1. Introduction
   1. Walcott works with a lot of different images, many of them focused on the natural beauty of St. Lucia
   2. Presentation will focus on one image in particular: the sea-almond tree
   3. Recurring image of the sea-almond means it becomes almost like a character
   4. Used to characterize Helen in particular
      1. Almond tree, her name – tying her body/being to the island
      2. Another layer of human/nonhuman: almond characterization ties into a wider pattern of objectification and exoticization of Helen
      3. To what extent is Helen a character? Or is she an object around which action is centered
2. Sea-almond: an important facet of the setting
   1. Effect 1: Setting the natural scene
      1. p. 4: First instance, the sea-almond provides shade, a place for repose
      2. p. 11: Seven Seas hears the “breeze washing the sea-almond’s wares”
      3. A frequent point of reference for analogy, e.g. on p. 314: a map “riddled with bays like an almond leaf”
      4. Partly to emphasize St. Lucia’s natural beauty—Hilton Als *New Yorker* profile of Walcott from 2004
         1. Walcott was also a painter, interested in faithful representations of the island, the sea-almond serves that literal function
   2. Effect 2a: A marker of time, in particular through color changes
      1. p. 147: (talking about Achille) “One hand clawed the pile of ashes, the other fist thudded on the drum of his chest, the ribs were like a caved-in canoe that rots for years under the changing leaves of an almond”
      2. 🡪 p. 164: “Copper almond leaves cracking like Caribs in a pepper smoke, the blue entering God’s eye and nothing raked from their lives”
      3. p. 248: “Centuries weigh down the head of the swamp-lily, its tribal burden arches the sea-almond’s spine, in barracoon back yards the soul-smoke still passes, but the wound has found her own cure”
         1. Personification of the sea-almond again, and similarly a marker of time’s passage (here not with leaves but with the shape of the tree)
         2. Barracoon = enclosure where captured west Africans were confined while waiting to be shipped abroad
         3. Tortuous almond trees mirroring the tortured body
         4. Almond retaining the echoes of the past
      4. Almond trees are dynamic, they are alive and changing continuously
   3. Effect 2b: (related to the last example) Connecting across space
      1. (TURN) p. 185 – Walcott’s voice, notable because it takes place in Boston, “Passing the lamplit leaves I knew I was different from them as our skins were different in an empire that boasted about its hues, in a New England that had raked the leaves of the tribes into one fire on the lawn back of the carport, like dead almond leaves on a beach”
         1. Almond leaves get related to Native Americans being swept aside
      2. Also a connection to the olive trees of Greece, Homer’s world
      3. Almonds are not native to the Caribbean, found in Australia, SE Asia, India, and most notably, Africa 🡪 introduced to Americas more recently
         1. Analogous to slaves being transplanted, can start to think about how the almond is a metaphor for people
   4. Effect 3: Humanization of the sea-almond
      1. The sea-almond itself as a sentient being
         1. (TURN) p. 232: “Hector was buried near the sea he had loved once… He did not hear the sea-almond’s moan over the bay when Philoctete blew the shell”
            1. Personification of the sea-almond, specifically in relation to Seven Seas, as if he is speaking to the island and the island speaks back to him
3. Characterizations of Helen: a means of connecting the natural setting with the people
   1. The almond as a way of describing eyes, in particular Helen’s eyes
      1. (TURN) p. 122: another image of the sea-almond: “It was the same every drought. The sea hot. The sea-almond aflame.” 🡪 p. 123 (still in Maud’s head), Maud recognizes Helen: “Maud knew that gait was Helen’s, but the almond eyes were hooded in the smooth face of arrogant ebony”
         1. Juxtaposition of the vivid description of the sea-almond on the island with the almond shape of Helen’s eyes
         2. p. 36 – she has an “incredible stare”
      2. Overview of the importance of eyes more broadly in the poem
         1. p. 157: the dead fish, p. 180: the “wink of a pen’s eye”
         2. Eyes frequently used as a metonymy for sight/looking
         3. p. 171: “I knew they all knew about my abandonment in the war of love: the busboys, the couples, their eyes turned from the smell of failure, while my own eyes had turned Japanese looking for a letter”
         4. p. 262: “His will be done, O Maud, His kingdom come, as the sunflower turns, and the white eyes widen in the ebony faces, the sloe-eyes, the bent smoke…”
            1. sloe = blackthorn berries
            2. Contrasting the whiteness of eyes with the blackness of skin
         5. Homer was blind, Seven Seas is blind: (TURN) p.281 “the blind stone”; p. 282: Read whole passage before start of III – “empty eyes” of Seven Seas, “I was seeing the light of St. Lucia at last through her own eyes, her blindness, her inward vision as revealing as his, because a closing darkness brightens love”
      3. Descriptions of Helen’s beauty, including the almond eyes but also her “ebony skin,” she is called a “panther” on p.36, emphasize her blackness in a world that Hilton Als described still as very preoccupied by gradations of skin color
         1. Contrasts with her name, a European maybe Anglicized name more so than the other black characters in the poem
         2. Almond eyes vs. olive eyes (TURN) p. 313: “one lies in a room with olive-eye mosaics, another in a beach shack with a straw mattress”
            1. Contrasting the Greek Helen with the St. Lucian helen
   2. “Exoticizaton” / Objectification/“Dehumanization”
      1. Helen is certainly objectified throughout – she is identified by the shape of her body, the sway of her gait, just the image of her excites strong emotions in men and women alike
         1. She’s also admired by tourists: “Who the hell is that?” a tourist near my table asked a waitress
         2. Frequently described in terms of “ebony” skin
      2. p. 36: “the chill of a panther hidden in the dark of its cage,” then, “just as a pantheress stops swinging its tail to lightly leap into the grass, she yawned and entered a thicket of palm-printed cloth”
      3. (TURN, read first few stanzas of III) p. 114
         1. Literally, the “she” refers to Helen and the “it” to her shadow
         2. She becomes her shadow, or, the shadow becomes her
      4. (TURN) p. 256: Major Plunkett yells at Hector about this “godforsaken rock” but then “He steered the conversation to Helen cunningly and asked if she was happy”
         1. Draws attention to the equivalence made throughout between Helen and the island
         2. Also places Plunkett as an outsider, because he doesn’t recognize that connection, the life of the almond trees, and instead thinks of the island as a rock
4. Conclusion
   1. Interplay of island and people in which images from one resonate in the other
      1. Almond trees are given life through their importance as symbols of change across time and space
      2. Humans are turned into objects through their characterizations as almonds
   2. Question of human/nonhuman particularly resonant in a poem in which the legacy of slavery is ever-present
      1. (TURN) p. 145: “The raid was profitable. It yielded fifteen slaves to the slavers waiting up the coast”
         1. Slaves are objects, certainly different from the type of object that Helen is
         2. Like the almond trees they were transplanted