



**HAL**  
open science

# The Contrapuntal Melophrasis of Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier” in Derek Walcott’s Omeros

Malik Noël-Ferdinand

► **To cite this version:**

Malik Noël-Ferdinand. The Contrapuntal Melophrasis of Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier” in Derek Walcott’s Omeros. *ESLA English Studies in Latin America*, 2024, 27, 10.7764/ESLA.83262. hal-04733770

**HAL Id: hal-04733770**

**<https://hal.univ-antilles.fr/hal-04733770v1>**

Submitted on 13 Oct 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License



The contrapuntal melophrasis of Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier" in Derek  
Walcott's *Omeros*

Author: Malik Noël-Ferdinand

Source: English Studies in Latin America, No. 27 (July 2024)

---

ISSN 0719-9139

Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





# THE CONTRAPUNTAL MELOPHRASIS OF BOB MARLEY'S "BUFFALO SOLDIER" IN DEREK WALCOTT'S *OMEROS*

MALIK NOËL-FERDINAND<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In his long verse poem *Omeros*, Derek Walcott sets the reception of Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier" on a Caribbean shore. The fisherman Achille washes his canoe while he remembers the song, before seeing himself acting in a western-like phantasmagorical movie where he kills palm-tree Indians with his Winchester oar. At the end of the nineteenth century, the historic Buffalo Soldiers participated in the US Frontier Wars, and in the colonial occupations of Cuba and Puerto-Rico. I posit that Achille's reenacting of the song constitutes a melophrasis, the verbal representation of music (Edgcombe; Vilmar), which complements the lyrics by revealing its counterpart colonial narrative. Moreover, the melophrasis works in two ways: it reshapes our understandings of Marley's music and it sharpens the reception of *Omeros's* aesthetics. Thus, we read the poem contrapuntally (Saïd), epitomizing Marley's and Walcott's common quarrel with history. This contrapuntal melophrasis also depicts how *Omeros's* poetics reverberates Walcott's appropriation of reggae aesthetics (Dawes). Stemming from an analysis of "No Woman, No Cry," the aural use of caesuras exposes Walcott's admiration for Marley's sophisticated and popular achievement.

KEYWORDS: Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, Bob Marley, Caribbean Music, melophrasis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Malik Noël-Ferdinand is associate professor (*maitre de conférences*) in comparative literature at Université des Antilles in Martinique, where he teaches world literature and creole culture. His research focuses on postcolonial literature, translation, and poetry. As part of ConnecCaribbean program, he gave a conference paper based on this article at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in April 2024. He thanks all colleagues and students for their remarks and suggestions. He also wants to thank Frank Bardol and Université des Antilles's librarians for their help, and the peer reviewers for their suggestions. This article has received funding from ConnecCaribbean, a European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 823846.

## Introduction

OM. Order of Merit. Motto: “He that does truth comes into the light.” A few weeks before he passed away, the Honourable Robert Nesta Marley was awarded the Order of Merit (OM), the fourth highest Jamaican distinction in the country. Sir Arthur Jennings,<sup>1</sup> a former Jamaican politician, discusses this bestowal in Marlon James’s *A Brief History of the Seven Killings* (2015).

Questioning the OM colonial inheritance, Jennings regards the award as an awkward label for a musician whose truest light comes with African revolution, not with patrician decoration,

They give the Singer an honour on his deathbed, the Order of Merit. The black revolutionary joins the order of British Squires and Knights, Babylon in excelsis deo. A fire that lights up Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and South Africa doused out by two letters, O and M. (James 599)

Did not the knighted Rastaman remember when he used to sing “Zimbabwe”  
...and to scold

the ignoble and unhappy  
regime that hold [held] our brothers  
in Angola, in Mozambique, South Africa  
in sub-human bondage (Marley, “War”).<sup>2</sup>

Did he really give up the fight? Sir Jennings pretends that Marley oversaw his own puzzling bestowment by singing “Buffalo Soldier”

But the Singer is sly. In time people will see that he prophesied over the very thing, singing of the false honour before it was even bestowed. Before the sickness took him. I hear him sing in his sleep, about Negro soldiers in America. Black American soldiers of the 24th and 25th Infantry, and the 9th and 10th Cavalry under the command of the paleface to butcher Comanche, Kiowa, Sioux, Cheyenne, Ute, and Apache. Fourteen black men in dirty boots take the Medal of Honor for killing a people and an idea. The Indians called them Buffalo

---

<sup>1</sup> Sir Jennings is a ghost narrator who speaks from death. The fictional character is modelled on the Jamaican politician Kenneth Jones.

<sup>2</sup> The lyrics are presented as such on the back cover of *Rastaman Vibration* (1976), the original album which includes the song. I am indebted to the late Mr. Robert d’Alexis, the English teacher who taught us “War” at Lycée Schoelcher.”

Soldiers. The Medal of Honor, The Order of Merit, the same sounds flipped. (James 599-600)

Composed by Bob Marley and Noel “King Sporty” Williams, “Buffalo Soldier” was recorded in 1978, and released posthumously in 1983. Though the “adversaries” are never mentioned in the lyrics, the song praises the Black regiments of Buffalo Soldiers, who were awarded the US Medal of Honor (MOH) for fighting the Indigenous Peoples of North America during the American Frontier Wars. In noticing the chiasmus (MOH/OM), Sir Jennings’ interpretation tries to conciliate two Marley imageries: the anticolonial African fighter and the brutal killer of Indigenous Peoples of North America. Marley sang a controversial song to fit a questionable award. However, his tale of slyness can console this other OM recipient, but not enough.<sup>3</sup>

The honourable Derek Anton Walcott was awarded the Jamaican Order of Merit in 1993. Three years earlier, he had published *Omeros*, a narrative poem which stages the reception of “Buffalo Soldier” by the fisherman Achille on a Saint-Lucian shore. *Omeros* explores the lives of a group of Gros Îlet villagers named Helen, Hector, Philoctete and Achille, among others. These names are common in Saint-Lucia, and, because French and British colonizers fought endlessly for its control, the island itself is nicknamed The Helen of the West-Indies. Interrogating the consistency of these mythical Greek affiliations, a metafictional poet narrator asks himself: “Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her with no Homeric shadow?” (Walcott, *Omeros* 271). But the narrator is not the only character who embodies Walcott’s search for an accurate poetic form to incarnate Saint-Lucia’s inhabitants. Achille himself engages in a self-discovery journey, as it says: “Then, for the first time, he asked himself who he was” (Walcott, *Omeros* 130). The “Buffalo Soldier” scene takes place after the fisherman has returned from a hallucinatory homecoming in ancestral

<sup>3</sup> In “Sea Grapes,” Derek Walcott questions the convenience of Odysseus’s myth for a contemporary wanderer: “The ancient war / between obsession and responsibility / will never finish and has been the same / for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore / now wriggling on his sandals to walk home, / since Troy sighed its last flame, [...] The classics can console. But not enough.” (Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* 297)

Africa. The day after the usual Friday night street party, Achille washes his canoe while Marley's music invades his mind,

... the systems' beat  
thudded in Achille's head that replayed the echo,  
as he washed the canoe, of a Marley reggae—

“Buffalo soldier.” Thud. “Heart of America.” (Walcott, *Omeros* 161)

Marley's song echoes Achille's quest for roots, as the singer says: “Stolen from Africa, brought to America” (Marley, “Buffalo Soldier”). Thus, the fisherman becomes so bewitched by it that he creates a masquerade of himself as a Buffalo Soldier:

he saw, like palms on a ridge, the Red Indians come  
with blurred hooves drumming to the music's sweet anger,

while his own horse neighed and stamped, smelling a battle  
in its own seat. Achille eased the long Winchester  
out of its fringed case. This was the oar... . (Walcott, *Omeros* 162)

Palm foliage for Indigenous Peoples of North America headdresses, an oar for a gun, the scene draws overtly upon comic similes. The silent extravaganza eventually culminates with the narrator linking the extermination of Indigenous Peoples of North America with that of the Indigenous Peoples of the Antilles:<sup>4</sup>

... then slowly he fired the oar  
and a palm-tree crumpled; then to repeated cracks

---

<sup>4</sup> In *Omeros*, the narrator talks about Aruacs and Caribs. But he does not make clear distinctions.

from the rifle, more savages, until the shore  
was littered with palm spears, bodies: like Aruacs  
falling to the muskets of the Conquistador. (Walcott, *Omeros* 162)

Achille's bathetic spectacle draws attention to the song's imperial oddity: "Said he was a Buffalo Soldier, / in the war for America" (Marley, "Buffalo Soldier"). In 1993, Rodney Edgecombe forged the term *melophrasis* to characterize the verbal representation of a musical work: "I have coined 'melophrasis' on the model of 'ecphrasis'[sic] by substituting a noun (melos=melody) for the preposition *ek*. Melophrasis by my definition is any verbal effort to evoke the experience of externally apprehended music." (2). In her article "It's in the silence you feel you hear," Therese Wiwe Vilmar points out the specificity of a verbal and external apprehension: "Melophrasis works semiotically as well as semantically" (285) before studying two canonical examples of melophrasis: the *Vinteuil Sonata* in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927), and the fugue chapter "Sirens" in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The inquiry leads her to identify two categories of melophrasis:

1. Diegetic melophrasis: The appearance and experience of a fictional or real piece of music on the level of characters.
2. Non-diegetic melophrasis: A narrative based on a musical form, a musical idea or an acoustic quality, experienced on the level of the reader but not necessarily in the world of the characters. (285)

In staging "Buffalo Soldier," Walcott plays on the two melophrastic categories proposed by Vilmar. On the diegetic level, a character (Achille) experiences the song; on a more semiotic level, *Omeros's* verse form recalls the idea of reggae music. By overlaying the Buffalo Soldiers' unspoken actions on the Caribbean shore, Walcott expands the complex ensemble that Kwame Dawes notices,

In most of Marley's compositions, and especially in his live performances, the solo is rarely in the foreground as it in blues or in jazz. Indeed, what the organist or guitarist or horn player does in reggae, in tiny soloing moments, can be best described as variations on the rhythm track. These subtle variations layer over each other to create a complex ensemble of sounds with a powerful and cohesive effect. (*Natural Mysticism* 115)

Like an improvised verbal solo, Achille's masquerade plays over the lyrics that are already there. Indeed, Walcott's melophrasis displays the counter-discourse of untold massacres, meaning, although reggae music is not baroque music, the "Buffalo Soldier" melophrasis in *Omeros* can be linked to Edward Saïd's contrapuntal reading theory:

In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, we can read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement (usually suppressed for the most part) with the West Indies or India, say, is shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism. (51)

*Omeros's* melophrasis interacts with the song's imperial theme. Although the depiction of the massacres is suppressed in "Buffalo Soldier," it emerges through Walcott's verbal rendition. However, Saïd's contrapuntal proposition is not ideological, as he says "My method is to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination" (Saïd xxii). To read contrapuntally in *Omeros* is to link the poem's analysis with the song's suppressed (imperial) politics without ignoring the song's creative nature. Accordingly, the contrapuntal approach discloses Marley's relation with history. The erasure of the



murder of Indigenous Peoples of North America is undisputedly partial, but the affiliation of the Rastaman to the Buffalo Soldier is undoubtedly creative. For this reason, the song's imaginative power also stands with Walcott's own irreverent quarrel with history.

Achille's reception within the narrative space molds the reader's reception within the reading space. This *mise-en-abyme* sets the song's acoustic composition at the core of its literary invention. With this in mind, I intend to explore *Omeros's* contrapuntal melophrasis both semantically and semiotically. First, I will explain how the melophrasis epitomizes Marley's and Walcott's common quarrel with history. Secondly, I will show how *Omeros's* poetics stem from Walcott's appropriation of reggae aesthetics.

### **The Rastaman Singer and the West-Indian Poet: Their quarrel with history**

Why did Walcott choose such an ambiguous song for his poem? Maybe because Marley's poetic tour de force illustrates the poet's peculiar conception of History,

These writers [the great poets of the New World] reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory. Their philosophy, based on a contempt for historic time, is revolutionary [...] Even in Borges, where the genius seems secretive, immured from change, it celebrates an elation which is vulgar and abrupt, the life of the plains given an instant archaism by the hieratic style. Violence is felt with the simultaneity of history. So the death of a gaucho does not merely repeat, but is, the death of Caesar. Facts evaporates into myth. This is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as renewed. Like Borges, too, the poet St.-John Perse conducts us from the mythology of the past to the present without a tremor of adjustment. This is revolutionary spirit at its deepest; it recalls the spirit to arms. (*What the Twilight Says* 37-8)

Doesn't Marley fit into Walcott's panorama of these New World poets who long for renewed myths rather than hard historical facts? Comparing Marley to Borges or Perse may seem unusual at first sight, but to associate the Buffalo Soldier with the Rastaman shows the same contempt for historic time, as well as the same revolutionary elation for historical fiction. Notwithstanding the issues around "Buffalo Soldier," the song's attraction may lie in the striking simile Rastaman/Buffalo Soldier. "Buffalo Soldier" starts with the verses,<sup>5</sup>

Buffalo Soldier, Dreadlocked Rasta

There was a Buffalo Soldier

In the heart of America

Stolen from Africa, brought to America

Fighting on arrival, fighting for survival

I mean it, when I analyze the stench

To me, it makes a lot of sense

How the Dreadlock Rasta was the Buffalo Soldier

And he was taken from Africa, brought to America

Fighting on arrival, fighting for survival

Said he was a Buffalo Soldier, Dreadlock Rasta

Buffalo Soldier, in the heart of America

If you know your history

Then you would know where you coming from

---

<sup>5</sup> The lyrics are presented as such on the back cover of *Confrontation* (1983), the original album which includes the song.

Then you wouldn't have to ask me

Who the heck do I think I am

I'm just a Buffalo Soldier

In the heart of America

Stolen from Africa, brought to America

The first verse introduces the metaphor by placing tenor (Dreadlock Rasta) and vehicle (Buffalo Soldier) side by side. The metaphor becomes explicit in the second couplet with the “to be” verb, “How the Dreadlock Rasta was the Buffalo Soldier.” And, finally, in the fifth couplet, the speaker reveals himself as a Buffalo Soldier.

Marley's rhetorical genius is double. First, he builds a metaphor upon the original metaphor Black Soldier/buffalo. In their *Buffalo Soldier* 1970 single, the US band the Flamingos express the widespread theory about the origin of the nickname, “he [this soldier] was black and robust looking with thick woolly hair, he sort [sic] of reminded the Indians of his great buffalo.” Marley develops this same “hair” motif by creating the simile Dreadlock Rastaman/Buffalo Soldier. Secondly, he imagines a metafictional discourse explaining the new analogy of Rastaman/Buffalo Soldier, strengthening even further the metaphor by producing a classical rhetorical discourse as the speaker clearly indicates that he exposes a thesis (“I mean it, when I analyze the stench / To me, it makes a lot of sense”). The narration expresses the shared experience of the Middle Passage between the Rastaman and the Buffalo Soldier, while a peroration logically concludes the demonstration, “I am just a Buffalo Soldier.” Imprisoned by *ad hominen* refutation (“If you know your history / Then you would know where you coming from / Then you wouldn't have to ask me”), the listener is left with no choice but to accept the connection between Rastaman and Buffalo Soldier.

Performing Marley's song, the fisherman becomes a Buffalo Soldier. The song's metaphorical vividness fits perfectly with Achille's unresolved quest for identity. In another section of *Omeros*, on the occasion of Saint-Lucian Boxing Day, he dresses in the costume of an African warrior: "a muscular woman, a scarf round his head" (Walcott, *Omeros* 273). From the masquerade of a Buffalo Soldier to that of an African warrior-woman, the character of Achille blurs the sempiternal association with his Greek mythical namesake. The making of this Rastaman/Buffalo Soldier link could not but please Walcott as the Saint-Lucian writer produces endless tropes to avoid the petrification of "history, that medusa of the New World" (Walcott, *What the Twilight says* 36). Reflecting on his own 1974 essay entitled "The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History," Edward Baugh suggests that this type of creative approach provides "[r]esolution, a seeing through, but not closure" (117). The Buffalo Soldier melophrasis in *Omeros* follows the same pattern: to praise the seductive power of fictional history, and, at the same time, acknowledge its limits. Thus, the reggae episode takes place at a pivotal moment in the narrative: Achille has just returned from his hallucinatory homecoming in Africa before the narrator chronicles his exile in America. Achille's quest for roots in the "mother continent" counteracts the narrator's little struggle in the US. The "Buffalo Soldier" section stands between two Caribbean muses: ancestral Africa and imperial America.

While fishing offshore, Achille becomes a victim of sunstroke and experiences an imaginary journey in precolonial Africa. In his dream, he witnesses a slave-raid and chases slave drivers to death, as

... with a clenched roar

he swung at the grinning laggard and the bladed oar

cleft through his skull with a sound like a calabash,  
splattering his chest with brain... . (Walcott, *Omeros* 147)

But the fisherman does not succeed in saving them and turning the tables of history:

and the one thought thudding in him was, I can deliver  
all of them by hiding in half-circle, then I could  
change their whole future...

... Then a cord  
of thorned vine looped his tendon, encircling the heel  
with its own piercing chain. He fell hard. He saw

the leaves pinned with stars... . (Walcott, *Omeros* 148)

With the allusion to Achilles's mythical heel, Achille's failed attempt conveys a mock-epic tone. As the use of the word "thud" in both episodes suggests, it also introduces features that are used in Achille's Buffalo Soldier masquerade as other warlike thoughts literally "thud" in Achille's mind when he remembers "Buffalo Soldier," the lethal oar becoming a Winchester, and, above all, the motif of Achille's cinematographic imagination is replicated with the song's melophrasis. Upon his arrival on the African coast, the fisherman remembers Hollywood African melodramas: "It was like the African movies / he had yelped at in childhood. The endless river unreeled / those images that flickered into real mirages" (Walcott, *Omeros* 133). This reference to a mirage is also used to conclude the first stanza of the "Buffalo Soldier" scene,

A remorseful Saturday strolled through the village,  
down littered pavements, the speakers gone from the street

whose empty shadows contradicted the mirage  
of last night's blockorama, but the systems' beat  
thudded in Achille's head that replayed the echo,  
as he washed the canoe, of a Marley reggae— (Walcott, *Omeros* 161)

The poem enlarges on the song, however: a spectacular enjambment separates the prepositional phrase (“of last night's blockorama”) from the name “mirage.” The blank space between the two stanzas acquires a polysemiotic significance as it not only materializes the bare sound of the speakers' echo but stands as a cinema screen for a “Buffalo Soldier” narrative where the “empty shadows” of the street can be converted into film characters. This cinematographic impression is strengthened by the cinematic effect of the interstrophic rhyme “street/beat.” Indeed, this type of rhyme is modelled on Dantean *terza rima* and Walcott considers *The Divine Comedy* as a precursor to cinema, “The antecedent of cinema is Dante; no other poet has his cinematic transparency” (qtd. in Fumagalli 277). The cinematic motif thus spreads:

Between the soft thud of surf the bass beat wider,  
  
backing his work up with its monodic phrasing.  
He saw the smoky buffalo, a black rider  
under a sweating hat, his slitted eyes grazing  
  
with the herds that drifted like smoke under low hills,  
the wild Indian tents, the sky's blue screen, and on it,  
the black soldier turned his face, and it was Achille's. (Walcott, *Omeros* 161)

As I said earlier, Achille sees a Buffalo soldier and then becomes him. This twist recalls the

rhetorical peroration of Marley's song where the speaker presents the Buffalo soldiers before ultimately saying he is one of them. The flip is also based on a joyful shading motif: the azure and the fabric of tents are offered as projected screens. To speak about "slitted eyes" at the end of the stanza, finally, makes the reader consider the actual blank space that he sees; if the reader looks through Achille's eyes, they will imagine buffalos ruling the Great Plains. In the same way, the previous interstrophic space provides ground for imaginative representations. Rhyme (wider/rider) and alliteration (between; backing; bass; beat) efficaciously drive the white crashing surf through the stanzas.

In addition, Walcott stresses an expression, "monodic phrasing," that is reminiscent of his comment about the Negro Spiritual "Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho":

[T]he epic poetry of the tribe originates, in its identification with Hebraic suffering, the migration, the hope of deliverance from bondage. There was this difference, that the passage over our Red Sea was not from bondage to freedom but its opposite [...] The epic concept was compressed in the folk lyric, the mass longing in chanter and chorus, couplet and refrain. The revivalist poems drew their strength from the self-hypnotic nature of their responses, interminable in monody as the tribal hope. (Walcott, *What the Twilight Says* 44-45)

Here, the adjective "self-hypnotic" can be appropriate to describe this reggae performance in *Omeros* by Achille. The appropriation of Jericho is also found in *Confrontation*, the album where "Buffalo Soldier" features alongside the song "Jump Nyabinghi," where its speaker says:

Cause, it reminds I of the days in Jericho  
When we trodding down Jericho walls  
These are the days when we'll trod through Babylon

Got to trod until Babylon falls.<sup>6</sup>

Accepting Rastafarian tradition, the song expresses the imaginative, mythical, and anticolonial power of music. Once again, Kwame Dawes explains the process,

Those who trampled down Jericho's walls are Marley and the audience. Time collapses and the power of that historical moment in time somehow reaches the present moment, turning the occasion of the song into a mythic one ... The Niyahbinghi sect of Rastafarianism drew its inspiration from Kenyan warriors who formed a secret society committed to battle the British white colonial force until death ... Marley's energy here is contagious (Dawes, *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius* 317-318)

We catch the verbal expression "to trod through" in "Buffalo Soldier" as well. Driven by Marley's musical puissance, Walcott builds a poem where a listener (Achille) visualizes an epic tableau, just as the audience of "Jump Nyabinghi" does. In the same manner, the poem's architecture encourages us to literally read between the lines, or more specifically, between the stanzas. The comic representation of cavalry charges is intended to create an anticolonial but galvanized reception to the song's energy.

### **The death-dance poetics of Walcott's reggae**

How does Walcott propose to capture the energy of reggae? How does he try to make the reader feel that he remembers reggae music with Achille?. Three years before publishing *Omeros*, Walcott expresses his fascination for Marley's music in a poem entitled "The Light of the World," and included in *The Arkansas Testament* (1987). This poem depicts Saint-Lucians listening to Marley's music in a small bus. As the epigraph shows, the Marley song playing is "Kaya": "Kaya now, got to have kaya now, / Got to have kaya now, / For the rain is falling" (Walcott, *The Arkansas*

---

<sup>6</sup> The lyrics are presented as such on the back cover of *Confrontation* (1983), the original album which includes the song.



*Testament* 48). In “The Light of the World,” the narrator does not sing with other passengers but the Saint-Lucian poet addresses the same subject as Marley, namely the rain,

... I had abandoned them,  
I had left them on earth, I left them to sing  
Marley’s songs of a sadness as real as the smell  
of rain on dry earth, or the smell of damp sand... (51)

Laurence A. Breiner sees Walcott “as a deejay, playing the B side of the Marley tune and improvising his own performance, his own story, over the classic track” (39). Yet he tries to stimulate the reader’s experience of reggae by playing his own writing instruments: sounding alliterations of [s] and [z] (sing / Marley’s songs of a sadness as real as the smell the song’s), visual enjambment (sing / Marley’s songs), anaphora (I had abandoned them, / I had left them) and renewed comparisons (sadness vs the smell of rain vs the smell of sand). Walcott, however, is also inspired by the metrical qualities of Marley’s lyrics. Discussing the poem with Glyn Maxwell and Caryl Philips, he analyzes the caesuras in Marley “No Woman No Cry,”<sup>7</sup>

I remember... when we use to sit in the government yard in Trenchtown”. The line has in it the essence of the rhythm of the poem, or the song. But it has to do with the sinuosity of the line<sup>8</sup> and, also, the fact that it contains three or four caesuras in that one line... The prose in it breaks up and contains three or four sections of that one sentence. So, it’s great fiction writing. Then, of course, there is a melody that comes with it. [Long silence of admiration] (Walcott, 2014)<sup>9</sup>

If he listens carefully to “No Woman, No Cry,” he claims, Walcott hears the prosaic sinuosity

---

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Matteo Campagnoli, one of Walcott’s Italian translators, who generously introduced me to this topic.

<sup>8</sup> Walcott also compares Marley’s line with Philip Larkin’s poem “The Whitsun Weddings” (1964), “Canals with floatings of industrial froth;” (Larkin 114).

<sup>9</sup> My transcription.

blowing through Marley's air:<sup>10</sup> "I remember || when we use to sit || in the government yard (||) in Trenchtown" (Marley, *No Woman, No Cry*). The pauses loosen up the discourse and open up the space in which we can quietly remember the houses, the neighborhood, the town.

In *Omeros*, the casual activities of Achille require the same Marley-like sinuosity, as the beginning of the reggae scene again shows,

... of last night's blockorama, but the systems' beat  
thudded in Achille's head that replayed the echo,  
as he washed the canoe, of a Marley reggae—

"Buffalo soldier." Thud. "Heart of America."—

Thud-thud. Mop and pail. He could not rub it away.

Between the soft thud of surf the bass beat wider... (161).

With the use of dashes between the interstrophic blank, the visual signals the aural. In *Omeros*, he capitalizes again on the word "thud" by using different forms (polypton): verb ("the system's beat / thudded"), ("the soft thud"), hyphenated noun made by repetition ("Thud-thud"), and a one-word sentence ("Thud"). The reader is then moved alike by the meaning (the thudding sound), and the shifted repetitions spread out through the idea of rhythm. Walcott reinforces this process by combining Achille's mopping with the aural-visual use of caesuras (in terms of imagination). The fisherman washes in rhythm and the verses break into clauses: "Buffalo soldier.' || Thud. || 'Heart of America,'" and "Thud-thud. || He could not rub it away." Of course, this suggestive impression of reggae dancing relies on the reader's penchant to mark the pause, his experience of the song, presumably, paves the way.

---

<sup>10</sup> I use the double-pipe mark sign (||) because the double slash (//) can be confused with interstrophic space.

In a similar vein, Walcott relies on the reader's familiarity with the narrative to reinforce the melophrasis' irony. At this stage, the reader knows the name of the dugout gommier canoe, *In God We Troust*. At *Omeros's* opening, the narrator describes its fabrication and baptism: made from gommier trees, the manufacturing process originates from the Indigenous Peoples of the Antilles. Though the word "canoe" is of indigenous origin, the original indigenous name of the gommier tree / canoe is forgotten. Claiming his right to invent, Achille uses Caribbean-English ("Is" for "it is") to assume the misspelling of the US motto, *In God We Trust*, "When he [the priest] smiled at Achille's canoe, *In God We Troust*, / Achille said: 'Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine.'" (Walcott, *Omeros* 8). With the canoe's name in mind, the reader is enthralled by the structural irony: while acting as a Buffalo Soldier, Achille basically mops away a mock US motto written on the hull.

The US imperial plea in the Caribbean is also inscribed in the "Buffalo soldier"'s lyrics,  
Driven from the mainland  
To the heart of the Caribbean  
...  
Trodding through San Juan  
In the arms of America  
Trodding through Jamaica, a Buffalo Soldier.

Here, Marley could be referring to the Spanish-American war of 1898, specifically the Battle of San Juan Hill in Cuba fought by the 9th Regiment, or he could be alluding to the 6<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment, a Company of Black volunteers who engaged in battle in Puerto-Rico. In either case, the song brings into light another problematic Afro-American achievement, how the Smoked Yankees—the Spanish name for the Buffalo Soldiers—embraced American colonial crusades without regard for the colonized Cubans and Puerto-Ricans. The contrapuntal melophrasis sets this

other colonial issue,

as, fist by fist, from the bow he pulled up anchor,  
he saw, like palms on a ridge, the Red Indians come  
with blurred hooves drumming to the music's sweet anger,

while his own horse neighed and stamped, smelling a battle  
in its own seat. Achille eased the long Winchester  
out of its fringed case. This was the oar. His saddle

the heaving plank at the stern, a wave's crest was the  
white eagle bonnet; then slowly he fired the oar  
and a palm-tree crumpled; then to repeated cracks

from the rifle, more savages, until the shore  
was littered with palm spears, bodies: like Aruacs  
falling to the muskets of the Conquistador. (Walcott, *Omeros* 162)

The rhyming interstrophic propulsion (anger/Winchester/the; oar/shore; cracks/Aruacs) follows the usual cinematographic reel of similes: as I said earlier, palms are being compared to Indigenous Peoples of North America and oars to rifles, but also, the wave's foaming crest is compared to the US eagle symbol, the stern seat to the saddle, a falling palm's cracks to gunshots, palm spears on the beach to dead Indigenous Peoples of North America bodies, and, finally, to the exterminated Indigenous Peoples of Saint-Lucia. Achille kills his fellow predecessors with his oar, which drives the same gommier canoe they created. The similes' outcome drives the melophrasis to its rhetorical

conclusion: the Buffalo Rastaman of the song kills the same Caribbean people who contributed to his Caribbean culture. Achille acts like the very Spanish conquistador the historical Buffalo Soldiers fought in Cuba and in Puerto-Rico.

Walcott cultivates the Buffalo Soldier/colonized people question by stirring up an astonishing reconciliation between reggae music and indigenous American dance. After Achille finishes washing his canoe while performing “Buffalo Soldier,” the fisherman maneuvers his boat when he notices the narrator’s plane in the sky: “Achille raised his hand / from the drumming rudder, then watched our minnow plane / melt into cloud-coral over the horned island” (Walcott, *Omeros* 168). This marks the end of the third Book before the reader can move on to the fourth, which will be dedicated to the narrator’s journey through the US. There he will recall the historic Ghost Dance movement for the reunification of Indigenous American tribes at the end of the 19th century. Participants believed the dance and associated rituals would cause their deceased get up and stand up to fight the anticolonial struggle. Noticing “that critics have tended to view [the inclusion of the Indigenous Peoples of North America material] in *Omeros*, as the poem’s major failing,” Sarah Philips Casteel thinks differently: “employing a strategy of indirection in *Omeros* that recalls Édouard Glissant’s concept of *détour*, Walcott calls attention to a suppressed indigenous past that haunts the Caribbean through a thematic focus on Native American history” (106-07). Marley’s contrapuntal melophrasis serves also to soften the reader’s encounter with the Ghost Dance:

Then, pennons in reggae-motion, a white bonnet  
in waves of heat like a sea-horse, leading them in  
their last wide charge, the soft hooves pounding his skull,

Red Indians bouncing to a West Indian rhythm,  
to the cantering beat which, as he swayed, the scull  
of the lance-like oar kept up like a metronome... (Walcott, *Omeros* 161)

Singular and plural uses of the word Indian (polyptoton), and the punning rhyme (scull/skull) encompass Achille's vision: Indigenous Peoples of North America could have danced to the same type of music that the Caribbean fisherman experiences. Could that music be the Ghost Dance? In the proofs of his manuscript, Walcott is even more explicit and speaks about "the death-dance of the reggae" (Walcott, Toronto Papers). That is the extraordinary privilege of Marley's "Buffalo Soldier" in Walcott's *Omeros*. To make a reader believe that the Indigenous Peoples of North America, whom the Buffalo Soldiers fought, were dancing reggae music to prepare for combat.

### **Conclusion**

At the Washington National Cathedral, on November 5, 2021, the US Army brass quintet played a Marley song at the funeral of General Colin Powell. Among the numerous decorations held by this son of Jamaican immigrants was the Honorary Order of Jamaica, conferred upon him in 1994 by Governor-General Sir Howard Cooke. By a strange coincidence of history, the US Vietnam veteran died on October 18<sup>th</sup>, Jamaican National Heroes Day. "Jamaican hero Buffalo soldier 'went to war for America,'" writes Vinette K. Pryce in *Caribbean Life* (1). Instead of "Buffalo Soldier," the brass band played "Three Little Birds," despite General Powell being the one who inaugurated, in 1992, the Buffalo Soldier monument in Fort Leavenworth, the third-oldest active military installation in the US. The sculpture, realized by Eddie Dixon, another Army veteran, shows a Black soldier riding a horse with a rifle in his hand. In opposition to the continuous glorification of the Buffalo Soldier figure in the Caribbean and in the US, *Omeros's* contrapuntal melophrasis shows how the system made the Buffalo soldiers kill the Indigenous Peoples of North America.

As a challenge to John Ford's grimly segregated *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960),<sup>11</sup> Danny Glover's television film *Buffalo Soldiers* (1997) establishes a "rainbow-coalition fantasy" (Schubert 16) where Black soldiers free the Apaches they have captured. Glover thus tries to amend the Black pride rhetoric found in Marley's "Buffalo Soldier." The recognition of the Buffalo Soldiers' heroism took time, however, as Buffalo veterans suffered during the Jim Crow era. For Dawes, this erasure explains Marley's dedication: "The key element of the story [The Battle of San Juan Hill] that would have moved Marley was the fact that this grand story of heroism and dignity had been suppressed by Babylon for so long" (Dawes, *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius* 321). The hidden story of Black soldiers' involvement in the early American Wars erupted in the US artistic scene of the political '70s. As I mentioned earlier, The Flamingos released a single called *Buffalo Soldier* in 1970. The Persuasion, an acapella group, adapted the song in 1972, and Quincy Jones included "Soul Saga (the Song of the Buffalo Soldier)" on his *Body Heat* album in 1974. The recording of "Buffalo Soldier" in 1978 follows this trend. In this context, Marley's African American involvement may look economically driven by a US agenda if we consider with Mike Alleyne "that economic and cultural forces external to his creative instinct have exerted enormous influence on his musical representation and expression" (Alleyne 226). However, Marley is not intimidated by cultural and commercial "gorgons" (Marley, "Rat Race"), nor by the Medusa of history Caribbean poets ignore. His creative freedom leads him to draw on the Buffalo's original metaphor: with his dreadlocks, the Rastaman is a Buffalo Soldier. In *Omeros*, Achille's "Buffalo Soldier" masquerade thus infuses the poem's ethics based on the refusal to fix a character in one definitive identity.

Although Achille's masquerade aligns with the song's creativity, it unmask the reality of the Caribbean-based lyrics, too. It connects Indigenous Peoples of North America to the Indigenous

---

<sup>11</sup> Sergeant Rutledge (Woody Strode) and the other Buffalo Soldiers disregard the Apaches. I thank my colleague Richard Parker for driving my attention to the John Ford movie.

Peoples of the Antilles while also recalling the US colonization of Cuba and Puerto Rico. *Omeros's* contrapuntal melophrasis does not only convey a counternarrative inscribed in the lyrics, but also uncovers a fictional narrative based on the untold butchery, and the song's imaginative energy. We thus start from an aural medium and move to a narrative masquerade as a verbal work of art. This unveiling is driven by the force of Marley's music. Regarding rhythm, Walcott alludes contrapuntally to reggae music. The Saint-Lucian poet uses his words as orchestration: rhymes induce motion, blank spaces stimulate polysemiotic reception, alliterations produce cadence, similes fantasize melody, and caesuras break into dance. Referring to the Sioux Ghost Dance, Walcott goes as far as suggesting a death reggae dance.

Visiting Dublin, *Omeros's* narrator worships James Joyce's achievement, calling him the "undimmed master / and true tenor of the place" (200). Regarding the reggae melophrasis, Marley—whose voice extends from baritone to tenor— appears here as the Carribean's true tenor. At the very end of *Omeros*, the poet narrator laments on his poem's reception:<sup>12</sup>

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,  
who never ascended in an elevator,  
who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,  
  
never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,  
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water  
(which is not for this book, which will remain unknown  
  
and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter

---

<sup>12</sup> Commenting on "The Light of the World," Catherine M. Douillet thinks Walcott "acknowledges that his poem cannot do much for the St. Lucian people and will probably not even be read by them, contrary to the ubiquitous Bob Marley's music with which Walcott began the poem" (Douillet).



that brought him delight, and that from necessity— (320)

The narrator seems to regret that Achille will not read his poem—but the poet is sly. This is the structural irony of inserting a blank space after the word “unknown,” and a rarely used parenthesis: the blank space makes the saying unpredictable. *Omeros*'s reader sees an optimistic future. In time people will see that the sons of Achille prophesied by Walcott will read through the stanzas and hear a similar sound to Marley's “Jamming,” “No bullet can stop us now, we neither beg nor we won't bow; / Neither can be bought nor sold.” When these Caribbean Achilles read that fishermen “haul *In God We Trust* back in place, / jamming logs under its keel” (Walcott, *Omeros* 324), they will know that dragging the anti-imperial gommier canoe requires the same rhythmic vigour as the jamming reggae dance. A fisherman ironically makes a rifle with his oar: the contrapuntal melophrasis does not only make you think, but it also helps to free your mind. This is one good thing about music and poetry, when they hit, you feel no anticolonial pain.

Works cited

- Alleyne, Mike. "Positive Vibration?: Capitalist Textual Hegemony and Bob Marley." *Caribbean Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3-4, 1994: pp. 224-41.
- Allsopp, Richard, and Jeanette Allsopp. "Is". *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*. Oxford University Press, 2003. 307.
- Baugh, Edward. "Reflections on 'The Quarrel with History.'" *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 2, July 2012: pp. 108-118.
- Breiner, Laurence A. "Creole Language in the Poetry of Derek Walcott". *Callaloo*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2005: pp. 29-41.
- Dawes, Kwame. *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius*. Bobcat Books. 2012.
- . *Natural Mysticism: Towards a new Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean writing*. Peep Tree Press, 1999.
- Douillet, Catherine M. "The Quest for Caribbean Identities: Postcolonial Conflicts and Cross-Cultural Fertilization in Derek Walcott's Poetry". *AmeriQuests*, vol. 7, no. 1, February 2010. <https://ejournals.library.vanderbilt.edu/index.php/ameriquests/article/view/169>.
- Edgecombe, Rodney. "Melophrasis: Defining a Distinctive Genre of Literature/Music Dialogue." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 26, no. 4, Fall 1993: pp. 1-20.
- Flamingos, The. "Buffalo Soldier." *Buffalo Soldier*. Polydor, 1970. CD.
- Fumagalli, Maria Cristina. *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante*. Rodopi, 2001.
- James, Marlon. *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Oneworld, 2014.
- Larkin, Philip. *Collected poems*. Ed. Anthony Thwaite, Faber and Faber, 1990.

- Marley, Bob. "Buffalo Soldier." *Confrontation*. Tuff Gong/Island Records, 1983. CD.
- "Jamming." *Exodus*. Tuff Gong/Island Records, 1977. CD.
- "Jump Nyabingi." *Confrontation*. Tuff Gong/Island Records, 1983. CD.
- "Rat Race." *Rastaman Vibration*. Tuff Gong/Island Records, 1976. CD.
- "War." *Rastaman Vibration*. Tuff Gong/Island Records, 1976. CD.
- Phillips Casteel, Sarah. "'One Elegy from Aruac to Sioux': The Absent Presence of Indigeneity in Derek Walcott's Poetry and Drama." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2011: pp. 106-18.
- Pryce, Vinette K. "Jamaican hero Buffalo soldier 'went to war for America.'" *Caribbean Life*, 22 October 2021. <https://www.caribbeanlife.com/jamaican-hero-buffalo-soldier-went-to-war-for-america/>. Accessed 7 Jun 2024.
- Saïd, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.
- Schubert, Frank N. "Buffalo Soldiers: Myths and Realities." *Army History*, no. 52, Spring 2001: pp.13-18.
- Vilmar, Therese Wiwe. "It's in the Silence You Feel You Hear." *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 75, no. 6, 2020: pp. 281-97.
- Walcott, Derek. *The Arkansas Testament*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.
- *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.
- Derek Walcott Papers. The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
- Interview and reading. By Glyn Maxwell and Caryl Phillips. 92nd street Y. 9 April 2014. <https://www.92ny.org/archives/derek-walcott-glyn-maxwell-caryl-phillips>. Accessed 7 Jun 2024.
- *Omeros*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
- *What the Twilight Says*, Faber and Faber, 1998.