

## Breadfruit in the Wake: Imagining Vegetal Mutiny in Derek Walcott's "The Bounty"

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on Derek Walcott's depiction of the historical journey of the breadfruit across the Pacific. The British Empire collected breadfruit plants from Tahiti in the eighteenth century to provide a staple food for enslaved Caribbean laborers, and, by extension, to bolster the system of plantation slavery. Yet in Walcott's poem "The Bounty," the breadfruit plants engage in a Glissantian act of *détour* in the Pacific Ocean. They collaborate with the human mutineers aboard the ship to subvert the imperial transplantation project. While the poem dilates this moment of vegetal agency, it also references the breadfruit's ultimate arrival in Saint Lucia. Christina Sharpe's notion of "wake work" sheds light on the symbolic status of the breadfruit plants that eventually landed in the Caribbean, which continue to live in the wake of plantation slavery, the wake of the *Bounty*, and the wake of their own vegetal mutiny in the Pacific.

**Keywords:** Breadfruit, Walcott, the *Bounty*, transplantation, *détour*, wake, Glissant, Sharpe, Caribbean studies, ecocriticism

In Caribbean history, oceans have always been critical border environments mediating the migration of people and plants to island soils. While the Atlantic was the avenue for European settler colonization and the notorious Triangle Trade, many Caribbean food crops actually hail from the Pacific, their transit a result of imperial transplantation. This article examines Derek Walcott's literary imaginary of one such plant, the breadfruit tree, which made an unplanned stop on its way to the Caribbean when the ship carrying the plants, the *Bounty*, erupted in a bloodless mutiny. Focusing on the breadfruit plants in this moment of rupture between continents provides a way of seeing how border environments can make space for botanical agency and resistance. The movement of the breadfruit plants in the interstitial space of the ocean disrupts a determinist narrative of their transplantation while also shedding light on breadfruit's resonance in the Caribbean today.

Examinations of the 1789 mutiny on the *Bounty* have mostly centered on the dramatic confrontation between the disgruntled crewmen and the stubborn captain William Bligh that resulted in the latter being set adrift in the Pacific Ocean along with eighteen loyalists. The fate of the breadfruit plants aboard the ship, which were being imported from Tahiti (known at that time as Otaheite) to Jamaica as a source of food for the enslaved people of the Caribbean colonies, is often swept aside (Powell 387). Yet Derek Walcott's poetic account of the mutiny reveals how the breadfruit trees themselves participated in the act of insubordination that delayed their importation to the British West Indies for four years. As the ship makes a detour away from its intended path, the breadfruit plants become symbolically engaged in an act of Glissantian *détour* that defers their incorporation into the plantation system.

The improbable drama of the *Bounty* has captured the popular imagination for generations, inspiring a novel and five feature

film adaptations including major blockbusters starring the likes of Marlon Brando and Mel Gibson. The details of this heavily mythologized journey bear rehearsing, as they offer insight into Walcott's poetic re-envisioning of the voyage as well as the place of breadfruit in the popular imagination at large. Joseph Banks, the President of the British Royal Society and the scientific director of Kew Gardens, advocated for the transplantation of breadfruit trees to the West Indies in the eighteenth century after encountering them on the island of Tahiti, where he surmised that their plentiful fruit afforded the local people a life of leisure and ease (O'Brian 232). The project met with great support among members of Parliament, many of whom had their own indigo and sugar interests in the West Indies. The transplantation was also the product of intensive lobbying on the part of West Indian planters, who argued that their slaves were facing a food crisis due to the trade embargo triggered by the American Revolution. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has convincingly disputed this narrative, arguing that the high rates of slave mortality during the period were actually the result of the brutal conditions workers faced on the plantations rather than the alleged lack of local food sources (DeLoughrey, "Globalizing the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties" 14). Nonetheless, Captain William Bligh was ordered by the British Admiralty to personally observe the collection of the "desirable vegetable" in Tahiti, where his crew amassed some 1,015 plants and loaded them aboard the ship (Wilder 6). Once asea, Bligh's poor leadership precipitated his expulsion in a bloodless mutiny, during which he was ejected to a small launch while the mutineers steered the ship back to Tahiti and tossed the precious botanical specimens to sea. It was not until four years later that Bligh succeeded in bringing the plants to the West Indies, where the enslaved people ironically refused to eat the fruit that had been imported at such extravagant expense (O'Brian 239).

Today, breadfruit continues to resonate culturally across the Caribbean archipelago as a vegetal legacy of enslavement. Jamaica Kincaid writes, "in a place like Antigua the breadfruit is not a food, it is a weapon" (Kincaid 137). Her rebuke speaks not to its prickly rind nor to its controversial texture, but rather to the fruit's role as a botanical projection of colonial power. Because breadfruit plants were historically meant to provide a cheap food source for enslaved Africans, and, by extension, to prop up the system of Caribbean plantation slavery, their ongoing presence on the islands of the British West Indies is a potent reminder of the dehumanizing conditions of enslavement (Braun 644). In general, the planters who lobbied for the breadfruit's importation viewed the problem of providing nutrition for their slaves in much the same manner as that of providing fodder for livestock (Zilberstein 507). Therefore, a reconsideration of the fruit's importation is one way of thinking about how the plantation structure placed Afro-Caribbean people into "forced intimacy with the inhuman" (Yusoff 10). The transplantation of the breadfruit was an effort to discipline the Melanesian tree into the system of "multispecies forced labor" that extracted the labor of people and plants alike (Haraway and Tsing 5).

Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott's "The Bounty" intertwines the history of the Tahitian tree with an elegy for the poet's own mother. Walcott, the 1992 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, is known for his evocative depictions of Antillean landscapes and histories in the colonial and postcolonial eras. In its portrayal of the mutiny on the *Bounty*, Walcott's poem opens up a moment of deferral in the plants' path from Tahiti to the Caribbean when they are cast asea. Invoking Christina Sharpe's notion of "wake work," I argue that the breadfruit specimens are aligned with the kidnapped Africans whom they were brought to feed; people and plants alike are located in the wake of colonial transplantation efforts. In centering the jettisoned plants in Walcott's poem rather than the crew or captain of the *Bounty*, I explore how the interpretation of the event might change if we imagined the flora themselves to be agentive participants alongside humans in the mutiny on the ship. This reading focuses on the interstitial zone of the Pacific Ocean where the mutiny occurs rather than the terrestrial endpoints of the *Bounty*'s journey. Dwelling in this oceanic border environment is one way of registering the fact that the breadfruit's journey to the Caribbean was not inevitable; instead, its transplantation was marked by rupture and indeterminacy.

I am not the first to read "The Bounty" through an ecocritical lens; George Handley has interpreted the poem in the context of progress recovery narratives of nature, as well as narratives of nature's inevitable decline, to argue that Walcott offers a third, cyclical model for the relation between human history and natural history (Handley 213). Likewise, Elaine Savory has explored the ecopoetic impulse behind Walcott's verse, claiming that the centrality of plants in his writing and in "The Bounty" in particular fulfills a vital need to highlight the environmental diversity and degradation of the Caribbean by presenting "a sense of eclectic and diasporic wil-

derness" (Savory 89). These critics have discussed the breadfruit as one plant among many in Walcott's characteristically rich botanical tapestry, treating it as a component of nature at large rather than a protagonist in its own right. By isolating the unique place of *Artocarpus altilis* in the poem, I want to show how this plant's history of routing and rooting has altered its material and metonymic content in Walcott's native island of Saint Lucia, where its graceful palms continue to denote the afterlives of plantation slavery with its legacies of interspecies violence and intercontinental dislocation (DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots* 3).

For Walcott, the notion of breadfruit as afterlife is deeply personal; its glossy leaves and spiky fruits mark the site of absence of his beloved mother, Alix. Indeed, he so closely associates her with the plants aboard the vessel piloted by Captain Bligh that his retelling of the infamous mutiny on its decks becomes a way of thinking the possible detours that her soul might have taken on its cosmic trajectory. Thus, when the breadfruit appears as a rooted tree in the poem, these moments, though joyful, are indications of her ultimate arrival in the port of death. The plant, in this configuration, becomes a form of life that is always necessarily an afterlife, a thriving organism that ironically requires loss as one of its essential nutrients. It is not accidental that Walcott gives the French Creole term "*bois-pain*" for the tree; the bilingual pun suggests that in its material grammar on Saint Lucia, the breadfruit is a tree of pain (Walcott 3).

Walcott's retelling of the breadfruit's notorious journey is closely linked to his agnosticism about the fate of his mother's soul. In a passage that begins, "But can she or can she not read this? Can you read this, / Mamma, or hear it?" he muses:

Snails move into harbour, the breadfruit plants on the *Bounty* will be heaved aboard, and the white God is Captain Bligh.

Across white feathery grave-grass the shadow of the soul passes, the canvas cracks open on the cross-trees of the *Bounty*, and the Trades lift the shrouds of the resurrected sail.

All move in their passage to the same mother-country, the dirt-clawing weasel, the blank owl or sunning seal. Faith grows mutinous. The ribbed body with its cargo

stalls in its doldrums, the God-captain is cast adrift by a mutinous Christian, in the wake of the turning *Argo* plants bob in the ocean's furrows, their shoots dip and lift,

and the soul's Australia is like the New Testament after the Old World, the code of an eye for an eye; the horizon spins slowly and Authority's argument

diminishes in power, in the longboat with Captain Bligh. (Walcott 9–10)

In this densely allusive passage, the passage of Alix's soul from life to death is linked to the historical journey of the *Bounty* with its botanical cargo. At first, the arrival of the ship to its destined port, like the death of Walcott's mother, would appear to be an inexorable destiny set out for it by the British Crown. Indeed, his use of the future tense ("the breadfruit plants on the *Bounty* / will be heaved aboard") implies the sense of linear time enforced by the domineering Captain Bligh. Likewise, "All move in their passage to the same mother-country" recalls the certainty of death as an ultimate telos for all beings, be they weasels, owls, seals, or human beings. Thus, the ship is rendered as a floating grave, transporting plants and soul alike toward their predestined termini. He imagines that her soul might take refuge among the Tahitian trees, entering through the cracks in the canvas meant to protect the saplings from the cold air of the quarter-deck (O'Brian 235).<sup>1</sup>

Yet the historical mutiny on the *Bounty's* decks allows Walcott to imagine a detour in the seemingly inexorable trajectory of his mother's spirit. What if, he wonders, she might have landed in the faraway realm of the "soul's Australia" rather than proceeding directly to her destination? In other words, he envisions a diversion in the seemingly linear journey toward death in the same way that Fletcher Christian's rebellion causes a swerve in the historical trajectory of the breadfruit to the West Indies. Walcott's fantasy of deviation from the path of death recalls Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant's theorization of *détour* as a set of linguistic and cultural practices developed by enslaved people to evade and manipulate the structures of plantation life while appearing to submit to their demands (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 20–26). *Détour* can be a subtly anticolonial act, a swerve away from the pressures of production through small acts of sabotage that are somewhere in between rebellion and acquiescence. To think the mutiny on the *Bounty* as *détour* means to conceive of the revolt as a divergence from the path of imperial "progress," a shift that is also, for Walcott, a way of deferring the exigency of death.

In the spirit of tracing the specific itinerary of the breadfruit in the poem, I want to focus not on the mutineers who sailed back to Tahiti nor on Bligh and his loyalists who alighted some 6,500 nautical miles away in Indonesia, but rather on the precious plants that landed in the open waters of the Pacific Ocean. Consider Walcott's telegraphic account of their fate: "in the wake of the turning *Argo* / plants bob in the ocean's furrows, their shoots dip and lift." These would-be transplants never attain their intended port; instead, they try futilely to take root in the sea whose furrows resemble the form of a plowed field, bobbing vertically in its stagnant doldrums rather than progressing laterally across its waters.

The reference to the *Argo* recalls the ancient hero's quest to deliver the golden fleece to King Pelias, a mission to restore his rightful throne by delivering a precious good. Like the transplantation of the breadfruit, which was intended to secure the authority of the slaveholding planters in the West Indies against the threat of possible rebellion, Jason's journey on the *Argo* to attain the fleece is

ultimately futile. He is deposed from the throne and exiled from his kingdom, left to die alone beneath the hull of his rotting ship (Euripides and Murray 96). Likewise, the importation of the breadfruit is now considered an expensive failure, as the enslaved Africans for whom it was intended rejected its tasteless flesh in favor of the local staples of their small provision grounds.<sup>2</sup> Thus, not only does the allusion to the Greek hero communicate the epic scale of the *Bounty's* voyage; it also refers to the irony of its mission by likening the *Bounty* to the ancient vessel and its pointless quest.

Returning to the poem, I want to stress that the plants are caught "in the wake of the turning *Argo*" (emphasis mine); that is, as the mutineers turn around to return to the shores of Tahiti, the plants float in its trail of disturbed water. Christina Sharpe has theorized the wake in its multiple definitions (a vigil for the dead, a path left by a ship, an act of waking up, etc.) to argue that the metaphor of being in the wake is the primary condition of Black being and consciousness (Sharpe 17–18). Specifically, "to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe 13–14). Sharpe proposes an analytic of "wake work," a practice of writing from within the wake of slavery while attempting to imagine alternative possibilities to its epistemic condition, as a means of negotiating the ways in which the Middle Passage continues to endure as captivity and antiblackness today.

Taken thus, for the breadfruit plants to bob "in the wake" of the ship, which indexes both the *Bounty* and the *Argo*, makes them a figure for Walcott's own consciousness as a poet writing in the wake of slavery on Saint Lucia, himself a descendant of enslaved and European people alike (Als). These floating specimens exist in a state of temporal and spatial dislocation, creating their own bobbing rhythm that is out of time with the pace of colonial transplantation yet still in the sway of its waves. Their jettisoning itself performs a kind of wake for those who have died of malnutrition and abuse on the plantations, the enslaved people for whom their fruits had been intended. Indeed, I cannot help but read in this brief elegy for the abandoned fruit an echo of Glissant's requiem for those drowned in the abyss of the sea during the Atlantic slave trade, ghostly hauntings marked by "balls and chains gone green" (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 6). The Pacific Ocean, like the Atlantic, becomes a receptacle for these traces of kidnapping and murder, where the matter of the dead becomes part of the ocean's "vegetal fury" (Walcott 13).

In answer to Sharpe's incitement to "wake work," which ruptures the form of the wake while inhabiting its space, I want to make space here for a more hopeful reimagining of this passage in Walcott's poem and in the mythologized history of the *Bounty* by reading the breadfruit as *waking up* to its own commodification in the very same gesture by which it stages a vegetal wake for the dead. This provocation requires an intentional misreading of the historical events on the ship to foreground the possibility of botanical agency. What happens when we reframe the jettisoning prompted by the mutiny on the *Bounty* as a moment of vegetal resistance in the

poem, a diversion away from the logics of linearity and economic efficiency toward some alternate mode of being suggested by the bobbing of the waves? In other words, what if we expand the notion of mutiny to encompass not only the disgruntled sailors led by Fletcher Christian to betray their captain, but also these bobbing shoots refusing their own commodification, and, in their very dying, betraying the British Empire? This vision is no less farfetched than the fantasy that Walcott himself advances: the dream of his mother's soul taking a detour through Australia to find pause on the way to her eventual death. Consider that this moment disrupts the monetization of the breadfruit, preventing its transformation into a colonial commodity via its importation to a distant land. Thus, the image of the floating saplings suggests a sort of economic subversion, one that rhymes with the long-standing tradition of sabotage by enslaved laborers on plantations. The breadfruit specimens maroon themselves at sea as if in homage to the defiant maroons of the Caribbean hillsides.

Yet we should recall that this moment of deferral is only an interlude; the breadfruit has long since arrived in the Caribbean by the time of the poem's writing, the lull of the detour a distant memory. In fact, the breadfruit was eventually imported to St. Vincent in 1791, where the specimens arrived in "flourishing state" (Powell 400). (This knowledge is compounded by the ironic truth that the species had already been introduced by the French years before, a fact of which Banks had been informed a full six months prior to the voyage of the *Bounty*) (DeLoughrey, "Globalizing the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties" 32). Thus, there is a quality of belatedness to Walcott's hopeful dilation of the detour on the breadfruit's (and, by extension, his mother's) voyage toward its destination; the reader knows that the plant has already arrived in the Caribbean, because it appears on the very first page of the elegy, where it "opens its palms in praise of the bounty" (Walcott 3). Thus, the breadfruit must have taken root on the island of Saint Lucia, meaning that it, and Alix, have already arrived at their respective ports of call before the elegy begins. In Glissant's idiom, this moment marks the complementary *retour* to the breadfruit's *détour* in the Pacific Ocean. The description of the living tree in Saint Lucia brings the poem back from the possibilities afforded by the sea to the terrestrial "point of entanglement" where people and plants became entwined in the system of colonial plantation slavery (*Caribbean Discourse* 26).

In this sense, the lovely image of the breadfruit opening its palms in praise that announces the start of the poem is taking place in the wake of the *Bounty*, in the wake of Captain Bligh, in the wake of plantation slavery, and in the wake of the death of Alix Walcott. Indeed, the plant and its contemporaries appear to draw their very nutrients from the remains of the corpses that lie buried in the ground:

Nothing is trite  
once the beloved have vanished; empty clothes in a row,

but perhaps our sadness tires them who cherished delight;

not only are they relieved of our customary sorrow,  
they are without hunger, without any appetite,  
but are part of earth's vegetal fury; their veins grow

with the wild mammy-apple, the open-handed breadfruit,  
their heart in the open pomegranate, in the sliced avocado;  
ground-doves pick from their palms; ants carry the freight

of their sweetness, their absence in all that we eat,  
their savour that sweetens all of our multiple juices,  
their faith that we break and chew in a wedge of cassava,

and here at first is the astonishment: that earth rejoices  
in the middle of our agony, earth will have her  
for good: wind shines white stones and the shallow's voices.  
(Walcott 13–14)

More than being cruelly indifferent to Walcott's loss, the plants actually feed upon Alix's body and transfigure her matter into edible fruit, suggesting a continuum between human and nonhuman materiality. It bears note that the breadfruit appears among the wild mammy-apple, the pomegranate, and the avocado, a medley of imported and native species that take root together in the creolized Saint Lucian soil. Apparently, tasting the fruit of the island entails a sort of intergenerational cannibalism, since its bounty is formed out of the physical and spiritual matter of the dead. Each nourishing bite imbricates the eater within this cycle of organic salvage; "you are what you eat." In other words, although Alix no longer has an appetite, she feeds the appetites of others with her "savour that sweetens all of our multiple juices." Recognizing this continuity between plants and people offers solace to Walcott in his grief, who realizes that the "earth will have her for good." Even out of his pain, the island ecosystem can find resources for renewal.

Thus, the breadfruit trees in the present tense of the poem reincarnate the forms of their perished human and nonhuman predecessors, becoming signs of a vibrant vegetal afterlife to the structures of colonial importation and plantation slavery. Consider the fact that most breadfruit plants are propagated by cuttings rather than by seeds, so they are exact genetic replicas of their ancestors that reproduce the botanical forms of bygone eras (Roberts-Nkrumah 6). When we recall that the story of the *Bounty* and the importation of the breadfruit is widely known across the Caribbean, it becomes apparent that the tree continues to act as a metonym for the story of its imperial transplantation as it spreads its clones across the island landscapes. It is always located in the wake of the detour, its meaning so overdetermined by its multiple histories of trans-Pacific transplantation that it has never become wholly naturalized in the Caribbean imaginaries in which it now

participates. Put differently, the breadfruit tree today still references the border environment of the ocean, the rupture between continents, even now that it is planted in the Caribbean soil. Its meaning is rendered irreducibly ambivalent: while one can rejoice in the exuberance of its growth and find sweetness in its juices, its fruits derive their nutrients from a painful past, their mutiny a distant, echoing memory.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that the botanical specimens were given this privileged place on the boat to allow them access to the sea air, while slave ships routinely crowded kidnapped Africans into the unwholesome conditions of the lower steerage.

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth DeLoughrey speculates about the reasons for their refusal, contrasting the breadfruit importation with the thriving market economy by which enslaved people could acquire a degree of autonomy by cultivating and selling their crops. She conjectures, "I'd like to think that the slaves of the Caribbean plantation complex recognized that this food contract [the breadfruit] was bought at the price of their own freedom." (DeLoughrey, "Globalizing the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties" 38)

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