3. Lyricizing the Planetary Epic: Genre Mixing and Discrepancies of Scale in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

One of the most acclaimed English language poets of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, Derek Walcott received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992 and the British T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry for his last collection *White Egrets* in 2010. After a long and prolific career that reached well beyond the Caribbean, his region of origin, he died in 2017 at the age of 87. Born on the island of St. Lucia in 1930, Walcott lived and worked in Jamaica, Trinidad, the United States, and Europe for extended periods, publishing nine plays, over twenty books of poetry as well as numerous essays and other writings concerned with poetics and politics. Since Walcott's works first began to attract scholarly attention during the early 1970s, his plays and poems have been the object of countless articles and book-length critical studies. In contrast to most of the other poets analyzed in this study, Walcott already garnered scholarly interest during the rise of postcolonial criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s and during the emergence of ecocriticism in the early 1990s. Even more, due to the ubiquity of representations of the natural world in his work and the increasingly transnational themes in his texts, his work became a touchstone for scholars working in the fields of postcolonial and transnational ecocriticism as well as for scholars interested in poetries of migration and travel. Walcott's poetry thus presents a paradigmatic case to demonstrate some of the larger issues that are at stake when examining poetries of migration as ecopoetries engaged in poetic place-making. Analyzing his 1990 book-length poem *Omeros*, I focus in this chapter on Walcott's reluctant and conflicted ecopoetics of mobility which, as I will show, relies crucially on genre-mixing. Combining the genre of epic with the travel poem, the pastoral, the (pastoral) elegy, and the confessional lyric, *Omeros* can be read as an environmentally resonant lyricization of epic that is ripe with tensions between the universal and the particular, the communal and the individual, the global and the local, the postcolonial and the transnational. Indeed, as I argue, Walcott's book-length poem *Omeros* can be described as a lyricized planetary epic that emphasizes the discrepancies of scale and the poetic as well as ethical problems of representation that come to the

fore when an Afro-Caribbean migrant poet engages in poetic place-making in the United States.

Derek Walcott always wrote about the natural world (see Mootry, Ramchand, and Izebaye). While some scholars suggest that the early poems of his "Caribbean phase" (Ismond 1) treat nature primarily as a metaphor for abstract social, cultural, and political phenomena (see Lane), Graham Huggan, in prefiguring later ecocritical and geocritical approaches to Walcott's work, noted already in 1987 that Walcott frequently infuses his Caribbean landscapes with "the dimensions of height and depth which [human geographer Yi Fu] Tuan considers to be disappearing in the Western world's predominant aestheticization of nature" (24). The motif of travel, too, is important in Walcott's poetry (Gray, *Mastery's End* 178–211). During his "American Phase" (Handley, *New World Poetics* 14)—a period starting in the 1980s that was marked by the poet's frequent work-related travels back and forth between Trinidad and the United States—Walcott not only increasingly began to write about places beyond the Caribbean, he also began to engage more directly with questions of mobility in his poetry. Scholars discussing his poetry collections *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981) or *Midsummer* (1984), for instance, have commented on Walcott's preoccupation with the figure of the "poet as permanent traveler" (Breslin 219) suggestive of "our [postmodern] sense of homelessness" (Lane 325) as well as of the postcolonial subject's sense of "imaginative dislocation" (Döring 195). Comments like these raise the question, of particular import for my present discussion, under what circumstances evocations of mobility in poetry matter not only figuratively but also as literally. What is more, if one assumes, as I do here, that mobility invoked in poetry and particularly in poetries of migration matters as geographical movement, the next question would be whether such movement must always lead to an "uneasy sense of dislocation" (Breslin 216) or to a problematic "tendency […] toward the mythology of placelessness" (Huggan 26), as scholars have claimed in the case of Walcott's poetics. Or, put differently, it raises the question whether the sense of dislocation that mobility can produce must necessarily be debilitating, also in environmental terms. I propose that it does not. Instead, I argue, it can produce an ecologically suggestive sense of place that is deepened by experiences of mobility, rather than being made shallower by them.

Because I am invested in evocations of various types of geographical movement in conjunction with evocations of American geographies, I focus here on Walcott's epic *Omeros* (1990). *Omeros* marks the culmination of Walcott's "American Phase" and the beginning of what could be called his "Transnational Phase," a period in his oeuvre when Walcott increasingly began to evoke concrete, multilayered European geographies in addition to Caribbean and North American ones. I turn to *Omeros*, because it features multilayered geographies in the United States and elsewhere as well as many different kinds of mobilities. I also turn to *Omeros*, because it is a poetic work of remarkable complexity that anticipates many of the themes and literary strategies

at work in later eco/poetries of migration, even as it demonstrates how some debates, for example surrounding Indigenous representation and settler-colonialism have progressed considerably in the past thirty years. Much like *The Arkansas Testament* (1989), the collection that directly preceded *Omeros,* Walcott's epic poem is centrally concerned with places in North America and its narrator's movements between them. At the same time, *Omeros* is concerned with human-nature relationships as shaped by past and present movements of people, whether in the form of European immigration and colonial settlement, as a result of the transatlantic and intra-American slave trade, in connection to people's present-day migrations between the Caribbean and the United States, or in connection to modern leisure tourism. Moreover, prefiguring important themes in later collections such as *The Bounty* (1997) and *White Egrets* (2010), *Omeros* marks the beginning of a period in Walcott's career in which his poetry gained more explicitly environmental undertones (see DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley 13; Handley "A Postcolonial Sense of Place"). What emerges as all of these concerns converge in Walcott's epic poem, I suggest, is an ecopoetics of mobility that goes beyond postcolonial and transnational sensibilities, gesturing instead toward the planetary.

Derek Walcott and Omeros: A Transnational Poet and his Planetary Epic

The main narrative of *Omeros* follows the transnational movements of the first-person narrator and poet Derek, who has left his native Caribbean to live and work in the United States. During his time in the United States, Derek travels extensively, visiting many different places and reflecting on the violent histories of displacement that mark them. When Walcott's narrator returns home to visit the island of St. Lucia, his perspective is no longer only that of an Afro-Caribbean postcolonial writer. It is also that of a Black transnational poet. According to Jahan Ramazani, the lives and works of "transnational poets" (6)—a term he uses in reference to Derek Walcott, among other poets—are characterized by "various global and ex-colonial criss-crossings" (6), that is, by many different kinds of figurative and physical movements. For Ramazani, as well as other scholars who have used the designation, the term "transnational poet" thus evokes the lived experience of transnational migrants, that is to say, people for whom "international moves are only part of a biography of movement between places, with some moves being more permanent than others, and many being part of a regular circulation between different places" (Boyle, "Migration"). The idea of a "biography of movement between places" is apt both for Walcott and for his poetic alter-ego Derek. It is thus not only because Walcott's long poem evokes many different physical geographies (the U.S. Northeast and the Pacific West Coast, the U.S. South, and the Western Plains) and many different forms of human mobility (the transatlantic slave trade, European immigration to North America, the west-

ward movement, Native American removal, contemporary transnational migration, and various kinds of travel), that *Omeros* is pertinent for this study. Walcott's epic poem is also of interest because one of the key elements of its main narrative is the ongoing—if at times conflicted and reluctant—efforts at (eco)poetic place-making undertaken by Walcott's narrator, a constantly mobile transnational poet.

In contrast to many other scholars who have discussed the environmental undertones of Walcott's poetry, I do not focus in my reading on his Caribbean poetry but on his poetry about the United States. While there are similarities between Walcott's representations of Caribbean and U.S.-American environments, I do not see the same kind of "poetics of conservation" (Handley, "Walcott's Poetics" 212) at work in Walcott's poetry about the United States that scholars such as George B. Handley find in Walcott's poetry about the Caribbean. Still, comparisons between Walcott's poetry about the Caribbean and his poetry about the United States are useful, such as when Roy Kamada suggests in his reading of Walcott's Caribbean poetry that Walcott replaces Romantic notions of nature with a historically conscious "postcolonial romanticism" that casts the more-than-human world as "traumatic as well as sublime" (91). As I show in this chapter, the U.S. passages of *Omeros* too are filled with landscapes haunted by the violent histories of the American (post)colony, including violent histories of displacement and removal. In similar yet also different ways than in the Caribbean passages of *Omeros*, the landscapes that the poet-narrator encounters while living in and traveling through the United States are ripe with tensions between experiences of the sublime and historical trauma. These tensions point to discrepancies between human and nonhuman scales of time and place, which take shape not only in the changing relations of the local and the global to be found in Walcott's work (see Clark 132–134), but also in his engagement with different forms of mobility, ranging from individual short-term travel to large-scale movements and displacements of entire peoples.[1] Conscious of these tensions and discrepancies, Walcott's epic poem examines the limitations of an ecopoetics of mobility that takes form when the individual mobile subject encounters—and tries to account for—the intertwined human and environmental histories that have shaped human-nature relations in the 'New World' more broadly and in the United States more specifically.

1 Timothy Clark discusses Walcott in a subsection of a longer chapter on "Questions of Scale: The local, the national, and the global" in his *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011). The relevant subsection is entitled "Literary 'reinhabitation'?" and asks, in drawing from Peter Berg and Dasmann, whether literature can be used to as a means of "learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation" (Berg and Dasmann qtd. in Clark 133). Clark's notion of Walcott as a poet interested in literature as a means of reinhabitation is instructive for my reading, especially since Clark notes that Walcott's "own Caribbean is particularly suited as a testing ground of the force and coherence of bioregional ideas" (Clark 133), a challenge that the poet responds to with an "affirmation of the Adamic possibilities of the archipelago" (134).

In his influential study *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell discusses Walcott's intensive engagement with Caribbean island landscapes as an example of literary bioregionalism (81). Later, when he emphasizes the need for "a place-responsive ecoliterature of global scope" (Buell, *The Future* 92), Buell again points to Walcott. Indeed, Buell views *Omeros* as an especially "resonant example" (*The Future* 92) for such an ecoliterature of global scope, because Walcott's long poem exhibits, according to Buell, "a global sense of place" (92) and is "centered" (95), yet also "migratory, global, and world-historical in its evocations of place" (95). Buell contends that Walcott's poetry "bears out the possibility of imagining placeness in multi-scalar terms: local, national, regional, transhemispheric; topographically, historically, culturally" (*The Future* 96). Taking Buell's observations as a starting point for my analysis, I begin this chapter by providing a brief discussion of the Caribbean passages of *Omeros*, before I turn to the text's U.S.-American passages to explore the "multi-scalar placeness" as well as the "migratory, global and world-historical evocations of place" of Walcott's epic in a transnational American context that is conscious of postcolonial as well as settler-colonial histories. Focusing primarily on these frequently neglected U.S. American passages of *Omeros*, I illustrate how the narrator's migrations between the Caribbean and the U.S. and his confrontations with histories of displacement during his travels in the United States change his perspective on the more-than-human world in both places. As I propose, the U.S.-American passages in Walcott's poem are not negligible, as many critics have suggested.[2] Rather, they are crucial for the critical transnational and emphatically glocal place-sense that comes to the fore at the end of Walcott's epic. What I emphasize in my reading, too, is how a deliberate mixing of poetic genres allows Walcott to re-examine different Anglo-American poetic traditions of representing nature and mobility together with the clashing scales of the local and the global as well as of human and nonhuman histories. By integrating various genres that are associated with nature and mobility into his epic poem, his text points to some of

2 Most critics so far have treated the U.S. passages of *Omeros* alternatively as irrelevant, odd, weak, or outright offensive (see Leithauser, Benfey "Coming Home," or Mason). Even Robert Hamner, one of the few Walcott scholars who has discussed the U.S. passages of *Omeros* in some more detail, refers to the Dakota sections as one of the "least defensible aspects of the poem" (*Epic of the Dispossessed* 95). Arguing that "each of [the text's] protagonists is *a castaway* in one sense or another" (3; emphasis added), Hamner reads the long poem as an "epic of the dispossessed" (3) that focuses on several "*transplanted individuals* whose separate quests all center on the fundamental need to strike *roots* in a place where they belong" (3; emphasis added). Hamner's use of metaphors such as "castaway" and "transplanted individuals" in search of "roots" reveals that many of the instances of dispossession he discusses are in fact the result of physical displacement. At the same time, his use of nature imagery evokes issues of place-attachment and belonging and, at least inadvertently, suggests that the natural world too is a crucial element in *Omeros*.

the profound ways in which the experience of migration changes mobile subjects' perspective on the more-than-human world in all its multi-scalar dimensions as well as their perspective on place-making as a means to establish or maintain meaningful relationships to the places they encounter, leave behind, and return to.

Engagements with literature and evocations of different literary tradition play a central role in Walcott's place-oriented poetry (Buell, *Future* 64–65; DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley 13); so do revisions of poetic modes, genres, and forms, as Sarah Philips Casteel points out in her reading of Walcott's *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000). Like Casteel, although I do not use that specific wording, I analyze representations of "rural and wilderness settings" in Walcott's poetry that I find to be "uniquely informed by experiences of cultural and geographical displacement" (Casteel 1), while paying special attention to the "modes of landscape representation" (1) it employs. Also, like Casteel, I hope to make explicit in my reading how Walcott articulates alternative "forms of emplacement" (Casteel 3). More so than Casteel, though, I focus on the means by which Walcott's poetry about the United States produces complex environmental imaginaries suited for our present age of mobility and ecological crisis. In particular, my reading of Walcott asks what happens when a poet—who was born on a colonized island that was "physically transformed in the service of plantation economies" (Casteel 32) and grew up with the idealized images of English landscapes projected in metropolitan literature (Casteel 32)—interrogates U.S.-American landscapes and U.S.-American histories from a migratory perspective. I argue that the result is twofold: by engaging with U.S.-American landscapes in and through poetry, Walcott's poet-narrator recalibrates both his historical and environmental sensibilities and, by consequence, his strategies of and attitude toward practices of poetic place-making in different locations. After engaging with U.S.-American places and U.S. histories of displacement from a perspective of mobility, the traveling poet returns to his native island in the Caribbean with a heightened awareness of how a privileged transnational migrant like himself can become implicated in, and indeed complicit with, neocolonial forms of exploitation and the environmental destruction these exploitative systems produce. It is at least in part through his move to and subsequent travels in the United States, I want to suggest, that the poet's sense of place shifts from a postcolonial to a critical transnational sense of place that foregrounds the many different experiences of mobility that have shaped and continue to shape human-nature relations in North America and carries subtle but important environmental undertones.

Where scholarly discussions of *Omeros* have centered on matters of genre, critics have often debated whether Walcott's book-length poem should be called an epic

and, if so, what kind of epic it represents. Four different positions have dominated this debate:[3]

1) "*[t]raditional classicists*" (Jay 545; emphasis added) have celebrated *Omeros* as a modern epic in the European tradition;
2) *critical classicists* have emphasized the ways in which *Omeros* engages with those facets of the ancient epic associated with its oral and folkloristic origins;
3) *traditional postcolonialists* have accepted Walcott's own demonstrative rejection of the genre of epic (see Davis 326–328) and thus avoid the label of epic due to the genre's Eurocentric and imperialist associations;
4) and finally, *critical postcolonialists* have stressed Walcott's creative engagement with the European epic tradition and consider *Omeros* an anti-imperialist revision of the epic as a classic metropolitan genre.

Among these different critical traditions, the work of scholars who explore how Walcott challenges the generic conventions of epic is most pertinent for my purposes. Taking inspiration from Line Henriksen, who describes *Omeros* as a "heteroglossic" text that "incorporates other voices and genres, and parodies of these" (238), and Tobias Döring, who analyzes the ways in which Walcott integrates elements of travel writing, nature poetry, the adventure tale, autobiography, and ekphrastic writing into his epic (169–202), amongst others, I highlight the specifically *ecopoetic* dimension of Walcott's place-making through genre-crossing. Specifically, I argue that it is through a self-conscious interlacing of epic with different genres of lyric, that is to say, through a self-conscious "lyricization of epic" (see Dimock, "Low Epic" 619), that an environmental imaginary of mobility begins to emerge in Walcott's epic *Omeros*.

While the wide range of places and the broad scope of histories of migration and displacement featured in *Omeros* may be said to call for the genre of epic, the text's simultaneous investment in the narrator's personal engagements with those places and histories demand the genre of lyric. In my analysis, I show that Walcott's ecopoetic place-making depends on his interlacing of epic with three lyrical genres or modes: the travel poem, the pastoral, the (pastoral) elegy, and the confessional lyric. By integrating different lyrical modes into his epic, a genre that has often served nationalist, settler-colonialist, and imperialist purpose (see Quint, Graham, or Adair), Walcott's *Omeros* challenges a Western poetic tradition in which representations of nature and mobility have more often than not erased histories of violence, displacement, and exploitation. In doing so, it gestures toward a critical transnational sense

3 This four-part categorization follows Paul Jay's summary of early scholarship on *Omeros* in "Fated to Unoriginality: The Politics of Mimicry in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*" (2006), which in turn draws on Joseph Farrell's "Walcott's *Omeros*: The Classical Epic in a Postmodern World" (1997). However, the titles for the categories two to four are mine.

of place with significant environmental resonances that accounts for the challenges ecopoetic place-making confronts when the subject engaging in it—like Walcott's poet-narrator Derek—is not only a Black postcolonial subject, but also a relatively privileged transnational migrant of color. Emphasizing Walcott's engagement with these histories, but also the limits of his engagement, I read *Omeros* as a lyricized *planetary epic* that draws attention to the discrepant scales of human and nonhuman histories as well as to the possibilities and limits of an ecopoetry of migration.

Discussed by such thinkers as Nelson Maldorado-Torres, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Wai Chee Dimock, whose writings counter "local-, ethno-, anthro-, or other centrisms" in favor of "intercultural networks that negotiate relationships between people and environments" (Thornber 25), notions of the planetary have been used in the past two decades as an ethically charged alternative to notions of the global. In the work of sociologist and cultural critic Paul Gilroy and ecocritic Ursula K. Heise, for example, the concept of *the planetary* for instance draws attention to the importance of rethinking globalization in relation to histories of colonization and imperialism as well as in relation to large-scale environmental change. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Gilroy suggests that "[t]he planetary […] specifies a smaller scale than the global, which transmits all the triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals" (xv). For Gilroy, "the planetary" thus allows for an anti-imperialist critique of discourses around globalization; for Heise, it represents an alternative to those environmental theorizations of the global that rely on an "erasure of political and cultural differences" (*Sense of Place* 24). When Heise proposes an eco-cosmopolitanism in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008) that rethinks local, regional, as well as national ecological discourses on the basis of "a thorough cultural and scientific understanding of the global" (59), she envisions a "planetary 'imagined community'" (61) that extends into the non-human world. Drawing from these and similar grounded conceptualizations of "the planetary" that highlight the anti-colonial/anti-imperialist as well as the environmental dimensions of the term, I argue that the U.S. passages of *Omeros* dramatize the process by which the mobile narrator's postcolonial sense of place transforms into a critical transnational and environmental, or in short, a planetary sense of place.

Epic, Travel Poem, and the Critical Planetary Sensibilities of *Omeros*

While *Omeros* can be productively read as an epic, it can also be read as an expansive example of the prolific Anglo-American tradition of the travel poem.[4] Indeed, the

4 Although not a genre as well-established as the pastoral or the elegy, the travel poem goes back at least to the tenth century with such Old English poems as "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer," two Anglo-Saxon laments recorded in the so-called *Exeter Book* (c. 975). Famous Amer-

travel poem is a useful lens with which to analyze Walcott's epic, because *Omeros* presents Derek as a postcolonial poet of mobility who constantly wavers between his positions as transnational migrant and tourist.[5] As Jahan Ramazani notes, "the travel poem […involves] a macro-level transition, a mimetically plotted border crossing from home to foreign land" (*A Transnational Poetics* 53). Ramazani's emphasis on "border crossing from home to foreign land" is consistent with the most common definitions of travel writing, although in the U.S. in particular the genre also routinely includes texts by writers who are traveling within their home country.[6] As Jeffrey Gray explains, travel poetry has generally been "associated with agency and power, whether as exploration, conquest, adventure, or, more recently, tourism" (*Mastery's End* 3). The agency and power accorded to Derek stems from his relative economic privilege compared to his fellow St. Lucians, economic privilege that is directly linked to his mobility. This privileged position comes with the potential to effect change through representation as well as with a certain risk of abusing the (writerly) authority that comes with this power. At the same time, his conflicting experiences of mobility give him insight into the complex glocal processes that are increasingly affecting the environment on St. Lucia. By having the narrator engage in poetic place-making that self-consciously evokes the divergent perspectives on the more-than-human world of the local, the traveler, the migrant, and the tourist, the ending of *Omeros* consolidates a planetary sense of place that remains conscious of place-specific historical and socio-political circumstances while also pointing to the imminent dangers of, as well as the interconnections between, local environmental degradation and global climate change.

The passages of *Omeros* in which Derek travels back to St. Lucia hinge on a tension between the narrator's self-styling as the prodigal son returning to his native island and his self-presentation as a privileged visitor from the United States. Like

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ican examples of travel poetry include works by Hart Crane (*White Buildings* 1926, *The Bridge* 1930), Elisabeth Bishop (*North and South/A Cold Spring* 1955, *Questions of Travel* 1965, *Geography III* 1976), Joan Kyger (*Desecho Notebook* 1971, *Mexico Blonde* 1981, *Patzcuaro* 1999), Campbell McGrath (*Road Atlas* 1999), Rafael Campo (*The Enemy* 2007), Kazim Ali (*The Far Mosque* 2005, *Bright Felon* 2009), and Naomi Shihab Nye (*Yellow Glove* 1986, *Red Suitcase* 1994, *Fuel* 1998, *Transfer* 2011).

5 As Jahan Ramazani notes, tourism studies challenge the distinction between the traveler and the tourist, a distinction associated with dichotomies such as "work vs. pleasure, active vs. passive, solitary vs. mass" ("Poetry and Tourism" 460). I uphold this distinction in my argument, at least initially, to highlight Derek's conflicted position rather than to suggest that the line of demarcation between tourist and traveler are clear-cut.

6 Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen imply as much when they include essays in the *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* that discuss Margaret Fuller's non-fiction account of her journey to the Midwest (*Summer on the Lakes* 1843), William Cullen Bryant's collection of popular tourist attractions in the United States (*Picturesque America* 1872), or John Steinbeck's travelogue *Travels with Charley: in Search of America* (1962).

Walcott, who admitted that he sometimes felt like "a Tourist […] from America" (Hirsch, "The Art of Poetry" 78), when visiting the Caribbean after taking up residency in the United States, his alter ego Derek experiences a split perspective. This can be seen in chapter 49, canto III, of *Omeros* where Derek simultaneously distances himself from and aligns himself with the tourists at his hotel:

> […] too much happiness was shadowed with guilt
> like any Eden, and [the tourists] sighed at the sign:
> Hewannorra (Iounalao), the gold sea
>
> flat as a credit card, extending its line
> to a beach that now looked just like everywhere else,
> Greece or Hawaii. Now the goddamn souvenir
>
> felt absurd, excessive. The painted gourds, the shells.
> Their own faces as brown as gourds. Mine felt as strange
> as those at the counter feeling their bodies change.
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 229)

Struggling with what sociologist John Urry has called the "tourist gaze" (*The Tourist Gaze* 1990), which resembles what E. Ann Kaplan has discussed as the "imperial gaze" (xii), Walcott's narrator here contemplates to what extent his perceptions of his native island have become aligned with those of the tourists around him. He acknowledges that St. Lucia is threatened by a commodification of space (Melas 151), which opens the island's natural environment up to foreign consumption just like the souvenirs mentioned in the canto, but he cannot shake the feeling that he too is implicated in what Walcott elsewhere calls the "benign blight that is tourism" ("The Antilles" 81).

While Derek's fear of unduly romanticizing the St. Lucians' poverty and the island's beauty is certainly justified, his perspective on the island's people and environment is made more complex on account of the postcolonial sensibilities his Afro-Caribbean heritage afford him, his migratory experience, and his extended travels throughout the United States, where he visits places associated with U.S. histories of settler-colonialism and slavery. In the canto just quoted, the sign of Hewannorra International Airport, the main airport of St. Lucia, points to those pre-colonial Caribbean Indigenous cultures that colonization has all but erased as well as to those new forms of mobility that are reshaping human-nature relations on the island in the present. In a different yet related manner, chapter 13, canto II, of *Omeros* evokes the Caribbean's history of slavery, while drawing attention to the harm modern tourism inflicts on the island's people and its natural environment. In this canto, Derek remembers a stroll he took with his father down to the wharves of Castries, St. Lucia's capital. Described as having a "hull bright as paper" (Walcott, *Omeros* 72)

and as "preening with privilege" (72), the cruise liner represents to Derek his dependence on white patronage and the distancing his social advancement has produced between him and his fellow St. Lucians. At the same time, the ship comes to represent the exploitation that the Caribbean suffered as a result of colonization and slavery, histories made manifest by the lines of "women" Derek and his father saw climbing the ship like "ants" (73) to load it with "baskets of coal" (73). Reminiscent of Virgil and Dante's journey into hell, the narrator and his father's walk down to the tourist-flooded harbor, is a figurative descent into the hellish parts of the Caribbean island.

Mass tourism as represented by the cruise ship is a threat for St. Lucia, according to the narrator, because it perpetuates the power imbalance between the continental tourists and the inhabitants of the island. It is also a threat because it has highly detrimental effects on the island's natural environment. While the tourist industry does create some revenue for the island, the costs St. Lucia pays for this revenue is far greater, the narrator implies. Observing the tourists who toss small coins into the water to encourage a few young boys to dive after them, Derek notes that the children use "old tires" to rest between dives and swim in a harbor into which the ship's "humming engines spew[…] expensive garbage" (Walcott, *Omeros* 73). Comparing the children to "fishes" and little "porpoises" (73), the narrator points to the fact that the more-than-human world of St. Lucia is in as much danger due to the excesses of the cruise industry as the island's human inhabitants, if not more immediately so. Mass tourism in this canto is thus not only presented as a modern-day version of the institutionalized dehumanizing systems of exploitation that have harmed the Caribbean in the past, it also threatens the St. Lucia's future along with one of the island's greatest assets: its natural environment.

Environmental degradation in the Caribbean is addressed several times in the long poem. In chapter 60, canto I, the narrator alludes both to problems of pollution and to the local effects of global climate change that have begun to manifest on the island. After speaking to Seven Seas, a local wise man, storyteller, former sailor, and world-traveler like, yet also unlike the privileged narrator, the fisherman Achille notices disturbing changes on the island. Interlacing multiple layers of storytelling, Derek relates Achille's musings, which in turn recall the comments of Seven Seas:

> He had never seen such strange weather; the surprise
> of a tempestuous January that churned
> the foreshore brown with remarkable, bursting seas
>
> convinced him that 'somewhere people interfering
> with the course of nature'; the feathery mare's tails
> were more threateningly frequent, and its sunsets

> the roaring ovens of the hurricane seasons,
> while the frigate hung close inland and the nets
> starved on their bamboo poles. The rain lost its reason
>
> and behaved with no sense at all. What had angered
> the rain and made the sea foam? […]
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 299–300)

Having closely observed the local natural world for years as part of his daily work, Achille displays intimate knowledge of the island's ecosystem, which is also why he begins to notice the increase in "feathery mare's tails" (a cloud formation that precedes a depression zone) and other unusual weather patterns that point to the local effects of global warming. As Seven Sea's suggested to him, the weather is changing because "somewhere people [are] interfering/ with the course of nature." What begins to manifest in this canto, which is narrated by Derek even if he does not take part in the conversation represented in it, is a planetary perspective on the world that stresses the interconnections between local and the global environments as well as the catastrophic effects of humans' interference with glocal ecologies.

A fisherman by trade, Achille is not only concerned about the "strange weather" and the "bursting seas;" he is also alarmed by the dwindling numbers of sea life around the island. The gradual disappearance of certain species may well be linked to the changing climate in the region and to the pollution caused by the burgeoning tourist industry. However, Achille—whose musings are presented with commentary by the narrator—is more enraged about "the trawlers / who were dredging the banks the way others had mined / the archipelago for silver" (Walcott, *Omeros* 300). The text here identifies industrialized overfishing as a major threat to Achille's livelihood, with the narrator providing the larger political context of this practice and the longer history as well as the environmental impact of foreign resource extraction in the Caribbean. "[T]he steely blue albacore/ no longer leapt to [Achille's] line," the narrator notes, and "the shrimp were finished, their bodies were curled/ like exhausted Caribs in the deep silver mines" (300), he adds, once again linking the present-day economic exploitation of the island to the region's settler-colonial history. Whether it takes the form of the modern cruise industry, industrialized fishing, or mining operations, the text implies, this exploitation has its roots in the racist ideologies of colonialism. The environmental degradation this exploitation causes is not only a matter of concern because it will ultimately affect all human and nonhuman life in the region; it is also a matter of environmental injustice, because it affects the region's most vulnerable inhabitants first.

According to the narrator, Achille interprets the dramatic changes in the local weather and the disappearance of certain species from the ocean around the island as "signs of a hidden devastation under the cones of volcanic gorges" (Walcott,

Omeros 300), that is, as indicators of a worse catastrophe yet to come. Seven Seas too foresees future catastrophe, one that threatens humans and nonhumans alike:

> […] Seven Seas would talk
> bewilderingly that man was an endangered
>
> species now, a spectre, just like the Aruac
> or the egret, or parrots screaming in terror
> when men approached, and that once men were satisfied
>
> with destroying men they would move on to Nature. (300)

Referring back to an earlier canto in the epic poem, in which the narrator links violent displacement of Indigenous peoples to the destruction of the natural world in the settler United States ("First men, then the forests," 207), this canto repeats Seven Seas' view that "once men were satisfied/ with destroying men they would move on to Nature" (300). Seven Seas' speech confirms Derek's logic, according to which settler-colonial ideologies are responsible for the decimation of Indigenous people as well as for the environmental degradation of the New World, while also echoing those environmental discourses that challenge the idea that humans are separate from the natural world. The passage just quoted thus emphasizes that human beings are one among many species threatened by environmental change, even though they are the only species responsible for the approaching catastrophe. The wordplay on "species" and "spectre" in the above excerpt along with the listing of birds ("the egret, or parrots") alongside "the Aruac" (St. Lucia's disappeared Indigenous peoples), sounds a dire warning of impending mass extinction. At the same time, the poem refrains from blaming all of humanity for global environmental change indiscriminately. Instead, it suggests that the past and present empires of the Global North are primarily responsible for the contemporary environmental crisis, while marginalized peoples, such as the poor Black Caribbean fishermen of St. Lucia are its primary victims. By commenting on Achille's and Seven Sea's speculations on the causes and future consequences of environmental change in the Caribbean, the narrator foregrounds marginalized voices as well as his own ambiguous position within the global political and economic system that the United States and the other great powers of the Global North have established by building on the legacies of colonialism. What is more, the narrator-poet raises questions about his own complicity in existing systems of oppression and about his responsibility to challenge them.

The ending of *Omeros* asks if the responsibility of the privileged toward the more vulnerable can be fulfilled, at least in part, through practices of poetic place-making that draw attention to matters of social and environmental injustice, even if (or perhaps especially when) the poetry in question employs modes of representation that have historically been used these injustices. The epic's last chapter suggests as

much by including references to the different lyrical genres employed by Walcott in the course of the text. Canto I of chapter 64 begins by evoking Homer's *Odyssey* and Eliot's *Waste Land* ("I sang of quiet Achille […] whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water;" Walcott, *Omeros* 320). It thus alludes to two very different kinds of epic, the main genre in whose tradition *Omeros* places itself, albeit reluctantly. In the same canto, which begins by praising the beauty and resilience of Caribbean peoples and their environment, the narrator notes: "now the idyll dies" (321). This brief remark points to the poet's critical engagement throughout his epic with the postcolonial pastoral and the pastoral elegy as a means to highlight the detrimental cultural, social, and environmental effects of centuries of colonization. It also emphasizes the narrator's struggle to represent in poetry the landscapes and peoples that are affected by different kinds of oppression and displacement. In the chapter's second canto, the narrator's own story comes back into focus. Here, the poem evokes the highly ironic confessional passages of Walcott epic that I discuss later in this chapter as well as the narrator's self-critical engagement with the poem of travel:

> […] For three years
> Phantom hearer, I kept wandering to a voice
> Hoarse as winter's echo in the throat of a vase!
>
> Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure,
> its radiant affliction; […] (323)

Directly addressing a ghostly reader ("Phantom hearer"), the "wandering" narrator expresses hope as well as doubt that his "language" will provide a "cure" for what ails the world. The last line of *Omeros* is equally ambiguous: "When [Achille] left the ocean, the sea was still going on" (325). Some scholars have read the end of *Omeros* as implying that the healing of the many personal and communal wounds referenced in the text will one day be possible, also with the help of Walcott's poetic "cure," because "the sea [is] still going on." From an environmental perspective, however, the word "still" here introduces a crucial caveat: healing will only be possible *if* or *as long as* the ocean goes on and someone is there to bear witness. Given the kind of global environmental change that Walcott addresses in some of the Caribbean passages of his epic, including disastrous storms, such permanence is no longer self-evident. Rather, it is something humans must work toward with direct environmental and political action and by engaging with complex planetary imaginaries like the one evoked in *Omeros*. A crucial part of the critical planetary imaginary that emerges in Walcott's text is its exploration of human-nature relations in light of different forms of mobility, an exploration that takes place in the epic's U.S.-American passages.

Epic, Pastoral, and Countering Epic Amnesia in *Omeros*

In the U.S. passages of *Omeros*, Walcott's narrator is frequently traveling between different places in the United States. While on the move, he reflects on the histories of the places he encounters and describes the natural environments he sees around him, engaging in place-making with a certain troubled reluctance. When faced with "nature's opaque and deep history" (Handley, *New World Poetics* 6) in the United States rather than in St. Lucia, Walcott's mobile narrator struggles to conjure those human histories that the natural world tends to obscure as time passes and memories fade. The first canto of chapter 35, a canto set in the U.S. South, dramatizes this pained effort of recovery:

> "Somewhere over there," said my guide, "the Trail of Tears
> started." I leant towards the crystalline creek. Pines
> shaded it. Then I made myself hear the water's
>
> language around the rocks in its clear-running lines
> and its small shelving falls with their eddies, "Choctaws,"
> "Creeks," "Choctaws," […]
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 177)

The guide's uncertainty about how to narrate the Trail of Tears as a history of place/s as much as a one of dis-placement in this passage points not only to the erasure from national consciousness of state-sanctioned acts of violence against Indigenous peoples during U.S. expansion, but also to the ways in which the regenerative powers of nature cover up the traces of human history. Where Derek expected to see a landscape marked by the injustice it has been witness to, an injustice which consisted not least in the violent disruption of land-based practices, an idyllic scene presents itself to the visitor. Despite what a cursory reading of the second stanza quoted above might suggest, nature is not telling the story of the Creek (Mvskoke Creek) and Choctaw (Chahta'), who were forced from their ancestral homelands in south-eastern Mississippi and parts of Alabama to the Indian territory of what is now Oklahoma in the aftermath of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Instead, it is the narrator who wills himself to perceive in nature traces of the murdered and the displaced. The "clear-running lines" are the narrator's—and by extension—the lines of poetry on the page, not the river's; and what will see "shelving" are not the river's waters, but Walcott's poems, poems that imagine the stories that nature does not, and cannot, tell. Where the regenerative powers of nature (along with human forces) erase human histories of violence, Walcott implies here, poetry can reconnect these histories with the places in which they occurred. In order to achieve this deepening of place-sense through a re-joining of human and nonhuman histories of place,

poets need to engage in poetic place-making in locally specific ways that counter national(ist) forms of "epic amnesia" (Breslin 241).

In the canto quoted above, the narrator struggles for a mode of representation that will do justice to the complex settler-colonial history of the places he visits during his travels through the U.S. South. The poetic genre Walcott turns to in these passages is a version of what Rob Nixon has called the "postcolonial pastoral" (*London Calling* 161), that is, a kind of pastoral that "brings into tension idealizing and historicizing visions of landscape" (Casteel 13). When Gregson Davis points to "a few key *loci*" in *Omeros* in which pastoral motifs are "elaborated and complicated" ("Pastoral Sites" 43; emphasis original), all the places he lists are on St. Lucia; none are in the United States. And yet, Davis's characterizations of Walcott's Caribbean pastorals also apply to his American ones: "sophisticated and multilayered" (fn.1, 43), they foreground "metapoetic issues" and employ "the bucolic scaffolding" for a "subtle exploration of important issues—ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic" (43). In the canto about the starting point of the Trail of Tears, the "metapoetic issue" addressed is how to write about the seemingly innocuous natural beauty of U.S.-American sites of injustice and trauma from the perspective of a Black Caribbean migrant and traveler. More bitterly and brutally than the Caribbean sections, the complex pastoralism of the U.S. passages of *Omeros*, I would like to suggest, subverts idealized representations of the natural world to expose hardly visible ideologies of oppression and exploitation that have shaped human-nature relationships in North America and specifically in the U.S. South. In the U.S. passages of *Omeros*, "the real" that troubles "the ideal" of the pastoral idyll (Davis 47) are histories and legacies of Native American displacement and dispossession as well as the histories and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade.

Upon evoking the Trail of Tears, the first canto of chapter 35 addresses the history of chattel slavery in the United States. Using richly metaphorical language and playing with the semantic field associated with the classical pastoral, the passage recalls the historical transmutations of settler-colonial and planter-colonial rhetoric employed in relation to the U.S. South, drawing attention to two different, yet ideologically and materially imbricated racialized regimes of oppression and their lasting effects in the narrator's present:

> […] I thought of the Greek revival
>
> carried past the names of towns with columned porches,
> and how Greek it was, the necessary evil
> of slavery, in the catalogue of Georgia's

marble past, the Jeffersonian ideal in
plantations with its Hectors and Achilleses,
its foam in the dogwood's spray, past towns named Helen,

Athens, Sparta, Troy. The slave shacks, the rolling peace
of the wave-rolling meadows, oak, pine, and pecan,
and a creek like this one. From the window I saw

the bundles of women moving in ragged bands
like those on the wharf, headed for Oklahoma;
then I saw Seven Seas, a rattle in his hands.

(Walcott, *Omeros* 177)

Recalling Greek antiquity as a model for a culture of enslavement that—unlike the removal of Indigenous peoples—has become manifest in the landscapes of the U.S. South, this canto suggests that the success of the United States as a "new empire" (169) depended on the interlinked domination of people of color and the nonhuman world. What is more, it suggests that pastoral (and georgic) ideals have historically helped, first, to justify and, later, to cover up the atrocities perpetrated against Native American and enslaved Africans and their descendants for the sake of turning the so-called New World into a "Garden." The "Jeffersonian ideal in / plantations" referenced in the passage above makes this political dimension of the American pastoral promise plainly explicit, a promise that originated, as Terry Gifford notes in drawing from Leo Marx, "in the georgics and advertisements of Beverley (1705), Crèvecoeur (1782), and Jefferson (1785)" ("Pastoral" 23). Indeed, Thomas Jefferson's glorification of the yeoman farmer not only arguably found its most perverse permutation in the slavery-based plantation culture associated primarily with the U.S. South; it also promoted the westward movement of European and American settlers and thus led to the forced relocation, violent dispossession, and genocide of Indigenous peoples on the territory of what are now the United States.

Using one of the "hybridizing literary strategies" typical of both postcolonial and transnational poetry (Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* 101), Walcott's U.S.-based pastorals rely on a complex "super-position" (101) of different places and time frames. As Derek evokes the different rustic scenes he saw while driving "past towns named Helen, / Athens, Sparta, Troy" (Walcott, *Omeros* 177), his references to the natural world continue to allude to the atrocities of Native American removal and chattel slavery. The mention of the "dogwood's spray," that is to say, of the opulent flowering of one of the most common ornamental trees in the U.S. South, is particularly resonant in this context. Known as "Cherokee Chief," "Cherokee Brave," and "Cherokee Princess," the names of individual cultivars of the dogwood invoke racist stereotypes masked as romantic ideas concerning Indigenous life.

What these Anglo-European names recall but also actively obscure, then, is the fact that the Cherokee are a living people whose ancestors were violently driven out of Georgia and other states in the U.S. South. What is more, the image of the "dogwood's spray" (Walcott, *Omeros* 177) is suggestive because the flowers of certain white dogwood variants look as if sprinkled with blood. Commonly associated with the crucifixion of Christ, the tree as well as the echoes of African American spirituals in the passage quoted above ("the rolling peace / of the wave-rolling meadows") hint at how religion, and Christianity in particular, has been used in the United States and elsewhere to justify what Walcott wryly refers to as "the necessary evil of slavery." At the same time, the metaphorical cross-fading of meadows and ocean in the passage, a figurative link struck between landscapes and oceanscapes that is crucial to Walcott's innovation of the pastoral (Davis 44), evokes the horrors of the Middle Passage. With all these resonances in Walcott's descriptions of a seemingly idyllic Southern landscape, this canto presents a version of postcolonial pastoral that has been carefully adapted to its U.S.-American location.

While the first six stanzas of chapter 35, canto I, juxtapose pastoral evocations of idyllic natural beauty with subtle evocations of histories of violence, the second half of Walcott's American postcolonial pastoral gains almost (southern) gothic undertones that allow for the true horrors of the region's slave-holding past to come to the surface. Against the ominous backdrop of an approaching thunderstorm, the narrator imagines "shadows" (Walcott, *Omeros* 178) of enslaved individuals being chased by the "hounds" (178) of unseen masters. The hunt leads through the same "pines/ and […] pecan groves" (178) that were part of the pastoral scene of "meadows, oak, pine, and pecan" (177) a few lines earlier. Re-inserting histories of slavery back into a seemingly past-less place, the landscapes depicted in the poem transform into a "'resonant' natural environment" (Davis 44) in which "echoes of brutality,/ and terror" (Walcott, *Omeros* 178) reverberate in the narrator-poet's present. In such an environment made resonant through poetic language, trees like the "oaks [growing] along red country roads" (178) can no longer be viewed as mere ornamentation. Instead, they evoke the crime of lynching, while "[h]ooded clouds" (178) recall the threat of the Ku-Klux-Klan. Any faith that the migrant narrator may be expressing in the redemptive power of nature's beauty in the Caribbean passages of *Omeros* is pushed past its breaking-point when Derek is confronted with U.S.-American landscapes and histories. Indeed, in the pastoral U.S. passages, Walcott reaches beyond the "postcolonial romanticism" of the Caribbean passages of *Omeros*, which, as Roy Kamada asserts, continue to insist on "beauty in the midst of […] devastation" (98). What emerges instead in the passages of *Omeros* that are set in the U.S. South is a decidedly unromantic American pastoral that emphasizes the horrors of American history, a horror that the beauty of nature (and the kind of poetry foregrounding it) could never adequately address, let alone begin to redress.

Repeatedly indicating that the narrator of *Omeros* is not only a Caribbean postcolonial subject but also a Black migrant "from the hem of a frayed empire" (Walcott 170) traveling in the U.S., the pastoral passages of *Omeros* insist that American geographies and histories must be considered in larger transnational contexts. In this insistence, Walcott's American pastorals resemble, but are also different from, what Heather I. Sullivan has described as the "the dark pastoral" (85).[7] According to Sullivan, the dark pastoral is a (post-)pastoral genre "undergirded by postmodernism's rejection of the possibility of unmediated language and things" (87), informed by a "rejection of the artificial delineation of local and global" (85) and marked by "the beauty and the horror of […] interconnectivity" (85). Replete with world-as-text figures and metapoetic commentary, the U.S. passages of *Omeros* reflect on the possibilities and limits of representing histories of displacements and local-global exchange in poetry. And yet, Walcott's transnational pastorals evoke a different kind of "horror of […] interconnectivity" than the texts Sullivan discusses, which describe European ecosystems made toxic by war.[8] When Walcott's narrator mentions "a silk-

7 Sullivan here draws on Timothy Morton who proposes "dark ecology" as an alternative ecological aesthetics that seeks to replace Romantic notions of nature with the postmodern, ecological concept of the "mesh" and aims to put "hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking" (*Ecology* 16). Unlike Morton, Sullivan argues that twenty-first-century critics should not prematurely reject Romantic ideas and textual strategies as outdated. On the contrary, she insists that "we need full recognition of our own pastoral impulses juxtaposed with current and scientifically informed skepticism" (87). Sullivan's idea of the dark pastoral bears some resemblance to Terry Gifford's notion of the post-pastoral, "a pastoral informed by ecological principles of uneven interconnectedness, as well as an educated understanding of the symbiotic link between environmental and social justice, at both the local level and beyond" (*Pastoral* 156).

8 It is one of my main arguments that analyses of contemporary ecopoetries need to pay attention to the specific contexts and politics of different forms of mobility. Sullivan's essay demonstrates why this kind of attention is important. In her article, Sullivan defines the dark pastoral as a genre that engages with the problem of "dirty traffic," which is to say with the fact that "[p]ollution has no place but rather is everyplace" (83) and the idea that the world we live in is shaped by "all types of material, bodily, ecological, and cultural flows" (84). When Sullivan summarizes her analysis by observing that the texts she analyzes "express concerns regarding the altered flows of resources, people, and bodies that are deterritorialized in the Anthropocene" (96), her listing of mobile "resources" alongside mobile "people" requires unpacking. Of course, Sullivan does not describe refugees as just another kind of "dirty traffic"; indeed, elsewhere in the essay she notes that refugees are "driven to flee amid war's dirty traffic" (89). Econativists do, though, when they compare im/migration to pollution, depicting it as a threat to environmental, racial, and national purity. For a detailed discussion of how a racist and settler-supremacist rhetoric of pollution enters U.S.-American environmental discourses about immigration and Indigenous mobility, see, for example, Sarah Jaquette Ray's chapter on "The Poetics of Trash: The Environmental Impact of Immigration in Organ Pipe Monument" from her 2013 study *The Ecological Other*.

cotton tree / from which Afolabes hung like bats" (*Omeros* 178), he on the one hand points to tropical West Africa, where his narrator meets his ancestor Afolabe during a dream voyage, and on the other to the Caribbean, where "silk-cotton" or Ceiba trees were venerated as spirit trees and used for canoe making by Indigenous people such as the Taíno. What is more, he points to the historical connection that existed between the U.S. South and the Caribbean due to the intracontinental slave trade and the trade in agricultural products such as cotton, a connection that is still visible because the landscapes of both places were radically transformed by the plantation system established there. Driving through the U.S. South, the narrator sees "islands reflected on windscreens" (178) and hence begins to imagine enslaved fieldworkers "moving through the foam of pods, one arm for an oar, / one for the gunny sack" (178). Here and elsewhere in *Omeros*, Walcott critically examines the ways in which the narrator's own "pastoral impulses" (Sullivan 87) are counteracted both by his postcolonial sensibilities and by the transnational sensibilities stemming from his perspective as a world traveler and migrant in the U.S. Read from a joint ecocritical and critical mobility studies perspective, the U.S. passages of *Omeros* set in the U.S. South demonstrate the violence inherent in an American pastoral tradition imbricated in the long history of obscuring settler-colonialism and romanticizing chattel-slavery. They do so by transforming an American pastoral rhetoric into a critical transnational pastoral informed by postcolonial sensibilities and made complex through evocations of different kinds of transnational and transregional mobilities, migrations, and displacements.

Epic, Elegy, and Ecopoetic Witnessing in *Omeros*

The canto discussed in the previous section features the narrator Derek as a transnational migrant who reluctantly engages in poetic place-making as he traverses the countryside of the U.S. South. Within the larger structure of Walcott's epic, this canto is framed by three cantos (Ch. 34, cantos III; Ch. 35, cantos II and III) in which the narrator alternately tells the story of and ventriloquizes another migrant: Catherine Weldon, a nineteenth-century white woman, artist, and social activist who emigrated to Boston from Switzerland with her mother in 1852, but eventually moved west to act as the secretary to famous Lakota (Teton Sioux) leader Tetanka Yotanka, or Sitting Bull. Walcott also included Weldon in his play *Ghost Dance*, which was first performed in 1989, a year before the publication of *Omeros*. In the Weldon passages of *Omeros*, Walcott's narrator addresses the events leading up to, and the aftermath of, the massacre at Wounded Knee as well as the death of Catherine Weldon's son. Moving back and forth between epic, pastoral, and elegiac modes, Walcott experiments with poetic voice and the poet's position as (non-)witness to personal and collective histories of displacement and loss. Natural environments are central

in these passages and play a key role in the narrator's self-conscious struggle for adequate expressions of grief and appropriate modes of commemoration, raising questions about the ethics as well as the aesthetics of (eco)poetic witness. What Walcott dramatizes in the Weldon passages of *Omeros*, is a migrant poet's attempt to come to terms with the burden of representation placed on him: he reluctantly begins to develop more profound relationships to the places he encounters while on the move and in the process feels compelled to account for histories of displacement and loss far removed from, but also relatable to, his own experience. Evocations of nature in the Weldon passages link individuals across time and space as well as across boundaries of gender and race without eliding their specific personal backgrounds and stories. In exploring transnational, transhistorical, and transethnic connections, the elegiac cantos not only draw attention to the fragility of place-based imagined communities, but also to the fragility of the natural world itself.

What little is known about Catherine Weldon's life must be gleaned from a few newspaper-clippings and Weldon's personal letters to Sitting Bull and his antagonist, the government agent James McLaughlin, materials which Walcott is known to have read (Bensen 119).[9] Catherine Weldon was a member of the New England National Indian Defense Association who traveled to Standing Rock Reservation in 1889 after her husband's death to support the Hunkpapa Lakota, a Sioux tribal band of the Great Plains. Weldon went west in order to work for and speak on behalf of Sitting Bull, perhaps the most famous Native American leader during the time of the second Ghost Dance Movement. The Ghost Dance Movement was a cross-tribal religious and political movement founded by the Paiute spiritual leader Tävibo in 1869/70 and revived again in 1889/1890 by another Paiute holy man, Wovoka, who prophesied a return of the spirits of the dead, an end of white settler-colonial rule, and a subsequent age of freedom and peace for Indigenous peoples in North America (Dunbar-Ortiz 153–54). Although Weldon left the Hunkpapa before the desperate hunger winter of 1890 and the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29 of that same year, a military attack on an unarmed band of Lakota refugees that left 300 of them dead, many of them women and children (Dunbar-Ortiz 155), Weldon witnessed some of the final, but ultimately futile attempts at resistance by the Sioux (Oceti Sakowin) and other Plains peoples against the U.S. government's policies of relocation and dispossession. Inspired by these events and the sketchy historical records of Weldon's time with Sitting Bull, several of the U.S. passages of *Omeros* provide an ac-

9 Already during Catherine Weldon's own lifetime, the details of her life among the Lakota were cause for speculation, as rumors circulated in the press and among government agents that she had been married to Sitting Bull and become pregnant with his child, stories Weldon herself continued to refute as slander in her correspondences. For more information on the Weldon documents, see, among others, Dorothy Johnson's *Some Went West* (129–36) and Eileen Pollack's *Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull* (2002).

count of Catherine Weldon's life on the Midwestern plains infused with reflections on her son's death as well as the mass-murder of the Lakota.

Early reviewers of *Omeros* were either puzzled by the Weldon passages or they completely ignored them (Gidmark and Hunt 13; Bensen 119). Robert Hamner, in his 1991 review of Walcott's book, for example, questioned the poet's motives for including the plight of Native Americans, when he could as well have focused on Caribbean postcolonial histories ("Epic of the Dispossessed" 114). Hamner later revised his position, conceding that the Weldon passages had "a thematic purpose" (*Epic of the Dispossessed* 94), suggesting that Weldon functions as a "representative of white imperialism" (97) in the text, yet one who rejects "the trappings of hegemony in favor of [living with] people who are traditionally victimized as racially inferior" and who, as a result of losing her son during her life on the plains, experienced her very own kind of "dispossession" (97). George B. Handley posits that Walcott must have been "tempted by the notion that indigenous experience throughout the Americas is cut from the same cloth and that all diasporas are perhaps created equal" (*New World Poetics* 394). What Handley does not mention is the fact that "indigenous experience" is always self-consciously mediated and poetically refracted in *Omeros*, like in the Weldon passages, where the migrant narrator channels the voice and perspectives of a nineteenth-century white woman who is an agent, albeit a reluctant one, of European settler-colonialism. This mediation and refraction in Walcott's text suggest that not all experiences of and perspectives on histories of dispossession and displacement are comparable, let alone that all these experiences are "equal."

While some of Walcott's representations of Indigenous people must be considered overly simplistic and stereotypical, the Weldon passages complicate these representations by creating a highly elaborate construct of narrative embedding, carried by a complex constellation of narrators and speakers from vastly different backgrounds. It is through the resulting refraction of perspectives and voices in the Weldon passages, rather than by adopting a seemingly objective perspective or endowing his narrator with an unchallenged, authoritative voice, that Walcott attempts to bear witness in poetry to the history of Native American removal. By interlacing the voices of a Black, late-twentieth-century transnational migrant from the Caribbean and a nineteenth-century white, European, female immigrant to the U.S, who was known for her ultimately failed attempts to speak *in favor of*, and indeed to speak *for*, the Lakota in her function as secretary to Sitting Bull, Walcott indicates that neither Weldon, nor his narrator, nor his lyricized epic as multi-voiced text can claim to speak with definite authority to all the histories of displacement and dispossession that inform the North American past and present. The U.S. passages of *Omeros* foreground the impossibility and even dangers of the outsider's desire to act as witness, even as it continues to attempt precisely such witnessing in and through poetry.

The few scholarly texts that have considered the Weldon passages address the problems and functions of representing history in poetry. Jill B. Gidmark and An-

thony Hunt, for example, suggest that Walcott invokes the figure of Catherine Weldon in order to construct "a cameo of her to represent yet another direction in his quest for the truth about fictionalized history" (12). Similarly, Robert Bensen reads Walcott's recourse to the Weldon persona as "a conversation about history registered as personal loss" (119). Jahan Ramazani's brief analysis of *Omeros* in *The Hybrid Muse* (2001) too emphasizes that Walcott "crosses and recrosses lines of race, nation, and gender" along with "the line between narrative and lyric poetry" (68) by intermingling historical events and personal histories in this part of the text. Building on these insights, I suggest that Walcott uses the pastoral elegy to explore the ethics of bearing witness in poetry to losses that go beyond personal experience. The pastoral elegy is well suited to interrogate the challenges and benefits of approaching the histories and experiences of others from a perspective that remains personal without presuming that all histories and experiences are identical. Relying on representations of nature and human-nature relations, these passages tentatively imagine a common ground for people to connect across spatial, temporal, and ethnic boundaries through a shared experience of grief. Rather than producing lasting imagined communities or "imagined individualities" (Müller 250), Walcott's pastoral elegies evoke what one could describe as temporary, place-based, and localized yet open *imagined communalities* that depend on acts of (eco)poetic place-making.[10]

Chapter 34, canto III of *Omeros* places Catherine Weldon in an ostensibly idyllic rural setting. From the onset, it uses pastoral and elegiac elements to create a sense of foreboding:

> The elegies of summer sighed in the marram,
> to bending Virgilian reeds. Languid meadows
> raised their natural fly-screens around the Parkin farm.
>
> Larks arrowed from the goldenrod into soft doors
> of enclosing thunderheads, and the rattled maize
> threshed like breaking surf to Catherine Weldon's ears
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 176)

The reader encounters Weldon on the farm of Mr. and Mrs. V. Solen Parkin, where, according to some historical accounts, her son Christie stepped on a rusted nail that would eventually cause his death from tetanus (Vestal 103). While the poem makes

10 Reading several contemporary Black poets alongside Walcott, Timo Müller contends that "transnational poetry is about imagined individualities" (250). This is particularly so, Müller contends, because "transnational poets tend to be more interested in redefining their individuality through the various cultures, languages, and identities their diasporic experience holds in store for them" (250) than in the "old or new promises of communal homogeneity" (250).

obvious its thematic and formal debt to the tradition of the complex "Virgilian" pastoral, the reference to "elegies" in the first line of the poem introduces the theme of death. From the very beginning, then, chapter 34, canto III of *Omeros* presents itself as a pastoral elegy, a genre that, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin note, has "particular resonances in the context of postcolonial settler societies which are marked by the death and/or dispossession of their original inhabitants" (89).

The description of the Plains in Walcott's poem blends images of sprawling midwestern farmland with those of the seaside, evoking the Caribbean passages of *Omeros* and the narrator's life on the East Coast near Boston, on the one hand, and Catherine Weldon's personal history of migration from Switzerland to the East Coast and further to the Midwest, on the other. It is due to the shared experiences of im/migration that both Catherine Weldon and the narrator, who imagines Weldon's thoughts in the poem, would have reason to compare the storm over the Plains rattling the "maize" and "[l]anguid meadows" of the Parkin farm to the sound of an ocean's "breaking surf" (Walcott, *Omeros* 176). The places the migrant characters have inhabited and left behind—Switzerland/St. Lucia and then New England—inform the descriptions of the natural world presented to the reader in this scene. The canto revises the pastoral elegy, a genre which traditionally emphasizes locality and immobility, by considering various migratory movements within and across national borders. It infuses the narrator's poetic account of Weldon's life with recollections of personal experiences of displacement, while also conjuring the dispossession, displacement, and strategic annihilation of Indigenous peoples of the Plains at the hand of the U.S. government.

As the poem progresses, the pastoral idyll initially evoked by Derek through the eyes of Catherine Weldon begins to include more and more allusions to U.S. colonialism and various ominous signs of future violence and death. At the same time, the poem begins to reveal Weldon's personal losses, highlighting how this section of Walcott's epic fuses the postcolonial pastoral and the pastoral elegy:

> Ripe grain alchemized the pheasant, the pelt of mice
> nibbling the stalks was unctuous as the beaver's,
> But the sky was scribbled with the prophetic cries
>
> of multiplying hawks. The grass by the rivers
> shone silvery green whenever its nub of felt
> was chafed between the thumb and finger of the wind;
>
> rainbow trout leapt arching into canoes and filled
> their bark bodies while a clear wake chuckled behind
> the gliding hunter. An immensity of peace

across which the thunderheads rumbled like wagons,
to which the hawk held the rights, a rolling excess
from knoll and pasture concealed the wound of her son's

death from a rusty nail. […]

(*Omeros* 176)

In the above passage, Weldon's and Derek's minds mingle, as is implied through intertextual references which draw attention to the themes of displacement, loss, and grief, but also to the different historical and socio-cultural positions held by Weldon and the narrator. It makes sense that a passage from Exodus describing the Promised Land of Canaan (Genesis 45:17-18) would resonate with a nineteenth-century Christian woman like Weldon determined to make a life for herself in the American West, while the evocation of Steinbeck's tragic novella of migrancy and longing for place-attachment, *Of Mice and Men* (1937), would resonate with the migratory narrator who, like Steinbeck, calls into doubt myths of America as a Land of Opportunity. By contrast, the reference to the proto-environmentalist poem "To a Mouse" (1785) by Robert Burns, from which Steinbeck borrowed his title, may come from both Walcott's Weldon and Derek, pointing to the construction in Walcott's text of a shared Anglo-American literary canon that is invested in representations of human-nature relations resonant with grief and thwarted hopes. Taken together, these references evoke the disastrous consequences of those "fiction[s] of entitlement" (Huggan and Tiffin 86) that infuse the colonial pastoral imagination and, in the case of the United States, arguably contributed to settler-colonial expansion into the West; the references thus not only inject Walcott's poem with a general sense of sorrow and dread, they also fill them with subtle anticolonial and environmental resonances.

In Derek's account of events, the dying of the Lakota Sioux constituted a deeply personal tragedy for Catherine Weldon, who witnessed, albeit only briefly, the disastrous effects of the government's strategies of attrition on Indigenous peoples such as the Sioux. Walcott's evocation of genocidal violence against Indigenous people together with the death of Weldon's son in the elegiac passages of *Omeros* juxtaposes events of very different kind and scale. While I would not call this comparison a complete success in terms of the emotional responses it tries to invoke, I see it as an attempt on Walcott's part to make sense of incomprehensible and inexpressible loss, while also acknowledging the impossibility of such a project via his alter ego Derek who tries to imagine Weldon's perspective on the topic:

[…] An immensity of peace

across which the thunderheads rumbled like wagons,
to which the hawk held the rights, a rolling excess
from knoll and pasture concealed the wound of her son's

> death from a rusty nail. […] That summer did not last,
> but time wasn't treacherous. What would not remain
> was not only the season but the tribes themselves,
>
> as Indian summer raced the cloud-galloping plain,
> when their dust would blow like maize from the furrowed shelves,
> which the hawks prophesied to mice cowering in grain.
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 176–77)

Revising seasonal imagery, which has a long tradition in pastoral poetry as well as in elegy, the canto's "elegies of summer" mourn the death of Catherine Weldon's son as well as the arrival of "Indian summer," a phrase repeatedly associated in the long poem with settler-colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples. At the same time, the narrator's elegies of summer foreshadow the "ghost dance of winter" (*Omeros* 213), that is, the hunger winter of 1889/90 and the Wounded Knee Massacre in December 1890.

As a non-Indigenous white woman, Catherine Weldon was able to leave the Dakotas to travel southward with her son when conditions on the Standing Rock Reservation became increasingly dramatic (Gidmark and Hunt 14). Making use of the freedom of mobility afforded to her as a white European-born settler in the expanding United States, she survived the winter of 1890/91, while many Sioux, confined to the reservation, did not. Like the migrant narrator of *Omeros*, who relates Weldon's story and the plight of the Lakota one hundred years later, Weldon observed the suffering of the Sioux and other Plains peoples as an emotionally involved, yet unaffected outsider. By juxtaposing a personal tragedy with acts of settler-colonial violence, Walcott's pastoral elegies explore the limits of poetic representations of grief as well as the paradox of trying to give an account in poetry of atrocities committed against a marginalized group from a distanced position of relative privilege. Parallel to this, evocations of nature become a powerful, albeit conflicted, vehicle for emotions in the explorations of the discrepant scales of loss and grief in the U.S. passages of *Omeros*. In drawing from a long tradition of politically-minded poetry of mourning centered on nature, Walcott's pastoral elegies counter stationary notions of emplacement and exclusive notions of community by inter-connecting displaced people from diverse backgrounds and across time. What must be acknowledged too in the specific context of the Weldon passages, though, is the fact that a settler's desire for place-based community, however temporary and seemingly innocuous, must be considered a form of colonialism that assumes "access to Indigenous Land and its ability to produce value for settler and colonial desires and futures" (Liboiron 11). One question the Weldon passages raise through

their narrative layering is how the desire for place-based community of an arrivant like Derek or Walcott should be judged in this context.

The Weldon passages exploit the conventions of the pastoral elegy to full effect at the same time that they wrestle with the potentially problematic dimensions of the genre. As Walcott himself once noted in an interview, modes such as the elegy "are sometimes suspicious because they so often focus on the person writing them [rather] than on the subject" (Baer 196). The narrator's struggle with this suspicious self-centeredness of the elegy comes to the fore in chapter 35, canto III. In this canto, Catherine Weldon reflects on her life on the Plains by contemplating the natural world, which she finds replete with omens of death. The text evokes traditional elements of the pastoral elegy, such as the dead bird as a symbol of mortality and the limits of poetry, but it also subverts such common tropes by figuring a dead crow—a harbinger of death in Western culture, but a symbol of wisdom in the cultures of many Plains peoples, drawing attention to the vast landscapes of the western and northern Plains as a historical site of intertribal as well as Native-settler conflict:

> I have found, in bleached grass, the miniature horror
> of a crow's skull. When dry corn rattles its bonnet,
> does it mean the Blackfoot is preparing for war?
>
> When the Crow sets his visage on Death, and round it
> circles his eyes with moons, each one is a mirror
> foretold by his palm. So, the bird's skull in the grass
>
> transfixed me, parting the spears of dry corn, just as
> it would your blond soldiers. As for the herds that graze
> through lance-high grasses, drifting with the Dakotas,
>
> are not the Sioux as uncertain of paradise,
> when the grass darkens, as your corn-headed soldiers?
> Doubt isn't the privilege of one complexion.
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 181–82)

Catherine Weldon does not primarily view the bird's skull as a reminder of her own mortality or of mortality as a universal human condition here. Instead, Walcott's narrator suggests (or alleges in his presentation of Weldon), she sees it as an emblem of the tragically doomed resistance of the Sioux and the Crow (Apsáalooke)—historically neighbors and then enemies, when the Sioux began to be pushed westward, which briefly led the Crow to form an alliance with the U.S. government in its war against the Sioux—against the U.S. government's violent project of resettlement and dispossession. The juxtaposition of the "crow's skull" with the war/ death mask of the "Crow" turns the Midwestern grasslands through which Weldon moves, but which

she and the narrator also re-imagine, into one unfathomable Native American mass grave.

The image of the (singular) grave in nature is a stable of the Anglo-European pastoral elegy, as represented by Milton's *Lycidas* (1638), Thomas Gray's "Elegy on a Country Churchyard" (1759), Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais* (1821), or Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam A. H. H." (1849), amongst others. In American literature, there is a similar tradition represented by such poets as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, in which nature itself is the grave.[11] Indeed, both in content and imagery, the lines above are reminiscent of the passage "A child said *What is the Grass*" from Whitman's "Song of Myself," in which the speaker views the "dark grass" as "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" and as a "uniform hieroglyphic" that is "sprouting in broad zones and in narrow zones" and "among black folks as among white" (*Leaves of Grass* 31–32). These lines have been read as evidence for Whitman's belief in "the continuity of individual lives and regional or racial types" (Killingsworth 34) and as "an originating moment" for all other moments of "noticing small nature" in *Leaves of Grass* (Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility* 60). Like Whitman's "Song of Myself," Walcott's poem points to different functions and scales of N/nature and reflects on the racial politics of human relations in light of the shared human experience of death. In his version of death as the great equalizer, Whitman presents the natural world as a regenerative force that is able to erase racial difference. Although Catherine Weldon's elegiac meditations on the landscape of the Midwestern prairies suggest that doubt about life after death may be an experience she shares as a grieving mother with the Sioux and the "corn-headed soldiers" (Walcott, *Omeros* 182)—perhaps due to colonialist ideas of her own missionary duties and failures—Walcott's poem troubles over-simplistic equations. Instead, it emphasizes the fact that the genocidal wars waged by the U.S. government against Indigenous peoples were motivated by white supremacist ideas and used religion to justify racist notions of Indigenous inferiority and moral deficiency.

When Catherine Weldon tries to distance herself from the U.S. government by referring to its troupes as "*your* blond soldiers" (Walcott, *Omeros* 181; emphasis added), one must ask whether there is any possibility that Weldon can position

11 Henry David Thoreau, for instance, rejects the Romantic motif of the lonesome tomb in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), his pastoral elegy for his brother John, when he writes: "It may be that I am not competent to write the poetry of the grave. The farmer who has skimmed his farm might perchance leave his body to Nature to be ploughed in, and in some measure restore its fertility" (171). In related yet different ways, Walt Whitman famously imagined the land as a mass grave for the fallen soldiers of the Civil War, pointing to the possibilities of national renewal in and through nature. In other English-language traditions, the motif remained common. As Ivor Indyk notes in his article "Pastoral and Priority: The Aboriginal in Australian Pastoral," for example, one of the most common motifs of the Australian (settler-)colonial pastoral is the Aboriginal grave (842).

herself outside the racist settler-colonial system and discourses of her time, even if she has made it her mission to support the Lakota. Walcott's poem does not answer in the affirmative. Without completely invalidating the gestures of personal and collective mourning inherent in Catherine's (and the narrator's) elegy for the Lakota, the poem raises questions about the limits of transethnic identification (in poetry) and the problem of bearing witness in poetry to histories of colonial and racial violence from an outsider perspective, even when this outsider perspective is occupied by the Black migrant and (reluctant) arrivant Derek, but especially when it is occupied by the white immigrant and considerably less reluctant settler Weldon.

The romanticized portrayal of both Native warrior and American soldier in the passage above showcases the extent to which Catherine Weldon's elegiac musings remain indebted to settler-colonial discourses. Weldon's reference to the "*miniature* horror/ of a crow's skull" (Walcott, *Omeros* 181; emphasis added) in chapter 35, canto III, speaks both to the marginalization of the horrors of Indigenous extermination in U.S.-American narratives of nation-building and to a marginalization of these same discourses in nineteenth-century American memorial culture more broadly. Highly popular during the nineteenth-century, the art of miniature painting was brought to the U.S. by the earliest European settlers and commonly consisted of small portable portraits painted on ivory lockets on the occasion of births, marriages, or deaths. If these portable portraits frequently functioned, as Robin Jaffee Frank suggests, as "substitutes for an absent loved one" (*Love and Loss* 1), Catherine's description of the skull as "miniature horror" links the murder and displacement of American Indigenous peoples to a highly sentimental and private form of nineteenth-century mourning. Walcott's poem draws attention to the problematic nature of such a sentimental rhetoric by reminding readers that what they read are not in fact Weldon's words but those of the narrator of *Omeros*, whose voice supplants Catherine's in Walcott's pastoral elegies for the Indigenous peoples of the Plains.

Another questions the Weldon passages of *Omeros* raise, then, is what Walcott's tendency to speak not only *for* but also *as* others means for his epic's gestures of poetic witness. I would argue that it calls them into question without condemning the poet to silence and that this tension is what Walcott seeks to express. The poem quoted above does not hide its deliberate supplementation of historical and autobiographical details with imaginary histories and experiences; hence it frequently disrupts its own pastoral-elegiac mode through meta-commentary. By the end of the canto, Weldon's musings about the omnipresence of death on the Plains become legible not only as an interrogation of nineteenth-century colonialist ideologies and sentimentalist rhetoric, but also as a critical engagement with the poetic tradition of the pastoral elegy and its conventions. At the heart of this critical engagement lies a cautious affirmation of what Robert Bensen describes as a "merging [of] human

identity in an imaginative act, across time and space" (122), but also an interrogation of the limits of such poetic identification along with poetic witnessing.

A later section from *Omeros* highlights how such a temporary merging of identity depends in crucial ways on the natural world as a conduit. In Chapter 41, canto II, a canto replete with references to Indian Summer as a figure for Native American removal and genocide, Walcott's narrator declares: "This was the groan of the autumn wind in the tamaracks/ which I shared through Catherine's body, coming in waves/ through the leaves of the Shawmut, the ochre hands of the Aruacs" (*Omeros* 208). As in several other places in the epic, human grief in *Omeros* is echoed by the natural world. As Timothy Morton argues, "the reverberation of nature is the way in which elegy imagines how grief is brought into language" ("The Dark Ecology of Elegy" 253). Indeed, it is a physical experience of the natural environment during the Indian summer in Boston—"Shawmut" (Walcott, *Omeros* 208) being a name for the area derived from Algonquian—that allows the narrator to do more than merely speak *for* or *as* Catherine Weldon in her moment of grief. He experiences her grief for the displaced and murdered tribes and her son in an explicitly and inevitably visceral manner. The reverberation of nature, we might say by misappropriating Morton's phrasing, is the way in which Walcott's elegy imagines how grief is shared across time and space.

Because both the grief and the natural world in the canto are experienced by people who live centuries apart in separate bodies and socio-cultural positions, Walcott's layered acts of ecopoetic witnessing—in the voice of Weldon or as the narrator-poet Derek (and on a meta-level as the author-poet Walcott)—retain their respective historical specificity and uniquely (if in part imaginary) personal quality. Catherine Weldon's story and perspective is refracted by the narrator's perspective on Native American histories of displacement and colonial oppression, a perspective influenced and further complicated by his experiences as a Black Caribbean poet and recent migrant to the United States. Where Catherine Weldon mourns the Lakota and the death of her son, Walcott uses his migratory narrator to evoke the fate of racial minorities and Native peoples throughout the Americas, in particular the Sioux and the Aruac of his native Island of St. Lucia. In important ways, the act of mourning presented in the U.S. American passages of *Omeros* is both personal and more than personal. If Walcott's poet-narrator is able to bear witness to the suffering of the Sioux, he can only do so from a position twice removed. Walcott's choice of the pastoral elegy in this context is significant exactly because it speaks to the poet's desire to do more than merely report on historical events. Instead, the pastoral elegies in the U.S. passages—which are also critical transnational elegies informed by postcolonial sensibilities—enable a trans-historic, trans-ethnic, highly self-aware, and explicitly situated act of mourning.

The natural world plays a key role in this act of poetic mourning, which is also an act of place-making that—if one takes seriously Indigenous rights to land and

sovereignty, including their right to make decisions about who to allow on their land and in their communities—verges on place-taking. Walcott's use of the pastoral elegy as a means of poetic place-making/place-taking has environmental relevance because it depends crucially on a natural world that can serve as a mediator between mourners, while also drawing attention to nature as a (potential) object of mourning itself. For as the narrator begins to notice upon observing seasonal changes upon his return to the East Coast and then understands during his return visits to the Caribbean, the relative permanence amidst gradual change that allows natural environments to become places of depth and resonance for those who encounter them while on the move and across time is no longer a given in a world affected by spreading environmental degradation and accelerated global climate change.

Epic, Confessional Lyric, and the Posthuman Comedy of Scale

Most of the U.S. passages of *Omeros* not concerned with Catherine Weldon's story are dedicated to the narrator's account of his life in the United States after the separation from his wife. Like the Weldon passages, these sections deal with loss. It is a loss, however, that pales in comparison with Weldon's loss of her child and, even more significantly even though in a less individuated manner, the losses of the Lakota. Traveling westward over the Great Plains on an airplane and musing about "a land that was lost" and "a woman who was gone" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175), Walcott's narrator combines a personal, at times blatantly self-centered perspective with the kind of impersonal, distanced perspective that has historically served U.S. settler-colonial projects and their imperialist successors by erasing the humanity of those Native peoples targeted for dispossession and displacement. The text makes this connection between a rhetoric of distance and a politics of violence explicit when Derek points to the countless broken treaties between the Sioux and the U.S. government as evidence for how "Empires [such as the U.S.] practiced their abstract universals of deceit" (Walcott, *Omeros* 181). The fact that the narrator sees his own "expression" (175), that is, both his face and his poetry, reflected in the plane's window and thus superposed onto the landscape at a far distance below him implies that he, too, is practicing such "abstract universals of deceit" (175) with his poetry. Rather than being unaware of the risk involved in choosing to speak to issues that one might consider of no concern to him, as some scholars seem to suggest, Walcott employs intentionally lopsided comparisons in the Dakota passages to expose "abstract universals" (*Omeros* 181) as dangerous distortions. Instead of seriously implying that Derek's personal losses could and should be compared to the loss of Indigenous peoples and cultures, the Dakota passages dramatize the poet's failure to find an appropriate poetic language for representing the places he encounters and the settler-colonial histories that have shaped them. This failure, Walcott's text suggests, is not just a personal or

moral one. It is also a failure of the poetic language of universalization commonly associated with the traditional epic and of the language of individualization commonly associated with the confessional lyric, a failure that becomes even more obvious when the two genres are combined.

Derek's struggle and ultimate inability to find a poetic language suited to the immensity of North American landscapes, the weight of North American history, and his own relationship to both is especially pronounced in chapter 34, canto I, a canto which conjures the striking landscapes of the American West. Contemplating the awe-inspiring sight of "Colorado" and the "Dakotas" (Walcott, *Omeros* 174) during a westward flight, the transnational migrant Derek envisions a statuesque Crow horseman, a romanticized heroic figure representative of a long-gone past, who points his "lance" to the "contrail" (174) that the narrator's plane leaves in the sky in a tragically futile gesture of defiance and/ or recognition.[12] Like the "interstate" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175) mentioned a few lines later and the "contrails" visible on the window's "Plexiglas" (174), the plane's condensation trail is symbolic of an America constantly on the move and constantly claiming new territory. The word component *trail*, together with the "white wagons" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175) mentioned in the third stanza, points to the Westward Expansion and the resulting Native American removal which not only affected Indigenous peoples of the U.S. South displaced by the Trail of Tears and similar forced acts of relocation, but also Plains Peoples such as the Dakota who the passage alludes to as well. The way in which these different Indigenous peoples are evoked is problematic: the warrior's "whitening" by the "[c]louds" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175) highlights the ambiguity of the poetic gesture that brings Indigenous people into passages centered on Derek. The horseman's gradual erasure by the passing time and by a natural world that does not provide a reliable historical record unless the poet intervenes is paralleled with the Crow warrior's eventual disappearance "into the page" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175) of the narrator's account of his travels westward—and by extension of Walcott's poem. The long and diverse histories of Indigenous peoples of North America are therefore quite literally "narrowed from epic to epigram" (175) in Walcott's epic poem in which Native American histories remain on the margin. Put differently, in the very moment in which Walcott's "poetry of subjectivity or confession" (Gray, *Mastery's End* 193–94) tries to challenge the restraints often imposed on poetry of migration by weaving together personal experiences and larger settler-colonial histories, the poet is confronted with the impossibility of such an endeavor.

12 This mention of a statuesque Crow horseman may be an allusion to James Earle Fraser's well-known bronze sculpture *The End of the Trail* (1918) which depicts a Native warrior on horseback, collapsed back upon himself, letting his lance trail on the ground in defeat. It might as well point toward an abyss right in front of him, into which he and his horse, which has come to an abrupt halt but is barely able to stand, are about to fall.

The narrator's description of the Colorado and Dakota plains is rich in metaphors that are oddly mismatched and strangely out of scale. Natural phenomena as clearly visible yet still incomprehensible in their temporal and geographical scale as the geological formations left behind by "the crumbling floes/ of a gliding Arctic" (Walcott, *Omeros* 174) are figured as marks left by "angelic skis" (174) and then compared to scratches on the airplane's windows, which are in turn compared to the trails of "comets" (175). These lopsided comparisons do more than deconstruct what might otherwise appear as a sublime vision of the Dakota Plains and "Colorado's/ palomino mountains" (Walcott *Omeros* 174) from the mobile perspective of the air traveler. The intentional awkwardness of Walcott's language here highlights the incomprehensible horrors of human history as well as the unthinkable timespans that have led to the formation of the landscapes he surveys. Poetic gestures like this one characterize the Dakota passages and by consequence Walcott's epic at large as a "posthuman comedy" (McGurl 537) of scale. Responding to Wai Chee Dimock's call for scholars to study American literature in a historical context that goes beyond the conventional timeframes of historiography governed by colonial, nationalist, and imperialist interests, Mark McGurl proposed the project of the posthuman comedy that is, of critical fiction "in which scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem" (McGurl 537). Although Walcott's epic is neither fiction, nor oriented toward scientific knowledge, the Dakota passages nonetheless strikingly render the "vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world" through densely figurative evocations of histories and places that highlight the clash of human time with deep time, of human perspectives with the scales of (continental American) nature. The canto just discussed shows how the poet struggles with the realization that even the "most epic productions" of human existence are "cosmicomically small" (McGurl 538) when compared with the vast scales of the more-than-human world. It is precisely because of the mind-boggling nature of these posthuman scales—"posthuman, not in the affirmative sense suggested by Hayles and Haraway, but in the devastating sense that, on any order of magnitude other than our own, human individuation is statistically insignificant" (Dimock, "Low Epic" 616)—that Wai Chee Dimock in a response to McGurl emphasized the particular ability of poetry to "represent something like a lyricization of epic—our brain's way of telescoping in reverse, turning unthinkable orders of magnitude into thinkable ones" (619). Walcott's Dakota passages capitalize on the ability of poetry to make the unthinkable thinkable with a single image, even as his text draws attention to that which is lost in the resulting processes of re-scaling. His posthuman comedy is one of ultimately incommensurable scales, histories, and voices that nonetheless produce relevant insights when combined in a text such as *Omeros*.

While the transnationally mobile narrator displays some confidence in his ability to adequately represent nature and its history in the Caribbean passages of *Omeros* (see Handley, *New World Poetics* 290–92), he is more doubtful in the cantos about the United States. In the Dakota passages, he sardonically admits to having "mis[taken] mountains for lakes" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175) while attempting to describe the northwestern plains. What this may be highlighting is that poetic place-making from too great a distance, without immersing into the places in question, is exceedingly difficult, if at all possible. What it also implies is that such poetic place-making, whatever insights it may yield with regard to the grandness of the nonhuman world (or because it yields such insight), entails the risk of becoming implicated in forms of place-based violence that stem from universalization and distancing. Indeed, I would argue, the narrator's self-conscious display of his failure to account fully for the complex, multi-layered and multi-scalar placeness and historicity of the American landscapes he only passes over by plane in the Dakota passages, implies an awareness that arrivants such as Derek are easily roped into the discursive project of obscuring, romanticizing, and thus perpetuating settler-colonialism in the United States. While they are not settlers, they too can become implicated in practices of writing that lead to a flattening of N/nature and a thinning out of places of depth into abstract political geographies void of meaning. They too can become complicit in the erasure or trivialization of the culturally, socially, politically, and ecologically significant human-land relations that other marginalized and displaced peoples have established, whether through place-making or other place-based practices. When this happens, a reading of the U.S.-passages of *Omeros* attuned to matters of place and displacement suggests, arrivant acts of place-making—whether undertaken out of a deeply felt desire for place-attachment and belonging, as in the case of Agha Shahid Ali discussed in the following chapter, or, undertaken with a certain reluctance and ironic distance, as in the case of Derek Walcott—become ethically fraught.

Throughout the Dakota passages, Walcott explores the problems that arise when a migrant poet like himself engages in poetic place-making in a U.S.-American context where such place-making has historically been tied, and continues to be tied, to a poetic self-fashioning that relies on a rhetoric of justified conquest and heroic individualism. Phrases like "Manifest Destiny" and "American dream" (Walcott, *Omeros* 175), and attributes like "paradise" (175) in the last stanza of Chapter 34, canto I, suggest that the narrator struggles with his role as a poet of place and displacement in the United States. In a certain sense, the Dakota passages renegotiate a dominant poetic instantiation of the myth of the "American Adam," namely that of "the poet-prophet, the artistic self who shapes the world" (Patea 23).[13] As Viorica Patea

13 In "The Muse of History" (1973), Walcott famously wrote: "In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge

notes, the myth of the American Adam has provided the foundational framework for "the drama of the American self" as well as for "interpreting space and time" (17) in the 'New World.' Following Myra Jehlen, Patea emphasizes that the Adamic project of self-definition crucially depends on "the existence of a 'garden'" (29), which in the U.S. American context also came to be mapped onto the open spaces of the American West, despite the obvious resistance of the landscapes and residents of the Midwest to such a figuration. George B. Handley reads Walcott's (Caribbean) New World Adam as a "postlapsarian Adam, a 'second Adam'" (2), who does not deny violent histories but expresses "'awe' before the wonders of a New World whose beauty has survived or has even, paradoxically, been nurtured by the wreckage of colonialism" (2). Walcott's U.S. passages too acknowledge histories of colonial violence and the (sublime) beauty of U.S. nature. Yet, if they express any "awe" for the "wonders" of the more-than-human world in the United States, the resulting elation is short-lived, tempered by grief or irony and undermined by the narrator's use of jarring metaphors and maladroit comparisons. The American Adam of the bitterly ironic Dakota passages is a reluctant one: the natural world Walcott's narrator encounters during his travels through the United States are ancient and saturated with human and nonhuman histories, not new, let alone made anew by his words. Rather than confidently presenting himself as a poet-prophet who (re-)creates the world, Walcott's narrator is a failing American Adam as much as a reluctant (eco)poetic place-maker. However, given the violent implications of such adamic place-making, for which erasure and misrepresentations are crucial, Walcott's self-conscious display of the poet's failures in *Omeros* may be read as an at times heavy-handed but necessary troubling of settler-colonial ideologies through a posthuman comedy of scale and thus as an achievement in its own right, especially for an Afro-Caribbean transnational migrant like Walcott's narrator.

Walcott's critique of the myth of the adamic poet-prophet not only challenges settler-colonial violence, it also has remarkable environmental implications. "The Adamic hero," Viorica Patea notes in drawing from Richard Slotkin, frequently "translates his self-assertions into acts of violence against the garden" (34), which is why "in his wake, the earthly Eden is transformed into a wasteland marked by ruin and debris" (34). Following Derek's return to the East Coast after his trip to the U.S. South and his voyage across the Great Plains, he recognizes New England as precisely such a wasteland. In chapter 41, canto II, he muses:

written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. […] The great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda, reject this sense of history. Their vision of man in the New World is Adamic" (37).

> […] The widening mind can acquire
> the hues of a foliage different from where it begins
> in the low hills of Gloucester running with smokeless fire.
>
> There Iroquois flashed in the Indian red, in the sepias
> and ochres of leaf-mulch, the mind dyed from the stain
> on their sacred ground, the smoke-prayer of the tepees
>
> pushed back by the Pilgrim's pitchfork. All over again,
> diaspora, exodus, when the hills in their piebald ranges
> move like their ponies, the tribes moving like trees
>
> downhill to the lowland, a flag-fading smoke-wisp estranges
> them. First men, then the forests. Until the earth
> lies barren as the dusty Dakotas. […]
>
> (Walcott, *Omeros* 207)

Figuring Native peoples as trees or leaves, as he also does in other passages in the epic poem, but also suggesting that migratory movements profoundly affect individuals and their perspective on the world, the traveling poet confronts the legacy of American settler-colonialism "in the low hills of Gloucester." The name Gloucester recalls Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* (1960, 1968, 1975), another twentieth-century American epic of place with environmental undertones that chronicles the European settlement of North America. The narrator's references to the "Iroquois" in this canto, like his references to the Choctaw, Sioux or Crow in other parts of *Omeros*, is marked by a blurring of the line between historical facts and (settler-colonial) fantasies and thus by a problematic erasure of cultural differences between the many different Indigenous tribes that were "pushed back by the Pilgrim's pitchfork" (Walcott, *Omeros* 207), as the narrator puts it. The Six Native nations of the Northeast commonly referred to as Iroquois, that is to say, the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk, and Tuscarora, did not live in "tepees" as suggested in the passage above, but in longhouses.[14] This kind of oversight, or as one might say, this kind of universal abstraction, is a problematic feature of *Omeros*, even if the text strongly implies that some of the stereotypical repertoire of images the narrator draws on

14 Historically, the confederacy of five Northeastern tribes known as Iroquois called themselves *Kanonsionni*, "people of the longhouses" before receiving the more commonly known, European name Walcott uses in his text. Today, the confederacy comprises six Northeastern Native nations—the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora (Ortiz 24)—and calls itself "Haudenosaunee," meaning "They made the house." For more information on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, see the Confederacy's official website (Haudenosaunee Confederacy).

for his description of landscapes and their histories—a repertoire evoked for instance through the allusion to "sepia" (Walcott, *Omeros* 207) colored films and photographs—in fact be a critical commentary on hegemonic U.S.-American representations of Indigenous peoples, rather than a mere repetition of stereotypes. When Walcott's narrator represents the historical victims of European colonization in the Americas with recourse to the same settler-colonial stereotypes that were used to legitimize Native American genocide and dispossession, the Gloucester canto seems to imply, it is at least partly because the migrant narrator's "mind" has "acquire[d]/ the hues of a foliage different from where it beg[an]" (Walcott, *Omeros* 207) during his stay in the United States, where the cultural and popular imagination continues to erase Indigenous diversity along with Indigenous histories, cultures, and experiences.

Importantly, the devastation resulting from conquest and expansion mentioned in the Gloucester canto does not only concern humans but also the nonhuman world. After Indigenous peoples have been driven off the land in the East and replaced by settlers and arrivants like himself, the narrator suggests, "the earth" will soon lie "barren as the dusty Dakotas" (Walcott, *Omeros* 207), an ominous prophesy not only given the historical westward progression of the U.S.-American colonial project, but also in reference to the (late) twentieth-century U.S. neocolonial expansions into the Caribbean, depicted in the Caribbean sections of *Omeros*. When the narrator temporarily returns to the Caribbean to visit St. Lucia during his sojourn in the United States, he cannot help but draw comparisons between both regions' histories of slavery and Indigenous genocide. As I have outlined in the beginning of this chapter, he also becomes painfully aware of the devastating manner in which mass tourism—depicted as a modern-day form of colonialism—affects his native island. What the Caribbean passages suggest is that the narrator's migratory experiences and his travels in the United States have not only changed his sociopolitical and socioeconomic status in ways that affect his perspective on human-nature relations, they have also made him acutely aware of his own complicity in systems of oppression and exploitation, including those that have caused and continue to exacerbate our current ecological crisis.

It is at least in part due to the increasingly complex perspectives of nature and mobility that the narrator develops during his travels through the United States, I argue, that a critical transnational and environmental sense of place emerges in *Omeros*. As Richard Kerridge notes, our current moment of escalating environmental crisis calls for "forms of epic realism that combine long perspectives with zooms into intensely realized local settings" (372) as well as for genres such as "confessional lyric poetry" that are "equipped to explore people' current reactions and evasions (such as 'splitting') and the emotional and behavioral shifts that would occur if we began to change" (373). Derek Walcott's text can be said to have responded to these conflicting demands on literature in the Anthropocene a decade before the term was

introduced to the public and at a moment in time when ecocriticism was only beginning to emerge as a field of inquiry. *Omeros* explores "long perspectives" and "local settings" as well as a transnational migrant's "reactions [to] and evasions" of his own implications in or at least complicity with systems of oppression and exploitation through a mixing and revision of genres. Walcott's frequently uncomfortable, but in many ways prescient, lyricized planetary epic does not erase the tensions and personal conflicts arising from the clash of the universal and the particular, the communal and the individual, the global and the local. Instead, it confronts them, allowing readers to explore with Walcott's mobile narrator and the other characters of *Omeros*, but also at a distance from them, what the discrepancies of scale inherent in the Anthropocene mean for human beings driven by their desire to engage more deeply with the world around them but also troubled by what their acts of place-making reveal.