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Rooting Identities: Derek Walcott's Connection(s) with the Caribbean Environment

Abstract I: Questo articolo intende dimostrare come i concetti di rappresentazione identitaria e di narrazione ecologica s'intersechino e si condizionino nella definizione dei personaggi e delle storie che ruotano attorno al capolavoro dell'autore caraibico Derek Walcott, ovverosia il suo *Omeros*. A partire dall'utilizzo di un campo di studi innovativo come l'ecologia letteraria, l'articolo prende in esame l'importanza dell'ambiente naturale, e in particolar modo animistico, all'interno del poema. I protagonisti walcottiani, persi in un lembo di mondo che non sentono loro, rintracciano le proprie radici identitarie grazie all'aiuto della natura, del mondo animale e vegetale. Dopo aver esaminato il plurimo contesto relazionale entro il quale l'autore opera, l'articolo analizza due episodi emblematici del poema per dimostrare come la cultura caraibica riscopra e interpreti i significati e i simboli del proprio ibridismo culturale attraverso l'aiuto dell'ambiente circostante, una "natura" che non dimentica e ha il potere di lenire le ferite di un passato travagliato.

Abstract II: This article aims to demonstrate how the notions of 'identity representation' and 'ecological narrative' complement each other in defining both the characters and stories that Caribbean writer Derek Walcott sketches in his well-known epic *Omeros*. In tune with the theories that have shaped "literary ecology", this study displays the symbolic role the natural and animistic world plays in the poem. Walcottian protagonists are lost in an "edge of the world" they perceive as 'hostile'. By presenting the hybrid cultural background that characterises the West Indian "space", this article addresses two emblematic episodes of Walcottian *Omeros* and focuses on the uncovering of truths the Caribbean land has concealed from human understanding. It is only through reconciliation with "nature" that once-colonised peoples are capable of accepting their colonial legacy and finally setting down "roots" in a place they can call "home".

1.1. Introduction: Caribbean Hybrid Society and its Relation with the Environment

Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott is a prolific writer from St. Lucia, a tiny island located in the heart of the Caribbean Sea and mostly inhabited by ethnically divided groups of peoples and communities. Even though the region was firstly 'discovered' by Spanish explorers, it rapidly became the privileged stage of recurrent disputes between the imperialistic powers of England and France, which wanted to take control of its strategic military position. As

Treves recounts in his West-Indian historical chronicles, St. Lucia “was held [seven times] by the English, and seven times by the French” (Treves 1928: 109), before it eventually became part of the British empire in 1814. European settlers transported black labour slaves from Africa to the islands and forced them to live and work in the sugar-cane plantations established all over the Caribbean colonies. As a consequence of this historical legacy, today’s St. Lucians are mostly individuals coming from different ethnical and social-cultural backgrounds and share the same feature of being confined in a sort of “hybrid” and continuously shifting “representation of identity”¹. As John Thieme aptly points out, the Caribbean archipelago is the land where an interesting and overwhelming “cultural cross-pollination” takes place (Thieme 1999: 1). This aspect has been underlined not only within the domain of postcolonial literary critique but also in other areas of the humanities because the formation and the perpetuation of a heterogeneous community implies the settlement and the ‘rooting’ of that same community in a shared and communal space and area.

In the light of this perspective, many critics have explored how Walcott’s poetical endeavour tries to attain a compromise bringing together different forms of identifications while engaging with the crucial questions affecting plural and various cultural groups, such as the different approaches to the burden of a colonial past or, more interestingly, the assimilation of languages formerly imposed as national and inclusive modes of communication.

Although the sketching of the contours of a “Caribbean identity” has proven one of the most urgent tasks critics and scholars had to investigate in the aftermath of Caribbean literary success, in recent years the attention has shifted towards other meaningful peculiarities of the ‘Caribbean singularity’. In particular, scholars have focused on the intimate relation Caribbean writers have with the Caribbean land. This is not only because most writers and poets are aware of the fact that the ‘New World’ landscape is an unavoidable subject to draw from but also because, in the domain of critical theory, *environmental discourse* has gained major attention as it encompasses multiple historical and literary concerns and addresses issues relating to the future of human destiny and survival.

In this sense, Caribbean authors have proven creative in promoting a parallelism between the prerogatives of “defying identity” with the issues regarding the relation between human(s) and the natural environment. Finding themselves in an uncontaminated and unknown territory, the Europeans, the transported Africans and the Asian indentured labourers² brought to the West Indies their plural and various traditions capturing immediately the dissonance existing between their former natural heritage and the Antillean land. Migrating to a new territory meant also coming face to face with a new landscape and an un-familiar flora and fauna. The general perception of the first colonisers was that of an alienating and

¹ In the introduction to *Pensiero Caraibico*, by Andrea Gazzoni (2016), the author examines the multifarious and different perceptions Caribbean societies and individuals have with regard to their indeterminable and ever-shifting “identity”.

² Indentured labour was a system of bond labour instituted after the abolition of slavery. Workers were recruited for sugar, cotton and tea plantations in British colonies in Africa, West Indies and South East Asia. From 1834 to the end of World War I, Britain transported about 2 million Indian indentured workers to its colonies. See: <http://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/indentured-labour-south-asia-1834-1917> (consulted on 26/04/2018).

estranging region difficult to “dominate” and relate to. As an example of this attitude I want to recall the negative connotation of the title the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss gave to his collection of exotic adventures in the primordial territories of central America during the 1950s: *Tristes Tropiques*, the “Sad Tropics”. Derek Walcott confutes this viewpoint directly in his collection of essays *What the Twilight Says* when he argues:

The Caribbean is looked at with elegiac pathos, a prolonged sadness to which Lévi-Strauss has supplied an epigraph: *Tristes Tropiques*. Their *tristesse* derives from an attitude to the Caribbean dusk, to rain, to uncontrollable vegetation [...]. The mood is understandable, the melancholy as contagious as fever of a sunset, like the gold fronds of diseased coconut palms, but there is something alien and ultimately wrong in the way such a sadness, even a morbidity, is described by English, French, or some of our exiled writers. It relates to a misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls (Walcott 1998: 76).

In this passage Walcott agrees on the immediate impression the colonisers derived from the sight of the Caribbean landscape, that of a “melancholic land” governed by “uncontrollable vegetation”, but he wisely denounces the incapacity of the observers to understand its “light” and thus the “true meaning” of those territories. In a profound reasoning, the poet is challenging the western canonical environmental interpretation, suggesting the need to interpret and decode the inner and implicit symbols that same place conceals from human eyes through a different awareness and strategy. In *Caribbean Discourses*, Édouard Glissant, one of the most acute observers of Caribbean society and the first to define its intricate agglomerate of communities as *creolised*, shares the same thinking as Walcott when he points out that in the West-Indies:

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from that land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work [of Caribbean writers] stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood (Glissant 1999: 105-106).

1.2. Wounded identities in Walcott's *Omeros*

The intrinsic connection Derek Walcott establishes with the Caribbean environment is easily recognisable in his mostly celebrated masterpiece, his epic *Omeros*. In the work, the relation the main characters entertain with the natural environment is extremely elaborate and symbolic. The poem recounts the stories of a multiple spectrum of identities dealing essentially with the issue of finding “their own roots”.

Achille³ and Hector are two black fishermen vying for the love of the beautiful waitress

³ In *Omeros* (1990) Walcott depicts the adventures and lives of several characters that recall the heroes of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. The re-writing of western classical literature is a well-known praxis in the domain

Helen. They both come from African descendants and need to come to terms not only with their own *aboriginal* origins but also with the destiny the island has chosen for them. From the beginning of the poem, in fact, the landscape ‘sends’ signals to their troubled questioning of life, inciting them to take the way of the blue sea. In the following section of the article I will analyse the beginning of the poem, where Walcott depicts a highly symbolic ritual the Caribbean seamen carry out in order to establish an indissoluble relationship with the land, i.e. the act of felling the trees so to “transform” them into canoes. This simple act takes on a significant meaning because in doing so the sailors seal off a reciprocal pact with nature, while turning away from it could lead to regretful consequences. This happens particularly to the character of Hector when he decides to abandon sea-life in order to “gain more money” and ends up accepting a job as a taxi driver, working for the exploitative and environmentally damaging industry of tourism. In this way the character corrupts not only his soul but also the intimate connection he had created with the land and so, towards the end of the epic, he perishes in a car accident.

Another important character Walcott decided to include in his work is the ambivalent figure of the crippled Philoctete. In direct contrast to his classical counterpart though, the Walcottian protagonist is not a marginalised figure, isolated from the society that surrounds him, but embodies the true essence of that same community and world. Philoctete is an outcast suffering from a symbolic “wound” he received from a “rusted anchor”. The bruise epitomises the agonies and injustices Caribbean people had to endure under colonial oppression and subjugation. It is only through the help of Ma Kilman, an enigmatic and eccentric obeah priestess⁴, that Philoctete will be able to cure his sore and finally be able to rejoice in the festivities of the island. Getting rid of the wound signifies for the character the freeing of himself from the burden of collective and historical pain affecting the “identity” of his fellow compatriots. As I will go on to present in the second passage I have chosen to analyse in this article, the most interesting event in Philoctete’s story concerns the rather peculiar quest Ma Kilman has to undertake to find the healing ingredients for his cure. The tenant of the symbolic “No Pain Café” will have to recover her instinctual and natural memory in order to read the “language of nature”, the only bearer of the truth, capable of helping the recovery of West-Indian integrity and wholeness. As Jahan Ramazani has rightly pointed out in one of his articles on Walcottian *Omeros*:

of post-colonial literature. For Caribbean writers, this exemplifies their “freedom” from canonical forms of expression while, at the same time, providing a possible alternative for the same subject or story. In *Omeros*, for instance, the characters cannot be identified as “heroes” but rather as “common people” of the region: sailors, workers, waitresses, retirees and so on. This would partly explain the reason why the character of “Achilles” becomes simply “Achille” in the Walcottian epic poem, thus responding to an ideal of the *creolization* of the text. The same concept applies to the title of the poem: *Omeros* stands for “Homer” but also for the symbols the observer finds in the Caribbean setting and landscape (*O* the sea’s invocation, *mer* mother and sea, *os* grey bone and sibilant surf, as Walcott explains in his verses).

⁴ In *Omeros* the character of Ma Kilman adopts the role of the wise woman, the “healer” of the community. She is the owner of the “No Pain Café” and it is not a coincidence that she keeps helping the “wounded” protagonists of the poem, such as Philoctete, Seven Seas and Major Plunkett. Ma Kilman embodies a West-Indian obeah priestess as her persona and practices are not linked to a single religion but rather to “a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality, which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world”, as Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert aptly assert in their introduction (2003: 136).

[Philoctete's scar is] a mysteriously unhealed wound that reflects the condition of the land and indeed of the entire region. Like the Fisher King in T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, Philoctete is a synecdochic figure for a general loss, injury, and impotence that must be healed for the (is)lands to be set in order. Like many vegetation deities, Philoctete requires the ministrations of a female counterpart to be healed: the obeah woman or sibyl Ma Kilman (Ramazani 1997: 410).

These two examples clearly show how Caribbean writing and the work of Derek Walcott in particular are closely embedded within a literary discourse that pays significant attention to the issues concerning the natural and the environmental awareness and its desirable preservation. Therefore, when looking for a coherent theoretical framework for the analysis of these two episodes, my choice naturally fell on the analytical features and stylistic tools provided within the field of 'ecolinguistics'. Specifically, I believe that Walcottian verses are compelling illustrations of what Arran Stibbe defines as "beneficial discourses", i.e. "discourses that convey ideologies which can actively encourage people to protect the systems that support life" (Stibbe 2015: 30). In his comprehensive study dealing with stories that promote critical attentiveness towards the protection of biological and bioethical diversity, Stibbe highlights important contributions coming from the study of other distinctive scholars from this research area, as in the following extract:

Traditional and indigenous cultures around the world provide a source for searching for beneficial discourses: after all, there are cultures which have survived for thousands of years without destroying the ecosystems that they depend on for their survival (Chawla 2001: 115).

Aboriginal communities did not believe in the human possession of the land and most of the groups thought that the natural elements and symbols were representative of a powerful and transcendental spiritual force.

Within the field of cultural studies, another important scholar who emphasises the human endeavour in re-establishing a connection with the natural world is the Jewish-American anthropologist and social activist Riane Eisler⁵. In one of her works entitled *The Power of Partnership* (Eisler: 2002), she has focused on seven complementary ways through which humanity could attain a transformative (r)evolution in order to reject the violent un-ethical dominator paradigm it is accustomed to perpetrate not only in relation with the other(s) but also within itself and towards the non-human world. According to Eisler, the power of communal and beneficial feeling of *partnership* will lead our societies to find a new ethical value, respectful of difference(s), peaceful and sustainable, a voice that could 'echo' the link sustaining the ecological network of life.

⁵ Riane Eisler is a cultural historian, system scientist, educator and author whose work on cultural transformation has inspired scholars and social activists all around the world. Eisler's 1987 bestseller *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* was published in 23 foreign languages. She is the President of the Center for Partnership Studies, dedicated to research and education on the *partnership model*. See: <http://www.rianeeisler.com>, <https://centerforpartnership.org> and http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=60 (consulted on 01/09/2018).

While western dominator cultural paradigms have tended to consider 'nature' either as a "locus amoenus" or, worse, as an element to be exploited in favour of economic progress, postcolonial cultures and writers have tried to promote a different, protective attitude towards the space they live in, as they recognise not only its life-sustaining significance but also its invaluable importance as a reassuring place for "transplanted" and culturally diverse individuals.

It is interesting to note, in fact, how in western literary criticism the different approach undertaken by these new *liminal literatures*⁶ has been recognised as an "ecocritic of the Global South", meaning in particular "the tendency to interpret the role of ecology in the light of a convergence between the history of humanity and that of the environment, attenuating in this way reciprocal conflicts" (Scaffai 2017: 69-70, my translation).

2.1. The Awakening of Nature and the Beginning of the Epic

This section explores the opening scene of the Walcottian epic *Omeros*, not only because it strikingly represents the first imaginative drawing of the Caribbean setting, but also because it exemplifies the meaningful features decipherable from Walcottian ideological writing, being in particular the representation of a drifting and unstable conception of 'identity':

This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras. Once wind bring the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded "Yes,
the trees have to die" [...] (Walcott 2008: 12).

Even if the act of 'cutting the trees' is here represented as a sacred ritual foregrounding its urgent and practical need for human survival, in these very first lines the reader is struck by the anthropomorphised and sensible 'consciousness' of the vegetation. In most of Walcottian writings the natural environment has the capacity of feeling, expressing and remembering much more acutely than the humans. Trees are the oldest inhabitants of the region; they were there before the arrival of the aboriginal tribes, they have witnessed disputes, wars and bloodshed and thus they represent the true custodians of the land. They are strongly linked with that 'particular space', that edge of the world in which people have been 'transplanted' and forced to migrate to.

Significant also is Walcott's choice to begin his epic with the rising of the day. This is, in fact, the moment of the "ordinary" (i.e. daily life) the poet prefers while working and com-

⁶ See for instance: Bhabha 1990, Britton 1999, McLeod 2010, Vasta et al. 2011 and Walcott 1998.

posing. As he pointed out in several interviews, the awakening of living nature corresponds to that rare moment, that surprising and inexplicable *awe*, through which humans are able to experience a profound connection with the world they inhabit. As Barnard Don recalls, in “his Nobel Prize acceptance address, *The Antilles*, [Walcott] said”:

There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defying itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defying dawn, which is why, especially at the edge of the sea, it is good to make a ritual of sunrise. Then the noun, the ‘Antilles’ ripples like brightening water, and the sound of leaves, palm fronds and birds are the sound of fresh dialect, the native tongue (Walcott quoted in Barnard 2014: 82).

Moreover, as we can discern from the beginning of his epic, Walcott does not abandon the common language of his people (i.e. the French Creole) to define and name the natural elements of his story. While the wind brings the news – of the cutting – to other plants, the poet records the *laurier-cannelles*⁷ frightening reaction. This is one of many specific West-Indian plants Walcott does not neglect to describe and talk about throughout his entire literary production. As subjective and independent actors, the natural elements have the right to say what they think and even take irreversible choices: “Yes, the trees have to die”.

In presenting the setting of his epic Walcott also promptly introduces one of the key figures of his mythical story, the ‘wounded Philoctete’, while he is having a conversation with some tourists:

For some extra silver, under a sea-almond,
he [Philoctete] shows them a scar made by a rusted anchor,
rolling down one trouser-leg up with the rising moan

of a conch. It has puckered like the corolla
of a sea-urchin. He does not explain its cure.
“It have some things” – he smiles – “worth more than a dollar”.

He has left it to a garrulous waterfall
to pour out his secret down La Sorcière, since
the tall laurels fell, for the ground-dove’s mating call

to pass on its note to the blue, tacit mountains
whose talkative brooks, carrying it to the sea,
turn into idle pools where the clear minnows shoot

⁷ In the open-access database of the University of the West-Indies, the reader can find the various and colourful names Caribbean people attribute to the *laurier-cannelles*: *bois doux isabelle*, *bois doux noir*, *bois negresse*, *Isabel sweetwood*, *laurier fer*, *laurier petite feuille*, *laurier riviere*, *loyé* while its scientific and technical name records it under the label of *Ocotea cernua*. See: <http://ecflora.cavehill.uwi.edu/plantsearch.php> (consulted on 15/05/2018).

and an egret stalks the reeds with one rusted cry
 as it stabs and stabs the mud with one lifting foot.
 Then silence is sawn in half by a dragonfly

as eels sign their names along the clear bottom-sand,
 when the sunrise brightens the river's memory
 and waves of huge ferns are nodding to the sea's sound.

[...] an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
 "Iounalao", "Where the iguana is found" [...] (Walcott 2008: 12-14).

Philoctete's psychological mark is described through an evocative metaphorical language that bonds it together with images coming from the Caribbean Sea: the wound looks like the "corolla / of a sea-urchin". The symbolic imagery continues in the recalling of different aquatic elements: the "garrulous waterfall", the "talkative brooks" and the "idle pools". These ever-flowing elements are not simple natural phenomena but they epitomise the motifs for Caribbean collective redemption: Philoctete, and all the community he stands for, will be finally freed from their curse after having accepted their 'true identity' and after being re-baptised through a cleansing bath. Another interesting and meaningful interpretation of this passage has been given by Barnard when he argues that these watery metaphors:

[...] are more than metaphor. They also recall the West African/Caribbean spirits of nature, particularly Mami Wata or Maman Dlo, the female spirit who hides in a waterfall and protects the rivers and forests against the abuse of men. She is seen as both the cause of and only cure for sickness (Barnard 2014: 83).

The island's landscape, as much as the animal world living on it, are direct witnesses of Caribbean human agonies. Through its animistic cries and movements, the environment is able to replicate the painful *amnesia* that has prevented the immediate healing of the people. The land reflects the problems of the human world: the iguana has forgotten its primordial aboriginal name while the egret tries to walk through an intricate and muddy area which prevents it from feeling stable and balanced.

A sense of precariousness pervades the entire scene: the flight of a light-weighted dragonfly breaks the dormant tranquillity of the forest. Everything contributes to the replication of the never-ending fluctuation and unsteadiness of the "Caribbean reality". The animal and the human worlds are tightly associated in the impermanence of their precarious existences while, at the same time, they are linked in the fight for establishing roots and determining their inevitable presence.

2.2. Healing identities through the sacred power of nature

The second passage of the epic I have decided to analyse relates to the moment in which the obeah priestess Ma Kilman leaves for a quest through the Caribbean forest in order to find the curative ingredients for Philoctete's wound. This occurs towards the end of the epic when any hope of recovery seems lost. Following the path marked by the Antillean ants, the obeah priestess finally uncovers the curative root or herb: an African sea-swift had carried its seed centuries ago while crossing the ocean. It is through a symbolical and holistic re-connection with the natural world that the priestess accomplishes her spiritual task:

The wild, wire-haired, and generously featured
apothecary of the caverned prophetess
began. Ma Kilman unpinned the black, red-berried

straw-hat with its false beads, lifted the press
of the henna wig, made of horsehair, from the mark
on her forehead [...]

[...]. Her hair sprung free as the moss. Ants scurried
through the wiry curls, barring, then passing each other

the same message with scribbling fingers and forehead
touching forehead. Ma Kilman bent hers forward,
and as her lips moved the ants, her mossed skull heard

the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother,
the gossip of a distant market, and she understood,
the way we follow our thoughts without any language,

why the ants sent her this message to come to the wood
where the wound of the flower, its gangrene, its rage
festering for centuries, reeked with corrupted blood,

seeped the pustular drops instead of sunlit dew
into the skull, the brain of the earth, in the mind
ashamed of its flesh [...] (Walcott 2008: 412-414).

In order to recover the powerful union connecting humanity to the environment, Ma Kilman has to undress and take off her fake ornaments. The ceremony could be read as a meaningful dropping of constructed values of 'being', a sort of 'decolonisation' of the body⁸:

⁸ Ma Kilman is aware of the fact that she has lost the power to discern and fully comprehend the knowledge and wisdom of her ancestors. Like most of the characters in St. Lucia, the obeah priestess is living a 'divided existence': she attends Catholic mass and dresses in a western-like manner (she wears ornaments and clothes typical of a West-Indian woman such as wigs and stockings) but she does not ignore the fact that she belongs to another primordial and different culture. In this sense, Ma Kilman is imbued with the spiritual values of

the priestess needs to retrieve her primordial and uncorrupted 'form' to become 'part of the land'. The animal world finally recognises her as an enlightening source of knowledge and as a prophetess of the truth. The ants are not afraid to run over her, they feel her ancestral power and so they decide to unveil the secret lingering over the herb. The flower has been bleeding "for centuries", wounded in its animistic living lymph. It has experienced the "corruption" and the transformation of the land and shared the destiny of transported African people. The flower has "seeped [...] pustular drops instead of sunlit dew".

The relation connecting the human and the natural world is here clearly and emphatically displayed: the flower and the communities transplanted to this "edge of the world" are intrinsically interfacing. The 'humanised' land is symbolically "ashamed of its flesh" as much as its living inhabitants. As Walcott points out in much of his critique:

History is there, in Antillean geography, in the vegetation itself. The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory (Walcott 1998: 81).

Having discerned the causes preventing Philoctete's recovery from the unhealed wound, the obeah priestess Ma Kilman calls on the power of nature to help her remember the atrocities of Caribbean history. It is only through redemption that her community will be able to unchain itself from the burden of European tormented subjugation. Although he has always professed the need for a "collective amnesia" in regard to colonial atrocities and their harmful consequences, Walcott is here disclosing his psychologically repressed feelings and agonies:

[...]. She [Ma Kilman] rubbed dirt in her hair, she prayed
in the language of the 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-flower sink through sand (Walcott 2008: 414).

different beliefs and the taking off of her clothes in this passage might suggest a symbolic 'dropping' of one of her double-sided personalities. The syncretism of this emblematic figure is also highlighted in the following lines, where the ancient gods of the forest are incapable of 'connecting' with her: "[...] so the deities swarmed in the thicket / of the grove, waiting to be known by name; but she [Ma Kilman] / had never learnt them, though their sounds were within her, / subdued in the rivers of her blood" (Walcott 2008: 410-412).

The mystical and redeeming ritual has been accomplished. Through the help and the guidance of 'nature', the Sibyl has initiated the journey for communal and individual recovery. The pain has been drained and transferred from the entrails of Caribbean land to "Philoctete's rotting shin". The union of once allied spiritual entities (the human and the environment) has been recovered and restored.

The ultimate task will be the washing off from Philoctete's shin the "shame" of his people. Having returned from the woods with the needed ingredients, including the seed of the "corrupted" flower, Ma Kilman prepares in an emblematic oval cauldron (that recalls the shape of a woman's womb) the redemptive and healing bath. Philoctete is immersed and, once again, while using a powerful metaphor that connects the prepared concoction to the beneficial washing of the Caribbean Sea, Walcott finally unchains Philoctete (and with him, allegorically, all his community) from the weight of his 'hybrid identity' and from his intricate relationship with the colonial past.

3. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of these two significant episodes shows how Walcottian writing reflects upon the arduous relationship linking Caribbean communities with their 'adopted land'. In the aftermath of their arrival, European colonisers did not only wipe out the aboriginal tribes that originally populated the islands, but they also forced multitudes of ethnically divided groups of peoples to migrate to those remote territories. These aspects had important consequences in the definition of a "Caribbean representational identity" firstly because the transplanted individuals did not know how to "relate" to a dimensional space that differed greatly from their land of origin and secondly because they did not feel that same place as their "home". From the beginning of colonialism, the relationship with the natural environment thus proved troublesome. Moreover, the European imperialistic powers brought immediate change to that same land, breaking and de-constructing its balance and conformity:

There is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and settlement than the Caribbean. [...] For this reason, writers have often articulated a *poetic relation with the land* that is consistent with the highest aims of sustainability (DeLoughrey, Gosson & Handley 2005: 1-4).

In this perspective, Walcott's work is a striking example of what critics have been identifying as an "ecocritical and sustainable" type of writing. In his poems the author firmly denounces the damaging exploitation of the Caribbean land foregrounding at the same time not only its uncorrupted and "virginal beauty" but also its possible representational revitalisation:

It has taken me over thirty years, and my race hundreds, to feel the fibres spread from the splayed toes and grip this earth, the arms knot into boles and put out leaves. When that begins, this is the beginning of season, cycle time. The noise my leaves make is my language. In it is tunnelled the roar of seas of a lost ocean. It is a fresh

sound. Let me not be ashamed to write this, because it supports this thesis, that our only true apprehensions are through metaphor, that old botanical names, the old processes cannot work for us. Let's walk (Walcott 2005)⁹.

For Walcott, the Caribbean environment as much as the heterogenous communities living in it share the possibility to 're-shape' and 're-mould' history because they have the power to describe it in a "new light", while stepping aside from a damaging anthropocentric type of discourse. Starting from this challenging viewpoint, Walcott has elaborated an original and renewing "Adamic" dialectic, i.e. a substantial re-naming of the 'Caribbean space' in which he and his community live. Through this highly attentive and cooperative approach, the author has succeeded in opening up the path to a rehabilitative environmental balancing of his territory, while also highlighting the possibility of a communal and favourable reconciliation between the Caribbeans and 'their land'.

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⁹ "Isla Incognita", an essay by Derek Walcott written in 1972, was published for the first time in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (DeLoughrey, Gosson & Handley 2005) as the authors point out in their introduction.

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