"Personal interpretations of past time—the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture."
Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*

We Will Both Praise it Now: A discussion on History, Memory, and the voices who sing of both

It has been said that history is written by the winners. Indeed, as Walter Benjamin says, "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate" (*Illuminations*, 256). But what of the memories of those who lived through the historical events? Before the appearance, or more specifically the study of, postcolonial literature, the stories of indigenous peoples were told by the conquerors and explorers: D.H. Lawrence, Leonard Woolf, and Daniel Defoe. It could perhaps then be inferred that "history" is a Western theory or recalling the past, while "memory" is a non-Western method of remembering the past. The emergence of memory as a category of academic discourse is then a "healthy result" of decolonization (Klein 135). Indeed, the declaration of history and memory as not being polar opposites has become one of the clichés of the school of thought. Memory is replacing old stand-bys such as "nature," "culture," and "language," as the term most usually coupled with history and that shift is remaking historical imagination (Klein 128). History, as with other key terms, finds its meaning largely through its counter concepts like "the future" as well as its synonyms "the past" and thus the emergence of memory seeks to redefine the boundaries of histories. Here, two authors who have broken the boundaries between history and memory in postcolonial literature will be discussed: Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and J.M Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians.* Walcott and Coetzee depict very different places in very different ways; Walcott describes the mythical history of St. Lucia through multiple voices and experiences, while Coetzee describes the confessional memoir of a

single man in an abstract place. Yet both authors aim to do the same thing: to insert their characters' memories into broader historical contexts, while at the same time allowing their characters to forget pieces of the past.

Walcott's *Omeros* has been discussed as the juxtaposition between history and myth of the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. To do so is to aptly represent a colonized, decolonized, and postcolonized nation whose history is amalgamation of colonial histography and cultural memory. Instead of privileging one over the other, "Walcott rather utilizes both historical and mythical modes of representation precisely in order to foreground the way in which one discourse relies upon and cancels out the other" (Williams 277). Walcott abstracts the Caribbean island into mythical proportions by creating a labyrinth of memories, histories, and identities. He translates the single landscape of St. Lucia by repeatedly redefining through different people's perspectives. Walcott seeks to step analytically sideways, to see the landscape of St. Lucia (literally and metaphorically) from a different angle, to see the life events of Helen, Achilles, Hector, and Plunkett not as trivial or isolated, but significant and necessary to History. At the same time he resists being a part of History. Walcott does not feature a central protagonist, but rather allows the maintenance of a wider interpretation through a chorus of different voices, albeit different experiences. He must negotiate the memories and histories of his characters as well as national identities such as British (the Empire), Greek (the literary tradition), and Aruac (the native culture): "where Ogun can fire one with his partner Zeus" (Walcott 53). In short, the multiplicity of *Omeros* is a hybridist cultural exercise.

On the other hand, J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* employs a single voice to tell the allegorical history of an abstract frontier. "By setting his novel in an unnamed country at an unnamed time, by terming the two parties the Empire and the Barbarians…Coetzee creates an allegorical landscape that loosely suggests the Roman Empire on the verge of collapse but

undoubtedly points to South Africa today" (Gallagher 281). Unlike Walcott, Coetzee indexes a theoretical geography and gives it a single voice. The Magistrate tells the story of "the frontier," wherever it may be. By creating a nationalist allegory, Coetzee also creates a universal Empire, or at least an Empire that has existed before, all over the globe. Moreover, Coetzee credits this universal Empire for dictating the way in which history is created. As the Magistrate declares: "Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe" (Coetzee 133). Though the catastrophe the Magistrate speaks of may be a natural disaster or war, it is evident to readers of Coetzee that he is speaking of the torture and oppression of South Africa, without calling it such. "The effect of this time displacement is to reveal truths about any oppressive society…" (Gallagher 281-282). Yet by saying so in allegorical terms, he speaks not only to South Africa's regime, but to any like it.

Just as Coetzee aims to display the truth about the world in which he lives, so too does the Magistrate of his novel. He wishes to leave behind an archive of what has happened on his frontier; the torture, the barbarism, albeit the madness of the Empire. Yet, any time he wishes to speak, write, or know the truth, he is at a loss for words. "What the second document is to be I do not yet know. A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier?" (Coetzee 58). The inability to decide which kind of archive to leave says much about the Magistrate's ambivalence towards his experience. By wanting to leave a "testament" he professes his belief about what happened; a "memoir" would be an account of his personal experience; a "confession" would admit crimes or wrongdoing; a "history" would be a record of past events. The Magistrate's memory then, is perhaps all of these modes of remembering, which leads him to be indecisive. Yet what he does know is this: "I will not disappear into the

earth without leaving my mark on them" (Coetzee 112). However, to correctly relay the events that have transpired on the frontier, the Magistrate feels he cannot be bounded by law, order, or Empire. "…I will abandon the locutions of a civil servant with literary ambitions and begin to tell the truth" (Coetzee 154). Nonetheless, memory and history take place in relation to broader social contexts, thus they are always bounded. The Magistrate is bounded by the Empire, whose agenda does not necessarily include the truth about happened, what people remember, but how it serves the Empire's interests. Indeed, Colonel Joll (the quintessential representation of the cold, distant Empire with his sunglasses and lack of compassion) very explicitly tells the Magistrate that his memory and the history of his frontier are of little importance: "You want to go down in history as a martyr, I suspect. But who is going to put you in the history books? These border troubles are of no significance…People are not interested in the history of the back of beyond" (Coetzee 114). Despite his seeming lack of agency as his aims of recalling his memories of the frontier and making a history or them, do not serve the Empire's greater interests, the Magistrate wishes to leave his mark in the history book as being the only man who was not a barbarian (Coetzee 104).

Another man who wishes to leave his mark on the history books is Walcott's Colonel Plunkett in *Omeros*. Plunkett obsessively researches the history of the Caribbean island, through its naval archives: "History was fact/History was a cannon, not a lizard" (Walcott 92). Yet as he delves further into St. Lucia's history, he realizes two things: firstly, that he is looking for his memory in the archives. "While Plunkett's textual identity is governed by and constitutive of a discourse of British imperialism, however, he is nonetheless compelled to construct a familial genealogy in a mode of discourse more mythical than historical" (Williams 278). Though he has no association but a name, Plunkett immediately inserts his name into the histories; he calls this sailor his son, as if Plunkett wants his lineage, his memory, to live on through history.

Secondly, Plunkett wishes to not only include himself into history, but also Helen, his housemaid, the embodiment of the beautiful island: "So Plunkett decided that what the place needed/was its true place in history, that he'd spend hours/for Helen's sake on research, so he proceeded/to the whir of enormous moths in the still house/Memory's engines" (Walcott 64). Plunkett's desire to give Helen a history, because he believes she does not have one of her own, without access to History and its archives, echoes Edward Said in his *Orientalism* where he says, "If he does not speak directly for the Orientals, it is because they after all speak another language, yet he knows how they feel since he knows their history, their reliance upon such as he, and their expectations" (Said 34). Plunkett wishes to take over, albeit colonizes Helen's history because he believes it is he who can properly and objectively represent her. She cannot do it herself, as she has no agency, nor a voice.

Plunkett is not the only one trying to define and write Helen. Walcott's Homeresque poet-narrator looks to do the same: "Plunkett, in his innocence/had tried to change History to a metaphor/in the name of a housemaid; I, in self-defence/altered her opposite. Yet it was all for her" (Walcott 270). Walcott's poet looks to do what Plunkett does, but more prosaically. He writes history from the bottom up, trying to give a voice to silenced people like Achilles, Hector, and Helen, individuals written of and about by those other than themselves. He attempts to tell of moments when the dominate history and one's own experience do not match up: "the prose/of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes" (Walcott 15). Yet by doing so, the poet-narrator (and in turn, Walcott) believes he is only perpetuating the myth of history: "What I had read and rewritten till literature/was as guilty as History" (Walcott 271). By inserting these everyday people and their experiences into the epic, Walcott creates a discord, but in doing so makes them legitimate for the epic genre, and renders them fit for the grandiose, for History. Perhaps then, "there was no real need for the historian's/remorse, nor for literature's" (Walcott 271).

In the creation of history, through the memories of a single man, or a multitude of island denizens, there is also the creation of forgetting. Whether intentional or unintentional, to recall, write, or sing the past is also to forget some of it. For Coetzee's Magistrate, the forgetting is a very intentional act. He wants to forget the Empire, the frontier, the Barbarians, as a means to erase the anguish of what he has seen and experienced. "It would be better if this chapter in history of the world were terminated at once…and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain" (Coetzee 24). The Magistrate's intentional forgetting is due to the guilt he feels for letting torture and hunting of the barbarians happen. His guilt, and his forgetting of his guilt, manifest in the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl. After being tortured by the soldiers of the Empire, she is blind and crippled; the Magistrate forms an intimate relationship with her, perhaps to alleviate his guilt. "So I begin to face the truth of what I am trying to do: to obliterate the girl. I realize that if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start. Is she truly so featureless?" (Coetzee 47). It is not that the girl is featureless so much as it is that the Magistrate wants her to be so. He wants to first understand her scarred body, and then erase it; her marked body will not allow him to forget, thus he wishes to erase her body. "Throughout the novel, when the Magistrate searches for meaning, he confronts blankness" (Gallagher 279). So it is with the barbarian girl, and his desire to "obliterate" her and the history on her body.

For those inhabiting Walcott's *Omeros*, the forgetting is less a deliberate deed and more a consequence of a colonial history that writes and rewrites the island's experience. "We think of the past/as better forgotten than fixed with stony regret" (Walcott 192). To remember is to regret; to forget is to let go. In a text where multiple traditions and characters overlap, it seems only natural that certain moments, names, places, and people are forgotten, and there is little that can be done about it. "This was history. I had no power to change it" (Walcott 217). But

forgetting is a form of loss, and by forgetting names, places, and people, the island suffers. What was once "Iounalao," becomes St. Lucia, and the men who contributed to the island's growth become merely myths: "but the builders' names are not there/not Hector's ancestors, Philoctete's, nor Achille's" (Walcott 315). It is both that the colonial history of the island forgets the builders and Iounalao as well as they forgetting themselves. "For those to whom history is the presence/of ruins, there is a green nothing" (Walcott 192). To do so is not an act of submission or resistance, but merely a natural part of life.

What Coetzee's Magistrate and Walcott's characters (specifically Plunkett and the poet-narrator) aim to do is place their own memories of themselves and their places into a larger historical narrative; for "those who are lying prostrate" as Walter Benjamin puts it, to rise to their feet. Memory then is a mechanism used to make, assert, and insert unique stories into a history. Yet it is not only a question of how and what individuals remember and how they represent their memories, but also what might be christened a "cultural struggle" over the creation and meanings of memory within culture; the ways in which the very means and possibility of remembering are created (King 5). For the Magistrate, Coetzee creates a solo lamenting the somewhat invisible injustices of the Empire's frontier, and how this one voice will be the only one to tell the truth of what has happened to the people at "the back of beyond." For Plunkett, and the poet-narrator, Walcott creates a chorus singing the island St. Lucia, and her ordinary inhabitants, living ordinary but meaningful lives. Yet in both songs, the authors, and their characters, embrace their memories into the Histories.

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