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Reappraising ‘value judgements on art and the question of macho attitudes: The case of Derek Walcott’ by Elaine Savory Fido

Abstract
It is as if woman has little reality in Walcott’s imagination, and that there is little between romanticism on the one hand and appalled rejection on the other in her treatment in his works.

(Savory Fido 1986)
Elaine Savory Fido’s 1986 article entitled ‘Value Judgements on Art and the Question of Macho Attitudes: The Case of Derek Walcott’ which appeared in the Journal of Commonwealth Literature has cast a long shadow. Other critics had already remarked briefly on Walcott’s attitudes towards women but not as strongly or clearly or with as much supporting evidence as Savory Fido did in this article. Savory Fido argued that ‘not only is the work of Derek Walcott … inclusive of strong prejudices about women but that these are often associated with weakening of power in his writing’ (108). She went on to acknowledge that whilst Walcott writes about: racism, colonialism and the situation of the poor masses with intelligence, anger and originality … his treatment of women is full of clichés, stereotypes and negativity. I shall seek to show how some of his worst writing is associated with these portraits of women… (110)

Savory Fido’s position was, in essence, that if artists like Walcott displayed a negative attitude towards women in their poetry, then this would reinforce negative attitudes towards women in the wider community. She struck a balance, acknowledging Walcott’s achievements whilst arguing that this flaw diminished them to some extent. Savory Fido felt that although these attitudes may be widespread throughout the culture of the islands and reflective of the society from which Walcott comes, these views are particularly reinforced when a major talent such as Walcott repeats them. Since 1986, Walcott has become a Nobel Laureate and local hero. The main square in Castries has been named after him and an annual festival constituted in his honour. Walcott’s cultural authority has increased considerably. Since 1986, Walcott has become a Nobel Laureate and local hero. The main square in Castries has been named after him and an annual festival constituted in his honour. Walcott’s cultural authority has increased considerably.
Savory Fido’s contention that the artist has a responsibility to resist the dominant thinking is a matter of concern because such an expectation imposes restrictions on Walcott’s treatment of the women of the Caribbean and dictates how they should be represented. This seems to be inherently dangerous territory, bordering on the intentional fallacy (wherein the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work). Furthermore it raises the question of what should be expected of Walcott and what does he himself expect from his own writing. His views on the role of the poet as a politician or revolutionary have changed over time but he has certainly not claimed to be a feminist. Savory Fido partially acknowledges this flaw in her approach but she continues to insist that it is a reasonable requirement:

Racism, class prejudice, sexism and colonialist attitudes are endemic in so many cultures that it might seem unfair to ask that writers control/eliminate them in themselves, but that is indeed the issue as we continue to look to serious art for moral sensitivity and the expansion of our conceptual horizons. (110)

Savory Fido relied on the work of Hugo Meynell to provide her with a framework to link the aesthetic and the moral. Savory Fido said that: ‘What I suggest in this paper is that relative technical incompetence (or alternatively, aesthetic limitation, over-control or linguistic evasion) arises out of limitations of perception as much as of the artist’s talent and training’ (110–11). So in other words, Savory Fido is arguing that because Walcott fails to deeply engage with the lives and complexities of his female characters, he fails to appreciate them fully and this weakness is associated with technically inferior poetry.

Subsequent book length studies of Walcott — particularly those by Terada, Thieme and Hamner — have tended to provide general insights and have not adopted explicit feminist readings. Bruce King’s biography provided some of the clearest biographical evidence and comment on Walcott’s idealisation of his mother and his troubled relationships with women including the allegations of sexual harassment which have been levelled against him three times since the 1980s (414–16, 539, 594–96).

I would suggest that there are three main reasons why the question of Walcott’s representations of women have not been analysed as comprehensively as they might. Firstly, following the critical impact of Savory Fido’s articles (Fido 1985 and Savory Fido 1986), and as discussed by Dennis Walder, Walcott’s attitude towards women was assumed to be obvious and that ground was deemed to have been covered. Secondly, these are difficult subjects for those critics who admire his work if not his prejudices; and finally, most studies of Walcott’s work have adopted post-colonialism as their theoretical framework of choice and within those terms they have either mentioned gender only briefly or they have deliberately chosen to focus more heavily on race, class and the effects of colonial history.
Setting aside the dangerous question of intent and concentrating on the poetry and its potential effects, I wish to focus on Savory Fido’s approach and its implications for and relevance to more recent works by Walcott. Specifically, do his more recent poems display this ‘strong prejudice’ against women and is it associated with ‘weakened power’? Savory Fido dismissed the two collections that in 1986 were his most recent — *The Fortunate Traveller* (1982) and *Midsummer* (1984) — describing them as ‘disappointing’ (111). Instead she chose to focus on earlier Walcott poems. Although selectivity is generally necessary in a paper on Walcott because the body of work is so large, it is important when making a selection to be aware of changes in Walcott’s approach and circumstances and to contextualise his work as much as possible. Bearing in mind Savory Fido’s analysis and argument, this essay will concentrate on two of Walcott’s major publications since then — *The Arkansas Testament* (1987) and *Omeros* (1990) — and the comments of selected critics since 1986 in order to determine if Savory Fido’s diagnosis of ‘strong prejudice’ and ‘weakened power’ is appropriate.

A test for latent misogyny in the later works, for that is the essence of the charge made by Savory Fido, would be to establish whether or not his treatment of women is any more negative, stereotypical and clichéd than his handling of the fishermen, taxi/transport drivers and retired sergeant-majors of *The Arkansas Testament* and *Omeros*.

It is worth noting from the outset that despite the strong male characters described by Savory Fido, and several of her examples are drawn from Walcott’s drama, Walcott has never been particularly interested in the realistic representation of people. Savory Fido said that ‘his treatment of women is full of clichés, stereotypes and negativity’ (110) but this is also true of many of his male characters. There are several versions in his work of his own experiences as a poet and those immediately close to him such as Anna and Gregorias in *Another Life* (1973). When he writes his version of Michael Manley in ‘The Star-Apple Kingdom’ (*Collected Poems* 383–95) and his mother in ‘The Bounty’ (*The Bounty* 1997) the central characters are neither described in detail nor allowed to speak for themselves. Walcott’s local fishermen and foresters, like the ones in ‘The Whelk Gatherers’ (*The Arkansas Testament* 36), Achille and Hector and their friends from *Omeros*, quickly become clichéd and stereotypical. Limited actions and the sketched perceptions of the poet are enough for Walcott’s general portraits so it seems to be unreasonable to expect much more when he comes to discuss women specifically.

For example, Major Plunkett’s attack on the members of the local expatriate Club in *Omeros* is laden with stereotypes, clichés and negativity. In *Omeros*, Walcott’s longest work to date, a poem whose epic status has been widely debated, he describes a group of people living in and around a village on the coast of St Lucia. There are fishermen (Achille, Hector and Philoctete) and a beautiful local
woman called Helen. There are also the Plunketts, an elderly, retired couple. She is Irish and he is English and together they run a pig farm in the hills. Major Plunkett is a cliché himself, with his old army khaki shorts and his blustering manner of speech, but he is not so predictable as to feel at home in the club:

He had resigned from that haunt of middle-clarse farts, an old club with more pompous asses than any flea could find, a replica of the Raj, with gins-and-tonic from black, white-jacketed servitors whose sonic judgement couldn’t distinguish a secondhand-car salesman from Manchester from the phony pukka tones of ex-patriates.

…surprised by servants, outpricing their own value and their red-kneed wives with accents like cutlery spilled from a drawer… (25–6)

You could almost be reading *Burmese Days* by George Orwell. The target is an old one for Walcott; he has previously explored similar themes in *A Country Club Romance* from the early collection *In a Green Night* (31–2) and that poem started life in public as ‘Margaret Verlieu Dies’ in *Poems* (1951.). The Major is a stereotype, his sense of alienation from a changing world is a cliché and although he is generally rendered in a positive light his prejudices and habits remain intact. The attacks on expatriate wives, mocking their accents and their pretension, are similarly stereotypical and class-driven as much as they are born out of race or gender prejudices. Major Plunkett is not very original and although Walcott is ultimately sympathetic to this character nevertheless Plunkett reveals prejudices against the white landowners on the island.

Another example of a deliberately stereotypical figure — deliberate in the sense that Walcott chooses to depict her in this manner — is the character of Catherine Weldon in *Omeros* (1990) (174ff), also featured in the play *The Ghost Dance* (2002). Catherine is a strong and independent white coloniser who acts on political principle, agitating for change and wider recognition of injustice towards the Native Americans (*Omeros* 215–18). She is part of a sub-plot within *Omeros* which is set in North America around the time of the Ghost Dance in 1870 when the Native American tribes west of the Rockies experienced a religious ‘revival’ (Mooney).

Unlike the women of the island in *Omeros* who are not mentioned during the election campaign (which Walcott dismisses as an irrelevance anyway) and who do not pronounce their views, Catherine Weldon is a vocal political force. But in the foreword to the published texts of *Walker and The Ghost Dance* Walcott describes Catherine Weldon as a cinematic cliché: ‘The Ghost Dance had as its model a John Ford film with its usual stock characters — an Irish sergeant, a tough independent widow — and its standard setting of a fort’ (vii). Such a statement indicates that Walcott is quite comfortable with using short hand clichés
and stereotypes to some extent, presumably if they offer him a method by which to establish a scene quickly and focus on the more interesting details and deviations. In the play these are provided by Major McLaughlin’s humanity towards the Native Americans and Lucy, the Christian convert who joins the dancers. In *Omeros* Catherine takes us through the events of the Ghost Dance and forms part of Walcott’s wider, American perspective. While the detour has not always been appreciated by critics and, as already noted, Catherine is a stereotype, nevertheless she is not portrayed in a prejudiced or negative light and the passages during which the climax of the Ghost Dance are described do not lack power (*Omeros* 215–16).

Catherine Weldon’s first person narratives and strong opinions are in contrast to the silence of the women characters in the poems of *The Arkansas Testament* which are particularly indicative of Walcott’s lack of interest in people, perhaps more so than the technical weaknesses which Savory Fido identified in earlier works. With age and practice, the technical lapses are better concealed and less frequent but the silence persists and is evident too in the personal, relationship poems in this collection such as ‘The Young Wife’ (91) and ‘Summer Elegies’ (93) or ‘A Propertius Quartet’ (97). However, a greater than usual level of maturity in his relationships with women can be detected in the tone and content of two very personal poems in the collection: ‘To Norline’ (57), which is later echoed in a section of *Omeros* (41–2), and ‘Winter Lamps’ (91). In these poems Walcott does not write comments for the woman or women described. He makes not attempt to balance his account with the other side of the story, for these poems are written purely from the poet’s perspective.

Similarly, towards the end of *Omeros* the poet’s climactic moment of self-awareness and self-acceptance, where he declares that there is no error in feeling the wrong love for the wrong person is, on the face of it, a further demonstration of a mature and balanced approach to relationships which have failed and lessons which have been learned. Walcott does resort, however, to the ‘female of the species is more deadly’ cliché with the qualifier that the male of the species can also be highly toxic:

> And often, in the female, what may seem willful
> Will seem like happiness, that spasmodic ecstasy
> Which ejects the fatal acid, from which men fall
> Like a desiccated leaf, and this natural history
> Is not confined to the female of the species,
> It all depends on who gains purchase, since the male,
> Like the dung-beetle storing up its dry feces,
> Can leave its exhausted mate hysterical, pale. (240)

The lazy repetition in ‘wilfull/will’ and the loaded etymology of ‘hysterical’ with its origins in Greek medical theories about moving wombs causing female fainting fits supports Savory Fido’s contentsions regarding weakened poetic power and stereotypes to some extent, presumably if they offer him a method by which to establish a scene quickly and focus on the more interesting details and deviations. In the play these are provided by Major McLaughlin’s humanity towards the Native Americans and Lucy, the Christian convert who joins the dancers. In *Omeros* Catherine takes us through the events of the Ghost Dance and forms part of Walcott’s wider, American perspective. While the detour has not always been appreciated by critics and, as already noted, Catherine is a stereotype, nevertheless she is not portrayed in a prejudiced or negative light and the passages during which the climax of the Ghost Dance are described do not lack power (*Omeros* 215–16).

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and strong prejudice, prejudice reinforced by cheap cliché. Even the use of the rare word ‘spasmic’, meaning spasmodic or convulsive, sounds like a nasty form of orgasmic.

In the poems of *The Arkansas Testament*, Walcott’s portrayal of women is more neutral, using them purely to provide local colour and this is at once a weakness in his poetry whilst also reflecting the poet’s preferences. The people are merely figures in a landscape, the painter-poet being much more interested in the landscape itself than the depiction of either women or men. For example, in ‘The Three Musicians’ (23), ‘Elsewhere’ (66) and ‘Steam’ (68), Caribbean fishermen’s wives and European Jewish peasant women are used in this way; also ‘Central America’ (70) deploys old men and children for the same simplistic effect. This is the ‘flashcard-picture-of-a-famine-victim’ approach to poetic imagery. Walcott criticises it himself in *Omeros* when he describes the impact of tourism on the village:

…Its life adjusted to the lenses
of cameras that, perniciously elegiac,
took shots of passing things — Seven Seas and the dog
in the pharmacy’s shade, …
The village imitated the hotel brochure
With photogenic poverty, with atmosphere.
Those who were ‘people’ lovers also have
A snapshot of Philoctete showing you his shin, … (311)

Walcott also acknowledges the inherent falseness of his own approach to progress and his romanticising of the poor in *Omeros*:

… Didn’t I want the poor
to stay in the same light so that I could transfix
them in amber, the afterglow of an empire,
preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks
to that blue bus-stop? …
… Why hallow that pretence
of preserving what they left, the hypocrisy
of loving them from hotels …
Art is history’s nostalgia, …
… Who needed art in this place
where even the old women strode with stiff-backed spines,
and the fishermen had such adept thumbs, such grace
these people had …(227–29)

Nevertheless, he uses the snapshot technique repeatedly and resorts to stereotypical images of the men and women of the island. This suggests that Walcott is aware of their limitations and the clichés of honest and noble poverty which it perpetuates, and yet he still finds them useful as figures in his landscape.

*The Arkansas Testament*, which was Walcott’s last collection before he published *Omeros*, also includes poems which feature female characters in
similarly cliché but sympathetic roles, in particular ‘The Villa Restaurant’ (25) and ‘Cul de Sac Valley’ (9). ‘Cul de Sac Valley’ has become a critical favourite because of its lines ‘...your words is English / is a different tree’ (lines 37–38).

In this poem Walcott chooses to feature a little girl and her mother as the spirits of the land and the language. He is appealing to the symbolic image of woman as Mother of the nation or, in this case, keeper of the language of the people. It is another cliché and once again a deliberate one and, as Susheila Nasta notes:

Although such female figures were represented as powerful symbolic forces, repositories of culture and creativity, they were essentially silent and silenced by the structures surrounding them. (xvi)

Relying on unoriginal imagery such as this ultimately damages Walcott’s poetry, more than limited representation of the characters, because he has proven to be capable of powerful descriptions and vital images that encapsulate meaning with particularity and force. For example, in ‘Salsa’ (72), where the woman’s black olive eyes and crow blue/black hair are neither original nor startling, the result is anti-climax. But then, every so often, a simple line describing ‘an old woman pinning white, surrendering sheets / on a line’ from Omeros (311) can take the reader beyond the ‘snapshot woman’ by linking the domestic act of washing sheets to the wars of colonialism which Major Plunkett has been researching and which are mentioned on the same page just a few lines later.

Having looked more generally at Walcott’s clichéd handling of men and women, it is interesting to compare ‘Menelaus’ from The Arkansas Testament to ‘Goats & Monkeys’ from The Castaway and Other Poems (1965) (Collected Poems 83), a key poem which Savory Fido considered in 1986. ‘Goats and Monkeys’ is a reworking of the story of Othello and Desdemona in which Savory Fido rightly identifies ‘images from the world of sexist prejudice and racial myth’ (111). Its style is both loose and intense. The poet describes the situation — it is not a dramatic monologue whereby he can use Othello as his mouthpiece. ‘Menelaus’ on the other hand (101) is an early sketch for the figure of Menelaus represented in The Odyssey: a Stage Version. This dramatic monologue is darker than the scene from the play. ‘Menelaus’ deploys the same worn images which Savory Fido objected to in Midsummer — Helen, woman as the sea, even an echo of the lifted skirt imagery (22) — cited by Savory Fido (119). However the ‘overblown emotional crudity’ (111) which Savory Fido detected in the earlier poem is not on display here. This is a tightly controlled poem written in four line rhymed stanzas. Menelaus speaks as a man who is bitterly resigned, more distressed by the death and destruction caused by the war than by his wife’s betrayal. Menelaus’ attacks on his wife are racist as well as sexist — she is white trash and a Romany gypsy as well as a whore. The ‘tightness of rhythm and unorthodoxy of word, image and idea’ (113) which Savory Fido admired is hinted at in the ‘gypsy constancy’ of Helen’s predictable unpredictability, but the poem
is ultimately about a bitter old man on the beach, another variation on the early Walcott treatments of the Crusoe theme.

In Omeros the figure of Helen is a cliché that, like Catherine Weldon or the puffing pompous Major Plunkett, Walcott finds useful. She is only ever the blank canvas upon which he paints his version of events. Every other character in the poem comments on Helen but she herself prefers action to talk. This could be seen as a problem but in actual fact it becomes a test for careful reading and a lesson against expecting Walcott’s characters to make grand statements about their positions. The author, Maud, Dennis Plunkett, Achille, Hector, the other women in the village, even, indirectly, the tourists, all pass judgement on her, throw comments, mud and praise at her but she refuses to reply to them. The Helen of Omeros is described as many things by other people but when the poet poses the key question (271), why not see Helen for what she really is, the very fact that he answers this with another question — avoiding an answer — suggests that he does not have an answer or, perhaps, that he feels that ‘what she really is’ has been plain from the start if we pay attention to the way she has behaved.

Helen’s resistance to the subservience imposed on her by economic necessity and the tension of working for Maud manifests as backchat and mutterings and behaving as if she owns the house. These are slight actions compared to the violence of pre-emancipation struggles but they too can be read in the light of a long history of non-violent protest actions which historians such as Hilary McD. Beckles have shown were weapons in the covert war on slavery (137–57). Beckles also provides evidence of the problematic relationship between white woman slave owner/employer and black woman slave which is relevant for Walcott’s handling of Maud’s discomfort with Helen. In this way Helen may indeed be typical of women in her position but it is difficult to describe the treatment of this theme as negative and clichéd.

Savory Fido’s phrase ‘limitations of perception’ could be applied to the careless reader’s response to the figure of Helen in Omeros. The trap that Walcott has set for the reader is that they will be tempted to accept the views and comments of every other perspective in the poem and overlook Helen’s actual actions and words. Two critics, in particular, have fallen for this temptation and their comments reveal little about Helen and much about the way that they have unthinkingly adopted the multiple negative, stereotypical and clichéd perspectives offered throughout the poem. Arguably, by doing this, Walcott is using the stereotypes as a method of critiquing the reader or critic’s casual acceptance of the opinions of others.

So, Julie Minckler accuses Helen of theft:

In addition to the yellow dress, Helen also steals a bracelet from Maud … but is caught in the act by Dennis Plunkett, who, bewitched by her spell, lets her take it… (275).

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Helen actually replaces the bracelet, she is only trying it on. Minckler even quotes these words from the poem:

… he was fixed by her glance
in the armoire’s full-length mirror, where, one long arm,
its fist closed like a snake's head, slipped through a bracelet
from Maud’s jewellery box, and, with eyes calm as Circe,
simply continued, and her smile said, “You will let
me try this”, which he did…. (Omeros 96)

The key line with Minckler ignores is the last line of the section which describes how, after Helen has left the room, Major Plunkett ‘moved to the coiled bracelet, rubbing his dry hands’ (Omeros 96) which shows that the bracelet is back in the jewellery box. Furthermore, the yellow dress is a disputed piece of property. Maud says that Helen stole the dress, but Helen says that Maud gave it to her. Theft is alleged but the poet does not confirm it for the reader, which is perhaps the closest thing to proof in a work of fiction.

Similarly, June Bobb provides a reading of the meeting between Maud and Helen in Maud’s garden (Omeros 122–25) which is wildly at odds with the text:

Helen, who is pregnant, is forced to ask Maud for money to have an abortion. Her poverty chains her to dependency. The relationship between native and coloniser remains one of patronage. (209)

There is no suggestion that Helen is seeking an abortion and the five dollars which she asks to borrow would be unlikely to cover the cost. Moreover, it seems unlikely that Maud, the devout Irish Catholic, would be supportive of such a request.

These readings are very difficult to support. It is as if Minckler and Bobb want to cast Helen as a negative, stereotypical and clichéd figure — a thieving, dependent, unreliable maidservant. They have overlooked the details of the accusations of theft and the way in which Helen acts. When Maud queries her need for the money and only reluctantly agrees to lend or give it to her, Helen walks away. As with her refusal to accept harassment at the hands of the tourists in the restaurants, through her actions in the poem Walcott suggests that dignity and independence are more important to Helen than money.

The last time we see Helen she is once again working as a waitress, still pregnant (Omeros 322). She seems placid, perhaps subdued and tired by her pregnancy and the demands of earning a living. The poet offers no comment on this. She is still a blank canvas for the viewer but she seems ‘too remote’, like one who has completely detached herself from the role she is playing. This is a return to the mask imagery of the first appearance of Helen at a tourist resort (Omeros 23): ‘As the carved lids of the unimaginable/ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-wool cloud’ (Omeros 24). Why unimaginable? Why does Helen wear a mask? Are these references to her mask, which recur throughout the
poem, meant to remind the reader that Helen is playing the role she is expected to play? This would fit with the many ways in which Walcott represents Helen because she is rarely allowed to speak or act in the first person.

Helen’s key role appears to be one of representing the island, to be a beautiful female symbol of the nation and the land (Omeros 29–32 et passim) similar to the model, strong Caribbean women described by Nasta. However, when Omeros says that Helen’s beauty cannot be claimed any more than the island can (288), Walcott challenges the expected link between woman, land and colonial possession. Shortly thereafter (301) bays are parting themselves under Achille like a woman, specifically, like Helen, with the result that Walcott has chosen to criticise and utilise the imagery of submission and domination of the land almost in the same breath. Once again this is a role and an image imposed upon her by another character, in this case Achille. It does not mean that that is what she really is.

One last example of clichéd, negative and stereotypical characterisation of Helen by other characters in the poem/novel (the poet being one) which is contradicted by Helen’s actions arises when Achille verbally attacks Helen after the blocko (Omeros 115). His words are sexist, clichéd and stereotypical, like his description of the bays as woman. Achille’s speech reflects his immaturity and insecurity, his macho need to demonstrate his power by controlling ‘his’ woman. Because the poet describes Achille’s lonely musings on the beach just before this explosion, the reader understands that Achille’s anger is actually born of many things outside Helen’s control, particularly the impact of tourism on the island. He is not a dancer himself so he chooses not to go to the blocko yet he is unable to allow Helen to enjoy herself without him. Once more Helen is rendered as a blank canvas for other characters to project their feelings on to but her silent actions are deployed by Walcott to demonstrate that she is a woman of her own painting who refuses to be their punching bag. Again, this is demonstrated by actions rather than words. Helen says nothing in response to Achille but the next day she leaves him.

In conclusion, Savory Fido’s claim (as expressed in 1986) that Walcott’s treatment of women was clichéd, negative and stereotypical and therefore misogynist is a valid but limited assessment when applied to his writings since 1986. Walcott’s representation of people, both male and female, is weakened by his deliberate use of clichés and worn imagery, and this is indicative of his generally weak characterisation. Sometimes the clichés work to his advantage by allowing him to establish his scene or setting quickly and easily so that he can move on to look at interesting deviations or special features. However moments such as ‘the female of the species is more deadly than the male’ passage in Omeros (240) suggest that Savory Fido may have had a point. Furthermore, careless reading, critical misrepresentations and unreasonable expectations only serve to further the accepted criticism — that Walcott is a sexist writer — and that criticism deserves to be tested more thoroughly.
NOTES

1 OED 2nd edn. vol. XVI, 129 cites Walt Whitman’s use in 1868 in poem 118 of *Chants Democratic*: ‘The slender, spasmic blue-white jets’. Whitman seems to have been quite fond of the word — he also used it in ‘Election Day November 1884’ in relation to geysers. So even in a passage of the poem which seems simple, there may be an example of the American Mimicry which has Terada explored.

WORKS CITED


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