

Transcending the Classics:

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

Richard Sacks – Spring 2023

Handout #3 (for class of 4/3/23)

Afolabe asking Achille what his name means in 25.3 (pp. 137-139):

25.3.17 ... His father said:
"Afo-la-be,"
25.3.18 touching his own heart.
"In the place you have come from
25.3.19 what do they call you?"
Time translates.
Tapping his chest,
25.3.20 the son answers:
"Achille." The tribe rustles, "Achille."
25.3.21 Then, like cedars at sunrise, the mutterings settle.

AFOLABE

25.3.22 **Achille. What does the name mean?** I have forgotten the one
25.3.23 that I gave you. But it was, it seems, many years ago.
25.3.24 What does it mean?

ACHILLE

Well, I too have forgotten.

25.3.25 Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know.
25.3.26 The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave
25.3.27 us; trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing.

AFOLABE

25.3.28 **A name means something.** The qualities desired in a son,
25.3.29 and even a girl-child; so even the shadows who called
25.3.30 you expected one virtue, **since every name is a blessing,**
25.3.31 since I am remembering the hope I had for you as a child.
25.3.32 **Unless the sound means nothing. Then you would be nothing.**
25.3.33 Did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?

ACHILLE

25.3.34 **I do not know what the name means. It means something,**
25.3.35 **maybe.** What's the difference? In the world I come from
25.3.36 we accept the sounds we were given. Men, trees, water.

AFOLABE

25.3.37 And therefore, Achille, if I pointed and I said, There
25.3.38 is the name of that man, that tree, and this father,
25.3.39 would every sound be a shadow that crossed your ear,



A. "A name means something" (25.3.28/p138)

- A1) Greek *Akhilleus*: compound of *akhos* 'grief, sorrow, pain' + *laos* 'people'**
A1a) 25.3.42: "the **tribe** began to **grieve**" (with *grieve* in boundary-crossing couplet)
A1b) 26.1.6/p139: "listen[ing] to the moan of the **tribe's** triumphal **sorrow**"
A1c) 27.2.27/p146: "The son's **grief** was the father's, the father's his son's."
A1d) 35.3.34-36/p181: "When one **grief** afflicts us we choose a sharper **grief** / in
hope that enormity will ease affliction, / so Catherine Weldon rose in high relief"
A2) Yoruban *Afolabe*: cmpnd. of *ola* 'fame' + *bi* 'born' (+ prefixes *a* + *f* 'one' + 'with')
A2a) Iliadic **Patroklos** = compound of *kleos* 'fame, glory' + *patro-* 'ancestors'
A2b) *kleos* also = 'epic' (e.g., *klea* + *patrōn* = a phrase for epic poems)
A2c) in the *Iliad*, **Achilles** only returns to battle after **Patroklos** dies in A's armor
A2d) 14.3.50/p83: the scene when Admiral Rodney "renamed **Afolabe** '**Achilles**."
A3) "Omeric" *Afo-la-be* (25.3.27): cf. French *la baie* 'bay' w/ Gk. or Yrb. prefix
A3a) 47.1.1-2/p235 (as Ma Kilman sets out to find the cure for Philoctete's wound):
"Islands of bay leaves in the medicinal bath / of a cauldron, a sibylline cure."
A3b) 56.3.25-28/p283 (as the narrator speaks with Omeros/Seven Seas in book 7):
56.3.25 **"your name was as wide as a bay,** as I walked along
56.3.26 the curled brow of the surf; **the word `Homer' meant joy,**
56.3.27 joy in battle, in work, in death, then **the numbered peace**
56.3.28 **of the surf's benedictions,** it rose in the cedars..."

25.3.40 without the shape of a man or a tree? What would it be?
25.3.41 (And just as branches sway in the dusk from their fear
25.3.42 of amnesia, of oblivion, the tribe began to **grieve**.)

ACHILLE

25.3.43 What would it be? I can only tell you what I **believe,**
25.3.44 or had to **believe.** It was prediction, and memory,
25.3.45 to bear myself back, to be carried here by a swift,
25.3.46 or the shadow of a swift making its cross on water,
25.3.47 with the same sign I was blessed with, with the gift
25.3.48 of this sound whose meaning I still do not care to know.

AFOLABE

25.3.54 **if you're content with not knowing what our names mean,**
25.3.55 **then I am not Afolabe, your father,** and you look through
25.3.56 my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here
25.3.57 or a shadow. **And you, nameless son, are only the ghost**
25.3.58 **of a name.** Why did I never miss you until you returned?

Transcending the Classics:

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

Richard Sacks – Spring 2023

Handout #3 (for class of 4/3/23)



Enrichment Program 2
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Achille as "Buffalo soldier" (his 1st post-Africa scene on land, 31.1/p161-2)

- 31.1.1 A remorseful Saturday strolled through the village,
31.1.2 down littered pavements, the speakers gone from the street
31.1.3 whose empty shadows contradicted the mirage
31.1.4 of last night's blockorama, but the systems' beat
31.1.5 thudded in **Achille's head** that **replayed the echo**,
31.1.6 as he washed the canoe, **of a Marley reggae**—
31.1.7 "**Buffalo soldier.**" Thud. "**Heart of America.**"
31.1.8 Thud-thud. Mop and pail. **He could not rub it away.**
31.1.9 Between the soft thud of surf the bass beat wider,
31.1.10 **backing his work up with its monodic phrasing.**
31.1.11 **He saw the smoky buffalo, a black rider**
31.1.12 under a sweating hat, his slitted eyes grazing
31.1.13 with the herds that drifted like smoke under low hills,
31.1.14 **the wild Indian tents**, the sky's blue screen, and on it,
31.1.15 **the black soldier turned his face, and it was Achille's.**
31.1.16 Then, pennons in reggae-motion, a white bonnet
31.1.17 in waves of heat like a sea-horse, leading them in
31.1.18 their last wide charge, the soft hooves pounding in his skull,
31.1.19 **Red Indians bouncing to a West Indian rhythm,**
31.1.20 to the cantering beat which, as he swayed, the scull
31.1.21 of the lance-like oar kept up like a metronome,
31.1.22 as, fist by fist, from the bow he pulled up anchor,
31.1.23 **he saw, like palms on a ridge, the Red Indians come**
31.1.24 with blurred hooves drumming to the music's sweet anger,
31.1.25 while his own horse neighed and stamped, smelling a battle
31.1.26 in its own sweat. **Achille eased the long Winchester**
31.1.27 **out of its fringed case. This was the oar.** His saddle
31.1.28 the heaving plank at the stern, a wave's crest was the
31.1.29 white eagle bonnet; **then slowly he fired the oar**
31.1.30 **and a palm-tree crumpled; then to repeated cracks**
31.1.31 **from the rifle, more savages, until the shore**
31.1.32 **was littered with palm spears, bodies: like Aruacs**
31.1.33 falling to the muskets of the Conquistador.

B. Achille as "Buffalo Soldier" (31.1.7/p161)... "fired the oar" (31.1.29/p162)

- B1) 31.1.7: "Buffalo soldier."** Thud. "**Heart of America.**"
The opening lyrics (and repeated refrain) of Bob Marley's "**Buffalo Soldier**"
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
- B2) 31.1.29: "then slowly he fired the oar"**
Achille after the raid in Africa killing one of the slavers (27.3.21ff./147-148)
27.3.21 ... **There was one spear only. An oar.**
27.3.22 He ran down to the pier. In the nets were their eyes
27.3.23 that seared through his skull; he cried his father's name
27.3.24/27 over the river. ... / ... with a clenched roar
27.3.28 he swung at the grinning laggard and **the bladed oar**
27.3.29 **cleft through his skull** with a sound like a calabash ... / ...
27.3.35 ... and **then, sobbing with grief**
27.3.36 at the death of a brother...
- B3) 31.1.32: "like Aruacs"**
B3a) 31.1.19 "Red Indians bouncing to a West Indian rhythm"
B3b) 31.3.4/p164: "**one elegy from Aruac to Sioux**"
B3c) the massacre of the **Sioux** in chapter 43: "the **Sioux**, the Dakotas, the Crows. /
/ The flour basting their corpses on the white fields (43.1.48-49/p215)
B3d) the nicknames of the drowned in Achille's head on his way to Africa:
"**Toujours Sou**" (24.2.22/p127) + "**Red Ant**" (24.2.26/p128) with "**red ants**"
used of the captured **Sioux** at 43.2.4/p215
- B4) 31.1.10: "backing his work up with its monodic phrasing"**
The opening lines of 29.1 (p. 152) as Helen awaits Achille's return from Africa:
29.1.1 At noon a ground dove hidden somewhere in the trees
29.1.2 whooped like a conch or a boy blowing a bottle
29.1.3 stuck on one note with maddening, tireless cries;
29.1.4 it was lower than the nightingale's full throttle
29.1.5-6 of grief, but to Helen ... / ... **the monodic moan**
29.1.7 **came from the hole in her heart.** It was ... / ...
29.1.9 ... the low-fingered O of an Aruac flute ... / ...
29.1.13 ... the O's encircled her