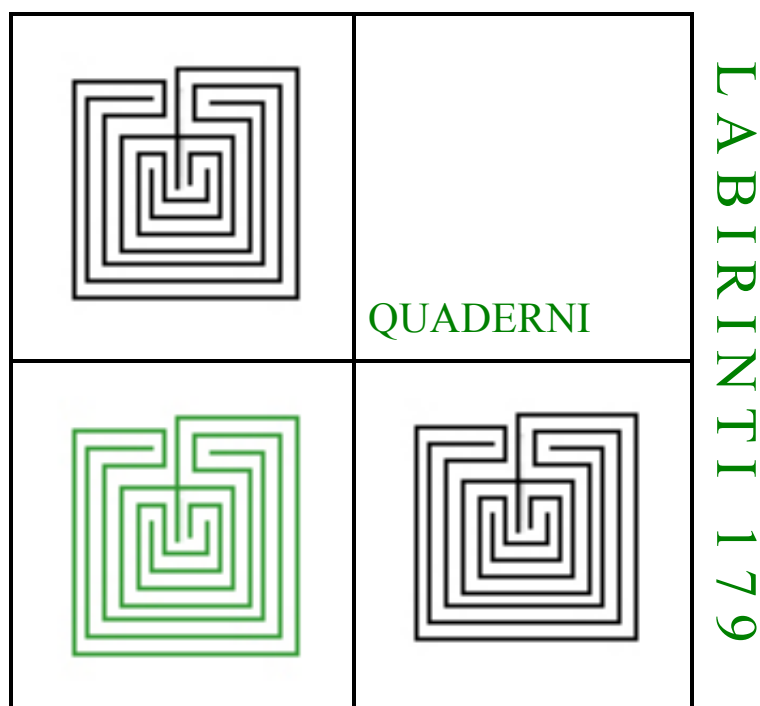

CONTACT ZONES

CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY
CONNECTIONS IN ENGLISH

edited by Maria Micaela Coppola,
Francesca Di Blasio, Sabrina Francesconi



Università degli Studi di Trento
Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia

Labirinti 179



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ELEONORA RAVIZZA

REPOSITIONING THE SELF IN THE CONTACT ZONE:
DEREK WALCOTT'S *OMEROS*

«We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos» – so claimed the American anthropologist James Clifford in his 1988 essay *The Predicament of Culture*.¹ In Clifford's view, the marginal, diasporic experience of the Caribbean can teach us a lot about contemporary, post-modern experiences by virtue of its peculiar relationship with issues such as 'home', 'nation' and 'cultural memory'. An early hotbed of globalisation – a sort of natural bridge between the Old and the New World – the Archipelago may well be envisioned as a conflation of contact zones where, to quote Mary Louise Pratt, a great number of cultures «m[et], clash[ed] and grapple[d] with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths».² As phenomena of hybridisation and transculturation gave shape to the Caribbean complex, composite reality, Caribbean literature showed that questions of identity and affiliation should be constantly posed and recomposed. After quoting the lines of the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire («Guinea from your cry from your hands from your patience / we still have some arbitrary land»),³ who developed a sophisticated, surrealist poetic language to give voice to a spiritual, transformative reconnection to the lost Africa of his ancestors, Clifford adds: «[p]erhaps there is no

¹ J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988, p. 207.

² M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 7.

³ From the poem *Ôde à la Guinée*: «Guinée de ton cri de ta main de ta patience/ il nous reste toujours des terres arbitraires.» (A. Césaire, *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire. Bilingual Edition*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown (CT) 2017, p. 450). The text is quoted in English in J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 207. Clifford also mentions that 'Guinea' stands for 'Old Africa'.

return for anyone to a native land – only field notes for its reinvention».⁴ This paper will argue that Clifford's claim may be read as a paradoxical one, as the paradigmatic quality of Caribbean literature resides precisely in its non-paradigmaticity. Dealing with 'home' and 'identity' means to deal with singularities rather than universalities, as every localised experience is related to a multiplicity of other experiences in its own specific way. Literature, as a site of articulation of hybrid subjectivities, cultural and linguistic translation, and cultural exchange, can give us precious insights into the distinctiveness of contact zones.

The arbitrary, subjective nature of a *return to a native land*⁵ is the central motif of Derek Walcott's Caribbean epic *Omeros* (1990). A post-modern, post-colonial rewriting of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* re-imagined in the present-day setting of the island of Saint Lucia, *Omeros* deals with 'exile' not only as the sense of displacement and dispossession induced by the forced migrations that shaped the Caribbean, but also as a more intimate condition, which affects the very relationship that Caribbean subjects have with their mixed cultural identity. «Our bodies think in one language and move in another», wrote Walcott (1930-2017) in his essay *What the Twilight Says*,⁶ thus linking the very idea of the estrangement felt by people of mixed race, brought up in a colonial educational system and at the same time marginalised by it, to the linguistic and cultural impositions that are the legacies of their colonial past. In *Omeros*, Walcott openly deals with the contradictions of his hybrid self, and he even strives to position his own fictional 'I'

⁴ J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 207

⁵ The reference to Aimé Césaire's seminal work *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939, eng. trans. *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*) is intended. Many of the themes that Césaire addressed in his poem are dealt with in Walcott's work as well, making Césaire one of the most influential literary references in the development of the Saint Lucian poet.

⁶ D. Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, London 1999, p. 27.

vis-à-vis a language and a culture that he considers both his own and foreign. The character of a nameless poet, who is the alter-ego of Walcott himself, performs two main functions in the economy of the poem. Firstly, he is the protagonist of one of the most significant narrative arcs that make up this almost eight-thousand-line-long poem. He is both a traveller engaged in a voyage of self-discovery across European and American cities connected to the Caribbean through an uneven, global history of colonial relations, and a returnee who goes back to his native island to meet his dying mother and confront his past. Secondly, as a self-conscious, first-person narrator, and as the voice of the author himself, he displays awareness of his own fictional status as well as of the processes of artful composition operating in the poem. He openly deals with the process of writing and questions his relationship to literature, language and art. Also, he constantly crosses the borders between the intra- and the extra-diegetic world, engaging in a dialogue with the reader that will allow him to position himself in relation to a contact zone issued from diaspora, exile and alienation.

«Every ‘I’ is a fiction», writes Walcott in *Omeros*,⁷ as he, as a narrator, discusses the genesis of its characters; later, towards the end of the poem he also adds: «The ‘I’ is a mast; a desk is a raft».⁸ In the following paragraphs a scene from the first of *Omeros*’ seven books, in which the poet/narrator says ‘I’ for the first time, will be discussed. This analysis will cast light on how, in the poem, subjectivities come into being as explicitly fictional and relational. When focusing on the self, *Omeros* also focuses on the mediation of otherness in the process of self-constitution. As the metaphor of the ‘I’ as a ‘raft’ mentioned above suggests, each time the nameless poet (or any other character) affirms his identity can be considered as significant linguistic acts of self-placement within an ever-changing geography of a contact zone characterised by the inharmonious

⁷ D. Walcott, *Omeros*, Adelphi, Milano 2003, p. 50.

⁸ Ivi, p. 492.

coexistence not only of different cultures but also of different forms of exclusion.

1. *Homecoming as Mediation and Relationality*

Although this essay focuses on a single character, *Omeros* is in fact a choral work whose protagonists are an array of characters from different cultural and social backgrounds. The story of the poet/narrator is intertwined with the stories of other Saint-Lucians, some of whom are African-Caribbean fishermen – e.g. Achille, caught in a love triangle with the waitress Helen and his best friend Hector; Seven-Seas, a contemporary, Caribbean incarnation of Homer; Philoctete, plagued by a stinky wound which is also, symbolically, the wound of History – while others are white colonists, such as the retired officer Major Plunkett, who dreams to embark on a «masochistic odyssey»⁹ through the British Empire and unsuccessfully strives to write a book which will give back Saint Lucia its «true place in History».¹⁰ The stories of these characters' homecomings follow very different trajectories and take as their destinations multiple cultural spaces which are differently linked to the Caribbean. While the poet undertakes a quest for his own identity that will take him to a variety of metropolises around the world, including Lisbon, London, Dublin, Rome and Toronto, the fisherman Achille embarks on a dream-like journey to 17th century Africa where he will be able to meet his ancestors before they are deported as slaves to the New World. Furthermore, in *Omeros*, real places are juxtaposed with literary spaces such as Dante's Inferno, and historical figures such as James Joyce, Catherine Weldon¹¹ or Admiral Rodney¹² are met

⁹ Ivi, p. 154

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 114.

¹¹ 19th-century activist and artist (1844-1921), who became the personal secretary to the legendary Lakota Sioux leader Sitting Bull.

alongside literary or mythical characters. In *Omeros* the motif of return is therefore multiplied and diffracted in space. Since the island of Saint Lucia is presented through its entanglement with a variety of other places, 'home' comes into being not as a singular space or a point of arrival, but rather a system of plural connections. It is not the Europe of the coloniser, the great cities and cultural centres that have produced the literature to which the poet declares his love and the History books that Major Plunkett admires. It cannot be fully identified with the Africa where the deported slaves whose descendants constitute the majority of the Caribbean population came from, or the mythical native land celebrated by Pan-Africanist movements. Similarly, it is not the Americas for which the Caribbean represents a sort of geographical and cultural bridge to the Old World. Yet the concept of 'home' traverses all these spaces and interacts with all of them.

As it explores the multiple cultural spaces to which Saint Lucia is connected, the poem also explores the mediations of 'otherness' in the processes of identity-construction. In *Omeros* 'coming home' is never a direct act, it implies traversing the space of the 'other', the space in which the self is conversely perceived as 'other'. Whenever a character strives to travel along a homeward path, he also faces disavowal and alienation. As he becomes ever more aware of his hybrid subjectivity, as well as of the impossibility of completely identifying with his idealised cultural models, difference progressively emerges not as an obstacle, but rather as the very foundation on which a productive, transformative dialogue with the 'other' may take place. As a matter of fact, while celebrating plurality and relationality, *Omeros* also works through the imbalance and

¹² George Brydges Rodney, 1st Baron Rodney (1718-1792), British naval officer best known for his victory over the French at the Battles of the Saintes (1782) during the American Revolutionary War. The Battle of the Saintes, which is also narrated in *Omeros*, consolidated British power over Saint Lucia.

instability of these associations, and adopts what Mary Louise Pratt would call a 'contact perspective', whereby

[t]he term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invader's perspective. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relation among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees', not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.¹³

A contact perspective is, most of all, complex and dialogical. Walcott adopts it in order to counter the widely-circulated, rigid narratives rooted not only in a colonial past, but also in a present constantly threatened by a neo-imperialist economy. For example, tourism, the most profitable source of income of Saint Lucia, is referred to as an unscrupulous form of exploitation and as an oversimplifying, oppressive discourse. The poem parodies the monolithic language with which the island is advertised and sold as a Paradise without history or conflict, available for the enjoyment of rich westerners. The latter are represented by Walcott in a deeply ironic way, as someone easily fooled by the blind assumptions of superiority which derives from coming from a richer country. The more they content themselves with the flat picture-postcard representations of the island they are sold, the more the rich plurality of the island becomes invisible to them.

As the characters in *Omeros* undertake their own personal journeys to explore the complexity of the island and of their identity, the word 'homecoming' takes on new, interesting connotations. Not only does it refer to a movement in space, it is also associated with concepts such as physical and spiritual healing. Most significantly, the poem draws a parallel between the idea of 'returning home' and 'storytelling'. All characters'

¹³ M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 8.

homecomings are initiated by the necessity to find new, complex ways to understand and narrate their stories so as to expose the inescapable presence of the foreignness within their own self. When the fisherman Achille, hit by sunstroke, travels through time and space to meet his African ancestors before they could undertake the Middle Passage across the Atlantic, he is made a prisoner by what he considers his own tribe. His chains are a metaphor for his being an outsider in the culture, language and system of values that dominated the life of his long-lost forebears. Similarly, Major Plunkett, who engages in the encyclopaedic endeavour to write the history of Saint Lucia, realises that 'History' (with a capital 'h') is like *Circe*, the sorceress who enchanted Ulysses and turned his companions into pigs. It is, differently put, a discourse that transforms its 'others' into fetishes to make them part of a system of knowledge-production. Omeros seems to undermine the practice of writing that, in his essay on *The Writing of History* (1975) Michel de Certeau described as the product of a Eurocentric modernity. The French scholar claimed that writing is a practice ensuing from the separation between a «will to write» and a «body to be written». In his view, to write about the past is made possible through a gesture which cuts off the past from the present, which silences the past and then tries to interpret its opacity by displacing it to the site in which the historiographical discourse is produced and legitimised. The same may be said about the many others – «the savage, the past, the people, the insane, the child, the Third World»¹⁴ – produced not only by historiography, but also by its cognates explicitly named by the French scholars (psychiatry, pedagogy, ethnology, etc), as well as in the many discourses which these writing informs. After discovering 'otherness', and letting their self-image be unsettled by its troubling presence, both Achille and Plunkett start speaking in a different way, and develop a new, more mature

¹⁴ M. De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, Trans. by Tom Conley, Columbia University Press, New York 1988, p. 9.

relationship to their island. They become progressively aware that their selves can never rest on stable constructions of identity and belonging, and they open up to new narratives that will allow them to cope with failure, loss and mourning both on a personal and collective level, as members of a society that has not completely recovered from the trauma of its past.

Along similar lines, the subplot of the poet/narrator deals with a search for a way to narrate the history of Saint Lucia in poetry. This makes the poet's journey a self-reflexive, performative attempt to mediate his own voice *vis-a-vis* the contradictory feelings that Walcott has towards the English language and the Western literary tradition. Language, literature and tradition are in fact presented as the site of the poet's deepest conflict. On the one hand, English is a language from elsewhere, imposed on the African slaves forcibly deported to the Caribbean and complicit with a system of segregation and control. It is a system of values and beliefs, the product of a culture which imposed itself as 'superior' while silencing other peoples' experiences. Yet, Walcott cannot help feeling emotionally connected to it, as it is also an integral part of Caribbean experience and, in his view, a richer and more versatile poetic tool than creole.¹⁵ On the other hand, Walcott's relationship to western literary tradition both develops and takes a distance from T. S. Eliot's attitude to European canon.¹⁶ In his essay on *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot claimed that tradition should be considered an «ideal order in which

¹⁵ These issues are a constant in Walcott's poetry. Beside the essays collected in the volume *What the Twilight Says*, see also his early poems, in particular, see the final stanza of *A Far Cry from Africa*: «I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein? / I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule, how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? / Betray them both, or give back what they give? / How can I face such slaughter and be cool? How can I turn from Africa and live?» (D. Walcott, *Collected Poems. 1948-1984*, Noonday Press, New York 1993, p. 18)

¹⁶ See C.W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 2004.

literature finds its meaning and its sense of historical belonging».¹⁷ This order is certainly not stable, as it can be modified with the introduction of a new work of art. Yet, every writer who wishes to enter the perfect order of tradition, in Eliot's view, «must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past»;¹⁸ they must, differently put, pay their due to the greatest writers of the past whose works are always a simultaneously present in each literary endeavour that follows them. Walcott, nonetheless, cannot ignore the fact that western literature has been complicit with the discursive marginalisation of the Caribbean, and has often dealt with it as a place outside history, exotic, and backward. If the poet's journey narrated in *Omeros* takes literary tradition as a point of departure and arrival, then it must do so in a way that certainly disrupts the ideal order imagined by Eliot. As tradition is implicitly white, European and mostly masculine (whenever Eliot refers to the artist, he uses the personal pronoun 'he'), the poet (as well as Walcott) finds himself in the uncomfortable position of seeking inclusion in a space which has served as an instrument of exclusion.

2. *Omeros' Dialogic Processes of Self-Constitution*

In this perspective, it is highly significant that the poet first introduces himself not as a writer, but as a reader. Since language and literature figure in the poem as the site of both the poet/narrator's exile and of his homecoming, the first step that the poet undertakes in his journey is an acknowledgement of the 'other', or, more specifically, of the role that the 'other' played in his access to language and literature, as well as in the development of his poetry. Before saying 'I' for the first time Walcott uses the pronoun 'you' as he invokes Homer, his main

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Methuen, London 1960, p. 50.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

literary model: «O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros, / as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun / gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise».¹⁹ The reference to the poet's boyhood evokes a primordial time of inventiveness and possibilities, which is also presented as a time of receptiveness and openness in the following lines:

[...] Only in you, across centuries
 of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise
 of the surf lines wandering like the shambling fleece

 of the lighthouse flock, that Cyclops whose blind eye
 shut from the sunlight. [...] ²⁰

In these lines, Homer plays the role of a mediator: he is the voice of the 'other' who awakens the poet/narrator to his own creativity and a source of inspiration which does not only want to be imitated but also asks to be translated and renewed. The Greek poet's inventiveness travels through time and space and reaches the shores of a world he could never have imagined. His poetry turns the sea into a «parchment atlas»,²¹ a map with creases and lines in which new connections – untold, unseen, and largely still unwritten – may somehow be heard by a receptive ear. The imagery in these lines shows that, on the one hand, Homer's poetry will function as a filter through which to describe Caribbean reality and it will allow the poet/narrator to see a transformative connection between culture and nature, the past and the present. On the other hand, the long-lost, ancient Homeric world will be revived, and new life will be breathed into it as Saint Lucia gradually emerges as a new Ithaca.

While the influence of Eliot's classicism is clearly detectable in the above-quoted lines, *Omeros* also subverts it by exposing precisely what it hides: the issue of the unaccommodating, often

¹⁹ D. Walcott, *Omeros*, p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

disturbing presence of the other. Although Walcott's poetry may indeed assert the immortality of Homer's poetry, what it achieves is not what Eliot referred to as an aesthetic 'ideal order', but rather the displacement of a Eurocentric literary tradition, so that it may become receptive of the Caribbean and African cultures. «The writers of my generation were natural assimilators», writes Walcott in his essay *What the Twilight Says*, «[w]e knew everything of empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics; and both the patois of the street and the language of the classroom hid the elation of discovery».²² The very fact that the legendary author of the *Odyssey* is addressed not with his English, but rather with his Greek name, Omeros, transliterated into the Latin alphabet, hints at this idea of new 'translation' of his work, that may actually liberate it from the narrow world of the classroom to bring it back to an epic, more popular dimension. While Walcott's poem is not written in patois, Walcott's ambition was to write it in an English that may reproduce as faithfully as possible the tone and the rhythm of its vernacular. This means that it should be a language able to incorporate 'difference' as well, and the complexity of the Caribbean as a contact zone.

The repetition of the word 'Omeros' at the end of section II and the beginning of section III in Chapter II (Book I) hints at the very ideas of exchange, translation, displacement, and difference. In the final lines of section II, the narrator reports the word of a Greek girl whom he presumably met in the United States («A wind turns the harbour's pages back to the voice/ that hummed in the vase of a girl's throat: "Omeros"»),²³ while in section III the girl speaks directly:

«O-meros» she laughed. «That's what we call him in Greek»,
stroking the small bust with its boxer's broken nose,
and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek

²² D. Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, p. 4.

²³ D. Walcott, *Omeros*, p. 28.

of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise.
 I said: «Homer and Virgil are New England's farmers
 and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you are right»²⁴

The dash that separates the two parts of the word 'Omeros' signals the difference in voice and accent. The girl's utterance adds new meanings to it, and paves the way for a much more humorous, down-to-earth representation of the Greek poet. She even laughs as she strokes a «small bust with its boxer's broken nose», thus indicating that her relationship to the old Greek poet is more intimate and less reverential than the one Walcott configured in the previous section. Subsequently, the image that the narrator associates with the bust is also of a much more prosaic nature than those of the previous section, as he thinks of the blind fisherman Seven Seas and of the stench of the latter's fishnets. In general, the stanzas perform a form of gradual carnivalisation that further dethrones the revered image of Homer, and which is epitomised in the narrator's pronouncement in which he compares him and Virgil to American farmers and gas-station managers.

The next stanza brings this transformation even further, and the word 'Omeros' is not only carnivalised, but even 'deterritorialised' when, in turn, the poet/narrator repeats it «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».²⁵ With the word 'deterritorialisation', the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari referred to a process in which order and control are taken away from language, and sets of previous relations are decontextualised, in order to prepare words to be 'reterritorialised', or re-inhabited, in a different way.²⁶ The word 'Omeros' is broken into smaller units

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi, Continuum, London and New York 2004.

of sound, each of which becomes a new unit of meaning, so that new connections between the ancient Greek poet and the Caribbean reality of today can be established. Most interestingly, these new units of meaning do not only include foreign languages such as the Antillean patois («*mer*») or Latin («*os*»), but they also include some pure sound («the conch-shell invocation»), as to indicate that the poem will also strive to give voice to the untamed, unexpressed voice of the Caribbean nature. Implicitly, when the poet pronounces the word ‘Omeros’ after the girl (or, as we could also say, after he ‘steals’ it from the girl), he makes clear that he is looking for a new, alternative path that will allow him to ‘return home’ by using words in a new way, and to reconnect with Homer and Western literary tradition by exploring foreignness.

The most striking feature of the Greek girl’s episode is the juxtaposition of tones, messages, and images which seem to interact in a never-ending dialogue in which new meanings constantly emerge. In the following lines, the girl (whose name is revealed to be Antigone, like the protagonist of Sophocles’ tragedy who, similarly to the poet himself, is torn by conflicting allegiances) declares her desire to go back home («‘I’m tired of America, it’s time for me to go back / to Greece. I miss my island’. I write, it returns – / the way she turned and shook out the black gust of hair»²⁷). Her image is superimposed with that of Homer («and I felt that another cold bust, not hers but yours/ saw this with stone almonds for eyes [...]»²⁸), as if the latter was watching the narrator and asking him to come home as well. A new type of dialogue arises again between the two poets, as the narrator explicitly refers to Saint Lucia’s history of suffering and injustice:

But if it [Homer’s bust] could read between the lines of her floor
like a white-hot deck uncaulked by Antillean heat,

²⁷ Ivi, p. 30.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

to the shadow in its hold, its nostrils might flare

at the stench from manacled ankles, the coffled feet
scraping like leaves, and perhaps the inculpable marble
would have turned its white seeds away, to widen

The bow of its mouth at the horror under her table,
from the lyre of her [Antigone's] armchair draped with its white
chiton,
to do what the past always does: suffer and stare.²⁹

The lines contain an implicit denunciation of western art's indifference to the suffering of those who were forcibly deported to the Americas and enslaved. The conclusion of the section contains a declaration of intent, as it addresses the need to create a new form of epic poetry which will be able to include not only the suffering and affliction of slavery, but also the cursing that testifies the will to survive: «And I heard a hollow moan exhaled from a vase,/ not for kings foundering in lances of rain; the prose/ of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes».³⁰ The ambition of the narrator is, therefore, to speak a variety of languages and dialects so as to include also the voices of those who were never represented in the great epic of the past.

3. Conclusion

The section that has been analysed here does not deal directly with the experience of travelling, and yet it shows that the narrator's journey home, as well as the fashioning and performance of his own lyric 'I', will take place in the form of a positioning amid an unstable exchange between different speakers. As the poem unfolds, the poet/narrator will travel to the «cities that open up like the *World's Classic*»³¹ – the

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ Ivi, p. 314.

Western metropolises that have somehow become a sort of canon for someone who aspires to become an intellectual – before returning to his small, native Saint Lucia. He will have the opportunity to conduct a dialogue with a variety of characters from the present, the past and even from the world of imagination. He will let himself be transformed by these encounters, and at the same time, he will steal the other's word and 'deterritorialize' it. He will take it away from its territorial belonging and from the sets of relations in which it is ingrained in order to prepare it for further processes of reterritorialisation. Identity is presented as 'transformation' rather than 'stasis', as each time the speaker establishes a new relation with the 'other', he is, in turn, deterritorialised by the latter. Writing emerges almost as a geographical endeavour, as it allows both the writer and the reader to trace and map the multiple paths that the encounter with the 'other' may take.

What is also relevant is that the search for identity that takes place in the poem does not only concern an individual, but it creates a path that is meant to be 'political' and 'collective'. Firstly, it is political because the need to write about a Caribbean 'return to a native land' is strictly linked to a need for recognition and representation. Finding new languages to deal with violent cultural encounters and hybridisation processes is necessary so that a new self-awareness may develop in a too often marginalised area. Secondly, the search for identity that *Omeros* performs is collective because the 'poetics of identity' that emerges from the text is also a 'poetics of alterity'. The voice of the narrator is a composite, complex one, which never speaks only for itself but always leans upon other people's enunciations, which could be high literary references or the dialect of common people. Also, his 'I' is not only his own, but it traverses a variety of experiences; it is, in fact, a 'we'. The narrator's homecoming journey would not make sense on its own, it acquires meaning only if intertwined with that of the other characters, who set out to explore other components of the

Caribbean experience. When Achille travels to Africa, the narrator says: «Half of me was with him. One half with a midshipman / by a Dutch Canal».³² This highlights that each character does not live in isolation, but they all participate in a shared history of multiple connections.

‘Political’, ‘collective’ and ‘deterritorialising’: these are the three main features of what Deleuze and Guattari, in their analysis of the work of the Czech writer Franz Kafka, called ‘Minor Literature’. According to the two French philosophers, a ‘Minor Literature’ is not a literature written in a ‘minor language’, but «rather that which a minority constructs within a major language».³³ It is, in other way, a form of resistance that takes its roots in the contact zone, through the interactions among different groups in asymmetrical relations, and the strategies that the oppressed develop in order to survive. In this light, what Eliot called ‘individual talent’ should not be seen as the artists’ capacity to surrender themselves to the vast order of tradition, but rather as the capacity to unsettle tradition, and to explore the multiple relations that make hybrid selves come into being.

³² Ivi, p. 228.

³³ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1986, p. 16.