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“Foamation” of a New Island Identity: An Analysis of Foam in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*

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Mythological allusions and references are commonplace in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. From the text's title, to characters' names, to the Homer-like character of Seven Seas, Greek mythology is abundant. Several critics argue that Walcott uses the verse narrative to explore his own identity, and by extension that of postcolonial St. Lucia. In this case, identity will serve to be defined as how people see themselves, and how they are perceived by others, in terms of their traits, values, beliefs, and physical characteristics. When considering the identity of a country, the same two-way street of perception applies, but it can be defined by wider and more complex concepts, including, but not limited to, physical geography and traditions, which include folklore derived from myths specific to that country's culture. When it comes to postcolonial literature, much of the works in the genre, as well as criticism on those works, deal with issues of discovering or accepting identities through the mode of writing. This is certainly the case in *Omeros*, as Walcott, a St. Lucian native with mixed ancestry, features characters trying to grapple with the past, present, and future, including the narrator who, through Walcott, makes metafictional departures from the text in order to analyze his writing and question its worth with Homer, a great vessel of myth. Considering Walcott's deep understanding of, and respect for, Greek mythology, it is possible to argue that Walcott is attempting to write his own form of mythology for St. Lucia — one that is made up of its own unique mixture of historical people and events — in order to help it continue to develop its journey of discovering its all-encompassing, postcolonial identity. The key element that gives this argument a strong foundation rests in Walcott's extensive use of the term "foam," which appears forty-two times in the text. With Walcott's knowledge of mythology in mind, one that would have been at the core of his Western education, it is hard to believe he wouldn't understand the association between foam and Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love (as well as sexuality and beauty). According to William Hansen's *Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans*, "Folk etymology perceived in her name the Greek word for foam (aphros) and accounted for it by representing her as foam-born" (106). Through Walcott's numerous uses of "foam" throughout *Omeros*, he employs the mythological birth of Aphrodite as an allegory for, not only the birth of his beloved island with a transformed identity stemming from the foam in the ocean, but also his aspirations of his poetic text becoming a pillar of that identity as a postcolonial myth for St. Lucia. Walcott does this by focusing on the optimistic and harmonious discovery and acceptance of all that was, all that is, and all that will be in forming St. Lucia's complex, hybrid identity.

In order to establish the foam's many-faceted connotations in *Omeros*, the somewhat gruesome story of Aphrodite's conception and birth must be examined. According to Hansen, as well as commonly accepted understandings of Greek mythology, Aphrodite was born from the sea foam that was created from the semen

of Ouranos, also known as the sky, after his genitals were cut off and cast into the ocean by his vengeful son, Kronos. Before Aphrodite's conception, Ouranos would come to lie on Gaia, the earth, in order to have sexual intercourse at the end of each day. However, Ouranos had no desire to be a father, so he repeatedly shoved his children back into Gaia, which caused pain that resulted in her forming a plan to stop him from trying to prevent her births. Gaia created a sickle and orchestrated a trap by Kronos, so that one day when Ouranos was getting ready to have coitus with her, Kronos violently severed his genitals and tossed them into the sea (Hansen 105-106).

While some mythologists debate about whether Aphrodite was formed from the sea foam or from the semen, Hansen, in an article titled "Foam-Born Aphrodite and the Myth of Transformation," delivers a compelling argument that it is both. His translation of Hesiod's *Theogony*, shows that Hesiod did use the word foam, and not just ejaculate or semen, when telling the story of Aphrodite's birth. Hansen takes it one step further in explaining that the story of Ouranos' semen is an example of a common theme in mythology — etiology, which is an attempt to explain a natural phenomenon through mythology ("Foam-Born" 9-10). The Greeks, like many other cultures, invented many tales of explanation like this in order to understand the backstory behind occurrences like rain, dew, and spring, as well as how bodies of water and mountains came to be. Hansen claims that Aphrodite's birth story is just such an etiology to explain the existence of sea foam. He calls this type of etiology an "aspectual transformation," "where the first element (or source) is a bodily exudation of a celestial or terrestrial being, and the second element (or result) is an ordinary phenomenal substance of the earth's surface" (13). This breakdown supports Hansen's argument that "the relationship of sea foam and semen in this myth is one of *identity*" (7). Through Hesiod's myth, Ouranos becomes forever linked as the ejaculating creator of foam; it becomes part of his identity. The myth also becomes part of Aphrodite's identity, although she is more commonly associated with love and sexuality. With foam being a recurring theme in *Omeros*, Walcott could be using the frothy lather as a medium to give birth to St. Lucia's new postcolonial identity through his verse narrative, which, like Hesiod's *Theogony*, becomes a conduit to deliver and immortalize this message. Like all myths, the tale strays from reality and leans on the supernatural. That's what makes it a good story. That's what makes it a good myth.

Centering back on Walcott's use of foam in *Omeros*, the word itself appears in many different forms and contexts. Of its forty-two occurrences, foam surfaces twenty-six times as a noun, eight times as a verb, and eight times as an adjective. This connects to the metamorphosis of Aphrodite because she not only arises out of actual sea foam (a noun), but her birth is also a result of semen that foams up (verb) while being stirred around by the ocean, making Aphrodite a foam-born goddess (adjective). Walcott also varies the context of foam in the verse narrative,

with the vast majority of foam's emergences, thirty to be exact, referring to sea foam. Other uses for foam are in relation to heads or features that appear on heads like hair (six), clouds or sky (five), and writing (three), while three others are described as white and three more fit in the "other" category that includes things like the foam on top of a Guinness beer. There is an overlapping nature of some of the references, as some uses of the word fit into more than one classification. The wide and specific range of contexts directly feed into the theory of Walcott using foam as a placenta for the genesis of postcolonial St. Lucia, through the comparison to Ouranos, Gaia, and Aphrodite, as well as the birth of his text as a postmodern myth for the country.

Walcott wastes no time inserting "foam" into *Omeros*, as it shows up four times in the first fourteen pages and all four have very interesting connotations. The very first time foam appears in the text is on page six after Philoctete has cut down the laurels and Achille is glancing up at the gap where a tree once stood. The narrator writes, "He saw the hole silently healing with the foam / of a cloud like a breaker" (6). While the reference has many meanings, it also symbolizes the sky because of the "cloud" and because that is where Achille is looking. This alludes to Ouranos, who is the sky in Greek mythology, and "the hole" could symbolize his castration, as well as the feminine earth Gaia, who includes the entire surface of the planet including its bodies of water. The word breaker is also incredibly meaningful as, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of its definitions is "A heavy ocean-wave which breaks violently into foam" ("breaker" def.5). This could be considered as an allegory for Kronos' defiling act, which was immediately followed by Ouranos' genitals splashing in the ocean and creating a foamy womb for Aphrodite. The next two times foam is used in *Omeros*, both demonstrate the next phase in Hesiod's transformation myth because of their connotation with a head, which is the first body part to emerge in a healthy birth. The first, and least relevant, is associated with Philoctete's hair (9). The second, and third foam reference overall, directly correlates with Aphrodite. It occurs when the first-person narrator touches a small bust of Homer, whom a Greek woman named Antigone calls "Omeros," and explains, "I felt the foam head" (14). With the reference to a famed Greek character and one of the most famous Greek poets, along with the multiple other excerpts about Greece, Walcott once again pays tribute to Greek mythology. He describes Homer's head with foam as an adjective because it is the origin of one of the many myths that came to define Greek culture and forever become part of its identity. The narrator, whom several critics identify with Walcott or even identify as a character named "Walcott," as is the case with Paul Jay, is touching "the foam head" with his own hands, trying to get a feel for how to emulate the same myth-making abilities through the body parts that will be responsible for holding a pen, or typing, to write his story.

Temporarily putting aside this connection between discovering identity and writing, the concept of identity being related to sea foam requires more explanation. Since a large chunk of *Omeros* focuses heavily on the ocean, it is not at all surprising that most of the foam appearances in the verse narrative relate to the sea. Due to the identity of a country being heavily associated with its geography, the ocean must be a central component of St. Lucia's identity because it is an island. Whether the ocean was used, or is used, as a source of food for natives, as a medium to carry ships, loaded with slaves and cargo, from Africa to the Americas, as a strategically-positioned port that caused the British and French empires to fight over control of the island for nearly one hundred and fifty years, a track for tourist cruises that serve as parasitic and invasive job creators and economy drivers, or as a symbol of power, resilience, and beauty, it can also be seen as the mother of St. Lucia. Walcott makes this maternal connection when the first-person narrator is speaking with Antigone about the name "Omeros," which contains the French word *mer*, saying, "*mer* was both mother and sea" (14). As the new postcolonial identity is being formed, it is as if the island is being reborn by accepting historical elements of multiple perspectives that are harmoniously colliding to create foam that will wash over the St. Lucia and assist in its transformation. In other words, Walcott's foam is being used as the island's secular, holistic baptism from numerous sources including Greek earth, Gaia, and contemporary Mother Earth. In Isabella Maria Zoppi's article "*Omeros*, Derek Walcott and the Contemporary Poem," she identifies this goal of Walcott's pursuit to build "a new whole by putting together the various parts of a divided world ... making a harmonious amalgam of the culture of Africa, the Greco-Roman, Christian, Mediterranean cultural roots he inherited from the Old World and the Caribbean reality of the New World" (527). This "new whole" comes to life out of the sea.

When Achille's history is explored, the ocean, and the foam in it, plays a crucial part. The story of Achille's family history, with Afolabe being a slave forced to do the manual labor for the British in one of their battles against the French, opens the door for Achille to be able to come to terms with his ancestry of being a victim of imperialism and the slavery. The history explains, "Some paused to watch the foam / chaining the black rocks below them" (83). With Achille coming to terms with the past that chains him just as his ancestors were chained, all of war, death, and inhuman conditions that the waters surrounding St. Lucia experienced are stirred up to create foam that will generate the new identity for the country. After this visit back to history, Achille has achieved a greater sense of peace and appreciation for St. Lucia because he was able to shed some of the burdens of his past in the ocean. As a fisherman who spends most of his time on the sea and lives off of its bounty, Achille, when he is fishing on this sacred water, is described as "at home / This was his garden. God bless the speed of the swift, / God bless the wet head of the mate sparking with foam, / and his heart trembled with enormous

tenderness" (126). This use of foam is extremely positive, and instead of foaming with negativity from atrocities of the past, the foam is now "sparkling" with love that Achille feels toward his home, toward the sea, and toward his mate. After his vision of returning to Africa, Achille realizes that the past cannot be forgotten, but that it has to be laid to rest. He learns that his life in Africa is gone when he finds out that his father had forgotten about him, but he is able to come to some sort of peace when he is there and "The white foam lowered its head" (139). White men operated the slave trade and white men drove empires that controlled his past, but now the white foam bows to him in sorrow and regret, attempting to allow for acceptance and progression.

With each generation, more learning, more healing, more accepting, and more progress can be achieved as postcolonial nations come closer to discovering their identities. It also demonstrates an ongoing tribute to the dead, slaves, laborers, soldiers, people who died of old age, and everyone in between by showing that they did not die in vain. This is hinted at when Hector is about to die because his van crashes. While crashing, he looks at the Madonna of the Rocks statue and finds peace because "Her lifted palm ... indicated that he had prayed enough to the lace / of foam round the cliff's altar" (225). It as if the foam, the life force of the island is reclaiming him and it will use the energy and matter of his body to fuel its cycle of regeneration. After Hector dies, Walcott once again includes the phrase "Mer was both mother and sea" (231), showing that the sea, and the foam that is always circulating and creating, is the progenitor of life on the island. St. Lucia can't ignore what has happened to it in the past. The terrible events, the violence, the mistreatment of humans, and the pain and suffering all go along side its beauty, all of the great traditions, culture, and individuals who have called the island home. Every act and every person has contributed to its genetic makeup, becoming, in a way, the biological parents of the current island. However, St. Lucia's identity doesn't have to be infinitely associated as a former colony, as a plantation for slaves, as an island with resources to be stripped by greedy forces of imperialism. Those elements are all part of the island, but they do not have to define it.

Just as Aphrodite refuses to be labeled as the offspring of a violent genital mutilation that resulted in a foam birth, her identity is centered on being a goddess of love, which is the most common way others perceive her. This proud realization of positive identity is felt by the narrator as well, both as a native of St. Lucia and also as an observer, who, through the course of discovery and acceptance throughout the text, is able to see the island's new identity. He admits, "I was seeing the light of St. Lucia at last through her own eyes, / her blindness, her inward vision as revealing / as his, because a closing darkness brightens love, / and I felt every wound pass" (282). This reference to the necessity of love being part of an identity of a country is seen again two pages later when the narrator and Seven Seas (also known as Omeros or Homer) are talking about why wars are fought in

contemporary times. The narrator explains that wars are no longer fought for beauty or “a girl’s love,” as was the case of the cause of the Trojan War in Homer’s *Iliad*. Seven Seas responds, “Love is good, but the love of your own people is / greater” (284). These wise words from Homer shed light on the solution in forming St. Lucia’s postcolonial identity: The people who live there, like Achille, Helen, and Philoctete in *Omeros*, have to go through the same journey as the narrator in order to affirm, embrace, and love the island for all that it was, all that it is, and all that it will be.

How Walcott is defined as a postcolonial author and how his texts, especially *Omeros*, are classified seem to be at the heart of one of the debates of postcolonial literature. In an article titled “Fated to Unoriginality: The Politics of Mimicry in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” Jay showcases a number of these arguments from labeling Walcott as an imitator of Homer, as an elitist who demands a high background of Western literature from his readers in order to access his works, to praising him as a loyal St. Lucian native who is able to represent the culture and identity of his country in a refreshing and enlightening way. The article reveals the illogical need critics have in desiring to compartmentalize texts and authors into clear-cut, easily-defined categories. Jay points out the impossibility of these efforts, claiming, “*Omeros* is less a poem about the Caribbean than a poem about writing about the Caribbean, one that embodies the various stands of Walcott’s identity—African, European, Caribbean, American”—in order to examine and explore his country and his own writing (546). Jay explains that it is impossible not to be “fated to unoriginality.” It is impossible to separate one’s self from the past, just as it is impossible for a baby to be made of a completely original genetic makeup that shares no traits with its parents. Walcott expresses this desire for reconciliation, acceptance, and starting anew outside of *Omeros* as well, as seen in the essay he wrote entitled “What the Twilight Says” when he explains what former Africans, who became slaves in the Caribbean, then victims of English and French colonization, and were then “granted independence” in a land they could finally call their own as they tried to end their diasporic existence, have to do. He writes, “We begin again with the vigor of curiosity that gave the old names life ... from the depths of suffering, with awe” (10). This awe is commonly referred to by Walcott and can be seen in his inspiring myth, *Omeros*. The past is a part of the present, and only once this fact is accepted, can something or someone progress forward with a more clear understanding of its identity and a higher chance of achieving a more complete comprehension of its identity.

No postcolonial country can discover its own identity without putting it in the context of others countries. This comes from confronting all of the good and bad influences other countries and cultures have had on it, and then embracing the positive traits it wants to have at the core of its new identity. Helen Tiffin illustrates this point in the essay “Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse,” insisting,

"Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity" (114). Neither Walcott nor *Omeros* fit into a solely European, African, American, or exclusively Caribbean labels. Why should they have to be one or the other? Neither Walcott nor *Omeros* are one or the other. Both are a product of everything that has happened to them. Walcott is part St. Lucian, part African, part former slave, and part European, since all of those contribute to who he is. His text shares the same qualities. Just as Ouranos and Gaia are Aphrodite's parents, neither the goddess, nor Walcott, nor the island, can break away from their biological influencers. Even though Jay's article is mostly about Walcott's paradoxical use of Western themes and ideas even while he is attempting to break free from them, Walcott's references to foam shows that his use of the word is less about the physical froth in the sea, but more about using other stories to explain the phenomenon of the current state of St. Lucia — similar to Hansen's explanation of Hesiod's etiologies that constructed meanings to unexplained occurrences.

Near the end of *Omeros*, the bust of Homer (also known as Seven Seas or Omeros) is delivered out of the ocean with its "plaster head, foaming" (279) before stepping out of the surf "in the white foam manacled his heels" (280), with his "foam-scalloped beard" (280) as Omeros is "moving to the foam's swell, / one elbow lifted, calling me from the hotel" (280). This also represents that some of the foam has to reflect the Greco-Roman roots that are entrenched in Western culture, and therefore, became another set of chromosomes making up the entity of St. Lucia. All of these elements, when morphed together completely, reflect a genetic code of a new identity — one that encompasses all that came before and allows it to progress forward peacefully. This reflects Zoppi's assertion that "a composite-Creole-reality where the African matrix plays the countermelody to the Eurocentric, neo-colonialist superstructure in an historical perspective of notable breadth and inclusiveness, which is yet neither paternalistic nor biased" (527). Not only does this demonstrate St. Lucia's necessity for comprehensive hybridity in order to establish a new identity it didn't proudly possess or emanate before, but it also relates back to forming a new kind of identity that embraces a new structure — that of affirming and welcoming the idea of the sea as its mother and manifesting more maternal values.

Returning to identity's inseparable link to writing, Walcott, occasionally throughout the text, expresses his wonderings about how to write his story through the narrator. When the narrator, or as Jay says, a character named "Walcott," is being lectured by Omeros/Seven Seas/Homer near the end of the story, Omeros describes the power of writing through foaming metaphors. Homer, a poet immortalized as a myth writer and contributor to the Greek identity, possesses a most outstanding ethos to deliver this message. After applauding the narrator for

completing a noble quest that he will be about to write about, Omeros tells him that the equally important part of his journey lies in writing his story down. He explains, “the ‘I’ is a mast; a desk is a raft / for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak / of a pen in its foam, while an actual craft / carries the other to cities” (291). Punning crafts that sail the seas with the craft of writing, *Seven Seas* emphasizes the imperative need for writing stories, so they can become immortal myths as part of an identity that St. Lucian residents will read and accept and that will be recognized in the perception of the country by others. This all comes through a foaming pen. In “What the Twilight Says,” Walcott calls upon the same awe-inspiring spirit that stems from curiosity of discovering and accepting postcolonial identity to be applied to writing: “To the writers of my generation, then, the word, and the ritual of the word in print, contained this awe” (10). As an author inspired by poetry and myth, Walcott understands the importance of such texts and hopes his can become what future generations read and associate with St. Lucian identity.

Upon first glance, frequent use of the word foam in a text like *Omeros* might seem arbitrary. That is until considering that there aren’t many works like *Omeros*, a verse narrative with lyrical poetry that encompasses the lofty aspirations of a St. Lucian writer hoping to come to terms with the island’s, and its people’s, painful history. As a writer, Walcott’s mission seems clear, which is to establish an optimistic and progressive identity for St. Lucia and its residents by creating a myth that is born from the foaming history surrounding the island. In an essay titled “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” Walcott claims, “For every poet it is always morning in the world. History a forgotten, insomniac night; History and elemental awe are always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of history” (79). Walcott’s fate is captured in *Omeros*. This love is seen in the when Achille comes to terms with his history and when the narrator finally recognizes he is proud of his identity as a St. Lucian when a boy “saw how deeply I had loved the island” (286). Just like Aphrodite rose out of the foam that was generated from a violent procreation but is more known for her association as the goddess of love than from the story of her coming to be, Walcott hopes the same can happen for St. Lucia through *Omeros* becoming an immortalized poem that will stand as the etiological myth of a new island identity.

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