

A CHOREOGRAPHIC DIALOGUE WITH CARIBBEAN POETRY

The sacredness of the feminine in Walcott's *Omeros* (1990)

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Abstract – The aim of this paper is to show how the poetry and art of Caribbean writer Derek Walcott (1930-2017) tends to manifest and substantiate the desirable *cultural transformation* promoted by the work of the American anthropologist and scholar Riane Eisler. The recognition and the exaltation of symbols connected to the feminine world stand at the core of Walcott's masterpiece *Omeros*. In a creative *mutual dialogue* between different genres and identities, the Caribbean author materialises Eisler's attempts to forge a type of society based on a new *partnership ethic*. In a second perspective, this paper analyses how Walcott's work opens the path to possible creative interdisciplinary approaches in the world of the arts. In my own contribution, as a professional dancer and choreographer, I have tried to "give voice" through movements to some episodes relating to the feminine included in *Omeros*.

Keywords: sacredness of the feminine; Archetypal Mother; connection between arts; Dancing in the Caribbean; Derek Walcott

1. An overview of Derek Walcott's poetical quest

Derek Walcott's large and extensive work is marked by his radical attempt at finding a new 'voice' for West Caribbean Indians and their diversified communities and peoples. In this perspective the author has always tried to reach a compromise between his ethnically divided background and the aspiration for calling "home" those colonial territories where he grew up and worked. Born in the tiny Caribbean island of St. Lucia, Walcott is "divided to the vein [...] between this Africa and the English language I love"¹ (Walcott 1965), as he recalls in one of his poems from the beginning, thus underlying his frustration for the impossibility to align himself with a single community. It took him some time and an autobiographical poem, *Another Life* (1973), to understand the rare opportunities he could reap from that same 'diversity' and heterogeneity of being. The recognition and acceptance of an *in-between* space came from the awareness of a cultural and social contextual hybrid in which he lived. In this perspective Walcott's work and life are a direct reflection of what postcolonial theorist and scholar Homi K. Bhabha defines as *hybridity*, that is to say: "the state of being at the border of two cultures, marked by a sense of 'double consciousness' and 'in-betweenness' [...] Hybridity is a subversion of single, unified, purist notion of identity, in favour of multiple cultural positions" (Mambrol 2016).

In its history, St. Lucia "changed hands" between French and English powers seventeen times before it became part of British Empire in 1814. The conquest, nevertheless, did not prevent the development and use of the French language in the form of a distinctive *creole*, which has always been associated with the simplicities of common life. The plurality and interconnectedness in which Walcott had been plunged since birth can be perceived in his most celebrated verses:

¹ The poem *A Far Cry From Africa* belongs to the collection *In a Green Night* (1965).

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
 I had a sound colonial education,
 I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
 and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.
 [...]
 I had no nation now but the imagination. (Walcott 1979, pp. 40-44)

Walcott does not reject the prerogatives of Western tradition but he is also aware of the fact that coming from a mixed family (his grandfathers were white, one Dutch and the other English, while his grandmothers were black) could mean a non-acceptance from the part of those same canonical influences coming from the *centre*. It is through the redemptive power of imagination that the author is capable of educating and transforming his bitterness into a powerful creative energy. John Thieme summarises Walcott's achievement in reconciling with his own identity in these terms:

From the outset [Walcott] promoted a cross-cultural - as opposed to an Afrocentric or Eurocentric - reading of Caribbean, and other, social formations and all his work to date is predicated upon an aesthetic which emphasizes the cultural cross-pollination that he sees as characteristic of the Caribbean region. (Thieme 1999, p. 1)

In his poetical journey, Walcott needed to come to terms with another distressing dimension as well, namely the legacy of the colonial past. The poet overcomes the pains of history with an innovative strategy: he urges for the right of an authentic and collective *amnesia*. History does not exist and the past is blurred into a sort of mist – not to say that Caribbean people should obliterate and forget what happened to their ancestors completely but that they should keep in mind that focusing and writing purely about ‘revenge’ would lead nowhere. In an essay titled *The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry* Walcott argues:

In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. (Walcott 1973, p. 6)

In addition, Walcott also rejects the ideas of western determinism and perpetual, endless progress because both these assumptions are linked to the concept of a linear time. For him time is cyclical and spherical, a kind of eternal flux of renewal and regeneration. Western Indians, therefore, need to concentrate more on the possibilities of the present in order to be able to build the basis for an equal and better future.

Walcott is capable of achieving self-determination only through the “act of naming”, the process of attributing a ‘new light’ to the shades of an *imposed reality*. The author acknowledges the power of language and the *written word* to shape people's mind and so he thinks that the only way to re-establish dignity and respectability for his community is through the action of moulding anew the Caribbean experience. In a profound shifting of perspectives, the author predicts the coming of a “second Adam”, the arrival of a new progenitor with the mission of accomplishing a rehabilitation of the natural beauty of the island's landscape. In an ultimate task, re-naming animals, vegetation, characters and practices assumes a symbolical valence, in which Caribbean people would be reconnected with their natural surrounding. As Breslin points out:

Naming is central to Walcott's claims for an 'Adamic' New World poetics. The act of naming takes the natural into the cultural domain while grounding language in the domain of the natural. The choice of a name reveals much about the consciousness of the namer. (Breslin 2001, p. 205)

As a craftsman scrapes the edges of a trunk to find its suitable shape, so Walcott engraves the lives and the main characteristics of his fellow compatriots. He describes the importance they bestow to their irrational and transcendental beliefs, especially those relating to the 'earth'. The interrelations Antillean people entertain with the vegetation and the animal world become indispensable in the author's poetical quest. Walcott deliberately uses names in *patois* to remember or imply features and entities one can only discern in those remote territories: the *sea-swift* is recalled also with the nomenclature of 'ciseaux de mer' in order to suggest the spiritual force its shape evokes to the Caribbean sensibility; although the *casuarinas* of his island could be easily identified with 'cypresses', the name given to them by indigenous people acquires more importance than the reality itself; the same *island* earns Walcott a new identity as he refers to it as the "Helen of the Caribbean", an emblematic expression blending in its essence the charming scenery of St. Lucia and the innumerable conflicts European empires brought about in order to control it. In a superlative line coming from his essay *The Antilles*, Walcott summarises his efforts on re-baptising his world suggesting: "At last, islands not written about but writing themselves!" (Walcott 1998, p. 78). Remembering the "calypso" music or the festivities connected to the Carnival allows Walcott to reiterate the customs and traditions of Caribbean folklore. This aspect is also emphasised in the naming of his characters: Achille, Hector and Philoctete are not shades of their Western mythological counterparts but remembrances of the appellations slave traders gave to their black 'transplanted' prisoners. Even the name of the protagonist of one of his most important poems, "Shabine" in *The Schooner Flight*, relates to the custom of the island's seamen who recognise in this term a "mulatto".

The peculiar relationship Walcott establishes with the natural environment can also be perceived in other Caribbean writers: humankind needs to re-join with Mother-nature because it is only through its powerful energy that man can find alternative types of cure to his centuries-old wounds. In this respect it might be useful to note how:

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

2. Circular paths connecting Derek Walcott and Riane Eisler

The work that better exemplifies Derek Walcott's main poetical prerogatives is his masterpiece *Omeros* (1990). Through this atypical poem, the writer is able to forge what R. Hamner defines as "an epic of the dispossessed" (1997, p.3). Giving a voice to the poor and common people of his island provides Walcott with a chance to redeem their 'past' by allowing them to follow a spiritual journey in search for identity and 'roots'. Narratively speaking, *Omeros* is dense and chaotic: it presents, in fact, a variety of complex characters and a large number of plots connecting different stories happening in the Antilles, Africa, America and Europe.

What this paper tries to confirm is the idea that the complete work follows a kind of *circular symbology* thus linking the idea of a spherical time with that of an encircling

dimension. In doing so Walcott is capable of denying the colonialist paradigm of domination and repudiation of the ‘*Other*’ (i.e. the western dehumanization of people being physically and mentally “different”) whilst recognising the positive outputs emanating from the encounter of plural and multiple world views.

In this perspective, the aim of this work is to display how Walcottian writing frequently recalls the symbol of the *chalice* (and that of its circular shape) evoked also by the American anthropologist and scholar Riane Eisler² in her fundamental book *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987). Both Walcott and Eisler, in fact, strive for the foundation of a *mutual society* lacking dominating figures in which each member of the community is able to express his or her own feelings and needs.

Eisler bases her studies on various archaeological discoveries which uncovered ancient types of societies ruled with common respect between men and women who found themselves equal and working together for the benefit of the common good. These communities had also lived in peace and harmony with the natural environment until the arrival of controlling groups, which used coercion and war in order to establish an ethic of the *blade*. Archetypal symbols of human regeneration and birth, such as the circular images of the female vulva or the Goddess Mother’s womb, were intently replaced by an iconography that glorified masculine physical power and strength. In Eisler’s opinion, today’s societies need to be guided towards a *cultural transformation* in order to regain the mutual understanding and reject the violence, which characterised those primordial communities.

In my opinion, Walcott’s work tends to manifest and exemplify implicitly what has been theorised through Eisler’s critical prerogatives. An example of this is seen in *The Schooner Flight* where the leading figure, Shabine, tired of the revolution Caribbean people were carrying out against the newly establishing black Federal power, has the courage of stating: “I have no weapon but poetry and the lances of palms and the sea’s shining shield” (Walcott 1979, p. 358). In this way Walcott denounces the irrationality of man, wanting a human against another human, while at the same time he encourages, as Eisler does, an ethic based on the power of human rehabilitation through art and the re-connection with nature. As Hamner points out: “[...] Omeros is clearly more domestic than the Iliad and other national poems that emphasise the martial valour of a distinctly masculine prowess” (1997, p. 29).

The connections to Eisler’s “cultural transformation” are even more evident in a number of symbols and episodes that one can clearly distinguish throughout Walcott’s *Omeros*. I will try to underline some emblematical passages that support these assumptions. In the work, in fact, sooner or later every character is faced with a sacred ‘oval’ shape.

Achille, for instance, in his long quest for ‘roots’ and identity, chases the circular trajectory marked by the flight of a *sea-swift*. Gazing at the bird from his canoe, he falls into a ‘trance’ which leads him back in time and space to his African ancestors. There, in Africa, he discovers not only that his true name is Afolabe, but also that his own group was taken captive by another brotherly tribe before being sold to European slavers. Following an undersea journey, a veritable baptismal dream, Achille will wake up again

² Riane Eisler is a cultural historian, systems scientist, educator and author whose work on cultural transformation has inspired scholar and social activists. Eisler’s 1987 bestseller *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* was issued in 23 foreign languages. See: <http://www.rianeeisler.com/> and <http://www.partnershipway.org/>.

on his Caribbean island, thus understanding the importance of his own inner circular journey.

In order to heal Philoctete's wound, a symbolic mark made by a "rusted anchor", the Obeah priestess of the Goddess Ma Kilman will have to follow a similar circular path. Having achieved a spiritual recovery with the forces of the natural surroundings, Ma Kilman asks for the help of the ants in finding the seed of a lost flower that came from Africa (in the belly of that same *sea-swift* that helped Achilles). It is in an oval cauldron that enables the Sybil to prepare a magical concoction made from the juice of that "remembered" seed and other healing elements, such as seawater and herbal oils. It is through a symbolic redemptive bath that Philoctete is able to cure not only his wound, but also the pains and the grief coming from his people's past.

One might be surprised to discern between the main characters of the poem the figure of the author himself. Walcott materialises in the work not only as one of the narrators, but also as a person who needs to find self-assertion and truth. It is in this perspective that the writer himself accomplishes a cyclical voyage in search of answers and hidden correspondences. Emblematic from this point of view is the episode in which Walcott, feeling 'estranged' from the American setting to which he moved, finds in an art gallery the painting of an artist named Winslow Homer. Besides the recognition of an intimate link between the name of the painter and that of the title of his work (*Omeros* in Greek means Homer), Walcott is struck by the painting itself. The work depicts, in fact, a black sailor striving for life on a drifting raft in the middle of the ocean. In the sketch the author perceives the quintessential effort his people are making in order to gain 'freedom of being'. Towards the end of the epic poem, Walcott finds himself in a similar boat circumnavigating his own island. He is guided by the figures of "Omeros" and that of a "black Charon" sailor. The two are leading him towards the island's *inferno*, the volcano La Soufrière (a toponym in *patois* which recalls the image of *La Sorcière*, the Witch in French). Here, the poet is able to witness the sufferings dead people need to experience if they had not accepted their own true identity in life. Walcott recognises the character of Hector, who perished in a car accident when he had left "the sea" in order to make money out of the degrading tourism business. On two significant occasions, the narrating author meets the incorporeal presence of his beloved lost father Warwick Walcott. These profound encounters are fundamental in the writer's poetical journey for the understanding of his life and work. His father, in fact, reminds him of the demanding role he must fulfil in being the poetical soul of his nation and community. Through a meaningful wording, Warwick Walcott explains how the definite boundaries of the 'circle' need to be disclosed in order to encompass the entirety of the 'spiritual world':

[...]

"Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere,
cherish our island for its green simplicities,
enthroned yourself, if your sheet is a barber-chair,

a sail leaving harbour and a sail coming in,
the shadows of grape-leaves on sunlit verandahs
made me content. The sea-swift vanishes in rain,

and yet in its travelling all that the sea-swift does
it does in a circular pattern. Remember that, son". (Walcott 1990, iii, XXXVI, book 4)

2.1. The feminine in Walcott's *Omeros*

Another important dimension connecting the ideology of Riane Eisler with the universe that is evoked in the Walcott's *Omeros* refers to the emphasis attributed to the sacredness of the feminine. Female figures are indeed essential in Walcott's work: they are the only characters able to listen, help, cure and generate life.

For instance, Helen's pregnancy represents not only the emblem for human renewal, but also the elemental opportunity of its own atonement. Towards the end of the epic, in fact, we find out that the father of the non-yet born child is the dead Hector: through this expedient, Walcott is suggesting the possibility of redemption on the part of that same character who chose to abandon "his sea" in search of an easier and profitable life. Helen is not only mystified as an 'angelical creature', but also as a rebellious woman in search for her own recognition and realisation. The author chooses to introduce her only at the beginning of chapter IV, thus increasing the reader's expectations. It is the same Walcott character that describes the scene:

[...]
 I felt like standing in homage to a beauty

 that left, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake.
 "Who the hell is that?" a tourist near my table
 asked a waitress. The waitress said, "She? She too proud!"

 As the carved lids of the unimaginable
 ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-whoop cloud,
 the waitress sneered "Helen." And all the rest followed. (Walcott 1990, iii, IV, book 1)

From these very first verses we can perceive the image of an independent and self-assured woman, impossible to dominate or control. Achille and Hector feel they are torn between her own decisions: as soon as one of the two shows lack of respect, she runs to the other. Likewise, Helen depicts the inevitable fragility of human consciousness as she follows a path to self-awareness of her 'inner being'. In this overview, she coincides with one of the archetypical women Estés Pinkola portrays in her study *Women Who Runs with the Wolves*:³ "If you have ever been called defiant, incorrigible, forward, cunning, insurgent, unruly, rebellious, you're on the right track. Wild woman is close by. If you have never been called these things, there is yet time. Practice your Wild Woman" (Estés Pinkola 1992, p. 198). It is only through the rejection of the *established order* that Helen is capable of re-appropriating her 'true self', thus also acquiring the determination needed to struggle against life's challenges. Focusing on the last line, Barnard (2014, p. 101) suggests that "by transference [Walcott is not referring to] Helen the woman but Helen the island of St. Lucia that is the driver of the poem". The relation confirms Walcott's commitment in re-connecting his community with the island's natural power and strength.

Another important female character Walcott decides to deal with is the iconic figure of Catherine Weldon, a wealthy widow who leaves the 'commodities' of her life in Brooklyn, New York, in order to advocate for the rights of North America's Sioux Indians. Having become the secretary of Chief Sitting Bull, Weldon tries to prevent the

³ Clarissa Pinkola Estés is a Jungian American psychoanalyst, spoken word artist and scholar. In her visionary work *Women Who Runs With Wolves* (1992) she unfolds rich intercultural myths, stories and fairy tales in order to help women reconnect with their instinctual nature.

project to exterminate the tribe by American soldiers and government. In the end, she is not capable of preventing the genocide but her example becomes highly symbolic of the possibilities for human recognition of minority groups. Weldon observes the importance that the Sioux attribute to their spiritual and magical traditions. She fears what they call “the ghost dance”, a physical tribal choral movement that allows dead warriors to fight against possible threats. At the same time, she wistfully notices how her own ‘white community’ has forgotten the spiritual values coming from transcendental and mythical communal ‘recoveries’. Walcott’s invocation to this highly spiritual and emblematic Goddess of the Sioux demonstrates how the author perceives the necessity of admitting the female’s prowess and capabilities.

At the end of the first book of *Omeros*, the ghost of Warwick Walcott (a reflection of Anchises in the *Aeneid*) reveals to his son Derek the ultimate aim of his poetic and lifelong journey. In doing so, the father points out the harbour of Castries, the capital of the island, to which he used to venture in his youth in order to gaze at the work of black female coal carriers: “the carriers were women, not the fair, gentler sex. Instead, they were darker and stronger, and their gait was made beautiful by balance, in their ascending the narrow wooden ramp built steeply to the hull of a linear tall as a cloud [...]” (Walcott 1990, ii, XIII, book 1). Recalling those women becomes fundamental in Warwick’s attempt at making his son write about them. In the recording of history, in fact, man has always forgotten to express the burden of their work:

Kneel to your load, then balance your staggering feet
and walk up that coal ladder as they do in time,
one bare foot after the next in ancestral rhyme.

[...]

keep to that narrow causeway without looking down,
climbing in their footsteps, that slow, ancestral beat
of those used to climbing roads; your own work owes them

because the couplet of those multiplying feet
made your first rhymes. Look, they climb, and no one knows them;
they take their copper pittances, and your duty

from the time you watched them from your grandmother’s house
as a child wounded by their power and beauty
is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice. (Walcott 1990, iii, XIII, book 1)

Re-establishing the dignity of these ancestral feminine progenitors through the art of poetry would mean to try to reconcile with their unknown and forgotten identities. In this passage Walcott associates the feet of those women with the feet in his verses in a constant correspondence that highlights linking of his endeavours.

Finally, in my opinion, the passage that better exemplifies the symbolic power of the feminine *oval shape* is the episode in which Walcott recalls the encounter with a Greek sculptress, who teaches him the correct pronunciation of the word “Omeros” (which means Homer in Greek language). In his attempt to articulate the word, the writer is taken into a sort of a mystical experience through which he can foresee the Archetypical symbols hidden in its etymology:

[...]
I said, “Omeros”,

and *O* was the conch-shell’s invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed. (Walcott 1990, iii, II, book 1)

The shape of the conch-shell and that of the cave suggest a connection with the fertile imagery of the *female vulva*, that ancestral womb from where all life begins. The power of the word *mer* can take symbolic correspondence to *sea* and *Mother*. The passage accentuates the natural renewal of seawaters. In a couple of verses Walcott is able to express his intimate devotion to the sacredness of the female Goddess, that concealed figure governing and shaping the “circling journeys” of human’s lives. In his acute analysis Hamner (1997, p. 42) stresses the importance “[...] of the repetition of the *O*, which is not only the first letter of Omeros, but also the sound emitted to blown conch shell [...]”. Later on the scholar adds: “the figure [of] the oval shape [dominates through the entire epic as] a mouth, a throat, a vase, a cave, an island [...]”.

3. The interdisciplinary openness of Walcott’s work

As a secondary intention, this paper tries to demonstrate how the writings and the artistic endeavours of Derek Walcott strive to be perceived as fundamentals for an authentic and innovative *dialogue* between different ‘expressional practices’. Starting from this point, it is important to recall how Walcott’s creative experience does not exhaust in the boundaries of a blank page: the author, in fact, is well known also for his significant contributions to the foundation of a West Indian Caribbean drama. Moreover, besides his production of original plays, Walcott is also a painter. In his autobiographical poem, *Another Life* (1973), the author vividly records how in his younger years he struggled to achieve mastering a brush. Art gave him also the opportunity to get to know the artist and painter Dunstan St. Omer, who would later become his best friend. Their friendship was sealed with a challenging pact: “that [they] would never leave the island until [they] had put down, in paint, in words, as palmists learn the network of a hand, all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines, every neglected, self-pitying inlet” (Walcott 1973, p. 52). Walcott’s devotion to Renaissance painters and their techniques (especially in their use of the “chiaroscuro”) triggered an attempt to reproduce *in words* similar nuances and shades that one would rather expect to find in figurative art.

The unconventional experiment of blending in the same work the influences and the prerogatives of different ‘types of Art’ displays Walcott’s ability in outdoing ‘canonical frameworks’, or better, it exemplifies the possibility of a new, original and productive aesthetics. In my opinion, Walcott expresses today’s social and cultural need to ‘feel connected and global’. The originality of expression challenges not only the basis of centuries-long *cultural western domination*, but paves the way to sustain other and different types of art forms. As an interesting example of this inclusivity, I want to underline how Walcott deliberately designs the sets of his plays in a ‘circular form’ not only with the intention of making the public feel as part of what is happening on stage, but also with the hope of recovering the ancestral fire-circle in which his progenitors used to

narrate their stories. According to Walcott folklore and innovations have equal influence in forging a kind of artistic experience that rehabilitates indigenous traditions without forgetting the prerogatives of the modern world.

In conclusion, Walcott has always been fascinated by the power of Art and its ability to reconcile and appease the agonies of the human soul. The author has projected in the artistic world the premises for collective regeneration and transformation.

3.1. A choreographical homage to Walcott's feminine world

Given these premises, in my own experience as a professional dancer and teacher of contemporary ballet, I attempted to follow the path marked by Walcott by creating of an innovative choreographical workshop. The idea of the project consisted in the production of an interdisciplinary melange of poetry, theatre and ballet.

The protagonists involved in this particular *encounter* were a group of nine female adolescent dancers, coming from one of my ballet classes that I hold in a school in Udine (Italy). During the workshop I attempted to 'give voice' to some of the symbolic passages relating to the Walcottian feminine world which I have previously analysed. In the conception of the work, my attention focused on the possibilities of the 'dancing movements' that these young women would create which reflected their 'inner universe'. Essentially, I tried to accomplish a *mini-cultural transformation* working on the physical emotions and attitudes the dancers would attain when interpreting Walcott's verses. During the first weeks of the workshop the students and I had the opportunity to 'improvise' and get acquainted with Walcott's poetry, recognising immediately the "fluidity" of his thoughts and words. It was as if his female characters were transfiguring the power of the weaving ocean: a direct confrontation with the marine imaginary therefore became inevitable. In the realisation of the choreography, in fact, great importance was given to the mirroring of seaside elements, such as seashells, the movements of the tides and that of the salty-breeze.

The work was later enriched by the cooperation of a female theatrical group working in the plural context of our regional territories: the collective of "Teatro della Sete".⁴ The actresses Caterina Di Fant and Valentina Rivelli helped the students in experimenting with new types of artistic expressions and movement 'forms' through the use of non-verbal communication channels, such as gaze, hand gestures and the ideas of 'theatrical presence and stasis'.

Walcottian episodes were thus transfigured 'into reality', in a sort of choreographical and dramaturgical homage to *Omeros* female world. A short film in the style of Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater*⁵ was produced in a coastal setting with the intention of evoking the Caribbean environment. The shooting of the video was made in Lignano Sabbiadoro, a seaside hotspot for young people and visiting foreigners. In order to help and guide the viewer's understanding, each dancing passage was first introduced by the reading of the related poetical episode.

⁴ The collective of *Teatro della Sete* is based in the city of Udine (Italy). For more information see: <http://www.teatrodellasete.com>

⁵ Pina Bausch (1940-2009) was a German performer of modern dance, choreographer and ballet director. With her unique style, a blend of movement, sound and voice, she became a leading influence in the field of modern dance from the 1970's on. She founded the company Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch (Germany).

In the first part of my dance representation there is the episode in which Walcott tries to pronounce the name of *Omeros* in the Greek language, thus evoking all those symbolic elements relating to the female Goddess of life (see part 2.1.):



Figure 1
The Goddess of life in my choregraphical interpretation of *Omeros*.

The choreography emphasises the figure of the oval “conch-shell’s invocation” (Walcott 1990 *Omeros*, iii, II, book 1) and the power of the word “*mer*” in the Antillean patois, which reminds us of the nuances of “both mother and sea”. The dancers are gathered together in a symbolic circle remembering that “cave-mouth” from which, in my interpretation, the figure of Helen arises. The movements of *fall-recovery*, typical of contemporary ballet, replicate the flow of the waves in a mirroring of the perpetual renewal of the sea waters.

The second part of the ballet is more narrative as it depicts the first appearance of Helen in a café in which the same character of Walcott remains astonished by her own beauty (see part 2.1)



Figure 2
The appearance of Helen in my choregraphical interpretation of *Omeros*.

In *Omeros* the ephemeral appearance of Helen is marked by a sense of ‘stasis’. Every single character stops “[...] in homage to a beauty that left, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake” (Walcott 1990, *Omeros*, iii, IV, book 1). The coming of the Goddess-like character produces a ‘mystical experience’ from the part of the participants to the event. There is a sense of energy and strength emanating from that powerful Archetypical Mother.

The last part of the choreography pays tribute to the unknown and forgotten figures of the black female workers that carried baskets of coal to European warships in silence (see part 2.1):



Figure 3
The Unknown Carriers in my choreographical interpretation of *Omeros*.

In this last part the dancers exploit the possibilities of the *contraction-release* movements, typical of contemporary dance, in order to portray the corporeal vitality and the moral dignity noticeable in the work of these unsung female “carriers”. As Warwick Walcott (1990) urged his son to “give those feet a voice”, in my own choreographical interpretation I have tried to free the physicality of the dancers’ bodies in order to represent the sacred energy sprouting from their choral dancing. My intention was to emulate that of a mystical dance through which “the worshippers of the ancient Goddess thought she had created the universe [...] moving rhythmically in circles and spirals thus organising the non yet formed matter (Mater)” (Riem 2007, p.16). Identifying themselves with those female figures helped the dancers to better understand the hidden and positive possibilities of their own physical and spiritual journeys.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper highlights how the poetry of Derek Walcott is capable of embracing - in its literary perspective - an aesthetic referring to the symbolic world of the feminine. Throughout the analysis I have pointed out how the author clearly rejects the fundamentals of a *dominant patriarchal society*. In tune with Eisler’s promotion of a *mutual community*, based on the respect and recognition of all its diversity and heterogeneity, Walcott dignifies the harsh reality besieging the lives of his fellow companions. In doing so, the author focuses his attention on the depiction of the feminine world. This is because Walcott does not only recognise the injustice coming from an indifferent attitude towards the prerogatives of women, but also, and more importantly, because he is aware of the female’s sacral energy and vitality. In *Omeros* the author urges his female characters to achieve recovery and regeneration from the region’s tormented colonial past and legacy. Moreover, the poem underscores how Walcott keeps on searching a re-connection with the power of the natural forces, because it is only through them than man can rebalance his ‘inner’ resentment and frustration. The powerful symbol of the ‘oval’ gathers and assembles the human richness of this multi-ethnic microcosm. As a shape the circle either

excludes or includes: in Walcott's reality the limits of that circle are not recognisable because in their extensions they are able to encompass the macrocosm of the universe.

In a world in which the power of the “creative and open dialogue” is at risk from the realisation of new walls and ‘boundaries’, the influence and the outcry of open-minded artists is needed even more. Derek Walcott's capability of merging in a unique ‘plural voice’ and different ‘types of expression’ determines an interesting and innovative approach to the complexity of today's interconnected reality. His own work encourages the actualisation of disparate interpretation of his verses: this is what I have tried to accomplish with the help and work of my female student dancers. The choreography, in fact, was the result of a plural and open dimension - an interpretation from a communal group. In this productive perspective I intend to conclude recalling an episode Pina Bausch used to take as an example to explain the valence of her dancing: finding herself once at the communal fire of a gypsy camp, the choreographer felt at once very uncomfortable when every single person around her started to dance. In many conferences and meetings she recalled how she felt ashamed and scared to participate in the ritual because she did not feel she was part of that group. It was only at that point that a young girl approached her and said: “Dance, dance Pina, otherwise we are lost”. It was the reassuring power of those words that made Pina finally dance not only for herself, but also for the community and for the universe surrounding her.



Figure 4
The final Choral Dance in my interpretation of *Omeros*.

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