

### **Bridging Walcott's Imaginary and Arendt's Problematic**

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. Since then, human rights discourse has become a customary feature of international civic life; so too has critique thereof, often grounded in discussions of nationalism. This discourse and counterdiscourse can be seen as broadly similar to other tensions that undergird critical and imaginative projects: for example, between the colonial and the anticolonial and the universal and the particular. Manifestations of these tensions occur in diverse contexts, from literature to philosophy to law. In this paper, I highlight two instances of these manifestations and bring them into dialog to gesture towards new critical and imaginative projects.

I argue that the work of Derek Walcott and Hannah Arendt can and should be read together. I begin by examining Derek Walcott's poetry on its own terms, outlining the tension in his work between rootedness in the Caribbean and participation in the "global republic" of English. I explore the strategies Walcott deploys in imagining a different future outside of both colonialism and anticolonialism, focusing particularly on Walcott's relationship with nationalism and history. I then turn to Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, highlighting in particular her articulation of the problematic of human rights. As with Walcott, I focus on how Arendt's critique is founded in her concerns with nationalism and history. Finally, I discuss human rights documents bearing in mind Arendt's critique of the discourse these documents represent. I take seriously the claim that these documents constitute a literary genre to then think about how Walcott's strategies in writing poetry can be applied to a different sort of literary imaginary.<sup>1</sup> Rethinking this act of imagination, I argue, enriches discussion of Arendt's problematic by offering space for new critical and imaginative projects. I seek to demonstrate that Walcott's literary imaginary can fruitfully engage Arendt's arguments against human rights to articulate a kind of postcoloniality outside of

anticolonialism.

### Walcott and his poetry

Walcott's project is informed by his deeper concerns with history and nationalism and the personal tension he feels between the universal and the particular; these are also the primary influences on Arendt's work, as I demonstrate later on. Walcott's work is rooted in a tension related to the postcolonial condition. On the one hand, Walcott is steeped in the Caribbean, and specifically in his home island of St Lucia. On the other hand, Walcott is invested in the "global republic" of English, in particular inheriting form and language from previous authors.<sup>2</sup> In short, Walcott – like any colonial subject – is always torn between being rooted and exiled at the same time. I argue that Walcott negotiates this tension both through his relationship with "nationalism" and his treatment of "history." I further argue that Walcott's response to the tension takes the form of a literary imaginary that fully inhabits the hybrid space Walcott exemplifies.

Walcott himself recognized the tension undergirding his work in the lecture he gave when accepting the 1992 Nobel Prize. He spoke eloquently about the "Caribbean genius" that "is condemned to contradict itself" by at once celebrating the Antilles – "the brown young archers of Felicity, with the same cabbage palms against the same Antillean sky" – while also invoking "the old plantation system, ... a white French language in a white pith helmet." As a writer, Walcott says, he feels "the same poignancy of pride in the poems as in the faces" of all Antillean diversity and contradiction.<sup>3</sup> Walcott, then, cares deeply about the Caribbean in both poetry and prose. Yet he yearns for and borrows from all the riches offered by what is, in effect, a colonial project: the global language of English. This tension is not only literary but also deeply personal, tracing right back to Walcott's childhood.<sup>4</sup> This is evinced not only by Walcott's biography but also by his writing in *Omeros*, his great 1990 epic, particularly when describing his father's heritage:

“I was raised in this obscure Caribbean port,  
Where my bastard father christened me for his shire:  
Warwick. The Bard’s county.”<sup>5</sup>

Both in his poetry and in his critical essays, Walcott clearly recognizes that he was always both rooted and exiled at the same time.

What is a poet so deeply torn between home and globalism to do? One answer is given by Frantz Fanon, a postcolonial Caribbean writer of an earlier generation: “The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future. But to ensure that hope and to give it form, he must take part in action and throw himself body and soul into the national struggle [*le combat national*].”<sup>6</sup> The martial language is reinforced by Fanon’s later reference to Algeria, where “national Algerian culture is taking on form and content ... in every French outpost which is captured or destroyed.”<sup>7</sup> Fanon draws explicit links between cultural nationalism, which is necessary to build a new polity in the aftermath of colonialism, and exclusionary nationalism, which is based on violent hatred of those who do not belong to the new nation.<sup>8</sup>

Walcott’s relationship with nationalism is key to understanding his work, and therefore understanding how his concerns coincide with Arendt’s and inform his creative project. Walcott does not entirely reject Fanon; indeed, he does resist colonialism by articulating a distinctly Caribbean poetry. Yet Walcott *does* react to Fanon in ways other than emulation; for example, he is not sympathetic to revolutionary violence. As Paula Burnett puts it, Walcott has “the need to counter not only colonial discourse but the first phase of oppositional discourse.”<sup>9</sup> As a poet, Walcott sees himself not only engaging with colonial discourse but also dealing with the damaging consequences of various counterdiscourses opposing colonialism. As a result, Walcott does not espouse the kinds of nationalism and revolutionary violence advocated by certain forms of

anticolonialism, including some interpretations of Fanon. In sum, then, Walcott's poetry is inextricable from his relationship with nationalism. As we will see, this is a central concern of Arendt's and particularly a key issue in the critique and imaginary of human rights discourse.

One of the most important characteristics of the potential future Walcott imagines is its relationship with "history." As Joseph Brodsky (a close friend of Walcott's) articulated, poetry "has some things in common with history: it employs memory and it is of use for the future, not to mention the present."<sup>10</sup> As I will elaborate later, this means that both literature and history do the work of imagining different futures – they are imaginaries. Because he is rooted in the Caribbean, Walcott recognizes that "historical discourses are sites for the inscription of power; [he does] not need Michel Foucault's prompt."<sup>11</sup> Walcott challenges the colonial control of historical discourse, which assumes the exclusive right to annex for its purposes a wide variety of heritages, including classical epic. In *Omeros*, Walcott reclaims epic not to inscribe another hegemonic discourse (this time based on nationalism) but rather to absorb the contradictions and histories of the Antilles into a "global self-identification with the human race."<sup>12</sup> Walcott "demythologizes" Homer not to be replaced by anticolonial narratives but instead to fully inhabit a "dialectical spirit."<sup>13</sup>

In *Omeros*, Walcott mobilizes against nostalgia both colonial (for classical ruins) and anticolonial (for the national past of a new imagined community). In his Nobel lecture, Walcott notes that "the sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over."<sup>14</sup> Yet Walcott does not wish to find new ruins for the Antilles; he remains "firmly opposed to the privileging of such relics" in all contexts.<sup>15</sup> Walcott's Nobel lecture articulates the tension structuring his work as reflected in his relationship with history; his poetry does the work of imagining a different future in which this tension is fully inhabited. To quote from *Omeros*:

in them was the terror of Time, that I would march

with columns at twilight, only to disappear  
into a past whose history echoed the arch  
  
of bridges sighing over their ancient canals  
for a place that was not mine, since what I preferred  
was not the statues but the bird in the statue's hair.<sup>16</sup>

Walcott's imaginary is at its basis beautiful, accessible poetry. The rich network of allusions and thematic concerns is overlaid on this foundation. One of these thematic concerns, as demonstrated above, is the tension between the universal and the particular as manifested in the tension between the colonial and the anticolonial: here, the statues as opposed to the bird in the statue's hair. At first, Walcott might seem to be clearly preferring the anticolonial (the bird). Yet what Walcott actually imagines is an anticolonial that *literally* inhabits the colonial (the statues): "the bird in the statue's hair." Walcott is too rooted in Caribbean to naively buy into hegemonic historical discourses of colonialism. His response is to imagine a different future altogether, one articulated with the repurposed tools of colonialism, including the English language and the *Odyssey*.

Walcott's literary imaginary, then, is founded on living in tension: it gives the hybrid (which so threatened empire) priority as a stable site for thinking, writing, and imagining. For Walcott, the response to colonialism is not the *combat national* of Fanon,<sup>17</sup> but rather a synthesis of different heritages that resists appropriation by any one narrative. Walcott successfully negotiates the tension underlying his writing and his life to imagine a "postcoloniality outside of anticolonialism."<sup>18</sup> Walcott's poetry is beautiful and powerful literature that does the work of imagining a different future. In other words, his work constitutes a distinctly powerful literary imaginary – an act of imagining what can be.

## Arendt's analysis and critique

Unlike *Omeros*, Hannah Arendt's 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a work of nonfiction that primarily articulates a critique of the contemporary situation. In particular, Arendt dissects the rise of totalitarianism, while Walcott is responding to the dynamics of (neo)colonialism. Arendt differs from Walcott in many other ways as well: she is about 25 years older, of a different gender, and from a completely different historical, religious, and geographical background. Yet, as I demonstrate, Walcott and Arendt share similar concerns, particularly engaging with the ideas of history and nationalism. In this section, I elaborate on Arendt's argument as it concerns the idea of human rights, especially when situated within the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism. In my reading, Arendt is clearly positioned as anti-human rights but pro-civil rights. Arendt equates the creation of rights with the creation of the nation: rights are inextricable from nationalism. This means that rights are only meaningful and enforceable within the parameters of the nation-state. In this context, Arendt rejects human rights because they are fundamentally in tension with national sovereignty.

One of the avenues through which Arendt elaborates on her critique is through the role of "history." Like Walcott, Arendt is concerned with the tension between the particular and the universal. Both writers draw on their personal experiences as members of marginalized groups to then articulate globally resonant concerns: Walcott through his literary imaginary and Arendt through her critique of human rights discourse. In particular, Arendt engages with her identity as a Jew and a stateless refugee who fled Nazi persecution to articulate her critique.

Arendt traces the idea of human rights to the universalizing project of the Enlightenment. Previously, rights were granted to groups because of their corporate identity; in permitting the Jews to charge interest, the state identified them not as individuals but as members of a group. The

Jews' rights were traditionally based on their particular history. In Arendt's analysis, the American Declaration of Independence and the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* exemplify the Enlightenment rejection of this tradition. As Arendt puts it: "when the Rights of Man were proclaimed for the first time, they were regarded as being independent of history and the privileges which history had accorded certain strata of society."<sup>19</sup> Rights were now based on "the universalization of reason": the idea that (in the public sphere) an individual can be stripped of his or her particular identity to become the ideal citizen-subject. In Arendt's words, "historical rights," like those granted to the Jews, "were replaced by natural rights, 'nature' took the place of history, and it was tacitly assumed that nature was less alien than history to the essence of man."<sup>20</sup> The fundamental challenge to this Enlightenment project was the Jewish Question: in the words of Aamir Mufti, the Jews (or, to be precise, "the Jew" of Western imagination) represented the "threat of particularism" to Enlightenment universalism.<sup>21</sup> This threat is inextricable from the "history" of the Jews, right through the events of World War II (which Arendt herself experienced). On multiple levels, Arendt convincingly argues that it is the Jews' (and therefore her own) history that reveals the inadequacy of human rights discourse. Both Walcott and Arendt make use of history – their own and that of the marginalized groups they are part of – to articulate their projects.

The other thread running through both writers' work is a concern with nationalism, of both the exclusionary and cultural kind. Arendt particularly points to the stateless as a site that pushes the limits of Enlightenment articulations of rights: "the Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state."<sup>22</sup> Arendt does not deny that the cause of mass statelessness was totalitarianism (and in this case antisemitism). But her critique is deeper than that. As Arendt previously demonstrated, human rights presume Enlightenment ideals of the universal, which are deeply destabilized by the

particular. In this case, the particular came in the form of the stateless. The fundamental problem is less that the totalitarian regimes stripped people of their citizenship and more that in so doing they revealed how utterly incapable the world was of securing rights outside the nation-state. It was “the constitutional inability [both in legal and foundational terms] of European nation-states to guarantee human rights to those who had lost nationally guaranteed rights” that “made it possible for the persecuting [totalitarian] governments to impose their standard of values even upon their opponents.”<sup>23</sup> Arendt agrees that World War II demonstrated the problems of totalitarianism, but she stresses that it revealed something far more fundamental too: the ineffectiveness of nation-based rights discourse. In her words: “we became aware of the existence of a right to have rights ... and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights.”<sup>24</sup> In short, Arendt’s trenchant critique implicates *all* kinds of nationalism – not just the exclusionary nationalism of totalitarianism – in the ineffectiveness of human rights.

Hannah Arendt articulates a powerful critique of human rights discourse, predicated on her concerns both with history and with nationalism and also with the tension between the particular and the universal. These are similar to the concerns that motivate Walcott’s literary imaginary; the difference is that Arendt operates in a legal and political register. Her criticism of human rights discourse focuses on the inability of documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which was written just three years before *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) to secure and enforce rights. Arendt’s critique of human rights discourse operates on a philosophical level, integrated with her personal identity and history as a Jew. Her historical and political analysis is incredibly astute (and influential), but she does not try to imagine any sort of different future.



## Human rights as a site

Human rights documents are intriguing sites for thinking with Arendt and Walcott because they engage both bodies of thought in different registers. These documents are not only the kind of legal documents that Arendt critiques. They are also a kind of literature because they use writing to imagine a different kind of future; human rights documents not only secure rights *now* but also imagine rights *in the future*. If we see them as literature, we can return to the themes and literary strategies Walcott deploys in his poetry, as analyzed above. I suggest that thinking through the human rights documents *qua* literature, accompanied by Walcott's poetry and Arendt's critique, gives space for new imaginative and critical projects to do with human rights.

One of the concerns shared by both Arendt and Walcott is history. For Arendt, the Jews' "history" is what undermines the Enlightenment conception of human rights, both through the historical problem of the Jewish Question and through the massive rise of statelessness in the wake of Fascism. Arendt's critique of "universal" human rights was grounded in her first-hand experience of the Jews' particular history. For Walcott, too, history grounds his work. His deep knowledge of the Caribbean informs both his critique of hegemonic discourses (in a Foucauldian vein) and his imagination of a different future. To recall Brodsky, Walcott's poetry "employs memory" in the service of a literary imaginary. Walcott's imaginary recognizes both the subaltern and hegemonic discourses in history. Most importantly, it does not insist (*à la* Fanon)<sup>25</sup> on excavating and repurposing history to inscribe another monolithic ideology. Instead, Walcott's literary imaginary inhabits the tension of the hybrid and treats it as a site that pushes us towards a "global self-identification with the human race."<sup>26</sup>

Human rights discourse, too, is fundamentally inextricable from "history"; recall Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that "there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a

document of barbarism.”<sup>27</sup> Human rights discourse is mostly responsive to a history of human rights abuses; treaties on toxic waste or child labor would never have been written had these violations never occurred. Following Benjamin’s thinking (and borrowing the words of Cadava and Balfour), would he be right in suggesting that “the human rights activist should therefore dissociate himself or herself from [the document] as much as possible”?<sup>28</sup> A response lies in Walcott’s imaginary. In *Omeros*, Walcott unflinchingly tackles the horrors of the Middle Passage. He deeply understands the complicity of his European (and some African) ancestors in the slave trade, and has inhabited a colonial and postcolonial space. His writing gestures towards a future that is founded in all the tensions, complexities, and hybridities of the modern world. Human rights discourse, too, both documents history (as Benjamin says) and looks towards a different future. In imagining this different future, it would be interesting to inhabit the space of tension – between colonialism and anticolonialism and the universal and particular – rather than attempting to steer history towards one “correct” path.

The second thread I have traced through Walcott’s poetry and Arendt’s critique is nationalism. Walcott (at least partly) rejects Fanon’s call to anticolonial nationalism.<sup>29</sup> Arendt’s critique of human rights discourse is founded on its entanglement with the nation-state. For Arendt, nationalism is not only problematic in its exclusionary manifestations but also as the foundation of the world political order. As with history, nationalism runs not only through the thought of Arendt and Walcott but also through human rights discourse. Arendt astutely discerned as much in her analysis of the nascent body of work based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The sixty-odd years since have seen nationalism become ever more entrenched in human rights discourse. Empires, absolutist monarchies, theocracies, and other forms of polities have given way to something resembling the nation-state. This was especially the case in the creation of new

nation-states through the breakup of the British and French Empires.<sup>30</sup> As Gayatri Spivak notes, “the human rights aspect of post-coloniality has turned out to be the breaking of the new nations, in the name of their breaking-in into the international community of nations.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, decolonization has worked under the hegemonic logic of the nation-state. I do not suggest that we should return to empire and jettison the nation-state, but I do believe that we should look toward systems that can structure decolonization and human rights without relying on the nation-state.

Again, I suggest that Walcott’s work offers interesting directions to explore. Walcott himself moved fluidly between St Lucia, the Antilles, the West Indies, the Caribbean, the Americas as a whole, and even the “global republic” of English. His poetry imagines a productive space where the movement *between* is treated as stable and legitimate, yet rootedness in a particular space is fully respected. In other words, Walcott’s poetry imagines beyond the strict boundaries of the nation-state. *Omeros* begins with a stirring depiction of a Caribbean island; indeed, it is the Antilles, Walcott’s home, that undergirds the work to the extent that *Omeros* almost becomes a West Indian odyssey. At the same time, *Omeros* imagines fluent inhabitation of London, Boston, Dublin, and beyond, respecting this kind of movement as a legitimate site (just like the nation-state) for critical and imaginative projects. What would it mean for refugees, for migrants, for all persons, if human rights discourse also chose to *inhabit* movement and fluid boundaries?

## Conclusions

In this essay, I have argued that the work of Derek Walcott and Hannah Arendt can and should be read together. Both writers are concerned with tensions between the particular and the universal: nature and history, in Arendt’s case, and the colonial and anticolonial in Walcott’s case. Both Walcott’s literary imaginary and Arendt’s philosophical critique are undergirded by considerations of history and nationalism. These commonalities establish a framework within which the two

works *can* be read alongside one another. I have also demonstrated why the two bodies of thought *should* be bridged: dialog creates space for new and interesting critical and imaginative projects. I have gestured towards two examples of these projects: rethinking history and reimagining nationalism in human rights discourse by drawing on Walcott's inhabitation of tension. By reading human rights documents with Arendt *and* Walcott in mind, we can open new horizons and explore new vocabularies of critique and imagination.

I began this paper as an experiment: what would happen if one took seriously the possibility of thinking about human rights with both Arendt *and* Walcott? My answer is not that I have arrived at a panacea, nor that I have developed a novel and perfectly coherent framework for thinking about human rights. Yet the very act of bringing together vastly different texts pushes us to think differently. Framing issues in new ways, critiquing new issues, and perhaps imagining different futures are all worthwhile tasks in their own right. By reading Hannah Arendt and Derek Walcott together, we think differently and think better about human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I do not imply any Lacanian sense of the "imaginary." Instead, it is simply the act of imagining.

<sup>2</sup> Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, x.

<sup>3</sup> Walcott, "The Antilles," 78.

<sup>4</sup> King, *Derek Walcott*, 4–5, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Walcott, *Omeros*, 68. The Bard refers to William Shakespeare, who was born in Warwickshire.

<sup>6</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 232. For the French see Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, 220.

<sup>7</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 233; Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, 221.

<sup>8</sup> I do not suggest that the two forms of nationalism are equated; Fanon rather argues that one requires the other.

<sup>9</sup> Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Brodsky, "Laureate of the Supermarkets," 8.

<sup>11</sup> Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Walcott, "The Antilles," 68.

<sup>15</sup> Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Walcott, *Omeros*, 204.

<sup>17</sup> To be more precise, I mean here the *combat national* of Fanon as read by me in the vein of one interpretative tradition, most famously articulated in Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*. I have not had the time to fully argue for this interpretation of Fanon, so here I use his ideas primarily as a stand-in for the kinds of anticolonialism Walcott responds to. I appreciate the advice of Elizabeth Falkenberg on this point.

<sup>18</sup> I appreciate the input of Anjuli Gunaratne on this point and particularly on this phrase.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 298.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 293.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>25</sup> Or at least certain interpretations of Fanon. See n. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> "Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein." Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 696 (in "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," section VII). "Kultur" is translated as "culture" in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 392, but is widely circulated as "civilization," as in Balfour and Cadava, "The Claims of Human Rights," 296, n. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Balfour and Cadava, "The Claims of Human Rights," 293.

<sup>29</sup> On my use of Fanon see notes 25 and 17.

<sup>30</sup> I do not mean that there were no nations (in a broad sense) before colonialism, merely that the identification of the polity with the nation was a fundamentally modern, European idea.

<sup>31</sup> Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," 525.