The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

MONUMENTS OF CULTURE AND THE CULT OF THE MONUMENT

A Dissertation in

Comparative Literature

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013
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Abstract

By evaluating instances of creative critiques and interrogations of the monument, this study seeks to demonstrate how commemorations of a valorized European past are constructions of an originary moment that elide the complexities of Conquest and its attendant legacy of transculturation and miscegenation in the Americas. This project explores the ways in which the American monument subverts popular resistance by embodying master narratives for a people, and focuses on the ideological manifestations of the monument through the works of writers who figure prominently, one could say, monumentally, in the Americas. I trace this phenomenon of alienating monumentalism in various cultural productions—not only books, but sculpture, earthworks, and other artifacts — examining the formation of asymmetrical cultural relations embodied by these products, especially as they continue to influence contemporary American narrative and art.

The examination of certain American poets as they confront or exemplify possibilities and limitations of monuments provides a means to observe how these “culturalizations” of memory function within contemporary America. This thesis examines the role of the monument in Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase* (1924), Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), Octavio Paz’s *Piedra de Sol* (1957), and Pablo Neruda’s *Canto general* (1950). These writers, as international figures, present their artwork as “documents” of American reality, making them particularly apposite for this project. Each of these poets has written in a form that may be considered “monumental,” whether
in the form of epic, agoric or Anacreontic (as opposed to lyrical) cantos, or by the appropriation of mythological subjects. These writers also happen to be winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, significant because such Nobel selections not infrequently prove to be monumental and monumentalizing of their laureates.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my family for helping me become the person I am today. I thank my parents, Ramona del Juárez and Walter Mitchell, who helped me develop resilience to challenges in life. I am grateful to my siblings, Tracy, Julie, and Daniel Mitchell for their love and support as we grew up together.

I thank my all-suffering husband, Vitaliy Gyrya, with whose tireless patience and affection this “precarious gait” has born fruit.

I am immeasurably grateful to Djelal Kadir for presenting me with an intense and challenging writing schedule, which I was able to adhere to because of his support, encouragement, attention, patience, and prompt feedback. Now, two years after becoming his student, I am proud to call him my academic mentor and friend.

Finally, I would like to thank all the people that made graduate life challenging and gratifying: Katherine Hume, Juana Djelal, Mich Nyawalo, Germán Campos-Muñoz, María Luján-Tubio, Dawn Taylor, Sara Marzioli, Brian Haines and the Advanced Applied Fluid Dynamics seminar, Tracey Cummings, Henry Morello, Libba Kelly, Jace Huff, and Matthew Karasek, among so many others.
“When a famous man dies one tends to remember only the sculpture … I can recall Constantius’s monuments but not his living face, not even those great dark eyes which are to my memory blank spaces cut in marble.”

— Julian, Gore Vidal
Introduction

MONUMENT, n. A structure intended to commemorate something which either needs no commemoration or cannot be commemorated … that is to say, monuments to perpetuate the memory of those who have left no memory.

– Ambrose Bierce, The Devil’s Dictionary (1906)

Poems serve as powerful and productive sites in which to study the function of monuments. My interest here is centered on the unique context of the Americas, where both the poetic and sculptural monument portrays in form, style, or theme, a depiction of and connection with Native and European origins, origins from which, historically, the populace at large finds itself alienated. Efforts to impose a distinct and creolized national identity seem to aggravate concerns regarding ethnic geneses, which have impelled the scholarly and creative scrutiny of portrayals of memory and supposedly well-defined beginnings embodied in the monument. In the case of the Americas, such literary formations simultaneously embody and challenge the formations of national identity. By evaluating instances of creative critiques, confrontations, and textual analogues of the monument, I seek to demonstrate that commemorations of a valorized European-Indigenous past are constructions of an originary moment that mitigate, if not outright elide the complexities of Conquest and its attendant legacy of transculturation and miscegenation. My project aims to explore in certain poetic texts that have attained to monumental status the ways in which the American monument simultaneously instantiates and interrogates certain master narratives imposed upon a people. I aim to focus on the ideological manifestations of the monument through the works of writers
who figure prominently in the Americas and well beyond the Western Hemisphere. My purpose in tracing what I see as the phenomenon of alienating monumentalism in various cultural products—not only books, but sculpture, murals, and other artifacts produced in the Americas—is to expose the formation of asymmetrical cultural relations within these cultural productions, asymmetries that also underlie these monuments’ public life as shared history. In the process, I hope to show, as well, how these asymmetries continue to influence contemporary American poetic narratives and artistic productions.

The examination of certain American poets as they interrogate and/or exemplify possibilities and limitations of monuments, I feel, provides a means to observe how these “culturalizations”1 of memory function within contemporary America. I will examine the role these monumentalisms enact in long poems by Saint-John Perse (Anabase, 1924), Octavio Paz (Piedra de Sol, 1957), Derek Walcott (Omeros, 1990), and Pablo Neruda (Canto general, 1950). These writers have had intimate and public ties with the political world by having accepted political posts, and their artwork as “documents”2 of American

1 The reconceptualization of material elements from Nature will play an important role in my discussion of the monument, and the term “culturalization” hinges upon the material aspects of memory and identity, as Jean-François Véran mentions: “political communities may still be objectively ‘imagined,’ but they still do try to ‘prove themselves’ on solid substantial elements produced by whichever combined culturalizations of nature and naturalizations of culture” (S253).

2 The definition of “document” here refers to the extensive discussion of historical artifacts in relation to history as described by Michel Foucault in his text The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969), in which he states that “the reconstruction, on the basis of what the documents say, and sometimes merely hint at, of the past from which they emanate and which has now disappeared far behind them; the document was always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence … [history has since]
reality make them particularly apposite for this project. Each of these poets has written in a literary form that is unmistakably “monumental,” whether in the form of epic, general canto, or by the appropriation of mythological subjects. As Nobel laureates, inevitably these poets have been historically “fixed” in ways that elevate their texts into permanent monumental objects. Such public and, inescapably political, appropriation of these poetic monuments is as ideologically driven a process as the construction and re-formation of sculptural monuments. Through these poets, I trace this phenomenon as it takes place in the Americas in the twentieth-century. This is a historical process that, according to a number of scholars, centers upon the transformation of secular Republican ideals into the dictatorial panopticon that is familiar to us today and has, as critics such as Jean Franco have stated, engendered “a number of violent incidents … that materially destroyed its monuments” (Decline, 12). The destruction of monuments is an action that resonates deeply with the people for whom the artifact has become a familiar object and, in the American Hemisphere, signals another transformation of landscape that has not been felt since the Independence movements and, further, since Conquest. The construction and, more importantly, destruction of monuments in the Americas indicates a transformation of the Americas into another political stage of development, distinct from previous

found its anthropological justification: that of an age-old collective consciousness that made use of material documents to refresh its memory; history is the work expanded on material documentation … history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the monuments of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments” (6-7).
political phases of Spanish rule and secularized Independence. This destruction of monuments has engendered a poetic fixation in the ways that monuments function—as sites of ideological solidification and rupture. And I trace the ways in which poets attempt to destroy and reconstruct monuments in the Americas, alongside the ways in which these poets are in turn fixed, petrified, and even “Nobelized” in order to serve as monuments to larger political interests. Moreover, as the erection of monuments has become identified as a masculine and often phallic preoccupation, projecting and imposing patriarchy upon their audiences, poetic monumentalism perpetuates the “representation of the poet as solemn patriarch [and] lauds the poet as a privileged man” (Dash, 610, emphasis added). The exemption of women-poets from my own study is not a slight or an intentional elision. Rather, it reflects the male-centered valuation of the monumental that historically has actively excluded women. And when an American woman such as Chile’s Gabriela Mistral is anointed by the Nobel Committee (the first American woman and the first Latin American to be so recognized, in 1945), the narrative of that occasion is elaborately marked by the praise of the maternal in her poetic corpus. Similarly, when Swedish Selma Lagerlöf, as the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in 1909, was referred to interchangeably as the “Great Swedish Mother” and “Sweden’s distinguished daughter” in the introductory speech during the Nobel banquet, she was inaugurated as a not only feminine, but as a maternal precedent for all women to follow in the Nobel lineage. In the context of the monumental and monumentalization, this complex phenomenon introduces yet another phase of the topic that merits its own
full treatment, rather than consideration as ancillary subject to history’s dominant masculine monument in the historical period that commands my attention here.

**Monumental (Mal)Functions**

In a contentious study of the geographic development of the pre-Conquest Americas, geographer William M. Denevan states that “[a]n apparent ‘mania for earth moving, landscape engineering on a grand scale runs as a thread through much of New World prehistory’ … The stone pyramids of Mexico and the Andes are well known, but equal monuments of earth were built in the Amazon, the Midwest U.S., and elsewhere” (377). The romantic idea of the Americas as a vast and virgin “New World” before the entrance of Europeans upon the scene is a popular belief based on what is now a widely discredited fiction. Certainly, later European conquistadors did encounter wide open spaces when landing on American shores and journeying further inland, but this image came into being only after initial landings initiated what is “probably the greatest demographic disaster ever” (Denevan, 370) in the form of disease and mass mortality. Buried within great swaths of American ground lie the remains of monuments inconceivable to those earlier visitors, only portions of which have been uncovered and only in recent times\(^3\). Yet, this nearly blank canvas (perhaps the term palimpsest would better serve), introduced a new stage in conceptualizing landscape, memory, and artistic

\(^3\) Denevan states that “[t]he degree to which settlement features were swallowed up by vegetation, sediment, and erosion is indicated by the difficulty of finding them today. Machu Picchu, a late prehistoric site, was not rediscovered until 1911” (378).
production. The poet-narrator of Octavio Paz’ *Piedra de sol* conceptualizes the landscape as a corporeal space that embodies an entire history, encapsulating a spatio-temporal site of collective memory that he seeks to excavate: “busco el sol de las cinco de la tarde / templado par los muros de tezontle” (16; “I search for the sun of five in the afternoon / tempered by walls of porous stone” Weinberger, 17). The search for the fifth sun of Mexica cosmology and history is enclosed by stone that is porous as human skin, absorbing the ways in which it has been shaped, conquered, and remembered over time. This permeable historical construction reflects the early palingenesis of America as “America⁴”, which has materially formed not only the landscape but the ways the geography was conceived and how it has come to serve as an element to distinguish the New World from both its decimated and exploitative progenitors.

The “writing” of historical memory has, as in most nation-states, become a fixation of powerful figures in order to ensure an image of themselves within national history. However, the twentieth-century has brought about yet another transitional period, one that has resulted in a fragmentation of historical memory, such that “[t]he secular and republican project of nationhood, born of the Enlightenment and monumentalized in Latin American cities, was over,” and the artifacts of substantive commemoration are literally destroyed. As Jean Franco further observes, this period has

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⁴ Since its first labeling as “America” within Waldseemüller’s famous 1507 map, which appeared in the *Cosmographiae Introductio* (1507), in which “[a]nyone with Waldseemüller’s philological penchant would clearly see the possibilities of the coincidence between the emergence of a New World and the etymological scansions that resonated in the name of [Amerigo Vespucci] who, for him, was its ‘discoverer’” (Kadir 1992, Ch. 3).
brought about “a number of violent incidents … that materially destroyed [American] monuments” (Decline, 11-2). In the twentieth-century, we see a particular phenomenon taking place in Latin America, for example, in which revaluations of Latin American identity were taking place that have had significant repercussions for national identity from that point onward. This new movement toward a re-visioning of the Americas was, in part, based on a presumed re-conception and integration of el pueblo (“the people”) in State policy in a “vision of national-popular political transformation [that] has been prominent in the sensibilities and strategy of twentieth-century politics in Latin America” (Hale, 572). Yet, despite this supposed acceptance and integration of the laboring-class into larger national identity, national history and national memory are still being re-written to exclude this populace, and to re-imagine a nation, a re-conception based upon images conceived by those in power. This questionable and illusory integration of a laboring class into hegemonic conceptions of the state is most explicitly challenged in Neruda’s Canto general, in which “la raza mineral, el hombre hecho de piedras … limpio” (23; “the mineral race, made of stone … clean” Schmitt, 24) is, upon the arrival of the Conquistadores, conquered, and “[l]os hijos de la arcilla vieron rota / su sonrisa” (47; “the sons of clay saw their smiles broken” Schmitt, 48). This fragmentary break from former innocent emanation from the substance of Nature is conceptualized as a modern-day allegorical exploitative excavation of the elements of Nature to build commemorations to dominant hegemonic figures.

The commemoration of hegemonic icons as a material conception of national identity is often reflected in images that emerge in a variety of contexts and in many
different forms. These images undergo transformation and reconceptualization from one historical period to the next. The re-imagining of ideologically interpreted artifacts exemplifies a particular narrative that when created does not, in fact, fix this narrative into an object that will endure forever, but in many ways perpetually “reconstructs” the narrative. Michel Foucault would describe this process with regard to his concept of the historical “subject,” an object that “becomes merely an ‘empty function,’ a vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals” (Major-Poetzl, 5). The “empty function” of the literary text has become the poetic analogue to the construction and destruction of monuments, imitating the durability and collective memorial aspect of the Western epic and enabled by such institutions as the Nobel Prize. This re-infusion of monumental constructions, literary or physically-dimensional, with re-imagined and ideological import, takes place in each of the poems discussed here. This process, as I shall be discussing shortly, occurs most explicitly within *Piedra de sol*, wherein the Mexica artifact becomes a subject of Paz’s critique of modern nationalistic appropriations of such historical objects. The reinterpretation of monumental “objects” also occurs in Perse’s *Anabase*, wherein the domination of a monumental landscape, described in ossified and material terms, becomes a commemoration to the figure of the conquering “Étranger” (“Stranger”) — a Western Xenophonic figure — thus illustrating the appropriation of a sublime topography for the veneration of Perse’s conception of the “ideal” poet. Pablo Neruda’s self-declared epic, *Canto general*, is an effort to materially deconstruct and rebuild the monument, contracting an entire history of the Americas into its material elements and reconstructing the sublime corporeal landscape into a
commemoration of the laboring body. Derek Walcott, by means of his text *Omeros*, seeks to appropriate the classical understanding of the Western epic as the material for his own replication of epic narrative, one that undermines the conventional monumentalism of epic, even as it embodies it. Although the construction of various forms of monumental objects in these poems exemplifies the ways in which monuments become a commemorative and collective voice for the people in general, as we shall see, the utilization of American landscape and bodies contribute to the particularity of this phenomenon in the Hemisphere.

**Monuments As Formations of National Identity**

A monument, as commonly understood, presumes to establish a permanent reminder of an event, culture, or person, and ostensibly functions as a site around which a group may unite and with which to identify. The etymological formation of the term “monument” stems from the Latin etymon, the verb *monēre*, meaning “to remind,” or *moneo*, “I remind”\(^5\). A large body of scholarship has been written about the function of monuments as embodiments of national identity\(^6\). Andreas Huyssen, one of the foremost recent scholars to examine the ideological function of monuments, defines the monument as one of “the material traces of the historical past in the present” (Huyssen, *Present*, 1).

\(^5\) and the Latin -mentum, “suffix forming nouns from verbs (to denote the result or product of the action of the verb” (OED).

In his many engaging studies of the monument, Huyssen examines what he considers today, as “a voracious and ever expanding memorial culture. [The] central concern … is the issue of the monumental in relation to memory — generational memory, memory in public culture, national memory, memory become stone in architecture” (Huyssen, *Seduction*, 181). The examination of memory, with a particular regard to collective national memory, is critical to the study of the function of monuments. This is particularly the case when ideological moorings are challenged as, for example, Raymond Williams argues in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), when during the years of the Industrial Revolution the very notion of “civilization” was threatened. Thus, “[c]ivilization’ then became an ambiguous term, denoting on the one hand enlightened and progressive development and on the other hand an achieved and threatened state, becoming increasingly retrospective and often in practice identified with the received glories of the past” (15). Such fixation with the past has become a driving force in the resurgence of commemorative construction, since this is one of the primary means by which “glories of the past” may be perpetuated, despite the vicissitudes that attitudes toward monumental construction have undergone. As Huyssen observes, nations today are “facing a paradox: monumentalism of built space or monumental tendencies in any other medium continue to be much maligned, but the notion of the monument as memorial or commemorative public event has witnessed a triumphal return. How do we think the relation between monumentality as bigness and the commemorative dimension of the monument?” (*Seduction*, 182). Although his studies are largely directed toward a post-World War II Germany, the questions he raises are critical for any study of the
function of monuments in the twentieth-century. Monuments are singular artifacts because they are not only aesthetic objects\(^7\), but are constructions that simultaneously embody a national history and are continually “re-written” and, some would argue, reinvigorated with new ideologies, challenging common understandings of the memorial and the role of memory in the public space, thus exhibiting palimpsestic mnemonic characteristics.

In U.S.-occupied North American territory, one of the most formative monuments for recent American history, Mount Rushmore, in reshaping the landscape between the World Wars, projects an ideological and topographic dominance over land appropriated from Native Americans. This now-iconic engraving, written upon a granite cliff and depicting the profiles of presidents, is replete with silent history, as Tony Perrottet points out: “for anyone with a sense of history, the reaction to being on top of the Black Hills has to be more nuanced … For Native Americans, Mount Rushmore has an entirely different set of meanings, since it was carved in the very heart of the most bitterly contested landscape in the Western United States” (5). Of course, the monument’s initial purpose to etch in stone a signpost for the onward march of Manifest Destiny is not apparent in the narrative now conceptually re-sculpted onto the monument’s façade. The

\(^{7}\) According to Terry Eagleton, the “aesthetic” signifies “a creative turn to the sensuous body … it represents … a liberatory concern with concrete particularity” (9). Further, the “aesthetic … is simply the name given to that hybrid form of cognition which can clarify the raw stuff of perception and historical practice, disclosing the inner structure of the concrete” (Eagleton, 16). Eagleton’s extensive study of the aesthetic with regard to the function of ideology is one that I have found to be particularly useful here.
monument, a reformation of landscape that presumes a claim that was previously protected by a treaty is exemplified by a popular appellation (now perpetuated by tourism websites): the “Shrine of Democracy”. In Latin America, the process of monumentalization is somewhat distinct from that of North America, and certainly no less susceptible to what Miguel Ángel Centeno refers to as “historical amnesia.”

According to Centeno,

In their search for historical symbols to appropriate, Latin American countries had two difficult choices. The first was to honor the pre-Columbian civilizations … However, such a strategy would present a significant problem: how to glorify a past whose destruction came at the hands of the forefathers of those who hold power? … Another option was to glorify the Conquest or the Colonial era … [but in] the twentieth century, worship of the Conquest has been universally rejected … A better answer … partly lies in the historical timing of both of the iconographic turns to celebrating the indigenous heritage. (84)

This difference, between appropriating heritage rather than recollecting a national memory that is faithful to Native civilization or, worse, worshipful of their conquerors, allows for a simplified re-interpretation of History, as in Centeno’s example:

8 The Treaty of 1868, also known as the Treaty of Fort Laramie.

9 As may be noted in one example, the website “Travel South Dakota,” (www.travelsd.com/Attractions/Mount-Rushmore). However, there are many other sites that refer to the monument in these terms. The epithet “Shrine of Democracy” has “caught on,” and may also be found in many print travel guidebooks to the area. Certainly, the attribution of a theological resonance to the monument imbues a novel aspect of pilgrimage to the visitation of the site.

10 The appellations “Latin America,” and the Caribbean, for that matter, are designations that I do not want to take for granted, but will serve for referring to the arbitrary division of the United States of America from the countries south of its southernmost border that have remained “unconquered,” at least geographically.
In Mexico, Porfirio Díaz’s attempts to re-establish the centrality of Mexico City … in the rebellion of 1877 required an integration of at least parts of the population. The veneration of the Aztecs was meant to not only give the Porfiriato a historical link with which to legitimize itself, but also to symbolically reassert the domination of Mexico City … [C]oncern with creating an inclusive authoritarianism helped shape their choices of nationalist myths to give an unbroken line from the Aztec emperors to the PRI. (84)

The association of a contemporary politician with the Aztecs (in whom there lies an implicit gateway to the origins of all of Mexico) is an ideology that is very carefully cultivated and informs all of the imagery associated with the nation-state, particularly its monuments. One of the most famous examples of the effort to solidify this ideology is by means of a statue displayed prominently in the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City, Miguel Noreña’s “Monumento a Cuauhtémoc” (1887)11. This statue not only draws a relationship between a contemporary political figure and a Native one from the past, but also associates this succession with a hybridization of the Classical Greek with what was being conceived of as the “national style,” exemplified by the juxtaposition of plinth, costume, and imagined ethnic origins: “The column formed by these structures made the pedestal for the statue of Cuauhtémoc, draped in a garment concocted from the pictographs in the codices but one that easily could have passed for something Socrates might have worn” and, moreover, “those creole thinkers interested in glorifying the Indians of antiquity … concerned themselves with Indian rulers like Cuauhtémoc rather than with real Indians living at the time. Therefore, the Greek details on Cuauhtémoc’s costume and his white features are quite deliberate” (Tenenbaum, 140, 142). Although

11 See Linares García.
Leslie Bethell derisively states that artists such as Noreña “helped to fill the need apparently felt by every new country to cover itself with congratulatory monuments” (407), such artifacts are intended to solidify in the minds and memories of onlookers the permanence and grandeur of the authority figure of a given historical moment.

With regard to the idealism that often motivates the construction of monuments, there exists the “desire for narratives of the past, for re-creations, re-readings, reproductions … at every level of our culture” (Huyssen, *Present*, 5). Yet, to declare that the monument is the embodiment of these ideals is to simultaneously elide the dangers that the monument poses to a sense of, or identification with, “community.” This “dangerous monument” is the impetus for which Lewis Mumford famously first issued the monument its “death certificate,” stating that “the notion of material survival by means of the monument no longer represents the impulses of our civilization, and in fact it defies our closest convictions … how many buildings of the last century, that pretend to be august and monumental, have a touch of the modern spirit in them? They are all the hollow echoes of an expiring breath … heaps of stone, which … are completely irrelevant to our beliefs and demands” (438). Mumford goes on to condemn even the concept of the contemporary monument as a possibility, insisting that “[t]he notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument” (438). This early and dismissive statement, in many ways, has proven to be untrue. As Huyssen demonstrates, the memorial impulse is now stronger than ever, even in what some consider not only modern, but a postmodern era.
Nevertheless, the critical danger that monuments pose lies in their having become a means to alienate a populace from its history and culture by absolving a community from the responsibility of remembering the figure, event, or subject that the memorial is supposed to represent. This effect of monument construction is detrimental, as James E. Young states, since “monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations. As cultural reifications, in this view, monuments reduce … historical understanding as much as they generate [them] … that rather than embodying memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community’s memory-work with its own material form … the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden … As a result, the memorial operation remains self-contained and detached from our daily lives” (272-3). Although Young, like Huyssen, refers largely to monuments erected in response to the atrocities of World War II, the same may be said for monuments constructed in other regions and time periods, including multiple monumental forms such as the plastic, aural, and textual.

The capability of monuments, in all of their emanations, to appropriate memory and bury it away under contemporary ideologies demands that we scrutinize their function now. In the many ways that physical-dimensional monuments pose a “danger,” as listed above, poetic monuments, exemplified by their epic intentionality, appropriate and reconceive national memory and absolve a public of the responsibility of
remembering. This absolution is apparent in such epics as Neruda’s *Canto general* that, in retelling the entire history of the American hemisphere in the form of a general and epic poetic narrative, seeks to reevaluate and reconceive this history with regard to his Marxist ideology. The poem, thus, supplants collective memory by speaking as the song that is representative of an otherwise silent people. However, the literary monument goes beyond the appropriation of memory that physical monuments enact by, additionally, taking the platform of “doctrine,” of placing the poet in the role of didact and the public as pupil, a critical positionality between poet and public that is exhibited in all of the poems discussed here.

**American Monumentalism**

Jean Franco, in her book *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (2001), notes that in the early twentieth century a change was taking place that was hemispheric in scope, manifesting itself in overt ways in such areas as the urban centers of Latin America. She states that the change was a significant post-Independence transition, when the “secular and republican project of nationhood, born of the Enlightenment and monumentalized in Latin American cities, was over. The city, once imagined as the *polis*, had long been an image of repression and confusion, either a panopticon surveyed by the all-seeing eye of a dictator ... or internally corrupted” (11). The city was no longer the site of elite urbanity but a radiating center of subjugation, and the result of this new repression was a form of “material destruction” in which “a number of violent incidents occurred that materially destroyed [the city’s] monuments” (Franco,
12). This period of American history forms the point of departure of this dissertation, when old monumental forms are being destroyed as new ones are being constructed, when poets and artists are observing a transition taking place and creating textual monuments upon vanishing monumental forms, and icons and artifacts stemming from Native American history, such as the Sunstone, are being appropriated to substantiate, foundationally, a re-imagined national identity.

New genres of art began to reflect a re-imagining of historical figures. The self-declared “monumental” sculpture by Joaquín Roca Rey,12 an artist who is credited with pioneering “[m]odern sculpture in Peru” (Bethell, *Cambridge History*, 427) offers a particularly vivid instance of the processes that my investigation addresses, since it exemplifies multiple features of the culturalization of memory. Roca Rey trained under Spanish sculptor Victorio Macho, who worked in Lima and left many of his sculptures in Peru upon returning to Spain in 1952. Roca Rey’s “Monumento a Garcilaso de la Vega” (1967) was a commissioned gift from Peru to Rome. The sculpture is a stylized interpretation of “El Inca,” exhibiting Mannerist enlarged limbs and hands that accentuate the figure’s disproportionately small head. Meant to be seen from below, the receding proportions from the base of the sculpture to its top are consciously rendered to accentuate the lofty heights that the structure appears to reach. The placement of this stylized rendering of one of the most well-known Mestizo figures of Latin American history in one of the traditional centers of Western civilization is a fascinating trans-

12 See Roca Rey in Works Cited for URL address for this image.
Atlantic exchange, and illustrates an artifactual response to Europe from a site that Garcilaso de la Vega once described as the site of an “otra Roma” (*Comentarios reales*, 365). This disproportionately sculpted monument depicts a figure that in many ways is a metonymy of the culture taking shape during the sixteenth century, and a reflection of the ideological promise of the twentieth.

The gigantic subject of Roca Rey’s statue is an apt reflection of the historical figures appropriated in other art forms to promote ideological interests. Jean Franco describes an artistic re-conception of the genre of realism that accompanied the promulgation of Mexican muralism of the 1920s-1970s, particularly by one of the most famous of the muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros. In a 1967 essay, he argues for the inherent message attendant upon figurative artwork, and the potential for political progress written into the message (Franco, 67). By using the example of Mexican muralism, Franco defines a term that describes a significant driving force of the formation of such artistic endeavors with a claim to monumentality. She states that “[m]onumental art (unless parodic like Botero’s paintings) tends to produce icons – figures that are venerated as sacred and therefore leave no room for a disparity of interpretations. Monumentalism reinforces the cult of the artist, turning art into a kind of pedagogy and the public into obedient pupils” (69). This monumentalism, a process of instantiation of larger-than-life figures depicted within an ideological artifact by a “didactic” artist, or what Andreas Huyssen describes as “twentieth-century totalitarianisms” (*Present Pasts*, 38), is a significant incarnation of a new commemoration that seeks to tear apart and reconstruct collective memory in the context of
edification. Russ Castronovo describes monumentalism as not only a means of didacticism, but argues for its popular instruction beyond national identity since, for him, “[m]onumentalism refers not simply to various cultural artifacts of grand theme or dimension; it also delineates how the narratives encoded within these artifacts, whether literary text or architectural column, access the authority of monēre to instruct people to enter the nation as citizens” (108). Yet, the definition of monumentalism that I utilize in this dissertation encompasses both Franco’s and Castronovo’s concepts, and moving beyond this, I implicate the poet-sculptor and his monumental creation as usurper of collective memory. Thus, I define monumentalism as the process by which the artist, whether poet or sculptor, produces a purposefully grandiose work that presumes an incontestable epic status, and assumes this authority from a platform of didacticism, enforcing a silencing and collective memory that stifles any competing possibility for popular dissension or alternative history. Because of the presumptive edification of a populace of the poet’s own definition of nationalism, monumentalism occurs in recent, twentieth-century epic productions when national exceptionalisms are exemplified by the durability of monuments, more than at any other period of history, as a projection of a unified national body. This process of monumentalism is both critiqued and enacted in monumental epic poetry of the Americas, examples of which I examine in this dissertation.
Epic Monuments

Each of the poems that I analyze is written in what has been critically deemed the literary epic form, or “a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around [sic.] deeds of significance to the community” (Farrell, 2). The monumentalism of these literary texts is an under-studied aspect of the epic text\textsuperscript{13}. However, to examine the monumentalism evinced in literary epics, a brief elucidation of this often contentious term is imperative. There are various ways to qualify a text as an epic that, unlike such literary forms as the novel, has a specific, distinctive, and formal quality. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his well-known essay “Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel” (1941), defines the epic as “a genre that has come down to us already well defined and real,” and a literary form that has been appropriated today, although the contemporary epic “arose only after the epic was already an established form, and arose on the basis of an already ancient and powerful epic tradition” (Bakhtin and Holquist, 14). He goes on to argue that the epic is characterized by its fixedness and inviolability, elements that contribute to the epic poem’s monumentality. Despite Bakhtin’s insistence that any attempt to appropriate the epic poem today is fallacious in its hopeless mimicry of a genre that has ceased to “live,” the declared choice of the epic as the mode in which the authors of my study have chosen to write is significant and purposefully selected.

\textsuperscript{13} Although there are studies of the American epic, for example, Alan Christopher Jalowitz’s dissertation \textit{Holding the center: American and German epic poetry, 1850-1950} (Penn State, 2004), my purposes here are quite different from treatment that consists principally of long catalogues and conscientious compendia of authors and works.
Cecilia Rangel argues that adoption of the epic structure “is consistent with how Latin American writers such as [Octavio] Paz and [Pablo] Neruda conceptualize modern poetry as the integration of the historical and the mythical in the structure of the poem. They incorporate formal aspects associated with the epic genre in order to historicize and politicize lyric poetry” (Rangel, 101). Although one may argue that the epic poem resides exclusively in the past, as Bakhtin states, American poets in the twentieth century have appropriated this form precisely because of its ties to the past, and, more than any other poetic form, the epic seems to fix the text, and the poets themselves, in a perceived sphere of permanence. This permanence is instantiated by means of the creation of collective memory, exemplified by a particular figure or event, since “[i]t is the content of collective memory that determines its shape, and this content consists primarily of people and their endeavors” (Russell, 793). It is this venture into the perpetual and permanent that drives this dissertation: the potentiality of the poet to construct and situate the collective memory of a group of people by the creation of certain monumental narratives that are manifestations of the poetic impulse toward an afterlife engendered and precipitated by the textual monument.

Certain conventional (and problematic) definitions of the epic imply that the “veritable” epic genre does not exist beyond Homer and his two works, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Aristotle, in his Poetics, “operates on the understanding that the only epics of Homer were the Iliad and Odyssey,” and that “[t]he epics of the [post-Homeric—the Homeridae] Cycle would not be epic … epic … achieves perfection in its complete and unified structure. Only Homer has that perfection … so Homer cannot be the poet of
these [belated] epics … And they are not really epics, since they are not created by Homer” (Nagy 33, 39). However, others argue that the epic is alive and well but has become inflated to an immensurably expansive and mutable categorization with regard to the cultural context within which it may be used: “the history of epic criticism … has thrived on … subjective judgment. Not only have critics wished to reserve the word ‘epic’ for the best, the highest, and the most comprehensive of literary artifacts; ‘epic’ immediately suggests an affirmation of essential cultural values … [S]ecuring a workable definition that is not idiosyncratic proves exasperating” (McWilliams, 3). Classics scholar J.B. Hainsworth, moreover, notes in his monograph *The Idea of Epic* (1991) that “a succinct description of epic quality in literature …[is] something like that which the old verse epic of Homer distilled from the fragments of its ancestral heroic poetry – ideas that stood at the center of its audience’s view of themselves and the world” (150).

However, scholars today have expanded upon this Eurocentric qualification of the epic. Gregory Nagy challenges conventional definitions, somewhat sardonically, by focusing on the author of the epic as the avenue through which the new, post-Homeric epic emerges: “How, then, can any new poet recreate epic? … The only way to recreate this genre is to become the ideal poet. But how can any new poet become the ideal poet? The lack of a clear response leaves the genre of epic stranded” (39). These questions are even more provocative when other post-Homeric works were referred to as epic, despite Aristotle’s seeming incontestable affirmation. Nagy notes that the idea of epic was contested from quite early, since “[o]ther epics were attributed to figures other than Homer. Those epics, which were classed in a grouping of epics known as the Cycle
(kuklos), were considered inferior to the two epics attributed to Homer” (Nagy, 22). If those contributions to the Epic Cycle were considered epics, whether or not they were written by Homer, then such assertions limiting the epic to Homer’s two works today are plainly shortsighted, and have not prevented poets from subsequently declaring their poems to be epic, claims seconded by scholars who insist that these texts cannot be dismissed outright in any continued study of the epic genre.

Two influential critics have expressed opposing views on the function of the epic, namely György Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin. The dialogue in which they have engaged is well-known, and their argument has formed the groundwork for studies that reify the distinction between the epic and novel and is critical for approaching claims of literary “epicity.” Lukács’s and Bakhtin’s differing perspectives are evident in such texts as Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase*, where the process of colonialism is played out by adopting Xenophon’s “historical” narrative approach, revolutionary because the conception of the “other” was addressed for the first time in Hellenic literature. Saint-John Perse’s extraordinary creation of the francophone epic as a re-emergence of the ideals of the Neo-classical period forms a productive *locus* in which one may examine the function of the epic and the role of the “Storyteller” as elaborated by Lukács and Bakhtin, with Walter Benjamin providing even further ammunition in the discussion of the characteristics of the “modern” epic. As we shall see presently in Chapter 1, Perse’s epic challenges the apparent “obsolescence” of the epic poem, and demands a rethinking of assertions that, as Lukács states, “no one has ever equalled Homer, nor even approached him – for, strictly speaking, his works alone are epics” (30).
Lukács’s, Bakhtin’s, and Benjamin’s views on the epic form a significant three-way conversation when one trains their deliberations on a self-proclaimed neo-epic\textsuperscript{14}. Bakhtin and Lukács differ most conspicuously in their approaches to the function of the epic in the present. Lukács argues that the epic functions within a dialectical teleology that, according to Paul de Man, reflects “a harmonious unity in the ideal Greece. The original unified nature that surrounds us in … the blessed times … of the same substance as the fire of the stars’ has now been split in fragments that are nothing but the historical form of the alienation … between man and his works” (de Man, 530). Bakhtin, however, sees the epic as dialogically relegated to an “‘absolute past’ … [that] indicates both that the singers are at an infinite temporal distance from their subject matter … and that they sing … about ‘utterly finished’ events from a valorized and reverently represented national past … Whereas [Lukács’] \textit{Die Theorie des Romans} laments the passing of epic timelessness, [Bakhtin’s] “Epic and Novel” delights in overcoming an unchangeable national myth through temporality” (Neubauer, 543). In addition, Neubauer emphasizes that social structures are never truly hermetic by stating that “[s]ocial life was not a closed, univocal ‘monologue’ to Bakhtin but an open ‘dialogue.’ … To Bakhtin (1984), the essence of dialogue is its simultaneous differentiation from yet fusion with another” (Baxter, 24).

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{14} The concept of the “neo-epic” is a term I have borrowed from Timothy P. Hofmeister’s essay “The Wolf and the Hare: Epic Expansion and Contextualization in Derek Walcott’s \textit{Omeros}” (1996), in which Hofmeister states: “Moving from an early modern view of epic as an "epistemological touchstone," to the "unlimited assimilative capacity" exhibited in the “neo-epic” … highlights an ineradicable strain of literary ambition in the epic genre” (541).
Many of Lukács’s assertions are problematic, as he himself admits, particularly with regard to his original objective of “looking for a general dialectic of literary genres... based upon the essential nature of aesthetic categories and literary forms,” which was problematically “cut off from concrete socio-historical realities” (16-7). However, many elements of his argument are quite useful in demonstrating that conclusions about the epic stem from the arguments he makes about the epic genre’s fixed life span, that it emerged from the “the subject’s [i.e., the artist’s] a priori needs, his metaphysical sufferings, which provided the impulse for creation, and the pre-stabilised, eternal locus of the form with which the completed work coincides” (40). The artist during the Hellenic period had particular needs and concerns that gave rise to the epic. However, as time has passed, these concerns become obsolete and then disappear altogether, and “it forces the same mentality to turn towards a new aim which is essentially different from the old one. It means that the old parallelism of the transcendental structure of the form-giving subject and the world of created forms has been destroyed, and the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless” (40-1). This artistic creation is confined to the Hellenic period, because it is only within this time period that the concerns of the “form-giving subject” lie. What did the concerns of the form-giving subject during the era of the epic include? Mainly, the mindset of the artist was one that was surrounded by “a passively visionary acceptance of ready-made, ever-present meaning,” such that “all that is necessary is to find the locus that has been pre-destined for each individual” and poetry involved simply “the copying of visible and eternal essence” (Lukács, 32). Thus,
everything within the artist’s closed world is a direct reflection of “essence,” as Plato’s cavernous lesson teaches, and everything that can be perceived can be, thus, explained.

Yet, Lukács argues that today we suffer from a markedly alienating characteristic of modern life, what he calls “the productivity of the spirit” that has created a chasm between the imaginary and substantial, such that human beings today “have invented the creation of forms: and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete” (33-4). The epic was the emanation of life become essential, “in which the meaning of the process is laid down as though in eternal hieroglyphics – these stages are the great and timeless paradigmatic forms of world literature: epic, tragedy, philosophy” (35). This chasm “between self and world” (Pettersen, 39) that once placed tragic necessity outside of human agency is nonexistent today. The former timeless aspect of epic today, though, has been consigned to a genre that retains a collective function by means, in part, of the reverence attributed to it. If, today, epic has “become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone,” since now “it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever” (Lukács, 37), the renewed interest in epic creation today calls into question the contemporary use and purpose of this text. Distinct from the novel, which is a reflection of an apparent “fragmentation” because it does not reflect an eternal essence, the epic today seeks to embody a collective and national history and transform what Lukács refers to as “transcendental points of orientation,” such that epic works “become subject to a historico-philosophical dialectic” (Lukács, 40), in other words, a synthesis of an old transcendental orientation and a new one.
With this understanding of the epic as a form of synthesis of a past mode of thought and a “novel” one, it becomes clearer why the Lukács who wrote *The Theory of the Novel* may accuse a poet like Saint-John Perse of “a more or less conscious hypostasy of aesthetics into metaphysics” (38), a form of “shoe-horning” a narrative of the post-epic world into a genre from which it is disaffected. An example of the American epic such as *Anabase*, although not rising from the idealized totality that Lukács describes (as problematically “abstract” as Lukács’s proscriptions for the epic genre can be), approaches a reinvention of the epic that enacts the dialectical nature of the genre. If the novel is the form of literary art that best represents today’s fragmentation of form from essence, then the epic written today, by Perse’s reckoning, apparently, is a means to re-establish not necessarily the reflective nature of form but to underscore contemporary fragmentation by engendering a totalizing narrative, by writing a narrative that can claim to tell a paradigmatic tale of colonization. This reclaimed epic incorporates a stylistic circularity that suggests that the modern epic is not enduring by remaining stoically whole, but is repeated over time.

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15 Lukács, in the “Preface” of the 1971 edition, makes a distinction between himself, the contemporary Lukács, and the one who wrote the original treatise in 1920, referring to himself as “the author of *The Theory of the Novel*” (Lukács, 13).

16 The term “totality” may be defined as “the assumption that phenomena can be understood only in relation to other phenomena. From a dialectical perspective, the notion of totality does not mean ‘completeness’ in the sense of producing a total or complete portrait of a phenomenon … Totality, from a dialectical perspective, is a way to think about the world as a process of relations or interdependencies” (Baxter and Montgomery, 14-15).
Bakhtin, in deliberate response to Lukács in his essay “Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel” (1941), concurs that the epic resides in the past, and that the past constitutes the content of the epic. Yet, the formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre has become the transferal of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past. The epic was never a poem about the present, Bakhtin argues, but about its own time (one that became a poem about the past only for those who came later). The epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it ... Both the singer and the listener, immanent in the epic as a genre, are located in the same time and on the same evaluative (hierarchical) plane, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance. The space between them is filled with national tradition. (13)

This epic distance has been undermined in the postepic world, and the national tradition that once set the epic hero apart is today replaced with an illusory nationalism. Yet, the epic talks back to the past that is dominated by myth, and to a present that will form a “dialogue” with the epic as it is interpreted in a different time. Bakhtin states that:

“every thing, every object of artistic representation loses its completedness, its hopelessly finished quality and its immutability that had been so essential to it in the world of the epic ‘absolute past,’ walled off by an unapproachable boundary from the continuing and unfinished present. Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. No matter how distant this object is

The concept of nationalism is distinguished here as a post-Enlightenment term that, as Benedict Anderson states, “in view of that word’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind … [and]became ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains” (4, Anderson). This portability imbues the term with flexibility, particularly if, indeed, the idea of “nation” is an imagined one.
from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. But meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the object is lost; its sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold.” (30, emphasis added)

Bakhtin, then, moves a step further than Lukács by taking a dialogic approach to the function of the epic that allows for a conversation to take place with a seemingly isolated past and with the ever-advancing present. Once the epic reaches the present-day, it is no longer the completed and “pristine” whole it was when confined to its historical and cultural context. Even as it reaches toward the “present,” it is subjected to “continuing temporal transitions” (Bakhtin, 30), such that the only time when it was whole occurred within the context from which it emerged. Thus, the epic is not “fixed” so much as renewed as it reaches a new “contemporaneity,” and in this way maintains its durability.

According to Leslie A. Baxter, “Bakhtin was critical of the ‘monologization’ of the human experience that he perceived in the dominant linguistic, literary … theories of his time. His intellectual project was a critique of theories that reduced the unfinalizable, open, and heterogenous nature of social life to determinate, closed, totalizing concepts” (24). This impermeable aspect of Lukács’ theory of the epic has been greatly criticized, and led to a reaction that reflects the debate that surrounds the epic. The idea of such closed literary boundaries has engendered a response from Bakhtin that argues that “[s]ocial life was not a closed, univocal ‘monologue’ to Bakhtin but an open ‘dialogue.’ … as an exemplar of dialogic expression … To Bakhtin the essence of dialogue is its simultaneous differentiation from yet fusion with another” (Baxter, 24). The
conversation in which these critics, Lukács and Bakhtin, have engaged, has contributed greatly to contemporary studies of the epic, and reveal the ways in which the development of epic in the Americas has much to be explored.

**An Interrogation of Monumentalism**

Russ Castronovo, in his monograph *Fathering the Nation*, states that “monumentalism narrates a history exercised with power over citizens. It is indeed power that shapes the history that defines people as citizens and collects them in the construct of a nation ... as an analysis of the material expressions of culture, monumentalism describes how similar narratives underlie different [art] forms” (109). Thus, among the many facets of artistic monumentalism lie formations of material power that seek to unify a people within the constructed concept of “nation.” The literary epic is a significant means to enact this practice, although it seeks to undermine hegemonic monuments in favor of their own conceptions of what the nation should be. The epic poet-creator, driven in part by a longing for Homeric immortality, becomes an architect of national identity by means of the interchange he forms with a public, and this interaction is solidified through the ways that he re-imagines memory and history, utilizes the public body as the material for his poetic monument, and concretizes his monumental role as voice of the populace.

In each chapter, I focus on a different aspect of monumentalism, exemplified by the American epic poem. These elements of monumentalism are evinced in four different ways: first, by means of poetic tropes of calcification of both a people and natural world;
second, by the poetic re-imagining of artifacts qua icons of national identity; third, the effort to rebel against monumentalism in recent decades, in the guise of a “counter-monumentalism,” which enacts a new form of monumentalism; and, finally, the fusing of the monument with the laboring body by means of poetic materialism. Each of these emanations of monumentalism, which I shall be discussing more fully in due course, reveals a poetic reaction to both the role of the monument as ideological structure and the simultaneous perpetuation of the monument in a new configuration. The works reflect the next étape of the monumental in an age that has increasingly witnessed the destruction of material monuments with the intention of eschewing an ideological dependence on such images.

Yet, the emergences of such phenomena as indigenismo, counter-monumentalism, and, significantly, the institution of the Nobel Prize for literature, are all symptoms of the evolution and transience of the function of monuments. The Nobel Prize, for example, has led to such “conditions” as the “Nobel complex,” one that Julia Lovell has described\(^\text{18}\) as an anxiety to enact national identity on the world stage by means of the identititarian hypostasis and permanence that the Prize engenders. One well-known instance of this “complex” is manifested by Pablo Neruda, who famously eagerly sought the Prize to the point of obsession (Lovell, 45). Nevertheless, those poets of the “marginalized” regions of the Americas who have won Prizes, with the exception of

\[^{18}\text{Julia Lovell’s highly-acclaimed monograph, The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature (2006), is one of the most comprehensive recent texts centered on ideological motivations behind the awarding of the Prize.}\]
Gabriela Mistral, all were cited by the Nobel committee for their epic poems. Politics, arguably, inflected the rationale for these awards. For example, after World War II, the Prize seemed to be awarded to those who, seemingly, could not fall into any political category. One instance of this is evinced by “[d]ifficult poets such as Saint-John Perse (1960 laureate) … praised for their ‘highly individual creations’ … postwar committees sought politically opaque universalism in esoteric creations” (Lovell, 59). However, at the same time, these political interests dovetail with Nobel “lobbyists” who advocate for the writer of their choice, since “[w]riters in minor languages enhance their reputations and become candidates for the prize if sponsored by major writers … Dag Hammarskjöld helped Saint-John Perse” (Meyers, 218). The complexity of Nobel committee selections underscores the immense significance of the Prize, which has proven to be a means to solidify poetic monumentalism, since it operates on the implicit criteria that “[t]o exercise critical judgment on literature … is an assertion of power” (Wright, 142). The Prize imbues the poet with an undeniable immortality as architect of ressentiment, perpetuates the view that literature is “both national and universal, both expressive and formative of civilization, as both representing the national whole and requiring geniuses who would stand above and elevate the lowly plebiscite” (Lovell, 51) and, as a result, forever fixing the writer in the history and collective memory of a national community. If, in other words, “[f]ame immortalizes poets by turning them into statues” (Rotella, 19).

Lovell describes the spread of “nationalism” as having been “driven by the ressentiment, or the competitive desire of national elites for the sense of uniqueness and prestige generated by consciousness of national identity” (15).
145), then their productions are the portal to immortality, both for the poet and the ideology his monument exemplifies. In the pages of this study that follow, we shall see how these processes play out in the Nobel laureates and their epic performances.

In Chapter One, I explore one of the earliest twentieth-century attempts to form a poetic monument by means of the instantiation of collective memory that immortalizes the monument and its builder. This construction is achieved, in this case, by means of the appropriation of the classical European epic tradition in the Americas in the twentieth century. Saint-John Perse’s epic poem, *Anabase* (1924), functions as a gateway for Perse to insinuate himself into a European teleology by means of his own neoclassical\(^\text{20}\) efforts. In this chapter I argue that Perse, writing contemporaneously with such writers as Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant, wrote in the epic form in order to concretize his poetic monumentalism, and by means of the French language he attempts to form a distinct site, albeit “extraterritorial,” of French collective memory. Perse’s Caribbean origins underscore all of his writing, as many scholars such as Mary Gallagher contend. As such, Perse’s poem lies within a contentious space in which a European monumentalism is appropriated in order to convey a narrative that embodies *créolité*, while serving as a means for a perceived permanence that accompanies the epic text. The epic, like the physical monument, is imbued with this perceived permanence by means of its hypostasis, or calcification, of collective memory. What interests me in Perse’s text is that by writing the French epic, Perse actually attempts to re-form francophone collective

\(^{20}\) I expand upon the “neoclassical” on the section beginning on page 79 and forward.
memory by way of a narrative that hinges upon colonization, diegetically enacted by the character of the poet-narrator. Moreover, this process is achieved not only by means of the subjugation of a people, but by a poetic calcification of the very landscape, a materialist and under-studied aspect of the poem that belies what Gallagher refers to as Perse’s “rhétorique de la création” (36; “rhetoric of creation”). This diegetic relationship with the landscape and solidification of collective memory is remarkably echoed by a monument recently constructed, based on the likeness of Louis Delgrès, Guadeloupean independence hero. My examination of Perse’s text, as a poetic monument to a landscape and material calcified, thus sets the stage for the ensuing readings of monumentalism in American poetry.

The subsequent section, Chapter Two, is an argument for one of the most recent and fascinating aspects of monumentalism, which is the attempt to disrupt the function of the monument by means of the shaping of a “counter-monumentalism.” An engaging example of counter-monumentalism is Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* (1990), a text that exemplifies the appropriation of epic tropes for a particularly American context. By portraying characters and circumstances that are flagrantly non-heroic with regard to the Western epic tradition, Walcott creates a text that challenges previous assumptions of what qualifies as an epic text. By means of such protagonists as Achille, the presumed epic hero who, throughout the text, exemplifies particularly non-heroic behavior, *Omeros*’ poet seeks to foreground the inaccessibility of the epic to persons of former colonies who must look to those European texts traditionally imposed upon them as the paradigm of epicity. However, in constructing a new monument that reverses the assumptions that a
subject nation has been compelled to take for granted, Walcott nevertheless recreates a new form of monumentalism by, as seems almost inescapable, speaking for a people whom he presumes cannot speak for themselves.

As I point out throughout this study, monuments are an integral part of cultural formations, as are countermonuments in multicultural contestations. In this regard, the phenomenon of the countermonument is a compelling historical phenomenon that merits a dissertation or book-length study in itself. For example, Native American counter-cultural discourse through the monument and countermonument could be read productively in such works as William Apess’ *Eulogy to King Phillip* (1836), among others. The novel / poem by Colombia’s Afro-American writer Manuel Zapata Olivella, *Changó, el gran putas* (1983), offers another potential line of investigation for the study of the counter-monument through the author’s appropriation of the epic tradition and its trasculturation through the oral and graphic expression in the Afro-Latin American imagination.

In Chapter Three, I explore further the journey of the poet to the site of the monument, and its subsequent unearthing and re-imagining. Octavio Paz, in his epic poem *Piedra de sol* (1957), diegetically crosses the American sublime landscape in a feminized portrayal of the telluric indigenous body. This journey, at once arduous and sublime, allegorically depicts the construction of the original monument, the Sun Stone. This journey takes place in a circular motion, leading perpetually inward and ultimately arriving at the forging of the monument, ossification of “un rey fantasma” (“a phantom king”) as paradigm of the monumentalized historical figure. The celebrated construction
of the monument, as the dénouement of the journey-calcification of the artifact, is a fallacious act, since the object ultimately crumbles. The object, then, returns the reader to the poem’s title and the Stone as embodiment of time and the poet’s own textual monument. The poet-creator rises from the residual stones, “siglos de piedra” (“centuries of stone”), as an element of the landscape who will re-form the materia of the earth to continue the process of building once again.

Finally, in Chapter Four I focus further on the silencing of the public vis-à-vis the monument. Pablo Neruda’s Canto general (1950) has been considered one of the most “ambitious” poems written in the post-colonial Americas. An egregiously political writer, Neruda’s text encompasses an entire history of the Americas from a Marxist perspective, tracing the evolution of labor and the laboring human’s increasing alienation from the earth. This alienation takes place as worker mines Nature for durable materials in which to construct the monument, or the artifact that has come to symbolize subjugation of the laborer to exploitative hegemony. Thus, Neruda’s “materialist history” of America is one that gives a voice to laboring bodies that contribute to permanent constructions, while the poet constructs a monument to his ideological orientation and has written himself, via the epic, into the very continuum of the Americas.

Although the study of monuments has been, in past scholarship, largely dismissed

21 Lewis Mumford is a well-cited example (see page fourteen). Of course, this perception has drastically changed since World War II, and its attendant renewed
the role of monuments in an increasingly “virtual” landscape takes new shape, and old monuments are being demolished or reimagined. Monuments remain an interest in scholarship for the ways that such artifacts can be “read” for the History that they write onto the bodies and body politic of peoples whose memories they presume to safeguard and recount. The interrogation of monuments in the Americas elucidates the national identity that hegemonic figures seek to forge, and this is principally where I wish to focus in this dissertation on the poetic monuments examined here. The relationship between the human and the silent object is one that Walter Benjamin explores in his essay, “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man” (1916), in which he insists that “[t]he existence of language … is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents” (62). While this statement may exacerbate somewhat the relationship between the phenomenological and the linguistic, Benjamin’s assertion alludes to the intimate interaction between human and object, artifacts created by human beings with inevitable ideological ends in mind. Commemorative objects reflect a multiplicity of messages, speaking to us in a manner that reveals the ways in which “[l]anguage communicates the linguistic being of things” (Benjamin, Writings, 62-3). Privileging, expressively, the object thus imbues such constructions as the monument

monument-fervor is arguably driven by an “obsession with new beginnings” (Huyssen, 144), as I have already pointed out above.
with a *logos*, and, as such, as Beatrice Hanssen notes, renders “human language as but one of many languages, to be classified next to the language of inanimate things, which was marked by the ‘magic of matter,’” (160). This “magic of matter”, I believe, functions as a useful lens for critically reading artifacts, especially in the material structure and aesthetic quality of the monument. And this is especially so in the case of monumental constructs such as epic poetry whose constitutive element is language, precisely.

Hence, if we are to approach and “communicate” with the monumental artifact in this way, what would it say and how would it tell its history? More importantly, who serves as the monument’s interpreter? Certain persons presume to serve as such interpreters, and construct what I consider textual analogues of national monuments. Most notable among these persons are national poets who seek to build a literary site that arrogates a national voice that speaks for a people in much an analogous manner as the monument. The study of poetry as monument, or as monumental analogue, as I hope to demonstrate, is particularly relevant because not only do poems act as monuments in themselves but, in the poems that I analyze in the following chapters, poems also illustrate the formation of the monument in, and as, the body of the poem itself and, thereby, divulge that process of construction and the ideologically nuanced perspective of the sculptor-poet.

This dissertation utilizes many concepts and terms that have a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations. I would like to briefly elucidate my own particular usage of a couple of key terms here. The term ideology has undergone ample critical
redefinitions, particularly as the use of the word implies “an implausible notion of socio-political Truth or objective ‘outside’, against which ideologies’ imputed ‘falsity’ could be measured” (Sharpe, 95). Yet, despite this haze, as the recently published text *Mapping Ideology* (2012), edited by Slavoj Žižek attests, the use of the term is germane since by pointing out the ideological is to recognize one’s relationship to the object of one’s criticism: “In this precise sense, ideology is the exact opposite of internalization of the external contingency: it resides in the externalization of the result of an inner necessity, and the task of the critique of ideology here is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency” (4). Thus, the use of the term with this relation in mind does not minimize the efficacy of my argument but, even in the case of artifacts as complex and, well, ideological as the monument, reinforces the challenge to the existing discourse of monumentalism. This dissertation is written under the assumption that the monument is necessarily an object infused with an interested message but, as Žižek states, “[w]hen some procedure is denounced as ‘ideological par excellence’, one can be sure that its inversion is no less ideological” (4). Thus, implicit within this entire project is the realization that through my criticism of the monument, as an artifact imbued with and perpetuating of ideology, I am reenacting an ideological premise from which I am not, and cannot be, exempt.

Imbricated with the concept of ideology is that of the *aesthetics* of monumentalism, which is a topic that I hope to expand upon in future projects. The use of the term “aesthetics” is almost always problematic and wrought with complexity, hence my sparing use of the term in this dissertation (lest I commit to a multi-volume
treatise). However, my use of the term alludes to Louis Althusser and the more recent criticism of Terry Eagleton and Jacques Rancière, who agree that aesthetics is tied to the political realm, or that “aesthetics refers to the distribution of the sensible that determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought. This general definition extends aesthetics beyond the strict realm of art to include the conceptual coordinates and modes of visibility operative in the political domain” (Rancière, 82).
Chapter 1

Epic Endeavors: Saint-John Perse, Walter Benjamin, and the Collective Storyteller

The perfunctory use of the term “epic” today belies the complexity of epic literature. The term “epic” has been re-imagined, and may modify anything from theatrical reinterpretations of the *Odyssey* to popular video games. Yet the twentieth-century American epic seems bent on declaring a sense of textual permanence and an implicit relationship to Antiquity. As narratives of expedition to a new land, the foundation of the city, and the very act of writing the communal story, the epic forms a textual site of a durable collective memory. This collective gesture, many scholars of the epic such as Valéry Larbaud agree, constructs “great monuments of the poetic art [that] form an architectural whole” (Larbaud, 101), a whole that presumably endures and preserves a collective memory tied to national identity perpetually afterward. Indeed, the epic may be perceived to function as a site of national collective memory more than any other Western literary form.

Since Antiquity, of course, the literary epic has taken on a new configuration and meaning, particularly with regard to the text’s geographical origin and linguistic construction. One example of a poem that has emerged from the Americas and presumes the role and composition of epic is a text written by Alexis Leger, whose self-assumed authorial name is Saint-John Perse. Perse’s poem *Anabase* (1924), translated as *Anabasis*
(which is a word that alludes to an upward movement from the coastline to the upland, interior of a country), is a text that, more than many other modern epics, appears to commemorate a valorized European-American-Hellenic past. The poem accomplishes this connection by means of a contrived relationship with Antiquity, and enacts its own arduous construction and that of the allegorical foundation of civilization through the diegetic domination of a silenced people. In this chapter, I will examine the ways that particular epic poems of the Americas, exemplified by Saint-John Perse’s text, function within a genealogy of original Classical texts as presumed monuments of collective memory and national identity. My contribution to the conversation surrounding Perse with regard to American epic poetry is my interrogation of the trope of calcification that occurs throughout the text, a poetic means of reflecting the ways in which the natural world and human bodies are fixed and, thus, sculpted into a “civilized” form of an otherwise tempestuous indigeneity, function as monuments to the poet himself. This hypostasis simultaneously freezes the language of the populace into memorial artifacts, enacting a form of what Terry Eagleton refers to as an “aesthetic ideology,” that “involves a phenomenalist reduction of the linguistic to the sensuously empirical” (10). This calcification is enacted in three different ways: by portraying organic aspects of nature in terms of the mineral; by portraying memorial structures as dead, and sepulchral language and imagery casting natural elements of the poem into monumental structures; and, finally, by fixing collective memory in a European form, the Neoclassical, and in this way fixing the monument in an alien and past configuration. By exploring the ways in which monumentalism functions within the poem, I expand upon the most recent work
regarding Perse’s epic, namely the implications of créolité discovered in Perse’s text and, more important to this dissertation, “the relation of memory to history” (Gallagher, *Soundings*, 81)\(^{22}\) that questions the many ways in which American and particularly Caribbean history is being, and has been, reimagined by its poets, a topic I will discuss further in the following chapter.

A visual metaphor that I have found useful in conceptualizing this process of corporeal appropriation and sculptural petrification is a material monument that in many ways enacts a similar process in the round. Roger Arékian, Guadeloupean artist, unveiled his monumental work, “Delgrès”, in 2002 at the entrance of Fort Louis Delgrès, arguably the oldest edifice on the island\(^{23}\). This fascinating memorial, which may be considered a form of earthwork due to its use of native materials and manipulation of the surrounding landscape, portrays in its center the sculptured head of Louis Delgrès, a military leader of Guadeloupe’s independence from Napoleonic France. The enormous head, reminiscent of the Olmec colossal heads created before 900 BC, is surrounded by stones in what the artist describes as being “[e]n référence à Delgrès et à ses hommes” (“in reference to

\(^{22}\) The relation of memory to history in the context of Perse’s work has been discussed in such monographs as Mary Gallagher’s *La créolité de Saint-John Perse* (1998), Carol Rigolot’s *Forged Genealogies* (2001), and *Soundings in French Caribbean Writing 1950-2000* (2002), to provide a few examples.

\(^{23}\) This fort was originally built by Charles Houël en 1649, and has undergone several name changes as governors and other authorities have changed in the département Basse-Terre in Guadeloupe: Fort Houël (1650-1794), Fort Mathilde (1794, 1810-1814 and 1815-1816), Fort Richepanse (1803-1810 and 1816-1960), Fort Saint-Charles (1960) and Fort Louis Delgrès (since 1989).
Delgrès and his men”). This earthwork arrangement has come to fruition by means of “40 blocs de pierre volcanique, qui semblent disloqués, sur le parcours de la spirale” (“forty blocks of volcanic rock, that seem dislocated on the spiral route”) (Arékian, *Errances*24).

These stones, arranged in a centripetal pattern around Delgrès’ head, form the artist’s conception of a population to whom Delgrès perpetually recites his “Proclamation.”25 Perse’s epic poem, by seeking entrance into the French and larger epic domain, seems a textual echo of the process that engenders such commemorative objects devoted to Delgrès, a historical figure who in 1998 was inducted into the French Panthéon. Although other monuments devoted to Delgrès exist,26 this particular artifact was constructed after his accession into the Panthéon and reflects what has become a popular rendering of the figure in Guadeloupe’s collective memory. The monument to Delgrès also reflects the reinterpretation of history that such commemorations evoke, or “[t]he process of bringing them into the Panthéon … reflected a broader process of reinterpreting history, of rethinking France’s history of colonialism and slavery” (Dubois, 312). This reflects an appropriation of a figure that justifies or mollifies a troublesome historical episode and reimagines it for contemporary political interest: “links between

24 I was fortunate to discover the artist’s own website in which he attributes a description and narrative to each of his works, as well as their dates of unveiling and locations: [http://errances-ra.blogspot.com/](http://errances-ra.blogspot.com/).

25 A speech that Delgrès presented to those with whom he was shortly to commit suicide in 1802, in an effort to dispel invading French soldiers who were directed to forcibly re-institute slavery on the island.

26 Most notably the stele dedicated to Delgrès in 1946 in Matouba, Guadeloupe.
historical work and the construction of public monuments in order to highlight how historical memory has been part of a continuing struggle over the relationship between metropolitan France and the French Caribbean departments” (Dubois, 313). Perse’s recuperation of the epic form, like Delgrès’ adoption into the French Panthéon, illustrates that the phenomenon of the alienating collective memory implicit in these monuments does not construct an authentic identity but, rather, reinforces the formation of asymmetrical cultural relations between post-colonial francophone countries of the Americas and Europe, diverging at the memorial site in the continuum of an what Pierre Nora would deem and “accelerated history” 27. This production envisions a process of alienation that is enacted, in the case of Perse’s epic poem, within the diegesis. The monument devoted to Delgrès, built as it was four years after Delgrès’ adoption into the French Panthéon, is a remarkable reflection of what the historical figure has become. By means of his adoption into a European framework that substantiates the actions and heroism of Delgrès, the sculptural head, with its severe expression, enacts a panopticism with regard to the stone population that surrounds him, freezing the rocks in place and, in__________

27 This disconnect is referred to by Pierre Nora as the “acceleration of history,” in which a distance forms between a subject population and “authoritative” or “official” history: “the difference between real memory – social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies – and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past” (Nora, “Between,” 8). The use of the term “unviolated” and “primitive,” though, are problematic here, when perhaps “authentic” and “subject” or “previously colonized” would better serve. The reason that Nora’s term is so useful here is because, with the exception of condescending terminology, it describes the division that has occurred due to what is more comfortably remembered in profitable patronage of the islands, “celebrating nostalgic reminiscences of colonialism within a historical void” (Reinhardt, 134).
a sense, perpetuating their silence. Delgrès has become, in this dynamic monument, a figure of domination empowered by a European “canon” that has returned to Guadeloupe to maintain a stern vigilance over the faceless and silenced masses. This process of “Europeanization” informs the conception of Perse’s Xenophonic epic, having become a means for Perse to inscribe himself into a European teleology by means of his own neoclassical efforts. In this chapter, I argue that although Perse, writing contemporaneously with such writers as Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant, wrote in the epic form to concretize his poetic monumentalism, and by means of the French language he attempts to form a distinct site of French collective memory. Perse’s Caribbean origins underlie all of his writing, as many scholars agree since attributes of créolité may be traced therein. Yet, the conception of the poem in the form of epic serves as an avenue for examination of the perception of permanence implied in the epic text. The epic, a European derivative in this case, monumentalizes the poem and poet. Like the physical monument, the epic poem is imbued with this perceived permanence by means of its calcification of collective memory. What interests me in Perse’s text is that by means of writing the French epic, Perse actually attempts to enact his own conception of a French-Caribbean collective memory, much like Arékian’s monument to Delgrès, and this process is observed in Perse’s allegorical anabasis. My examination of Perse’s text thus sets the stage for the subsequent readings of monumentalism in American poetry in this dissertation.

[28] Mary Gallagher’s intense study of the créolité of Saint-John Perse is one of the most thorough and well-known, and will inform an important portion of this chapter.
Invasion of a Poet-Conqueror: An Exegesis

The narrative of Anabase may, quite simply, be summarized by the poem’s title. The epic describes the journey of one person, the Étranger (Stranger), the “anonymous hero of an epic in an imaginary country, placed under a title from Xenophon, but who isn’t Cyrus” (Rigolot, 63), who will conquer an unspecified group of people. This character, also referred to by T.S. Eliot as Conqueror\textsuperscript{29}, builds the monumental city and finally conceives the poem, the ultimate monument of the epic and his nation. Yet, Perse’s text is often regarded as confusing and prolix, the result of the fact that, as revealed “through an interview published in 1960 in the journal Arts, [Perse] cut Anabase from 200 to 60 pages … all of the intermediary links which would have explained the logical relationship between the various elements of the poem were taken out. Hence the impression of rupture, of discontinuity, of incompleteness … like inscriptions half obliterated on monuments or stones” (Galand, 13). Despite the fragmented condition in which Perse relinquished the text, the progress of an anabasis is still quite apparent within the ten sections that make up the poem. The poem is framed within a “Chançon,” in which the arrival of the Stranger is observed under the sign of the birthing of a foal, which Carol Rigolot states is a “motif of generation” that alludes to “life and death,

\textsuperscript{29} Whom I will refer to variably as Étranger and Poet-Conqueror. This character is referred to by several names, as Carol Rigolot observes: “Perse’s protagonists have many names – Prince … Conqueror, Stranger … Artist, Poet,” but most significantly “Perse creates a new Republic with a poet as head of state” and “where a single hero is both conqueror and poet, Aeneas and Virgil” (11, 88).
fertility and sterility, paternity and genealogy” presented in opposition to the new arrival: “The Stranger who arrives in the opening is, by definition, someone whose genealogy is unknown” (Rigolot, 85). The central poem commences with a first person declaration of self-generation and, soon after, the takeover of a populace. The Étranger–narrator announces this conquest by noting that the takeover is not so much physical as conceptual: “je hantais la ville de vos songes et j’arrêtis sur les marchés déserts ce pur commerce de mon âme” (26) (“I haunted the City of your dreams, and I established in the desolate markets the pure commerce of my soul” Eliot, 27). The idea of conquest is emphasized through a distinction between socio-economic classes, by describing first lands “ou l’on met a sécher la lessive des Grands” (30) (“where the linen of the Great is exposed to dry”; Eliot, 31). In the next section, the poet-narrator begins to describe the quotidian life, when one may observe such commonplaces as when “a la moisson des orges l’homme sort” (34; “man goes out at barley harvest” Eliot, 35). Nor are those enacting these quotidian roles described as distinct from the conquerors, they create what Rigolot describes as a “mosaic” that “raise it above any particular city and thereby suggest all empires and peoples” (83). This paradigmatic nature of Perse’s descriptions contributes to the universal nature of the poem that emerges periodically throughout the poem, enjoining the reader: “[t]racez les routes où s’en aillent les gens de toute race” (38; “Trace the roads whereon take their departure the folk of all races” Eliot, 39). All of these roles culminate in the sudden appearance of the most fecund and epochal of roles a human being may incarnate: “toutes sortes d’hommes dans leurs voies et façons, et soudain! apparu dans ses vêtements du soir et tranchant à la ronde toutes questions de
préséance, le Conteur qui prend, place au pied du térébinthe” (84; “all sorts of men in their ways and fashions, and of a sudden! behold in his evening robes and summarily settling in turn all questions of precedence, the Story-Teller who stations himself at the foot of the turpentine tree” Eliot, 85).

Commencing with the fourth section of the epic the material city is founded, by means of stone and mineral, “les galeries de latérite, les vestibules de pierre noire” (42; “galleries of laterite, the vestibules of black stone” Eliot, 43). This is significant because we begin to see the poem take on a much more material nature, such as the allegorical mention of Memnon, monuments in the form of horsemen, trees become iron, and “Un lieu de pierres à mica” (62; “A place of stone quartz” Eliot, 63). This process of construction culminates in the last line of the poem: “Terre arable du songe! Qui parle de bâtir? – J’ai vu la terre distribuée en de vastes espaces et ma pensée n’est point distraite du navigateur” (86; “Plough-land of dream! Who talks of building? – I have seen the earth parcelled out in vast spaces and my thought is not heedless of the navigator” Eliot, 87). The poem ends with the final Chançon, the narrator lauding “mon frère le poète” (92; “my brother the poet” Eliot, 93), fixing the relationship between the poet-narrator, Étranger, and Perse, the poet himself. By means of these multiple identities, Perse is able to further inscribe himself into a European literary teleology, as Rigolot notes: “Perse’s protagonists have many names – Prince, Queen, Conqueror, Stranger … Artist, Poet – but they are kindred spirits on multiple journeys of exploration and self-discovery … Through these encounters, Saint-John Perse shapes his poetic identity in relation – and resistance – to a long line of literary and mythological figures … all of them participate in
one way or another in the evolving legacy of intellectual and imaginative accomplishments – texts, artifacts, beliefs and practices – which we commonly call culture” (11-2). Yet further, these poetic personæ – including Perse – perform poetic immortality diegetically by means of monumental construction and a perception of the natural environment as a reflection of this monumentalism.

**Genealogy and Monumental Invasion**

Perse’s text falls within a genealogy of epic writing to which its title alludes. T. S. Eliot, in the “Preface” for his translation of the epic poem *Anabase*, states that the “poem is a series of images of migration, of conquest of vast spaces … of destruction and foundation of cities and civilizations of any races or epochs” (10). In this statement, which describes the poem as a narrative of the process of nation-building, Eliot implicitly refers to a previous *Anabasis* (c.370 BC), a text written by Xenophon, who was a mercenary and historian in ancient Greece. Eliot in one statement negates the

30 “Anabasis” is the English translation of *Anabase*, the noun and the title of Perse’s poem.

31 Eliot states that “I did not need to be told, after one reading, that the word anabasis has no particular reference to Xenophon or the journey of the Ten Thousand, no particular reference to Asia Minor … using the word anabasis in the same literal sense in which Xenophon himself used it” (10). However, in a rather Orientalist digression, Eliot states that “[t]he poem is a series of images of migration, of conquest of vast spaces in Asiatic wastes, of destruction and foundation of cities and civilization of any races or epochs of the ancient East” (10). Eliot first asserts that a historical or geographical specificity should not be assumed, yet relegates the process of the founding of “civilization” to “Asiatic wastes” by “any races,” demonstrating his very problematic reading of the text.
assumption of a relationship between Perse’s text and Xenophon’s. However, he suggests in his translator’s “Preface” for Perse’s poem that the reading of the poem is difficult, a reflection and manifestation of the poem’s title. As Steven Matthews observes, Eliot suggests Perse “seems to make the experience of reading itself an anabasis – a term meaning a march across open country, as especially associated with early wars, and with displacements of peoples in early history [portrayed] by Xenophon” (Matthews, 68). This continuum also tends “upward” such that the terrain requires an ever-increasing effort to traverse, but ultimately rewards its reader with a “higher” understanding of the poetic landscape s/he is crossing. Poetry is a means of existential anabasis32, as opposed to an unenlightened catabasis, and this trajectory commences from the poem’s incipit. The anabasis is both a journey extraneous to the Étranger and an intrinsic one, established by means of the language of the narrator-Étranger who establishes a form of diegetic “ideology” in addressing the populace he encounters: “[M]’établissant avec honneur, j’augure bien du sol ou j’ai fondé ma loi … Pour une année encore parmi vous! … Je ne hélerai point les gens d’une autre rive. Je ne tracerai point de grands quartiers de villes sur les pentes … Mais j’ai dessein de vivre parmi vous” (24, 26; “I have built myself,

32 The idea is advanced by many Latin American writers such as Pablo Neruda, whose poetics “tends upward” in order to bring about a heightened perspective of reality or, in other words, “Neruda’s conceptual basis [is that] the importance of his poetry lies in his use of language to heighten the reader’s feeling of process and ascension to a more complete view of reality,” (Lesage, 228).
with honour and dignity have I built myself\textsuperscript{33} ... Yet one more year among you! ... I shall not hail the people of another shore. I shall not trace the great boroughs of towns ... But I have the idea of living among you” Eliot, 25, 27). The I/you distinction here may be described in light of Louis Althusser’s well-known illustration regarding the police officer’s “hail,” in which “the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there’ One individual turns ... The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (174-5). This herald, “the second person (‘hey you!’), such that the only normal(ising) response for her/him can be to answer in her/his own name” (Sharpe, 96), establishes the subjugation of the diegetic populace to the Étranger from the text’s first lines. In the case of the poem, the poet-narrator’s condescending “parmi vous” (“among you”) goes unanswered, a silence that exemplifies the monumentalism of the epic, the “turning [of] art into a kind of pedagogy and the public into obedient pupils” (Franco, 69) that occurs in instances of interaction between the speaker and populace.

This dynamic between the Étranger and the Other, one of condescension and silencing on the part of the Étranger, is emphasized in the nobility of the Étranger’s epic journey, his agency and mobility that is distinct from the passivity of native onlookers. As the epic’s translator and, in a sense, interpreter, T.S. Eliot underscores the formation and reading of the poem as a telling of events. This narration can be traced on a teleological time-line, the construction of which is not unlike the process of journeying

\textsuperscript{33} I will use T.S. Eliot’s translation throughout, and I will point out sections of the translation that seem to take liberties with the original text. For example, the original text may be more literally translated as: “I have established myself with honor, I prognosticate well from the soil where I have established my law.”
across a landscape, or traversing Perse’s poetic “terrain.” Carol Rigolot describes the poem as “enigmatic,” necessitating not just one interpretation of its meaning, but three, each of which delineates a “story of expedition and foundation, [and thus] this poem depicts the human adventure in its physical, spiritual, and poetic dimensions,” whether the expedition and foundation is enacted by the diegetic conqueror, non-diegetic poet, or the human process of “civilization” (62-3). The expedition to the new land, foundation of the city, and the writing of the epic are all gestures toward the establishment of a durable collective memory, or what Derek Walcott would refer to as a “tribal mode” that, by means of these gestes, imbues a narrative with permanence (Walcott, “Muse,” 47). This collective motion, according to Larbaud, is evinced by monumental literature that form a unified whole, and “[t]his whole endures, nor can any fragment of it be detached” (101). Indeed, by these criteria the textual literary form of the epic seems to be “durable” in form, a monumental and archetypical site of national collective memory.

However, an aspect of the poem that Eliot does not consider in his transcriptive journey is that in a presumed epic such as Anabase, the commemoration of a valorized European-American-Hellenic past reflected in a contrived relationship with Antiquity, is a formation of an originary moment that enacts its own arduous construction and that of the foundation of civilization through the domination of and silencing of numerous voices. Perse’s self-proclaimed epic evinces a story that is inaccessible to those who would otherwise identify with the nationality embodied in the epic. György Lukács states that the author “invent[s] a relationship between Greek forms and our own epoch” (31) that, as seen in Anabase, will forever be an attempt to recapture an idealized
invention and monumentalizes a national identity by placing it in a derivative European structure. Instead of “fixing” a national identity as one of the “great and timeless paradigmatic forms of world literature” (Lukács, 35), the modern resuscitation of the epic instead entrenches alienation and has transformed a national literature into a reified fragmentation of the post-colonial nation from a native identity.

An indication of the text’s monumentality lies in the epic poem’s durability and function as a locus of collective memory, a term that I will elaborate upon later. For this reason, I will trace the emanations of collective memory throughout the poem by means of elucidating the role of the poet-narrator as the builder of the collective memory of a “disparate” populace. By tracing the material aspects of the poem, in which the construction of monumental forms imbues elements of Nature with the characteristics of permanent objects, one may perceive the ways in which elements of calcified Nature are venerated as ideological monoliths. As these monolithic objects are formed, the unnamed people subjected to poetic domination exert little of the agency and mobility of the poet-narrator. Significantly, the epic – the poetic monument that is constructed diegetically as well as non-diegetically – forms the locus of collective memory and the significance of this literary site within a peoples’ national identity. The resuscitation of the epic as a link with a Hellenic past and “purity” of language reveals Perse’s endeavor to revive a form of

34 Nicholas Russell, in his article “Collective Memory Before and After Halbwachs” (2006), points out that the concept of “collective memory” is and has been defined in several different ways, the most rudimentary of which states that “[m]emories attributed to a single person … are personal memories; whereas, memories attributed to more than one person are collective memories” (793).
Neoclassicism, although many critics have argued that the emanation of Perse’s Antillean origins in his poetry are undeniable: “Saint-John Perse transformed the poetics of the French language by introducing the genius of Creole, even if he tried to hide this” (Glissant, 85). It is the attempt to hide this créolité that informs much of the conventional “epic” quality of the poem.

Perse’s text, in a Neoclassical gesture, claims to be an epic, the first of the modern French language. Anabase similarly seeks to pioneer a new and progressive narrative mode that is arguably begun by Xenophon, whose writings are considered not only epic but, because of the text’s subtle utilization of prose, a form of “proto-novel.” Perse’s use of prose in his poem was a point of much consternation for Eliot-cum-translator, who felt the need to just its use in his “Introduction.” Moreover, for the first time a past is regarded as “past” rather than a concomitant of the present and future, and the text begins to take “others” into account, as entering into the Hellenic sphere (Wencis, 44). Bakhtin notes that in Xenophon’s major work, “the heroic past chosen here is not the national past but a foreign and barbaric past … [O]ne’s own monolithic and closed world (the world of the epic) has been replaced by the great world of one’s own plus ‘the others.’ This choice of an alien heroism was the result of a heightened interest” (28-9). Not only did this past include an increasingly cosmopolitan perspective, Xenophon also made a stylistic shift, as Leonard Wencis states: “Xenophon’s subtle presentation … indicates a type of major

35 Eliot devotes an entire paragraph to this rationalization for prose in poetry, and states that “There are two very simple but insuperable difficulties to any definition of ‘prose’ and ‘poetry.’ One is that we have three terms where we need four: we have ‘verse’ and ‘poetry’ on the one side, and only ‘prose’ on the other … But Anabase is poetry” (11).
contribution to the development of the prose narrative which was to become the ancient novel … Xenophon was admired by antiquity’s early novelists, who probably looked to the *Anabasis* … for stylistic hints” (44). Thus, by appropriating the subject of one of Xenophon’s prose narratives, Perse perhaps hopes to innovate the epic for a modern audience, one that has witnessed or experienced postcoloniality and, as I will discuss later, Perse seeks to set the stage for his own contribution to the epic teleology, the telos embodied in his new role as epic creator.

Perse’s poem resists exclusion from the epic genre, declares itself epic through its title, and enacts the monumentalism of the epic within the narrative. In the poem *Anabase*, the reader follows an exchange among three main speakers (in addition to other voices), including a paradigm of the peasant populace, the “Rhéteur” “Rhetorician” or “Poet”; the “Conteur” “Storyteller” or “Reader”; and the sovereign builder of the monument, referred to as “l’Étranger” (“ Stranger”) and Poet-Conqueror. This polyphony diegetically re-enacts the contention over the function of the post-Homeric epic, and the difficulty of creation: “Ainsi *Anabase* réalise et représente la tension d’un homme vers la création, transpose poétiquement la naissance même de la idée poétique et la maîtrise des poussées du songe et de l’imaginaire sous la conduite d’un poète-conquérant” (Camelin and Tamine-Gardes, 210; “Thus, *Anabase* produces and represents the reticence of a man confronting creation, he poetically translates the very birth of the poetic idea, and the domination of burgeoning dreams and imagination under the guidance of a poet-
“conqueror”\textsuperscript{36}. From the beginning of the poem, we witness the encroachment of the Étranger (“Stranger”), the Poet-Conqueror, upon quotidian life, and the subtle displacement of native culture by the new, invading one, in which the “Stranger … the poem’s personification of the desire to reach new lands, has won over his audience … members of the townsfolk” (Winspur, 29). The narrative seems pertinent to the political situation that Perse’s native Guadeloupe faced during his lifetime, although he “warned … about the interpretation of \textit{Anabase}, which he said should ‘always be thought of as outside the boundaries of space and time, as ruled by the absolute,’ even though it had actually been written in China” (Little, 20). Thus, the poem \textit{Anabase}, both diegetically and non-diegetically, confronts the alienation of man from his works and the fragmentation of reality as a dialectical product yet, simultaneously, seeks a dialogical role that allows the epic to continue fully-formed into the contemporary realm. We see this process taking place as the reader follows a narrative search for and construction of origins that alienates the populace of the nation from the Stranger. The figure of l’Étranger is invariably associated with death, tombstones, sepulchers, and the act of prophesying memory – tropes that reflect the ossification of the natural world inhabited by a colonized populace – and the poet-narrator’s authority as storyteller, and whose prognosticative abilities serve as a means of storytelling nostalgically while the populace listens silenced. This site of dominance, monumentalism, is bound up with circumscribed spaces that are built upon the vast American landscape, and is a characteristic of the text

\textsuperscript{36} All non-poetic translations are my own.
that is often elided in studies of *Anabase*, an oversight I am aiming to ameliorate, however modestly, with this chapter.

**Unearthing the Epic Poet: History, Memory, and Collective Re-cognition**

Is the epic a *bas-relief*, emerging from and forever rooted in a Classical base? Or is it, rather, a sculpture *ronde-bosse*, or “in the round,” that is, like the statues of Antiquity, imbued with an independent life by a deified, heroicized, or idealized creator? This last question foregrounds a significant distinction of the American epic from other forms of literature, such as Perse’s text. The very idea of the “American epic” is a contentious one, as Steven Winspur illustrates in his essay “Saint-John Perse and the Imaginary Reader” when he states that “[t]he genre invoked most often for classifying *Anabase* is the epic and yet this has immediately posed a problem for scholars since twentieth-century literature appears to leave little or no room for such poetry” (37). However, he admits that “*Anabase* situates itself squarely within this epic tradition of the founding of a society” (Winspur, 41). As I discuss in the Introduction, the idea of “American epic” is a classification that is not a reinvention of epic but, instead, an expansion of the genre, moving beyond conventional epic forms because “an epic for the New World had to be something other than Homeric, Virgilian, or Miltonic poem” (McWilliams, 2), in other words, a New World epic should signify a non-European (re)production. Yet, Perse’s epic, despite its self-positioning as Caribbean, exhibits a purposeful assay into the immortality that accompanies what Rigolot describes as an epic “genealogy” or “lineage”: “In *Anabase* a narrator hesitates between the roles of …
statesman and artist. With the Aeneid acting as watermark beneath the poem, Perse renews a perennial (and personal) question while placing his work in an epic lineage” (Rigolot, 72). This axis, upon which Perse, as the poet and the character of the Étranger (or the Poet-Conqueror), is balanced and form the identity of epic poet that is substantiated by his textual lieu de mémoire.37

One point upon which all definitions of epic converge is the concept of the “epic hero”, and in the case of Saint-John Perse’s Anabase the hero is not explicitly named and seems difficult to locate, due to an often transient and enigmatic narrative voice. However, this ambiguity is a means to accentuate the heroic act as not only a diegetic anabasis but a construction of the monument – the epic – and the dominance of the creative power that the poet-creator exhibits, constituting himself as the apotheosis of the epic hero. In the fifth section of the poem, the narrator declares: “Et l’Étranger tout habillé de ses pensées nouvelles, se fait encore des partisans dans les voies du silence: son œil est plein d’une salive, il n’y a plus en lui substance d’homme. Et la terre en ses graines ailées, comme un poète en ses propos, voyage…” (50; “And the Stranger clothed in his new thoughts, acquires still more partisans in the ways of silence: his eye is full of a sort of spittle, there is no more substance of man in him. And the earth in it its winged seeds, like a poet in his thoughts, travels…” Eliot, 51). The “new thoughts” of the

37 “A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora, xvii). Nora has published a significant body of work on the topic of the site of memory as it occurs geographically, and in time and memory.
Étranger form the conception of the epic, one that silences his “partisans” but, like the monument, immortalizes the poet who becomes a figure “venerated as sacred and therefore leave[s] no room for a disparity of interpretations” (Franco, 69). The poet is a demiurge who is divinely “winged” and may engage in the anabasis of monumental construction.

The Étranger-poète is an emanation of Perse himself, and Rigolot notes that “Perse’s poems are ateliers where a master blacksmith shapes his stories and his identity … Perse, like every poet, sought to create ‘iron words’ … as he called them, capable of resisting the vagaries of time” (Rigolot, 14). In any literary study, of course, committing an “intentional fallacy” by drawing diegetic conclusions based upon the author’s own biography can make critical examination of a text problematic. Perse’s biography, one that encompasses trans-Atlantic exile, is a tempting avenue to traverse as evidence for the uncommon elements of Anabase, but “[t]he meaning of the poem rest[s] on linguistic mechanisms that are internal to the text itself and not on putative links to the life of a writer who [ostensibly] went out of his way to separate his poems from his career” (Winspur, 34). If, as Nagy points out, the epic is an exceptional form of literature and “that epic must be an ideal genre created by an ideal poet” (39), then Perse’s life does play some role in interpretation of his poem but does not explain entirely the characteristics of the text that evince the process of coloniality and the silencing aspect of material objects within the colonial context.

Yet, this explicit relationship between the “ideal” creator and the epic poem is not manifest exclusively in the work itself, since “ideal genre” and “ideal poet” are not
individual or singular phenomena. The “ideal” in this case implies an emanation of
textuality or artifact that embodies a collective national voice, one that, according to
Maurice Halbwachs, “is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all
artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the
consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive” (80). These aspects of the epic
as monument, especially, may be noted in all of the texts studied in this dissertation. But
in the particular case of Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase*, the “sculptor” of the epic is vocal
about his objectives as epic writer, and his place within the teleology of epic production.
In one of the most dramatic moments of the poem, the poet-narrator reveals that it is
through his creativity, emanating from his own “brow”, that he conceives of the *objet de
mémoire* – the monumental poem – that will imbue (or impose upon) the people with a
voice: “Au point sensible de mon front où le poème s’établit, j’inscris ce chant de tout un
peuple” (28; “[T]here at the sensitive point on my brow where the poem is formed38, I
inscribe this chant of all a people” Eliot, 29). Perse’s *autopoïèsis* as epic poet is evinced
in this scene, as the creator of a song or “chant” for an entire people that is “inscribed” or
engraved both upon the hard surface of himself to speak for the populace. His brow, the
formative point of conception and construction, functions as the ground from which his
imposed collective memory emerges.

38 Perhaps an alternative, or a more precise, translation would be “where the poem is
established” or “founded”.
The idea of a collective memory is misleading because the apparent import of the term suggests that such memories are not only shared by a group of people, but are formed by that group as well, as Halbwachs has argued. Nicholas Russell, in his article “Collective Memory Before and After Halbwachs” (2006), points out that the concept of “collective memory” was the focus of the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who argued for the development of mémoire collective as emerging particularly from social groups (793). However, Russell then comments on the ways that the idea of collective memory has changed to reflect the diacritical aspects of what is remembered: “It is the content of collective memory that determines its shape, and this content consists primarily of people and their endeavors … only certain kinds of people and only certain kinds of material inscribe themselves eternally in the collective memory of humanity. One gains entry into collective memory through great actions or creative endeavors … heroic or poetic glory … Part of the rationale for this selection of material for collective memory [is] the idea that exemplary figures from the past should serve as models” (Russell, 793). These “certain people” and “certain kinds of material” are ideologically determined and, in fact, have received little contribution from the social collective that the memorial artifact claims to speak for. Creative and memorial endeavors, as presumed products of collective memory, are “[t]he works of great artists, especially poets [have] a claim to

39 The work of Maurice Halbwachs is fundamental in current studies of collective memory, although mainly utilized as a foundation from which to develop original work, because “a broad comparison of the most typical articulations and the most salient characteristics of the concept before and after Halbwachs reveals a general shift in the way that collective memory has been conceptualized in French literary and intellectual discourse over this period” (Russell, 792).
collective memory,” yet this claim comes not from the fact that they originate from a particular social collective but, instead, because they lay claim in order to manufacture this memory according to the poet’s own interests (Russell, 793).

The monumental work of poets, the monumental artifact in the form of the epic poem, seeks to function as the site of collective memory and, in so doing, shape a people’s history. Tangible sites of collective memory through which monumentalism functions in the Americas are exceptional because, as the Arékian monument to Delgrès demonstrates, such lieux de mémoire act as fixatives for memory that undergoes perpetual reconceptualization. The transient nature of the monument [makes] this seemingly permanent site one that is indistinct. It is this incoherence that makes current studies of the site of memory problematic, as Marie-Claire Lavabre notes: “The memorial phenomenon itself can take extremely diverse shapes, sometimes carried by the decomposition and recomposition of national myths, sometimes fed by specific political or social experiences, both individual and shared, and sometimes boosted by the circulation of paradigms. This … raises a series of questions and brings up alongside a few difficulties, starting with the very definition of memory” (262). The problem of memory and its indistinctness becomes a matter that the Étranger must confront in his efforts to write the memory of the people he conquers. How can the Poet-conqueror form a site of collective memory upon the shifting sands of the quotidian?:

… Or je hantais la ville de vos songes et j’arrêtai sur les marchés déserts ce pur commerce de mon âme, parmi vous …

Hommes, gens de poussière et de toutes façons, gens de négoce et de loisir, gens des confins et gens d’ailleurs, ô gens de peu de poids dans la
mémorie de ces lieux; gens des vallées et des plateaux et des plus hautes pentes de ces lieux …
présage de royaumes e d’eaux mortes hautement suspendues sur les fumées du monde, les tambours de l’exil éveillent aux frontières l’éternité qui bâille sur les sables …

Mathématiques suspendues aux banquises du sel! Au point sensible de mon front où le poème s’établit, j’inscris ce chant de tout un peuple, le plus ivres,
à nos chantiers tirant d’immortelles carènes! (25-28)

… So I haunted the City of your dreams, and I established in the desolate markets the pure commerce of my soul, among you …
Men, creatures of dust and folk of divers ways, people of business and of leisure, men from the marches and those from beyond, O men of little weight in the memory of these lands …
omen of kingdoms and omen of dead waters swung high over the smokes of the world, the drums of exile on the marches
Eternity yawning on the sands …

Mathematics hung on the floes of salt! There at the sensitive point on my brow where the poem is formed, I inscribe this chant of all a people, the most rapt god-drunken,
drawing to our dockyards eternal keels! (Eliot, 26 - 29)

In this scene the Poet-Conqueror, as the stranger to the lands he conquers, brings to this new land “pur commerce,” established in the agora of quotidian life. The narrator emphasizes that the populace of these lands are “gens de peu de poids dans la / mémoire de ces lieux,” living among kingdoms and wars (“fumées du monde”), even technological advance is ephemeral when confronted with the epic (“Mathématiques suspendues aux banquises du sel!”). But, upon that tenuous point on the poet’s brow from which a poetic monument is engendered, the explicitly oral “chant de tout un peuple” (“chant of all of a people”) comes to represent an entire alienated people that, in the next section of the
poem, come to exhibit “les plus grands silences” (30; “the greatest silences” Eliot, 31), which is the quieting of contention over the site of collective memory.

The framing of the larger “chant d’un peuple,” *Anabase*, within the “Chanson” is an indication of the perpetuity of the poem, particularly since the “Chanson” ends the entire text with an ellipsis, an open ending that suggests that the story is unfinished and perhaps still being told. This circularity, like Arékian’s Delgrès monument, will perpetually revolve around the historical event that, through repetition of the poem, will embody its permanence in collective memory. Winspur notes that “[w]hat the Stranger brings the narrator of *Anabase*’s opening Song is therefore not just a passing whim – the idea of setting up a city in his own name – but indeed the very transhistorical spirit of civilization, the eternal truths that all past societies tried to express … and in which resided the imperial power – both cultural and political – of these lost civilizations” (46).

For example, in the poem the narrator states that:

“Ainsi la ville fut fondée et placée au matin sous les labiales d’un nom pur.” (42)

“Thus was the City founded and placed in the morning under the labials of a holy name (Eliot, 43).”

Here we see that the foundation of the city occurred in a passive tense41, the agent responsible for this construction remaining unnamed and, thus, universal, paradigmatic,

40 In T.S. Eliot’s 1930 translation, Eliot has transcribed “ville” as the capitalized “City”. Perhaps Eliot’s intention is to emphasize the significance of the city’s construction, or its centrality in the poem’s narrative.
and forcibly communal. The City represents the site of the monument around which a people look on voicelessly. Their breath, in a subsequent scene, is taken in order to infuse the poetic with the permanence of an age:

A nos destins promis ce souffle d’autres rives et, portant au delà les semences du temps, l’éclat d’un siècle sur sa pointe au fléau des balance …
Au point sensible de mon font où le poème s’établi. (28)

To our destiny promised this breath of other shores, and there beyond the seeds of time, the splendour of an age at its height on the beam of the scales … … there at the sensitive point on my brow where the poem is formed.
(Eliot, 29)

The epic poem will be launched into the future, from the brow of the journeying Poet-conqueror, “au delà les semences du temps,” carrying “l’éclat d’un siècle” onward. This éclat is the collective memory that the Étranger has incorporated to his own grand gestes. Yet, the splendor of this age, embodied in the poem, rests not on the raised or lowered end of the scale but rather on its beam, a critical fulcrum that allows the epic to both call back beyond the seas of time and also look forward, and is not subject to the vicissitudes that the extremes of the balance must periodically undergo.

The seemingly hermetic genre of the epic is actually a conversation across time, which is also enacted within the poem:

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41 The Merriam–Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage (1994) notes the use of passive voice most often occurs when “identifying the object (receiver) of the action is more important than the subject (agent), and when the agent is unknown, unimportant, or not worth mentioning” (720-1). Certainly, this is not self-effacement on the part of the Poet-narrator, but instead reinforcing the nature of an event being remembered, an event that is here divinely – inspired.
Tracez les routes où s’en aillent les gens de toute race, montrant cette couleur jaune du talon: les princes, les ministres, les capitaines aux voix amygdaliennes; ceux qui ont fait de grandes chose, et ceux qui voient en songe ceci ou cela … Le grammairien choisit le lieu de ses disputes en plein air. Le tailleur pend à un vieil arbre un habit neuf … (38)

Trace the roads whereon take their departure the folk of all races, showing the heel’s yellow colour: the princes, the ministers, the captains with tonsillar voices; those who have done great things, and those who see this or that in a vision … The grammarian chooses a place in the open air for his arguments. On an old tree the tailor hangs a new garment … (39)

Unlike the Homeric epic, we see in Anabase an interaction with “les gens de toute race,” ministers and captains with strange accents from afar, and where the presence of the grammarian, or Rhétour, indicates a polyglossia that distinguishes the text from the Classical epic and sets it in the context of the Americas. The use of various languages is what Mikhail Bakhtin may describe as a distinction between the epic of Antiquity and the contemporary text that emerges from a particularly postcolonial context. Polyglossia, Bakhtin states, has always existed, but in the era of the epic “it had not been a factor in literary creation … creative consciousness was realized in closed, pure languages” (12). Today, however, “[t]he new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world … completely new relationships are established between language and its object (that is, the real world)—and this is fraught with enormous consequences for all the already completed genres that had been formed during eras of closed and deaf monoglossia” (12). This polyglossia, in Perse’s poem reinforces the collective aspect of
the monumental poem while simultaneously imposing a monolithic voice of francophonie.

Bakhtin’s treatment of the epic highlights *Anabase*’s distinction from the conventional understanding of the epic poem that, as a site of collective memory continues moving forward in time while carrying along with it a narrative of the past. The narrative elements of polyglossia of the epic exhibit the dialogical characteristics of *Anabase*. Perse, in declaring *Anabase* an epic, is constructing a poem that seeks to establish distance from its reader and creator by means of characters that the author states are “universal.” The most formidable of these characters, the Étranger, diegetically constructs a lieu de mémoire that embodies a collective memory that he, as Poet-Conqueror, has envisioned and stations upon the people he dominates. This domination of memory and voice is displayed in the very act of writing epic, implicitly revealing Perse’s own motion toward establishing himself within the “epic genealogy” by constructing the textual monument to his own voice. However, by means of his literary persona, Perse crystallizes the permanence of the epic text by appropriating elements of the material environment, portraying living objects as calcified and lifeless.

**Walter Benjamin, Death, and Frozen History**

History is an important element of *Anabase* because of the ways in which the poet-narrator implicitly exemplifies the function of the epic through the embodiment of national memory in artifacts. Paul Connerton, author of *How Societies Remember* (1989), states that “[k]nowledge of all human activities in the past is possible only
through a knowledge of their traces. Whether it is bones buried … or a pile of stones … or a narrative written … what the historian deals with are traces … Historians proceed inferentially … historians are their own authority” (Connerton, 13). Connerton portrays the historian as one who draws upon artifacts that he encounters, forming a narrative from them. Perhaps Benjamin drew upon a similar premise when he wrote his essay, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936), by seeing history as embodied within particular objects and reconceived by a historian who culls a meaning from these artifacts to form a narrative, evincing characteristics of what Benjamin refers to as the “Storyteller.” In this way, the historian is in some ways similar to the builder of the monument, or writer of the epic, in that the historian has an authority to build the narrative upon these objects. Each of these objects forms sites of a national history by being divested of its original function and story, and is then imbued with a new one.

Within Perse’s *Anabase*, in the sixth section of the poem, the singer of history emerges and plays a significant role in imbuing and authenticating the epic with the collective memory that he now refers to as a history. “Tout-puissants” the poet-narrator declares, “nous établîmes en haut lieu nos pièges” (52; “Omnipotent … we set in high places our springes for happiness” Eliot, 53). The new rulers set the symbol for their perpetuity on high, but this is not the “city on the hill” that has been constructed diegetically. Soon after, the narrator states, rather obliquely, that “[a]ussi longtemps nos verres où la glace pouvait chanter comme Memnon. . .” (52; “For so long the ice sang in our glasses, like Memnon” Eliot, 53). The myth of Memnon is a meaningfully selected figure to open this section of the poem. The myth is so compelling a tale that it has
encroached upon a pair of famous monuments, those dedicated to the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep III. The statues are not now known as memorials to the pharaoh, but instead as the Colossi of Memnon. The legend of the Colossi of Memnon is well-known, and the statues are likely what are referred to in the poem rather than the mythological character. The monuments sit as harbingers of the poet-Conqueror’s demands, and as precursors of the construction of the monument in the subsequent section of the poem. The Étranger exclaims: “Levez un peuple de miroirs sur l’ossuaire des fleuves, qu’ils interjettent appel dans la suite des siècles! Levez des pierres à ma gloire, levez des pierres au silence, el à la garde de ces lieux les cavaleries de bronze vert sur de vastes chaussées! …” (64; “Levy a wilderness of mirrors on the boneyard of streams, let them appeal in the course of ages! Erect stones to my fame, erect stones to silence; and to guard these places, cavalcades of green bronze on the great causeways! …” Eliot, 65). Beyond having founded the City, or rather central to its foundation, is the building of the monument that is constructed upon the graveyard in the “course of ages”, placed on top of the numerous human “traces” of history in order to appropriate their memory. The monument represents the Poet-Conqueror, celebrates his fame, and silences dissension or alternative ways of remembering. It guards the causeways to the City and demonstrates

42 The legend of the Colossi tells of an earthquake that shook the statues, and the resulting suffered by one of the pair of monuments resulted in the objects’ “singing” just before dawn, hence the name Memnon, “Dawn Ruler”, rather than “Pharaoh Amenhotep III”, for whom the statues are memorials (Kérisel, 9-10).

43 The capitalized “City” is Eliot’s translation of Perse’s lower-case “ville”, which I use here because it is a useful way to emphasize the centrality of the city’s foundation in the poem.
that the power to construct a monument is, in many ways, a form of power over memory
and history of a people.

The monumental guardian of the boneyard commences the inclusion of death or,
in other words, the ossification of life in the narrative, which serves as a means to inhere
an otherwise transient Nature into the teleology of history. The Étranger encounters
death in everything that he sees from this point, and narrates his encounters with the
natural world as calcification. For example, in the sixth section of the poem, the Poet-
narrator first describes the “toute la terre aux herbes s’allumant aux pailles de l’autre
hiver – el de l’éponge verte d’un seul arbre le ciel tire son suc violet” (60; “the whole
grassy earth taking light from the straw of last winter – and from the green sponge of a
lonely tree the sky draws its violet juices” Eliot, 61). However, this scene that seems rich
with the color and life of Nature is struck dead by the glare of the Étranger: “Un lieu de
pierrès à mica! … De la fissure des paupières au fil des cimes m’unissant, je sais la pierre
tachée d’ouïes, les essaims du silence aux ruches de lumière” (62; “A place of stone
quartz! Not a pure grain in the wind’s barbs. And light like oil. – From the crack of my
eye to the level of the hills I join myself, I know the gillstained, the swarms of silence in
the hives of light” Eliot, 63). Here we see the landscape become stone quartz, and as far
as the Étranger is able to see to the distant hills he sees this stone, a fixed and silent
monument to his dominance over the “hives of light” that signify communities of people
subject to his narrative of history.

These encounters that freeze Nature allegorize the epic poet’s encounter with
history that, as Derek Walcott states in his early essay “The Muse of History” (1974),
indicates the power over history and memory that the poet possesses: “[t]he ‘epic’ poet in the islands looks to anthropology, to a catalogue of forgotten gods, to midden fragments, artifacts, and the unfinished phrases of a dead speech … The epic-minded poet looks around these islands and finds no ruins, and because all epic is based on the visible presence of ruins … the poet celebrates what little there is … all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history,” but this epic-mindedness is requisite, according to Walcott, who states that “yet it is there that the epic poetry of the tribe originates, in its identification with … the hope of deliverance from bondage” (44). Walcott, in “A Letter to Chamoiseau” (1997), a text that is not unlike Benjamin’s “Reflections on Nikolai Leskov” in its investigation of the historian, distinguishes the writer from historian by stating that the text’s “style, like yours, is adjectival rather than nominal, a style that lies in the gestures of the storyteller, and it is in the metre of Creole” (214). The author, poet, and storyteller have a style and language that is distinct, the work of whom Benjamin describes as that which alludes to the past, penned by a figure who writes the narrative of historical past that is epic in form and scope, bound up with social memory and, in the telling (when the storyteller presumes to write history), “he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (Benjamin, 87).

This dialogic narrative gesture is what Walcott refers to as “[t]hat ‘beg your pardon,” which is “an implied gesture anticipating interruption by the reader-listener, uttered with the authority of the storyteller,” and to some degree invites the participation of hearers (226). The role of the storyteller is thus communal and reciprocal, one that Benjamin claims has apparently become extinct yet preserves the memory of a people.
This collective memory has a very intimate relationship with the function of historiography and results in a sort of displacement of the privileged space that historiography has occupied, since “[h]istoriography would thus be the medium of all epic form” and, further, “[e]ven in its final form … historiography does not exceed the bounds of epic genre” (Wohlfarth, 1003, 1004).

The writing of history and the writing of the epic are akin, and are critical in the preservation of shared memory, despite the fact that “[h]istoriography is not itself another epic form, but rather the creative matrix … of the various epic forms” (Wohlfarth, 1002). Benjamin further states that, “[m]emory is the epic faculty par excellence. Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other” (Benjamin, 97). The epic performs a critical role in its monumental regard of history, embodying significant events as they take place and “pass away,” dissipating into nothing if not for perpetuation of memory in the epic. The careful preservation of a historical moment is one that Foucault states is inherent in the genre, staving off the death of a shared memory since “Greek narrative or epic … was designed to guarantee the immortality of a hero. The hero accepted an early death because his life, consecrated and magnified by death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death” (117). Perhaps, then, epic writing such as Perse’s epic of colonization, domination, alienation, and identity formation, functions as a site of collective memory that exists in a perpetual confrontation with the encroachment of ephemerality, while simultaneously negotiating the function of death within the dynamic of the subjugation of
a people – death of a culture, death of an identity made obsolete, and death of the storyteller himself.

This power of death with which the epic must “make its peace” appears, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, characteristic of the very form and genre of the epic. Bakhtin emphatically states in his essay, that the epic form is analogous to an entity that exhibits no signs of life, “long since completed and in part already dead” (4). This seeming “deadness,” however, emerges in part from the fact that the epic arrives at the present as an essentially fixed form, already whole, and with an almost material crystallization, structured, and solid inasmuch as it cannot be re-formed despite the fact that it is renewed by passage through its new historical context. Death, nevertheless, imbues the “story” with an authenticity, as Benjamin states, in “The Storyteller,” that “[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death … it is natural history to which his stories refer back” (Benjamin, 94). Death, counter-intuitively, is what infuses the epic with immortality and serves as the ultimate means of alienation from quotidian life, by means of both the diegetic and non-diegetic Storyteller. Winspur notes that death imbues the heroic storyteller with a archetypical quality, since his role is to “descend into the realm of dead civilizations in order to translate into the words of the living the eternal truths half-grasped by the characters of earlier epics” (46). The Storyteller, in a sense, speaks from the dead and tells the paradigmatic story of a nation. This seems to be the role of Anabase, Winspur again notes: “it is precisely the role of the epic poem to tell the story of the rescuing from oblivion of the original, pre-historical truths underlying the evolution of Western culture.
It is because of its place within this epic tradition that *Anabase* too chronicles an attempt to rescue the original truths of the past” (46). Perse likely realized the significance of death with regard to the Storyteller’s role in telling “eternal truths,” (Winspur, 46). For that reason, Death is associated with the Stranger-Poet, even from the “Chanson” that begins the epic: “l’Étranger a mis son doigt dans la bouche des morts” (18; “the Stranger has laid his finger on the mouth of the Dead” Eliot, 19). This line of the poem illustrates the power that l’Étranger has over Death, or alludes to the very intimate relationship they share. Another example of the role of Death in preservation of the epic includes the lines:

*Âme jointe en silence au bitume des Mortes! Cousues d’aiguilles nos paupière! Louée l’attente sou nos cils!* (48)

Soul united in silence to the bitumen of the Dead! Our eyelids sewn with needles! Praised be the waiting under our eyelids! (Eliot, 49)

Death, in this scene, preserves the silenced Soul (“*Âme*”) of a people, its portals sewn up and its viscera awaiting deliverance to a new shore.

The epic remains fixed by the fact that it embodies a world of what Bakhtin describes as “the national heroic past,” rather than an individual and contemporary orientation: “a national epic past … serves as the subject for the epic … [N]ational tradition (not personal experience …) serves as the source … [A]n absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality … from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives” (13). It is this separation from the context from which the epic emerges that alienates the poem from poet and audience. The epic, as opposed to the novel, is dislocated from the circumstances of its creation, is carefully
crafted to embody an entire national narrative, one that it carries forward, fixed, forever afterward. “Fixed” here, of course, means to set permanently and solidly in place, but the term also signifies the contriving aspect of works of art that often presume to embody and establish national memory, yet fix them in a sort of “gerrymandering” gesture. In narrating a national memory, the epic writes a history that is in a sense misleading and alienating, since “[t]o tell history nowadays is already to tell a lie – a lie of the most insidious kind, since it marks the ideological exploitation of a utopian potential … historicism is reduced to an ‘indolence of the heart’ capable of ‘empathizing’ only with the powers that be” (Wohlfarth, 1006). The epic takes part in a nuanced form of historicism, as it writes an imagined national narrative, one that serves the purpose of the storyteller and those who hold power in the State, privileging the Storyteller’s voice while silencing the “listener.” Within the poem, this process takes place most explicitly at the end of the fifth section of the poem, in which the narrator exclaims,

‘Solitude! Je n’ai dit à personne d’attendre … Je m’en irai par là quand je voudrai … ‘ – Et l’Étranger tout habillé de ses pensées nouvelles, se fait encore des partisans dans les foies du silence: son œil est plein d’une salive, il n’y a plus en lui substance d’homme. Et la terre en ses graines ailées, comme un poète en ses propos, voyage … (50)

‘Solitude! I have told no one to wait … I shall go away in that direction when I wish … ‘ – And the Stranger clothed in his new thoughts, acquires still more partisans in the ways of silence: his eye is full of a sort of spittle, there is no more substance of man in him. And the earth in its winged seeds, like a poet in his thoughts, travels … (Eliot, 51)
The moniker here refers to the Poet-Conqueror’s name for “the alienated ones,” those who are now silenced and distinct from this dominating voice that speaks for them. The population grows in silence, and the Stranger at this point is becoming more explicitly a solid and non-human structure for the embodiment of national identity. Shoshana Felman, scholar of literature of trauma and testimony, in an essay on the subject of Benjamin’s treatment of “silence” in his body of work, states that, “[i]t is the victor who forever represents the present conquest or the present victory as an improvement in relation to the past … Historicism is, however, based on an unconscious identification with the discourse of the victor and thus on an uncritical espousal of the victor’s narrative perspective” (Felman, 209). This statement may seem self-evident, but it serves as a useful elaboration upon an assertion that Benjamin makes in his *Theses on the philosophy of history* (1940), where he states that

> the cultural treasures he [the historical materialist] surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. (256)

The epic, as a document of civilization, is “tainted” with the ideologies that led to its creation, then, seems to fix this imagined history within its narrative, silence those that “listen” to it, and carry this fixed memory perpetually into the future, ossified and unchanging.

The epic, in this sense, is related to the monument, as a fixed site of historical memory, differentiated from the plastic object by its means of literary dissemination.
Despite the fact that the epic as monument may be petrified, as Bakhtin and Lukács contend, and that the Storyteller writes a deafening national history, as Benjamin states, the text is not immune to new life, a significant example of this being Perse’s *Anabase*. Perse’s text is transgressed by the reading and storytelling tradition that he is re-casting, extending the history of conquest and alluding to origins – a time immemorial because it overflows with memory, saturation, and plenitude. As Bakhtin has stated that the epic lives on by its dialogical reappearance in any given time, Benjamin argues that the epic story lives on through the preservation of its authenticity and authority. The epic is distinct from the novel because of its “essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic … differentiates [it from] the novel … [I]t neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it … The storyteller takes what he tells from experience … The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual” (“Storyteller,” 87). The novel is tied to printing and mechanical reproduction, unlike the epic, which retains its storytelling quality by emerging from an oral tradition. Thus, as Benjamin famously states in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221). Yet, in the presumed preservation of a sort of aura in his epic, Perse also steps into a cycle of writing that is distinctly francophone, yet allows him to take a step further by incorporating colonized francophone countries into this French practice.
**Perse and a Neo-classical tradition**

Carol Rigolot, in her text *Forged Genealogies: Saint-John Perse’s Conversations with Culture* (2001), states that “Perse shared the belief that France had not yet found its Homer or Virgil, that the art of the epic was still to be perfected, and that a great French epic remained to be written. Throughout his career … he attempted to bring an epic breath to French poetry” (70). This assertion, that one’s country does not have, and has not had, a national poet, is a claim that is not unusual in a time of shifting national identity. Marie-Noëlle Little, in a study of Perse’s epistolary life, states that the “Légers moved to France in early 1899. That was a critical year in the history of Guadeloupe … because of serious … political crises and the possibility that the island … would be annexed by the United States” (4). Because of this, Perse was “always carrying a particularly strong sense of exile after leaving Guadeloupe … In his poems and letters one can find … a longing for the island” (Little, 8). The surety of Guadeloupe’s identity as a nation was compromised, and it is this contention that initially drove Perse, as drives many poets during such periods of transition, to long for a means to permanently establish a national identity and memory. Perse’s own identity was compromised as well, or self-sabotaged to some degree, since, as Mary Gallagher states, Perse had striven for much of his life to repudiate any suggestion that he was a regional poet, and having proclaimed at every possible opportunity his pure and absolute Frenchness, the main emphasis of his final creative act … was to emphasize the role played in his definitive image as poet by his family’s colonial past and by his own Caribbean birth and childhood … the Creole connection is presented precisely as proof of the authenticity of the poet’s quintessential Frenchness … [F]or him, the process of transplantation paradoxically strengthens the original, genetic identity of a given ethnic group. (Gallagher, “Seminal,” 24-5)
Walt Whitman, although speaking from the other side of the struggle between the United States and countries seeking to escape manifest acquisition, states in his 1871 *Democratic Vistas* that, “[t]his something is rooted in the invisible roots, the profoundest meanings of that place, race, or nationality; and to absorb and again effuse it … carrying it into highest regions, is the work, or a main part of the work, of any country’s true author, poet, historian … Here, and here only, are the foundations for our really valuable and permanent verse … these swarms of poems … are useless and a mockery” (Whitman, 64). In a time when national identity is, in many senses, under threat, the poet can construct the textual monument that will establish this identity, and that is why “Perse’s poems are ateliers where a master blacksmith shapes his stories and his identity … In the forge of language, Perse, like every poet, sought to create ‘iron words,’ … as he called them, capable of resisting the vagaries of time” (Rigolot, 14). The epic poem, in many ways, shares the ideals of permanence often attributed to stone, steel, and monument, and the reshaping of *materia* that has not fully formed.

Yet Perse’s aspirations for this role are particularly problematic, since his attempts seem to elide a pattern of historical French endeavors to establish a national epic. Rigolot points out that the medieval authors of such poems as the *Chanson de Roland* (11th century), “may have been the first to write epics in French,” thus, implicitly establishing a national epic literature that would precede by many centuries anything that Perse could attempt (70). Perhaps, then, the “Chanson” that commences Perse’s “Anabase” is a nod to the medieval work that is largely considered the oldest significant extant instance of
French literature. It is very likely that Perse did not regard the romantic verse of France’s epic poetry as what Whitman refers to as a “useless mockery,” but Perse’s effort to instantiate himself into the role of epic national poet is not unlike Whitman’s gesture with regard to the young United States, as an attempt to place himself within a teleology that would allow him to erect a poetic monument to a national identity that he would imagine, and one that would allow him to appropriate the role and voice of Storyteller of a national history and identity. Perse not only hopes to write France’s national epic, but a global francophone one, a monument to the French language, emerging from a continuum of a sort of *translatio studii et imperii* that has made its way west from Greece, then to Rome, then France, finally to Guadeloupe, and as such, “Perse renews a perennial (and personal) question while placing his work in an epic lineage” (Rigolot, 72).

However, Perse was not the first to attempt to establish French as a global language that would imbue its literature with epic monumentality. Perse seems to reenact what seems to be a cyclical phenomenon, in which the ideals of Antiquity have been invoked as a means of reform, referred to as Neoclassicism. This movement was “peculiar to France,” and was one that “acquired an extraordinarily homogenous character” (Honour, 29). The Neoclassical period took place in two different periods, largely during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and again during the late eighteenth century. The first emergence of Neoclassicism acted as a political maneuver to substantiate then King Louis XIV’s reign, and prove “the superiority of [the] monarch’s century over that of Augustus Caesar,” by usurping the reverence that Antiquity continued to hold in popular thought (Casanova, 66). The second period of
Neo-classicism emerges from “a shift in the direction of the Enlightenment,” where artwork began to take on a “moralizing tone,” and sparked a reaction to and “rejection of the Rococo” (Honour, 18). The latter instance was not confined within the borders of France since, “[u]niversality was … one of its prime aims. The Neo-classical artist sought to appeal not to the individual of his own time but to all men in all times” (Honour, 29).

One of the most significant aspects of these movements is their appropriation of stylistic tropes of Greco-Roman antiquity as a means to “recreate a dream of classical perfection … towards high-minded and instructive themes of an austere and stoic morality” (Honour 32). However, despite the fact that these manifestations took place because of similar political and aesthetic motivations, their objectives diverged in ways that illuminate Perse’s claims to epic status. The first materialization of Neoclassicism took place, according to Pascale Casanova, because of “what was really at issue … the unspoken and specifically literary basis of the quarrel, namely the balance of power with Latin – and … the political stakes of the conflict, which is to say the place and the power of the language in the face of the declining and contested hegemony of Latin” (67). The earliest catalyst for Neoclassicism, then, was embodied in a contest for the dominance of a language, and that,

in the seventeenth century the arts had been brought to a higher degree of perfection than they enjoyed among the ancients. Those who were rightly called ‘classics,’ and who borrowed their references and literary models from antiquity … were reckoned to mark the apogee of the century of Louis XIV, the triumph of French language and literature, because … [i]n their works, and in the language they used, they incarnated the victory of French over Latin. (Casanova, 66)
The dominance of one language over another has been a means for establishing power and culture from the earliest human communities. As Benedict Anderson states, “[a]ll the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power” (13). This dominance often radiated from the metropole, as Derek Walcott asserts, noting that “in the prose poems of Perse … there is a strict, synonymous armature shared within the tradition of the metropolitan language,” a decision that did not simply lend urbanity to his poetry, but his poetry was “made numinous by their elation in the metropolitan language … perpetuating [the metropole’s] grandeur” (“Muse,” 50). Thus, Perse does not only write an epic for modernity, but a francophone one; an epic that would not displace a universal Latin, but revive the dominance of the French language in the world. Perse’s endeavor is not unlike that of Charles Perrault who, in the seventeenth century, through his French poetry sought to establish francophone “superiority over the ancients … because he considered them as having arrived at the summit of perfection” (Casanova, 67).

The latter emergence of the Neoclassical during the late eighteenth century occurred alongside the apogee of the Enlightenment that, rather than enacting a linguistic takeover, sought to reform a world that had frittered away its creative energy in such aristocratic excesses as the Rococo style, often characterized as “intricate and highly coloured, gauzy” (Honour, 20). The Neoclassical artist sought to create artwork on a monumental scale and achieve permanence by addressing “posterity, which might better understand the exalted nature of his Utopian conceptions and have adequate means to
execute works on the vast and frequently megalomaniac scale he demanded” (Honour, 21). The very Western conception of durability was one associated with the Classical period, so that during this time, the artist “sought effects of solidity and permanence, of solemnity and rigidity, of a stillness and silence evocative of that archaic world of timeless truths from which his … principles were drawn” (Honour, 20). To incorporate aspects of the Classical into one’s work in eighteenth-century France was to instill it with an epic quality, one that would endure. If we are to interpret the diegetic founding of the City in *Anabase* as the construction of the poem, then we become witness to its immortality in the reading of it:

Levez un peuple de miroirs sur l’ossuaire des fleuves, qu’ils interjettent appel dans la suite des siècles! Levez des pierres à ma gloire, levez des pierres au silence, et à la garde de ces lieux les cavaleries de bronze vert sur de vastes chaussées! … (64)

Levy a wilderness of mirrors on the boneyard of streams, let them appeal in the course of ages! Raise stones to my fame, raise stones to silence; and to guard these places, cavalcades of green bronze on the great causeways! … (Eliot, 65)

The use of mirrors here *en masse* reflects, so to speak, the cyclical yet permanent act of construction of the city or, as Bakhtin has explained, the epic constantly renewed as it is re-read and reinterpreted through time. Another writer has famously used the mirror, Jorge Luís Borges who, in order to sometimes depict “un tiempo y en un espacio ilimitados,” (“unlimited time and space”) would include the mirror as an element of his narrative so that “se vea él mismo en los espejos sin cuento, diminutos o inmensos, de universos que contienen a otros universos, de átomos que contienen a otros átomos” (Barrenechea, 23-4; “one sees himself in the numberless mirrors, small and immense,
from universes that contain other universes, of atoms that contain other atoms”). The image of the graveyard illustrates the authority that death lends to the monumental text in this unlimited space and will appeal in the course of ages. The epic text will endure, just as the plastic monument made of stones and green bronze and erected on populous causeways will persist.

Of course, permanence of the monument in turn monumentalizes the poet, but the eighteenth-century Neoclassical movement imbued the artist with a new role. The role of the artist during the Neoclassical period had undergone a shift, one which “implied a new and more elevated estimate of the artist and his role in society. He should raise himself above the status of the complaisant craftsman … He should take on the mantle of the high priest of eternal truths, the public educator … it was to the public at large … that he should address his message” (Honour, 19). The poet had, in a sense, become a pedagogue, and his work took on a didactic function, and who then “begin to see poetry as a form of historical instruction” (Walcott, “Muse,” 59). This is a role that Perse has arrogated to himself, asserting that “the poet’s task was to explore the universe and human consciousness while remaining outside the literary currents of the time” (Little, 7). Although, of course, the Neoclassical is essentially a “literary current,” as are all such re-emergences of the tropes of antiquity, the writing of the epic has always been idealized as a means of fixing and making permanent. Thus, to view Perse’s efforts to substantiate himself as the epic writer of France is to see a renewed emergence of the objectives of the Neoclassical, since “only the writer can immortalize them … The last word belongs to the poet” (Rigolot, 72). He seeks to establish a literary text that would serve as France’s true
epic, perform a universal role of monumentalizing the French language and, implicitly, the national identities of those francophone countries that always existed in the undercurrents of Perse’s writing, whose struggle for sovereignty drove Perse from his original island home. Further, by explicitly placing the poem within the francophone tradition, especially within the French Neoclassical tradition and its literary re-enactments of Greco-Roman antiquity, *Anabase* endeavors to separate itself from the polyglot world into which it was born and reaches for a lofty “purity” of language that, most obviously today, is wholly imaginary.

This effort, then, would place Perse on a pedagogical podium. This would not be the first time that Perse would be so addressed, as “his admirers have imposed a static, unilateral image upon him. He is today preserved as in a reliquary, poised on a pedestal, contemplated in awed silence or discussed in hushed tones ... his sayings scripture, he is in danger of lying forever in state, encased in a great gilded sarcophagus ... Turned into a grandiose statue without a flaw in its superb outlines, an impurity of color, a chisel mark, or an unexpected shadow, he has been fixed in a sublime pose fit for a shrine or a mausoleum ... with a chant that endlessly echoes solemn hymns of adoration” (Ostrovsky, 1). To examine the formation of Perse’s own identity as Storyteller, as Benjamin has illuminated, leads to the revelation of a fascinatingly and carefully sculpted persona. “Saint-John Perse,” as stated above, is a pseudonym that the poet insists is a “simple coincidence,” and emerges from what he claims is “l’esprit du poète, pour des raisons inconnues de lui-même” [“the spirit of the poet, for reasons only known to him”] (Ostrovsky, 4). Although Perse gave little clue as to his choice of pseudonym, the fact
that he chose to adopt a different persona as poet is significant, and demonstrates a purposeful and significant reinvention, as Mary Gallagher notes: “[a]vant même que la lente composition et l’ultime rassemblement d’une œuvre aient rempli de sens et d’identité le nom inventé, un certain désir de création poétique avait donc sécréité ce masque mystérieux, ce non au nom donné. L’acte de rupture, de volonté et de ré-invention de soi qu’est la conception de son propre nom (propre) me semble d’ailleurs dépasser de loin en importance le jeu des diverses consonances et résonances” (Créolité, 41; “even before the slow composition and eventual collection of a work has fulfilled a sense of identity and contrived name, it is a desire for poetic creation that has filtered into this mysterious mask, not the poet’s given name. The act of bending the will and reinventing the self that designs its own name (very own) also, it appears to me, far outweighs in importance any loosening of poetic consonance and resonance”). In her thorough investigation of the problem of Perse’s patronyms and pseudonyms, Erika Ostrovsky finds that one possible source for one of Perse’s names is derived from the time that he “spent in the Orient as a diplomat and is the transposition of his name into Chinese; Lei Hi-gnai (“La Foudre sous la neige”; 5). The origins of Perse’s chosen name of Saint-John (or St-John, as he sometimes signed), is rather more difficult to trace.\footnote{René Galand summarizes the speculations on Perse’s choice of first name in his authorial pseudonym: “Different explanations have been suggested. It is possible that Alexis Leger, who believes in the prophetic power of poets, was thinking of Saint-John the Baptist whose voice was heard in the desert. Others have indicated that “Saint-John” might come from the American writer of French descent Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur. Others still, considering the West Indian origins of the poet, have thought that it might allude to the Caribbean island of Saint-John, or that perhaps it could be the}
although he does state, when asked about the change of his full name when shifting roles from diplomat to poet, that “to be a poet was ‘so suspicious’ that he had always wanted to keep the two roles separate [and he,] in fact, could have ‘at least four or five personalities’” (Little, 35). Ostrovsky attributes the fascination of this name with “its poetic quality, its incongruity, the estrangement it provides, its link with thunder and lightning – for, among the rare possessions that accompanied him during his entire nomadic life was a stele with the Chinese calligram of this name, a calligram that also adorned one of the flags he flew over his last abode” (5). This may be too simplistic an interpretation, however. A more productive avenue to interpret Perse’s choice of name may emerge from a purposeful attempt to form his identity in the tradition of the Neo古典, just as he formed his epic with an eye to an emergence of an equivalent of this movement. Nicolas Cronk, in his study of the poetic theory emerging during the Neo古典ical period, *The Classical Sublime: French Neoclassicism and the Language of Literature* (2002), emphasizes the importance of images emerging from such influential texts as Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (c1593), particularly since contemporary critics form their theory from “their view that words function as pictures of reality. It seems apposite … considering the literal image of the Classical Sublime, as part of the seventeenth-

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English translation of the name of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. It could also be the French translation of the name of another American island, “l’île Saint-Jean”, the name given to Prince Edward Island by the first French settlers … Another intriguing hypothesis has been advanced: in the Supplément au Grand Larousse illustré du XIXe siècle, the name “Saint-Leger” is immediately preceded by the name of the English writer “Saint-John”, whose first name is “Percy”. In dictionaries and encyclopedias, of course, the last name precedes the first, so that the name appears as “Saint-John, Percy”, which sounds very much like “Saint-John Perse” (Galand, 2).
century iconographical tradition of eloquence” (159). Ostrovsky states that French
Classical was preoccupied with the idea of “eloquence,” and to understand this fixation,
“Ripa’s influence here is paramount … the Iconologia provided the essential inspiration
… even before the Iconologia was translated into French” (Ostrovsky, 160). Ostrovosky
further states that,

The thunderbolt as symbol of powerful oratory … was a commonplace of Greek
and Roman criticism … the symbol was familiar to authors of Renaissance
emblematic handbooks, such as Ripa and Valeriano. In his description of
‘Eloquenza’, Ripa writes graphically of the overwhelming power of ‘il folgore’ …
Valeriano describes a range of meanings associated with the thunderbolt:
strength, power, fame, speed, clemency, and, of course, the force of eloquence.
The image of thunder was associated with ancient orators like Pericles … because
of the way in which they moved their audience, and because of the power and
authority of their words; this image … has its source in the Scriptures, [Valeriano]
claims, citing several examples of thunder used as an image of the persuasive
Heaven-sent voice. Thunder as a symbol of forceful or even religious eloquence
had thus been a commonplace … The image of le foudre is pivotal to the picture
of poetic discourse. (Ostrovsky, 167-8)

Taking into account Perse’s extensive knowledge of tropes of antiquity, which he took
advantage of in order to establish the epic nature of his work, the image and meaning of
le foudre from the Classical and Neo-classical would not have been lost on Perse. We
see, in the beginning of the text, in the “Chanson” that commences the epic, the Stranger
is introduced as emerging among “un grand bruit” (“a great bruit of voices”), carrying a
“don du chant! Tonnerre / et flûtes dans les chambres! tant / d’histoires à l’année, et
l’Étranger à ses façons par les chemins de toute / la terre!” (18; “gift of song, thunder and
fluting in the rooms. O what ease in our ways, how many tales to the year, and by the
roads of all the earth the Stranger to his ways” Eliot, 19). Thunder and flute (the lyric)
are introduced as aspects of the “don du chant,” emblems of the ideal poet. Thus, the
Stranger is introduced to the narrative amid the very image of eloquence, the Poet-Conqueror immediately associated with the power and authority of words.

**Conclusion: Anabase and the Construction of National Identity**

The first chapter of the epic begins by making clear the *constructed* nature of the Étranger, stating that “Sur trois grandes saisons m’établissant avec honneur, j’augure bien du sol où j’ai fondé ma loi” (24; “I have build myself, with honour and dignity have I build myself on three great seasons, and it promises well, the soil whereon I have established my Law” Eliot, 25). This is the first indication the reader has of the building of identity, and it reaches its climax with the founding of the City, “cementing” the identity of the population:

C’est là le train du monde et je n’ai que du bien à en dire – Fondation de la ville. Pierre et bronze. Des feux de ronces à l’aurore mirent à nu ces grandes pierres vertes et huileuses comme des fonds de temples, de latrines, et le navigateur en mer atteint de nos fumées vit que la terre, jusqu’au faîte, avait changé d’image (de grands écobuages vus du large et ces travaux de captation d’eaux vives en montagne). (40)

Such is the way of the world and I have nothing but good to say of it. – Foundation of the City. Stone and bronze. Thorn fires at dawn bared these great green stones, and viscid like the bases of temples, of latrines, and the mariner at sea whom our smoke reached saw that the earth to the summit had changed its form (great tracts of burnt-over land seen afar and these operations of channelling the living waters on the mountains). (Eliot, 41)
This significant section of the poem both echoes the anabasis of Xenophon’s narratives, and reveals also the ways in which the Americas have been transformed by the arrival of the European Conqueror.

The following stanza begins with the Stranger’s most formidable ally. He states that:

Puissance, tu chantais sur nos routes nocturnes!
… Aux ides pures du matin que savons-nous du songe,
nôtres aînesse? (24-6)

Power, you sang as we march in darkness … At the pure ides of day what know we of our dream, older than ourselves? (Eliot, 25-7)

Power, personified here, sings alongside the Stranger, who marches during the night. This singing alludes to the “Chanson” (“Song”) that begins the epic, which describes “le Soleil entre au Lion et l’Étranger,” alluding to the astrological sign as it might appear to the Conqueror as he steps onto new shores serving as an augur of an eternal configuration of nature that changes as it is viewed from different parts of the globe. This encroachment into a new land during the “ides” of day perhaps signifies the Poet-Conqueror’s death at noon, but the monument, as we find out, keeps the Memnon-like poet “singing” through the dawn. Like the monument to Delgrès that portrays not only a figure significant to Guadeloupean history but a persona “legitimized” by the Panthéon and its embodiment of appropriated and reimagined history, Perse’s self-proclaimed epic exemplifies the immortality that the epic poet acquires by shaping memory and history into his likeness through ingress into the epic lineage.
Chapter 2

American Counter-Monument: *Omeros* as “Counter-Epic”

“Each castle throws its black shadow like a primitive stone monument protected by a National Trust and one feels that in the next shallow valley a village will appear … But the road just goes on, past more ant castles … The illusion is past” (97).


In the above epigraph, Naipaul conflates the image of the castle, a construct with particularly Western and grandiose implications, with that of six-foot tall anthills that tower above their miniscule denizens. By appropriating the European castle for this description of the exotic Caribbean scene, Naipaul attributes monumentality to a natural phenomenon that is characteristic of an alien and disturbing landscape, while also imposing the Western idea of cultural accomplishment upon a Westernized portrayal of the post-colonial inhabitants of Caribbean islands – small, laboring, and dark. Yet, by adopting this Western image, the author underscores the absurdity of imposing Western ideas of the monumental upon a Caribbean landscape that seems to operate so much in opposition to these ideals.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the many ways in which Perse appropriates language and reinvents the function of history and memory to establish the “epicity” of his poetics. However, more recent epic poems actually appropriate many elements traditionally attributed to the Western epic in order to contravene them, to
restructure the epic to operate in *opposition* to a European ideal. This aspect of the American epic is distinguished by re-imagining the stylistic concerns and formal qualities of the epic, because “for ‘American Epic,’ longstanding models of hierarchy, societal as well as generic, were [and are] being successfully challenged” (McWilliams, 4).

However, this opposition to the traditional epic is not the sole means by which authors in the Americas have confronted epic monumentality: a new appropriation of the epic’s stylistic qualities is actually utilized to undermine the monumentality of the epic. This form of literary subversion, or even recalcitrance, is expressed by means of the subject matter and context treated in the narrative. In other words, the American author employs “the efficacy of poetry … not through its language but through its subject” (Walcott, “Muse,” 59). The requisite nobility of *topic* of the American narrative seems to elide beforehand any Caribbean attempt at epic monumentality.

This exclusion from the dominant epic genealogy is engendered by enforcement of Western ideals of “nobility” associated with the epic, a strict exclusivity that rejects the Caribbean outright because of the region’s historical subjectivity within the margins of the Empire. Caribbean reality diverges from the “heroic” dominance traditionally portrayed by European conquerors, as Joseph Farrell states in his essay, “Walcott’s *Omeros*: The Classical Epic in a Postmodern World”: “the epic … in the classical tradition of European literature … has been accorded a privileged place among the most elevated genres,” and as a result, the American, particularly the Caribbean epic in this case, is disregarded since its “tone is seldom elevated, nor is much of its matter especially dignified” (279-280). One text that arises from the Americas and flouts the nobility of
topic that is a supposed aspect of the modern epic is *Omeros* (1990) by Derek Walcott. Through the lens of what may be described as Walcott’s “textual counter-monument,” I will examine how the American author often appropriates Western ideals of monumentality in order to circumvent them and construct counter-monuments on behalf of a people whose history and memory has been arrogated. In the text, we observe that monuments built in the Antilles are purposeful re-imaginings of Western ideals. These re-imaginings oppose Western ideals rather than attempt to embrace them, a maneuver that underscores the fragmentation of Antillean history, memory, and contemporary reality. These new writings, in fact, appear to make constrained categorization of the epic obsolete, since “it is through the refigurative, counter-discursive articulations of representational mode and generic structure, as much as through the textual manipulation of plot and character or theme and voice, that post-colonial writing reclaims its text from the dead hand of received tradition and enjoins the project of cognitive liberation” (Slemon, 14). This is particularly apparent in *Omeros*, whose characters, for example, represent inverse paradigms for Western ideals and monuments. I argue that *Omeros* builds upon and re-forms monuments, foregrounding the fact that what was once considered derivative is now the foundation for new monumental structures that are re-worked, renamed, and function as embodiments of a new history and new imagining of the post-colonial. By taking into account the landscape, language, and memorial function of the Antillean monument, Walcott builds a new monumental tradition for the Americas that is antithetical, and “counter-monumental,” to the Western ideal and its legacy.
The epic *Omeros* is a text of seven Books, set largely on the island of St. Lucia but includes the travels of the poet-narrator, “Derek,” to other locales across the Atlantic, and the dilatory lives of the Plunketts, a European couple who become disaffected from the ideal of living out their advanced years in an “island paradise.” The narrative follows Achille, who serves as the “hero” of the epic, in his day-to-day life as a fisherman and pursuer of Helen, the female embodiment of the island. Achille acts as the paradigm of quotidian labor in the epic, the primary actor in monumental *gestes*, and the counterpart to the “learned” Derek who travels to sites deemed to be monuments in the West. Achille and Derek exhibit different facets of monumentalism: Achille, a personage who is silenced by the monumental artifact yet, as epic hero, defaces the very conventions that inform the monumental text. Derek, however, is acutely aware of the monumentalism of Western artifacts, yet by traveling to confront these objects that exemplify ideals that are alien to islanders such as Achille, he “faces his own inherited sense of inadequacy as an artist...As he visits the monuments of London [among others,] ... [h]is personal sense of displacement … now becomes intensified by his sense of alienation as a poet striving to give voice to his people’s experience” (Friedman 463). This displacement reaches a culmination in the seventh and final Book of the poem, as the poet confronts the monument itself. The poet-narrator detects a coconut floating in the water while standing on his hotel balcony. The coconut morphs before his eyes into the bust of Omeros, the Greek appellation of Homer. This material icon of the Western epic communicates with him, and in the bust the poet-narrator is able to confront History: “I stood looking back where I came from. The bust became its own past, I could hear its white lines in the far-
off foam” (294). Derek finds his origins in the Homeric icon as a poet entering into an epic genealogy. The material object of Western epic tradition leads Derek into Hell, often grasping Derek with a marble hand, striking him blind while simultaneously showing him how to “see.” While in Hell, they see other poets, and soon after, once the vision has dissipated, all epics are rejected by the sea. The text ends with a particularly non-epic scene in which Helen, throughout the narrative pursued as an apotheosis, is portrayed as a mundane waitress and not the semi-divine character of legend.

The restriction of narrative subject to the seemingly noble is a Western ideal employed according to Western conventions, and Farrell bitingly states that “the idea that epic is a closed, authoritative genre, objective in its regard of the heroic past … is a significant discursive construct that evidently answers some deep-seated cultural longing on the part of readers brought up on European literature. But a discursive construct it is” (Farrell, 283). The fact that the epic has undergone many cultural and formal transitions since its emergence in Ancient Greece is a point that is rarely examined in traditional epic discourse, which elides a significant aspect of the epic, since “there has always been a counter tradition of reading epic as more open to pluralities of interpretation than the conventional view of the genre would seem to allow … [A]n acceptance of alterity is a basic constitutive feature of the European epic from its inception,” (Farrell, 283). The acceptance of alterity, which Farrell argues is evinced by the texts of Virgil onward, is inherent in the epic genre, and thus to relegate particular epics to such hedging categories as the “lyrical novel” is to relegate the concept of epic to a shibboleth and to confine the American epic to the literary standards of a strictly European, and alien, apotheosis. This
divergent literary form is, indeed, exemplified by “New World” productions, embodying what John McWilliams, in his monograph *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (1989) asserts is distinctively American Epic: “It was the eventual combining of laughter and sublimity, familiarity with awe, folly with heroism, neo-classical knowledge with the provincial’s scorn for it, that … truly New World models … of the epic genre finally emerged because their authors were able to laugh at the portentous gravity of their own creations” (McWilliams, 6-7). Walcott’s epic, in which the emboldened hero Achille commences the poem having just “peed in the dark,” set the tone for a recalcitrant text that will continue to flout any traditional and conventional ideas of the majestic hero and his supposed requisite gravitas (Walcott, *Omeros*, 8).

Walcott emerges within a lineage of Caribbean writers, including George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Jean Rhys, and many others that, while not originating from St. Lucia, as Caribbean writers exemplify what “[h]is own island … gave the world,” and on whose shoulders he happily stands (Walcott, “Naipaul,” 127). Yet, the epigraph that opens this chapter is written by someone whom Walcott considers an “almost great writer,” a response to Naipaul’s treatises that attribute to the islands “neither Art nor Culture.” Because of Naipaul’s seemingly unquestioned “belief in [European] history,” Walcott accuses him of a sort of betrayal. A “selling out,” such “that the descendants of the enslaved will revere their servitude if it will lead them to those peaks of Art and Culture, to the heart of that empire … [T]he servant’s present tense is not Naipaul’s … That tense has been refined, rewritten, judged, given an epic sweep” (Walcott, “Naipaul,” 128-30). My use of the epigraph above serves to illustrate the distinction between the
mere appropriation of epic language and its potential for perceptual inversion, a
distinction based on Walcott’s careful avoidance of applying an epic veneer upon the
“torpor” of the Antilles (“Naipaul,” 130). The inclusion of Walcott’s *Omeros* into the
epic genre is a point of contention among scholars, despite the fact that “[h]e has often
been praised for his ability to fuse the classics, folklore and history and to combine the
vernacular and the grand manner” (Bruckner, 397). Joseph Farrell’s essay is a prime, and
exemplary, contribution to the argument. Nevertheless, in this chapter I will examine not
the “questionable” inclusion of *Omeros* into the monumental epic genre, but *how*
Walcott’s epic often self-consciously disrupts monumental ideals that emerge from the
European tradition. The role of the monument as the safeguard of memory, history, and
culture, and of the ways that “collective memory and institutional culture define historical
life and its materiality,” are challenged when the builder of the monument purposefully
constructs objects that undercut larger ideals of what qualifies as monumental (Kadir, 92).
We see a phenomenon of “counter-memory,” resulting in what James E. Young refers to
as counter-monument or, in other words, a form of anti-monument. Scholars have noted
this antithetical approach in Walcott’s critical essays, in which the writer seeks to
challenge poetic ideals primarily through reconsidering the ways in which history and
memory are privileged, as Natalie Melas points out in an essay entitled “Forgettable
Vacations and Metaphor in Ruins: Walcott’s *Omeros*”:

[T]he phrase “monumental achievement,” particularly when it applies to the
intrinsically historical genre of epic resonates oddly with the antihistoricist
postcolonial aesthetic Walcott develops … whose discourse on amnesia would
seem to resist, if not actively oppose, conventional notions of monumentality,
posed as these are in a redemptive relation to history … given the banality of
history for the colonial, the disproportion between the bombast of the [epic] genre and the insignificance of provincial life is a recipe for mock epic. A witty catalogue of vignettes of local characters presented under the names of heroes from Greek mythology demonstrates the proposition. Epic monumentality is clearly not here a viable possibility. (Melas, 147-8)

As Melas states, Walcott has famously disregarded historical memory as “a creative or culpable force,” exemplified in his statement that he “felt history to be the burden of others” (Walcott, “The Muse of History,” 63). Yet, this recalcitrant inclination suggests, I believe, that Walcott’s work is not a fairly passive “epic of the dispossessed,” a term many have used to champion his work, but Walcott’s rejection of history is an active response to the genres to which the text has been relegated and against which it is unfairly compared. Omeros is not a narrative of the dispossessed, but an openly defiant text of re-imagination, reclaiming pejorative epithets for the Caribbean as a means to infuse authority into his poetics (Melas, 148).

Since, as Guy Rotella argues, “even the best and worst monuments both satisfy and violate public and private needs,” the longing to memorialize a past that Walcott insists must be forgotten within a “postcolonial aesthetic” – yet is inescapably recalled in the global context – operates in a unique and counter-memorial way (Rotella, 2). With the understanding that counter-monuments act as “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being,” I will examine Omeros as a narrative that appropriates monumental figures from the Western epic tradition and inverts them into what would be otherwise considered marginal and non-

45 I borrow this term from Robert D. Hamner’s Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott’s Omeros (1997).
heroic figures (Young, 271). These characters embody, and construct, the counter-monument that Walcott has created in a post-colonial Antillean context. Thus, despite the attempts that such authors as Saint-John Perse have made to establish themselves as epic authors in the traditional Western sense, authors such as Derek Walcott emerge from the Americas with a dissimilar intent: to appropriate and actually reconstruct the epic as it would emerge from the “unoriginal and broken” aspects of the post-colonial (Walcott, “The Antilles,” 68). Authors who write in the vein of appropriation and inversion of the apparent nobility of the epic enact this “reversal” by means of the monuments that are constructed or confronted in the narrative, a monumental achievement in itself, despite the fact that Walcott “insists that he is not an epic poet,” (Bruckner, 399). If, as Rotella states in his essay “Derek Walcott: ‘The Sea is History,’ Omeros, and Others,” “monuments … are the visible proof of a culture’s military, religious, civic, and other achievements and traditions, that is, of its very existence … a culture rich in monuments … is superior, and a culture with few or no monuments … is inferior – or isn’t a culture at all” (127), then the examination of the role of monuments as they appear in a text is critical to understanding the author’s intentions with regard to portraying a culture that is “real” or historically elided and disregarded. This is a problematic that is confronted by Walcott in Omeros. Since the existence of monuments or monumental ruins, as artifacts traditionally equated with veritable culture in the history of the West, are yet another criteria that the Antillean epic cannot overcome, defiance of convention is one of the few avenues left open to the Antilles because “[t]he sigh of History rises over ruins … and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over” (Walcott, “Antilles,” 68).
Walcott’s concern with the monument’s relationship to national memory and identity informs the ways in which he counter-memorializes European structures. Walcott refuses to allow an imposed history to inform his identity as an Antillean, and insists that reminders of this artificial memory must be re-imagined in order to construct what Paula Burnett refers to as a “counterhistoriography.” Walcott’s effort to sever the memorial aspect of the monument from the ideologically driven history from which it emerged and with which it is suffused is significant because of the monument’s function as a means to cache memory and critical scrutiny away, relieving the viewer from the responsibility of active remembering – a clever means of imposing a large-scale passivity within the shadow of a constructed historical narrative. Young states that, “the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally … there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shoudering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden” (Young, 273). This investiture of the monument with national memory recalls the concept of the pharmakon that Jacques Derrida, in his well-known essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1968) examines: “If one takes the king’s word for it … it is this life of the memory that the pharmakon of writing would come to hypnotize: fascinating it, taking it out of itself by putting it to sleep in the monument” (107). It is for this reason that the counter-monument is so critical to re-forming a national identity and the newly imagined narrative, because “[c]onfident of the permanence and independence of its types …
memory will fall asleep, will not keep itself up … Letting itself get turned to stone by its own signs … it will sink down into lēthē, overcome by nonknowledge and forgetfulness” (Derrida, 108). The counter-monument, though itself a type of monument, nevertheless attempts to disrupt what Derrida refers to as “the mnemonic device for live memory … the prosthesis … the passive” (109), by appropriating a particular imperial narrative and re-shaping it to inform a new American identity, one that does not allow its viewer to take a European image-as-narrative for granted.

How would an Antillean epic hero appear and function in a land lacking “veritable” monumental structures? Walcott demonstrates in his epic that the answer to this question is uncertain, because epic heroes in the Caribbean can never escape their subject status, whether colonial or post-colonial, whether or not their history is elided. Thus, it is the role of not the Homeric, but the Omeric poet to build inescapably counter-monuments as a means, in Walcott’s own terms, a “gathering of broken pieces [that are] the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels … Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent”

46 The poem, in Book I, Chapter 2, describes the name “Omeros” thus: “I said, ‘Omeros,’ / and O was the conch-shell’s invocation, mer was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes,” (Omeros, 14). Thus, Omeros is a figure whose name is Greek yet is constructed entirely of elements of the Caribbean islands, as opposed to “the small bust with its boxer’s broken nose,” (Omeros, 14). In this way, Walcott commences the construction of his Antillean counter-monument from European monumental materials.
(Walcott, “The Antilles,” 69). This fragmentation of the islands is due, according to Walcott, to the islands’ treatment as derivative, a perspective that motivates Walcott to openly respond to and reconstruct imaginings emerging from an inaccessible *translatio imperii* that informs an underlying thread of history in the poem. For example, the island

> [b]oys watched the white man’s inexhaustible patience …

> which was to prove that the farthest exclamations

> of History are written by a flag of smoke,

> from Carthage, from Pompeii, from the burial mound

> of antipodal Troy. Midden built on midden; by nature men always chose

> the same dumping ground. (*Omeros*, 98-9)

This assertion is often repeated throughout the poem, that of the passivity of islanders whose history is shaped by means of European battles for control over the potentially profitable islands. History, read “White Man’s History,” is written by the victors of war, during which the “boys” of the Caribbean islands merely serve as uncomprehending onlookers. The naming here of such polities as Carthage and Troy are examples of burial and forgetting, of strings of wars for supremacy among European nations for imperial expansion with each victory establishing just another “midden” westward from Thrace to St. Lucia.

Military engagement is the traditional means by which the epic hero exemplifies his heroic qualities, yet, by appropriating even this epic trope, Walcott inverts the role of the soldier into one that gives rise to shame, regret, and ultimately failure, demonstrating that the appropriation of the islands by otherwise heroic European figures is a fallacious

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{47} In this case the French and Dutch conflict for control of the islands during the seventeenth-century Franco-Dutch wars.}}\]
enterprise. This failed soldier is exemplified by the character of Plunkett, who in Chapter XVI of Book Two had hoped to “embark on a masochistic odyssey” (*Omeros*, 90), yet is constrained by his wife who insists that such a journey would leave them in penury, insisting that “It’ll eat up your pension” (90). Walcott re-imagines Western ideals in order to draw attention to the fragmentation of Antillean history, memory, and contemporary reality that results in part from such conflicts, tracing the premise that the existence of culture on the islands is due to superior European influence, resulting in the “way that the Caribbean is still looked at [is as] illegitimate, rootless, mongrelized, ‘No people there,’ … Fragments and echoes of real people” (Walcott, “Antilles,” 67-8).

Therefore, the epic as monument to martial transcendence is undercut.

The poem *Omeros* embodies and constructs the concept of counter-monumentality, highlighting the assertion that what was once considered derivative is now the foundation for new monuments, re-worked, renamed, and function as embodiments of a new history and new imagining of the post-colonial. Integrating the American landscape, language, and memorial function of the Antillean monument, “Walcott does not pass over or ignore the era of European empire but engages directly both with colonial discourse and the counterdiscourse devised to oppose it,” thus conceiving a monumentalism for the Americas that is “counter” to the Western ideal (Burnett, 74).
The concept of the “counter-monument” is commonly understood as a reaction to monuments that represent war, atrocity, or period of oppression in a form that is purposefully not immediately aesthetically pleasing, and is motivated by such affective responses as are embodied in a “nostalgia for innocence by the enactment of remorse for the genocides of civilization” (Walcott, “Twilight,” 6). James E. Young, in his essay “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today” (1992), delineates many aspects of the counter-monument, stating that:

the counter-monument … flouts any number of cherished memorial conventions: its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet. By defining itself in opposition to the traditional memorial’s task, the counter-monument illustrates concisely the possibilities and limitations of all memorials everywhere. In this way, it functions as a valuable ‘counter-index’ to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site. (Young, 276-7)

These recalcitrant objectives resonate with many of Walcott’s affirmations of the alterity of not only the American epic, but the very nature of the Caribbean, of “memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence from re-memoration as the mere repetition of a monument” (Derrida, 111). Walcott states that “since History is based on achievement, and since the history of the Antilles was so genetically corrupt … a culture was inconceivable and nothing could ever be created in those ramshackle ports,” thus reifying an imperial perspective that excludes the islands from a European-defined legitimacy.
(“Antilles,” 76). Hence, environments such as the city, a customary center of national
culture, in the Caribbean is “not to be measured by the traveller or the exile, but by its
own citizenry and architecture. To be told you are not yet a city or a culture requires this
response. I am not your city or your culture” (“Antilles,” 76-7). The reification of a
boundary between the Caribbean city and the European ideal of the *civitas* underscores
an Antillean self-possessed urban center, despite attempts of neoliberal appropriation,
illustrating “Walcott’s faith in the multicultural cities of the Caribbean as closer to the
ideal city than are the metropoles of the North” (Burnett, 52).

In order to flout rejection enacted by European hegemony and exclusion, Walcott
constructs the ultimate counter-monument by appropriating and altering one of the most
fundamental of Western artifacts, the epic poem, monument to the ideals of civilization
conceived by colonizing nations. Ironically, “Walcott secures legitimation for the work’s
epic scope in the very gesture of disavowing any epic intention or pretension” (Melas,
148), foregrounding the alterity that the Americas must often embrace in order to acquire
credibility as literary products. Moreover, the appropriation of the epic allows him to
“deconstruct … the ‘glory’ of the classical world,” a historical narrative that elides
Antiquity’s foundation upon slavery, necessitating that “[t]he epic image serve … finally
as a political conscience-raiser, all the more authoritative because of its aesthetic power,”
(Burnett, 76). More than any other form of monument, the poem, Walcott asserts, is the
most evocative and the most defiant within the impossibility of the contemporary
Caribbean context, and is the artistic form that most exemplifies the Caribbean condition:
Poetry … as fresh as the raindrops on a statue’s brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and of self-discovery. Tonally the individual voice is a dialect … in defiance of an imperial concept of language, the language of Ozymandias … Poetry is an island that breaks away from the main … as those raindrops on the statue’s forehead, not the sweat made from the classic exertion of the frowning marble … Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary. (“Antilles,” 69-70)

Thus, the American epic poem is an ideal and substantial site for the construction of the counter-monumental text, due to “the power of words to occupy physical and moral space,” and because of the poem’s ability to provoke, inviting violation and desecration from European critics, embracing the change that takes place on the pristine Western monument by, drop by drop, wearing away at the idealized façade to defy the traditional memorial task of defining “civilization” (Jacobs, 744). The counter-monument or, in this case, the counter-epic, scoffs at its elision from history and reconstructs the Western monument on a foundation of fragments.

James Young utilizes the idea of the counter-monument in the context of post-War Germany. However, the notion has also been used to define structures in the Americas that seek to function in a similar way. For example, Joshua S. Jacobs states in a later essay on the subject of the counter-monumental poetry of Adrienne Rich, that “what [Young] refer[s] to as a ‘countermonument,’ in which the experiences of those Rich calls the ‘unmonumented’ … are brought into an ongoing process of defining national identity that emerges from within the official symbols and narratives of America” (729). In this
case, Rich’s counter-monuments memorialize those for whom such iconic structures as the Statue of Liberty impose a universal, normative, and ultimately exclusive and alienating national identity. Jacobs observes that, “[a]s a process of engaged revision, rather than a total rejection of the monument genre, we can see Rich’s countermonumental strategies as … both the literal form of the monument … and the generic monumental subject are connected to the mundane variety and uncertainties of a given historical landscape,” (733). Like Walcott, Rich appropriates the conventional and alienating monumental subject and re-imagines it in her counter-monumental poetics she refers to as the “unmonumented.”

“Derek” and Counter-monumental Reconstruction

The attribution of the concept of “counter-monumentalism” to the work of Derek Walcott is a valid one, particularly when his views of history are taken into account. Walcott states that “just to write history is wrong. History makes similes of people,” underscoring the distance that a written history creates from the activity of the original subjects it presumes to record (in Bruckner, 397). His premise of history as problematic in forming a self-sustaining national identity stem from his belief that “[c]enturies of servitude have to be shucked … there is no history, only the history of emotion” (“Twilight,” 5). In all countries where a violent history of subjugation is memorialized, subsequent generations, especially now in our age of critical suspicion, often question the implications of textual and plastic monuments that portray a past that is (mis-)conceived and exploitative. Walcott, in one of his earliest critical essays, points to the alienated
history that such textual monuments as Saint-John Perse has written must confront.

Walcott states, “we are all strangers here. The claim which we put forward now as Africans is not our inheritance but a bequest … a bill for the condition of our arrival as slaves … [T]heirs were the names we used … [T]he old names … charged an old language … with awe. To the writers of my generation, then, the word, and the ritual of the word in print, contained this awe, but the rage for revenge is hard to exorcise” (“Twilight,” 10). As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, language, particularly that imposed by an imperial history, contributes to the “awe-inspiring” aspect of the American epic. Yet this awe, Walcott contends, is imbued with rage at the elision of the implicit pain and violence from the history of the imposition of that language. Thus, and without disregarding the significance of the past, Walcott calls for a sort of subterfuge or deconstruction of a history that would otherwise continue to elide the alterity of the Antilles by means of “oppositional strategies to try to strip it of its still hurtful power” (Burnett, 65).

Walcott’s poetic demonumentalization of history serves as a means for re-imagining national identity entirely and, thus, creatively restructuring existing monuments or building new ones that exhibit what Paula Burnett refers to as “a countermyth of history … a counterhistoriography” (64). In a vein that parallels Walcott’s intention to impose a form of creative anamnesis, “[t]he counter-monument objectifies for the artist not only the … desire that all these monuments just hurry up and disappear but also the urge to strike back at such memory, to sever it from the national body like a wounded limb” (Young, 281). In order to reconstruct the monumental epic
into a counter-monument, Walcott reconstructs three primary forms of visual monument in Europe: the Greek column, the equestrian statue, and iconic towers that today are now considered European national icons. Walcott appropriates these three forms of European monuments and reconstructs them by turning them inside out: he removes the veneer of History that has been written upon these monuments, and explores how each of them is built upon a foundation that elides an entire dominated people, a revelation that undermines the monumentality of these objects that seem so unquestionably infused with presumed culture and history. Such re-imagination of historical icons questions how one is to remember, challenging the role and function of memory and how those objects have become entrenched icons of a gangrenous national body. If the epic monument may be considered a form of the pharmakon, as Derrida conceives it, Walcott recognizes and confronts “the pharmakon’s two misdeeds: it dulls the memory … the pharmakon can at best only restore its monuments … it affects memory and hypnotizes it” (113). Thus, an unchallenged European history provokes anguish because it induces a passive acceptance of a history that invokes a sense of incompleteness, and “[t]hose views are incised with a pathos that guides the engraver’s tool and the topographer’s pencil … [and is] tenderly ironic” (Walcott, “Antilles,” 75).

The Antillean history has been imagined by the Western conception of it, one that is written by the dominant – and alien – power, such that it appears that any canonized writer can imbue it with independent life: “[h]istory can alter the eye and … conform a view of itself; it can rename places for the nostalgia in an echo … to elegiac monotony in prose, the tone of judgment in Conrad, in … Trollope” (“Antilles,” 75). For this reason,
Walcott states in a particularly counter-memorial premise, “[t]he idea is not to hallow or invest the place with anything, not even memory …[which is] mapless, Historyless” (“Antilles,” 82-3). The anguish that oscillates between a conflicted memory and the solace of amnesia periodically takes place in the narrative of Omeros as, for example, in the third book of the epic when Achille sinks into a memory of origins, a hallucination that takes place in a canoe:

Achille, among those voluble leaves, his people estranged from their chattering, withdrew in discontent …

but the shadow face / swayed by the ochre ripples seemed homesick for the history ahead, as if its proper place lay in unsettlement. So, to Achille, it appeared …

The sadness sank into him slowly that he was home – that dawn-sadness which ghosts have for their graves,

because the future reversed itself in him. He was his own memory, the shadow under the pier …

with the other shadows, saying, “Make me happier, make me forget the future.” He laughed whenever the men laughed in their language which was his …

They brewed a beer …

but the moment Achille wet his memory with it, tears stung his eyes. (140-1)

Achille’s homesickness, here, is engendered by remorse of the past, “home” being a locus of origin that is fragmented and lost, likened to a confining grave that ceaselessly incites the ghost to seek a deceptive nostos. Yet, he is not left bereft of agency, since in his imagination the future is reversed, and “He was his own memory” – he is both a product of an imagined past and the embodiment of a counter-narrative. Nevertheless, in
dredging up the past, Achille “subvert[s] the project to heal history, by reopening old wounds” (Burnett, 77). This scene allows Walcott to demonstrate the pain of a History that is better left buried.

The concept of History that Walcott rejects is one in which the exploited have no place, and it is this non-place, what José Buscaglia refers to as the “space of disappearance,” that can be mined for the material to re-construct the counter-monument (Buscaglia, 251). Walcott capitalizes his concept of Western “History” in the text in order to distinguish it from a nonexistent ideal of ubiquitous history: “‘History,’ the supposedly authoritative ‘progressive and linear’ version of events Walcott regularly debunks,” (Rotella, 143). This History that the monument presumes to embody is a narrative that the counter-monument seeks to efface, since traditional “[t]heoretical discourse is anxious at the possibility that monumental, memorial and museal architecture may engage in history rather than memory, as if history contains the seeds of ‘H’istory. ‘H’istory is but a short step away from the totalising, authoritarian logic of the master narratives” (Crownshaw, 213).

Achille enacts a rejection of authoritarian History in a scene near the end of Book Three, in an encounter that illustrates the fragmentation of Antillean language, Antillean alienation from origins and shattered histories, the frustration of estrangement from a

48 Paula Burnett appropriates the term “dredge” from Walcott’s poem “The Schooner Flight” (1980) as a more befitting description for delving into a past that should be forgotten: “He knows, it seems, from his own pain and bitterness which such reflection causes, that some aspects of history are best not (to use the image from the poem) ‘dredged’ up to the light of art” (Burnett, 77).
conquered and now extinct people, and his “archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent” (Walcott, “Antilles,” 69). In this scene, Achille, while raking the leaves of a pointedly-named “pomme-Arac” tree, encounters an obstruction that is revealed to be a fragment of History:

Gradually, Achille

found History that morning. Near the hedge, the tines of the rake in the dead leaves grated on some stone, so he crouched to uproot the obstruction. He saw

deep marks in the rock that froze his fingers to bone. The features incised there glared back at his horror from its disturbed grave. A face that a child will draw:

blank circles for eyes, a straight line down for the nose, a slit for a mouth, but the expression angrier as Achille’s palm brushed off centuries of repose.

A thousand archaeologists started screaming as Achille wrenched out the totem, then hurled it far over the oleander hedge. It lay dreaming

on one cheek in the spear-grass, but that act of fear multiplied the lances on his scalp. Stone-faced souls peered with their lizard eyes through the pomme-Arac tree,

then turned from their bonfire. Instantly, like moles or mole crickets in the shadow of History, the artifacts burrowed deeper into their holes. (163-4)

This moment, of unearthing the totem and throwing it blindly into the landscape, is highly significant in, ironically, establishing the counter-monumentality of the epic. The totem is symbolic of the alienated history of the Antilles, one that has an expression of anger etched upon it, perhaps because of the circumstances that caused it to fall and become buried there. Now Achille confronts this face, a totem likely constructed by the
native Aruac (for whom the tree whose leaves he is raking is named). Hence, while
Adamically setting the garden in order with his rake, he happens upon an artifact that
embodies his alienation from History, an alienation he confronts in this scene with horror,
not the fascination and academic interest with which he “should” embrace it. Thus,
archaeologists scream, the only ones who can truly “appreciate” this artifact by properly
excavating it, examining it for what it can contribute to a Western historical narrative, and
placing it properly in a museum outside of the islands, only to be seen by those who
would pay the entrance fee to gawk – those who have the capability to afterward visit the
islands in the capacity of tourist. Achille’s visceral reaction to all that this small sculpture
encompasses is the affective response that the counter-monument seeks to elicit from
viewers. As Joseph Young states, the anger invoked by the counter-monument “forces
viewers to desanctify the memorial, demystify it, and become its equal. The counter-
monument denaturalizes what … is an artificial distance between artist and public
generated by the holy glorification of art” (279). Indeed, this is precisely Walcott’s
purpose. As Rotella states, “it’s a common antimonumental charge in literature and
elsewhere that monuments elevate dead objects over eventful life, and Walcott regularly
states his preference for living things over monumental works of art, routinely associating
monuments and their attendant attitudes with exhaustion, inertia, and death” (139).

Perhaps, the academic reader’s reaction to this scene would also echo that of the
screaming archaeologist, and it is this reaction that Walcott also hopes to question. The
totem is entirely severed from its original function, and is monumentalized in the Western
museum, a process in which Octavio Paz, in an essay entitled “The Art of Mexico:
Material and Meaning” (1993), traces the strange history of one of America’s oldest extant monuments, a sculpture of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue. Paz examines the totem from the time it was discovered in the late eighteenth century and hailed as a “monument of America’s ancient past,” to the moment when it was reburied where it was discovered, disinterred again a century later, again buried, and permanently recovered after the Mexican Revolution decades later, and presently housed in the Museum of Natural History in Mexico City (29-30). Paz describes the “vicissitudes of Coatlicue” as a means of tracing the evolution of European sensibilities and the increasing secularization of popular thought with regard to Mexican history. This study of how Coatlicue’s function has changed since her creation, when her “nature changes though her appearance does not,” is precisely the convenient Western configuration of History that Walcott seeks to challenge by means of the totem that Achille discovers (31). This statue was created for a very specific, religious purpose, and, like Coatlicue (which has since become a political icon of distinction of Mexican identity from Europe, and an object of historical study), the totem retains its awe-inspiring, numenous quality, but the source of this quality is lost, and can only have a secular value in the museum, a site that Walcott considers synonymous with death. Achille’s act of throwing the totem away is, like the entire epic itself, a means of discarding the memory that a European monument (which the totem would now become) embodies and perpetuates. Moreover, to distinguish the totem from its potential archaeological “death,” Walcott infuses the totem with its own personality as, after its unexpected journey into the hedges, it lies dreaming in the grass, having avoided a museal decease.
If such buried, atavistic totems are the extent of the Antilles’ monumental offerings, Walcott sends his protagonist-namesake to the European continent in order to confront “real culture,” one with “real” monuments, original home of the original monumental epics and a history that is forcibly remembered as it is enshrined in marble and bronze. Here we see an echo of Achille’s counter-monumental behavior, enacted upon the objects that would otherwise exemplify monumentalized historical figures.

Derek⁴⁹, the poet-narrator, first travels to the United States in Book Four, the half-way point of the epic. The journey, similar to the many seafaring journeys Achille has embarked upon up to this point, is clearly meant to reverberate with the journey that largely drives Homeric epic. Yet, when Derek will arrive on the shores of the “new empire,” the land will not prove to be the anticipated august domain of epic proportions (Omeros, 169).

Previous to his arrival on the Continent that is “frayed,” “concrete,” and a land for the lost, he first confronts History in the U.S.-American South (Omeros, 170-2). During this prefatory journey, Derek encounters the neo-classical construction of the plantation homes that symbolize the industry on which the country was built, providing the narrator with the opportunity for criticism of the epic in its traditional sense: “the Greek revival / carried past the names of towns with columned porches, / and how Greek it was, the necessary evil / of slavery, in the catalogue of Georgia’s / marble past, the Jeffersonian ideal” (Omeros, 177). This critique of the monument, as the marmoreal aspect of the

⁴⁹ From this point on, the name “Derek” will refer to the poet-narrator, and “Walcott” will refer to the author of Omeros.
monumental Western ideal, embodies the slaves upon whose backs these columns were built. The Classical revival of the plantation home is simultaneously a revivification of the slaves that first built the Greek Doric capitals, and the African vertebral columns supporting Antebellum capitols. The columns, thus, stand concurrently for the translatio imperii of the Greek to the North American empire, and for the spinal columns of the slaves who made this Western historical progression possible. The monuments that these subjects have built does not represent them, but exemplifies an ideal from which they are wholly excluded, and for whom Walcott erects a counter-monument that “focuses on events and people unrecognized by official American histories … and takes as one of its artistic models a new monumental tradition – founded to oppose the enforcement of homogeneity” (Jacobs, 729).

Derek also encounters museums, where “[a]rt has surrendered / to History with its whiff of formaldehyde … past immortal statues inviting me to die” (182-3). Again, art and monuments are not treated with reverence but are associated with death, with the dead who built them and were dominated by them, and the dying imperial ideologies these monuments often represent: “So I stood in the dusk between the Greek columns / of the museum touched by the declining sun” (Omeros, 184). This conclusion of the museum scene ends with the sun that at one time never set on the British Empire, but now as it sets before the columnar symbols of Empire the death of imperial history becomes manifest both to Derek and the reader.
Yet another figure emerges from the bourn from which no traveler returns, namely the poet-narrator’s father, who appears to Derek while he stands on a beach in the town of Marblehead, Massachusetts, in a vision in which he bids his son to continue his journey to the monuments that he is fated to (en)counter:

But before you return, you must enter cities
that open like The World’s Classics, in which I dreamt
I saw my shadow on their flagstones, histories
that carried me over the bridge of self-contempt,
though I never stared in their rivers, great abbeys
soaring in net-webbed stone, when I felt diminished …

I longed for those streets that History had made great,
but the island became my fortress and retreat,
in that circle of friends that I could dominate.
Dominate, Dominus. With His privilege,
I felt like the “I” that looks down on an island. (Omeros, 187)

To completely understand this passage, we must look to the last line of this section of the father’s mandate, particularly the “I” that looks down upon the Antilles, “I” acting not only as a god-like master (dominus), but as a pictographic representation of the Greek columns that exemplify a Western history. The use of the “I” to represent the monument which represents History is a reconception of conventional forms of remembering, an affront to Derrida’s concept of the “process of redoubling” in which “the graphic signifier … reproduces it or imitates [the monument], goes one degree further away, falls outside of life, pulls life out of itself and puts it to sleep in the type of its double” (112), jarring

50 This title presumably refers to the Oxford series that is emblematic of Walcott’s colonial education.
the reader’s relationship with language and reading-viewing. Thus, reading against the mandate to visit the cities (and their “palladiums”) in which “I dreamt I saw my shadow” is a means to invoke the column (into which we read the entire history of slavery) that ultimately undergirds the History of the Antilles, a monument that dominates the islands that fall in its shadow.

Derek must now step out of the shadow of the I-monument, seeking out the European source from which the fount of “real culture” originates, that which the column supposedly represents. Walcott confronts the European monument by sending Derek on a journey “[a]cross the meridian [to] try seeing the other side” (*Omeros*, 191). The journey is prefaced by a revaluation of a significant journey that took place in the opposite direction, when:

> Once the world’s green gourd was split like a calabash by Pope Alexander’s decree. Spices, vanilla sweetened this wharf …

> Now I had come to a place I felt I had known, an antipodal wharf …

> but not as one of those pilgrims whose veneration carried the salt of their eyes up the grooves of a *column* … (193, emphasis added)

The poet-narrator is, of course, referring here to the Papal Bull *Inter Cætera*, issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 that divided the globe from “all islands and mainlands found and to be found … towards the west and south … from the Arctic pole … to the Antarctic pole … one hundred leagues towards the west and south from any of the islands commonly known as the Azores and Cape Verde” (*Inter Cætera*). This decree opened up the New World to European domination, which had arguably begun with the bull *Dum*
diversas that allowed Portugal to freely consign the “Saracens” of western Africa to perpetual slavery in 1452. Lisbon, after the issuing of this papal bull, became Portugal’s primary port for the slave trade, and it is to this port that Derek arrives to begin his tour of European monuments.

With the rise of global imperial power, the perception of heroes of the empire emerged in the form of monuments dedicated to them. One of the most common ways to immediately invoke empire in a viewer’s imagination in the West is often by means of the image of the equestrian. This response is due to the fact that, as Peter Hammond Schwartz states, “[o]n the most fundamental social level, transcendence has required both the presence and the subordination of another, the Other … the sovereignty identified with transcendence can only be sustained through the subjection, the reduction to immanence, of fellow creatures … in early modern Europe those who invoked equestrian images were concerned either to uphold or to subvert the traditional politics of order” (Schwartz, 654). This association of equestrian imperial figures with dominance is one that Walcott understood very well, and he appropriates this image with the arrival of the poet-narrator in Europe, who first confronts the Continental monument as he arrives at the port of Lisbon:

A bronze horseman halts at a wharf, his green-bronze cloak flecked with white droppings, his wedged visor shading the sockets’ hyphenating horizons,

his stare fixed like a helm. We had no such erections above our colonial wharves, our erogenous zones were not drawn to power, our squares shrank the directions

of the Empire’s plazas. Above us, no stallions paw
the sky’s pavement to strike stars from the stones, no sword is pointed to recapture the port of Genoa …

In this highly sexualized description of the monument, we understand the implicit power that lies within the portrayal of the bronze horseman, yet it is an image that is aged with a green-bronze patina and “shit upon” by the very birds that would, otherwise, reinforce the affect of transcendence and flight. Schwartz provides a brief history of the domineering equestrian in literature in a lengthy footnote in his essay, associating the horseman with avian flight in Shakespeare’s “Dauphin in Henry V, who soars like a hawk when he ‘bestrides’ his steed, [which] confirmed the association of mounting and riding a horse with winged flight and with feelings of transcendence” (654). For the monument to appear covered in “white droppings” undermines its implicit imperial narrative, textually rebuilding the monument as an inverted version of the bronze original. Further, the monument embodies the visceral nature of the human figure of the equestrian, an element that subverts the original deified intentions for the statue.

However, as Walcott’s narrative demonstrates, this viscerality is inescapable since “[b]y imagining ourselves … in equestrian terms, we engage … in a process of desublimation that reduces us to bodily realities from which, ultimately, there may be no escape” (Schwartz, 655). The noble intentions of the monument are reduced to the “sum of its parts,” the summa being an unmistakably phallic association that would suggest the infusion of life and immortality, since “[t]he association of royal or aristocratic power with horses enabled the monarch or the lord to appear more ‘erect,’ more potent, more the rational and the spiritual master not merely of his own flesh, nor simply of its various
analogs in political and natural worlds, but of death itself” (Schwartz, 657). However, it is this phallic nature that Walcott appropriates to illustrate an allegorical contest of masculinity that the Antilles cannot win – not due to a sense of inferiority but, rather, because the islands refuse to participate in the European power play; Caribbean public sites, its “squares,” have no need to demonstrate “mastery of death by virtue of one’s ability to inflict death upon others [which is] the measure of virility” (Schwartz, 657). This disregard, in turn, causes Empire to “shrink,” since in the Antilles’ European monuments are insignificant despite their attempts to reify a presumably timeless colonial power by means of the equestrian monument.

The extant monument of the horseman has also emphasized sundry characteristics of presumed “lack” in those nations where these monuments do not exist or peoples excluded from the historical narrative that the statue embodies. As Schwartz states, “equestrian images in Europe typically identified personal efficacy with mastery over those who lacked self-discipline and who were given over completely to the chaotic passions of the flesh … this symbolism also addressed the tension within politics between genuine self-mastery, as the legitimating basis of authority, and illegitimate fantasies of omnipotence and grandiosity – involving the wish of rulers literally to master death” (658). If the traditional conception of the image of the horseman would suggest to its viewers a form of idealized national identity, one that embodies civilization versus passion and omnipotence versus mortality, Walcott’s counter-monumental portrayal of the statue underscores his defiance of this ideal, and his reformation of the memory and history the European monument is purposed to preserve:
We think of the past

as better forgotten than fixed with stony regret.
Here, a castle in the olives rises over the tiered roofs
of crusted tile but, like the stone Don in the opera,

is the ghost of itself. Over the flagstones, hooves
clop down from the courtyard, stuttering pennons appear
from the mouths of arches, and the past dryly grieves …

an admiral
with a grey horned moustache and foam collar proffers a gift
of plumed Indians and slaves. The wharves of Portugal

were empty as those of the islands. The slate pigeons lift
from the roof of a Levantine warehouse, the castle in the trees
is its headstone. Yet, once, Alexander’s meridian

gave half a gourd to Lisbon, the seeds of its races,
and half to Imperial Spain. (192-3)

The Antilles are left without the great ruins that have come to signify a monumental
History; the islands of the Caribbean do not have grandiose pillars, and a past driven by
great mustachioed horsemen who bring slaves from the margins now represents the
collapse and death of Empire. Europe’s presumably timeless constructions are subject to
time’s deterioration, such that the poet-narrator “could see the dreck under the scrolled
skirts of statues, the grit … he saw under everything an underlying grime / that itched in
the balls of rearing bronze stallions” (Omeros, 195). These monumental ruins that

supposedly crystallize the History are discovered, while looking up from beneath and in
their shadow, to be exposed to the elements and to the poetic persona’s discerning gaze as
monuments to imperial dissipation.
Walcott’s derision and reconstruction of the Hellenic column and the bronze horseman into counter-monumental icons precedes the poet’s process of counter-monumentally reconstructing another icon that embodies the European-imperial past – the tower. The critique of the image of the tower allows the narrator to plunge ever deeper into his critique of what objects qualify as monumental, and which group of people can claim to possess a “veritable” culture, especially vis-à-vis the West Indies, since:

For those to whom history is the presence
of ruins, there is a green nothing. No bell tower utters its flotilla of swallows … no cobbles crawl towards the sea. (45)

Again, the poet-narrator, while in Europe, confronts the icons of culture that do not exist in St. Lucia, but are portrayed as indicators of culture and civilization. Walcott’s choice of the tower – including bell towers, spires, and fortifications – as source for reinforcing the counter-monumentalism of his epic is significant, since the tower, like the Greek column and the equestrian, is laden with ideological associations in the West. Some of the most common associations with the tower are likely to be self-evident, since “[t]he Tower is an archetypal image; it has traditionally embodied man’s aspirations, his glory, and his ultimate transience. For example, Milton uses the Tower on several levels in [his] poem: the heavenly towers are unfalls originals, the earthly and hellish are derivative perversions” (Low, 171). The tower signifies an upward pursuit of progress (within which imperial is embodied) but, as the Tower of Babel has come to exemplify, the tower is also iconic for irreverent pride, and the “culmination of evil among men” (Low, 172). Thus, the absence of a tower to “speak bird” as noted in the scene above, and issue forth
stony ruins to later signify cultivation, leaves the island bereft not of the refinement that such an edifice would indicate but, instead, its swaths of empty green bespeak an absence of evil and imperious barbarity.

The poet-narrator points out several iconic landmarks in London, but towers seem subject, like the Greek pillar and equestrian statue, to his most pointed critique. Throughout the epic, Walcott equates imprisonment and chains with slavery, which he alludes to when describing the manner in which:

the swaying bells of ‘cities all the floure’

petalling the spear-railed park where a couple suns near the angled shade of All-Hallows by the Tower, as the tinkling Thames drags by in its ankle-irons,

while the ginkgo’s leaves flexed their fingers overhead. He mutters its fluent alphabet, the peaked A of a spire …

he saw the tugs chirring up a devalued empire

But the shadows keep multiplying from the Outer Provinces, their dialects light as the ginkgo’s leaf …

as a gliding fog hides the empires: London, Rome, Greece. (195-6)

Here the All-Hallows is surrounded by particular elements of *translatio imperii* that are elided by History and the monument, such as the sound of chains that signifies the ultimate moment of the abolition of slavery, when “the wider slave economy permeated almost every aspect of London’s commercial life,” one example being the well-known

51 This is taken from William Dunbar’s sixteenth-century poem, “To the City of London”: “London, thou art the floure of Cities all,” “floure” rhyming with “tour” (“tower”) in a subsequent line of the poem.
tale of James Somerset. Walcott also mentions the immigrants and their language that is signified by the gingko tree, an aspect of London life that monumental towers ignore.

Walcott returns to the subject of European history and its relevance to the Antilles, underscoring the exploited subjects that these monuments have “forgotten.” For example, in Book Five, Chapter XXXVIII, the poet-narrator as Omeros himself moves about London and stumbles about as if homeless, and is turned away by “a raging sparrow of a church-warden” (194) at one of London’s famous landmarks, the St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church. Then subsequent to this episode, the character takes on the perspective of a bargeman looking upon the filthy underbelly of the “devalued empire” built by slaves, whose “shadows keep multiplying from the Outer / Provinces … and the statues raising objections” (195-6). These monuments, which have become profitable icons for promoting the British culture abroad in modern times, provide a means for Walcott to re-appropriate them, and reinscribe them with a history that they elide. This is not a new idea, since often, in many instances, “British commemorative traditions … seem both the ultimate source of recent antimemorializing animus and the indirect inspiration for recent countermonuments” (Trumpener, 1096). Again, Walcott reads into these monuments a history that has elided his island, and that he thus hopes to elide in return. The idea of slavery as an aspect of London’s history is further elucidated when Walcott asks:

52 Somerset was abducted as a slave to the Americas, sold, and ultimately “in late November 1771, Somerset was bound in chains on a ship on the Thames,” where he managed to free himself (Van Cleve, 601).
Who decrees a great epoch? The meridian of Greenwich …
in the widening rings of Big Ben’s iron flower,
in the barges chained like our islands to the Thames …

Where, in which stones of the Abbey, are incised our names?
After every Michaelmas, its piercing soprano steeple
defines our delight. Within whose palatable vault
will echo the Saint’s litany of our island people?
St. Paul’s salt shaker, when we are worth their salt.

Stand by the tilted crosses of well-quiet Glen-da-Lough …

Who screams out our price? The crows of the Corn Exchange …

Who will teach us a history of which we too are capable?
The red double-decker’s view of the Bloody Tower …

Where is the light of the world? In the national Gallery.
In Palladian Wren. In the City that can buy and sell us
the packets of tea stirred with our crystals of sweat. (Omeros, 196-7)

In this passage, Walcott more directly associates the monument with the slave history that
is elided in a common – and in the case of these landmarks, lucrative – understanding of
European culture. These monuments are portrayed amidst a market context, where the
slave is exploited alongside the cultural icon, since “Historic resources, such as
monuments … are transformed through the commodification process of interpretation
and packaging the past ‘into a product intended for the satisfaction of contemporary
consumption’” (Nelson, 137). By re-constructing these iconic monuments, Walcott draws
attention to the fact that “[a]s a social mirror, [the counter-monument] becomes doubly
troubling in that it reminds the community of what happened then and, even worse, how
they now respond to the memory of this past” (Young, 283). Walcott builds a counter-
monument by building upon the façades of what today many associate with European culture, engendering a tourist trade that capitalizes both on the icons and the slave labor that was bought and sold in its shadow.

Near the end of the poem Maud, the wife of the character Major Plunkett, has succumbed to “[t]he empire of cancer” (Omeros, 260). The Plunketts, as a European couple who seem to exploit the land and the poor islanders around them, maintain an unusual relationship with the island and its people that involves an obsessive writing of the island’s history and a simultaneous exertion of tacit authority upon it. Like the character Helen who, upon the death of her husband Hector53, became “like a stone … her lips incised … more stern, more ennobled,” Major Plunkett also ossifies into a sort of monument to his former life (Omeros, 233). Associating Maud with English “lanes ending in spires,” after the moment of her death he lays beside her, “as if they were statues on a stone tomb” (261). Death, in the story, seems to act as the culmination of monumental ideals, both indicating the end of the life of the figure it represents, and its own perpetuation into the future. However the poet constructs his monument, the poet-narrator observers in the end, he must remember that all monuments, like the lives of the figures they represent, will dissipate over time:

There, in her head of ebony,
there was no real need for the historian’s
remorse, nor for literature’s. Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow …

________________________

53 This Helen is, of course, the Helen of Omeros. The Helen of Troy is not married to Hector, whose wife in the original Homer narrative is Andromache.
What I had read and rewritten till literature
was guilty as History …

When would it stop,
the echo in the throat, insisting, “Omeros”;  
when would I enter that light beyond metaphor? (271)

Helen, as the island personified, is the subject of contested monumentalization
throughout the epic by Major Plunkett as Historian and Derek as Poet. By the end of the
poem, it is clear that Helen will not live forever despite the efforts to “fix” her, and that
she would (and does) resist monumentalization in any case, as a woman who “hated
shoes, whose soles were as cracked as stone” (Omeros, 320). Helen - St. Lucia
insistently breaks convention, and for this reason Walcott ends the epic with an
encomium of her, because she embodies the fallacious endeavor to even form her – it into
a counter-monument:

You can see Helen at the Halcyon. She is dressed
in the national costume …

like an ebony carving. But if she should swerve
that silhouette hammered out of the sea’s metal
like a profile on a shield, its sinuous neck …

you might recall that battle
for which they named an island or the heaving wreck …

But the name Helen had gripped my wrist in its vise
to plunge it into the foaming page. (322-3)

Thus, the poet-narrator admits at the end of the epic that his efforts to speak for and to
counter a History on behalf of the Antilles, or Helen, are ineffectual since, as is often the
case with epics, she realizes that the epic is not so much written for her or the collective
voice she represents, but for the glory of the epic poet himself.
Conclusion

The role of art, and its relevance to quotidian Antillean life, is a significant and problematic aspect of such artifacts as the counter-monument, and is a topic that Walcott addresses through moments of reflection in which the poet-narrator engages when he returns from his trip to the West. Inasmuch as he implicitly critiques the function of the epic and visual, stone monuments as means to perpetuate European ideological and cultural domination throughout the former colonies and slave populations, he also recognizes his own problematic role in this structure. In reifying a relationship between his art and the artifacts that emerge from the islands, the poet-narrator first draws a parallel between the writing of poetry and manual craftsmanship: “My craft required the same / crouching care, the same crabbed, natural devotion / of the hand that … planed an elegant canoe; its time was gone … and plasterers smoothed the blank page of white concrete” (*Omeros*, 227). The possible superficiality of the relationship between the shaping of the canoe and the crafting of poetry is not lost on Derek (or Walcott), and the obsolescence of the canoe before the encroaching tourist trade reflects a perceived waning utility of the poetic craft. One of the problematic distinctions between the carving of the canoe and the poem is that the subject of the poet-narrator’s workmanship depends upon a distinction between himself and those he portrays:

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 …

Didn’t I prefer a road
  from which tracks climbed into the thickening syntax
of colonial travellers, the measured prose I read
as a schoolboy? …

Why hallow that pretence
of preserving what they left, the hypocrisy
of loving them from hotels, a biscuit-tin fence …

Art is History’s nostalgia, it prefers a thatched
roof to a concrete factory, and the huge church
above a bleached village …

Hadn’t I made their poverty my paradise? (Omeros, 227-8)

In this passage, the poet-narrator (alongside Walcott) takes into account his inescapable
elitism and privilege – he travels in cabs driven by those he portrays, and resides in hotels
serviced by those whose livelihoods are threatened by the industry that he criticizes yet
perpetuates. He longs to gaze upon and eulogize the thatched roof, but requires the
comforts of an allopoietic system, or one that produces a product from which its
producers are alienated, exploits the populace yet produces “happiness … just like
everywhere else, / Greece or Hawaii” (Omeros, 229).

Nevertheless, this self-critique is a means not to relegate the entire epic to a
meaningless endeavor. Rather, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, in order for
the counter-monument to be effectual it must not disregard the role of the poet within the
symbolic order of subject-empire. Terry Eagleton, in his text The Ideology of the
Aesthetic (2005), states that in an environment in which the work of art has become a
commodity, “the question of an ‘elitist’ or a ‘popular’ art, one aesthetically aloof from
everyday life as against one which embraces the motifs of common experience, cannot be
posed in a purely formal, abstract way, in disregard for … common experience” (374).
There is a distinction, he affirms, between that “which responds to local community needs, in art … from one which takes its cue from the market place” (374). By taking this distinction into account, the “authentically” popular endeavor versus acceptance in the marketplace, Walcott avoids what he considers Naipaul’s affectation in order to solidify the foundation for this counter-art. This distinction is particularly relevant with regard to the numerous characteristics that Walcott and Naipaul share – both Nobel laureates, and both standing toe-to-toe on the world stage of global capital, cultural and otherwise. Therefore, the elitist aspect of the poet-narrator does not necessarily reflect upon the non-diegetic author, but diffuses accusations of interested motivations by taking his socioeconomic condition, with regard to those he presumes to speak for, into account. Thus, the author infuses his work with a presumed authenticity, one that provides him with the plinth upon which he may construct a monument that genuinely represents his public, an object that elides the values of the market or of the Eurocentric.

He further addresses an aspect of the artifact that other counter-monuments have ubiquitously confronted since their inception, whether constructed through textual literary artifacts in the Americas or as public national monuments in post-War Germany. Eagleton concisely traces the problem by describing the changing role of art since it has, over time, become a product of the market rather than a critical aspect of social knowledge instrumental to the “ethico-political question” (366). He states that, ideally, we view rebellious artifacts, “art as critique of alienation … The aesthetic becomes the guerilla tactics of secret subversion … Art will [ideally] pulverize traditional form and meaning” (Eagleton, 369). However, this sort of counter-art, “an art which isn’t art,” has
been criticized (as in the case of the counter-monument) as “fall[ing] victim to the very
social logic they oppose … We stumble upon the contradiction of all utopianism, that its
very images of harmony threaten to hijack the radical impulses they hope to promote”
(371). Therefore, objectives in which the counter-monument engage, woefully
leave … us with anti-art, an art which is not appropriable by the ruling
order … The problem with this … is that what cannot be appropriated and
institutionalized because it refused to distance itself from social practice in
the first place may by the same token abolish all critical point of purchase
upon social life. (Eagleton, 371)

Thus, there exists between the counter-monument, the populace it hopes to speak for and
the history it hopes to re-imagine for a people, a chasm that is deepened by fallacious
revolutionary intention before an impracticability within the “culture of late capital,” a re-
writing of history and its alienation from quotidian life. The poet-narrator states, in rather
deterministic manner, that within the island

unvarying vegetation flashes
of a primal insight …

that shot from the verge, that their dried calabashes
of fake African masks for a fake Achilles
rattled with the seeds that came from other men’s minds.

So let them think that. Who needed art in this place
where even the old women strode with stiff-backed spines …

the calypso part, the Caribbean lilt
still in the shells of their ears. (Omeros, 228-9, emphasis added)

Indeed, if “art” cannot serve a purpose and “turn a profit,” for example, as the fake
African mask in the tourist market, the poet-narrator asks: who in the islands needs it?

Like the African mask, a Western-inspired narrative of history may be worn upon the face
of a people whose true history is an alien one, and its safe predictability as a Western fantasy can provide a livelihood for such characters as Hector (who dies from being entirely consumed by the tourist trade), and transform “the gold sea / flat as a credit card” (*Omeros*, 229). Unlike the African mask, the counter-monument seeks to write a new history, and imbue national identity with a new memory, while the mask simply commodifies the history that has been imagined by a Western imagination. Yet, like the mask, and like all revolutionary compositions, its radicalness is absorbed if it is not in danger of being disregarded by its audience, which is significant since, “[t]heir reliance on social interaction, their stated objective to bridge the distance between spectator and object, makes their public reception vital to their successful social implementation” (Lupu, 132).

Moreover, despite the counter-monumental aspects of *Omeros*, the poem embodies a monumentalism that Walcott had hoped to avoid. Despite the counter-monument’s objective of re-construction and re-imagination of the monument, “[t]here are problems with this conception of a countermonument in that it constructs a binary opposition between the monument and the countermonument” (Crownshaw, 214). This Manichean distinction oversimplifies critical examination of the function of the monument in writing a national history and identity, and heroicizing counter-monumentalism as wholly distinct alternative. The counter-monument is, despite its vociferous alterity, nonetheless a monument, it embodies a narrative (although a narrative otherwise), and as mentioned above, it seeks to impose a memory (or amnesia) on a people that seem to remain largely silent (or silenced). The counter-monument’s
overarching failing, as many have argued, is “that countermonuments failed to escape the symbology they resented in traditional monumental forms and thereby failed to create a sphere of social interaction outside the didacticism of traditional monuments” (Lupu, 132). The epic, as a monumental site of presumed collective memory and history, is challenged by the counter-monumental aspects of Walcott’s text. Nevertheless, Walcott’s poem is an epic, one that is inaccessible to the Antilleans portrayed in the narrative, and imposes an imagined history (although an “effaced” one) upon them.

Walcott does not offer a solution to the problem of monumental art, or a means to challenge conventional History by means of his counter-monument. Nevertheless, Walcott’s epic monumentality does not lessen the counter-monument’s critical role as a means to challenge traditional historical narratives and imagined national/cultural identity, since the “countermonument does not attempt to express direction or to propose an alternative spatial regime … if it is to be critical, [it] has to acknowledge its limitations and its complicity in the production of ideology” (Buscaglia, 258). Of course, Walcott’s epic emerges from a particular context, since “[t]he counter-monument accomplishes what all monuments must: it reflects back to the people and thus codifies their own memorial projections and preoccupations” (Young, 283). Yet, Walcott’s epic emerges from a particular period of questioning and examination that has given rise to such disciplines as New Historicism and Post-colonial studies. Without the jarring dissension of the counter-monument as a means to force a re-consideration of the memory embodied in the monument, marginalized voices would remain marginal since, as Derrida states, “[t]o seek ‘among yourselves’ by mutual questioning and self-examination, to seek to
know oneself through the detour of the language of the other, such is the undertaking presented by Socrates, who recalls … to Alcibiades as the antidote (*alexipharmakon*), the counterpotion” (124). This “counterpotion” is formed from a reshaping of European monuments that have disregarded the historical role of the colonized Americas and the diasporas displaced there in the formation of empire. As I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, *Omeros* re-forms monuments of an imagined Western history, placing the once-derivative colony on a centripetal course that rethinks and reshapes memory in the Americas. Despite appropriating the monumental epic as a foundation for a counter-monument that may reenact an exclusion of a people from a re-imagined history, Walcott nonetheless constructs a new monumental tradition for the Americas that challenges an imposed history and identity that continues to tyrannize the Caribbean today.
Chapter 3

Grand Designs: *Piedra de Sol* and Monumental Journey to Omphalos

One of the most significant characteristics of the monument lies not in the monument’s material structure, but in its context and situadedness. This extrinsic aspect of the monument, namely the geography and landscape that surrounds it, is a characteristic that, until recently, has often been elided in studies of the memorial’s function. Placement of the monument within a certain geographic site is very much a conscious decision, one that is intended both to contribute to the structure’s visibility, accessibility, or both, and serves to accentuate the monument’s ideological message. As Colin Richards, specialist in Neolithic archeology of the British Isles, states, for those persons who originally built the monument “each stone erected and every portion of ditch carved out of the natural rock would have marked individual biographies and an altered understanding of the landscape... which was intended to last for ever ... By their toil a specific place in the world was given a permanency and sharper physical definition through monumental constructions” (191, 193). Thus, the landscape, the builders, artisan, and ideologue are all implicated in the formation of the monument.

The primal intention exhibited by the monument’s builders is not isolated to the henges of Orkney, of course, but is a motivation that underscores all such substantial undertakings. In this chapter, I will explore the relationship that monuments are intended to form, and *have* formed, within the landscape in which they are placed, specifically in
the American hemisphere. Further, I will explore the process of construction, a procedure fraught with anxiety vis-à-vis the landscape, history, and, in urban surroundings, the city that gives rise to monumental constructions. Finally, I will explore how the landscape, an integral aspect of the monument, often must be traversed, domesticated, and civilized, and past monuments confronted, in order for a national identity associated with that landscape and its monuments to be (re-)formed.

Aspects of these groundbreaking moments in the history of the monument can be traced in American poetry such as Octavio Paz’s poem *Piedra de sol* or “Sunstone” (1957). In many studies of the poem, the subject of love that the poet discovers during his journey becomes the focus of scholarly attention. Since this topic has been already discussed quite extensively, I will focus on the narrator’s interactions with nature versus civilization and, most significant to my reading, his confrontation with the monument in stanza forty-five, a section of the poem that is often elided, but that serves as a confrontation at the site of convergence of nature and civilization, which is also a complex intersection of politics and ideologies. Within the narrative of this poem, the poet narrator embarks upon a journey to discover and confront “un instante,” a site that is both chronological and geological, that signifies the site of an interaction between human being and the landscape. However, as the poem progresses, there emerge two *instantes*, translated as “unities” or “moments,” that the poet must contend with: the singular moment that Paz constructs that is formed upon the sublime body of the landscape as a vital portal to the past; and the singularity that is artificially constructed by modern
civilization, one that writes a continually crumbling narrative of national identity upon the collective historical memory of Mexico, an evolution that ultimately advances to a present-day “death.” If we are to understand the concept of “origins” in the Heideggerian sense, as “that from which and by which something is what it is and as it is,” then one may say that the poet calls for a return to origins, one lost when the Mexica culture was decimated by Spanish invaders, and forms a spatio-temporal position symbolized by the Sun Stone (143). In seeking an originary moment by building the poem, the poet constructs a national identity, since “[n]ations are thought to begin or to be bounded in time – they are said to have definite historical origins or at least historical roots that can be traced back to an indefinite past” (Handler, 29). The implication of this “indefinite past” contributes to the poem’s monumentality, since the poet-narrator is perpetually searching for the idealized moment that only he can reach.

In this act of delineating origins within divine Nature that stems from a lost relationship formed by the indigenous peoples of the Cuenca, Paz inscribes himself as a sculptor whose poetic monument will inevitably crumble away yet returns to an instante through which it is renewed. By analyzing these contending “instantes” within the process of the construction of national monuments as diegetic sites of the formation of memory, I shall examine how Paz places himself within the teleology of nation-building through the body of the monument, achieving, in the process a monumental instantiation that is the poem Piedra de sol.
American Sublime

First published in 1957 as an independent work, *Piedra de sol* is a poem of 584 lines (or a Venusian cycle) plus six lines at the poem’s end that repeat the poem’s first six lines. The poem progresses by means of a journey, what Susan Nalbantian describes as a process in which “the poet takes himself on a journey through dark, labyrinthine passageways … tracking shadows of the past” (130-1). Throughout this voyage, the poet-narrator gathers *instantes*, stone by stone, that all together will instantiate the history he hopes to tell. These instantes are culled from the body of the landscape: “roca solar, cuerpo color de nube, / la hora centellea y tiene cuerpo, / el mundo ya es visible por tu cuerpo,” (12; “the solar rock, cloud-colored body, / the hour sparkles and has a body, / the world is visible through your body” Weinberger, 13). The instante is perpetually re-encountered yet is infinite, eternal, and near the end of the poem becomes a portal through which he may pass to encounter the final and completed monument built from these moments in which “no hay redención, no vuelve atrás el tiempo / los muertos están fijos en su muerte / y no pueden morirse de otra muerte … su muerte ya es la estatua de su vida” (45; “there is no redemption, time can never / turn back, the dead are forever / fixed in death and cannot die … their death is now a statue of their life” Weinberger, 46). The poet-narrator is imbricated with the stone of the monument by the poem’s *finale*, and the journey ends by never ending, concluding yet “llega siempre” (52; “forever arriving” 53).
The concept of the sublime has played a significant role in intellectual thought in the Americas. It informed the writings of persons such as Jorge Santayana, or George, as he was known in the United States, within whose text *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) Santayana states that “the sublime would not appear as an aesthetic quality in things, but remain merely an emotional state in the subject … this subdued and objectified terror is what is commonly regarded as the essence of the sublime” (39). Historically, the sublime in literature is commonly understood in this way, influenced by the Enlightenment writings of Immanuel Kant. This apprehension of the sublime may be primarily distinguished from Longinus’s original use of the term by locating the sublime within human perception rather than outside of it. Longinus, in his treatise *On the Sublime*, states that “nature is the original and vital underlying principle in all cases,” thus endowing nature with the power to compel sublime transports upon the person, a process that may be imitated by means of the metaphor, the “effect of elevated language” (Longinus). Kant, however, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), states that affect “denotes nothing in the object, but is a feeling which the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected by the representation” (203). Thus, the sublime as now understood since Kant’s elaboration upon the concept, allows for a more precise understanding of European colonists vis-à-vis a vast and alien landscape, and how newly independent nations formed within a previously indomitable space.

Such writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman are arguably among the first writers to view the American landscape as sublime, “in its chaos, or in its wildest and
most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime” (Kant, 70). Rob Wilson argues in his text, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (1991), that “rhetoric of sublimity and norms of poetic excess … differentiated the diction of an American great-tradition centered in Emersonian theory and Whitmanic practice” (Wilson 7). One decade before Whitman published his *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento published *Facundo o Civilización y Barbarie en las pampas argentinas*, a text that formed a distinction between civilized and order urban regions and the irascible wilds of the vast landscapes surrounding the cities. Doris Sommer, in her *Foundational Fictions* (1993) re-iterates this idea when she describes Sarmiento’s resentment toward “the awe-inspiring land, so immense and empty that it was uncontrollable. The indistinct horizon on an endless pampa may inspire the American sublime and may be a source of national pride” (Sommer 60-1). The invocation of an American sublime emerged at particular contemporary historical moments with regard to the US and Latin America and, as Sommer suggests, each implementation of the concept was driven by political motivations.

Definitions of the sublime, from Longinus to Kant and today, have maintained a relationship with both the daunting aspects of nature and with the metaphoric quality of poetry. It is within the realm of poetry that the site of the imagined confrontation between human beings and sublime nature is located or, in other words, where the sublime “takes a place within the poetry as it refers to the irrational outside the text”
(Arensburg 16). The regard upon the American landscape is one that is inflected by Manichean “good vs. evil,” what Richard Kearney refers to as a teratology of the sublime, that “focuses on the ‘monstrous’ character of evil, variously associating it with ‘horror’... ‘abjection’, ‘privation’ or ‘nothingness’” (Kearney, 487). This is notable in such movements as described in the text *Facundo* (1845), written just twenty-nine years after Argentine independence. Like the re-formation of the land by means of such sculptural sites as the “Espacio escultórico” in Mexico, poets seek to reform the landscape through literature, by constructing textual monuments that establish a national identity upon the sublime landscape.

**Landscape, Poetry, and the Sublime**

The aesthetic relationship that human beings develop with the land that they inhabit has garnered the attention of many fields of study. Such disciplines as cultural and human geography, for example, analyze the relationship that people have historically formed respecting the land, and study the artifacts that emerge from a culture, under the assumption that “people need to have a strong sense of who they are, which they can have only when they are rooted in the customs and habits of a particular place” (Tuan, 878). Those who specialize in studying human beings’ cultural relationship with the land recognize the fact that humans view a new landscape in a particular way, reform it according to the culture’s own mores and sensibilities, and are, in turn, determined to some degree by the landscape and the architectural and memorial formations built upon it. Raymond Williams, for example, notes that there is a “connection between the land
from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society have been deeply known” (Williams, 1). This connection has driven scholars to view the landscape as more than just a terrestrial space for the establishment of a human population.

The idea of a “legible” geography, one that can be read for the narratives that human beings write upon it, proves useful when examining the relationship of human artifacts with the land from which they emerge. In the edited volume *The Iconography of Landscape* (1988), Denis Cosgrove states that the concept of “landscape” is defined by “a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings … [T]he meanings of verbal, visual, and built landscapes have a complex interwoven history” (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1). In this sense, landscape becomes a visual element that is implicated in the artifact, not simply functioning as a foil or surface upon which the artifact resides but, rather, as an element of the artifact itself, and allows for a study of “the social power of landscape imagery” (Cosgrove and Daniels, 7). Of course, there are problems with this method, and we must be aware of the meanings that we inevitably read into a landscape. Nevertheless, depictions of landscape in artifacts, and the landscape itself, reveal a “politics of landscape,” namely “the social implications [and] ‘ideological’ history of ‘landscape’” that play a distinct role in examining monuments of the Americas (Cosgrove and Daniels, 7).

In the case of the Americas, this “cultural geography” takes on a distinct connotation. Europeans were entering a land that was vast and uncultivated, in many
senses of the word. The landscapes of this “new” continent seemed boundless, and challenged Western understandings of the world at that time. How, then, did Europeans eventually come to grips with the vastness of the Americas? This process is in itself an enormous topic, much-studied, and beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, these colonies eventually became politically and culturally self-sustaining, and formed their national identities by bringing into subjection the landscape around them, a process that can be traced in literary and plastic productions. In a fascinating study of promotional literature from the 1820s to 1900, G. Malcolm Lewis discovered “descriptions of what environments and landscapes were supposed to be, would be found to be or ought eventually to be like” (Lewis, 179). The “new” landscape was rhetorically cultivated in these pamphlets that were distributed in Europe, though immigrant settlers, as Lewis later states, upon arriving were intimidated by the land that was surprisingly incorrigible and immense. However, in fictional writing, the portrayal of the landscape within American literature allowed the poet to exert control over the landscape through art. Poetry of American landscape in the twentieth century often suggests that, through the portrayal of monuments, attempts to dominate the sublime by means of a presumed permanent constructions through the use of materials such as stone and metal are fallacious, as are the ideologies that are written and read into them. We observe this critique in Octavio Paz’s poem *Piedra de sol*, a poem in which the narrator traverses a sublime landscape and forms a monument upon and from the “body” of the land, one that presumes to exist
forever. This object of cultivation allows the poet to depict the “full circle” of the civilizing process.

In his essay “Descripción de ‘Piedra de sol’,” José Emilio Pacheco states that “Mujer y Mundo se hacen un solo cuerpo que Yo recorre amorosamente hasta despeñarse, recoger sus fragmentos y proseguir sin cuerpo y a tientas por otros corredores que esta vez son los de la memoria” (Pacheco, 137; “Woman and World make up a unified body that I lovingly traverse unto going over the edge, then recovering its fragments and proceeding bodiless and groping about for other corridors that, this time, are those of memory”). It is this journey that I will focus on in this chapter, the crossing of a body of land upon which human endeavors are built, aspire to permanence, and collapse. A fascinating example of this, which in many ways resonates with Paz’s poem, is found in the southwestern area of Mexico City, originally called the ”Cuatzontle,” or “Navel,” by the Nahuatl Cuicuilco people who once lived there. The site is now named the “Espacio escultórico,” located at a vent of the volcano Xitle, and is apparently the site of significant political changes among the entire population who live in the area. At some point around 100 BC, “the volcano Xitle erupted, and its flow of lava began to cover Cuicuilco … at the same time, Teotihuacán experienced prodigious growth; its population came to comprise 90% of … the basin” (Berlo, 7). Hundreds of years later, in 1979, a group of artists made a decision to “erect several sculptural works there. After serious reflection, the artists concerned decided to leave the land intact, barely accenting it with a circle 120 metres in diameter formed of natural elements” (Bethell, 409). The site was
not “barely” accented, however, although the earth forming the vent remains untouched by human constructions. The artists encircled the volcanic vent with “a tall basalt rubble wall that is topped by 64 archaic-looking triangular concrete modules … four meters high and ten meters on each side” (Beardsley, 179). The apparent subject of the now-enclosed space is “the very creation of the earth – the processes of land formation and the sublime power of volcanoes … in the Valley of Mexico. Its allusions are to the great sweep of planetary history and to the monumental architecture of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica” (Beardsley, 181). This installation opens up the possibility for the landscape to be read in a way that critically regards cyclical human constructions in the Americas, in a manner that is similar to ways in which Paz portrays the landscape, as “Madre, la Magna Mater, que de algún modo es un tiempo la Tierra, la naturaleza y la materia” (Pacheco, 139).

In enclosing this space, previously already recognized as a site of historical significance, the “authors” of the Espacio escultórico subsequently re-ordered the landscape, dominating this site of wild origins (both in its geology and its early Nahuatl history) by means of creating a solid boundary around it, bounding it by shapes that mirror pyramid ruins. This type of structure is not wholly unique for the containment of dangerous earthly entities, such as bodies of water, for instance. One example of a sculpture that embodies and portrays a narrative of what it contains is a sculpture-wall in

54 See Escobedo, Helen, in Works Cited for URL address for this image.
Kandy, Sri Lanka, where “allegories which were meant to teach … the circularity and unity of existence were encoded in the landscape in a simple and yet compelling fashion. A wall in the shape of waves, containing triangles and circles and surrounding a lake … transformed the allegory of the world of the gods into a landscape text and in the process helped to impress the allegory upon the everyday consciousness of the … citizen” (Duncan, 106). The necessity of impressing this narrative upon the quotidian population reinforced a mythology of power in support of the king who erected it, but also created a connection with a landscape that contained a portal to the divine.

The containment of a dangerous and sublime Nature also allows one to be “written” into this narrative, or allows the artist / sculptor a direct relationship to this mythology. Helen Escobedo, one of the primary designers of the Cuatzontle sculpture-wall, discusses her motivations behind the creation of her “site-oriented sculptures” in an article entitled “Site-Specific Sculpture or the Mythology of Place” (1988). She opens her essay by describing her “need to design works that enhance rather than interfere with the original site … relating this work to its immediate surroundings,” an assertion she repeats throughout her essay (141). Yet, in choosing the future site of her work, she states that she will “tear from a magazine a page that has a site that appeals to me – for instance, a street flanked by trees and a monument that I want to replace with my own … The resulting work transforms the ancient or industrial remnants into sharply defined sculptural elements that read as drawings of found objects in ideal space” (Escobedo, 143-4). Thus, Escobedo and the other artists who contributed to this project, seem to
seek to place themselves within a historical teleology with regard to sites of historical origins, by re-forming the earth at a site that already holds some cultural significance. In addition, in attempting to “transform the ancient” into the “sharply defined,” they put into order, they re-form the sublime landscape to perpetuate a national identity of which they themselves are the arbiters.

**Civitas, Urbanity, and the Ordering of the Landscape**

Poetry, similarly, can and does act as a site of struggle between human and landscape, and a means of imposing an order and civilization upon the absence and blankness of the vastness of the American landscape. In the process, it seems the artist establishes a culture and identity of a society, utilizing poetry because “the American poet is appalled by the absence encountered and instead settles for the white shroud of metaphor (the invention of nature) that veils the abyss ... a cosmetic that turns itself on the white and colorless” (Arensberg, 11). Absence and emptiness, coupled with immensity, are characteristics of the threatening sublime that can be attributed to the abyss of uncultivated American land. The sublime appears to be bound up with confrontation of “nothingness,” as Mary Arensberg argues, since “what the speaker has seen is nothing, that he encounters nature as whiteness or absence ... is truly emblematic of a major strain of the American sublime: the incantation of whiteness as a figure for the alienation one feels toward nature (the encounter with nothingness) and the emptiness of the vessel of the self” (11). The emptiness of the American sublime must be filled,
cultivated, and put into order to form a national identity. The poet then seeks to construct *civitas*, and to do this s/he must construct the city, centered upon the culture’s iconic monument.

A significant means of imposing *civis* upon a wild and threatening landscape is by means of construction of the city. This transformation of the “empty” and vast wilderness to civility is a process that is intimately tied to the establishment of colonies and their expansion as the European polity grew increasingly prosperous. The idea of the city as a center of civilization, in the West, stems from the concept of the “Eternal City” and the establishment of Rome. Human endeavors that aspire to monumentality in this context begin with the building of the city, and are established with the presumption that it will last forever. The formation of the city serves as an integral turning point both in *Piedra de sol* and the “Cuatzontle,” since each of these monuments to human undertaking rest upon the landscape-as-body that, by means of violent confrontation, attest to the ultimate destruction of re-formed stone and earth, as we see in an urban scene in the text: “casas arrodilladas en el polvo,/ torres hendidas … los dos se desnudaron y se amaron / por defender nuestra porción eterna … recobrar nuestra herencia arrebatada / por ladrones de vida hace mil siglos” (Paz, 32). The poet’s return to carnality, to the most visceral of human nature, acts as an affront to the constructions that are collapsing around him and “la amada,” who acts as “la mediadora entre el hombre y la naturaleza, es el lenguaje de la afección divina” (Pacheco, 139).
The city’s most prominent sites center on its monuments, and it is the monument that is most often the first of all objects, spaces, and architecture to be destroyed when the city comes under siege. Once demolished, monuments, as bearers of culture and history, signify the destruction of the culture that gave rise to them. Monuments form the site of cultural achievements and history, and as such, “[m]onuments are abstractions of memory and history, of culture and the achieved imagination; their ruins illustrate natural deconstruction” (Kaplan, 200). This destruction takes place not only on the physical plane, but is, of course, a symbolic destruction and an attempt to erase memory and an entire history. We observe in the poem that “ruins and decay culminat[e] in personal journeys brought the well-placed stones and the skeletons of buildings, in an effort to erase their uncomfortable historical context” (Rangel, 9). Andreas Huyssen argues that, just as there is a compulsion in any culture to establish a permanent reminder of its historical moment by constructing the monument, the destruction of the monument is a necessary aspect of a perceived progress. From the nineteenth century, “[t]he price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world. There was no liberation without active destruction” (Present Pasts, 2). Yet today, memory and history have collapsed into a shared space, such that “we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and transitory, and sculpture as subject to the vicissitudes of time” (Huyssen, Present Pasts, 7). Monuments, as synecdoches of the city and culture, are built with an enduring intention, are in reality
ephemeral, and are destroyed or re-shaped by its physical dissolution or in the ways it is read from the future.

Therefore, the re-construction of the city, in itself a monumental task, re-establishes its culture and the human impulses that led to the founding and building of the city in the first place. This is a task most often carried out by the rebuilding of monuments. The role of the poet, historically, has proved integral to this process in the Americas and it serves, especially, in the productive linkage between civic monumentality and emerging national identity. However, these new identities are formed not only from the subjection of previous identities, but, rather, from the “enact[ment of] a history for America, the poet must displace his precursors and clear the way for his writings” (Arensburg 74). It is in this displacement that the anxiety arises: those artifacts indicative of European or indigenous identities were, by means of their identity-formative qualities, considered permanent and enduring. Yet, the poet, progenitor of a new nation, in order to build new monuments of national identity, must transform those of his or her predecessors, with the realization that his/her constructions will inevitably suffer the same fate. As Arensburg states, “the parental space and memory itself are seemingly obliterated and estranged from the past, the poet is faced with the … fictional moment of sublimity … the sublime as salvation and suicide, as the poet loses an identity he knows he never possessed” (17). This is the collapse of memory, identity, space, and time that takes place in the omphalos, or cosmic navel of the “Espacio escultórico,” and in the climactic forty-fifth stanza of Paz’s Piedra de sol.
Mexico and the Poet as Ephemeral Builder

To examine the role of the monument in Mexican identity, one should understand the post-Independence movement of *mexicanidad*, a movement within the larger *indigenismo* of the early twentieth century that invoked indigenous monuments as symbols of a distinct Mexican national identity. The use of the Indigenous body as symbolic device is indicative of, as Carlos Monsiváis suggests, “definitive illustrations of a mythological undertaking then in fashion: reverence before a pure and abstract Mexicanness which gradually spreads from people to objects” (84). These objects were visibly, monumentally, placed, and meant to manifest an even larger and more monumental national ideology. According to Joseph Galloy, “[t]he ideology of a synthetic, mestizo identity is today expressed in a variety of ways: through song, dance, literature, plastic arts, murals on public buildings, the excavation and restoration of pre-contact archaeological sites and the display of pre-contact artifacts and sculptures in museums” (Galloy, 17-8). Several Aztec-created monuments emerged as national symbols during this time, one of the most visible being the Calendar Stone, or “Sun Stone.” One of the first manifestations of the monument as symbol during this period is circulated, literally, as Mexican currency: “representation of Indians on Mexican currency began near the end of the Revolution. In 1920, a 2 peso note … depicts a native woman, wearing traditional costume, standing before the Aztec calendar stone … [D]uring a time of greater post-revolutionary social stability … to appear was a 1 peso note … that displays the Aztec calendar stone … in print from 1935 until 1970” (Galloy, 18). Yet, it is the appearance of this monument in poetry, particularly epic poetry, which illustrates a
reading of that cosmic and monumental sculpture as reflective of the entire process of appropriation and, thus, metamorphosis of monuments as indicative of national identity and national progress.

The title of Octavio Paz’s *Piedra de sol* invokes a sculpture that, many agree, “[o]f the extant artistic monuments created by the Aztecs of Pre-Columbian Mexico, the Aztec Calendar Stone is undoubtedly the most important” (Klein, 1). Paz’s appropriation of this iconic Mexican image for the title of his poem is significant, and places the poem within a particular historical moment. In appropriating and redefining this symbol of Mexican identity, Paz also places himself and his poem in a long and intricate tradition. Cecilia Rangel, in her engaging study *Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics* (2010), states that “[r]uins evoked an imminent sense of reality and gave these poems, these artificial products, a powerful scent of authenticity” (Rangel, 3). I argue that appropriation of monuments performs a very similar function, and by constructing the poem on this historical monument to Mexican origins, Paz clearly hopes to re-form the Sun Stone as a monument for modern Mexico. He appropriates the Aztec monument in order to criticize the process of forming monuments, and illustrates how the construction of the monument as the vessel for historical memory and purveyor of national identity brings about a petrification of the population that looks upon it, and an alienation from both this imagined identity and from each other. Paz describes the building of monuments as a circular process, since they are built with intention of forever standing for national memory, yet these structures degrade over time and are finally destroyed
when a new power seeks to “rewrite” memory and identity, bringing about a renewed
petrification and alienation of a populace. Paz proposes a rejection of this process, and a
return to an ideal origin based on what he refers to as an “instant” of unification between
human beings and Nature free of monuments and the civilization (read domination) of the
landscape. However, in doing so, Paz himself constructs a monument, the poem, which
appropriates the Sun Stone as a foundation for the textual monument that he will build
upon and from it, reshaping it into the site of the poem, and will thus read the Sun Stone
as a gateway to the unity with Nature that allows him to form an allegory for his own
self-monumentalization as a national poet of Mexico.

The poem *Piedra de sol* has drawn the attention of many scholars, whose
interpretations of the poem’s thematic elements range from the very extensive work of
John Fein, who asserts that the “poet’s quest is within his soul, a voyage into the depths
of his own identity as he strives to define an ultimate reality … [Thus, the thrust of]*

*Piedra de sol* is the relationship between time and reality” (Fein, 18), to Victoria
Carpenter, who takes a more visceral stance. Carpenter argues that the poet “searches to
understand himself through his imaginary relationship with the woman (who embodies
the world) and time-space unity … [A]s the main driving forces of the male’s quest for
himself … the multiplicity of time lines in the poem [serve] as the reflection of the
satisfaction of the male’s sexual and emotional desires [and are what] I consider the main
theme of ‘Piedra de sol’” (Carpenter, 493-4). Nevertheless, Carpenter points out in her
essay that “all the critics agree on one point: the main idea of the poem is the male
narrator’s travel or search” (493). Thus, the poem appears to be structured as a journey or quest, but there are differing interpretations with regard to the motivation behind the poet’s pilgrimage.

The journey that the poet undertakes is not one that is necessarily driven by a search for an ultimate reality, nor is it only motivated by love and the creative drive. I argue that the journey the poet undertakes is an allegory for the building of the monument upon the sublime landscape, driven by an exploration of a poetically feminized national identity. The image of the body that the poem invokes throughout is not necessarily the body of the “beloved,” as John Fein states, but rather the Mexica body that exudes “mexicanidad.” Moreover, the journey progresses in a circular, rather than a linear, trajectory. This platting of the Aztec body into a circular form is a trope that is presumably based on the Mexica understanding of reality. The body that Paz invokes within the poem – circular, Native, fecund, sublime – is a construction that parallels the monument found at the “Espacio escultórico,” or the “Cuatzontle,” a monument also formed upon the circular understanding of Aztec temporality. These monuments to Mexican origins, textual and sculptural, are examples of the modern appropriation and reformation of the Native body qua monument as artistic means to form Mexican national identity that allow for what Rangel calls a “conscious re-evaluation of the past” (4). The indigenous artifact serves as a site from which modernity can be revalued.

However, the site of the monument is not easily encountered, and the poet must traverse the wild American landscape, a journey that is allegorical for the difficulty in
traversing history and constructing a modern poetry and a new nation. John Fein states that “[t]his long poem is essentially a quest … in which the unnamed voice attempts to define his identity … as a search for woman, and … the metaphors link her to Nature, menacing but regenerative” (Fein, 11). Thus, in the poem we see the sublime landscape portrayed as feminine Nature that will undergo a process of husbanding and cultivation by the poet. The sublimity of the landscape is established from the first two stanzas,

un árbol bien plantado mas danzante,
un caminar de río que se curva, 
avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo,
… agua que con los párpados cerrados
mana toda la noche profecías,
unánime presencia en oleaje,
ola tras ola hasta cubrirlo todo,
verde soberanía sin ocaso. (10)

Movement, in these passages, signifies the recalcitrance of Nature: trees dance while rooted, and the river, seemingly fixed, moves, twists, turns, and even evinces a sublime characteristic from antiquity. Longinus states that “there is another road to sublimity … like the Pythian priestess, who … at a spot where the gaping earth exhales … she becomes impregnated with the power of the divinity, and … promulg[at]es oracles” (52). Paz’s reference to the process of inspiration taking place in Nature by means of prophecies, establishes a portal from the chthonic, or earthly landscape to the divine, a green dominion that has the ability to overwhelm.

Yet, the third stanza introduces us to the first intrusive signs of civilization:

un caminar entre las espesuras
de los días futuros y el aciago. (10)
a path through the wilderness of days to come. (Weinberger, 11)

A path has been driven through the seemingly impenetrable forest, a sign of progress that leads into the future. This process is not a happy one; the poet describes the transition as a “fulgor de la desdicha como un ave / petrificando el bosque con su canto” (10; “and the gloomy splendor of misery like a bird / whose song can turn a forest to stone” Weinberger, 11).

Indeed, the landscape is one that is described as increasingly solid, hardened, and turning to stone. The itinerate poet is seeing progress taking place around him, including his own intervention, as a means of the shaping of the wilderness into stone constructions, as we see in the following lines:

roca solar, cuerpo color de nube…
oh bosque de pilares encantados…
voy por tu cuerpo como por el mundo,
tu vientre es una plaza soleada,
tus pechos dos iglesias donde oficia
la sangre sus misterios paralelos …
eres una ciudad que el mar asedia,
una muralla que la luz divide. (12)

the solar rock, the cloud-colored body …
oh forest of pillars that are enchanted …
I travel your body, like the world,
your belly is a plaza full of sun,
your breasts two churches where blood performs its own, parallel rites …
you are a city the sea assaults,
a stretch of ramparts split by the light.
(11, Weinberger)

The use of stone as symbolic of the building of civilization in Piedra de sol also signifies the “petrification” that comes about when the sublime is subdued and, thus, acts as a critical portrayal of the calcifying process of civilization. These constructions, like the
poem itself, are the sites of human ritual and mark the passage of time, of which the very Sun Stone as astronomical instrument and technological achievement is a primal example. Fein points out that, in *Piedra de sol*, “[t]he poet’s concept of time as judged by his own experience anticipates the circularity of the poem’s structure … expressed in terms that unite the circularity of time with the concrete – and hence temporary, since time changes everything” (20). Despite the domination of the cultivated stone over the landscape, nature assaults human constructions, seemingly diminishing them, and necessitating rebuilding by the sculptor and, eventually, the poet. Interestingly, these constructions are portrayed as aspects of a human body, suggesting that monumental constructions are not only isolated sites of civilization, but are metonymic of human society, polities, and their incorporation as the national body. This entire process is enmeshed in the structure of the poem, which is enclosed by its most obvious characteristic of circularity: the repetition of the first six lines of the poem at the poem’s end.

A similar process of circular enclosure takes place in the Cuatzontle site. Like the uncontrollable aspects of nature mentioned in the beginning of the poem, the “navel” of the Cuilcuilco people was an area of natural upheaval, likely displaying, for some time, signs of the eruption that was to ultimately take place in the year 400 BC. This site is of great archaeological importance because of its role as site of cultural origins, “one of the first cultural expressions of the entire country” (Delgado et al., 116). That this area gave rise to the first signs of human civilization in the Americas is extraordinary, although
most of the artifacts of the Cuilcuilco remain buried or in some other way are not extant. Its name, “navel,” is significant, since it possibly signifies ties to an originary myth, one that establishes a divine relationship with the land. Before its volcanic destruction, the area was considered one of the most significant for the developing society, “era el centro rector de una gran región … que ejercía control sobre otros centros menores y quizás constituyó un importante centro irradiador de pautas ideológico-culturales sobre la Cuenca” (Schávelzon, 31; “it was the principle center of a great region … that exerted control over other lesser centers and, perhaps, constituted an important radiating hub of ideological-cultural patterns with regard to the Cuenca”), perhaps much like the “plaza soleada” that appears in the “vientre,” or belly, of the poem. Yet, the vientre burst into violent life and devoured the life that had formed on its body. The circle that Paz has constructed to confine his poem, like the circle of pyramids that the artists constructed around the Cuatzontle, is a particular measure against another destructive emergence of a dormant possibility.

The poet continues, for seven stanzas, to describe the journey he takes across the landscape, interspersing images of the landscape that he addresses a familiar “tú” with his own movement, such as when he states “voy por tu cuerpo como por un bosque, / como por un sendero en la montaña” (14; “I travel your body, like a forest, / like a mountain path that ends at a cliff” Weinberger, 15). He also repeats that “busco sin encontrar … busco sin encontrar, escribo a solas” (16; “I search without finding … I search without finding, I write alone” Weinberger, 17). During this period of searching, the poet is alone
and in quest of “un instante,” which Paz describes, in his noteworthy text *El arco y la lira* (1956), “hay un momento en que todo pacta. Los contrarios no desaparecen, pero se funden por un instante. Es algo así como una suspensión del ánimo” (Paz, *El arco*, 18).

This solidified moment is elusive, and seems to reinscribe the narrator’s solitude until, again, he encounters civilization by means of the violence perpetrated on the landscape through language. He states:

> escritura de fuego sobre el jade,
grieta en la roca …
columna de vapor, fuente en la peña …
guardiana del valle de los muertos (18)

> writing of fire on a piece of jade,
    crack in the stone …
    column of mist, spring in the rock …
    gatekeeper of the valley of the dead (Weinberger, 19)

Here we see the reformation of the recalcitrant landscape that is being cultivated amid cracks and mists, not unlike the eruption of Cuatzontle. Then, as the earth opens up and explodes, a face appears in the flames, a “rostro de llamas,” one that embodies all faces and all of time in its incorporation:

> los sucesivos rostros de la llama,
todos los nombres son un solo nombre,
todos los rostros son un solo rostro,
todos los siglos son un solo instante
y por todos los siglos de los siglos
cierra el paso al futuro un par de ojos,

> no hay nada frente de mí, sólo un instante
rescatado esta noche, contra un sueño
de ayuntadas imágenes soñado,
duramente esculpido contra el sueño, (20)
all the faces
that appear in the flames are a single face,
all of the names are a single name,
all of the faces a single face,
all of the centuries a single moment,
and through all the centuries of the centuries
a pair of eyes blocks the way to the future,

there's nothing in front of me, only a moment
salvaged from a dream tonight of coupled
images dreamed, a moment chiseled
from the dream, (Weinberger, 21)

The site of the monument is found, and the construction of the object necessitates an
unearthing of a face that will absorb all faces of a populace, will stop time, and is
chiseled not only from stone, but from human conception, “un sueño,” or, like “el poema
… ostenta todos los rostros” (Paz, *El arco*, ). This object forms in turmoil, and does so in
a particular intersection of time, geographic space, and emotional state. In this
“eruption,” the poem can be read allegorically as a description of the political state and
national “identity crisis” that is taking place, when individual faces and centuries of
nation-formation have merged into this singularity, one representative face that, having
been chiseled into stone, will capture a mo(nu)ment in morphing perpetuity.

By means of Paz’s poetics, the reader is provided an affective description of the
process of nation-building that takes places around the monument. That this monument
is implicitly in the form of the Sun Stone blatantly ties the formation of the monument to
memory and time. John Gillis, in his introduction to the anthology *Commemorations*,
states that “memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or
constructions of reality,” indicating that seemingly fixed objects, in whatever plane of
reality, only represent an imagined reality (Gillis, 3). These constructions are, moreover, a meshing of individuals in a violent moment, since “[c]ommemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and ... annihilation” (Gillis, 5). This process is illustrated also in the arrangement of the poem’s lines, which are intermittently indented such that they reflect the circular nature of the entire poem. The lines of the final stanza of what is considered the first half of the poem are arranged in this way, like the very first stanza of the poem:

un caminar tranquilo
de estrella o primavera sin premura,
agua que con los párpados cerrados
mana toda la noche profesías,
unánime presencia en oleaje,
ola tras ola hasta cubrilo todo,
verde soberanía sin ocaso
como el deslumbramiento de las alas
cuando se abren en mitad del cielo, (10)
nombres, sitios, calles y calles, rostros, plazas, calles,
estaciones, un parque, cuartos solos,
manchas en la pared, alguien se peina,
alguien canta a mi lado, alguien se viste,
cuartos, lugares, calles, nombres,
cuartos, Madrid, 1937, (30)

We see, in juxtaposing these two stanzas, first and last of the first half of the poem, the change that has taken place in the poet’s journey. The “caminar tranquilo,” the first vestige of human civilization, has transformed into “calles y calles,” and the sublime “verde soberanía sin ocaso” has become “alguien [que] canta a mi lado” enclosed in

55 “‘Madrid 1937’ ... is an obvious unmusical intrusion in the rhythmic circularity. The impact of the break is reinforced ... to mark the conclusion of the first half of the poem” (Fein, 18).
“cuartos, lugares, … nombres.” Thus, we see again a petrification of Nature that will eventually form the monument to progress and civilization.

The sublime natural landscape, up to this point in the poem, has been transformed and civilized, but the identity upon which a civilization has formed eventually undergoes a violent metamorphosis into a new one. Paz provides an example of the violent process of an instance of the collapse of national identity with the line that begins “Madrid, 1937,” a line that scholars agree marks the halfway point of the poem, and takes place, significantly, on a plaza, the Plaza del Ángel. The poet’s choice of this particular site in Madrid is no accident. The plaza has a counterpart in Mexico City, in a sense, since one of Mexico’s most iconic monuments, “El ángel,” stands “along the Paseo de la Reforma. The Angel of Independence, Cuauhtémoc, and Christopher Columbus [are] sequential landmarks,” and both plazas are considered central icons of Independence movements56 that were formative for each country’s national identity (Sheridan, 150). In an essay entitled “Americanidad de España,” written in the year 1937, Paz draws an intimate relationship between Spain and Mexico that did not always exist, stating that, “España, en Mexico, era regresión, fanatismo, incuria … [H]emos crecido todos … vengando siempre a Cuauhtémoc … [N]acieron en México dos cosas: la Nación y la Democracia …

56 Of course, the idea of “Independence” is a concept that is formed from an interested ideology in each case, Mexico and Spain. Mexico’s liberation from colonization from Spain as a war of independence is apparent. However, in Spain, “the ‘War of Independence,’ [was] a war fought in the Iberian Peninsula between the armies of Napoleon and his enemies between 1808 and 1814, reinterpreted by Spanish nationalism as a war of national liberation” (Moreno-Luzón, 70).
[Mexicanos] [n]o sabían que al combatir a la España republicana, a la del Frente Popular, combatían también la América” (Fierro, 70-2). Thus, it is during this particular historical moment that Mexico and Spain have traversed a diametric pass, formerly in opposition since Mexican Independence, but now sharing in the experience of national upheaval that forces a larger rethinking and reconstruction of national identity.

By making this assertion, Paz is forming an ideology on a relationship with Spain that did not previously exist, one that constructs a shared body that will suffer pain that is inflicted on either side of the Atlantic, sharing a vein that lies within the figure of the “ángel” monument. The moment of the Spanish Civil War, like the upheaval Mexico endured during its Independence, allows for the construction of a new history that is remembered by means of the monument. Yael Zerubavel states that, “[w]hen a society undergoes rapid developments that shatter its social and political order, its need to restructure the past is as great as its desire to set its future agenda … such periods often stimulate the creation of new cultural forms that replace … older traditions … These ‘invented traditions’ are particularly significant for the legitimation of the emergent social and political order … These newly constructed commemorations are successful when they manage to project an aura of traditionality that obscures their … career as cultural representations of the past” (Zerubavel, 106). Within the Plaza, a process historically took place in which “commemorations reveal the political culture of those who organized them, their desire to maintain a particular version of history and to affirm their own
identity while giving a meaning to the past that was still valid in the present” (Moreno-Luzón, 70).

In the poem, we see violence and Nature actively dismantling monuments to national identity, portrayed allegorically as one “instante” devouring the other. As exemplified by the site of the Cuatzontle, Nature is taking over again, but this time the explosion comes not from a volcano but from erotic engagement, and in searching for “roots,” the couple of poet and beloved delves into divine Nature, thus, returning to the locus amoenus that commenced the poem and the poet’s journey, “por defender nuestra porción eterna / nuestra ración de tiempo y paraíso” (Paz, Piedra, 32). This scene of returning to roots and retracing the paradisiacal is juxtaposed against the collapse of the nation around them that had formed an identity on a post-Napoleonic government, in the city that Paz himself inhabited on the cusp of the Franco Civil War in Spain. The cycle of the civilizing process and construction of national memory is portrayed metonymically in the bedroom, within the Plaza that served as an enduring construction of national identity yet is falling apart, as described in the lines: “entre ciudades que se van a pique,” cities collapse inward, and “todos se transfiguran … el tiempo inútilmente los asedia / no hay tiempo ya, ni muro; ¡espacio, espacio … corta los frutos, come de la vida/ tiédete al pie del árbol, bebe el agua!” (Paz, Piedra, 34; “all are transformed … time lays siege / to them in vain, there is no more time, / there are no walls: space, space, / pluck the fruit, eat of life, / stretch out under the tree and drink!” Weinberger, 35). The poet seeks to accelerate the process of transformation, by returning to the only sublime landscape that
exists within the City: “the poet enters a woman’s body, seen as a body without borders … the internal landscape [that] barely occludes the journey’s center as one in which blood continually reappears” (Quiroga, 120). This return to roots and to “origins,” in a sense, is seen by Paz as a defiance against the petrifying aspects of civilization that we have seen since the first camino was constructed in the poem’s forest. Making love in a time of war, tossing aside societal norms to seek the lost “unity,” is to imbue humanity with life that is being lost alongside the monumental structures that are crumbling with time and progress.

The poetic journey to the monument is further clarified when juxtaposed with a play that Paz wrote the year before his publication of Piedra de sol. Paz’s Hija de Rappaccini (1956), like the poem, centers upon a sublime landscape that is circumscribed by paredes of civilization. Based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s original short story, Rappaccini’s Daughter (1844), Paz’s play seems focused on a “quest of a lost unity, the effort to escape from the prison of individuality through love or – finally – through a leap to ‘the other shore’” (Sterne, 233). This “other shore” is an arrival at the moment the poet seeks: “piso mi sombra en busca de un instante busco una fecha viva” (16). The character of Rappaccini, the “mad scientist” whose obsession with progress destroys the beloved Beatriz, serves as a counterpart to the collapsing fountain in the center of the garden, both scientist and fountain serving as symbols of civilization that signify alienation from Nature. The character of the daughter poisoned by Rappaccini’s scientific experiments, whose society restricts her from making love to the oblivious
Juan, as Anna Brickhouse argues, stems from the fact that “Hawthorne explicitly sexualizes the poison … in a female body that may entice the hero … The positing of lethal toxicity in female sexuality predictably conforms to the nineteenth-century American literary convention of the femme fatale” (Brickhouse, 231). As in the poem, we see the gesture toward love and a return to origins as a transgression. We also see the petrification of the instant of love and communion with Nature:

Marchas por una ciudad labrada en cristal de roca. Tienes sed y la sed engendra delirios geométricos. Perdido … recorres plazas circulares, explanadas donde obeliscos melancólicos custodian fuentes de mercurio, calles que desembocan en la misma calle. Las paredes de cristal se cierran y te aprisionan … Condenado a no salir de ti mismo … ese que está ahí, frente a ti, que te mira con ojos de súplica pidiéndote una señal, un signo de fraternidad y reconocimiento, no eres tú, sino tu imagen. Condenado a dormir con los ojos abiertos. ¡Ciérralos, retrocede, vuelve a lo obscuro, más allá de tu infancia, hacia atrás, hacia el origen! (30).

You march past a city etched in rock crystal. You are thirsty and this thirst engenders geometric delusions. Lost … you cross circular plazas, esplanades where melancholy obelisks guard fountains of mercury, streets that discharge into the same street. The crystal walls enclose and imprison you … Condemned to never leave yourself … this that is before you, that peers at you with supplicating eyes asking for a signal from you, a sign of brotherhood and recognition, you are not you, but your reflection. Condemned to sleep with eyes open. Close them! Retreat! Return to the dark! Beyond your infancy, further back, unto the beginning!57

This scene occurs in Juan’s dreams and, narrated by the character El Mensajero describes, as Brickhouse states, “[t]he ‘geometrical deliriums’ of ‘transparent corridors,’ ‘circular plazas,’ and ‘streets that flow into the same street’ form a labyrinth that momentarily imprisons both the audience and the dreaming Juan” (236). However, as insightful as

57 This is my translation.
Brickhouse’s comment is, I read this passage as an iteration of what Paz is trying to explore, particularly during this surrealist period of his writing: that, like Juan, a populace circles about in plazas and calles, within the shadow of the obelisk qua monument, and in pursuing quotidian life is alienated from each other and from the identification with the nation when the identity that the monument embodies is imposed upon it. This passage, like the poetic persona in Piedra de sol, allows the narrator to implicitly address the audience while seeming to remain within the diegesis. Unlike the poem, there is no return to origins, since Beatriz, the portal to a feminized ideal origin and on the cusp of reaching a unity with Juan, has become mechanized and is a monument only to what she once was, and due to modern “medicine,” allegorizes a mutual “isolation in an industrialized world” (Brickhouse, 236).

Conclusion

The poem hinges upon a circular rather than the teleological process of civilization that is portrayed in the play. This is a process that is reiterated during the latter half of the poem, as the poet experiences the instant that stems from this destructive violent moment when the human being is in touch with the chthonic. In Piedra de sol, the poet states that “todo se transfigura y es sagrado” after having undergone an apotheosis and then having made love to the beloved,

\[
\cdots \text{las paredes invisibles, las máscaras podridas} \\
\text{que dividen al hombre de los hombres,} \\
\text{al hombre de sí mismo,}
\]
The walls that are built by civilization, and the ideologies that divide one person from 
another, eventually crumble, and only for an instant the sublime landscape is glimpsed.
The poet again seeks a return to a moment of origin, and declares that “vuelvo adónde 
empecé, busco tu rostro / camino por las calles de mí mismo … caminas como un árbol, 
como un río … el mundo reverdece” (40; “I go back / to where I began, I search for your 
face, / I walk through the streets of myself … you walk like a tree, you walk like a river, / 
the world / grows green again” Weinberger, 41). The poet falls intermittently into the 
petrification of constructed monuments and national identities, and looks back to a time 
when the world was green and not divided by artificially shaped stone and brick.

Finally, the poem reaches stanza forty-five, in which we observe the other 
“instante” taking place, the human-constructed monument that has been forming and 
establishes itself as the source of national memory, in place of the originary unity that the 
poet has called for. The explosive forty-fourth stanza has signified the violence of this 
formation, and the forty-fifth begins with a jarring and anticipatory silence, followed by
the gesture toward a permanent construction: “no vuelve atrás el tiempo / los muertos están fijos en su muerte” (46; “time can never / turn back, the dead are forever fixed in death” Weinberger, 47). Time is suspended in this moment, and the dead – representing the death of indigenous origins, the death of an “authentic” national memory, and a lost relationship with Nature – fix identity into an artificial stone structure, because “[m]onuments served to anchor collective remembering, a process dispersed, ever changing, and ultimately intangible, in highly condensed, fixed, and tangible sites” (Savage, 129). The stanza continues by stating that those dead and fixed in their stone deaths “no pueden morirse de otra muerte / intocables, clavados en su gesto / desde su soledad, desde su muerte / sin remedio nos miran sin mirarnos” (46; “cannot die / another death, they are untouchable, / frozen in a gesture, and from their solitude, / from their death, they watch us, / helpless, without ever watching,” Weinberger, 47). The monument fixes the figure or body that will forevermore stand vigilant, watching over the population that is in turn transfixed by the site, since “monuments perpetuat[e] memory in external deposits, located not within the people but within its shared public space” (Savage, 130). Like the Cuatzontle structure, which contains within its guts the history of an imagined and glorified origin of Mexican civilization, and in its re-imagined pyramids...

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58 Here, I am referring again to Heidegger’s definition of authenticity as “an ‘ecstatic’ relation of the essence of man to the truth of Being” (Heidegger, 236). This is a complex concept, but underscores the relational aspects of authenticity rather than a “scientific” understanding of the “unity” that Paz portrays. Paz does not seek to return to anthropological origins, but to a relationship that unifies human beings to Nature with regard to modern society.
forms an ocular space that seeks to look forever into the future, the monument in the poem

es la estatua de su vida
un siempre estar ya nada para siempre,
cada minuto es nada para siempre,
un rey fantasma rige tus latidos
y tu gesto final, tu dura máscara
labra sobre tu rostro cambiante:
el monumento somos de una vida
ajena y no vivida, apenas nuestra, (46)

their death is now a statue of their life,
an eternal being eternally nothing
every minute is eternally nothing,
a ghostly king rules over your heartbeat
and your final expression, a hard mask
is formed over your changing face:
the monument that we are to a life,
unlived and alien, barely ours, (Weinberger, 47)

The life of a population has become a “statue” to the ideologies that perpetuate such violently transformative events as the Spanish Civil War, and forms the center around which the calles and other aspects of civilization that alienate a populace from “unity” revolve. The figure monumentally portrayed on the surface, whether a circle of pyramids, Columbus, or Gonzálo Guerrero, is a phantom king with a stony mask for a face, and comes to stand for national identity, which Paz refers to directly as “tú” in this stanza. Like the crumbling fountain in the center of Rappaccini’s garden, the face of this figure is forever changing, crumbling beneath the violence of war and time yet, in so changing, remains perpetually present, and representing not only the ideology that built it
but the alienation that a community undergoes when the monument comes to stand for presumed collective identity.

If the poem were to end with this stanza, then we would be given to understand that the monument is ever-lasting, and that we, as the populace whom Paz is addressing the poem, have reached a point of alienated “life”– “una vida ajena y no vivida.” Yet, this poem is circular, and will lead inevitably back to the originary moment that commences the poem, reinforcing the idea that the national monument cannot last. The stanza that follows laments this alienated life, and the poet states that “nunca la vida es nuestra, es de los otros / la vida no es de nadie … vida que nos desvive y enajena / que nos inventa un rostro y lo desgasta” (46; “life is never / truly ours, it always belongs to the others, / life is no one’s, we all are life” Weinberger, 47). This lament commences with a decisive “never,” yet even this certainty will crumble away if the poem continues its convention of circularity.

The penultimate stanza commences with an incantation to the portal that leads to sublime Nature: “puerta del ser: abre tu ser, despierta, / aprende a ser también, labra tu cara” (50; “door of being: open your being / and wake, learn to be, form / your face, develop your features” Weinberger, 51). However, this attempt to reach the ephoric fails, because the poet is still trapped within the walls of civilization: “para mirar la vida hasta la muerte, / rostro de mar, de pan, de roca y fuente, / manantial que disuelve nuestros rostros / en el rostro sin nombre, el ser sin rostro” (52; “to see life until its death, a face / of the sea, bread, rocks, and a fountain, / source where all our faces dissolve / in the
nameless face, the faceless being” Weinberger, 53). The faces of individual persons
dissolve into the representative identity manifested by the monument, with which the
poet is now merged. Yet, Paz makes sure to emphasize that constructions that presume
permanence ultimately dissolve, and “se despeñó el instante en otro y otro” (52; “as each
moment was dropping into” Weinberger, 53). The last stanza recapitulates the circularity
of human constructions, and the poet reminisces that:

dormí sueños de piedra que no sueña
y al cabo de los años como piedras
oí cantar mi sangre encarcelada …
una a una cedían las murallas,
todas las puertas se desmoronaban
y el sol entraba a saco por mi frente, …
desprendía mi ser de su envoltura …
de mi bruto dormir siglos de piedra
y su magia de espejos revivía
un sauce de cristal … (52)

I dreamt the dreams of dreamless stones,
and there at the end of the years like stones
I heard my blood, singing in its prison …
one by one the walls gave way,
all of the doors were broken down,
and the sun came bursting through my forehead …
cut loose my being from its wrappers …
from this animal sleep and its centuries of stone,
and the sun’s magic of mirrors revived
a crystal willow … (Weinberger, 53)

The monument has confined the poet, and the people of a nation, within the prison of its
façade, but “al cabo de los años,” years that are like stones in their impermanence,
decompose and dissolve, and it is when the monument falls that a people is momentarily
freed from an imposed and representative national identity, and the “siglos de piedra”
can, for *un instante*, be perceived as crumbled and ruined walls that allow the poem to begin again with the repetition of the first six lines in its last.

The Cuatzontle site, explored by tourists and the intermittent archaeologist today, remains fascinating because, as Beardsley argues, “[t]he subject of the work might be described as the very creation of the earth - the processes of land formation and the sublime power of volcanoes still active in the Valley of Mexico. Its allusions are to the great sweep of planetary history and to the monumental architecture of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica … [T]he space suggests the fullness of time, both geological and historical … said to derive at least part of its effect from the humbling contrast between the size of the individual … and the intimations of vast time and space” (Beardsley, 181). In this site we see a chthonic portal, rife with a violent potentiality, inherently sublime yet bound by artificial structures, a metonymic space in which to observe the process that Paz illustrates in his poem. The site resonates with Paz’s panegyric to a monument that serves as a calendric portal to a moment in time when humans and Nature shared a bond that has been severed by the very function of the monuments erected by contemporary nation-states. As stated in the previous chapter, monuments exhibit a numenous quality that is appropriated by nation-states to form and “aweful” relationship between the populace and authority figures, unlike the Sun Stone which functions not as an awe-inspiring object as much as it is the convergence of civilization and sublime landscape. In the next chapter, I will examine how such monuments function beyond the scope of identity-formation and serve as aesthetic objects within the Latin American Neobaroque.
Chapter 4

**Material Memory:**
**Pablo Neruda’s Monumental Geology**

[T]his food, belonging to the monarch and the priesthood, afforded the means of erecting the mighty monuments which filled the land ... The non-agricultural labourers ... have little but their individual bodily exertions to bring to the task, but their number is their strength, and the power of directing these masses gave rise to the ... gigantic statues of which the remains astonish and perplex us.

— Karl Marx, *Capital*

The monumentality of Pablo Neruda’s *Canto general* (1950) in part emanates from its imbrication of American human origins with stone and mineral within an idealized, vast Nature. However, the text strays rapidly from this romantic strain by sometimes guardedly, yet often violently, re-shaping these materials into constructions that challenge the exploitation of a laboring population. This corporeal fusion of stone and laboring flesh is often elided in scholarly studies of the text, yet this significant topos informs a decidedly materialist dimension of the poem. An examination of the fundamental molding of the *materia* (matter) of the American landscape into monumental structures reveals how Neruda, a self-declared epic poet of the Americas, valorizes a particular population and materially allegorizes exploited labor by means of images of mining, and of stone and mineral. Without attempting to examine the entirety of Neruda’s endeavor to “contar la historia americana entera” (“to tell the entire history of America”), in this chapter I will analyze the function of a particularly elemental site within the *Canto*
general. Neruda’s poem erodes the aspirations of those who would confer monumentality on memorial objects by illustrating that the very materia mined from the earth and fundamental to the monument has, throughout history, remained consistent, while the forms shaped by human beings with this materia degrade and ultimately wear away.

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which Pablo Neruda’s monumental poem both implicitly challenges and poetically re-enacts the process of monumental production that he claims is a source of the exploitation of a non-elite American populace. Neruda, in order to illustrate a dialectical materialism that literally emerges from materia, utilizes the poetic tropes of stone and mineral – the elements of the monument – to illustrate the embodiment, corrosion, and erasure of the labor utilized in the construction of the monumental object. Without becoming entrenched in the political debate of the latter sections of the poem, or what Jason Wilson refers to as “Neruda’s anger politics” (Wilson, 187), I will utilize Michel Foucault’s archaeological tools, and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “object of knowledge,” among others, to excavate the history of the monument that has been, thus far, largely elided from studies of Neruda’s Canto. Many scholars have focused on the poem that he wrote a decade later, his collection entitled Odas elementales (1954), as a means to examine Neruda’s materialist poetic underpinnings, particularly such poems as “Las piedras de Chile” (1960) that Roberto González Echeverría states is “a celebration of matter in its various forms,” (Echeverría, 5). Only few have examined this topic with regard to Canto
general, beginning with Frank Riess’s text The Word and the Stone (1972), in which the author observes “the extent of the poet’s relationship with other men and the world of matter” (Riess, 2), but goes no further than to claim that the intensity with which Neruda infuses structures in the poem informs a relationship between the poet-narrator and his terrestrial surroundings. In a more recent text New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott (2007), George B. Handley focuses on the distinction that Neruda makes between a historically imagined locus amœnus of the New World and the material reality of geological history, utilizing the material tropes of the text as a means to examine questions of “poetic agency” (Handley, 168). While these texts contribute to elucidating the role of materialism in monumental constructions, this chapter is concerned with the function of literary materiality as a means to confront and reflect upon the non-literary physical realm, and I argue that Canto general, as a notable American epic work, provides a means to investigate the ways in which poetry embodies monumentalism by means of both exploring and interrogating the historical and material aspects of the formation of the monument.

Canto general is an epic poem (and I shall be elaborating further on this genre designation of this work) that Neruda published in Mexico, after having already received a great deal of attention globally for his political activities. Parts of the poem were published separately, previous to the collection’s publication in 1950, such as “Canto general de Chile” and “Alturas de Macchu Picchu,” two of the fifteen “cantos” that make up the entire text. The narrative of the epic begins in a prehistoric moment, when the
landscape is forming and human beings are first emerging from such telluric elements as “piedra germinal” (109; “germinal stone”; Schmitt, 16). This early “history” is told from what seems to be a semi-divine voice, one that narrates the emergence of life in its many forms, and declares: “Yo estoy aquí para contar la historia … Yo, incásico del légamo, / toqué la piedra y dije … Tierra mía sin nombre, sin América” (13; “I am here to tell the story … I, Incan of the loam, / touched the stone and said: … My land without name, without America” Schmitt, 14). The poet’s power of creation here is a significant element that emerges throughout the text, but particularly in the final sections, as I will discuss later. Not only does the poetic persona establish himself as the storyteller, he is materially of the earth, and his creative power is exerted through his “handiwork” by touching the stone, a manual labor that informs an underlying Marxist element that runs throughout the work. The opening lines of the early section of the poem entitled “Los hombres” (“Man”), describes these new beings as “Como la copa de la arcilla era / la raza mineral, el hombre / hecho de piedras y de atmósfera” (119; “The mineral race was / like a cup of clay, man / made of stone and atmosphere”; Schmitt, 24). The poem then follows the progression of mankind as the greatest creation, Machu Picchu, comes to fruition, which the poet-narrator describes as “Madre de piedra … Alto arrecife de la aurora humana” (55; “Mother of stone … Towering reef of the human dawn”; Scmitt,

59 See footnote on page six for further discussion of the naming of America.
34). The erection of this monument is the pinnacle of human progress, and signals a monumental epoch.

Yet, this era of an idealized origin of mankind is ruptured by a turning point. Near the end of this section of *Canto general*, the poet-narrator addresses the monument directly, asking: “Macchu Picchu, pusiste / piedras en la piedra, y en la base, harapo? … Devuélveme el esclavo que enterraste!” (38; “Machu Picchu, did you put / stone upon stone and, at the base, tatters? … Bring me back the slave that you buried!” Schmitt, 39).

Yet, this plaintive outcry is quickly buried like the slave under stone, and this exploitation is forgotten until the invasion of the Conquistadors. The invasion commences the tumultuous section in the third canto, when the invaders provoke the alienation of humankind from Nature by exploiting the human body, which was originally formed from telluric materials and is now unnaturally utilized to mine these materials from the stone and mineral of the earth. In the third and lengthiest section of the epic, the exploitation of the peasant and laboring body has become entrenched within the diegesis. Although I investigate the entire poem for its materialist poetics, it is within this section that I analyze the formation of the monument, which here functions as a metaphor for exploitation of human flesh and earthly elements. The final canto takes a self-reflexive turn, one that has been the subject of scholarly work for its theological or adamic elements, but one that, I argue, reveals the problematic pursuit of the immortality inherent in the role of epic-poet who exploits popular voice to exhibit his own monumentalism.
Tracing the evolution of the stone and mineral through *Canto general* reveals the ways in which materialist poetics is imbricated with the dynamics of the monument’s emergence in history, the landscape, and the function of monumentalism in the Americas. The tracing of these elements within such texts as *Canto general* is significant because the text is generally agreed to be an epic, is often argued to function as a monumental modern text, and its integration of Neruda’s contemporary political ideology within the history of the Americas demonstrates the compelling nature of monumentalism. Jean Franco observes “the significant difference between what counted as Marxist aesthetics in Latin America and Europe … [from] 1932 to 1956 … [D]uring this so-called black period of socialist realism there were inventive departures from the European script … Latin American writers – among them … Pablo Neruda – composed poems that would certainly never have taken the form they did had they not been propelled by the visionary strain of Marxism. It was also during this ‘black period’ that the muralists painted some of their finest monumental art, an art that is a radical departure from the sentimental idealism of Soviet art” (Franco, 85). This “inventive departure” is grounded in materialism. In this chapter, the examination of the *Canto*’s material dimensions will be approached from three perspectives. First, I will utilize the concept of a “fallacy of permanence,” a concept that describes the process of appropriation of durable earthly materials in order to imbue an object with permanence, an effort that is ultimately fallacious. As Andreas Huyssen reminds us, monuments have demonstrated the “fundamental temporality of even those human endeavors that pretend to transcend time
through their material reality and relative durability” (Huyssen, *Palimpsests*, 7). This fallacy informs the fundamental and critical aspects of study of monuments, and serves as a useful lens for examining the ways in which collective memory may be forged, particularly within a given historic moment. Second, this chapter investigates the unearthing and generation of history in the *Canto general* by means of the diegetic evolution of stone in the human realm, a transformation that traces the increasing alienation of the human from the “*piedra germinal*” (“germinal stone”), the source of humanity’s “*espesura madre*” (“maternal density”; Neruda, *Canto*, 109, 114). This growing estrangement illustrates the poet’s contention that contemporary construction of monuments erases the identity of the subject and builder of the monument. Finally, Neruda’s use of monumental materials constructs history and, as Jean Franco has stated, transforms the poet into a didactical figure and his audience into silent onlookers. Within the diegesis, the poet searches for idealized American telluric origins that comprise a period when humans and mineral were symbiotically unified. Yet, the modern-day “post-lapsarian” nature of human endeavors has become alienated from an idealized pre-lapsarian communion with the mineral. This material exploitation has left behind the contemporary laborer who is silenced until, by means of poetry and the selective utilization of textual *materia*, “el pueblo” is given voice again by the poet who transposes the popular voice into Neruda’s imagined “*grandeza calcinada*” (Neruda, *Canto*, 282; “calcined grandeur”).

60 Please see my Introduction.
Beyond the monumentality emanating from the text’s materiality, certainly few titles can be considered more ambitiously monumental than Neruda’s *Canto general*, an appellation that seeks to encompass the history of an entire continent (if not an entire hemisphere), from the origin of human history to the poem’s contemporaneous present and beyond. Further, the thematic elements of the poem endeavor to embody such a grandiosity that, as many scholars have observed, “the *Canto general* incorporates into one framework an astonishingly rich and varied range of experience and … the real achievement is the sheer organization of all this material into one vision” (Riess, xiv). The text is considered a paradigm of modern poetry written on epic scale, to such a degree that “[e]l *Canto General* es el mayor poema cíclico de Neruda y su poema épico más extenso y más valioso estéticamente. Podrán encontrarse algunos bellos momentos épicos en su producción posterior, pero el *Canto general* es la más alta cumbre que alcanzó en este tipo de poesía” (Araya, 123; “*Canto General* is the greatest of Neruda’s cyclical poetry, and his epic poem is more extensive and aesthetically more powerful. One will encounter some beautiful epic moments in his later production, but the *Canto general* is the highest summit reached in this type of poetry”). This monumentality is constructed upon a particularly materialist plinth, one that has thus far remained hidden beneath its own grandiloquence.

Of course, much scholarly work has examined the *Cantos’* prodigious scope

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61 See such texts as John Felstiner’s well-known *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* (1980), Jason Wilson’s recent *A Companion to Pablo Neruda*:
regarding origins, history, and the “neo-romantic”\(^{62}\) use of such images derived from nature as the river, tree, and clay that allegorize distinct geographical and human aspects of the Americas. However, the poem has also been derided for problematic appropriation of popular voice; for masochistic elision of feminine agency; and for problematic adherence to Soviet ideology, which critics have argued illustrates that “Neruda ‘remained a virtual Stalinist, a virtual accomplice of the Soviet mass murders’” (Wilson, 170). He adhered to these much-criticized positions until 1956 when, rather suddenly, “Neruda underwent a significant change in his poetics … noting a new self-questioning attitude” (Handley, 185). Until this transformation in his poetic approach, Neruda was a contentious figure, at once epic and disparaged. This contentious aspect of his writing has, quite often, deflected scholarly attention away from the intricate relationship between poetic materialism and the trope of materia [matter] – an aspect of the text that is substantiated by what he deems America’s “true” monuments: the piedra [stone] and mineral. These elements of the “body” of America are symbolic representations of the exploited populace, which serve implicitly as the permanent materia that form the framework of monuments for those who exploit the American elemental body.

The fact that these autochthonous materials imbue the monument with permanence, in spite of the monument’s temporal ideological resonances, draws attention

\(^{62}\) A term that Chilean poet Enrique Lihn used to describe Neruda’s poetics (Wilson, 8).
to an aspect of all monuments that can never be wrested or extricated from them. This textual excavation, or “architectonic analysis” as Foucault would have it, reveals the ways in which monumental claims of permanence inhere in materials, components that, Neruda allegorically demonstrates, ultimately and actively erode claims of monumentality from the inside out. The role of poetry and the poet, according to Neruda in this period of his life, is to excavate the monument itself, to dig into it and analyze its materia within the context of the Fundamento, which will reveal not only the origin of the finished object, but the origins of America entera, and must ultimately toil, as does a miner, on the level of the laboring populace. The role of the poet, Neruda’s poetic-narrator insists, is not to become fixated with surface, the beauty and “purely mental and escapist ‘art’” that “non-political” and strictly affective poetry exemplifies (Wilson, 26). Instead, Neruda as “true” poet delves into the Fundamento in order to not only commune with the past, as many scholars argue undergirds the poem, but to explore this re-shaped History and challenge the fundamental aspects of the monument.

Thus, the “general” in the title of Canto general not only contributes to the poem’s grandiosity as a song to an entire hemisphere of exploited peoples and history, but draws attention to and “materializes” the generative and genetric aspects of its natural elements, minerals whose reformation inters idealized origins. The “general” of the title may also point to the very act of historical exploration, one that Foucault may describe as

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63 The “Fundamento” is, according to Julia Lesage, a Nerudian term: “In Las alturas de Macchu Picchu the poet describes his totally self-conscious penetration into the Fundamento [which encompasses] the past, death, nature, his heritage” (225).
a Nietzschean “genealogy” that ultimately exposes the futility of a search for ideal origins, demonstrating that Neruda, by constructing his own monument from the native *materia* of the Americas, falls into the trap of searching for and re-shaping origins, an act that he criticizes in the construction of conventional monumental objects. The possibility of this monumental self-subterfuge is also a key aspect of Neruda’s work I wish to examine here.

**Materialism and Neruda’s Monumental Takeover**

In 1974, a sculptor named Raúl Ayala Arellano created two remarkable and very similar statues named “Gonzalo Guerrero y sus hijos,” placed in two different sites in Mexico. Each of the statues illustrates an idealized origin of the *mestizo* through the use of the imagined body of the “indigenized” Spanish conquistador, Gonzalo Guerrero, who in 1511 was shipwrecked in the Yucatán and subsequently taken in by a nearby Maya population. These monumental objects, one placed in Mérida and the other in Akumal, demonstrate that the imagined Americanized body is utilized, even in recent times, as a means of establishing the permanence of an ideology by fixing the body in both solid and imagined/poetic *materia*. The statues are fascinating for the way in which a corporeal narrative has been written upon the surface of bronze which emphasizes, as Rolena Adorno has observed in her study of the statue, that “la precariedad de las fuentes

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64 See Ayala Arellano, Raúl in “Works Cited” for URL address for this image.
[de historia] precisamente [ofrece] un material de plasticidad suficiente para moldear y remoldear sus contenidos con el prestigio de lo histórico” (912). The use of solid matter, in Adorno’s rendering, as a means to mold historical events, figures, or narratives in order to reinforce a contemporary ideology is a fascinating aspect of monumentalism, and begs for an intensive examination of various aspects of physical and poetic monuments. As I have stated in the first chapter\(^{65}\), contemporary history is often formed by means of what Paul Connerton refers to as “traces,” artifacts upon which a historical narrative may be written in subsequent historical epochs. The “traces” of such historical figures as Gonzalo Guerrero, whose very name may be an invention\(^{66}\), does not alter the fact that “the outline of Guerrero’s life is well-established historically” (Mueller, 137). Yet, the absences in this biography allow for liberties to be taken, and, as a result, “the conjectural details of his biography and the limited historical facts have tempted revisionists from the beginning” (Mueller, 137). It is precisely this latent material of the nebulous figure of Guerrero – combined with the need to shape a monument that embodies a collective ideology – that led to the construction of these two sites of embellished or invented Latin

\(^{65}\) See my Chapter One, in the section entitled “Walter Benjamin and Deathly History,” in which I examine the role of the artifact in the formation of contemporary history.

\(^{66}\) See Rolena Adorno’s engaging piece on the statues of Guerrero, wherein she states that “el apellido ‘Guerrero’ no aparece en las narraciones de su caso hasta la publicación de la Historia general de las Indias de Francisco López de Gómara en 1552 (otros testimonios anteriores contienen nombres distintos)” (912; “the name “Guerrero” does not appear in the narration of his case until the publication of the General History of the Indies of Francisco López de Gómara of 1552 (previous testimonies contain other distinct names”).
American identity. The memorial, despite representing the purported figure of Guerrero, in reality entirely elides the historical individual himself, forming a monument that is quite distinct from those that are fashioned after recognizable historical figures. Guerrero, an intermediate figure who bridged the indigenous culture and the European imperial invaders, is re-imagined so that the concept of the ancestral mestizo may be reified. And it is this process of ideologically reconstructing the identity of the indeterminate bodies that in many ways serves the project of monumentalization. This is the ambiguous process that is both contested and enacted by Pablo Neruda in *Canto general*.

Moreover, despite the religious and metaphysical aspects of Neruda’s poem, the shared space of bodies and stones demonstrates that laboring persons cannot be forgotten or disappear in the æther but, instead, are continuously present and regenerated within their constructions, exemplifying what Richard C. Vitzthume refers to in his monograph *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition* (1995) as a “plenitude of being,” which signifies that “[t]here can be no ‘nothingness’ or ‘nonbeing’ … only varieties of material being” (229). Thus, laboring and indigenous, or indigenized, bodies, despite elision in European histories, continue to function by embodying the memory of their own existence, yet may only be recalled to contemporary memory by the poet, as Neruda’s poet-narrator declares intermittently throughout the poem:

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pero no puedo, no puedo
sino arrancar de tu silencio
una vez más la voz del pueblo …
(281).
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but I cannot, I cannot
but wrench from your silence
the people’s voice again …
(Schmitt, 142).
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The instantiation of materialism by the poet is, in a sense, a means to rescue those who would otherwise disappear. Neruda’s poetic materialism demands that despite monumental attempts to inter the memory of laborers, their existence within the very material of the monument (and his poetic recollection of their bodies) affirms that these individuals, and the cultural/national identity that they embody, cannot vanish within a European-validated History.

The Guerrero statues, as ideological attempts to re-shape History, form physical loci of invented collective memory and form concrete sites that emerge from textual narratives and from which textual narratives have burgeoned, in turn. The monuments exemplify the encounter of the imaginary and the fixed, the textual and material, the collision of which Daniel Tiffany concisely problematizes by asking: “What do the intuitive properties of an object (what we can perceive of it) have in common with the invisible foundation of material substance?” This intersection of the poetic and substantial informs a materialist approach to poetry and, as Tiffany argues, demonstrates that poetry can reveal the artifice of the surface of the material, such that:

“real bodies appear to be composed of unreal substance. And the substance of things – the insensible foundation of material bodies – possesses intuitive reality solely in the form of images and tropes. Substance, in this sense, is the solution to the … verbal identity of these objects … the role of analogy in the determination of material substance [and] the inescapable role of language in depicting the nonempirical qualities … The production of verbal or lyric substance in poetry

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67 For an explanation of the capitalized, European-validated concept of “History,” see my Chapter Three.
therefore corresponds to an essential aspect of the way [we understand] the nature of the material world” (75).

Hence, examining the deeper material at the intersection of the textual and physical monument demonstrates that *materia* mined from historical traces and from the landscape often reveals a narrative that is quite different from what is shaped upon the monument’s surface. The concept of materialism is a useful tool for carrying out the “archeology” of the monument in its many forms, although the term has undergone many variations since its earliest inception. One of its most recent uses emerged as an aspect of “historical materialism,” issuing from the work of Friedrich Engels and serving to substantiate Marxism in its initial stages as a burgeoning philosophy, a topic that very much interested Neruda. The concept underwent another transition in the 1980s by Raymond Williams, who first conceived the term “cultural materialism” in his well-known text *Marxism and Literature* (1977), described succinctly as “a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism” (5). Although the concept

68 According to Richard C. Vitzthum, the concept of materialism, which he defines as the notion that “human beings are entirely the product of material nature and that material nature is all there is,” meticulously demonstrates materialism’s long history from the very early stages of Classical Greek philosophy, through the Middle Ages, and onward to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (229).

69 Frank Riess notes that Neruda believed in the “benefit of the collectivity, who can use the minerals of the earth for their salvation on earth and achieve a unity that is perfect” (125). This collective endeavor materialized through earthly substances has, as Riess states, “obvious Marxist references for Neruda.” As Marx would have it, the "materialist conception of history” entails “[t]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men” (Marx, *The German Ideology*, 47). It is this process that finds its metaphorical materialization in Neruda’s poetry.
of materialism subsequently declined from academic interest, it is again becoming a topic that engages scholars today, as apparent in such texts as *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. In this study, the authors argue for the limitless possibilities of the material, stating that “[a]t every turn we encounter physical objects fashioned by human design and endure natural forces whose imperatives structure our daily routines … [T]he capacity of these currently dominant theories … to alert us to the way power is present in any attempt to represent material reality … give material factors their due in shaping society and circumscribing human prospects” (Coole and Frost, 2-3). This critical anthology foregrounds a renewed interest in the evolution in materialist thought, foregrounding the intersection of materialism and power in a new stage of what the authors refer to as a “new materialism.” This argument for the re-emergence of materialist thought underscores my own concern with regard to the monumental aspects of *Canto general*: that “a reprisal of materialism … means returning to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world” (Coole and Frost, 3). This new approach delves into the utilization of *materia* in human productions and sheds new light on the ideological function of monuments in American monumentalism.

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70 The term “new materialism” is not itself an entirely new concept. According to Vitzthum, the term “new materialism” was first coined by Roy Wood Sellars in his text *The Philosophy of Physical Realism* (1932), in which the term signifies the role of physics in “quantifying nature,” having little to do with ideas of power that interest Coole and Frost in their utilization of the term (Vitzthum, 133).
As the Guerrero statues graphically exemplify, material substances mined from history can be shaped to substantiate past events, historical episodes that emerge periodically and are substantiated by means of terrestrial metals and elemental materials. These materials are, of course, chosen for the permanence that they will impart to the monument, with the prospect that the construction will endure and outlast historical vicissitudes. However, as Neruda illustrates, this will-to-permanence is misguided, since the materials mined from the American landscape are shaped from stone that is simultaneously the human organism, “cuerpos: aceros convertidos” [“bodies: transformed steels”], flesh that is either silent or dead from its integration into the monumental construction (Neruda, Canto, 127). The imbrication of the flesh and stone conveys a materialist theory of natural history that Walter Benjamin argues places “emphasis on the transitory, or the process of decay that marked history” (Hanssen, 9). To observe this process take place is particularly relevant to a study of monumentalism because Benjamin’s view of history evinces a materialist history that hinges upon the “[w]elding together [of] nature and history [that] pointed to the originary unity and dialectical interaction between nature and history” (Hanssen, 9). The dialectical interaction of nature and history, one that Neruda explores throughout Canto general, is manifested in the work of the creative poetic text, since this “natural history” is simultaneously “a nonhuman … history, which often found its privileged topos in the work of art” (Hanssen, 10). The materialist monumental poem, then, functions as the site of a dialectic of nature and history, and invites the reader to excavate the “object of
knowledge” that lies within it – knowledge of the work of art that, in this case, recuperates the exploitative enterprise of monumental construction by excavation of the true “material content” that may only be discovered in its *materia*: the stone, earthly material that is shaped by laboring hands (Hanssen, 71).

The incarnation (or “encarnalization”) of the exploited through the poetic excavation of material substances takes place in roughly three stages within the narrative way stations of Neruda’s *Canto general*, which may be described as pre-lapsarian, lapsarian, and post-lapsarian. The pre-lapsarian is encapsulated within the first two cantos of the epic, evinced especially by the idealized context of the “Alturas de Machu Picchu.” The lapsarian is a transitional stage that takes place in the following canto, during the Conquest of the Americas and the conflict that arises from this period between indigenous peoples and the Spanish conquistadors, many key players of which are addressed by name in the poem. The post-lapsarian stage includes the remaining twelve cantos of the poem, and encompasses the violent process of actualizing national Independence, and the ultimate formation of national identity within a neo-imperialist global society after the fetters of the monument are demolished.

With regard to Machu Picchu, Neruda has re-appropriated the icon of what has become a memorial to an autonomous Peruvian past. As Helaine Silverman states, “[e]arly in its independence history, Peru recognized the importance of its conquered

71 A similar phenomenon takes place with regard to Octavio Paz’s appropriation of the Piedra de sol, which I explore in-depth in Chapter Two.
cultural heritage to the project of nation building … for reasons that also encompass the deeply historic, social, personal, and political problems and aspirations” (899). The site of Machu Picchu has served a multitude of political purposes from the first movements toward Independence, as Silverman states in one contemporary example: “References to the brilliant pre-Columbian past continue as Peru enters the 21st century … [N]otable in [a recent] presidential election … the winning candidate, Alejandro Toledo … announced that he would symbolically take his oath of office on the mystical heights of Machu Picchu … He said that the ceremony would evoke an Inca ritual of homage to … *pachamama* (mother earth) … [I]t is the Incas, above all … who are the basis of virtually all national appropriations” (882). By allegorically infusing the monument with the flesh of laborers, Neruda reclaims Machu Picchu from the incessant appropriation of indigenous monuments from their re-interpretation by means of political ideology.

Although the building of monumental sites does occur from the very earliest sections of the poem, it is within the most well-known section of the epic, entitled “Alturas de Macchu Picchu,” that we see an elucidated allegorical integration of flesh and stone that will inform the remainder of the epic. This consolidation occurs during an idealized period of construction of the primordial Machu Picchu, which lays the foundation for the process of subsequent memorial construction:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Muertos de un solo abismo, sombras de una hondonada, } & \quad \text{O remains of a single abyss, shadows of one gorge –} \\
\text{la profunda, es así como al tamaño de vuestra magnitud} & \quad \text{the deep one – the real, most searing death} \\
\text{vino la verdadera, la más abrasadora muerte y desde las rocas taladradas,} & \quad \text{attained the scale of your magnitude,}
\end{align*}
\]
desde los capiteles escarlata,
desde los acueductos escalares
os desplomasteis como en un otoño
en una sola muerte.
Hoy el aire vacío ya no llora,
ya no conoce vuestros pies de arcilla,
…
Él sostuvo una mano que cayó de repente
desde la altura hasta el final del tiempo.
Ya no sois, manos de araña, débiles
hebras, tela enmarañada:
cuanto fuisteis cayó: costumbres, sílabas
raídas, máscaras de luz deslumbradora.

Pero una permanencia de piedra y de palabra:
la ciudad como un vaso se levantó en las manos
de todos, vivos, muertos, callados,
sostenidos
de tanta muerte, un muro, de tanta vida un golpe
de pétalos de piedra: la rosa permanente,
la morada:
este arrecife andino de colonias glaciales.

Cuando la mano de color de arcilla
se convirtió en arcilla, y cuando los pequeños párpados se cerraron
llenos de ásperos muros, poblados de castillos,
y cuando todo el hombre se enredó en su agujero,
quedó la exactitud enarbolada
(133-4, emphasis added).

and from the quarried stones,
from the spires,
from the terraced aqueducts
you tumbled as in autumn
to a single death.
Today the empty air no longer weeps,
no longer knows your feet of clay,
…
It sustained a hand that fell suddenly
from the heights to the end of time.
You are no more, spider hands, fragile
filaments, spun web:
all that you were has fallen: customs,
frayed
syllables, masks of dazzling light.

But a permanence of stone and word:
the citadel was raised like a chalice in the hands
of all, the living, the dead, the silent,
sustained
by so much death, a wall, from so much
life a stroke
of stone petals: the permanent rose, the dwelling:
this Andean reef of glacial colonies.

When the clay-colored hand
turned to clay, when the little eyelids
closed,
filled with rough walls, brimming with
castles,
and when the entire man was trapped in his hole,
exactitude remained hoisted aloft:
this high site of the human dawn:
the highest vessel that has contained
silence:
a life of stone after so many lives
(Schmitt, 35).
In this section of the poem, the poet-narrator speaks directly to the corpses that have given over flesh to the monumental structure. He states that these bodies are literally consumed ("abrasadora") and in the same breath, the material of stone, read flesh, is pierced ("taladrada") as it is shaped into monumental structures. These bodies also form the materia of the column, a trope I have already discussed in Chapter Two\(^{72}\), which functions as the support of monumental constructions that embody an entire history of bondage to labor. Despite the fact that this primordial site embodies an idealized originary moment, monumental objects necessitate labor for their construction and are, thus, sostenidos de tanta muerte. These bodies contribute to the permanencia de piedra y de palabra (the permanence of stone and word), and it is for this reason that Machu Picchu, literally, embodies an idealized monumental site that will endure forever.

Thus, during this one originary and implicitly pre-lapsarian period, the monument as it is portrayed in the poem represents all of those bodies that have contributed to its formation in opposition to, as we shall see later, a disregard for the identity of the laborers and the memorialization of a single exploitative figure. Though silent, the monument of Machu Picchu embodies the language, voices, and flesh of those who built it, foregrounding the materialism that is imbued within the poetic monument:

El hombre que construye es luego el humo de lo que construyó, nadie renace de su propio brasero consumido: de su disminución hizo existencia,  

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\(^{72}\) See subsection “‘Derek’ and Counter-monumental Reconstruction”.
cayó cuando no tuvo más que polvo. (Schmitt, 98).

When lyrically “viewing” the structure of Machu Picchu, the textual image of the structure allegorically exemplifies “a moment in the history of materialism when matter is captured by language and thus, suspended between materiality and immateriality” (Tiffany, 76). In these lines of the poem, the poet-narrator describes the process of construction, imbuing the monumental structure with the builder’s vitality that then becomes interred within it, equating the site with the characteristics of fire and smoke, elements appearing to embody substance but simultaneously exhibiting ephemerality. This construction also refers to the text itself, and the poet as builder, illustrating that “materialism in its most rigorous forms descends unavoidably into language, to a place where matter is mostly not matter, where matter cannot be distinguished from the tropes and analogies that make it intelligible” (Tiffany, 76). The poem is a crossroads of language and materia and forms the ideal site in which to explore the bodies that historically form the monument, commencing from its roots in universalizing monuments such as Machu Picchu to the exploitative monuments that were built after the lapsarian Conquest.

The intersection of the material component of the monument, the flesh of the laborer who builds it, and the poetic monument in which the physical monument is depicted occurs at the locus of the allegory – the site of multiple meanings and the geneses of many possible narrative avenues. In this case, “[a]llegory … marks a bifurcation or division in the directionality of the interpretive process, and we can see
such a bifurcation cutting across the kind of ‘reading’ that [the] monument … seems to demand” (Slemon, 4). The allegorization of laboring flesh with monumental stone is, in many ways, a summons by the poet-narrator for the re-interpretation of monuments. Continuing from the passage cited above, the poet-narrator states that Machu Picchu functions as:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>el alto sitio de la aurora humana:</td>
<td>this high site of human dawn:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la más alta vasija que contuvo el</td>
<td>the highest vessel that has contained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silencio:</td>
<td>silence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>una vida de piedra después de tantas</td>
<td>a life of stone after so many lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vidas (134).</td>
<td>(Schmitt, 35).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Here, the primordial monument is the “highest site of the human dawn,” the highest vessel to contain within it silenced laborers (entombed language), and operates as a life of stone, of so many living stones built upon each other. The “dawn” here is a dawn of both humankind as a whole and the individual birth, signifying both a site of the origin of man and the creation of the person who (e)merges allegorically from the stone. This sort of double entendre is essential to the image of the stone, and is paradigmatic of the “division of interpretation” that forms a site lying at the center of the contest between the seemingly antithetical concepts of the permanence and ephemerality of art.

The ancestral constructions of Machu Picchu are invaded by the Spanish conquistadors in the section of the text entitled “Los conquistadores,” an event that signals the “lapsarian” section of the poem and an evolution of stone. The Natives of America are described as innocents who are “burned and branded, / bitten and buried” and die “startled” (Schmitt, 145). The subsequent and inevitable conflict takes place at
the level of stones, in which indigenous constructions, like Native bodies, are demolished. One example of the intersection of the slaying of Native bodies with the destruction of indigenous monuments is illustrated by the first gravestones, erected in Guatemala:

Guatemala, la dulce, cada losa de tu mansión lleva una gota de sangre antigua devorada … Alvarado machacó tu estirpe, quebró las estelas astrales, se revolcó en tus martirios … (152)

Sweet Guatemala, every gravestone of your mansion bears a drop of ancient blood devoured … Alvarado crushed your kin, smashed your astral stelae, wallowed in your martyrdom … (Schmitt, 48)

Each gravestone functions as a stone imbued with indigenous blood, and has been allegorically devoured by the European invaders. The stela is portrayed as akin to the fleshly gravestone, and the inclusion of a stela is particularly significant since it is one of the most visible and accessible artifacts of Mesoamerica today and, thus, is most commonly associated with Mesoamerica. The stone structures have formed an integral aspect of the cultural lives of those who built them: “[t]he conceptual link between rulership, freestanding stone sculptures, and dynastic and temporal rites of passage lies in a realm of spiritual associations … identified with their stone monuments and related types of directional shrines” (Newsome, 115). In the Canto, stelae are referred to as estirpe [kin], ancestors of the gravestones and crushed by the conquistador. In section XI of “Los conquistadores,” stones demonstrate fragmentation of indigenous bodies:

la elevación de las rocas cortadas … the elevation of the sculpted rocks …
Palpitó cada escama de la piedra, Each flake of stone trembled,
sintió el pavor caído … felt the dread descending …
habló con las corrientes de la tierra, spoke with the currents of the earth,
This passage exemplifies the significance of the allegory of stone and flesh within the rock that has been sculpted into memorial structure, one that is losing its original significance as the landscape around it is transformed by invading conquistadors. The fragments of stone that form the object “palpitan” (“tremble”), solid, silenced, and suffering inherent discord. The image of the sleeping soldier here forms a significant contrast with the nearby monument at whose foot he sleeps. Although the stone monument feels dread and trembles, it is nonetheless immobile and silent, while the soldier, who presumably is aware of nothing, is rife with mobile and destructive potential.

In section XX, in a subsection of the poem entitled “Se unen la tierra y el hombre,” the poet-narrator depicts the idealized environment of La Araucanía, in which the use of the past tense signifies the lost relationship between the terrestrial and human. This lament for the unavoidable transition that is taking place between man and his environment delineates a disappearing original unity, and illustrates the synchronicity of flesh and rock:

Araucanía …
Oh Patria despiadada, amada oscura …
eras sólo gargantas minerales,
manos de frío, puños
acostumbrados a cortar peñascos:
eras, Patria, la paz de la dureza …
No tuvieron mis padres araucanos

Araucanía …
O merciless Homeland, my dark love …
You were only mineral gullets,
hands of cold, fists
accustomed to splitting rocks:
Homeland, you were the peace of hardness …
cimeras de plumaje luminoso, …
eran piedra y árbol …
cabeza de metal guerrero …
Se hicieron sombra los padres de piedra, se anudaron al bosque, a las tinieblas naturales, se hicieron luz de hielo …
un fragmento de metal que oía …
Así nació la patria unánime:
la unidad antes del combate (171-2).

My Araucanian ancestors had no crests of luminous plumes …
they were stone and tree …
heads of militant metal …
The forefathers of stone became shadows,
they were bound to the forest, the natural asperities of land and thorns …
a fragment of metal that listened …
That’s how the country was born unanimous:
unity before combat (Schmitt, 61).

The ideal nature of this conjunction of stone and flesh lies within the unformed nature of the rock, its confinement to the forest and the “asperities” that it retains in its natural state. The process of splitting these rocks exhibits the extent of the labor that takes place with regard to the stone in Neruda’s idealized setting, enacted for the good of the indigenous population itself. This labor moreover serves allegorically as an illustration of the expanding population of bodies that each forms a fragment of the entire indigenous corporeal stone, indicative of a once-thriving society.

The process of the poetic appropriation of monuments begins in earnest after the conclusion of “Los conquistadores,” when the lengthy “post-lapsarian” stage of the epic begins. The section of the epic entitled “Los libertadores” commences the difficult road to Independence and, in later sections of the text, transitions into an attack of the formation of national identity within a neo-imperialist global society. This post-lapsarian period, one that reaches into the poet’s own historical context, necessitates the dissemination of interested ideologies – including the poet’s own. The ideological contentions that occur in the text may be succinctly described, as a recent article has
stated, as a “utopian vision” in which Marxist ideals – the tools by which the poet will chip away at the monument’s exterior – confront imperialist appropriation of “lo material,” or natural resources that are embodied by the mineral and stone – resources qua corporeal labor.

**The Forging of an Originary Moment and the Fallacy of Permanence**

The perception of permanence versus ephemerality or transience of the material object is crucial to recognizing that the memorial artifact portrays one narrative while embodying another. The poet, intending to recapture the seemingly imperishable monument to infuse it with a new narrative formed from laboring flesh, tears down the ideological substance that the monument exemplifies at a given historical moment and infuses it with a new poetics. The division of the monument into the human *materias* that forms its internal structure and the shaped surface that is forged with a disregard for its “underlying” substance evinces a “stratification” that, through poetic excavation, reveals Neruda’s process of architectonic analysis. The poet explores the History of a national ideology by means of an allegorical geologic interrogation of the monument, a method of inquiry wherein "the structures of a work, its architectonic forms … are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships" (Foucault, 118). This analysis is particularly apparent in a subsection of the poem entitled “Cuauhtémoc,” in which the poet-narrator addresses the Mexica ruler as an allegory for the idealized laboring body. The well-known account of Cuauhtémoc’s capture serves to allegorically convey the process of reformation of the material substance of the monument:
joven estremecido en las tinieblas metálicas de México …

Son tus labios unidos por la muerte el más puro silencio sepultado …

Pero en la noche huía tu corazón como un venado hacia los límites … entre los monumentos sanguinarios, bajo la luna zozobrante …

Era la tierra una oscura cocina, piedra y caldera, vapor negro … que te llamaba desde los nocturnos metales de tu patria.

Pero una mano dura como siglos de piedra apretó tu garganta. No cerraron tu sonrisa … te arrastraron, vencedor cautivo, por las distancias de tu reino, entre cascadas y cadenas … como una columna incesante, como un testigo doloroso, hasta que una soga enredó la columna de la pureza y colgó el cuerpo suspendido sobre la tierra desdichada (189).

The “joven” ("youth") referred to is Mexico’s idealized origins, its voice now sealed away and interred. Mexico’s heart, it’s “gargantas minerales” encountered in a previous section of the poem, is buried away in monuments that are formed from the blood of the indigenous population. The land has become a series of forges, signified by an oscura cocina that is made up of stone, steam, and the “metals” of the country – the laboring
bodies. The working hand, made of stone, grips the throat of the country whose body is hung on a European column, and signifies the choking away of an idealized “youth.” Near the end of the poem, the poet-narrator actually addresses Cuauhtémoc as a blood relative, even touching him, again bringing attention to the laboring hand that they in his cosmos share: “nuestra mano oscura” (612; “our dark hand”).

Another way to consider this section of the poem is by means of what is likely the most famous three-dimensional monument to Cuauhtémoc, the “Monumento a Cuauhtémoc” (1887) by Miguel Noreña and Francisco M. Jiménez that stands on the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City. The statue evinces a history of the utilization of an historical figure that elides the body of the indigenous peoples whose culture and history is represented on the monument’s surface. According to Paul Gillingham, the “raw material … left, rather, the shapers of historia patria in a symbolic power vacuum. Had Cuauhtémoc not existed, it would have been eminently necessary to invent him. The cultural nationalists of the liberal era and the Porfiriato … did just that” (69). This appropriation is an indication of a larger trend that preceded and followed Revolution, in which “the Indian was regarded in Romantic terms, not as an important actor in his own right but as the primeval source of the mestizo race … It was also from this context that there emerged a renewed admiration for Cuauhtémoc, who was redeemed as an emblem of el pueblo mexicano” (Fulton, 7). Subsequently, after the ideological popularity of the reconception of Cuauhtémoc again seemed to wane, the monumental image was once more famously utilized by David Alfaro Siqueiros who, during a contentious period of
the Soviet Union\textsuperscript{73}, obsessively painted “a spear-waving hero [who] seems to be inspired by the nineteenth-century Cuauhtémoc Monument on Paseo de la Reforma, of which Siqueiros kept a paint-stained photograph” (Fulton, \emph{Paeans}, sidebar 79). The “Monumento a Cuauhtémoc” resonates with the Guerrero statues in a particularly American way: both evince the ideals of \emph{mestizaje}, but one embodies the \emph{mestizaje} ideals of an indigenous corporeally powerful potential, while the other (and nearly a century more recent) incarnation envisions the Mestizo fully formed. The juxtaposition of these two figures illustrates the various (and nefarious) means by which such historical entities are appropriated from historical traces to solidify a contemporary political ideology. The statue of Cuauhtémoc, then, may function as one of the “bloody monuments” that Neruda describes, and the chains that drag the body of Cuauhtémoc, the embodiment of the indigenous laboring population, are the \emph{cadenas} of history that utilize his image from one historical period to another. Of course, by utilizing Cuauhtémoc as a stand-in for a contemporary laboring population, Neruda is enacting the same process of appropriation as such political figures as Don Vicente Riva Palacio, who chose to utilize the image of Cuauhtémoc as a tool to promote the Porfirian regime at the end of the nineteenth, beginning of the twentieth century.

The materiality of the monument and the poem is centered, in the post-lapsarian stage of the epic, on the dynamic mining of mineral and stone, stones that progressively

\textsuperscript{73} Siqueiros’ alleged involvement in an assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky on May 24, 1940, is well known. In the book \emph{Siqueiros: His Life and Works} (1994) by Philip Stein, an entire chapter is devoted to Siqueiros’ involvement in this plot.
come to embody human history. The initial absence of this history is apparent in the
beginning of the poem, when the poetic-narrator asks:

Tequendamas, recuerdas
… abriendo muros de oro
hasta caer del cielo en el teatro
aterrador de la piedra vacía? (115)

Tequendama, do you remember
… opening walls of gold until you
fell from the sky into the terrifying
theater of empty stone? (Schmitt, 20)

The “vacant” stones do not yet embody history, but from this point, they become the
means by which the poet illustrates the development of human history progressively
rendered into the stone. Through the extraction of these stones from the earth, their
manipulation and reformation, Neruda allegorically delineates the progression of human
estrangement from the materia with which human labor works, a process that plays out in
the laborers’ alienation from national identity and monumental ideological product of
their labor. The stones and their elemental constituents, mineral, become a means to
indicate the exploitation and suffering at the hands of Europeans by the Native population
and subsequently the Mestizo peoples. The poet enacts this archeology by ultimately
portraying the stone and mineral in its natural state as the monument of human beings,
and the stone and mineral, once shaped and restructured from its original state in the
sculpting of monuments illustrates the damage that such “unnatural” use of the stone, and
signifies the damage that the Americas have suffered under various forms of exploitation
throughout human history.

This lapidarian progression is evinced in the section of the poem entitled “Las
flores de Punitaqui” wherein, on a “jueves mojado” (“wet Thursday”), a “día de vapor /
construye sobre los cerros su gris ferretería” (288; “a steamy day / builds its gray foundry on the hills” Schmitt, 289). This Thursday is, simultaneously, “las pequeñas semillas / que en sus bolsas guardaron los campesinos hambrientos: hoy apresuradamente picarán la tierra y en ella / dejarán caer sus granitos de verde vida” (288; “of little seeds / that hungry peasants store in their pockets: today they’ll hurriedly break the earth and / drop their little grains of green life into it” Schmitt, 289). Here we see the relationship that is immediately drawn between the casting of metal and the sustenance of the peasant who buries away the seed of his life at the foot of the foundry. There is no mention of the crop that may grow from the sowing of the peasant seeds. Instead, the poet-narrator provides a brief description of the barren landscape that is poignantly followed by a stanza that brings stone to life, insinuating that it is stone that grows from what the peasant has planted:

Las rocas son inmensas bolsas coaguladas
en la edad del fuego, sacos ciegos de piedra
que rodaron hasta fundirse en estas implacables estatuas que vigilan el valle
(488).

The rocks are immense bags congealed
in the age of fire, blind sacks of stone
that rolled until they were fused in these implacable statues that stand vigil over the valley (Schmitt, 290).

The association of stone and bag refers again to the originary vacancy of the stones, that are “congealed,” petrified, forged in the “age of fire” that alludes to that narrative that occupies them once they are forged in “foundry fires” – an allegory for the technologies that allow for the formation of statues and monuments, formed from the sowing of peasant labor, constructions that will look down forever upon the valley of laborers.
As the section of the epic progresses, the poet-narrator introduces an individual named Juan Ovalle who, not unlike Cuauhtémoc, functions as exemplar of the laboring body. Ovalle exhibits the imbrication of the metonymic hand for the laborer and the fleshly stone that both he and the poet-narrator share: “Juan Ovalle,” the narrator states, “la mano te di, mano sin agua, / mano de piedra,” (189; “I gave you my hand, a waterless hand, / a stone hand” Schmitt, 291). Mauricio Ostria González notes that, in these lines of the poem, “[a]hora, los seres humanos adquieren rasgos del desierto … De pronto, a los ojos del poeta testigo, el sacrificio de los mineros adquiere rasgos y prestigio míticos” (“Now, the human beings acquire features of the desert … Suddenly, to the eyes of the poet witness, the sacrifice of the miners acquires mythical features and prestige”; 119).

As the figure of the laborer and the earthly minerals merge, the body and its sacrifice to the foundry take on mythical resonances that infuse Neruda’s epic with a materialist ideology: statues formed from the miner’s labor and forged from the miner’s hand are inescapably infused with the matter of laboring flesh and the earth’s most durable substances. As Frank Riess notes, “the Canto general records [laborers’] enduring achievements … Work not only is a means of constructing permanent shapes, it is also a means of regaining contact with tierra … when man and earth are come together for a common end” (124). This lyrical portrayal of exploitative work is the primary means by which Neruda may enjoin the laborer to reunification with the landscape, but also allows the poet to reacquire objects that, as I have discussed at length in previous chapters, presume to embody a permanent message. The poet thus unveils the monumental as “a
historical text rather than as universal condition or metahistorical norm” (Huyssen, *Seduction*, 191). By means of his materialist poetics, Neruda deprives the most seemingly permanent artifact of ideological images of its immortality in order to re-infuse it with a narrative that glorifies the hands and flesh that built it.

One of the most illustrative sections within “Las flores de Punitaqui” is section five, entitled “Hasta los minerales,” in which the poet-narrator actually embarks upon an ascent, what the fifth century B.C. Greek historian Xenophon termed an *anabasis*, in order to imbue the miner with a material agency he would not otherwise possess:

Después a las altas piedras
de sal y de oro, a la enterrada república de los metales
subí:
eran los dulces muros en que una piedra se amarra con otra, con un beso de barro oscuro.

Un beso entre piedra y piedra por los caminos tutelares …
las pircas de materia pura,
las que llevan el interminable beso de las piedras del río a los mil labios del camino.

Subamos desde la agricultura al oro. Aquí tenéis los altos pedernales …

Y de allí en la transversal cuna del oro, en Punitaqui, frente a frente, con los callados palanqueros del pique, de la pala, ven, Pedro, con tu paz de cuero, ven, Ramírez, con tus abrasadas manos que indagaron el útero de las cerradas minerías,

Then I climbed to the high stones of salt and gold, to the buried republic of metals:
they were sweet walls on which one stone is bound to another with a kiss of dark clay.

A kiss between stone after stone along the tutelary roads …
the dry-stone walls of pure matter, those that bear the interminable kiss of river stones to the road’s thousand lips.

Let’s climb from agriculture to gold. The towering flintstones are here …

And from the transverse cradle of gold, there in Punitaqui, face-to-face, with the silent brakemen of the shaft, of the shovel, come, Pedro, with your leathery peace, come, Ramírez, with your burning hands that questioned the uterus of the confined mine works,
The narrator climbs a stone structure that is redolent of the heights he has encountered at Machu Picchu. They are structures, though, that inhabit the poem’s diegetic present in the vicinity of the foundry, the implacable, watching statues that contain within them the “republic of metals,” or the interred national identity bound within the “dark clay” of the laborer’s flesh. The intimacy that binds one stone and another is evinced by their ability to kiss, and alludes to the visceral nature of the stone. This intimacy is apparent even within the divisive walls of materia pura, the pure material mined from the earth and that forms the flesh of statue and laborer.

In order to intersect his own experience with that of the laborer, the poet-narrator has included a personal encounter with laborers in the region of Punitaqui whom he describes by name, clearly purposed to imbue this scene with the poet-narrator’s credibility in bearing witness as testigo and the epic as, to some degree, his testimonio, reinforcing the poet’s authority to speak for laboring individuals. He enumerates the roles that all contribute to the mining of the earth: the brakemen who ensures the safe arrival of cargo to the construction site; the mineshaft into which miners will enter; their shovels—synecdoche for the activity of mining; and, finally, the leathery hands of the miner that reach into the earth’s uterus to draw out the telluric flesh that will ultimately
form monumental structures. This section ends dramatically with the diabolical scars that remain on both the laborers’ bodies: “vuestras digitales / herramientas marcadas con fuego” (492).

The poet-narrator later illustrates the perpetuity of the life of the peasant in the mines, describing the beauty and generative nature found deep within the mineral, symbolized by the flowers that persist in growing despite interment:

las minerales hijas de la mina,
un ramo entre mis manos …
de aquella tierra dura,
depositaron en mis manos como
si hubieran sido halladas en la mina más honda
…
volveran desde el fondo sepultado del hombre.

Tomé sus manos y sus flores, tierra
despedazada y mineral …
Flores, flores de altura,
flores de mina y piedra …
 quedasteis vivas, construyendo
la pureza inmortal, una corola
de piedra que no muere. (493)

The hijas of the mineral deposit flowers into the hands of the poet-narrator, exemplifying the seeds of vitality within the stone that would seem otherwise inert. This image is significant because the flower here evinces a generative power and potential for beauty amid hardened and gray matter. The image of the flower is a striking contrast to the images of stone and mining with which it is juxtaposed, and seems, as Elizabeth Grosz states, to contribute to a “compound of sensations … composed through materials in their
particularity … Sensation can only emit its effects to the extent that its materials, materiality itself, become expressive” (74). The flower holds affective significance in this instance, and paves the way for the most beautiful and historically most deadly of earthly minerals: gold. The next stanza states:

Tuvo el oro ese día de pureza.
Antes de hundir de nuevo su estructura
en la sucia salida que lo aguarda,
recién llegado, recién desprendido
de la solemne estatua de la tierra,
fue depurado por el fuego, envuelto
por el sudor y las manos del hombre.
(494)

Gold had that day of purity.
Before plunging its structure again
into the dirty debut that awaits it,
recently arrived, recently extracted
from the solemn statue of the earth,
it was purged by fire, enveloped
by man’s sweat and hands.
(Schmitt, 295)

Gold here seems to function symbolically as the reification of an idealized period in the past, a sort of “Golden Age” when the mineral was not the cornerstone of capitalist market forces as it is today. Yet, for the poet-narrator, gold is a material instance when nature itself served as a monument to the unity that once existed between human beings and the landscape. Gold is extracted from the “solemn statue of the earth,” and indicates the removal of the materia of one monumental form to serve as the profit of another. The mining of gold, valued for its beauty and juxtaposed with the flower, is symbolic of the transformed material relationship between human beings and the earth.

This section, “Flores de Punitaqui,” ends with a declaration of the ways in which material aspects of a contemporary society must be re-appropriated in order to bring about a new society with unified laborers. A once-silenced people must take over the
material resources of the city in order to bring about a new reality formed from laboring hands:

Sobre esta claridad irá naciendo la granja, la ciudad, la minería, 20 y sobre esta unidad como la tierra firme y germinadora se ha dispuesto la creadora permanencia, el germen de la nueva ciudad para las vidas. Luz de los gremios maltratados, patria amasada por manos metalúrgicas …

muros armados por la albañilería desbordante, escuelas cereales, armaduras de fábricas amadas por el hombre. Paz desterrada que regresas, pan compartido, aurora, sortilegio del amor terrenal, edificado sobre los cuatro vientos del planeta. (502)

Above this clarity, farms, cities, mines will bring forth, and above this unity like firm germinant earth, creative permanence has been disposed, the seed of the new city for lives. Light from the abused trade unions, homeland kneaded by metallurgic hands …

walls erected by burgeoning masonry, grain schools, structures of factories forged by mankind. You return, exiled peace, shared bread, dawn, sorcery of earthly love, built above the four winds of the planet. (Schmitt, 301)

This intense and final stanza of “Flores” illustrates, as did the Anabase by St. John Perse in my first chapter, the material foundation of the city as a reflection of the perpetual characteristic of the monumental epic. The city will be appropriated and renewed by laboring, “metallurgic” hands that, once exploited for the construction of an alien monument, now forge a new city and provide “pan compartido” (“shared bread”), or a new collective memory.

As it should be obvious by now, the function of monumental material throughout this epic is extensive, and a thorough treatment of this topic surpasses the scope of this chapter. However, I would like to cite one final section of the poem in which the poet-
narrator establishes the historical significance of the monument within the teleology of
history. He does so by naming several port cities that seem to mark historical events and
includes, once again, an *anabasis*:

Subí a las rocas de Mollendo, blancas …
cráter cuyo agrietado continente …
sujeta entre las piedras su tesoro …
Pisagua, letra del dolor, manchada
por el tormento, en tus ruinas vacías,
en tus acantilados pavorosos,
en tu cárcel de piedra y soledades …
y en las desnudas grietas ofendidas
está la historia como un monumento
golpeado por la espuma solitaria.
Pisagua, en el vacío de tus cumbres,
en la furiosa soledad, la fuerza
de la verdad del hombre se levanta
como un desnudo y noble monumento.

I ascended the white rocks of Mollendo
... crater whose cracked continent
imprisons its treasure amid the stones ...
Pisagua, painful script, stained
by torment – in your empty ruins,
in your terrifying crags,
in your prison of stone and solitude ...
and in the offended naked fissures
history stands like a monument’s
pounded by the solitary foam.
Pisagua, in the emptiness of your peaks,
in the furious solitude, the force
of man’s truth rises
like a naked and noble monument.

(569)

The treasure buried within the stones of Mollendo signifies the region’s long history, one
that can be traced to the rule of the Inca, according to Inca Garcilaso de la Vega⁷⁴. The
account of Pisagua receives even greater attention, likely since it is famous for being the
site of a political prison, one that has housed such social “deviants” and enemies of the
State as communists. Tamara Lea Spira notes that the city has become a condemned

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⁷⁴ This event is recorded in Libro sexto, Capitulo XXVI in the *Comentarios reales de los Incas*: “habiendo alargado su Imperio más de quinientas leguas de largo a la parte del sur, desde Atacama hasta el río Maulli. Y por la parte del norte más de ciento y cuarenta leguas por la costa, desde Chincha hasta Chimu.” (“having extended his Empire over five hundred leagues extending to the south, from Atacama to the river Maulli. And toward the north over a hundred and forty leagues by the coast, from Chimu to Chincha”).
region, and “rendered by Pablo Neruda through empty ruins and terrifying cliffs …

Pisagua has served as a site for the detention, torture, and murder of leftists and queer 
‘sexual dissidents’ throughout the latter half of the twentieth century” (127). For Neruda 
this site, then, has become the apogee of the monumental, especially if we are to view the 
prison as a sort of metaphor for the monument. As a “painful script,” a manifest text that 
evinces language of anguish, the ruins are empty, the outer stone of the prison and rocks 
upon which it stands are terrifying, yet it is, within its walls and the peaks of its towers, 
“empty.” Yet, of course, like the cenotaph of the Unknown Soldier, an empty tomb 
symbolically enshrined by most nations, the prison is not empty, but inhabited by those 
who, in this case, seek to appropriate corporeal sovereignty and, as this section states, 
construct a new naked, noble monument built upon truth. This truth, of course, is one 
that is written by the poet himself and its incarnation is the epic Canto general.

**Generative History and Erasure of Identity: Poet as Didact**

The idea of the poet as an exemplar, instructor, or pedagogue is one that I have already 
discussed in Chapter One with regard to the Neo-classical “storyteller,” who assumes the 
role of “the high priest of eternal truths, the public educator” (Honour, 19). In this 
capacity the poet remains, in a sense, aloof from surrounding society, with the ability to 
observe and create a monumental text without hindrance from his contemporary 
historical period, and therefore able to create a monument for all time. Ralph Waldo 
Emerson, in his essay “The Poet” (1844), states that “the poet is … isolated among his 
contemporaries, by truth and by his art,” which is necessarily true, of course, because we
could all otherwise claim to be poets (254). But Emerson further states that one of the characteristics that distinguishes the poet from all others is that he wields a communal voice, and “traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” (254). This defining aspect of the poet, the epic-poet in particular, is an exceptional quality that is implicitly understood by those of us who are but “secondaries … as sitters or models in the studio of a painter, or as assistants,” because we accept that such poets have an ear to expression and the natural world that privileges them to write what “become the songs of the nations” (Emerson, 256). This ability and exceptional office is a powerful one, if the poet’s entrance into a cosmos can be so consequential, and if “[a]ll that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology” (Emerson, 258). Yet, Emerson’s idea of the “true poet,” one that reflects a popular understanding of the poet, and Neruda’s self-proclaimed poetic vocation diverge on a significant point: Emerson states that “Thou [the poet] shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all from the muse” (Emerson, 260). Neruda, however, insists that his calling as a poet resides in the very depths of the political world, in immersing himself and his creative objects into the earthly and ideological, eschewing the Muses for the materiality of human existence not just on but within the earth:

Quiero que a la salida de fábricas y minas
esté mi poesía adherida a la tierra,
al aire, a la victoria del hombre

At the gates of factories and mines I want
my poetry to cling to the earth,
to the air, to the victory of abused
maltratado.
Quiero que un joven halle en la dureza que construí, con lentitud y con metales, como una caja, abriéndola, cara a cara, la vida, y hundiendo el alma toque las ráfagas que hicieron mi alegría, en la altura tempestuosa.
(622)

mankind.
In the hardness that I built, like a box, slowly and with metals, I would like the youth who opens it, face-to-face, to find life, and plunging his soul in may he reach the gusts that spelled my happiness, in the stormy heights.
(Schmitt, 394)

Neruda, thus, re-imagines the function of the poet through his creation of Canto general, a role and duty that appropriates the implicit power of the poet-creator and centers it on a political and ideological “responsibility” from which the poet, in Emersonian terms, is commonly understood to be, by definition, exempt.

Neruda sees himself as a Whitmanesque poet-creator of lasting national identity, but one that is revolutionary and (in)formed by the laborer, and indicative of a distinct period of American history. As he states in an interview, “Chile has an extraordinary history. Not because of monuments or ancient sculptures … but rather because Chile was invented by a poet … The history of Chile thus had this epic greatness and heroism at birth” (Plimpton, 63). Neruda implicitly claims to reside within Chile’s “epic” heritage, yet despite assuming such an exalted platform as poetic demiurge, he claims to identify most with stones and laborers whom he depicts as proximate to the materia of the monument.

75 See discussion of Whitman as poet-creator in Chapter One.
Neruda speaks primarily to miners, workers of the terrestrial \textit{materia} within the realm of what Iván Carrasco and Jaime Concha refer to as the “Nerudian \textit{Fundamento},” a cosmological space where the poet must confront what may seem to be the senseless and constant degradation of the universe. As Iván Carrasco states: “Frente a la muerte que impregne todo lo viviente, el poeta siente la angustia de su vida sin sentido … de un mundo absurdo, y lucha contra la muerte, con el anhelo desesperado de vencerla mediante el encuentro de un Fundamento, de una realidad absoluta que anule su poder y devuelva el sentido a la realidad” (Carrasco, 9; “Facing a death that pervades everything living, the poet feels anguish of the senselessness of his life … of an absurd world, and fights to the death with the desperate longing to conquer it within the encounter of the Foundation, of an absolute reality that annuls his power and returns sense to his reality”). The implication of the poet’s encounter with death and the \textit{Fundamento} is that only \textit{he} may construct a bulwark against the senselessness of the life of the miner, and by means of his poetry the poet dutifully imbues the laborer with a new voice and agency.

Within the Nerudian cosmos, the poet thus resides in an exceptional space, in which his utility of language allows him to restore the relationship with the terrestrial that has become lost by the exploitation of the laboring body and the extirpation of stone and mineral from the earth. This endeavor necessitates re-imagining an originary period, one that informs the materialism of his poetics, as George B. Handley notes: “Neruda is interested in … what has formed him [that is] the natural world … In the beginning was not the Word of the poet but the sensual encounter with physical being, and it becomes
poetry’s task to capture anachronistically the essence of that encounter” (Handley, 74).
This linguistic capture is a significant aspect of the poetic task, one that Neruda has taken
in hand since “words arrive belatedly to try to recapture this prelinguistic experience of
things; words arrive belatedly to try to recapture this prelinguistic experience of
materiality” (174). However, this longing to recapture the lost experience of materiality
is now imbued with ideological resonances taking place throughout the epic.

Neruda hopes to reclaim the monument and the ideology it entails, and in doing
so he re-establishes the relationship between nature and human beings. It is by means of
this reformed monument that the poet-creator imbibes the laborer with a new voice.
However, what Neruda considers in many ways a noble task has, in reality, and perhaps
inevitably, enacted an appropriation of popular voice that is not unlike the sort of
interment employed by the monument. Likened to the very process that occurs in his
epic poem, Neruda has appropriated not the body and flesh of the pueblo but, rather, its
voice. Of course, in order to substantiate his monumental text in a way that will remain
as durable, if not more so, than a tangible monument, Neruda must, like all epic poets,
establish a collective memory76 that by the definition “grants a kind of eternal life to the
people and actions it preserves” (Russell, 794). In order to appoint himself the voice of a
nation, he cannot depend upon the individual memories of his contemporaries, since the
“modern collective memory … transcends individual human temporality. It derives its
immortality from its inherent ethical or aesthetic value, which naturally draws posterity to

76 For more about the epic poet and collective memory, please see Chapter One.
it and thus sustains it” (Russell, 794). Just as all poets who seek to adopt the role of national poet, he must construct the most durable and permanent of monuments, one embodied in the national epic.

This declaration of his monumental role in his nation’s history is implied throughout the *Canto general*, yet only after he has illustrated the process of monumental construction within the first two-thirds of the text does he exclaim his role in the instantiation of his own. His illustriousness is evinced by a repeated denial of his epic intentions, or inhibition of his own epic potential by means of those who hope to maintain an exploitative ideology. This self-denial and demurrer, instead, instead implicitly emphasizes his own justification for establishing himself as epic poet:

me decían: “Qué grande eres, oh Teócrito!”
Yo no soy Teócrito: tomé a la vida, me puse frente a ella, la besé hasta vencerla, y luego me fui por los callejones de las minas a ver cómo vivían otros hombres.
Y cuando salí con las manos teñidas de basura y dolores, las levanté mostrándolas en las cuerdas de oro, y dije: “Yo no comparto el crimen.”
Tosieron, se disgustaron mucho, me quitaron el saludo, me dejaron de llamar Teócrito, y terminaron por insultarme y mandar toda la policía a encarcelarme, porque no seguía preocupado exclusivamente de asuntos metafísicos.

(506-7)

they told me: “How great you are, O Theocritus!”
I’m not Theocritus: I took life, stood before it, kissed it until I conquered it, and then I went through the mine galleries to see how other men lived. And when I emerged with my hands stained with filth and grief
I raised and displayed them on gold chains, and I said: “I’m not an accomplice to this crime.”
They coughed, became very annoyed, withdrew their welcome, stopped calling me Theocritus, and ended up insulting me and sending all the police to imprison me, because I didn’t continue to be preoccupied exclusively with metaphysical matters.

(Schmitt, 304-5)
The poet-narrator self-effacingly denies the title of “Theocritus,” or paradigm of the telluric epic poet. However, by means of his minute attention to the imbrication of flesh and stone, and idealization of a relationship that human beings once experienced with the natural world, there is ample evidence that Neruda functions as a Theocritus reborn. His epic not only emanates the idyllic quality of Theocritean poetics, but further is not “preoccupied exclusively with metaphysical matters,” evidenced in his imbuing his poem with the materialism that reflects the reality of the laborer’s quotidian life. For this reason, he must sustain his creative aims despite the oppression he suffers, enacting the heroism of his fearlessness, a characteristic he has attributed thus far to the miner.

By means of archetypical ancient Greek personae, Neruda not only instantiates himself within the Chilean epic tradition, but within that of the entire West. His Theocritan apologia is not the sole reference to ancient Greece, but one among many, an element of the poem that substantiates his epic sensibility. He alludes to his creative power by later standing aside the “Nautilus” of Antiquity:

Pero debo nombrar, tocando apenas
oh Nautilus, tu alada dinastía,
la redonda ecuación en que navegas

…
y debo hacia las islas, en el viento,
irme contigo, dios de la estructura
(582).

But I should name, barely touching,
O Nautilus, upon your winged dynasty,
the round equation in which you navigate

…

and I must run to the islands,
in the wind, with you, god of structure
(Schmitt, 364).

In these brief lines, the poet-narrator deifies the nautilus mollusc, which conveys a seemingly carefully sculpted exterior that is striking for its intricacy and pearlescent
Yet, within the architecture of its beautiful structure resides the flesh of its builder, demiurgic in its miniature cosmos, and for the poet-narrator serves as a paragon of the monumental builder with whom he declares his kinship.

The poet-narrator places himself within a sort of teleology of excavation in which he, as poet, does the work of breaching stone to discover the history buried within it. By enacting this imagined disinterment, the poet confronts the buried national identity embodied in ruins as well as hand-as-laborer who fights to free himself from imprisonment:

No supe qué amé más, si la excavada antigüedad de rostros que guardaron la intensidad de piedras implacables, o la rosa reciente, construida por una mano ayer ensangrentada.

And so I went from land to land touching American clay, my stature, and oblivion recumbent in time rose through my veins, until one day its language shook my mouth. (Schmitt, 384)

The act of touching is significant here, indicating the poet’s material connection to American materia throughout time, and alluding to the creative touch that commenced the poem. Placing the scene in the historically vague moment of “un día” indicates the characteristics of the nature of process evinced by this connection, one that emerges from his mouth in the form of language. Touching and linguistic communion allows the poet-
narrator to enter beyond the epic teleology of the West into the realm of legend, and he

calls out to the pre-lapsarian realm:

Canto a Cuauhtémoc. Toco
su linaje de luna
y su fina sonrisa de dios martirizado.
Dónde estás, has perdido,
antiguo hermano, tu dureza dulce?
En qué te has convertido?
En dónde vive tu estación de fuego?
Vive en la piel de nuestra mano oscura.
(613)

I sing to Cuauhtémoc. I touch
his lunar lineage
and his fine smile of a martyred god.
Where are you, ancient brother,
have you lost your sweet hardness?
What has become of you?
Where does your season of fire live?
It lives in the skin of our dark hand.
(Schmitt, 385)

The poet-narrator dedicates Canto general to “Cuauhtémoc” who, like the monument
standing in Mexico City, has ceased to represent the original historical figure. Instead, in
the Nerudian epic, Cuauhtémoc signifies an epic genealogy within which the poet-
narrator operates, and with whom he is a brother. Yet, the poet-narrator asks his “sibling”
if he has “perdido … tu dureza dulce” (“lost … your sweet hardness”), as if he is perhaps
free of such monumentalism as the mineral statue of Cuauhtémoc represents. Yet, it
seems that Cuauhtémoc steps from the foundry into the fire, by becoming one with the
poet and contributing to yet another claim for national identity.

As the poem reaches its end, the poet-narrator declares more adamantly his
participation in the formation of his country’s monumental history by affirming, despite
his poetic self-apotheosis, that he is also the laboring miner par excellence. For example,
he states that the truth, the poet’s truth, is “más alta que la luna,” and “La ven como si
fuieran en un navío negro / los hombres de las minas cuando miran la noche / Y en la
sombra mi voz es repartida / por la más dura estirpe de la tierra” (675; “The men from the
The poet sings from the depths of stone, his flesh, like the laborers’, emanating from a mineral *materia*. Yet, he declares his “oficio” (“trade”) as one of metallurgy, the shaping of the very stones that he claims to sing for. Like the miner, he states that “[e]xtraje el bien como un metal, cavando / más allá de los ojos que mordían,” (616; “I extracted good like a metal, digging / beyond the eyes that bit” Schmitt, 389). He reaches past the “biting eyes” of the monument to reach the *materia* underneath, the “good” flesh of the
laborer. However, the poet-narrator has the ability to simultaneously join in this material existence:

Pero cuando fui piedra y argamasa,  
torre y acero, sílaba asociada:  
cuando estreché las manos de mi pueblo  
...  
se organizó el metal de la pureza.  
(618)

But when I was stone and mortar,  
tower and steel, associated syllable:  
when I joined hands with my people  
...  
the metal of purity was organized.  
(Schmitt, 390-1)

Perhaps by means of joining in the material existence of the laborer, the poet may reach those for whom he speaks since, for them, the poem is inaccessible:

No escribo para que otros libros me aprisionen  
sino para sencillos habitantes ...  

Escribo para el pueblo aunque no pueda leer mi poesía con sus ojos rurales.  
Vendrá el instante en que una línea ...  
el minero sonreirá rompiendo piedras.  
(621-2)

I don’t write so that other books can imprison me ...  
but for simple inhabitants ...  

I write for the people, even though they cannot read my poetry with their rustic eyes.  
The moment will come in which a line ...  
the miner will smile breaking stones.  
(Schmitt, 393)

The inaccessibility of his poetry actually contributes to the monumentalism of his text. Since monumentalism is marked by the numinous quality of the monument for those who look upon it, the epic distance that Neruda creates by building a monument contributes to its grandeur. If, to restate Jean Franco’s assertion: “figures that are venerated as sacred and therefore leave no room for a disparity of interpretations,” and “monumentalism reinforces the cult of the artist, turning art into a kind of pedagogy and
the public into obedient pupils,” then the process of appropriating the laboring voice actually functions as a means to perpetuate the poet’s epic status while didactically telling the story of his envisioned national identity, one that “rescues” the body of the laborer and maintains his poetic alturas (69; “heights”).

**Conclusion**

Neruda has succeeded in textually constructing a monument that is epic in historical breadth, thus exhibiting an “effort to create an American myth” (González Echeverría, 2). And, of course, the poem is modulated by Neruda’s political ideology, and as Roberto González Echeverría states in the “Introduction” to the English version of *Canto general*: “[t]he epic thrust of Neruda’s poem … holds the entire poetic enterprise together: Neruda’s faith in the ultimate redemption of humanity, even if such a salvation is to come through the agency of something as worldly as historical materialism … is to be taken as a song about the totality of the human” (6). This song, viscerally human yet epic in reach, nevertheless embodies Neruda’s imaginative construction of the monument, and moreover, through his conception of his teleology, reverberates with the monumentalism of his epic enterprise.

So influential is the poem that in any discussion of the text one must be cautious not to venture into hyperbole. However, as many scholars point out, Neruda’s modern epic is arguably the first of its “kind,” and one whose ambition seems to surpass its textuality. As González Echeverría observes:
There are really no antecedents in Spanish for his kind of poem … except perhaps in [the] colonial histories … The closest modern parallel to the *Canto general* in the Hispanic world is in painting, particularly in Mexican muralism … Like the Mexican muralists, whose works he saw often and whom he knew personally … Neruda’s poem is monumental, in the sense that it covers a vast span of history and focuses on transcendental persons and deeds as well as on the humble masses … The self is dwarfed by the size and by the transcendence of the historical figures; one is properly reduced to being a member of the mass of spectators or victims. (7)

Herein lies the peril of Neruda’s monumentalism: by means of appropriating history and popular voice, and establishing a “redemptive” and “restorative” ideological monument on behalf of a group of people, the poet-creator also silences and reburies the voices that stand in the monument’s shadow:

Me enseñaste a dormir en las camas duras de mis hermanos.  
You taught me to sleep in beds hard as my brothers.

Me hiciste construir sobre la realidad como sobre una roca …  
You made me build on reality as on a rock …

Me has hecho indestructible porque contigo no termino en mí mismo.  
You have made me indestructible because with you I do not end in myself.  
(Schmitt, 399)

The poet re-presents historical figures in his own image, in order to instantiate himself as one, as the creator of the national epic. González Echeverría points to the “chiliastic scheme of *Canto general*” and, indeed, we see the poet-narrator function as a Christ-like figure of sacrifice and attrition on behalf of his people. Yet, it is the claim that he makes over his people, one that bespeaks collective memory, which reveals the epic poet’s perpetuation of monumentalism in a new form. Certainly, the process of the diegetic material dismantling of the monument is an engaging process with regard to the entirety
of Neruda’s epic endeavor, yet it is belied by his reconstruction of the very structures he labors to tear apart.
Conclusion

American Monumentalism through an Epic Lens

This dissertation is concerned with how monumentalism is and has been conceived, constructed, and portrayed in the Americas and centers on epic poems emerging from the Americas in the twentieth century. Monumentalism, I have argued, is the process by which the poet, sculptor, or poet-sculptor produces an intentionally epic work that presumes an incontestability, and assumes this authority from a platform of didacticism. This monumental work compels silence, and it imposes a collective history that precludes popular dissension or alternative history. The presumptive nationalist edification enacted by the poet’s own strictures exhibits a monumentalism that occurs in twentieth-century epic productions, when nationalisms are exemplified by the durability of monuments, and at more than any other period of history, as a projection of a unified national body. The works that are in question here are diverse with regard to genre, materia, and provenance: stone monuments from Guadeloupe and Mexico (Chapters 1 and 3); an epic poem that challenges Western epic mores (Chapter 2); and a “song” that encompasses the entire history of a continent (Chapter Four). Thus, I have sought to illustrate the unfolding of this historical and poetic process through four particular instances of a self-declared epic composition, in each instance monumentalized, in turn, by the Nobel Prize conferred upon the poets in question. In the case of Saint-John Perse (Chapter 1), I explore an early twentieth-century effort to form a poetic monument by
means of the instantiation of collective memory that immortalizes the monument and its builder by means of the appropriation of the classical European epic tradition in the Americas in the twentieth century. Saint-John Perse’s epic poem, *Anabase* (1924), propels Perse into a European teleology by means of his own neoclassical efforts. In this chapter, I have argued that Perse wrote in the epic form in order to concretize his poetic monumentalism and, by means of the French language, forms a distinct site, albeit “extraterritorial,” of French collective memory. Because Perse’s Caribbean origins underscore all of his writing, Perse’s poem lies within a contentious space in which a European monumentalism is utilized to convey a narrative that serves as a means for a perceived permanence that is characteristic of the epic text. The epic, like the physical monument, is imbued with this perceived permanence by means of its hypostasis, or calcification, of collective memory. By writing the French epic, Perse actually attempts to re-form francophone collective memory by way of a narrative that hinges upon colonization, diegetically enacted by the character of the poet-narrator. This memorial colonization is accomplished not only by means of the subjugation of a people, but by a poetic calcification of the very landscape, a materialist and under-studied aspect of the poem that belies a “rhétorique de la création” (Gallagher, 36; “rhetoric of creation”). My examination of Perse’s text, as a poetic monument to a landscape and material calcified, has set the stage for the subsequent readings of monumentalism in American poetry.

In Chapter Two, I have explored the undertaking of the journey of the poet to the site of the monument, and its subsequent unearthing and re-imagining. Octavio Paz, in
his epic poem *Piedra de sol* (1957), diegetically crosses the American sublime landscape in a feminized portrayal of the telluric indigenous body. This arduous and sublime voyage allegorically depicts the construction of the original monument, the Sun Stone, and takes place in a circular motion, leading perpetually inward and ultimately arriving at the forging of the monument. The narrative realizes the ossification of “a phantom king” as paradigm of the monumentalized historical figure. The celebrated construction of the monument, as the culmination of the journey and calcification of the artifact, is a fallacious act, since the object ultimately deteriorates. Yet, the object returns the reader to the poem’s title and the Stone as embodiment of time and the poet’s own textual regenerative monument. The poet-creator rises from the residual stones as an element of the landscape that will re-form the *matera* of the earth to perpetuate the process of building.

Chapter Three is an argument for a recent and fascinating aspect of monumentalism, evinced by the shaping of a “counter-monumentalism.” The example of counter-monumentalism I have utilized is Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* (1990), a text that exemplifies the appropriation of “contrarian” epic tropes for a particularly American context. Walcott creates a text that challenges previous assumptions of what qualifies as an epic text by portraying flagrantly non-heroic characters and circumstances with regard to the Western epic tradition. By means of the presumed epic hero who exemplifies particularly non-heroic behavior, Achille, *Omeros’* poet-narrator seeks to foreground the inaccessibility of the epic to persons of postcolonial “heterotopias,”
compelled to seek those European texts traditionally imposed upon them as the paradigm of epicity. Yet, in constructing a new monument that counters Western assumptions, Walcott recreates a new form of monumentalism by speaking for a people whom he presumes cannot speak for themselves.

Finally, in Chapter Four I have focused on the silencing of the laboring public vis-à-vis the monument by means of Pablo Neruda’s *Canto general* (1950), which has been considered one of the most “ambitious” poems written in the post-colonial Americas. Egregiously political, Neruda’s text comprises an entire history of the Americas through a Marxist lens, tracing the evolution of labor and the laboring body’s increasing alienation from the earth. This alienation takes place as worker mines Nature for suitable materials with which to construct the monument, the artifact that has come to symbolize subjugation of the laborer to exploitative hegemony. Neruda’s “materialist history” of America is one that gives a voice to laboring bodies that contribute to permanent constructions, while the poet constructs a monument to his ideological orientation and has written himself, via the epic, into the continuum of the Americas.

Of course, this dissertation is not the only text to approach either the epic of the Americas or monumentalism of the hemisphere. John P. McWilliams has written a monograph entitled *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (2009) that describes the ways in which the epic in North America developed from narrative poetry imitative of the Classical epic genre into the new genres of prose history and fictional romance of James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. Jean
Franco’s *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (2002) has addressed the transient function of monumentalism in Latin America and examines the intersection of memory and history elucidate the many ways in which we may critically examine memorial texts and objects. My argument, however, attempts to trace the ways in which memory is constructed by means of a reimagining of history, and to unpack what Michel Foucault refers to as a “charade” of “monumental history,” in which “a history [is] given to reestablishing the high points of historical development and their maintenance in a perpetual presence,” a maintenance that is “given to the recovery of works, actions, and creations through the monogram of their personal essence” (Foucault, *Nietzsche*, 94). These “high points” are captured in monumental objects built from stone or text, objects that usurp a collective memory from those who look on in the present. The reverence that a people is taught, either implicitly or explicitly, to devote to these artifacts of imagined history is a behavior that compels a lack of critical deliberation and, thus, “the veneration of monuments becomes parody,” as Foucault continues: “the critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held by men in the present becomes the destruction of the man who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge” (97). For those in hegemonic power, or those who seek immortality in the collective memory of a people, the construction of objects that exhibit and impose a degree of monumentalism is an almost necessary aspect of rationalization of a place in national history.
Monuments adopt many forms, and the epic poem is one of them. As we have seen, the interrogation of texts that are declared epic in many ways reveals aspirations to power and immortality. The texts that I have examined in this dissertation embody these inclinations on the part of the poet but, fascinatingly, actually explore the process of monumentalism diegetically in many different ways. Through an interrogation of Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase*, I hope to have demonstrated the ways in which an epic poet seeks to enter into a Western epic genealogy through the crafting of an imitative epic, in the process of constructing a monument to the poet by going so far as to appropriate popular voice and natural landscape, and the ways that this mimetic construction\(^7\) alienates a formerly colonized people further from their history. By examining Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, I demonstrate an opposing view, in which the author consciously seeks to countermand a Europeanized version of Caribbean history by instantiating his own through his epic. However, as I have sought to show, Walcott succeeds in appropriating the history he had hoped to liberate for the people of St. Lucia, constructing his own monumentalism with regard to the public. In my study of *Piedra de sol* by Octavio Paz, I have endeavored to explore the function of monumentalism with regard to the sublime landscape. By pursuing the poet-narrator on his journey to confront the historical artifact become monumental object, and observing the ways in which the very journey and

\(^7\) This mimetic construction is an allusion to the “mimetic desire” that is a well-known topic of René Girard’s theory of mimesis, in which he describes the “appropriative gesture of an individual … rooted in the imitation of an individual” (9). In this case, we see Perse’s appropriation of the European “voice” in the form of French language as a gesture toward appropriation of *the* French epic. See Chapter One.
geography contribute to monumental construction and the silencing of indigenous voice, my study reveals how the epic has utilized the Sunstone as a means to teach readers about a Mexican history that Paz himself imagines. Finally, I encounter a text that many scholars consider the most ambitious and “most monumental” of epics, Pablo Neruda’s *Canto general*. This is a text in which I examine the diegetic material structure of the monument as an allegory. That allegory, it seems to me, serves to calcify history and instantiate the poet-creator as the voice *par excellence* by telling an entire continental history, one that is based upon the hemisphere’s perpetual alienation from the *materia* of Nature.

Finally, this dissertation is a means by which to attempt a re-cognition of myself as an element of the ideologies and historical constructs that I attempt to deconstruct. Although assuming a critical perspective with regard to these texts and to the process of monumentalism, I am certainly not immune either to idealization of the works that I encounter nor to my own contributions to the cosmos of monumentalization. By utilizing the epic of the Americas, particularly those epic poems that have been gilded and ossified by a global Nobel-ity, through this dissertation I am performing a process of self-instantiation or *autopoiesis* that is not unlike the means by which these poets have appropriated the *materia* for their work. Nevertheless, by regarding this study as symptomatic of the processes of appropriation that occur throughout the human history of letters, I hope to draw attention to our works’ inescapable condition, like monument, gazing forever at the passage of history and existing perpetually *en media res*. 
Appendix:
Internet Addresses (URLs) and Citations for Images

In Chapters One, Two, Three, and Four, several images depicting Monumento a Cuauhtémoc, Monumento a Garcilaso de la Vega, Cuatzontle, Louis Delgrès, and Monumento Gonzálo Guerrero y sus hijos are discussed. For copyright reasons, the images themselves are not reproduced in this dissertation. They are referenced in footnotes and in the Works Cited list. In addition, because these images speak to each other, for convenience in consulting them their URLs are listed together here, in the sequence in which they are discussed. The sequence below is governed by the first page on which each image is mentioned.

Pages 13, 164, 204-5, 223: “Monumento a Cuauhtémoc” by Miguel Noreña – Noreña, Miguel. Monumento a Cuauhtémoc, or Monument to Aztec Leader Cuitlahuac on Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City. 2011. Wikipedia.


<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_A0sRTFi35A/TCyyydpbBxI/AAAAAAAAABg/A2xxAzGCIpI/s1600/spirale.jpg>.


<http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_poTKC38if4o/TBP7XQx1UtI/AAAAAAAAPP8/GdOcje8ZAiw/s400/EstatuaAkumal.jpg>.


<http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_poTKC38if4o/TBP7XQx1Utl/AAAAAAAAPP8/GdOcje8ZAiws400/EstatuaAkumal.jpg>.


<http://repository.wellesley.edu/frenchfaculty/10>.


Spira, Tamara Lea. “Neoliberal Captivities Pisagua Prison and the Low-Intensity Form.”


Sterne, Richard C. “Hawthorne Transformed: Octavio Paz’s ‘La Hija De Rappaccini.’”


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