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“Wilson Harris, the Philosophy of History, and the Sovereignty of the Imagination:  
A Critical Reply to Duane Edwards”

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Duane Edwards' essay "What Happens When We Stop Dreaming? A Critical Exploration of Social Change in Walter Rodney's and Wilson Harris' Works" (2019) is a refreshing and insightful reading of two significant Guyanese thinkers. Edwards' reading of Rodney and Harris is all the more noteworthy precisely because it cuts against the grain of an interpretative approach that tends to view Rodney and Harris as polar opposites. Rodney, the radical Pan-Africanist, Marxist historian, is placed in confrontation with Harris the obscure 'artist of the imagination', who is inclined to flights of literary escape.

### **Fusing Horizons**

Edwards avoids this simplistic thinking and views Rodney and Harris as pursuing complementary projects. Accordingly, Edwards maintains "that a fusing of Rodney's activism with Harris' radical imaginary results in an appropriate model of social action and social change which could be of tremendous benefit to the contemporary Caribbean bearing in mind the nature of problems which beset the region" (2019, 235). So, as far as Edwards is concerned, there is a possible fusion of horizons because Rodney's calls for collective action also requires entanglement with the immateriality of consciousness. Collective action grounded in the materiality of everyday existence and history more broadly is compatible with or, rather, can be considerably strengthened by Harris' emphasis on the imagination, particularly the need to think beyond traditional absolutist categories. Similarly, with regard to Harris' position, imagination and thought cannot realistically provoke meaningful collective action without a method of praxis informed by Rodney's focus on the material and historical realities of existence.

Edwards also perceptively refuses to extricate Rodney and Harris from the Caribbean intellectual tradition. Following Paget Henry (2000), there are roughly two major schools of Caribbean intellectual production: Poeticism and Historicism. The historicist tradition claims that history is primary and that, therefore, ontological transformation of Caribbean existence is contingent upon changes in the basic social, political and economic institutions of Caribbean society. The poeticist tradition emphasizes the primacy of consciousness. Accordingly, it maintains that genuine ontological transformation of Caribbean existence is contingent upon changes in consciousness. As Edwards observes, "Instead of the history-structure/consciousness relationship, as in the first group, the consciousness/unconsciousness relationship is given prominence among the poeticist group" (2019, 238).

### **Caribbean Social Ontology**

Edwards also warrants credit for mentioning the notion of a new social ontology of the Caribbean, an idea often ignored by other thinkers. The significance of focusing on the social ontology of the Caribbean is to underscore the extent to which any credible approach to understanding the Caribbean situation must critically engage with the various structures of existence that constitute the reality of human existence in the Caribbean. Common narratives of human existence and styles of thinking that claim to capture the universal

structures of human existence are not immediately applicable to the creolized reality of the Caribbean. The particularity of the Caribbean mode of existence is not, contrary to universalist style of thinking, secondary; rather, although not totally unique to the Caribbean situation, human existence in the Caribbean has been characterized by rhythms of differences that are at once tantalizing and yet productive of possibilities of impossibilities—hybrid forms of existence that are incompatible with traditional absolutist modes of thinking that crave purity and metaphysical stability. Edwards shares CLR James' contention that “the core of Wilson Harris' conceptualisation of the Caribbean lies in his claim that there is no fixed tradition, no investment in hardened customs. This ontological fluidity—the shifting between ego and unconscious” (2019, 239).

Although, it would be blasphemous to deflate Rodney's importance and significance as an original thinker, I think that Edwards is at his best when he emphasizes Harris' poetist orientation in contrast to the historicist orientation. My point is not to suggest that the historicists do not have anything of value to contribute to understanding the Caribbean existence; rather, the point is that Harris posed a challenge to Caribbean historians and intellectuals that shatters their dependence upon irrelevant or unproductive styles of thinking. Again, Edwards is at his best as he describes Harris's take on history:

According to Harris, history, as it is approached in the Caribbean, centralises a victor/ victim opposition which contributes to a deformed psyche by keeping history locked in an infinite rehearsal of this staged duality. Seeing itself as a perpetual victim, the Caribbean is never able to draw upon its native resources in designing a unique civilisation, cross-culturally connected with other civilisations though a product of its own native imagination. This victor/victim duality results from a particular way of reading historical facts in particular and reality in general—a way of reading that privileges a particular, coherently connected linear storyline based on the 'staging' together of discrete facts connected only at the surface level (2019, 239).

And, in yet another context, Edwards adds that, “Harris argues that genuine social change should confront the dominant colonial and neo-liberal categories within which oppositional politics is encoded.... Social change entails disentanglement from the old European heritage and the new neo-liberal imposition with the aim of fashioning of a new Caribbean civilization” (2019, 240). Hence, the task at hand is not one of mimicry; nor for that matter complacently using imported categories and concepts, treating them as neutral structures of intelligibility, to describe an unruly Caribbean reality. Harris demands new styles of thinking, new ways of seeing, new ways of reading and interpreting the world, and the creation of a new Caribbean metaphoricity. Interestingly enough, although Edwards wisely raised these issues, he is nevertheless philosophically removed from the radical implications of Harris' challenge. For although it is true that both Rodney and Harris are supportive of a flourishing and self-determined Caribbean, Harris is more attuned to the potential pitfalls waiting to frustrate these efforts. What I propose to do at this time is to briefly describe Harris' position, with the intention of revealing its radical core.

## Life Emergent

Wilson Harris argues for a teleological suspension of empiricist and positivist reductionist historiography, while actively favoring a more substantive role for the arts of the imagination in interpreting and understanding Caribbean reality. Here historical writing and styles of thinking are infused with the arts of the imagination and not inspired by the blind empiricism of positivistic science. Instead of collapsing under the burden of a reductionist historiography that imprisons the Caribbean in deprivations of rootlessness, historylessness, and voicelessness, Harris urges Caribbean thinkers to impose figurative meaning on the seemingly wretched empirical reality of the Caribbean. In this context, we can make positive use of Fanon's notion of a zone of nonbeing, and understand Harris as urging historians and other thinkers not to passively settle for the idea that the Caribbean is a zone of nonbeing, that is, a place inhabited by things and objects and not subjects/agents endowed with creative human agency.

Harris recommends that Caribbean thinkers search for new root metaphors to interpret the Caribbean reality, and he believes that there are ontologies of life emergent from "a figurative meaning beyond the real or apparently real world" (1995, 18). The basic thrust of this statement by Harris is that the imaginative impulse or, rather, imagination is primary. Positivistic realism does not warrant our exclusive and complete fidelity. Accordingly, for Harris, it is possible for ontologies of life to liberate the Caribbean from imprisonment in its deprivations only if Caribbean thinkers acknowledge the void between conventional historiography and the arts of the imagination. Continuing writing history in the tradition of conventional positivistic history entails emphasizing exploitation and deprivation. However, if Caribbean thinkers were to fundamentally commit themselves only to this type of historiographical activity, they would forfeit perhaps their most valuable asset: their creative imagination. Imaginative illiteracy results from cognitive inertia—from imprisonment in absolutist and complacent modes of thinking—and it fosters existential stasis that may generate a paralysis both of praxis and consciousness. But he maintains that this sordid situation is avoidable. As Harris writes:

[I] believe the possibility exists for us to become involved in perspective of renaissance which can bring into play a figurative meaning beyond an apparently real world or prison of history. I want to make as clear as I can that a cleavage exists in my opinion between the historical convention in the Caribbean ... and the arts of the imagination (1995, 18).

Harris insists that the Caribbean need not be imprisoned in cognitive structures of conventional history that produce both cognitive and existential inertia. Indeed, he believes that "a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination" (1995, 18). The very idea of a philosophy of history being buried in the arts of the imagination signals the coming into being of a Caribbean postmodernist sensibility. The notion of history that Harris advances for the Caribbean is a history that is not consistent with the linear logic of modernist history. Additionally, this new philosophy of history, emergent from the arts of the imagination, would not be another dogmatic developmental and progressive conception

of history. Here, history is a history without a telos, goal or end. Clearly, history inspired by the arts of the imagination would be history subservient to an improvisational imperative. There is another sense in which the kind of history Harris advocates is postmodernist in that it would not be grounded in any metanarrative. Consistent with Harris' repudiation of absolutism, even history would be characterized by narrative pluralism, which in turn would be compatible with ontological pluralism—plural styles of existence.

Harris does not cement his position in abstraction. He provides concrete examples of how a philosophy of history is emergent from the arts of the imagination. As examples of the conditions of possibility of this new philosophy of history, Harris maintains that the sources are *limbo* and *vodun*. He immediately connects both limbo and vodun with Africa, stating that "There are two kinds of myths related to Africa in the Caribbean ... One kind seems fairly direct, the other has already undergone metamorphosis" (1995, 18). Indeed, Harris regards this turn to these African sources of imaginative inspiration as critical to the philosophical assumptions supporting the writing of Afro-Caribbean history.

### **The Role of Imagination**

The irony of the Caribbean situation, however, is that Caribbean historians remain captivated by the inertia of a conventional historiography that supports historical stasis. Again, this is the core element of the challenge confronting Caribbean existence. Efforts to interpret the Caribbean space remain imprisoned in styles of thinking that preclude the possibility of impossibility, that is, ways of thinking that render the coming into being of new forms of existence in the Caribbean as theoretically unintelligible and ontologically unviable. Harris essentially scolds Caribbean historians for obsessing over irreconcilables, the cataloguing of injustices, the tautology of fact, and filing of multiple sources of deprivation. By rejecting this "documentary stasis," Harris proceeds by critically exposing the theoretical poverty of those historians writing in the Caribbean. The descriptive should yield to the pregnant forces of the imagination. Harris writes:

What is bitterly ironic ... is that present day historians ... have fallen victim ... to the very imperialism they appear to denounce. They have no criteria for arts of the originality springing out of an age of *limbo* and the history they write is without an inner time (1995, 22).

Harris does not favor a revisionist historiography tasked with making Caribbean history more palatable, hence deemphasizing the brutality so deeply embedded in the dramatic space of Caribbean existence. Similarly, he does not suggest that historians should deny the horrible truths that litter the Caribbean historical landscape. Rather, Harris desires liberation from narrative bondage through the utilization of alternative metaphorical structuring of Caribbean history and existence. The new challenge is to think differently about how Caribbean people think about and interpret their lived experiences. Harris' involvement with metaphor is made clear when he states that, although new historians of the Caribbean have sought to debunk imperialism, they have overlooked the possibilities provided by "the complex metaphorical gateway" of various aspects of Caribbean existence.

Again, Harris directly invokes the African presence in the Caribbean and uses the limbo dance and vodun as prime examples of practices pregnant with imaginative and metaphorical possibilities for imposing figurative meaning on Caribbean history. Acknowledging the fact that limbo was born on the slave ships of the Middle Passage, Harris invokes limbo as a metaphor. And he further states that as one reflects on the meaning of the Middle Passage, it is necessary to adopt a limbo perspective, which is to recognize “a *limbo* gateway between Africa and the Caribbean” (1995, 19). Here, Harris views limbo as representing the dislocation of the chains of miles—the in-between. The focus is on limbo as a gateway to or threshold of a new consciousness, a new philosophy of history and a new social ontology. Notice, then, that Harris presents limbo as indicative of the logic of the in-between, the zone of qualitative difference that facilitates the unfolding of new realities. Harris writes:

For *limbo* ... is not the total recall of an African past since that African past in terms of tribal sovereignty or sovereignties was modified or traumatically eclipsed with the Middle Passage and with generations of change that followed. Limbo was rather the renaissance of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures (1995, 20).

Harris attributes great value to the notion of “architecture” to emphasize the importance of reconstitution, recreation, invention, and remodeling of myths and narratives. Indeed, the architecture metaphor reminds us that the Middle Passage was not world-destroying but was able to accommodate the normativity of Africa for Caribbean subjects. While limbo signals the birth of a new consciousness, Harris also indicates that it represents a glance back to Africa. Perhaps it would not be too much of an exaggeration to construe limbo as an attempt at reassembling Africa in the new space of the Caribbean.

Haitian vodun, like limbo, represents the entanglement of Africa and the Caribbean. But unlike limbo, Harris claims that vodun has a more direct connection with Africa. Here, Harris identifies “possession trances” as the common bond between Haitian vodun and African myth:

[H]aitian vodun is more directly descended from African myth and yet...it is also intent on a curious re-assembly of the god or gods. Therefore I asked myself—is *vodun* a necessary continuation of a matrix of association which had not fulfilled itself in the Old World of Africa? If so that fulfillment would be in itself not an imitation of the past...but a new and daring creative conception of itself. If Haitian vodun is creative fulfillment of African *vodun* one must ask oneself where do the similarities and differences lie? The basic feature they hold in common lies in ‘possession trances’... (1995, 24-25).

Possession trances facilitate the displacing of mundane consciousness in order to transcend habitual styles of thinking. This journey into the unconscious, the abyss, represents the imaginative apprehending of differences of thought and existence. Harris concludes that

“Haitian *vodun*...may well point to sleeping possibilities of drama and horizons of poetry, epic and novel, sculpture and painting—in short to a language of variables in art which would have a profoundly evolutionary cultural and philosophical significance for Caribbean [people]” (1995, 27).

Although I consider Edwards’ essay insightful, and despite the fact there are no serious disagreements in our views, I thought that by way of response to his essay it would be important to crystalize the radicality of Harris’ poeticist challenge to Caribbean intellectuals. Even if Caribbean thinkers, such as Rodney, acknowledge and appreciate, the role of imagination and thought to efforts to transform of the ontological conditions of Caribbean society, the problem is that choices are made within already determined discursive spaces. Harris’ point is to pursue thinking beyond predetermined categories and concepts. This new thinking obviously, as Harris indicates, requires profound imaginative acts of thinking beyond conventional limits of intelligibility and possibility.

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