present by the neo-imperialist forces of tourism. The continual presence of tourism as the staple of the St. Lucian economy means that these cultural wounds are constant. Yet Walcott’s vision of cultural healing does not address St. Lucia’s economic conditions; indeed, the political apparatus that could address such issues appears farcical. Philoctete works on the election campaign for his friend Maljo, a.k.a. Statics, who cannot even remember to turn on his megaphone. Nonetheless, Maljo represents an alternative to what Walcott describes as “identical factions” (104), though one party is ostensibly Marxist and the other Capitalist. Walcott rejects the possibility of a political solution to St. Lucia’s problems and consequently follows the pattern of Crane, Pound, and Virgil in healing the psyche by renewed interaction with the natural world. Ma Kilman’s mystical ritual of healing addresses the trauma that originates in the past, but it does not address the continual economic servitude of the island. And yet, we can see the threat to Walcott’s cultural vision in the fact that the tourist industry threatens the survival of this natural world, which is the source of Ma Kilman’s power (Ma Kilman finds both the gods and the healing root in the forest). In 1989, while Walcott was completing *Omeros*, the St. Lucian government sold land between the two mountain peaks, the Pitons, for the development of a tourist hotel. In a newspaper article, Walcott compared the sale to
selling your mother’s breast and suggested that alternate means of raising money through
tourism would be to place both foreign and local investors in the live lava pits of
Soufriere, another tourist attraction (King 490). This suggestion corresponds to the
Inferno-like scene in the poem where Walcott, guided by Omeros, witnesses the betrayers
of the island, who include local politicians who have sold off land to tourist development.
Though Walcott may speak of “The process, the proof of a self-healing island / whose
every cove was a wound, from the sibyl’s art / renewed my rain-washed eyes” (249), the
continual encroachment on the natural world calls into question the island’s capacity to
remain self-healing. Seven Seas announces that “we shall all heal” (319), near the end of
the poem, but his utterance is soon followed by a description of Helen working as a
waitress in a tourist hotel, wearing a low-cut bodice that Walcott describes as “the
national costume” (322). The problem of economic servitude still haunts the main
characters. By locating such details at the end of the poem, Walcott acknowledges that
his vision of cultural healing, derived from responses to the mysticism of The Bridge, The
Cantos, and The Aeneid, can only cure part of what ails St. Lucia. The poetics of
modernism and the epic can attempt to address the psychical trauma resulting from
narratives of history, but the psychic wounds generated by the present day material
struggles of St. Lucia will require another poetic strategy of cultural healing that is absent
from Omeros.
Conclusion

I began this study by arguing that Walcott’s status as a postcolonial/postmodern artist has concealed the importance of modernism to his later poetry. While numerous critics have noted the modernist echoes in his earlier work, the prevailing critical narrative regarding his oeuvre has been that as Walcott matured as an artist he sloughed off these early influences to embrace a polyvocal poetics rooted in a postcolonial perspective. I argue, however, that the modernist practices of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane are crucial to illuminating the central theme of cultural healing in Walcott’s most ambitious work, *Omeros*. In particular, Walcott follows a pattern of adopting and transforming elements from modernist epics, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land* and *The Bridge* in order to articulate the complex relations among self, tradition, land, and language that can allow the postcolonial subject to overcome the traumatic legacy of imperialism in the Caribbean. Walcott’s engagement with the epic tradition makes the pattern of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* (which Joseph Farrell argues is an inherent feature of the epic) a useful strategy for defining the relation between *Omeros* and its modernist intertexts. In order to articulate this relation, I organize my study into four chapters, each focused on a particular issue: the process of redefining the epic, the use of myth in constructing indigenous status of a particular cultural group, the search for alternative modes of understanding the past that would resist the hegemony of chronological history, and the mystical process of cultural healing that synthesizes the human, the divine, and the natural world.
As a prelude to my main chapters, I define the key terminology which informs my discussion. I began by outlining the constitutive features of literary modernism since I argue that the specific practices of Pound, Eliot, and Crane are more important to Walcott than the concept of modernism as a local response to the conditions of modernity. The salient aspects of modernism for this study are its strategies of synthesizing perceived fragmented aspects of modern culture and its disruption of linear historical narratives with the concept of the palimpsest and eternal forms. I then define the term “culture,” which, for the purposes of this study, is simultaneously “the distinctive genius” of a particular community and the common condition of that community. Walcott shares this dual understanding of culture with Eliot and Pound. His definition leads him to conceptualize “cultural renewal” as the process of heightening cultural activity and generating greater synthesis, or “totality,” from the fragmented state of contemporary culture.

In my introduction, I also define the modern epic according to its desired cultural function. As part of its attempt to position itself as a culturally authoritative text, the modern epic self-consciously engages with epic tradition through the process of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. It also presents models of behaviour proper to the *citizen*: the individual who consider him or herself a participating member of a national community. I indicate that the modern epic invokes the quest motif, particularly through the authorial/ narrative voice who seeks to bring imaginatively a fragmented culture into a coherent form that can experience cultural renewal. As part of this quest, the authors of the modern epic make extensive use of parataxis and also deploy the rhetoric of the jeremiad. The source of dissatisfaction in the modern epic is the urban world, which generates problems of
sterility, rootlessness, alienation, and consumerist greed. I indicate that these failings are represented as deviations from positive cultural practices located in the past, thus highlighting the conservative trend of the modern epic and the genre at large: root causes, exemplary models of behaviour, and the seeds of a utopian future are all located in the past. Indeed, the genre’s attempt to offer of a vision of cultural totality attempts to encompass all essential historical and/or mythic heritage that will form the basis for a future vision of coherent and vital culture.

In Chapter One, I argue that the idea of epic is a complex ideal which all four writers seek to redefine and deploy for the purpose of attaining cultural authority. In spite of the prevailing critical opinion at the beginning of the twentieth century that the genre was obsolete, Pound defined *The Cantos* as an epic because this category allowed him to claim authority on the subject of economics. The epic is a “poem including history,” and history, for Pound, closely concerns economics. By bringing these two ideas together, Pound indicates that the epic is a poem including economics. Crane argues that the epic articulates a national mythology, an essential component of a spiritually vital culture. His attempt to position himself as mythmaker led his contemporary critics to judge his poem as failing to meet the criteria of the epic genre. By explicitly identifying his work as epic, Crane actually diminished the cultural authority of his work rather than elevating it. In contrast, Eliot more cannily located the fully realized epic in the future, positioning it as a signal that the fragmented state of modernity has achieved some kind of organic synthesis. Rather than argue for the epic status of *The Waste Land*, Eliot implies that his poem is a proto-epic: a work that spurs readers towards the cultural renewal necessary for creating a *true* epic. Walcott is even more circumspect in his engagement with epic
authority than Eliot. In essays and interviews, he denies the epic status of *Omeros*, but these denials focus on the imperialist elements of the genre. *Omeros* redefines the epic to incorporate elements of intimacy and domesticity. Walcott’s encounter with the shade of *Omeros* highlights the fact that tradition empowers the modern epic, but for the postcolonial artist, the process of using tradition requires negating the latent imperialism in the genre.

In Chapter Two I examine how in *Omeros*, Walcott attempts to negate these imperialist assumptions which circulate through attempts to construct indigeneity after the fact of immigration. For Walcott, Eliot, and Crane, achieving indigenous status is essential to a vital culture, but the conditions of the postcolonial world and/or modernity alienate a community from the landscape. The epic model for the process of linking community to land goes back to *The Aeneid*, in which Virgil uses a series of divine interventions to retroactively make the Trojans indigenous in their new home in Italy. Both Eliot and Crane link the English and American nations respectively to the land at the expense of other national/racial communities. In Eliot’s case, *The Waste Land* articulates the immediate necessity of indigenization and his subsequent essays develop a program for generating indigeneity. In order to ensure that English rootedness retains a cosmopolitan aspect, Eliot envisions English culture as the mediating force between its colonial outposts in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and the rest of Europe. The “colonies” enrich English culture with “local colour” while Europe acts as the international space in which English culture can import and export more sophisticated ideas. In *The Bridge*, Crane makes modern, urban America indigenous by means of a series of sexual metaphors that signal union with Pocahontas, the Earth Mother figure in the poem.
According to Crane, this union can only occur by supplanting Pocahontas’ Indian lover. Consequently, *The Bridge* presumes the necessary extinction of Native Americans as part of the mythological process of founding America. In *Omeros*, the spirits of the exterminated Aruacs metamorphosize from trees in the forest to the canoes of the fishermen. This narrative follows the pattern of Eliot and Crane of constructing indigeneity by exploiting the “natives,” but Walcott refuses to naturalize this form of imperialist violence, representing it as a traumatic repetition. Additionally, Walcott does not limit the power to become indigenous to any one racial group, indicating the indigeneity is a state of mind rather than an essentialized identity.

Chapter Three focuses on Walcott’s alternatives to linear history. Walcott regards chronological versions of the past as degrading narratives for the inhabitants of the Caribbean. He models his idea of the simultaneity of the past and the landscape as a palimpsest on versions of these concepts presented in Eliot’s poetry and prose. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss how conventional linear history presumes continuous technological and economic progress towards a form of society modeled on Europe and/or the United States. Using Glissant, Benjamin, and Caruth, I argue that Walcott perceives the history of the Caribbean as a process of breaks, irruptions, and trauma that require a non-linear narrative of the past in order to empower the community in the present. While Walcott finds Eliot a useful resource in this regard, I point out that Eliot’s understanding of the past is inherently nostalgic, presuming as it does, a cultural wholeness located in the past. Though Walcott represents nostalgia as a form of paralysis, he does not escape, despite his process of self-interrogation, his own nostalgia for a pre-mass marked consumer culture. I conclude this chapter by noting that while Walcott
cannot divest himself of nostalgia, he acknowledges that the possibility for transcendence resides in change, which he embodies in his representation of the Caribbean Sea.

Chapter Four explores the process of cultural healing in Omeros and the forays into mysticism that align Omeros with The Bridge, The Cantos, and The Aeneid and ultimately distinguish it from these poems. I argue that while Walcott shares Crane’s and Pound’s view that healing constitutes a synthesis of the human, the natural world, and the divine, the cultural wounds in Omeros are defined according to elements of trauma absent in The Bridge and The Cantos. Walcott struggles with the relation between memory and trauma in a manner that recalls Virgil’s representation of traumatic memory in Book Six of The Aeneid. Walcott ultimately rejects Virgil’s faith in the restorative power of amnesia, relying instead on ritual substitution for lost memory as a principal means of overcoming cultural trauma. I conclude the chapter by suggesting that this approach to cultural healing can address trauma from the past, but seems unlikely to effectively engage the ongoing cultural wounding generated by the tourist industry in the Caribbean.

In charting Walcott’s vision of cultural healing via his relation to modernist versions of the epic, I have attempted to demonstrate that Walcott’s postcolonialism in Omeros is both empowered and limited by the modernist strategies that he deploys. By adhering to patterns in The Cantos, The Waste Land, and The Bridge, Walcott is able to redefine the epic as an intimate form of poetry, affirm the indigenous status of the St. Lucian community, represent the past as a series of simultaneous presences embedded in the landscape, and envision cultural healing as a synthesis of the natural world, the human, and the divine. On a less positive note, Walcott seems strongly influenced by modernism when he attempts to confront the violent imperialist legacy of genocide and
ends up making dubious comparisons between the present day fishermen and the Spanish conquistadores. Additionally, Walcott, for all his gestures of self-criticism, participates in nostalgia for an idyllic simple life closely akin to the nostalgia that saturates Eliot’s understanding of the past. Finally, while the mysticism of Crane’s and Pound’s cultural healing acts as a model for Walcott, it cannot address the present day economic dilemmas of St. Lucia. In sum, the intertextual relation between Omeros and modernist texts is a complex source of strengths and weaknesses with regard to articulating a progressive vision of a renewed Caribbean culture.

Throughout my thesis I have been offering a corrective to two of the more recent full length studies on Walcott: New World Modernisms (2004) by Charles Pollard and Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics (2000) by Paula Burnett. Though both authors articulate nuanced analysis of various aspects of Walcott’s poetry, they conclude with misguided pronouncements about Walcott’s intertextual relations. Pollard begins his study by noting that his juxtapositions will illustrate “how modernism has migrated as a cultural ideal and how it has been changed through this migration” (9). He concludes on a similar note, identifying modernism as a “traveling culture,” a term he borrows from James Clifford’s anthropological study Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (1988). Pollard notes that the term modernism “functions in this study as travel functions in Clifford’s theory: it is a ‘translation term’ of ‘apparently general applications used for comparison in a strategic and contingent way’” (179, Pollard’s emphasis). Modernism, according to Pollard is the mobile term that is only specifically defined in its particular local manifestations. The postcolonial artists (Walcott and Brathwaite) import modernism (Eliot) as raw material and then proceed to reshape it to
suit the particular local conditions of the Caribbean milieu. This is an understandably attractive reading since it reverses the usual imperialist narrative in which raw materials/local colour flow from the edges of empire to the metropolitan centres. Indeed, it implies Walcott’s mastery of the modernist tradition as he remakes modernism into a specifically Caribbean version. This emphasis on Walcott’s mastery also appears in Burnett’s conclusion, where she uses it to refute the claim that Walcott has “sold-out” to the Anglo-American culture industry: “He is not assimilated to the Western hegemony but on the contrary has assimilated the Western traditions to his own revolutionary project, making it his own and investing it with new significance, as this study has aimed to show” (323). In Burnett’s case, the entire Western tradition of literature is the raw material that Walcott incorporates into his poetic oeuvre. Once again, Walcott’s poetry demonstrates mastery over his literary influences.

In positioning Walcott as master of European traditions, Pollard and Burnett are (over)reacting to a crudely reductive vein in earlier Walcott criticism that questioned whether Walcott’s highly metaphorical and allusive poetry could assist the process of decolonization in Caribbean culture. Often, in this type of criticism, Walcott was set in contrast to Kamau Edward Brathwaite, whose own poetic practice constituted an ostensible “folk” idiom in emerging Caribbean literature. I can sympathize with

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1 This position inadvertently parallels that of Simon Gikandi, who regards modernism as a local response to the conditions of modernity, and from whose approach Pollard sought to contrast his own methods at the beginning of his study.

2 One example is Dionne Brand’s review of Walcott’s *Midsummer* (1984) in which she declares, “Walcott’s figure in the Caribbean plays to the belief that colonization brought civilization, brought culture” (qtd. in Gingell 44).

3 Pollard observes accurately that at one point in Caribbean literary criticism “Brathwaite and Walcott came to represent a series of oppositions within Caribbean poetry: Afrocentric/Eurocentric, public/private, historical/ahistorical, black/mulatto, authentic/hybrid popular culture/high culture, political/psychological, protesting/quietism, oral/written, and experimental/formalist” (29, my emphasis). For examples of this type
Pollard’s and Burnett’s desire to demonstrate that Walcott’s use of European literary traditions does not constitute a betrayal of the Caribbean people or subordination to Western hegemony. To assert that Walcott transcends the traditions (i.e. modernism) that shape his poetry, however, transforms just admiration into uncritical adulation. The modernist version of the epic is a source of both utility and ideological ambiguity in *Omeros*.

By emphasizing how Walcott transforms modernism (Pollard) and the Western tradition (Burnett) to suit the specific Caribbean milieu of his poetry, both critics also highlight a recent trend in modernist studies that to my mind now requires diverging investigations. As I note in my Introduction, there have been numerous studies that discuss *local* variations on the phenomenon of modernism, particularly in literary traditions that fall within the purview of postcolonial studies. It is important to recognize, however, that this process is not simply a one way process of importing a literary tradition and then transforming it. This assumption is, according to Simon Gikandi in *Writing in Limbo*, the ideal to which Caribbean modernism should aspire (see the Introduction). Gikandi views European modernism as inherently corrupted by the hegemonic practices of imperialism, and argues that it must therefore be subverted by Caribbean artists. But whatever insights can accrue from emphasizing the *local* phenomenon of a Caribbean modernism, this approach limits our understanding of the complex relation between modernist poetics and postcolonial literary practice. As I have tried to demonstrate with Walcott’s *Omeros*, the specific patterns within the modernist epic both empower and constrain Walcott’s own cultural vision. It is time to expand the

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way we examine intersections of modernism and postcolonialism. While recent trends in modernist studies have focused on how the phenomenon of modernism is altered and/or redefined by particular localities, we need to examine in more detail how the literature of the local is shaped by canonical modernisms.
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