Reimagined Historiographies on a Mnemonic Stage: Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours*

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Abstract: The essay contends that in the post-plantation context of the Caribbean, verse drama is endowed with a mnemonic function aimed at retrieving the voices silenced by centuries of colonialism and slavery. With *Drums and Colours*, written to celebrate the Independence of the Federation of the West Indies, Derek Walcott pens a drama encompassing the whole post-Columbian History of the Caribbean. Far from reactivating nationalistic patterns of dominant historiography, the play deploys forms of dramatic memory challenging past forgetfulness with the progressive futurity of ritual and collective remembering.

Résumé : Cet essai défend l'idée que, dans le contexte post-plantationnaire de la Caraïbe, le théâtre en vers acquiert une fonction mnémonique permettant de faire entendre les voix réduites au silence par des siècles de colonisation et d'esclavage. Dans *Drums and Colours,* pièce écrite à l'occasion des célébrations de l'Indépendance de la Fédération des Indes Occidentales, Derek Walcott embrasse toute l'Histoire des Caraïbes à partir de 1492. Il ne s'agit pas, tant s'en faut, de réactiver des gestes nationalistes et d'encourager une historiographie dominante, mais bien de déployer des formes de mémoire théâtrale à même de résister à l'oubli. Cette écriture en vers vise un avenir paradoxal et en chantier, dont la clé se trouve du côté d'un art collectif du ressouvenir.

Keywords: Walcott, Black Atlantic, postcolonial, decolonial, memory

Mots-clés : Walcott, Atlantique Noir, postcolonial, décolonial, mémoire

> Ce n'est pas, comme je l'ai longtemps avancé, l'effet d'une alternative sans fin entre la sincérité d'une parole à trouver et l'artifice d'une écriture exclusivement préoccupée de dresser ses remparts : c'est lié à la chose écrite elle-même, au projet de l'écriture comme au projet du souvenir. (Perec 62-63)

Decolonising the stage? The odd newness of verse

Often associated with an elitist European culture and the prevalence of written forms of literature rather than of performative and improvisational experiments, verse drama is actually fraught with emancipatory promises of political and social progress in the post-colonial world. Yeats's major contribution to the Celtic revival movement is a case-in-point. The Irish playwright's forays into a foundational drama for the independent nation have resonated outside Europe in the following decades, when decolonisation was both a political and a cultural concern. Such figures as Wole Soyinka in Nigeria, Athol Fugard in South Africa, Louis Esson and Jack Davis in Australia, Mohan Rakesh or Girish Karnad in India, have all associated freedom from the English yoke with renewed theatrical practices; but they have all included forms of epic, of poetry, and of mysticism (Carlson 46), in their respective experimentations. A marked return to ancient forms of drama, traceable both in extra-European and European cultures, has led them to including verse in their textual creations.

The fact that a large number of these postcolonial playwrights should have resorted to verse drama, as did Derek Walcott in the Caribbean, seems paradoxical at a time when agendas were focused on inventing new cultural forms for the independences. As a point of fact, "[m]any of the performance traditions outside the Western norms did not place the literary text at the centre of their experience" (Carlson 93). Part of the present endeavour is to formulate hypotheses around the fact but also the modalities of such a choice. This first

section lays the foundations of a tension between notions of the old and the new, and of the ways in which they might be reshuffled into a non-linear temporality which makes verse drama both an outdated form, and a promise of newness.

One lens through which to examine the re-emergence of verse drama in a postcolonial context is presented by Eugenio Barba's "theatre of roots", where modernity encounters tradition through the spatio-temporal distortions induced by colonialism. The linearity promoted by European reason has long hidden the accidents of cultural encounters but the latter have been exposed by such studies as Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*[1] and Appadurai's work on *scapes* and the ruptures of globalism (32 *seq*.). Verse could be associated with the civilising mission which the colonial propaganda, promoting the Bible and canonical English poetry, imposed – but from a non-Eurocentric point of view verse drama had appeared in a number of places, at a number of times and eras, without corresponding to any sort of (retrospective) teleology. A dialectic form pulled apart between the old and the new, Barba's theatre of roots "represents the force which causes us to change our horizons precisely because it roots us to a center" (Barba 128). The concept could usefully map out Derek Walcott's own dialectical relation to tradition and invention in the Caribbean and Walcott did comment on the importance of the art of Jerzy Grotowski,[2] whose *Towards a Poor Theatre* was not published before 1968 but who was already one of the key names in Western theatre in the late 1950s, when *Drums and Colours* was written and first performed. However, the comparison is bound to be limited by the distinct distrust which Barba had inherited from his collaborator and mentor, Grotowski, towards drama written by a single author. The "theatre of roots" inherently promotes non-text-based drama, or textual montage (Schechner 12-13).

Another option would be not to scale down the European element in verse drama and to see it instead as an element of creolisation among many others, in the context of the Black Atlantic negotiations of diverse literary and linguistic elements. Indeed, the specificities of

Caribbean cultural forms, be they colonial, postcolonial or decolonial, include the almost complete disappearance of pre-Columbian cultural forms[3] and a resulting combination between African, European, and South East Asian languages and practices. This does not mean a lesser resistance to colonial forms of oppression, as pinpointed by Mignolo:

> one crucial difference between decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century and the same phenomenon in the Americas, but called instead "revolutions" and "independences", is that in Asia and Africa the natives or indigenous were the ones who fought and managed to build their own nation-states. In the Americas, instead and with the exception of Haiti, all the revolutions and independences were in the hands of people of European descent (Creoles rather than Natives or Indigenous). (Mignolo 231)

The emphasis in *Drums and Colours* on subaltern European characters (Spanish sailors and women, a Jew fleeing the Inquisition, Pauline Leclerc and Madame de Rouvray, whose gendered submission echoes and re-casts the racial one endured by Haitian slaves and rebels) would corroborate such creolised take on the History of the Caribbean and account for Walcott's borrowings from "high" forms of European culture, including the iambic pentameter. This creolisation is visible for example in a cue where Pauline mentions her having "toured the compounds" and tells Calixte-Breda: "So if I reek a little of the *parfum d'Afrique*" (*DC* 221).[4] What starts like an iambic pentameter becomes, as soon as English turns into French, an alexandrine, while the internal rhyme (reek / *Afrique*) contributes to welding the two parts of the line, the English and the French prosodies, together.

I do not contend that either hypothesis is misleading but will pursue a less explored and somewhat less obvious line of investigation. Building upon Lars Eckstein's work on the re-membering of a lost past in the Black Atlantic, this essay will connect verse drama and memory. Such, after all, has often been put forward by critics as the obvious origin of verse: the necessity to commit a text to memory was bound to be favoured by repetitions, rhymes, and a regular metrical pattern. The contention behind Eckstein's book (concerned with the literary oeuvre of Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Toni Morrison)

is that literature does remember and allows us, readers and spectators, to remember as well – especially when, as is the case for descendants of deported Africans and East Indians, no archival documents are there to bear witness to the past. The works of the writerly and readerly imagination then take over the voids of historiography. In *Drums and Colours*, memorisation is at stake on two grounds: a literal one (whereby the human mind is required to commit a text to memory) and a figurative one (through which figures and facts erased from a Eurocentric historiography can be excavated).

At the moment when the West Indies declare themselves independent they also reclaim their right to a site of anamnesis, or "rememory" to borrow Toni Morrison's phrase (43). The necessity to create sites of togetherness beyond the trauma of four centuries of oppression, domination and, in most cases, enslavement, meant that drama was going to be foregrounded. Derek Walcott, who identified Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Whitman as his literary mentors, was well aware of the necessity to open new forays into the practice of performative textualities when it came to founding a national, or regional, literature. In terms of genre, as is the case with the Martiniquan Aimé Césaire, one notices in his production a clear prevalence of poetry and drama, and of poetic drama; he also wrote essays but never any fiction. One reason might have to do with the possibilities of reception on an island where people's ears are much more educated than their eyes and where culture survived orally despite the century-long ban on writing, reading, and literacy, for the enslaved. Another reason might derive from the prestige of poetic drama in terms of nation-building, and with its connection with the epic. These agendas are both fed by the ambition to invent a regional (or national) tradition.

Although I would like mostly to discuss *Drums and Colours* I will actually begin with a short discussion of another, later play, entitled *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (first performed 1983, published 1985), where verse is deployed in opposition to prose in a true Elizabethan fashion. The plot hinges on a troupe of actors who, in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, are rehearsing *Antony and Cleopatra*: a play about the 'Oriental' other, also cast as the African, or the gypsy, as she was de-

scribed in Shakespeare (for an excellent overview of these stereotypical representations, see Ania Loomba's Norton edition). In this respect, Walcott's play can be seen as a postcolonial re-writing aligned with Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969), where the Shakespearian verse drama corresponds to the hegemonic take on a difference construed by the West and whose constructedness can only be resisted from within, including formally.

Walcott's play is both writing back and with *Antony and Cleopatra*. *A Branch of the Blue Nile* displays the ambivalence about Europe which tore the playwright ever since his early poem entitled "A Far Cry from Africa" (*CP* 17-18). Chris, one of the actors, exclaims in exasperation:

> You know I taught English as an ass, as an ass, an assistant master, with jacket and tie in them hot rooms? You know I did French? You know what they call this in Racine, Gavin? A *tirade*! *Tirade*! Well, I got focking tired of all them Racinian and Corneillian tirades, when I would look outside over the boys' heads and see the hot sun, the glare, the dust, the traffic, the trees half dead with dust. (*BBN* 246-247)

The mention of Racinian and Corneillian tirades can function as an allusion to the plays which famously epitomised the rivalry between the two playwrights who brought seventeenth-century tragedy in French to perfection: Corneille's *Titus and Berenice* and Racine's *Berenice* (both first performed within a week's time in November 1670). The body of verse drama attached to the impossible marriage between a Roman conqueror and an Oriental queen addresses questions of political domination and cultural stereotypes not at all unlike those staged in *Antony and Cleopatra*, all of which echo Walcott's own reflection around the Haitian Revolution – which gets the lion's share of History re-writing in *Drums and Colours*.

The director of *A Branch of the Blue Nile* mocks those European conventions and constraints which were contemporary to the beginnings of English colonisation. On the other hand, he imbues some of Shakespeare's quotes with a new life, replacing the lines of low characters with a Trinidadian dialect and attitude of pride and carelessness, of protest and pretence. While Shakespeare's clown says, in prose,

"Truly I have him; but I would not be the party that should desire you to touch him, for his biting is immortal. Those that do die of it do seldom or never recover" (5.2.111), his Walcottian counterpart expresses the same ideas in the Trinidadian dialect which corresponds to the "low" characters of Shakespeare's subplots: "Madam, I have him, but 'tain't go be me who go ask you handle him, because one nip from this small fellow and Basil your husband; this little person will make the marriage, in poison and in person, but the brides who go to that bed don't ever get up" (*BBN* 262). As the director explains himself, "since in old Willy's day the clowns spoke dialect, and since our dialect is so Jacobean, I felt quite justified" (*BBN* 268). I shall return to this perceived proximity between the Bard's language and the West Indian idiolect but would like to insist here that the verse remains, in Walcott's play, under the authority and authorship of the English canon; only the prose parts are rewritten. A tension emerges between the original version and the Caribbean re-writing, in an apparently clear case of the periphery writing back to the centre, righting its own past, in an unapologetically antagonistic fashion but from the marginal position of prose, not verse.

Verse versus nationalism

Due to its circumstantial programming during the festivities of Independence, *Drums and Colours* corresponds to a political agenda of nation-building. The play was commissioned and staged on the occasion of the creation of the Federation of the West Indies (1958-1962) – a short-lived nation, although no one knew it at the time, and while there was an immense hope in the capacity of the two larger islands, Jamaica and Trinidad, to integrate the smaller islands into an Anglophone Caribbean state. The play was performed as an official event during the inauguration. The question of nation-building became prominent after WWII and *Drums and Colours* was indeed tasked with initiating a national literary tradition, a cultural landmark. Its versified form would then recall the epic thrust of a Homer, a Virgil, a Chaucer, and a Whitman, in establishing a liter-

ary precedent which would be both prestigious and memorable, in all senses of the term. Seen in this light, Walcott's own attempt at historiography would appear as compromised with a repetition of a European gesture of foundational poetry. I contend in this section that the choice of verse drama corresponds instead to a radically anti-realistic, anti-naturalistic manoeuvre.

The play was first performed with more than a hundred actors, most of them unprofessional. This device reactivated the Greek sense that drama is an essentially collective art, gathering the city on stage in a performative art of togetherness. The play starts with Trinidadians wishing to put together a pageant for Carnival, so that what unfolds throughout seventeen scenes, an epilogue and a prologue, is an imaginative representation of the History of the Caribbean told by them: a play-within-the-play of 'Mas' (or Carnival). There is a number of Brechtian *tableaux* through which the drama gleans key moments: the first colonial encounters with the pre-Columbian population, the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Haitian Revolution, the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865, in Jamaica, amidst a flurry of subplots staging maroon slaves in the island hills, or *mornes*.

Clearly, the attempt was to reclaim one's own past and to decolonise historiography. As Frantz Fanon pointed out, the hold of Empire is discursively retroactive: "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon 210). A few years later, Chatterjee deconstructed the double movement of European nation-building, and its confiscation of such tenets (self-rule, modernity, secularity), in front of cultures construed as "other":

> Nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonised people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernise' itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political

> domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based. (30)

Neil Lazarus's landmark study, entitled *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), actually argued that a large number of post-colonial states did nothing but mimic this nationalistic discourse. A side-line of Lazarus's argument is that the imposed model of the West thwarted such collective political moments as the Bandung conference, producing an urge towards nationalism in the newly built nations. Seen in this light, verse drama might be seen as a distance taken from the colonial propaganda, its apparent realism, its discourse of seeming rationality – all of these being preferably translated through prose. I wish to suggest that in *Drums and Colours*, verse corresponds to a veering away from the pitfalls of nationalistic enterprises and their realistic illusion. Watching *Drums and Colours* throws the reader / spectator into a vortex of formal combinations and possible interpretations which recall / re-member but also redirect the historical episode of the Haitian revolution, the representation of which constitutes the most important part of Walcott's own play.

In ways that echo James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, where Richard is dead when the play opens but performs moments of his life throughout the action in moments of showing, not telling, *Drums and Colours* instantiates the destiny of characters whom we know are dead. This is made possible through other characters' evoking and convoking them: the actors become figures both of the playwright, and of the audience, and all join in a space of unforgetting which abolishes the fourth wall. In the same ways in which Richard appears in flesh and blood on Baldwin's stage, the mnemonic strategies deployed in *Drums and Colours*, through sonorities, orality, the presence of the chorus, contribute to the excavating of historical moments which had been left out of, or minimised in, the master narratives of colonial Caribbean History.

Drums and Colours allows silenced voices to emerge again through the incantation of verse. In the prologue, the chorus convokes Spanish sailors who, "fished from a drowned age, / Were simple men, obscure, anonymous" (123). This comes as the second part of a quatrain (ABAB)

where "age" rhymes with "stages" and "anonymous" with "course": the retrieving of these ghostly presences goes hand in hand with the progress of a dramaturgical action. In this sense, the play is mnemonic and convokes a History of the Caribbean which runs against the grain of a Eurocentric modernity based upon power relations. Such reversal is also at play in this quote:

> The fire's shadows, magnified into myth, were those of the Jacobins of Haiti. They were Jacobean too because they flared from a mind drenched in Elizabethan literature out of the same darkness as Webster's Flamineo, from a flickering world of mutilation and heresy. (Walcott 1998: 11)

The process of national unification, the Saint Lucian playwright's desire to initiate a literature for his people, are operated through a time of carnival. Such literally "preposterous" (or non-chronological) periodicities were outlined by another Caribbean author, David Dabydeen, when he discovered English alliterative poetry:

> Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was a startling moment. The sheer naked energy and brutality of the language, its 'thew & sinew', reminded me immediately of the Creole of my childhood. John of Trevisa, a fourteenth-century translator, described the alliterative poetry of the North of England as 'harsh, piercing and formless.' This quality of lawlessness and the primarily oral form of delivery bore a curious resemblance to Guyanese Creole. I began to see, albeit naively, the ancient divide between north and south in Britain, the Gawain poet standing in opposition to Chaucer in terms of a native idiom versus an educated, relaxed poetic line tending towards the form of the iambic pentameter. The north / south divide is of course evocative of the divide between the so-called Caribbean periphery and the metropolitan centre of London. (4)

For Dabydeen and Walcott, there is no perceived abnormality of verse. The natural tone of any regional brand of English will produce its own poetry, be it through the resistance of meters or the insistence of sounds. Derek Walcott has often contended that the diction of verse was spontaneous in the Caribbean – and *Omeros* (1991) would prove him right. What has been hailed as a *tour de force* has also been described by its author as a transcription of the Saint Lucian idiolect in its most congenial form: the rhymed hexameter. In an interview

he gave at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in 2006, Walcott explained how "A lot of the Caribbean Englishes are basically Elizabethan" (Dvorák 105).[5] The mnemonic function of verse is therefore poised between Europeanness and Caribbeanness, not geared towards the fixity of an identity but on the contrary towards a process, which turns nation-building into something to experiment with and destabilise as one goes, performance after performance. The line break can be read as a rupture, a diversion from Europeanness, but also as a breath ensuring the return of the same, one line down.

Turning back: verse as re-membering

In my analysis of *Drums and Colours* I would like to "detour" through a possibly outdated dimension of the performativity of literature, that is to say, its ability to remember. It is no secret that verse finds its roots in orality and the need to commit stories to memory. Such a function takes on a distinctive meaning when deployed in islands where the long-standing and protracted up-rootedness provoked by the Middle Passage has all but erased personal and collective memory. Orality looms large in post-plantation cultures, and rhythm has been seen by critics as one of the ruling and overarching patterns in the Caribbean. Thus, the notions of entropy and of the machine have yielded together, in Benítez-Rojo's landmark *The Repeating Island*, to the idea of polyrhythm. This entry into verse, and into memorisation, is visible in the Allegory of Memory convoked at the very beginning of *Drums and Colours*, in the prologue:

> Before our actors praise his triumph, Time
> Shows his twin faces, farce and tragedy;
> Before they march with drums and colours by
> He sends me, his mace bearer, Memory. (*DC* 122)

The rhyming of tragedy with memory might not be as significant as the fact that the first and third lines are regular iambic pentameters while lines two and four are metrically irregular. Their piling up of monosyllables call for a different diction, and call attention to the final dactyl, a meter retrieved from Ancient Greece. Here, Walcott

goes beyond the epitome of regularity in English verse to invent a new, more elemental, prosody. This was expressed by Césaire's own rejection of formal conventions in the name of authenticity:

> Lire les poètes martiniquais, c'était comme compter sur vos doigts jusqu'à douze, et vous obteniez un alexandrin. Ils écrivaient des choses charmantes, qu'on appelle le *doudouisme*. Le surréalisme manifestait justement un refus de cette littérature. Ce mouvement nous intéressait, parce qu'il nous permettait de rompre avec la raison, avec la civilisation artificielle, et de faire appel aux forces profondes de l'homme. (27)

The conventions of verse drama are not only Shakespearian, they take us back to far earlier, to the Trojan cycle whose stories gave birth to Greek drama, centuries after Homer, who had already started dramatising his own epic material. Let us compare for instance scenes 1 and 2 in *Drums and Colours*.

> COLUMBUS *(Rises, distracted)*
> Oh, all the cruel patience of the long years,
> The fawning humiliation before great princes,
> The fears and terrors of the whale-threshed seas
> Broke through my cloud now, with his cry of light! (144-145)
>
> JEW *(Apart, praying)*
> O God, rib me with Thy strength
> As I embark across the whale-threshed water,
> Because my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle
> And are spent without hope. (155)

The lines rely on formulaic set phrases which are strikingly reminiscent of Homer's own verse, and tie in with the intertextual dimension of mnemonic literature which Eckstein deemed central (43) in his discussion of re-membering across the Black Atlantic.[6] The fact that the low and the powerful, the haves and the have-nots, the dominated and the dominating, Columbus and the Jew, should express the same whale / wail, speaks volumes about the collective dimension of the undertaken process of remembering. What is left for the community to hold as a common denominator is a sea, the very symbol of change and the flimsiness of human fate.

The sea becomes a stage for the drama to unfold, or be unremembered, in a number of passages, starting with this monologue uttered by Columbus:

> I had hoped to open the green page of this sea
> To be a book cartographers could read,
> Let me be buried in the backwash of oblivion,
> My bones unmarked, my grave a mystery
> And some unlettered seastone be my tomb (145)

One seems to be taking things the wrong way around here, since literature is remembered more than it remembers.

While postcolonial theory attached itself to undermining the representations of the Other as an other, recent decolonial thought has concluded that any type of representation was doomed to be biased, and borrowed. Instead, the concept of enunciation has been favoured by such critics as Walter Mignolo in order to elaborate the means of language production which would be fully disengaged from power relations. A full-fledged adaptation of such a distinction still needs to be produced around issues of performance and drama but I would suggest here that the language of the stage is much closer to the 'enunciation' gesture, since the playwright's voice is never to be heard as such.

A form of collective enunciation is operated in the play, as when Yette works against the grain of the Afrocentric conception of creolisation which prevailed immediately after the independence of Caribbean islands, and recalls that the ethnic spectre is much wider:

> Mano! Is Yette. I bring you more recruits. We got a Chinese cook, an East Indian tactician; now we have a preacher and a ruined planter. Attention, recruits. In about five minutes, if the Maroon commander like you, you might promote to the rank of generals, for that's the way things devise here, equal powers. (*Mano and the others emerge*) Your commander, Emmanuel Mano, sometimes known as Cudjoe, sometimes John Orr, sometimes Fedon, and various multicoloured aliases. They call he Calico; all he have left in his name is an antique Spanish coin that ain't worth much. And you there, put down the breadfruit and salute. (266-7)

The quote belongs to the "low" characters, the maroon slaves, and is therefore written in prose. However, both a rhyming and a metrical pattern appears in the musicality of Yette's speech. The rhythm is clearly iambic, with entire phrases scanned as half-pentameters ("I bring you more recruits", "We got a Chinese cook", "They call he Calico") or even entire pentameters ("an antique Spanish coin that ain't worth much", "And you there, put down the breadfruit and salute"). The sounds of the quote allow a number of internal rhymes to create a sense of echo in the passage ("preacher" / "planter"; "generals" / "powers"; "breadfruit" / "salute"). This act of remembering is no longer isolated or private. It becomes collective and ritualistic. What is remembered? The fact that descendants of African slaves do not constitute the entire Caribbean.

In *Drums and Colours*, Walcott proved to be visionary; like Wilson Harris, the Guyanese, although with very different aesthetics, the playwright suggests that the Caribbean is a truly global laboratory where Amerindians, Europeans (including Jews, often fleeing the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition), Africans, Asians, have formed a population and a culture. None of this means that there is a necessary consensus, quite the contrary – dissensus traverses the play. The language coined by Walcott here circulates, his lines are shared, in communal and formulaic blocks of textuality. I will now sketch some thoughts about how the play actually turns its back on all historiographies in order to sketch the future of the region, as a space, a stage, a time and a landscape.

Shaping the future: the invocations of verse

I would like here to go back to the question which Fanon's previously quoted observation poses. What is the nature of his "profound research" which drives the new forms of visual and cinematic representation? Is it only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite different practice entailed - not the

rediscovery but the *production* of identity; not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past?

As previously suggested, verse drama inevitably connotes a return to previous forms and texts, to a certain tradition of Anglophone theatre which goes back to Shakespeare at least. In other words, it is bound to be posited as a sign of, and gesture towards, European modernity. I will contend in this last section that the form of verse drama also shapes a future for the Caribbean, in *Drums and Colours*. This sense of futurity functions in the play as a line of flight in relation to entrenched linearities. This is operated in two different ways at least. The first one has to do with what Lars Eckstein calls "multi-directional memory"; the other one, with what Gilbert and Tompkins have written about, namely "metamorphic bodies" (231-217).

In this last part of the argumentation I would like to insist first upon the protracted and fragmented structure of the play *Drums and Colours*. The playwright indicates this himself in his initial note to the published version:

> The play, fully performed, runs well over three hours; however, the scenes are so arranged that interested producers can excise shorter, self-contained plays from the main work, for example, the story of Paco, the El Dorado theme in the Raleigh scenes, the betrayal of Toussaint, the relationships with M. Calixte-Breda (in which the young Anton becomes the central figure), and the escapades of Pompey. (113)

Although this is not at all unusual on stage – how many spectators, for instance, have seen a full production of *Hamlet*? – I would suggest that it comes at cross-purposes with the very idea of rewriting History. In the nineteenth-century European tradition of national and nationalistic History-telling which largely derived from Hegelian thinking, linearity was required. It warranted consistency, rationality, and provided hints of teleology into the bargain. The fragmentation that Derek Walcott premises and promises corresponds instead to a choice of multi-directional memory whereby some episodes can be discarded without imperilling the overall structure and purpose. By openly addressing the unstable duration of plays, the author engages

with rhythmical effects that can be compared to how a line, in a poem or a play, invites either protraction and deferral, or precipitation and curtailing.

The other point I want to make about the futurities actually projected in *Drums and Colours* functions through the mutability of the characters on the stage. Far from characterising the historical figures, the playwright toys with a wide range of blurring strategies. One of them is the recourse to the trickster figure, a ubiquitous device in Caribbean cultures at the crossroads between the European carnivalesque and the West African Ananse / Anancy. It is precisely this figure, this 'empty' value which can mutate and morph, which Gilbert and Tompkins use as the paradigm of bodily mutability and character metamorphosis:

> Shape-shifting, unbounded, timeless, and indestructible, the trickster is an ideal character through which to present the theatricalised body of the post-colonial subject. In performance, trickster transformations often structure the renewal of both the fictional community, and, potentially, the audience. Moreover, such transformations challenge conventional paradigms of spectatorship as the appearing and disappearing trickster traverses the stage, occupying all areas physically and psychically, in order to elude visual reification. (235)

What is engineered here is a recreation of something lost, not the period before the Middle Passage, but the round but open shape of the barrack-yard, where people would gather in the evening in order to tell, and listen to, stories. In this respect, verse operates like a physical space of togetherness which ruptures linearity, a visible shape of the community gathered not in the round, trapped as in a hold, but in a baroque fold where a nation, or nations, could indeed be born and endlessly reinvented.

As a form, verse drama takes us away from nostalgia and closer to futurity. What Lars Eckstein allows us to hear is the repetition heard in '*re*membering', a repetition of something which never happened. In fact, the Atlantic Slave Trade is the epitome of the event which cannot be remembered: slaves lost their names because they were considered

"things" or property; they were chosen young so that they might work better and longer; they were snatched from areas where social turmoil was prevailing; they were bought by masters keen on not gathering slaves from the same region, speaking the same language, belonging to the same religion. Families were torn apart, social ties were frowned upon, and few archives were constituted, in other words everything was done for forgetfulness to rule.

The form of verse drama may be the most extreme site of ambiguity, as it necessarily conjures the Shakespearian tradition, and as it constitutes a form of collective remembering; it asserts and subverts legacy at once. We should not underestimate the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this dialectical conception of a rediscovered, existential identity entails. Hidden histories have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time - feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist, and the historiography offered up by Derek Walcott gleans such micro-histories. The European archetype of selfhood is, I argue, radically shunned in favour of a collective agency within the expanding and fluctuating Caribbean spaces described in *Drums and Colours*. Any historiographic essentialism is re-cast by the postcolonial and the transcultural, replacing being with becoming and enunciating the ethical mandate of decolonial playwrights. In *Drums and Colours*, Derek Walcott disposes of the realistic conventions which were still largely attached to the Anglophone stage at a date when the likes of Samuel Beckett were only starting to hack at the mid-century "well-made-play." This ought not to be relegated to a subversive writing back of "prosaic" colonial narratives but must be connected also to the ethical predicament of the slave-master dialectics which was going to be recast by Homi Bhabha's theories. This reversibility bears the future of any literary form: "We talking Shakespeare like 'rangatang' people... And vice versa" (*BBN* 244).

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1 See "Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense", 175-198.

2 See "The tradition that is very strong in the theater gets its vitality not from the finish and reality of Realism, it gets it out of another source: a primal source. And a lot of Western directors return to that source, people like Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski, they go back to that power of narration that is there in the

presence of the storyteller or the story being told by the dance and the bodies and the music that's happening. The theater that is poor has a greater chance of being imaginative than the theater that is rich." (Walcott 1996: 276-277).

3 "The invasion of Europeans in the Americas resulted in a massive genocide of the indigenous population, leading to a decline from 54 million people in the Americas in 1492 to approximately 6 million in 1650, a result of murder, enslavement, famine, and disease" (Yusoff 31).

4 *Drums and Colours* will hereafter be abbreviated as *DC*; *A Branch of the Blue Nile* as *BBN*; *Collected Poems* as *CP*.

5 He made this comment about his own translation of a passage in Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, "Au bout du petit matin", translated by him as "Fore day morning."

6 For the echoes of Homer, see Wallart.