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A Song from the Depths of the Sea: Eco-epic Textures in Romare Bearden and Derek Walcott

Abstract:

An eco-critical analysis of Romare Bearden's *The Sea Nymph* (1977) and Derek Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" (1979) not only reveals new interpretive possibilities for Caribbean literature, but also demonstrates the centrality of nature in Afro-diasporic historical imaginary. This article argues that epic invocations of the Caribbean Sea in both works deconstruct the nature/culture binary by foregrounding a notion of diasporic environment as a text creatively rewriting Black Atlantic histories. To examine textual effects of the Caribbean Sea in Bearden and Walcott, I elaborate a notion of an "eco-epic texture," a mode of literary figuration that highlights entanglements of history, nature, and literature in processes of diasporic life-making. These textures, I argue, engender a cultural and political imaginary where affirmations of belonging give onto a critique of historical determinism and political ontology.

Keywords: Eco-epic, Derek Walcott, Romare Bearden, Diaspora, Sea

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Art will go where the energy is.
I expect a convincing outpouring of creative energy
from lands touched by the Caribbean Sea.
Romare Bearden "Clouds in the Living Room" (1985)

At last, islands not written about but writing themselves.
Derek Walcott "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" (1992)

Derek Walcott's enthusiastic reception of Romare Bearden's *The Sea Nymph*—a collage from the 1977 Black Odysseus series and cover art of Walcott's *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979)—evokes the poet's own commitment to an epic articulation of Caribbean cultural identity. "[T]he grandeur of some of those 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' cutouts!" Walcott marvels,

> Because the *brilliance* of making black silhouettes, right? which come out of Greek vase silhouettes, but are black … and to make that silhouette alive in terms of the Caribbean. … Because that Odysseus figure going down … that's a *Caribbean* guy diving, you know? … The breadth of it is staggering, because the color of that green is *exactly* what you get when you go down. I was there [diving in the sea] this morning. (qtd. in Price & Price 95; original ellipsis, emphasis, and commentary)

In his reading of the collage, Walcott not only points to the ways in which Bearden's work displaces Western literary imaginary from its origins in the Mediterranean and situates it within the context of the Caribbean archipelago and the Black Atlantic; he also foregrounds the interpenetration of Caribbean environment and art, a texture of the literal and the figurative. Diving *there* in the Caribbean Sea upsets the representational relationship this activity at first appears to establish between the blue sea in the painting and the blue sea in the world. In fact, for a moment it is unclear precisely where the poet found himself immersed that morning. And while the deictic *there* in Walcott's commentary is corralled by the interviewers' editorial intervention hooking the word to its material location, the ambiguity of the word persists, as the adverb cannot entirely disavow that moment of crossing between the green of Bearden's collage and the green of the Caribbean Sea, which equivocally entangles aesthetics and materiality.

Walcott's elated response to *The Sea Nymph* reflects the poet's own approach to the Caribbean environment in aesthetic terms. In fact, a poetic engagement with the natural world of the archipelago lies at the heart of Walcott's own philosophy of poetry. Critic John Thieme recalls that "[Walcott] and Dunstan St. Omer [St. Lucian painter and Walcott's friend] took a vow that they would not leave St. Lucia until they had 'put down' its neglected natural history 'in paint, in words' and, in a 1989 interview, Walcott spoke about his attempt to recapture the particular 'tactile' quality of specific St. Lucian trees and plants on the printed page" (8). This commitment to give the

natural world space in poetry and art illuminates why Walcott would take to Bearden's work with such exhilaration: for him, *The Sea Nymph* must have captured something of the Caribbean Sea's tactile quality, vividly evoking a simultaneously corporeal and aesthetic experience. But if the mimetic relationship traditionally organizing depictions of the natural environment in literature and art assumes the object and the act of representation to be separate, what are we to make of the impossibility of satisfactorily disentangling the material from the figural, as subtly suggested by the ambiguity of the adverb *there*?

This problem of exactly how to understand the relationship between the act of literary or visual representation and the represented objet is further probed by Walcott in an interview recorded in 1979. Registering his impatience with the paltriness of what he calls "postcard poetry" of early St. Lucian writing, Walcott suggests that what he is after is a kind of writing that disturbs the traditional economy of representation:

> There were so many *easy references* to bright blue seas, so many colorful depictions of peasant life. […] West Indian verse seemed to have more of the flavor of a library than the most metropolitan verse not at all related to the Caribbean experience; and naturally I went in the direction in which the language was most vigorous and alive. I had to impose on myself the severe discipline of making sure that what I was doing was difficult; it was not willful obscurity. (283; added emphasis)

In contrast to "easy references" evoking simple realism that takes the environment as a knowable object, Walcott wants to mobilize poetic expression not merely to convey difficulty for difficulty's sake, but to grasp something of a difficulty inhering in the Caribbean experience itself. And what is crucial about Walcott's understanding of the relationship between poetic language and this experience (involving culture as much as the environment) is his intuition that it is the poetic language that can convey the Caribbean's difficulty, or perhaps that this difficult archipelago elicits a poetic, and not, for instance, ethnographic, articulation. For him, it is the entanglement of the poetic and the material that generates cultural and historical meanings of the archipelago.

This juxtaposition of Walcott's reading of *The Sea Nymph* with the poet's own reflections about the relationship between poetry and the natural environment sets the stage for the central question of this essay: What difference does a touch of the Caribbean Sea make for diasporic cultural representation, historical identity, and literary genealogy? Indeed, many scholars have extensively theorized the philosophical, political, and aesthetic repercussions of the Black Atlantic. For Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic deconstructs the inherited habits of dualistic thinking: it functions as a "non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, an asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding" (198). Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley retrieves from the Atlantic abyss a queer archive "where [...] currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together to transform

racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves […] reflect[ing] the materiality of black queer experience while refusing its transparency" (192-193). And Elizabeth DeLoughrey foregrounds traumatic burdens of the Middle Passage to reflect on "how Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present" (704). My essay likewise insists on the necessity of thinking through the opaque, unequivocal, and decentering currents of the Black Atlantic. But taking cue from the epigraphs anchoring this essay, I want to argue that the ecological materiality of the Caribbean Sea likewise transforms our understanding of aesthetic, cultural, and political representation. The grammatical shift in Walcott's comment on the textual activity of the archipelago—islands writing themselves—seems slight, but its consequences are substantial. For if the natural environment of the Caribbean is envisioned as a text actively engaging in its own representation—writing itself rather than being written about—then what is at stake is nothing else than the relationship between nature and culture, and the whole problematic of knowledge, ontology, and historical change that follows from it.

In what follows, I examine how *The Sea Nymph* and Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" rewrite the epic motif of home-leaving and home-coming to highlight the textual activity of the Caribbean Sea. Reflecting on the problem of Afro-diasporic collective identity in relation to the epic, these works, I propose, not only testify to diasporic resilience, dignity, and imagination, but also dramatize the creativity of the Caribbean Sea to offer an account of history and politics constitutively entangled with and transformed by nature. In the first part of the essay, I show how Bearden's environmental vision of Afro-diasporic continuity and re-creation transforms notions of identity, cultural authenticity, and literary genealogy. In the second part, I focus on how "The Schooner *Flight,*" departing from the notion of nature as re-creative, engages the Caribbean Sea as riven with displacements, losses, and memories of dispossession. In demonstrating how for Walcott, diasporic turbulences disturb rather than consolidate political community in the post-independence Caribbean, I suggest that re-formulating Caribbean materiality in terms of scatter will allows us to honor diasporic affirmations of belonging while eschewing the idea of a fixed, timeless ontological ground of identity.

In my readings of *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*," I elaborate the notion of an "eco-epic texture," which foregrounds those figurations where nature complicates historical imaginary. As an inextricable entanglement of the natural, the literary, and the historical, texture invokes Walcott's interest in capturing the tactile quality of the environment of the page. But the word compels me for another reason as well. Texture conveys meanings of weaving, of making, of a temporal process by way of which it broaches the notion of firm ontological grounds taken to stabilize and render legible cultural and political identities. How then do diasporic lives materialize on such shaky foundations?

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1. A Black Atlantic Odyssey

Walcott's appreciation for *The Sea Nymph* as a Caribbean collage reflects the significance of the Caribbean as a central inspiration animating Bearden's work in the 70s and 80s. Critics have pointed out that in the last two decades of his life, Bearden's work is marked by a shift in technique, subject, and color. Art critic and curator Lowery Sims observes that "Bearden's work began to take on a particularly lush quality. He used sumptuous shades of blue and green to present the dense vegetation of the Caribbean. Now Bearden's work was literally awash with the turquoise blues and lapis tones of the Caribbean" (qtd. in Price & Price 92). Other characteristics of Bearden's work in the 70s and 80s include his increased use of watercolor, and manifest interest in exploring the meaning of seascapes in Afro-diasporic cultural and historical imaginary. [1]

This artistic preoccupation with the Caribbean indicates that the archipelago's tropical settings become as crucial for an articulation of Black identity as the urban scenes of Bearden's Harlem collages or the southern rural spaces in the Mecklenburg series. Beyond this centrality of the Caribbean for Afro-diasporic artistic expression, however, *The Sea Nymph*—a Caribbean translation of the Greek epic—compels a radical rethinking of cultural foundations. In approaching the Atlantic abyss as a stage for a founding performance of historical memory, Bearden places the Caribbean at the center of a reflection about Afro-diasporic ontology; and his rewriting of a Western epic as a diasporic narrative unsettles a binary, oppositional alignment of cultural difference, drastically changing the ways in which diasporic and European identities have been conceptualized.

In the Black Odysseus series, Bearden claims the *Odyssey* as a universal narrative of human ingenuity, resilience, and survival to reflect on the continuities and discontinuities of Black Atlantic historical formations. One of the twenty collages comprising his visual revision of Homer, *The Sea Nymph* renders a scene in Book V where a drowning Odysseus is saved by goddess Ino, who pulls him out of the ocean depths with her veil of immortality. Situated in the Black Atlantic historical imaginary, this scene in particular engenders an Afro-diasporic collective memory of death and endurance, "a theft of the [black] body" (Spillers 67) and its startling "will to survive" (75). For a number of critics, then, Bearden's Black Odysseus is significant both in hemispheric American terms, as a narrative of life in the wake of colonial dispossession characterizing the "New World," and as a dramatization of Afro-American experience in the U.S.—an invocation of the 20th century Great Migration out of the South, or a visual representation of jazz composition, a style characteristic of Bearden's collages in general. [2] The significance of Bearden's accomplishment in the Black Odysseus series was best captured by Ralph Ellison who argued that the triumph of Bearden's art in general lies in the artist's ability "to express the tragic predicament

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of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world" (227).

However, in concretizing diasporic human drama, *The Sea Nymph* likewise draws attention to the activity of underwater life. With the two black silhouettes aligned off-center, the right-hand side of the collage is occupied by the tumultuous waves of the sea, tangled sea plants, and high wave crests, whose supple shapes resonate with Ino's veil. While in the Greek version, Ino's life-sustaining veil acts against the raging sea, in Bearden's retelling the waves beat against the vessel and abet the transmutation of death into life. In this way, both the veil and the sea plants enwrap Odysseus—in the collage he is holding onto seaweed as he is extending his other hand toward Ino who is holding the veil in her hand—forming around him umbilical lifelines and delivering him into the future. This scene, then, is much more than a story of surviving the storm, of living through the Middle Passage; rather it narrates a new kind of cultural beginning that disrupts received notions of cultural continuity. This is a distinctly Black Atlantic narrative structured according to an "American grammar"—writing that "begins at the 'beginning', which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation"—as Hortense Spillers described U.S. American writing in the wake of the Middle Passage (68), but which I would say characterizes Afro-diasporic literary and intellectual traditions more broadly.

Following Spillers's suggestion that what we refer to as cultural continuity in the Black Atlantic must be submitted to radical questioning, I want to extend her notion of an "American grammar" to include as well the writing of the Black Atlantic continuity performed by the natural world. How should one conceive this peculiar kind of continuance that flows from Ino's hand through her veil that wraps itself around Odysseus and moves through his hand onto the sea plant? Here, the environment is not merely a background, a frame, against which this continuance unfolds; it is, rather, an active, transformative element that shapes diasporic historical and cultural imaginary. In the words of Édouard Glissant, "To describe the [diasporic] environment is not enough. The individual, the community, and the environment are indissociable in the constitutive episode of their history. The environment is a character in this history. One must [*il faut*] understand it in all its complexity" (343; translation mine). In the ruptured beginning figured in *The Sea Nymph*, the constitutive indissociability of humans and the environment is vividly envisioned as a stitching—a texture—of the cultural (insofar as the veil through which Ino extends the future to Odysseus is an artifact) and the natural. Figured as a chain of human body, textile, and seaweed, diasporic continuance emerges here as a peculiar foundational fabric—dispersed and differentiated—but nevertheless unfolding a narrative of ingenuity and endurance. Highlighting a transformation of the negativity of the Middle Passage into fragile conditions of possibility for the emergence of new futures, this texture centers a process of underwater *poiēsis.* But whereas we might be

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accustomed to the meaning of *poiēsis* as "the capacity of human beings to alter radically the forms and structures they inherit" (Gourgouris xvii), what is so crucial about the kind of *poiēsis* at work in *The Sea Nymph* is that the transformation of the annihilating inheritance of the Middle Passage into forms of life is a conjoined activity of a natural-cultural making. In this ecological American grammar inscribed from the abysses of the Black Atlantic, nature is threaded with culture as a process of re-creation, laboring against the dehumanizing effects of colonialism that stifle creativity.

Such an intervention into our thinking about foundations is significant both at the philosophical and political level. Bearden takes the chaos and disorder of Afro-diasporic historical experience as a deconstruction of the nature/culture binary that has structured much of Western philosophical tradition. Feminist critics Val Plumwood and Nacy Hartsock have argued that "[t]he structure of reason/nature dualism and its variants is the perspective of power […] [structuring] 'a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant, white, male Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities'" (Plumwood 44). In this context, then, the sea texture in *The Sea Nymph*, insofar as it de-structures this sovereign, exclusionary way of looking, enables a radically new alignment of difference. Envisioned as interdependence rather than opposition, the relationship between nature and culture (and its variants such as reason, history, mastery, etc.), opens up the possibility of a likewise interdependent relationship between "identity" and "difference," where neither of these positions can be stabilized within an already familiar social, cultural, and historical landscape. The political stakes follow from the philosophical ones and involve a thorough revision of political myths based on traditional notions of filiation and legitimacy. The image of drowning Odysseus grabbing onto the veil and the seaweed as two available lifelines evinces a foundational texture—rather than a firm ontological ground—that upsets the presupposition of a timeless ontological essence. An eco-epic texture, thus, does not support an absolute political vision, nor does it inscribe in teleological terms the social formations it patterns. Instead, an ecological epic that comes out of Afro-diasporic textured beginnings is a social event that simultaneously—and this is the intellectual challenge *The Sea Nymph* confronts us with—affirms Afro-diasporic lives in their multiplicity and dispersal, and deconstructs those socio-political arrangements which perpetuate the dispossession of and deny livelihood to all humans negatively constructed as "Other."

Such a double articulation emerges in Walcott's ecological reading of *The Sea Nymph* where the Caribbean becomes key for the transmission of the epic:

> Besides its veracity, there is the color […] which is absolutely, perfectly the color of coral water, while the figure could simply be a coral diver or a shell diver going down

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> to pick up shells from the bottom of the sea. So this combination of images—the black diving figure and the green water—immediately strikes me not as Aegean but as completely Caribbean. And as it is for Romare, it is perfectly valid for me to think of an archipelago in which there are boats and pigs and men, […] to think of the *Odyssey* in terms of the Caribbean. […] I think you can't live in the archipelago—and Bearden *lived* in the Caribbean—without that great poem in the back of your head of the time. And it's not sort of *adapting* it to the Caribbean—it's direct. […] If you're living in the archipelago, the light is there, the rituals—the primal Greek rituals, the pantheism of Greek culture, it's still there in the Caribbean. (qtd. in Price and Price 96, 94; original emphasis)

In this feat of cultural translation, Walcott discerns in the Caribbean landscape epic exuberance not derivative of the genre's Greek articulations, but embedded within the region itself, yielding a radically different engendering of cultural origins. The sense of the simultaneous immediacy and latency of the Greek within the Caribbean—that it is all *still there*—bespeaks the constitutive multiplicity of the archipelago that complicates the understanding of a culture—any culture—and its material environments as present, determinate, and synchronized. To follow the logic of Walcott's reading, the emergence of the *Odyssey* within the Caribbean, while inextricable from "the artist's head," is not an effect of a singular artistic design to fit the Caribbean within the inherited form. And although the word *direct* is not an entirely fortuitous choice as it does not capture the entire complexity of the situation where the poem is both on the artist's mind and "still there" in the Caribbean, *directness* nevertheless foregrounds the materialization of the epic out of the lived world of the archipelago—materialization textured as an entanglement of nature, historical and cultural specificity, and artistic creativity. Such a *direct* emergence of the poem in the Caribbean simultaneously diffracts the epic's familiar proper place in the Mediterranean, and the peculiar naturalization of the *Odyssey* within the archipelago in fact denaturalizes the notion of a grounding location as such. To pull a canonical Western text through its other origins in the Caribbean means to challenge the mono-cultural trajectories of influence and filial transmission the epic is so often taken to inscribe. Thus, the significance of Walcott's ecological reading is that he discerns in Bearden's gesture not simply an application of an inherited universal narrative to Black experience (or a translation of the Black experience as fitting with the universal narrative), but rather a destabilization of the very structure that organizes the patterns of inheritance, the notion of cultural authenticity and derivation, and literary genealogy.

I emphasize this point because existing studies of Afro-diasporic revisions of the *Odyssey* often focus on the reappropriation of the hegemonic form initially deployed to oppress black and indigenous populations in the Americas (McConnell 2). In contrast to such interpretations, the point of my argument is that it is not enough to register the postcolonial appropriation of form, for such an account leaves intact the ideological presuppositions that ground the very form that is being

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claimed. Rather, if Afro-diasporic interventions into the literary history of the epic are to reflect anti-colonial political commitments, then we must think about how these appropriations deconstruct colonial grounds and alter the ways in which societies are instituted, in the very gesture of claiming the epic for an articulation of diasporic lives.

My intention in unfolding this argument largely through a reading of a reading—through an analysis of Walcott's appraisal of Bearden—is to offer a performative reflection on Glissant's ethical injunction that rather than describe the environment, "one must [*il faut*] understand it in all its complexity." What is so pertinent about Walcott's engagement with Bearden's work is precisely this appreciation for the complexity of the environment—not mere description, but a reading that dwells on the nuance of the natural. Such a reading is vital for affirmative articulations of Caribbean lives aiming to resituate the environment in positive terms, as a space of flourishing rather than a resource for appropriation, an attitude long characteristic of colonial and neocolonial approaches to the region. Historian Londa Schiebinger notes, for instance, that "[in the eighteenth century,] nature […] was there for the taking. […] [U]nspoken notions concerning a global commons applied only to nature and its resources outside Europe: European trading companies and states claimed exclusive rights to the natural resources of the territories they could hold militarily" (45). In contrast to the acquisitive approaches of colonial bioprospectors, the natural environment envisioned in Bearden's collage—insofar as it eludes stable and stabilizing empirical description—allows differential inscriptions of historical continuity unhinged from the determinism of colonial deprivation. It is for this reason that Walcott's charge of "an easy reference" is never directed at the magnetic blue of *The Sea Nymph.* In eliciting a *reading* of diaspora's natural environment, Bearden's collage never simply refers to—never just points to, or sends away to—the Caribbean Sea as if it stood outside the figural play of art. To the contrary, the Atlantic textile is inextricable from the process of cultural life-making in the Afro-diaspora—an intractable unit of American grammar—which invites an alternative understanding of socio-political reality and reframes nature as ethico-political category.

Ralph Ellison observed that Bearden's art, in its modern engagement with the specificities of Black lives in the U.S., brings about such an alternative understanding of reality: it "brings a new visual order into the world, [...] [insisting] that we *see* and that we see in depth and by the fresh light of the creative vision" (229, 234; original emphasis). To engage with Bearden's work, he writes, is to be offered a lesson in the appreciation of "the creative possibilities of cultural diversity" beyond "the distortions of newsprint and the false continuity imposed upon our conception of Negro life by television and much documentary photography" (228, 234). And in revealing this inherent creativity of Black lives, Bearden's art reflects less the "prose" of Black life, and more its poetry—"poetry compounded of vitality and powerlessness, destructive impulse, and the all-pervading and enduring faith in [the Black] style of American humanity. […] A harsh poetry this, but poetry

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nevertheless" (237, 235). In other words, the poeticity of Bearden's work lies in how it attests to the fact that race is not "an ontological given" (McDowell 234) and that Black bodies produce numerous "representational potentialities" (Spillers 80). Reading through the complexities of the Atlantic's underwater life, my goal in this section was to demonstrate that Bearden's vision responds also to the poeticity of Afro-diaspora's natural environments. The complexity of the natural world that Bearden captures in relation to Black history suggests that this poetics of the natural is not a purely aesthetic commitment, but first and foremost a political one: in unhinging reductive representations of a culture's materiality, Bearden's Atlantic epic challenges how the diaspora's socio-historical realities have been configured, and opens up new and unknown ways of inhabiting diasporic terrains.

2. A Song from the Depths of the Sea

Walcott's choice of *The Sea Nymph* as cover art for his landmark collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* reveals the centrality of Bearden's Black Atlantic vision of the *Odyssey* for the poet's own reflection on Caribbean collective identity in the charged political context of West Indian independence movements in the 70s. [3] In this section, I focus on how "The Schooner *Flight*," the inaugural poem of this collection, elaborates the Atlantic texture figured in *The Sea Nymph*, and inquire about the political positionalities and diasporic continuities the eco-epic texture underwrites.

In her account of the socio-political context of "The Schooner *Flight,*" literary critic Patricia Ismond puts her finger on the political interest of this poem:

> "The Schooner *Flight*" deals with the case of Trinidad, whose materialistic spree threatens to destroy the very fabric of the society. […] Walcott responds to [a representative case] of social and political collapse in the Caribbean of the late 70s, to extend against these, his definitions of a viable Caribbean selfhood and path towards self-development. (228-229)

What is crucial to note is that Walcott extends these definitions by way of a departure from the concrete location in which the socio-political crisis unfolds: the title of the first section of "The Schooner *Flight*" reads "Adios, Carenage." [4] Further, this reflection is articulated by Shabine, Walcott's captivating sailor-poet, whose frequently cited autobiographical confession—"I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody or I'm a nation" (4)—has become a motto of postcolonial hybridity and statelessness. While the political community to which Shabine's equivocal identity might belong is referred to as "a nation," his claim to this political formation appears enigmatic because the kind of nation summoned here answers neither to the demand of common ethnic origins or cultural ties, nor to the demand for a shared historical memory.

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Therefore, if this claim to a national political community is to mean that "this very condition of not belonging to any exclusivist, absolutist ideology may be the basis of a different, other identity with its own access of freedom and possibility" (Ismond 232), then we must necessarily reflect on what it means to make a claim for this kind of political community from the midst of the Caribbean Sea. What is crucial about Shabine's claim is that this declaration of political belonging (or perhaps non-belonging) is made on the brink of leaving the island as a geo-political unity where such a community might begin to cohere. Departing from Ismond's reading of this fragment, then, what I am suggesting here is that we must not only ponder the possibilities of "a different, other *identity*," but also, and perhaps more importantly, envision a different, other *basis* of political identities. Given his composite pedigree, Shabine is an especially fitting protagonist of the quest for Caribbean alternative foundations. Initially a derogatory word for lower-class people of African and European ancestry, "shabine" reflects "the most problematical category of colour and ethnicity in the region. […] [T]he *chabin* is an impossible human being, neither black nor white" (Arnold 45; see also Ismond 230). [5] For Walcott, "Shabine" simultaneously gives a vernacular name to the class of people who embody the contradictions of colonialism, and names the poem's Odyssean protagonist who strives to give "voice to one people's grief" (19)—to its complex history of ruptures and re-beginnings. Shabine himself, then, is an epic poet whose unending voyage is to find an articulation of a community that evinces this community's aporetic genealogy and envisions its future.

While Shabine witnesses on his journey various historical events that chart the region's harrowing history—including the Middle Passage and Carib suicide—the moment that especially interests me is a texture of underwater witnessing in the second part of the poem "Raptures of the Deep":

> I start salvage diving with a crazy Mick,
> name O'Shaugnessy, and a limey named Head;
> but this Caribbean so choke with the dead
> that when I would melt in emerald water,
> whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,
> *I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans,*
> *dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.*
> *I saw the powdery sand was their bones*
> *ground white from Senegal to San Salvador* (7; added emphasis)

Echoing the Atlantic abysses of *The Sea Nymph* but foregrounding more sharply its aporias, Shabine's descent into the emerald green of the Caribbean Sea reveals the submerged burial ground of the Black Atlantic. What begins as a witnessing pledge—"I saw them corals"—marks in fact an undoing of the witnessing subject as a result of his very inability to tell coral from the human remains that the coral symbolizes. Following the witnessing pledge, the colon—rather than

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establish equivalence between what follows and what precedes it—in fact confuses the distinction between the object of representation and the traumatic history it represents. Indeed, what is striking about this texture is that the punctuation mark functions as a transformative aperture through which multiple meanings of coral proliferate. Words that allow us to dwell on this scene as a foundational scene of agony—brain, fire, sea fans (also called sea whips), and dead-men's-fingers—sprout after the colon, engendering a horrific memory entangled with the spectacular eco-system of corals. This narration—which at no point can be ascribed solely to Shabine—testifies at one and the same time to the complex historical *poiēsis* taking place at the bottom of the sea *and* to the dissolution of the distinction between nature and history—the literal and the figurative—as the very distinction that regulates a unified and legible representation of historical being.
The complexity of this scene is compounded by the fact that while the witnessing subject is in crisis as a result of the confusion between the material and the figural, the historical circumstances of the Black Atlantic do indeed find a fairly accurate articulation in these lines. While living corals might *resemble* human body parts, they quite conceivably adhere to them in material ways as well. Although coral reef skeletons are generally self-produced by coral polyps, corals can also grow upon artificial substrate, such as sunken ships, tires, concrete blocks, or human bones. [6] Thus, the Atlantic slave trade—with sunken slave ships and slaves who were thrown overboard or jumped into the sea as an ultimate act of defiance—contributed its own peculiar skeleton for marine life. In this context, the coral ecosystem likely engenders human bodies at a material as much as at a symbolic level and—interwoven with Shabine's historical sensibility—creatively sustains historical memory.

While in the first two highlighted lines ("I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans, / dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men") historical memory is created in part through a transformative activity of coral, thus exploring the textures of Black Atlantic memories through a markedly Caribbean environment, the next two lines ("I saw the powdery sand was their bones / ground white from Senegal to San Salvador") rearticulate the conditions of possibility for inscribing historicity by retracing the routes of the Middle Passage back to Africa. Unlike the former lines that evoke material exuberance, the closing verses are permeated by the images of dispersal—powdery sand and bones ground white. Thus, while Shabine's dive into the emerald waters of the Caribbean Sea brings to mind an epic descent into the underworld, where the hero typically becomes reacquainted with his origins and gains a sense of direction in his journey, Shabine's descent into the underworld of his ancestors is anything but an ontological confirmation. This ground is literally *ground*, pulverized into bone dust and sea sand the whiteness of which recalls the bleaching of history, the objectification of black bodies and, consequently, the denial of their status as subjects capable of producing their own culture and history. For Shabine, this descent

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cannot reaffirm filiation, and neither can it offer a teleological vision of an anticipated arrival. For what is scattered at the bottom of the ocean are two Black Atlantic genealogies that cannot be reconciled, or recuperated, or redeemed in the service of filiative continuity.

Walcott famously captures this genealogical aporia in the closing paragraph of "The Muse of History" (1974):

> I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper "history," for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. (64)

This essay ends with a "strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds" (64). The "soldering" of Africa and Europe is a very different image than the powdery sand indistinguishable from ground bones. Rather than as an incongruity, however, I propose to read the above passage and the verses from "The Schooner *Flight*" as staging a necessary contestation within Caribbean historical consciousness, an inexorable tension between a sense of possibility arising from the chaotic encounter of multiple histories, and a lingering sense of loss and privation. Thus what Walcott rejects is not so much the idea of Caribbean historicity, but rather a certain "idea of history"—a concept of temporal continuity—whereby the past becomes integrated within a historical narrative of a given society as a factor determining or orienting this society's present and future. For Walcott, this is both a philosophical and an ethical question, for to accept either European or African genealogy would inevitably involve conceding to one's own dehumanization as much as justifying and explaining—that is, explaining away—the history of the Middle Passage. Instead, the philosophy of history that unravels in "The Schooner *Flight*" resonates more with Spillers' notion of Black Atlantic beginnings as marked by a rupture and a new idea of continuation: according to American grammar of the poem, history becomes an interruptive event, an event that disrupts rather than grounds, an event in the wake of which the future—unhinged from the past—is imagined as a potentiality, as is the case in "The Muse of History," or as a question, as it emerges in "The Schooner *Flight*."

A sense of this paradoxical historical continuity emerges likewise in the eco-epic texture I have been interpreting. While the bedrock of history appears constitutively shattered—the route from Senegal to San Salvador is traced by powdery sand and ground bones—a peculiar historical continuance is patterned poetically, through a recurrent use of the sibilant "s," both a poetic sound pattern and an onomatopoeic sound suggestive of its elemental origin in the sea and wind. The winding, sinuous S tenuously ties the African point of departure with the American point of arrival as a poetic and material rather than subjective continuity. Rather than conceding to the

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determining reification of historical injury or reinforcing subjective knowledge of real historical conditions, Walcott traces at the site void of controlling ancestry a poetic-material involvement that calls for a persistent reading of history and nature that weaves origins in and out of shape.

Reflecting on the variegated patterning of Caribbean beginnings, literary scholar Valérie Loichot helpfully glosses such practices as "patterns escap[ing] the agency of a central authority, whether a father or the author of a text," suggesting that the severing of filiative lines in the Black Atlantic in fact led to practices of creative restitution of family lines not essentially along bloodlines (1). While such an "orphan narrative" (Loichot's term) captures the notion of history that follows from Walcott's repudiation of African and European genealogy, I find the term "eco-epic texture" more fitting when considering the poetic-material-historical entanglements in "The Schooner *Flight*." One reason why this concept of texture is so central is because it helps us read literary passages where the natural environment emerges differently than a frame, a context, or a background. In the first texture, coral is integral—symbolically and materially—to the metaphoric transaction between corals and brains. This complex poetic texturing of the material and the figural displaces the human as a sole transformative agent of his or her historical environment. In foregrounding the impossibility of determining whether the source of transformation is Shabine's creative mind or whether it originates in the coral, texture enables us to read in those spaces where the ontological separation between nature and history collapses, and where the formal and logical operations of the human mind cannot be taken as the sole structuring representation of the world. In textural readings we dwell on intricate, poetic patterns of mind and matter that give space to the contingency of nature as a shaping (rather than shaped) element of representation. What is important about this co-implication of mind and matter is that in their entanglement, their relationship is not one of a reversed hierarchy where the material is re-privileged over mind. Rather, creativity, imagination, innovativeness, and capacity for transformation, are dispersed across the larger ecological body, making political and historical change a much more nebulous but an infinitely livelier affair.

Another reason why I find it helpful to think about foundational figurations in Bearden and Walcott as textures is that texture holds poetic, natural, and historical transformations as inseparable. It centers the "voluminous and indefinite" skills of *poiein*—poetic practice (Gourgouris 7). Stathis Gourgouris approaches *poiein* simultaneously as an artistic and historical transformation, material more than abstract, that eludes the grasp of conventional historical knowledge and alters the relationship between form and matter:

> *poein* as history in the making […] does not really have a precise temporality; hence traditional methods of historiography cannot grasp it. Its working is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, that would not spare even itself as an object of that work. (The clichéd notion of a poem always being at work on itself, on making itself into a poem, should be understood here as an elemental force of *poiein*.) The energy

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> of *poiein* is dramatic: Literally, to form is to make form happen, to change form (including one's own). […] The political substance of *poiein* is thus not signified just by its constitutively transformative power, but by the fact that in its ancient meaning, it pertains to humanity's immanent (even if perpetually self-altering) encounter with the world. (10-11)

The Atlantic textures in the works of Bearden and Walcott evince this idea of a poetic remaking of history through an ecological involvement of humans and the world. This remaking is poetic not only because it becomes legible through art and poetry, but also because the transformative power of *poiein* refers to a socio-cultural imaginary and thus bears a poetic rather than analytical relation to knowledge (Gourgouris 9). Lastly, with the emphasis on the ecological character of these transformations, texture de-centers the human as a custodian of transformation, sustaining the site of change as continually open and contingent, and thus in a sense ultimately indifferent to and non-appropriable by specific socio-political interests and political projects. Therefore, thinking about the eco-epic as modulated by texture does not mean substituting the natural for historical origins but rather holding them in a productive tension where the epic recalibrates the ways in which history is written.

Taking the eco-epic texture as such an open, self-transformative space of beginnings involves then a thorough revision of inherited definitions of the epic. Notice how differently the relationship between the past and the present is figured in *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*" when juxtaposed with the absolute distinction between "the presentness of the present and the pastness of the past" (14) that characterizes the epic in Bakhtin's account:

> "beginning," "first," "founder," "ancestor," "that which occurred earlier" […] are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories. […] Epic discourse is a discourse handed down […] solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself. […] [I]t is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in [the epic world]. It is completed, conclusive, and immutable. […] [W]ithin this [epic] time, completed and locked, all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present; insofar as this time is whole, it is not localized in an actual historical sequence; it is not relative to the present or to the future; it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time. (15-19; original emphasis)

Certainly, the notion of temporality subtending this characterization is structured by the oppositional descriptions of the novel and the epic in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where it is the former genre that strictly belongs to the present. But, more generally, Bakhtin's definition of the epic also reflects a traditional metaphysical thinking of temporality that posits—in a circuitous, repetitive, and policing manner—an unspoiled, ideal, and plentiful origins sheltered from any change or difference. In securing a particular cultural and political heritage, this metaphysical origin assumes a controlling and normative function; it determines the interpretation of present political events according to whether they lead towards a future state already prescribed by the imagined,

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idealized origin. Thus, according to this logic, change is not really change for any truly new occurrence would signal an aberration, a tear, in the socio-political fabric of the community, threatening both the stability of its being and the epistemic organization of its world. In the classical epic, such a totalizing teleological ideology is emphasized for instance in Virgil's *Aeneid* where the quest for the fatherland is driven by the nostalgic obsession with the lost Troy and the promised land in Italy and where "the setting, action, imagery, and even the hyperbolic rhetoric […] are patterned through the epic's focus on Rome as omphalos, the cosmic center that both orders the horizontal space around it and establishes a vertical *axis mundi* as a hierarchical index of being and value" (Cook 117).

In contrast, Bearden's and Walcott's Black Atlantic epics de-valorize originary categories to open the epic time to diasporic human and natural multiplicities. These epics—threaded from sea, wind, words, color, and coral—weave fragile homes out of diverse and often destabilizing elements, precarious but sustaining multiplicity, which I see as offering some traction for challenging inherited colonial patterns of thought. I thus want to suggest, following DeLoughrey, that the sea in *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*" functions simultaneously as a fluid ground of historical affirmation and a critical space, offering

> an alternative to the rigid ethnic genealogies of colonialism and nationalism. In other words, the ocean's perpetual movement is radically decentering; it resists attempts to fix a locus of history. Focusing on seascape rather than landscape as the fluid space of historical production allows us to complicate the nation-state, which encodes a rigid hierarchy of race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity for its representative subjects. (*Routes and Roots* 21)

This fluid ground allows us then to consider a different "basis of a different, other identity" Ismond evoked in her reading (232). What possibilities of political articulation and continuity follow from such aquatic foundations?

The sense of political belonging Shabine develops on his journey is as perplexing as the ground that underwrites it. In part nine of the poem, Shabine looks back at the petty politicking he has left behind and issues a warning to government officials:

> All you fate in my hand,
> ministers, businessmen, Shabine have you, friend,
> I shall scatter your lives like a handful of sand,
> I who have no weapon but poetry and
> the lances of palms and the sea's shining shield! (16)

Although hardly a constructive political stance, the political valence of Shabine's threat to scatter the existing vision of the region's future lies precisely in his resolve to unsettle political projects in order to give space to the multiplicities and contradictions of the Caribbean experience. Derived

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from the marine environment and from his poetic skill, Shabine's capacity to unsettle can be read as a peculiar form of agency drawn from his textured eco-epic beginnings. While the locus of agency at first rests with Shabine, as suggested by the sovereign articulation "I shall," the concluding lines of this passage suggest a slightly different distribution of agency. Indeed, poetry, palms, and sea enwrap Shabine in a peculiar material-poetic armor as if the region's very culture and geography rebelled against Caribbean post-independence political institutions and practices.

This ecological form of political agency can be understood as underwritten by the eco-epic texture because the historical, the natural, and the literary entangled in the eco-epic texture are co-involved here engendering a radically new field of political possibility. What is striking about the image of Shabine armed with poetry, palms, and the sea is that all these entities have been either excluded from political participation, or considered as threatening to political activity, or thought of as existing outside of politics. Shabine cannot find place in the political space marked out by specific colonial and anti-colonial positionalities: "After the white man, the niggers didn't want me / when the power swing to their side" (8); poetry, for Plato, has detrimental effects on politics insofar as it speaks to the changeable and unprincipled aspects of the soul thus threatening the faculty of philosophical and political judgment; [7] and nature has been traditionally assumed to exist outside of politics as something to be overcome on the path towards progress and development. The texture of history, nature, and poeticity that marks Caribbean beginnings, then, underlies this peculiar form of identity—a radicalized version of what Gourgouris in the passage cited above described as "humanity's immanent encounter with the world"—the political valence of which lies in its ability to de-form recognized political institutions. Indeed, to mark this nexus of history and politics as indelibly poetic and ecological in character suggests that for Walcott multiplicity, indeterminacy, and difference—rather than stable, intelligible meanings of political categories—constitute the warp and woof of the political. This is a valued register of political contestation because this style of articulation thrives on and nourishes equivocality, honoring the inherent complexity (i.e. non-objectivity and non-appropriability) of diasporic communities and the worlds they inhabit.

To reiterate, the political valence of Shabine's claim on the present political configuration lies, first, in the gesture that attempts to make space for what has been excluded from the political terrain—for the hybrid identities that do not square with the binary alignment of political positionalities, for a poetic, equivocal articulation that confuses political register, and for nature's radical otherness that reopens political beginnings and demands a different configuration of the political community.

However, the textured socio-political formation engendered by Shabine yields "a new horizon of [political] possibility" (Scott 3) in a more fundamental way as well. Situated at a junction between history and politics, Shabine's gesture also compels a question about the place of the past within a

community's present. For historian David Scott, a thorough rethinking of this relation is crucial for marking out a space for a more radical political critique:

> I wish to take issue with a prevalent way of conceiving this relation between community and history, one that makes the shape of the former dependent upon the story the latter tells about the past. […] How we make a (political) determination about community today, so it is widely believed, ought to be derived from our knowledge of the nature of the pasts of such communities. The shape of the past ought to guarantee the shape of the present. (93)

I find Scott's use of the word "shape" to refer to the relationship between the past and the present highly evocative in the context of Shabine's threat to scatter political bureaucracy. For to scatter means precisely to de-form, to un-shape, to split open the community through, in our case, this community's past. Thus, when Shabine is forced out of the present alignment of political identities—black or white—what is at stake is not only a search for an alternative space of belonging for his equivocal identity, but also a thorough reassessment of how history matters for politics. It appears that for Walcott, the political valence of Afro-diasporic history is precisely *not* to shape political identities into fixed, reactive positions of guilt and blame, but to decouple politics from historical determinism through a historical "rupture and a different kind of continuation" (Spillers 68). This disruptive persistence of the past in the present derives from the open time-space of the eco-epic texture, radically unlike the "completed, conclusive, and immutable" epic past in Bakhtin's account. The temporality of the natural, while entangled with the time of history, weaves into the eco-epic texture a thread of radical temporal difference and continuity indifferent to human interests. As a result of this syncretic temporal conjunction, the historical time does not remain locked and completed, but rather overflows the present, indicating "that the political task […] is to refuse to be governed by the *questions* of one's adversaries [in our context, by colonial ideologies], that the task in fact is to […] risk *changing the problematic* in which those questions have appeared to us natural, legitimate, or even imperative" (Scott 103, original emphasis). I want to suggest here that perhaps what lies behind Walcott's desire to capture the tactile quality of the environment on the page, Glissant's idea that the environment is a character in Antillean history, or Wilson Harris's interest in articulating "a material vision of time in which whole societies conscripted themselves" (182) is this intuition that nature can radically alter historical trajectories and open up visions of life, community, and historical continuity not over-determined by colonial representations of African and Afro-diasporic humans.

While such "a material vision of time" reconfigures political possibilities, it also impinges upon how the future unfolds. "The Schooner *Flight*" invites an inquiry into what this material continuity might mean in the poem's concluding verses. While the narrative ends with Shabine's likely perishing in

the churning currents of the Caribbean Sea, the closing line is ambiguous insofar as it appears to escape the poem's ending:

> My first friend was the **sea**. Now, is my last.
> I stop talking now. I work, then I **read**,
> cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast.
> I try to forget what happiness was,
> and when that don't work, I study the stars.
> Sometimes is just **me**, and the soft-scissored foam
> as the deck turn white and the moon open
> a cloud like a door, and the light over **me**
> is a road in white moonlight taking **me** home.
> Shabine sang to you from the depths of the **sea.** (20; my highlighting)

In his reading of this ending literary critic Edward Baugh also comments on its ambiguity: "The poem ends with [Shabine] sailing on, to no definite destination, although it may end more ambiguously, with the last line indicating that the voice of Shabine is the voice of a drowned sailor" (312). The uncertainty I would like to focus on has less to do with whether Shabine survives or drowns, and more on the vague location from which that last verse is articulated. The emphasized words of the passage highlight the poetic repetition of two vowel sounds that tie the sea with the person of the narrator—both his activities (*r**ea**d*) and the trajectory of his journey (*road, home*). The very last line is thus an inextricable part of the narrative as it forms the closing arm of the friendly embrace anticipated in the first line of this fragment in which Shabine takes the sea as his first and last friend. And yet, with the shift in the narrative voice from the first to the third person, this line simultaneously escapes the narrative in that this last sentence seems to be spoken from an elsewhere, the precise location of which is unsettled by the undecidable origins of the voice. Following from my reading of the eco-epic texture in the section "Raptures of the Deep," which has shown that Caribbean beginnings are figured as a writing of history as much as of nature, I propose to read this concluding ambiguity as an effect precisely of this conjoined articulation. Lingering in excess of the narrative spun in the poem, this last verse turns us back towards the entanglement of matter, poetry, and history as it reminds us of the oceanic depths where Shabine's song originates. The very last word of the poem—sea—suggests that this last verse lingers as the narrative's own material surplus that warrants a future, but a radically unpredictable one as continuance depends here on the structure of address and inheritance (as marked by the second-person pronoun *you*)—and thus on a certain indeterminacy of how inheritance is claimed and spent. In this way, the aqueous matter entangled in the articulation of this poem exists as simultaneously inextricable and non-appropriable, entangling historical and future trajectories.

In this non-appropriability, this lingering verse appears as scatter (but this time beyond human agency), driving off and rerouting the trajectory of the future in relation to the present. As scatter,

the sea thus appears to hold little in place. Walcott himself is interested in the sea as a space that cannot be appropriated for human projects: “Nothing can be put down in the sea. You can’t plan on it, you can’t live on it; you can’t walk on it. […] The sea does not have anything on it that is a memento of man” (*Conversations with Derek Walcott* 158-159). If my reading of the fluidity of the sea as scatter might strike as an incongruity, it is to suggest that material scatter be understood not as a breakdown of solid entities into smaller, discrete particles, but rather as a non-appropriability of matter in general. As literary scholar Geoffrey Bennington suggests, *scatter* names this paradoxical ability of matter to linger over epistemic, ontological, and political categories as alterity impossible to assimilate:

> 2.1.1.4. Scatter *remains* (as scattered remains). Scatter is (what) remains. […]
> 5.1. Scatter rhymes with (and entails) matter (this really is a kind of ‘materialism’). […]
> 5.1.3. ‘Matter’ in the [materialist] tradition is *essentially* scatter.
> 5.1.3.1. Or rather, scatter is why matter has no essence, is ‘essentially’ noting.
> (“Scatter” 7, 13; original emphasis)

Scatter, thus, remains other, disuniting identities more than solidifying their contours. It is something that resists formal enclosures and lingers as an excess that cannot be fully incorporated into the shape of historical and political identities. We could translate Bennington’s statement that matter has no essence as meaning that it is in the very essence of matter to escape, to scatter, to go into any direction without purpose or intention, thus escaping the predicative constraints that hook material bodies to their essential, reifying property traits.

What such a material non-essentialism means in the context of a Caribbean eco-epic is that the moments of gathering eco-epic texture enables—such as the one when Shabine makes his political claim—allow for an evaluation and critique of specific political activities and projects. Such moments, however, do not themselves become reified into new prescriptive political goals that would over-write future insurgent and de-forming political claims. Linking the earlier passage where scatter de-forms political organization with the sea scatter of the closing verse, we can see that scatter is not simply a destructive activity, but also one which enables futures not determined by the present. Or, put differently, scatter is this possibility that history offers to open up the present to the futures it cannot foresee.

I proposed earlier to think of eco-epic textures as involving practices of *poiēsis*—historical, material, and poetic—the working of which “is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, that would not spare even itself as an object of that work” (Gourgouris 10). This foundational motility textures a complex mode of diasporic belonging, and a complex relationship between identity and place. The movement I have been tracing through “The Schooner *Flight*”—from the underwater eco-epic texture that figures historical memory through a transformative involvement of nature, history, and poetry, through the emergence of a political positionality this texture underlies, to a

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textured future that sustains the eco-epic's transformative movements—resituates the Caribbean as a space involved in an ongoing process of making, unmaking, and remaking the cultural, political, and historical ties that bind the region's communities. In this way, "The Schooner *Flight*" offers a compelling counter-trope to the structuring image of the Black Atlantic—Paul Gilroy's "ship in motion." Rather than moving "*between* Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean" (4, added emphasis)—an emphasis on transnational movement that inadvertently inscribes a subtle opposition between place and motion—Shabine's schooner never leaves the Caribbean, probing in this way the textures of Caribbean internal multiplicity. Staying within the Caribbean, Walcott envisions new modes of historical and political being energized by the Caribbean environment rather than a departure from it.

3. Conclusion

In taking up Romare Bearden's invitation to think about what difference a touch of the Caribbean Sea makes, my aim was to offer readings that tap into energies of the material environment for thinking differently about cultural representation, historical identity, and political belonging. The main thrust of my argument was that eco-epic textures figured in *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*" situate human historical and political world in a transformative relationship with the natural environment, a relationship enabling a paradoxical form of historical and political continuity that unhinges the present and the future from the over-determining grasp of the colonial past. To be sure, a Caribbean eco-epic cannot disavow the violence and dispossession of slavery and colonialism. Yet, in dramatizing creative interactions between history and nature, Caribbean eco-epic alter conditions of legibility through which cultural and material worlds are approached. This ecological reconfiguration demands not only a non-reductive engagement with—a reading of—racial and ethnic difference, but also a careful reading of the islands' writing—the text of the environment—not so much as a reminder of colonial dispossession, but as a historically and politically transformative script that resists absolute domination.

Endnotes

[1] Bearden makes a few brief trips to the Caribbean in 1960s. In the 70s and 80s, he spends a couple of months each year in his home in St. Maarten. See Price & Price's comprehensive study on the significance of the Caribbean for Bearden.

[2] See "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey." http://www.sites.si.edu/romarebearden/video/index.html

[3] 1979, when *The Star-Apple Kingdom* was published, marks the year of St. Lucian independence.

[4] Carenage is a bay in Trinidad.

[5] Nowadays, the word is used primarily to refer to light-skinned women in the Caribbean.

[6] See Steven Harrigan's "Artificial Reefs." DFIX (Design, Fabrication, Innovation for Xtreme Afforability)—an organization designing sustainable solutions—developed a Reef In Peace (RIP) initiative which assists with funeral expenses in exchange for human bone material as a substrate for artificial reef construction (http://www.dfix2012.com/rip/). Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater sculptures constitute another reef restoration project designed to foster coral accretion and growth (http://www.underwatersculpture.com/).

[7] Socrates discusses his view on poetry in books III and X of *The Republic.*

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