Rejecting Colonial Memory

It is clear that a collective historical memory, which in this case refers to more of an accepted global or national notion of what happened in the past, is an integral part of society's notion of its place in time. Yet it is not valid to take this historical memory as the only existent form of history. Writers across the world strive to uncover and in some cases retain the history that, as Walter Benjamin might say, “present rulers step over” (*Illuminations*, 256). It may remain in the memory of the few, but still seem absent from the collective historical memory. Authors can choose different media to shed more light on lost aspects of the past that have been forgotten or removed. In the specific category, although it may be a problematic one, of post-colonial fiction impressive attempts to indicate lost histories can be found. This attempts maybe in relation to a specific history that the author may be trying to revive or in other cases, the author may simply try to bring to light the fact that histories may be lost in general. Two authors that bring these ideas out through their allusions, symbols and description are Derek Walcott and Michael Ondaatje. In their works, specifically *Omeros* and *The English Patient*, contain well constructed points that can be interpreted to shed some light on the loss or at least the obstruction of historical memory. In another vain, it could be argued that these authors are trying to recreate a memory that they think has been lost. Both works use allusions, characters, and specific examples to highlight the way in which colonialism has 'stepped over' the collective memory or history of those they colonize.

In Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, the character Kip creates an interesting subject to discuss the attempt to include the memories and histories of colonized places. One of the interesting ways in which this happens is through the transformation of Kip’s name. Although this happens later in the book through a flashback, it brings out a curious way of thinking about the relationship between the colony and the colonizer. First, it must be noted that the temporal setting of the book is important. During the

time of World War II, India was still a colony of the British Empire. This point must be made, because some may argue that Ondaatje does not have any particular reason for the situation of Kip, and is merely reflecting the time in which the book is placed. But it must be made clear that this is almost undoubtedly not the case. As a writer who is a part of the colonial experience, one cannot take his writing just as a piece of historical fiction. The devolution of Kip's name from Kirpal Singh shows brings light to one way in which the colonizer slowly covers up a colonies collective memory. The first notion of this is that as soon and the flashback of Kip's time in England begins, he is no longer referred to as Kip, but as Kirpal Singh (Ondaatje 181). This is significant, because before this point, there was only one mention of Kip's full name, and it was only in passing. It is almost as if the author is using the name to mark the transformation of the man. The flashback begins with the use of Kirpal Singh, and it seems that instantly the author is discussing a different person. "Kirpal Singh stood where the horse's saddle would have lain across its back" (181). Also, in first parts of the flashback, there are references to Kip by his last name. Ondaatje makes the point that this is not the Kip that the reader has gotten to know previously in the book. It is then made fully clear at the end of the flash back when, Kip "hears Miss Morden's voice. 'There is a change in Kip throughout his time in England. In the same passing tone that his full name was brought up at the beginning of the book, Kip's name is lost. The voice of his skeptical brother is all but forgotten in favor of Lord Suffolk, who has befriended Kip. By transforming a name, Ondaatje shows how colonial powers can facilitate the loss of a collective memory, and slowly start to replace it with their own notion of collective memory. Losing the last name is especially important. In many ways, the loss of the last name shows a loss not only of his family, but in a more far reaching way, his Sikh culture. Although the author is using a personal memory situation, using a loss of culture in the example points clearly to a collective loss of memory. At this point in the book, the realization of loss is not as clear, but Ondaatje plants the seed of what would later be a full

realization of the way the colony has lost some of its collective memory.

Towards the end of *The English Patient* Kip's tenuous relationship with his colonizer is exposed for what it is, and Ondaatje uses historical events to make trigger his indictment on colonial powers. As Kip hears of the atomic bomb blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all the experiences of British imposed memory and learning seem to be of no consequence, and the memory of his native history is restored. Anger boils to the surface of the usually collected Kip and Ondaatje brings to light the conflict between the memory of the colonized and the colonizer. When Kip begins to comprehend the new events, he immediately confronts the English Patient: "I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country" (Ondaatje 283). The author could not be more obvious in bringing to light how Kip's own memory has been sacrificed for that of the power of the British Empire. He uses the colonial era to describe issues that are now relevant in the post-colonial era. Kip goes further talking about how there was an element of fear behind the way in which the Indian man was changed in some way to accept the British version of memory. Memory is not always just history, but the memory of customs, the memory of a way of life. Further making this point, Kip says, "Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be pukkah" (Ondaatje 283). Pukkah here is to mean something along the lines of authentic. The point made is that Indians gave up their lives, their potential to contribute to their Indian collective memory, because they had been indoctrinated into thinking that the British historical cause was the more important. An extra point to be made from this passage is the use of a Hindi word. It is interesting that Ondaatje uses a non-English word without feeling the need to define it anyway. Could this word be seen as an attempt to show that the use of a colonial tongue is just as valid as English? Assuming that a very small portion of the books audience speaks Hindi, it could be argues that the author is bring attention to the fact that he no longer thinks that colonial languages should be relegated to the memory and should be revived again in modern writing. Taken together, Kip's

conflicting relationship with the country that colonized his India shows how Britain has in many ways, through the colonial experience, suppressed the collective memory of India.

Derek Walcott is another author that uses fiction to discuss the notions of the loss of collective memory. Most intriguing is one way in which Walcott chooses to highlight this, taking the project one step further and try reviving a sense of collective memory of former colonies. The tool used is myth, using a tool that extends the memory of a civilization long after it has passed to create recall a memory that was lost prematurely. *Omeros* plays on the myths of Homer, which have lasted thousands of years, and places them in the colonial St. Lucia. In doing so, Walcott creates a way to work inside the frame of thinking that colonial rule has created but still recall the unique memory that each colony has lost. It is critical that authors try to work within the system, because a majority of these writers are products of this colonizer-colonized system. The characters of Major Plunkett and Maud in *Omeros*, almost play a role like that of Friday in Robinson Crusoe. A parallel can be drawn between the two. Friday is an image of what the majority of the colonial power structure felt of those people they colonized and controlled. On the reverse of this, in *Omeros*, Plunkett is an image of what the colonial people think of colonial power. One purpose of including these characters is what can be considered an attempt to revive a lost memory, is to include why the memory was stepped over. Walcott understand that the colonial experience has become apart of that collective memory and must also be included in addition to the revival of the old. The best way to assert ideas is to insure that the opposition, in this case, the colonizing power, is aware of the points that are being raised. Walcott creates parallels with Greek myth that draw importance to the common memory of the colonized fisher folk. One such example is when the narrator asks, “when would I not hear the Trojan War in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop?” (Walcott 270) Creating a dialog between lasting memories of myth and lost memory helps revive it. The work is filled with such examples, but this is what makes the work so effective. The

close intermingling of the average colonial life with the epic stories with which many readers will be familiar makes the forgotten memory as if it had never been lost. This allusion is another tool that Walcott uses in the revival of the importance to the St. Lucia collective memory. Authors such as Walcott seem to consider myth as a way in which memory stays alive. Linking a lost collective memory to it gives it new light in a unique form that is memorable.

Recalling a collective memory that has not been allowed to flourish is a difficult task. Fiction provides a medium that can at once draw attention to the lost historical memory and in some ways, revive it. Walcott and Ondaatje have found ways to incorporate the revival of memory 'stepped over' by colonial powers. It is important to also remember that these authors come out of a combination colonial and post-colonial era, which brings out some specific characteristics in their writing. First, they have a greater understanding of how to meld two different types of traditions and further, they understand as well not to throw one out in favor of the other. Each colony/colonizer pair are apart of the collective memory of the other, and the acceptance of this fact is a key to the revival of the colony's faded memory. Second, it has given them a variety of issues specific to their homeland in which to emphasize in the voice of a person educated at the 'colonial center'. Of course they discuss multiple issues in their novels, but there is something to say about multiple authors from somewhat similar experiences address a common issue. Those readers who find truth in what they learn must understand that they also have an opportunity to reclaim an identity, a memory and a history that might have been lost or partially glazed over in the past by the colonial experience. Kip found the realization that he no longer had to strive to be *pukkah*, and in some ways embraced himself and the memory of his people again.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968.

Ondaatje, Michael. The English Patient. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Walcott, Derek. Omeros. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.