

**Université de Montréal**

**Queering the Cross-Cultural Imagination:  
(Trans)Subjectivity and Wilson Harris's *The Palace of the Peacock***

**by Prathna Lor**

Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des arts et sciences en vue de l'obtention du grade de  
MAÎTRISE en ÉTUDES ANGLAISES option AVEC MÉMOIRE

Avril, 2013

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## RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire comprend deux volets : une étude théorique et un texte de création littéraire. Dans un premier temps, il s'agit d'étudier le rôle du désir dans la démarche thématique et philosophique employée par l'écrivain Wilson Harris dans son roman *The Palace of the Peacock*. Ainsi démontrerons-nous dans le premier chapitre que Harris se sert – de façon paradoxale – du désir empirique pour faire valoir les limites mêmes de celui-ci. Nous aborderons dans le deuxième chapitre le rapport problématique qu'entretient, chez Harris, la subjectivité féminine avec la subjectivité masculine. En particulier, nous examinerons la représentation de ce rapport sous la forme de métaphores ayant trait à l'environnement et à l'anatomie. Nous avancerons que le caractère problématique que revêt le rapport entre subjectivités féminine et masculine dans le roman est en quelque sorte nécessitée par l'écriture même de Harris. Dans le troisième chapitre, nous prendrons part aux débats sur la poétique qui animent la littérature contemporaine afin de situer notre propre élan vers la création littéraire. En même temps, nous entreprendrons une tentative de récupération de certains des concepts théoriques formulés par Harris, en lien avec notre propre poétique. S'ensuivra notre projet de création littéraire, intitulé *HEROISM/EULOGIES*, qui constitue le quatrième et dernier chapitre du mémoire. Ce texte, extrait d'un projet d'écriture créative plus vaste, trace les mouvements d'un certain nombre de sujets à travers une Amérique imaginée.

Mots-clés: Wilson Harris, imaginaire transculturel, désir, érotique, relationalité

## ABSTRACT

This study contains two parts: a theoretical component and a literary text. The theoretical component discusses desire as a thematic and philosophical methodology in Wilson Harris's *The Palace of the Peacock*. Chapter one argues that Harris paradoxically makes use of forms of empirical desire to demonstrate its epistemological limits. Chapter two discusses the problematic situation of female subjectivity in relation to male subjects, through environmental and anatomic metaphors, which Harris's writing necessitates. Chapter three discusses contemporary poetics in order to situate my impetus for literary writing and attempts to salvage some of Harris's theoretical concepts in dialogue with my own poetics. Chapter four contains the creative writing project, *HEROISM/EULOGIES*—an excerpt from a larger project—that charts the movement of various subjects across an imagined American landscape.

Keywords: Wilson Harris, cross-cultural imagination, desire, relationality, erotics

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## Chapter One

### The Limits of Desire

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall by my only negation.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (157)

A link exists between the occult and the triumph or resurrection of love. There is a link between the occult and love. It is a link which has virtually vanished from our civilisation because one tends to think of the occult as something sinister, in which people are involved in all sorts of cruel ritual or else decadent or whatever.

—Wilson Harris, “Unfinished Genesis: A Personal View of the Cross-Cultural Imagination,” *The Radical Imagination* (94)

She was waiting for him he told himself, like any young girl—frightened in a first indiscretion and affair—nevertheless waiting for love to enter and take her everlastingly.

—Wilson Harris, *The Palace of the Peacock* (67)

#### *What's Love Got to Do with It?*

To broach the question of love—and desire—as the fundamental underpinning of Wilson Harris’s work, both critical and fictional, is to understand its machinations at a philosophical level rather than strictly a thematic or topical one. Harris’s first novel, *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960), can be interpreted as a critique of desire, that is, as a linear trajectory towards knowledge, fulfilment, and reward. To consider desire as Harris’s fundamental philosophical question of investigation, as well as cause to radical literary form, is to understand how desire as such is a historical problematic that *must* be remembered and worked through in order to move towards a new conceptualization of community. Indeed, as Lorna Burns writes, Harris’s work is “strongly oriented by his philosophy of the imagination which incorporates both a vitalistic sense of

creation as actualization and an understanding of the past as productive force.”<sup>1</sup> For Harris, this is the “cross-cultural imagination [which is] a creative and re-creative complex that springs from the depths of the human psyche.”<sup>2</sup> The cross-cultural imagination hinges upon literary engagement across cultural traditions, histories, mythologies, time periods, and peoples in order to unearth our originary, fractal pasts and gesture towards a compassionate future. As Hena Maes-Jelinek notes, there “is the need [in Harris’s work] to be aware of and suffer with the apparent void in the history of conquered peoples and in the individual psyche, for in that void lies the source of heterogeneous community modern man must strive to build if he is to survive.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, “[t]he metamorphoses of images render the essential fluidity that Harris opposes to the fixity of human polarizations.”<sup>4</sup> In numerous essays, Harris has suggested with several amatory metaphors that such movements across contesting subject positions (i.e. colonizer vs. colonized) require “intercourse, shorn of violence, with the womb-body of nature and reality,”<sup>5</sup> an “addiction to the magic of intercourse secreted everywhere,”<sup>6</sup> and the “marriage of consonance and dissonance.”<sup>7</sup> Desire is therefore that which Harris seeks to reconsider in a particular manner but also a theoretical methodology.

In this chapter, I trace the re-staging of imperial desire as Harris’s object of critique but that which is explored through a poetics of compassion rather than mere antagonism. Subsequent chapters will continue to address desire in its various modalities: the homosocial/homoerotic

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<sup>1</sup> Lorna Burns, “Writing Back to the Colonial Event: Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris,” in *Contemporary Caribbean Writing and Deleuze: Literature Between Postcolonialism and Post-Continental Philosophy* (New York: Continuum Books, 2012), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Harris, “The Psyche of Space (Intuition and Otherness),” *Theory and Creation/Théorie et création littéraire*, ed. Jean-Pierre Durix (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 1999), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, introduction to *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966-1981*, by Wilson Harris (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, “Voyage into Namelessness: *The Palace of the Peacock*,” in *Wilson Harris* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (London: Routledge, 1999), 234.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 64

<sup>7</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 44.

archive, its framing within a heterosexual narrative, and the absolutely singular subjects which arise from Harris's attempts to organize new collective forms of subjectivity and being. I trace therefore the "limits of desire"—conceptualized in one light as an impossible horizon—and its nuanced reorientation towards a transcendental limit of infinite possibility and necessity.

*Palace* charts the journey of a sometimes living, sometimes dead, multiethnic, ten-man crew who penetrate the interior of an imagined Guyanese landscape in search of a woman named Mariella and "the folk" (escaped slave labourers) with the help of an Arawak woman. Already, the racial configuration of the crew is antithetical to history's impulses. Ostensibly, there is the irony of a non-white crew who, participating in a narrative of colonialism, inflict upon others their very own histories of systemic, violent, and racial oppression. As Nouri Gana notes, "*Palace* belongs to the very early days of the Dutch settlement (1616) and is, as well, pertinent to the later uninterrupted British colonization (1831-1966) of what used to be called British Guiana."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is a conglomerate palimpsest with allusions to Walter Roth's *The Marches of El Dorado*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Book of Genesis*. Through its dialectical maneuvers with history—colonial and literary—Harris, far from anti-colonial stances against imperialism, radically demands that we alter our cultural attitudes by imagining oppressor/oppressed relationships as not only interdependent, but as a lesser reality through which we can transcend into a universal consciousness.

For Harris, this requires embracing the "enigma of violence,"<sup>9</sup> and the search for "original vessels"<sup>10</sup> of memory through which to detect the infinite ways in which we are already participating in absolute being and community. Harris's use of metaphorical tools and language

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<sup>8</sup> Nouri Gana, "Donne Undone: The Journey of Psychic Re-Integration in Wilson Harris's *The Palace of the Peacock*," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 32,1 (2001), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson Harris, "Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*," preface to *The Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 9.

serve to detect such things in the work of fiction and run the gamut of intuition, faith, visualization, cross-fertilization, death and re-birth, quantum mechanics, and music. The fomentation of the cross-cultural imagination as an interpretive practice requires, on the one hand, an understanding of how one is materially implicated in the world and, on the other hand, a deep, psychical understanding of the various layers of reality undercutting our apparent apprehension of the phenomenal world. It is only through certain kinds of deaths, closures of what one thinks one knows or can know, that one may enter, re-generatively, into a new sphere of knowledge. I begin by looking at the various ways cross-cultural engagements are performed in *Palace* in dialogue with Harris's theoretical writings as they center on various interruptive forms of desire.

### *Cross-Fertilizations*

Harris's prefatory remarks to *Palace*, entitled, for this edition, "Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*," includes a short but dense meditation along the theoretical lines Harris was thinking through writing this series of books.<sup>11</sup> Providing complex yet fleeting gestures to the ideas which structure *Palace*—such as music, primitivism, the myth of El Dorado, vessels, the spirit-bone, Guyanese geography as a "land of waters," spider webs, nooses, and the work of anthropologist Walter Roth—Harris foreshadows the ways in which these elements develop throughout the novel.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Harris's usage of the Carib bone-flute metaphor is an apt point of departure as it is more or less a concrete example of cross-fertilization or cross-cultural engagement—a metaphor that extends into an aesthetic device that operates on structural, syntagmatic, and philosophical levels. "The Carib flute," Harris writes,

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<sup>11</sup> *The Guyana Quartet* is the collective name given to the four books in this series beginning with *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960), *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962) and *The Secret Ladder* (1963).

<sup>12</sup> See Walter Roth, *An Introductory Study of the Arts, Crafts, and Customs of the Guiana Indians* (1924).



was hollowed from the bone of an enemy in time of war. Flesh was plucked and consumed and in the process secrets were digested. Spectres arose from, or reposed in, the flute [...] In parallel with an obvious violation ran therefore, it seems to me, another subtle force resembling yet differing from terror in that the flute become the home or curiously *mutual* fortress of spirit between enemy and other, an organ of self-knowledge suffused with enemy bias so close to native greed for victory.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage, the border lines of subjectivity become blurred, crossed, and transformed. An enemy's body turns to nourishment; an object of death and animosity shifts to life, sustenance, and gratitude. The presence of terror and "another subtle force resembling yet differing terror" come to inhabit the bone flute which exists as that "*mutual* fortress." Such "terror" can be read in relation to the affects of terror, awe, and marvel as they emerge in the philosophical thinking of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.<sup>14</sup> This metaphor of life-death exchange or "transubstantiation in reverse" is integral to Harris's thinking.<sup>15</sup> In such a radical re-orientation of conceiving the other—a transformation which tracks the shift from desiring the other as an enemy to desiring the other as friend—Harris, in using this metaphor, illuminates what he means to say when fiction must perform "the consuming of bias," or an "assimilation of contraries"<sup>16</sup> which, according to Homi Bhabha, "presages powerful cultural changes."<sup>17</sup> As Harris writes,

if indeed therefore any real sense is to be made of material change it can only occur with an acceptance of a concurrent void and with a willingness to descend into that void

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<sup>13</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> An interesting and necessary undertaking that has yet to be made between Enlightenment philosophies of aesthetics, terror, the beautiful and the sublime, and the moments of terror, cathectic emotional upheaval, and radical re-organization of social thought in Harris's work.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> See Harris, *Palace*, 11 and *Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays* (London: New Beacon Publications, 1967), respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 38.

wherein, as it were, one may begin to come into confrontation with a spectre of invocation whose freedom to participate in an alien territory and wilderness has become a necessity for one's reason or salvation.<sup>18</sup>

Much like the borderline crossings invoked in the metaphor of the Carib bone-flute Harris demands that we "participate in an alien territory," and unhinge ourselves from whatever biased subject positions we appear to inhabit in order to abdicate ourselves from static political stations. As Bhabha states "it is precisely that popular binarism [in reference to Fanonian anti-colonial, nationalist struggle] between theory and politics, whose foundational basis is a view of knowledge as a totalizing generality and everyday life as experience, subjectivity or false consciousness that I have tried to erase."<sup>19</sup> Harris invokes similar theoretical strides yet pushes forward, I would argue, with the conviction of secular faith.

Indeed, such territorial movement, or de-territorialization, resonates with what Edward Said has called "contrapuntal reading," which, for Harris is both an exercise in reading and writing. Said uses the technical register of music to theorize the ways in which interpretive practices as "a post-imperial intellectual attitude might expand the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, "[b]y looking at the different experiences contrapuntally," Said writes, "as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility."<sup>21</sup> Harris executes precisely this exercise in considering *both* imperial subjectivity and colonial history, performing a contrapuntal

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<sup>18</sup> Harris, *Tradition*, 60

<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, *Location*, 30. See also Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1993), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 18.

shift of seemingly static positions. The contrapuntality of *Palace* can be first analyzed in its generic modes of engagement.

Structurally, Harris summons the colonial narrative and cannibalizes it in order to destabilize the literary form. Indeed Harris writes that “the very bareness of the West Indian world reveals the necessity to examine closely the starting point of human sciences. [...] The West Indian artist therefore has a central theme or symbol and that symbol is man, the human person, as opposed to the European artist whose symbol is masses and materials.”<sup>22</sup> To clarify, “the European artist,” for Harris, is a post-modern one, and one that has “discarded depth.”<sup>23</sup> According to Harris, “a post-modernism that is bereft of depth or of an appreciation of the life of the intuitive imagination is but a game for a dictatorship of technologies aligned to sophistry and nihilism.”<sup>24</sup> Harris is interested in “writing a fiction that diverges from realism”<sup>25</sup> since he is cognizant of the “deficiencies of pure realism.”<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly Harris writes that “the supreme casualty that we suffer as things now stand in conventional realism is the death of cosmic love [...] a ‘transcending of the limits of individual existence’ is an enormous question that bears on the roots of love in the womb of space and time.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, in contradistinction to Georg Lukács conception of the “middle-of-the-road hero” and depthless postmodernism, Harris attempts to track subjects along the generic limitations of realism in order to move towards collective thought.<sup>28</sup> As Nana Wilson-Tagoe

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<sup>22</sup> Harris, *Tradition, The Writer, and Society* (London: New Beacon Publications, 1967), 14.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, “The Fabric of the Imagination,” *Third World Quarterly*, 12.1 (1990), 186.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, eds. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège: L<sup>3</sup> Liège Language and Literature, 1992), 26.

<sup>26</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 230.

<sup>28</sup> See Wilson Harris, “Interior of the Novel: Amerindian/European/African Relations,” *Explorations* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), 16. Harris wants to break free from—while simultaneously making use of—the position which, “[f]rom [Harris’s] point of view *weak person* and *middle-of-the-road-hero* are of distinct interest because it is

writes, “[i]t was Wilson Harris who first recognized the limitations of the linear vision and its novelistic expression in the realistic novel of persuasion.”<sup>29</sup>

*Palace* progresses as a linear narrative, but deviates and subverts the rational teleology by engaging in the dream language. In *Fossil and Psyche*, Harris illustrates how he constructs his narratives:

The physical arrow recedes but a psychical arrow comes into play and infuses my subjective premises with physical/psychical targets of parallel extremity. Whereas before the pressure of the game was a physical expedition, now it is as if a curious “interior” body takes over and sets out to erase a build-up of suffocating “exterior” limits—to revise the canvas of physical community through a psychical parallel or intuitive expedition back into the past or through the burdensome present into the future.<sup>30</sup>

The physical arrow can be interpreted as the rational linear narrative which, through the language of the hunt, seeks its target/game/truth/arrival. The psychical arrow that runs parallel to the physical arrow dismantles the target/arrival, the “exterior limits,” and effectively engages in the free play of transhistorical and transcultural moments; it doubles and mimics; compresses and expands. It is in this domain of temporal fluidity within which the spectre finds the space for movement. The psychical arrows can exist ad infinitum; they are the spectral doubles of the narrative form. Therefore the paradox of the novel as a linear progression is subsumed by the dream divergences of the psychical arrows which Harris calls “a consuming of bias” which is akin to a cannibalization process.

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here, [Harris] believes, at this location of uncertainty that a breakthrough from the consolidation of the fashionable absurd (the self-mockery of the contemporary European novel) may well lie.” (emphasis in the original)

<sup>29</sup> Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson Harris, *Fossil and Psyche* (Austin: Occasional Publication: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1974), 3.

In other words, the conventional realist mode is Harris's literary enemy, but by consuming it—i.e. the enemy—in essence, befriending the enemy, Harris engages in “a mutual psyche.” Harris's rejection of the linear form necessitates its presence in order to reject it through a process of consummation. At the syntagmatic level, the level of the sentence, Harris plays on linear ways of reading. Harris does not employ extreme literary devices that break up the text; rather, Harris writes linearly, that is there is a subject and an object and the subject moves towards that object through verbal signifiers. Yet Harris's language is so intensely metaphorical, so fleetingly dense, that the expectation that one can read a sentence, which follows quite logically, and derive a knowable certainty from it is put into question, or at least obfuscated.

Therefore, at the structural level, Harris takes a narrative about linear progression that derives from a literary and historical context of realism, and remaps it through the perspectives of psychological realism. This also happens at the syntagmatic level. In fact, this pattern, or cross-fertilization, of positioning two apparently contrary ideas against one another occurs numerous times and in various metaphorical forms throughout Harris's oeuvre.

Indeed, at the end of the novel the imperial desire with which the ten-man crew set out is never fulfilled. Mariella, and the folk that they set out to find are never found—although Mariella is reconstituted and reworked, both artistically and as in the work of genesis, an aspect chapter three will examine in more depth. The novel's refusal of narrative closure problematizes the notion of conquest and desire for substance—both imperial and literary. As the crew experiences their multiple deaths, they commence the work of creation. These are deaths which they have experienced infinitely before since “[e]veryone remembered that not so long ago this self-same crew had been drowned to a man in the rapids below the Mission.”<sup>31</sup> As Harris writes, “Man's survival is a continual tension and release of energy that approaches self-destruction, but

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<sup>31</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 37.

is aware of self-discovery. This contradiction has its identity that comes into form or being and goes out of form or being.”<sup>32</sup> In the movement from being to non-being, from one inhabited position to another—cross-cultural movements—Harris foments through the metaphor of death ways in which we can re-orient our desired ways of reading, being, and feeling. At the end of the novel, the ten-man crew realize that “each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been for ever seeking and what he had eternally possessed.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, the very substance of *the thing* is ungraspable, unfathomable. Through a strategic reconfiguration of an imperial narrative, Harris foregrounds productive aesthetic and political value but one beyond the realms of anti-colonial and post-colonial antagonism. The work of narrative destabilization comes from the uncovering of each narrative tissue in order to find, at last, nothing, which, taking up Roland Barthes’s alimentary metaphor functions much like an onion with no discernible core.<sup>34</sup>

### *Blindness and Visionary Consciousness*

As Jean-Pierre Durix writes, “art [for Harris] is not a question of mastery. It is a deep exploration of the paradoxes of vision, for which a new approach must constantly be invented.”<sup>35</sup> The novel’s end refuses to concede the crew’s mastery over their goals of conquest. Donne, the leader of the crew, represents the archetypal colonial subject and the narrator’s twin double: as the narrator writes, “[h]is name [...] had always possessed a cruel glory for me,”<sup>36</sup> and Mariella,

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<sup>32</sup> Harris, *Tradition*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 117.

<sup>34</sup> See Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 99; emphasis in the original: “The problem of style can only be treated in relation to what I shall call the *layered* quality of discourse; and, to continue the alimentary metaphor, I shall sum up these few remarks by saying that, if hitherto we have *seen* the text as a fruit with its pit (an apricot, for instance), the flesh being the form and the pit the content, it would be better to see it as an onion, a superimposed construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems) whose volume contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the very infinity of its envelopes—which envelop nothing other than the totality of its surfaces.”

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, “The Visionary Art of Wilson Harris,” *World Literature Today*, 58.1 (1984), 22.

<sup>36</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 20.

whom he abuses, aptly states “Donne cruel and mad.”<sup>37</sup> As Gregory Shaw writes, Donne refers to “the idealism and the cruelty of the age of conquest.”<sup>38</sup> Yet, despite such cruelty—burdened with all the violence, trauma, and oppression conjured in the image of the colonizer—Donne stands in for much more than colonialism. In the opening section of *Palace*, Harris anticipates the re-orientation of Donne as a colonial subject to one that becomes communally implicated:

Donne’s face clouded and cleared instantly. “Dreamer,” he warned, giving me a light wooden tap on the shoulder, “life here is tough. One has to be a devil to survive. I’m the last landlord. I tell you I fight everything in nature, flood, drought, chicken hawk, rat, beast and woman. I’m everything. Midwife, yes, doctor, yes, gaoler, judge, hangman, every blasted thing to the labouring people. Look man, look outside again. Primitive. Every boundary line is a myth. No-man’s land, understand?”<sup>39</sup>

Donne’s statement of absolute being, “I’m everything,” is the nascent gesture towards the novel’s end where Donne “truly blind [...] saw nothing.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore,

[i]t was the unflinching clarity with which he looked into himself and saw that all his life had had loved no one but himself. He focuses his blind eye with all penitent might on this pinpoint star and reflection as one looking into the void of oneself upon the far greater love and self-protection that have made the universe.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the aesthetics of disability, here blindness, is integral to not only *Palace*’s but Harris’s overall philosophy of imagination. As the first epigraph of this chapter gestures towards, Nietzsche’s negative act of “looking away” is the predominant trope of Harris’s thinking, one

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<sup>37</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory Shaw, “Wilson Harris’s Metamorphoses: Animal and Vegetable Masks in *Palace of the Peacock*,” *Callaloo*, 18.1 (1995), 159.

<sup>39</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 107.

<sup>41</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 107.

that turns away from the apparent sphere of politics and its “obsessions”<sup>42</sup> since, according to Harris, a “popular movement cannot penetrate the troubles of time [...] it continues to reiterate its disadvantages against the seas of imperialism.”<sup>43</sup> Harris’s attempts to salvage such colonial pasts are “well aware of the *disablement of the arts*, the irrelevance of the arts, in an age dedicated to materialism and violence. And yet—having confessed to this—what may be better constituted than the arts to *visualize the irrelevant disabled of mankind, the irrelevant dead, the irrelevant event, the irrelevant blind?*”<sup>44</sup> Thus, in attending to the “disabled” status of the arts, Harris takes up such disability in the metaphor of blindness itself.

For Harris anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles function as the “block imperative at the heart of cultural politics” and are merely a “tautology of power.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than “fall back on what it calls ‘independence,’” in the context of nationalist struggle, Harris asserts the productive force of the imaginative arts which, for him, is fiction. According to Adam Riach, “[Harris] continually affirms the *socially* transformative power of the imagination.”<sup>46</sup> While the “difficult” reputation Harris’s writing harbours may appear to counter socially transformative modes of thinking, it is precisely because of Harris’s refusal of epistemological certainty that he stakes his politics.<sup>47</sup>

Rather than inhabit strict subject positions of oppressor and oppressed in battles against imperialism, Harris invites us to conceptualize our positions as well as the position of the other (as eternally locked into specific modes of being) but *without* hopelessness. As Harris writes in his essay “Literacy and the Imagination,” *imaginative* illiteracy is a much more complex and

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<sup>42</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 217.

<sup>43</sup> Harris, *Radical Imagination*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Harris, “Interior of the Novel,” 12.

<sup>45</sup> Harris, “The Fabric of the Imagination,” 177.

<sup>46</sup> Harris, *Radical Imagination*, 12; emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> See Joyce Sparer Adler, *Exploring the Palace of the Peacock: Essays on Wilson Harris*, ed. Irving Adler. (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 1.



urgent problematic of our times: “[I]ots of people may be able to write and read competently, but if they are locked within block functions, they protest against society without a grain of understanding that they carry within themselves the very seeds of disaster against which they protest. Unless they can understand that, complex, inner revision, complex, outer dialogue is lost.”<sup>48</sup>

In the beginning of *Palace* the omniscient *vision* of the narrator is immediately put into question and the reader is already asked to question his or her own reading practice as a teleologically constant and an epistemological certainty. Thus, in the opening paragraphs, Harris is already initiating the reader into intersubjectivity, or universal consciousness, which prepares the reader for the eventual dialectical, self-consuming processes to follow. This is the cannibalistic process operating on the thematic level, by forming “a mutual psyche ... [since] [o]ne cannot know the enemy unless the enemy has something in common with oneself.”<sup>49</sup> This is also symptomatic of the spectre which “allows something to act on and affect itself or another (and also to affect itself as an other) or to be acted on or affected by another (and also by itself as an other).”<sup>50</sup> This is exemplary of the racially diverse ten-man crew that penetrate the interior of Guyana, representative of the fragmentary nature of Guyana. Their spectral histories, racial and cultural differences, colonial doubles, and permeable and mutable selves form a community of spectres and spectrogenic processes. At all times during the novel’s trajectory there are ambiguities and uncertainties, paradoxes, and irreconcilable differences. For instance:

Death was the shadow of a dream. In this remarkable filtered light it was not men of vain flesh and blood, but active ghosts whose labour was indeed a flitting shadow over their

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<sup>48</sup> Wilson Harris, “Literacy and the Imagination,” in *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*, ed. Michael Gilkes (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1989), 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> Harris, *Radical Imagination*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 388.

shoulders as living men would don raiment and cast it off in turn to fulfill the simplest necessity of being.<sup>51</sup>

Harris explicitly draws parallels between the dream language and death as both are involved in a dialectical relationship, each modifying the other. The dream language is haunted and enabled by the spectres of death which follow it. Furthermore, this apparent darkness, the shadow of death, is paradoxically illuminating—validating the destructive and deathly apparitions which constitute the dream language for it makes possible the visionary processes of unveiling the men of their flesh and blood. Indeed, as Maes-Jelinek notes in “Voyage into Namelessness,” the “consciousness and phenomenal world overlap,” and “the metamorphoses of images render the essential fluidity that Harris opposes to the fixity of human polarizations [...] Also contributing to the fluidity of the narrative is the presentation of opposites, first separately, then as a reconciled whole.”<sup>52</sup> Harris performs numerous inversions of epistemological concepts which are polarized and taken for granted, aptly summarized in the metaphor of the “dead seeing eye” and “living closed eye.”<sup>53</sup>

Donne appears in the opening of the novel and is shot and/or hanged. The shot is “near and yet far,” implying a temporal and spatial paradox as it implies both distance in terms of space, but also a temporal distance of being “far” in time. Moreover, “bow[ing] to heaven like a hanging man to his executioner,” the narrative creates ambiguity as to the nature of Donne’s death. Yet, in the following pages he continues to “live” as an animate dead, only to find out he was part of the same crew that drowned many times before.

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<sup>51</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, “Voyage into Namelessness,” in *The Labyrinth of Universality: Wilson Harris’s Visionary Art of Fiction* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2006), 46.

<sup>53</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 19.

“There are three possibilities,” Harris writes, “we need to sense all of those possibilities.”<sup>54</sup> These uncertainties and possibilities of Donne’s un/death are multiple spectres of his temporal moments which exist simultaneously in Donne as he progresses through the novel. Therefore Donne’s apparent telos is destabilized by his very spectrality and disfigures the linear rationality of the novel’s arc. Donne is the horseman who is passing/passed/will pass.

In addition to Donne’s multitudes—his living/non-living state, his transcultural hybridity, drawing upon the colonizing figure of John Donne and a contemporaneous Caribbean identity—the narrative is further complicated by the doubling of Donne and the unnamed narrator. When Donne is shot, that same “shot had pulled [the narrator] up and stifled [his] own heart in heaven.”<sup>55</sup> Additionally, “someone was watching [them] from the trees and bushes.”<sup>56</sup> There are multiple points of entry into the text, as Maes-Jelinek notes in “The Poetry of Space in *Palace of the Peacock*”: “Donne is presented both objectively and subjectively by a third-person and a first-person narrator.”<sup>57</sup> By inhabiting simultaneously these multiple spaces one is able to move from one biased perspective to another. In his essay “Judgement and Dream,” Harris writes:

Suppose one dreamt of oneself lying dead on the ground and yet one dreamt of oneself approaching oneself lying dead on the ground. So one occupies two positions: one is dead on the ground and yet one is approaching oneself. It is as if the dreamer enters into the world and is masked by the world, by the horrors of the world. And yet one is able to move up onto an edge just above the disaster and to look at it, to see it from that position, so that the dreamer is not locked wholly or absolutely into the predicament of horror or

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<sup>54</sup> Harris, *Radical Imagination*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, “The Naked Design,” in *The Labyrinth of Universality*, 58.

catastrophe of the world, but in fact moves on the edge, on the edge of things, looking into what is happening.<sup>58</sup>

Such vision, however, is only made possible, for Harris, through a different kind of seeing: dreaming and blindness. The poetics of vision and its corporeality are vital to *Palace*. During the scene of the hanged horseman, the narrator says “[t]he sun blinded and ruled my living sight but the dead man’s eye remained open and obstinate and clear.”<sup>59</sup> In this reversal of visual anatomy, the sun as an object of illumination, clarity, and revelatory light becomes a burning falsehood, while the dead eye becomes furnished with a superior way of seeing. As Harris writes in his essay “In the Name of Liberty,” Harris argues that

[a] love of Justice born of a voyage in space cannot be real until it gains cross-cultural resonance [...] a ceremony that so enacts, and re-enacts itself, that it *sees* within and through its own *blind* one-track logic [...] *sees* the constellation of the starred, tiger cloak, *visualizes* the constellations of the scales of the fish upon a masked priest who listens to the hidden voices of creation, the fantasy, chaotic yet blended voices of stone and tree.<sup>60</sup>

Harris emphasizes the difference between seeing and visualizing. Much like the aforementioned “living closed eye” and the “dead seeing eye,” mental clarity only becomes possible when one arrests the sensory limitations of vision as mere reception of visually material knowledge and, in turn, through imaginative processes, visualizes the hidden, possible layers of reality. As the narrator states in *Palace*, “I had never before looked on the blinding world in this trusting manner—through an eye I shared only with the soul, the soul and mother of the universe.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Harris, *Radical Imagination*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 217; emphasis in the original.

<sup>61</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 112.

As the second epigraph of this chapter states, “a link exists,” according to Harris, “between the occult and love,” and so far, I have been exploring this relationship specifically as love or the object of desire becomes *occulted*, that is, blocked and made opaque in such a way that requires an imaginative (visualizing) process to reach new levels of understanding. Thus, the various oppositional forces I have been discussing, which are metaphorical markers for a concept, I would argue, is put forth by metonymy; these metaphors of a cannibalized corpse turned into life, the “living closed eye,” and the “dead seeing eye,” vessels, masks, blindness yet vision, are mere iterations of the same unifying philosophical idea.<sup>62</sup>

### *Hegel's Love, Harris's Love*

In her essay “To Sense What is Living in the Other: Hegel's Early Love,” Judith Butler opens by saying that “there are not many manifest reasons to think about Hegel and love together [however] it was a topic to which he turned in his early work, where “love” is the name for what animates and what deadens, and his views have clear implications for thinking about the senses and aesthetics more generally.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, as Butler's essay goes on to argue—an argument that is heavily fleshed out in her book *Subjects of Desire*—love, or desire, for Hegel, is not simply the

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<sup>62</sup> See *Reading Lacan*, ed. Jane Gallop (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 124. As Jacques Lacan writes, “metonymy is there from the beginning and is what makes metaphor possible.” Moreover, the “infinite” possibilities of Harris's work, especially when considered more thoroughly with the infinite, metonymical possibility, invites a reading of Harris's fiction and philosophy in comparison to Alain Badiou's work on philosophy and mathematics, considering Badiou's claim that “*philosophy must enter into logic via mathematics not into mathematics via logic*” [Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, edited and translated by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2004), 16]. In “The Interior of the Novel,” Harris writes that “the character of events in this age—the age of control in this day—is profoundly influenced by the defensive and humiliating *trauma* of the past and, in fact, if we are to digest that *trauma*, if we are not to succumb to a chasm of proportions—implosion/explosion—the *death of numbers through numbers*, we must begin, I believe, to visualize the globe within a new corpus of sensibility wherein the function of character within the interior of the novel will begin to displace a helpless and hopeless consolidation of powers” (12; emphasis mine). An interesting exploration of the workings of mathematics and philosophy in both writers, although from radically different positions, Harris being a Romantic, and Badiou searching for the post-Romantic, remains to be fleshed out.

<sup>63</sup> Judith Butler, “To Sense What is Living in the Other: Hegel's Early Love,” in *The Book of Books* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, documenta 2012), 415.

philosophical underpinning of the expression of a lyrical subject, but a fundamental relationship with the phenomenal world. The work of love as “the name for what animates and what deadens” becomes immanently clear in Harris’s work. Shaw has similarly argued that Harris’s work relates to the “idealist/romanticist notions of nineteenth-century German philosophy whose fundamental tenet is that of an absolute mind or consciousness embracing a totality of experience.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Shaw states that “we can, of course, discern the powerful influence of Hegel,” in a comparative remark between novelist Herman Hesse and Harris.<sup>65</sup> The relationship between Harris’s work and Hegelian desire becomes clear in light of the dialectical manoeuvres Harris performs in *Palace* and his critical writing. For instance, “[w]hat Hegel seeks through the idea of animating law (or enlivening form),” Butler writes,

is something close to a dance, the dance of lovers (not presumably dyadic), understood as a rhythm between a finite series or sequence, understood as spatial elaborated time, and that which cannot be captured within its terms, the infinite. The point is not that nothing or no one dies. The point is only that living and dying punctuate an infinite series that no one can ever comprehend through a single or static idea.<sup>66</sup>

This “living and dying” which “punctuate an infinite series” resounds with the crew’s vitalistic ambivalence, being dead and alive, having been dead, and their coming, futural experience of their deaths, yet again. Yet, what is interesting in this passage is the reference to “the dance of lovers,” its rhythm, and its associations with the infinite—ideas which resonate with Harris’s work. Fittingly, at the end of *Palace*

[Donne’s] feet climbed a little and they danced again, and the music of the peacock turned him into a subtle step and waltz like the grace of an outspread fan of desire that

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<sup>64</sup> Shaw, “Wilson Harris’s *Metamorphoses*,” 158.

<sup>65</sup> Shaw, “Wilson Harris’s *Metamorphoses*,” 159.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, “To Sense What is Living in the Other,” 421.

had once been turned by the captain of the crew into a compulsive design and a blind engine of war. His feet marched again as a spider's towards eternity, and the music he followed welled and circumnavigated the world.<sup>67</sup>

Similar to the dance in the passage of Butler's reading of Hegel, the dance and music, the waltz of Donne's feet are what, after having died, propel him into his re-creative genius and genesis. Moreover, in *Black, Beige, and Brown*, Harris refers to Haitian vodun which "court[s] a subconscious community" and "sees its own performance in literal terms—that is, with and through the eyes of space: with and through the sculpture of sleeping things which the dancer himself actually expresses and becomes [...] He is a dramatic agent of subconsciousness. The life from within and the life from without now truly overlap. That is the intention of the dance, the riddle of the dancer."<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, the parallels between Butler's reading of Hegelian desire, living and dying as an "infinite series," reverberates with Harris's idea of the infinite deaths which the crew are alluded to have already experienced—dramas in which one is already rehearsing narratives, lives and deaths that are not only temporally locked in the past, but also yet to come in the future—one is, more or less, according to Harris, remembering the future. The worldly and temporally abound implications of Harris's "cosmic love" can therefore be read alongside a stricter understanding of Hegelian desire not simply as consciousness of an Other or object but, as Butler writes, "also *reflexive* in the sense that desire is a modality in which the subject is both discovered and enhanced."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, "the subject becomes a locus of ever more sophisticated forms of deception, and thus learns about ever more insidious appearances of the Absolute which turn out

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<sup>67</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 114-115.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson Harris, "Wilson Harris," in *Black, Brown, and Beige*, eds. Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelly (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 132.

<sup>69</sup> Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 25.

to be partial, fictional, and false.”<sup>70</sup> Butler’s reading of the Hegelian subject as negative closely echoes Harris’s philosophical thinking. As Butler writes, “[e]very deception immediately releases a broader conception of truth by which it might be transcended.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Harris states: “I want to suggest to you that precisely because our bodies have some kind of disadvantage or wound, whatever it may be—we are all, at some level or other, wounded—we have all suffered something which has brought about this inhibition in ourselves, this incapacity to enter reality.”<sup>72</sup> Yet, it is this very incapacity, this impartiality, or negativity that allows the subject to construe its “intentional” desire and continue to attempt to enter reality, or as Butler writes, “[n]o matter how many times his world dissolves, he remains infinitely capable of reassembling another world; he suffers the negative, but is never wholly consumed by it [...] The negative is always and only useful—never debilitating in any final sense.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, I correlate this negative insufficiency to the complex and ironic narrative structure of *Palace*. Harris understands the insufficiency of realism, of finitude, of seeing, yet because of such insufficiencies is able to carve out that space for infinite transcendence.

Metaphors abound in *Palace* as well as his critical writing and function as traces, or threads, which hints at how one must imaginatively participate in his work. The lack of clarity, I would argue, opens Harris’s texts to challenge our perceived knowable capacities. It is this precise, aesthetic gesture, this exercise in contrapuntal compassion, that possesses the most theoretically and creatively useful tools for engaging rethinking modes of community building.

Harris’s understanding of the particular and limiting construed senses of the world that require knowledge of other worlds kept hidden from one’s sensual engagement with the world

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<sup>70</sup> Butler, *Subjects*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Butler, *Subjects*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Harris, *Radical Imagination*, 95.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, *Subjects*, 22.



can be theoretically related to Jacques Rancière's claim that "[f]iction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective."<sup>74</sup> Such a statement cannot but resonate with Harris's work and philosophy considering his interest in "the music of silence."<sup>75</sup> The penultimate example occurring at the end of *Palace*: "[t]he music Carroll sang and played and whistled suddenly filled the corridors and the chosen ornaments of the palace; I knew it came from a far source within—deeper than every singer knew. And Carroll himself was but a small mouthpiece and echo standing at the window and reflecting upon the world."<sup>76</sup>

Harris's densely metaphorical language can be unpacked with the aforementioned theoretical tools I have gestured towards. If one understands Harris's belief in at least two realities (one being what one materially sees, the other being what one must visualize), the hidden reality—what must be visualized—can be likened to the "silence," the void, the abyss, the "zone of occult instability"<sup>77</sup> in which we must all experience suffering together. As Shaw states, "[t]he trees of the forest [an example of a vessel of memory in Harris's work], like the rocks in the stream, become extensions of that absolute self which is extended both in space and time, so that trees are transformed into archetypal presences, ancestral masks."<sup>78</sup> Harris's aesthetics therefore appropriately demand that we re-work our sense and senses of the world, our apparent understanding of what is being communicated to us, in order to detect new ways of

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<sup>74</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum Books, 2010), 141.

<sup>75</sup> Harris, "The Music of Living Landscapes," *Selected Essays*, 40.

<sup>76</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 116.

<sup>77</sup> Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 267.

<sup>78</sup> Shaw, "Wilson Harris's Metamorphoses," 160.

moving towards a collective identity that may transcend the material world of politics itself. As the narrator writes at the close of *Palace*:

This was the inner music and voice of the peacock I suddenly encountered and echoed and sang as I had never heard myself sing before. I felt the faces before me begin to fade and part company from me and from themselves as if our need of one another was now fulfilled, and our distance from each other was the distance of a sacrament, the sacrament and embrace we knew in one music and one undying soul. Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been for ever seeking and what he had eternally possessed.<sup>79</sup>

In this passage music operates as the aesthetic tool for detecting and understanding the limits of the sensual world. It is Carroll's music that allows them to *hear* one another in greater capacities than the physical world permits. Their bodies appear to be radically divested, rearranged, and held within an occult sphere in which, together, they inhabit "one undying soul." Although Harris argues that material politics do not interest him, I argue that it is at this precise moment that we can detect Harris's most radically political movements.

It is not the space in which we suffer together, infinitely, that I find political, but Harris's understanding of the sensuality of the world, of its limits, and the ways in which it is constructed and gestures towards particular ways of seeing and thinking. It is Harris's demand that we consider the sensuality of the world, but also, simultaneously and urgently its facetiousness. In understanding the world as aesthetics, one can garner the ways in which to read Harris's work as political work: one that seeks to displace one's apparent sense of the world and collapse another unknown world onto it, bridge one hidden world from within it.

Ostensibly, Harris's fictional and theoretical work possesses its own problems. As implied by Harris's amatory metaphors, insistence on perceiving vessels of memories as

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<sup>79</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 116-117.

“wombs,” and the conflation of women and landscapes, Harris is susceptible to damaging oppressive attitudes towards female subjectivity insofar as woman is posited as the mere reflection of man, a mere text through which man can discover himself. These processes, which Harris’s language has blatantly suggested, rest upon certain symbolic forms and methods of intercourse, engagement, dissemination, and fertilization. The following chapter discusses the metaphors Harris employs which position female subjectivity in relation to male subjects and the homoerotic narratives they mask.

## Chapter Two

### The Womb/Rectum of Space

No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less.

—John Donne, Meditation XVII (575)

That involuntary ground reaches subconsciously, unconsciously, *through* the *humanization* of nature that we set up into ruling models in our places of learning and in the humanities, the universities, reaches *through* such models into nature(s) which, I repeat, are *extrahuman* even as they (such natures) bear on humankind, even as they bring gifts to humankind. Such gifts are akin to quantum fire of soul (*anima mundi*), quantum oceans, quantum landscapes, quantum riverscapes, which imply miniscule linkages between being and nonbeing, psyche and pebble or leaf or wood or cloud or tide or rock.

—Wilson Harris, “Creoleness, The Crossroads of a Civilization?” (246)

The buck woman can’t speak a word.

—Wilson Harris, *The Palace of the Peacock* (76)

The imaginative re-workings of Harris’s fictional and critical writing have been recognized as various reconciliatory processes involving the internal and the external—the self and his world. As Joyce Sparer Adler writes, Harris’s critical essays “are filled with passion against divisions in humankind and for a vision of an evolved humanity integrated and creative as a result of the fertilization of imagination by the artist.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, “[i]n its extraordinary concise complexity,” Hena Maes-Jelinek writes, “[*Palace*] presents an almost unlimited number of relationships on all levels of experience and their transformation into a ‘genuine open dialogue.’”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Joyce Sparer Adler, *Exploring the Palace of the Peacock: Essays on Wilson Harris*, ed. Irving Adler. (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 60.

<sup>81</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality: Wilson Harris’s Visionary Art of Fiction* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2006), 27-28.

Yet, while Harris's early critics have been at ease to perform comparative readings between his critical essays and his fictional writing—an interpretive move that is to be expected and necessary, providing initial revelatory forays into his work—the problems of the ways in which love as a thematic, philosophical methodology that rests upon and reinforces patriarchal and colonizing heterosexist politics has yet to be thoroughly addressed.

Maes-Jelinek is cognizant of the relationship between “Man and landscape [... which] at times takes on the features of a human body [...] More important still, the glaring contrasts and uncertainties of the Guyanese natural world are a phenomenal and spatial equivalent of the psyche, and the two blend in the narrative.”<sup>82</sup> The “human” body is however undoubtedly female. Moreover, Maes-Jelinek states that “the Amerindian woman is the muse who can regenerate his diseased imagination,” yet does not make any critical feminist commentary concerning the Arawak woman's positionality and subservience to a male-dominated subject formation process.<sup>83</sup> Conversely, in her essay “The Evolution of Female Figures and Imagery in Wilson Harris's Novels,” Adler admits that she “wonders mainly about the female figures who are ‘muses’,” adding that “the muses arouse the imaginations of the male characters but [...] do not seem to have imaginations of their own [...] Nor do they seem in the narratives to have significance outside of their relations with males, whereas the males always have a being apart from the female characters.”<sup>84</sup>

Adler's expository commentary on Harris's earlier work invites an analytical intervention since “only in three outstanding novels in the first two decades of Harris's work do the changes in consciousness occur in the female character.”<sup>85</sup> While Adler articulates the key problems of

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<sup>82</sup> Maes-Jelinek, *Labyrinth of Universality*, 34.

<sup>83</sup> Maes-Jelinek, *Labyrinth of Universality*, 48.

<sup>84</sup> Adler, *Exploring the Palace of the Peacock*, 71-72.

<sup>85</sup> Adler, *Exploring the Palace of the Peacock*, 72.

woman's subordinate relation to man in Harris's early work, specifically in *Palace*, the breadth of her essay's scope in tracking female characters across Harris's entire oeuvre limits the space for critical inquiry. More recently, however, in "Race, Sex, and Historical Tension in the Search for the Transcendental West Indian Subject," Shona Jackson writes that "[d]espite the techniques Harris employs and the overwhelming emphasis on the landscape, *The Palace of the Peacock* appears to be a highly masculinized reconstruction of a Caribbean psychic subjectivity achieved through a renarrativization of a moment of oppression that Harris's text *cannot reconcile*."<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, it is Harris's aspiration to re-work historical trauma that posits apparently oppositional identities (victim/oppressor) and forces one to come face to face with the very historical problem as such—that is, colonizer/colonized identities—in order to repudiate its overdetermined significance. According to Harris, "when one begins to move through and beyond a formal ground of relations [... one may move] towards a new subconscious alliance within a chasm of proportions belonging to the past, present and future."<sup>87</sup> The "formal ground of relations" being, for instance, the very subject positions of oppressor/oppressed which must be transcended into a timeless "subconscious alliance."

Similar to Jackson's admonition that such oppression *cannot* be reconciled, I seek to not only question the validity of Harris's attempts at displacing a heterosexist conjugal politics, but to trace and demonstrate its presence in Harris's work. In the previous chapter, I discussed love/desire as a philosophical methodology in Harris's work with attendance to the similarities to Hegelian desire. In short, love/desire as an operative move between a subject and his phenomenal world, a subject who is damaged, or wounded, and seeks through occulted or

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<sup>86</sup> Shona Jackson, "Race, Sex, and Historical Tension in the Search for the Transcendental West Indian Subject," *Changing Currents: Transnational Caribbean Literary and Cultural Criticism*, eds. Emily Allen Williams and Melvin Rahming (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), 196; emphasis mine.

<sup>87</sup> Wilson Harris, *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), 11.

blocked processes of engagement methods of visualization (as opposed to strict material vision) as an artistic and philosophical exercise in the movement towards radically shifting our desires for and conceptions of community. This chapter will discuss the problem of the exigencies of positioning woman as the blocking process—as a textual subject created in the mind of the male subject who must in turn be overcome, possessed and dispossessed, in order to allow for the generation of a collective consciousness reserved for the domain of men. Exploring Harris’s heterosexist conjugal politics, metaphors of maternity and female anatomy, and the conflation of women subjectivity to environmental landscapes, I seek to argue the ways in which woman as a transcendental signifier comes to inhabit a space of restricted agency and textual subordination.

### *Projecting the Caribbean Womb*

In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* Antonio Benítez-Rojo states that “[i]f someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic picture of what the Caribbean is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way [...] that sketches in an “other” shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness; change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter.”<sup>88</sup> The cosmic metaphorical prowess within which Benítez-Rojo frames the Caribbean represents its spiraling hybridity within its particular cultural contours while attending to its planetary reach. These images resound with Harris’s own imaginative thinking. As a metaphor for the Caribbean, the Milky Way refers to both the astronomical, cosmological, and erotics of Harris’s work—the last of which I find aesthetically interesting and will re-visit in my own theoretical situation of my poetics in chapter three.

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<sup>88</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

In *Palace*, the crew are signified as a cultural composite of racial identities including “Portuguese, Indian, Negro, Amerindian and others,”<sup>89</sup> and represent Harris’s “architecture of consciousness.”<sup>90</sup> This communal, unstable, and malleable complex of characters progress through the novel and become re-born in the metaphorical womb of space. The irony of the crew’s racial composition allows Harris to displace cultural and historical identities and shift the grounds upon which we place our assumed prejudices and attitudes. Since the colonizing crew of the novel is not composed strictly of European colonists, but an amalgamation of cultural identities; this functions as Harris’s cross-cultural method of redistributing subject positions.

In other words, binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized become inverted, destabilized, and restructured across a field of knowledge—atomized into a heterogeneous architecture where identities become part and parcel of the same fabric of being—in order to problematize strict anti-imperialist critique, but, more importantly, to engender the “suffering,” as Maes-Jelinek writes, in the void of a “heterogeneous community.”<sup>91</sup> These cross-cultural moves are achieved through metaphors of death and rebirth. Nearing the end of Book Three, “The Second Death,”—the section before the crew’s rebirth in the palace of the peacock—the narrator writes that “[t]hey were bound together in wishful substance and in the very enormity of a dreaming enmity and opposition and self-destruction.”<sup>92</sup>

As I discussed in chapter one, these subjective displacements are made possible by simultaneously making use of a given set of appearances or ideas—metaphors of life and death, seeing and knowing—in order to overcome the limits of the epistemological boundaries of perceived empirical norms—a paradoxical move that requires knowledge and the existence of

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<sup>89</sup> Adler, *Exploring the Palace of the Peacock*, 2.

<sup>90</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 62.

<sup>91</sup> Maes-Jelinek, introduction to *Explorations*, 1.

<sup>92</sup> Wilson Harris, *The Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 96.



apparent boundaries in order to transcend them. In understanding how transcendence in Harris's philosophy is aligned with pregnancy and rebirth, this drive towards the theoretically-shared metaphor of the womb nevertheless requires a critical intervention. In fact, the implications of space are so crucial to Harris; in his own words, he is "particularly concerned with the Caribbean, the Guyanas, and the Central Americas where a cross-cultural medium of traditions may be discerned."<sup>93</sup> In fact, it is "the very bareness of the West Indian world [that] reveals the necessity to examine closely the starting point not only of human sciences."<sup>94</sup> Such "bareness" intuitively imagines exposure and openness that problematically seem to coincide with desires for copulation and occupation. The *OED* defines "bareness" as "nakedness, lack of covering," or "destitution, scantiness."<sup>95</sup> Additionally, although not quite a homograph but visually proximate, "bareness" may also remind us of "barrenness" as a kind of fertile dearth, an "incapacity for child-bearing,"<sup>96</sup> once again, echoing maternal metaphors which Harris frequently draws upon.

The metaphorical bareness and barrenness of the land in a Caribbean context invites the insemination of European history. Indeed, Benítez-Rojo writes that "the Atlantic is the Atlantic (with all its port cities) because it was once engendered by the copulation of Europe—that insatiable solar bull—with the Caribbean archipelago; the Atlantic is today the Atlantic (the navel of capitalism) because Europe, in its mercantilist laboratory, conceived the project of insemination of the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa."<sup>97</sup> Yet, the possibility of a *post-imperialist* critique still permits the language of colonial texts and ideologies to dominate as its center. If "the location of culture," according to Homi Bhabha, is to be found in the interstitial

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<sup>93</sup> Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (London: Routledge, 1999), 89.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays* (London: New Beacon Publications, 1967), 14.

<sup>95</sup> "bareness, n." *OED Online*. March 2013. Oxford University Press. 10 Mar. 2013.

<sup>96</sup> "barrenness, n." *OED Online*. March 2013. Oxford University Press. 10 Mar. 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, 5.

spaces of dominant forms and subjects, as *already* existing, we must ask, as Rey Chow does, “what is the genuine import of such openings? Whom do they benefit?”<sup>98</sup> In Chows’ critique of Bhabha, “‘hybridity’ revives, in the masquerade of deconstruction, anti-imperialism, and ‘difficult’ theory, [...] an old functionalist notion of what a dominant culture permits in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium.”<sup>99</sup> In thinking through Harris’s hybridity, his writing back to the colonial event, we must ask how far, if at all, can one move away from such damaging logics that only re-center the imperial text.

Harris further develops Benítez-Rojo’s conception of the impregnation of the Caribbean by the West as a historical event but also as a philosophical methodology for overcoming mere antagonisms. As Peter Hitchcock writes, “Harris will ascribe consciousness to rocks and trees as both informative and polemical. His animism gives his fiction a multilayered narration in which every dream permeates not only the consciousness of the dreamer, but the space and place in which it occurs.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, “[f]or in animism of structure,” Harris writes, “one is aware of something relayed to the present by the past but so possessing us [...] it coheres into a void within us [...] which] as coherent void it dramatizes the deeps of subjective frustration and mystery, reason, unreason, inspiration in man-made institutions [...] with the very inner space of nature-made nature.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, “the vessel of memory may appear alien at times in some perspective—be it ship or rock.”<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, as the second epigraph states, Harris is interested in the “humanization” of nature—which requires a singular subject—in order to image its “extrahuman”-ness, that is, his

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<sup>98</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) and Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>99</sup> Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 50.

<sup>101</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 108.

<sup>102</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 12.

relationship to the phenomenal world which “imply miniscule linkages between being and nonbeing, psyche and pebble or leaf or wood or cloud or tide or rock.”<sup>103</sup> Therefore, developing from copulative and projective metaphors of penetrating the “womb of space,” that is, the Caribbean, the Guyanas, and the Central Americas, the crew in *Palace* gaze upon the female figures in the novel in order to form linkages between their atomized bodies and the landscape.

In Harris’s more explicit heterosexist critical writing, however, this process is a “marriage of consonance and dissonance”<sup>104</sup> and the conquest of “love of heaven [whose] instrumentalities are bred from *intercourse* with the imagined, flying animal in the skin of a tree or flesh or leaf.”<sup>105</sup> In the novel “the fury of [Mariella’s] voice is in the wind,”<sup>106</sup> she “dwell[ls] above the falls in the forest,”<sup>107</sup> and “had existed like a shaft of fantastical shapely dust in the sun.”<sup>108</sup> Early on in the novel, Mariella’s subjectivity is assembled into the landscape, described from the point of view of a male subject, who projects her identity onto his phenomenal world. Indeed, Harris’s own experience as a surveyor in the interior of Guyana intimated the “[need] to immerse [himself] in the living, disturbing but immensely rich text of landscapes/riverscapes/skyscrapes.”<sup>109</sup> Harris began to sense intuitive and quantum connections between the “living landscape,” history, and memory, providing the preliminary terms for his cross-cultural complex. Therefore, Harris’s own terms for defining the cross-cultural complex questions the viability of the destabilizing and reconciliatory processes *Palace* attempts to enact. It is a process contingent upon a heteronormative sexually violating act.

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<sup>103</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 235.

<sup>104</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 44.

<sup>105</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 64; emphasis mine.

<sup>106</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 21.

<sup>107</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 27.

<sup>109</sup> Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, eds. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège: L<sup>3</sup> Language and Literature, 1992), 72.

The spectres which proliferate in *Palace* are gendered and possess sexualities, and Harris, accordingly, realizes the “apparent sexuality of time.”<sup>110</sup> Harris attributes the void of creative potentiality to the “birth-wish/death-wish” which is a grotesquely caricatured feminine body; it is a “borderline between a pregnant body and an all-consuming enlarged body.”<sup>111</sup> The void where the birth-wish/death-wish can realize its potentiality oscillates between the generative inflated body, and an inflated body that is ready to burst into its own self-destruction. Mariella embodies the persistently futural desire of finitude, truth, and arrival; while the Arawak woman embodies the connection with the past. One is situated in a future that will never arrive; while the other is located in a past temporality.

Oscillating between these two is the male intersubjective consciousness that must penetrate and transcend these temporalities by simultaneously refracting its mutable self between them. “Even as Donne embodies a plurality of voyagers, a plurality of living deaths,” Harris writes,

so Mariella (whom he abuses) embodies a plurality of women. These are made visible as terror-making faculties and the regenerative womb of time when the skeletal fabric and artifice of history’s masquerade acquire luminous density in the music of living landscapes.<sup>112</sup>

The feminine therefore is a type of frailty, exemplary of a masculine insecurity, as the narrator remarks at one point in the novel that his “body grew faint and trembling as a woman’s or a

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<sup>110</sup> Wilson Harris, *Fossil and Psyche* (Austin: Occasional Publication African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1974), 2.

<sup>111</sup> Harris, *Fossil and Psyche*, 2.

<sup>112</sup> Harris, *Selected Essays*, 56.

child's.”<sup>113</sup> Thus, if femininity is constructed in this passage as a type of insufficiency and undesirable weakness, that same femininity is reinserted into the landscape:

A lull fell upon the crew, transforming them, as it had changed Donne, into the drumming current of the outboard engine and of the rapid swirling water around every shadowy stone. All understanding flowed into Winthrop's dreaming eternity, all essence and desire and direction, wished-for and longed-for since the beginning of time, or else focused itself in the eye of Vigilance's spirit.<sup>114</sup>

Intersubjectivity is only made possible through the boat, which is connected to the riverscape. The crew's psychic ability to intuitively tap into each other's psyche is only made through the penetration of the riverscape, in which they are able to reconstruct a new image of themselves—that of a universal unity. The “our” in the passage is a collective pronoun of plurality, yet in this context, is inclusive only to the men who constitute that community.

Although this passage may not appear to be destructive, it nevertheless operates as an intrusive refraction of their androcentric selves through the prism of the feminized landscape. Another instance of intersubjective crystallization occurs with the Arawak woman in the following passage:

Tiny embroideries resembling the handiwork on the Arawak woman's kerchief and the wrinkles on her brow turned to incredible and fast soundless breakers of foam. Her crumpled bosom and river grew agitated with desire, bottling and shaking every fear and inhibition and outcry. The ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew. This sudden insolence of soul rose and caught them from their powder

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<sup>113</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 29.

<sup>114</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 33.

of her eyes and the age of her smile and the dust in her hair flowing back upon them with silent streaming majesty and abnormal youth in a wave of freedom and strength.<sup>115</sup>

What is remarkable in this passage is that the Arawak woman is defined entirely through her physical appearance. The parallels between “her crumpled bosom” and the river that is “agitated with desire” cannot be ignored. The water is congruent to her dress “rising to embrace the crew.”

Therefore, as the Arawak woman coalesces into the landscape as well as their consciousness, she is de-subjectified, crushed, shattered, dispersed—experiencing a kind of death which permits a “wave of freedom and strength.” The male intersubjective consciousness can only realize its potential by diffusing itself through the Arawak woman. These quantum connections situate a type of universality where there is hybridity and intersubjective thought forming between the animate and the inanimate. However, what is severely lacking is female agency, female inclusion in the so-called universality of the cross-cultural imagination.

If Harris’s oeuvre constitutes a dream book,<sup>116</sup> a collection of narratives that must be read communally, then we can follow similar lines of logic in Vera Kutzinski’s analysis of Harris’s *Carnival*. As Kutzinski writes, Harris’s “revisionary logic invites readers to recognize the limiting partiality of familiar analytical and social categories such as gender, sexuality, and race, and to imagine truths and personalities beyond their bounds.”<sup>117</sup> Yet, this transcendence requires a sacrifice, and in *Palace*, a feminine one. As Kerry Johnson notes in her analysis of the *Carnival*

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<sup>115</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 62.

<sup>116</sup> See Andrew Bundy, introduction to *Selected Essays*, 15: “In the dreamscape will be a number of promontories and I would point them out here: (1) The so-called *Guyana Quartet* (*Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *The Whole Armour*, *The Secret Ladder*), a homeland tetralogy written between 1960 and 1963 to unravel the masquerade of appearances that dog the conventional histories of colonialism; (2) A Carib diptych (*The Sleepers of Roraima*, *The Age of the Rainmakers*) published in 1970-71, which explores the vestiges of legend carried in indigenous peoples; and (3) The Lord Carnival Trilogy (*Carnival*, *The Infinite Rehearsal*, *The Four Banks of the River of Space*) published between 1985 and 1990, which chronicles the way folk art embodied in Carnival can cause a slipping-off of the masks worn by a society. These three groups, I feel, give shape to Harris’s dream-book of novels, with his other works of fiction serving as breath-lines/breathing lines in a living dreamscape that releases circularities and revisitations in the dream-book of novels.”

<sup>117</sup> Vera Kutzinski, “New Personalities: Race, Sexuality, and Gender in Wilson Harris’s Recent Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 17.2 (Summer 1997): 72-76.

*Trilogy*, “when the female body is represented in the novel, however, it is mostly in a state of crisis.”<sup>118</sup>

Mariella and the Arawak woman possess little agency. Mariella’s dialogue in *Palace* is limited as she is only privileged to a few lines, “He beat me,” “Look,” and, finally “Donne cruel and mad”—a line that resonates with an African’s only utterance in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, the Arawak women must be interpreted through Schomburgh, since “the buck woman can’t speak a word.”<sup>120</sup> Essentially, her language and constitutive self must be constructed through the language of the male subject. The dreaming language, therefore, is excluded from the women; they do not have the capacity to experience the cross-cultural imagination actively, rather, they are the locus where the dreaming language intimates itself, the repository where psychic reverberations experience exaltation. By the end of the novel there is “the sacrament and embrace we knew in one muse and one undying soul”<sup>121</sup> which still suggests an exclusive act between the feminine muse and the collective male subject, which is Harris’s greatest irony and charge.

### *Objections*

In detailing the traumatic positionality of woman as a transcendental signifier in Harris’s work, this chapter seeks not to perform a recuperative reading of female subjectivity in *Palace*—if it is at all possible. Nor, by detailing her symbolic rape and subjugated relationality to man do I simply seek to restate forms of misogyny, else one is charged with the curious question of why resurface a text and interpretation that will only perpetuate such damaging ideologies. Instead, I

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<sup>118</sup> Kerry Johnson, “Translations of Gender, Pain, and Space: Wilson Harris’s *The Carnival Trilogy*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44.1 (1998), 129.

<sup>119</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 76.

<sup>121</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 117; Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and the Secret Sharer* (New York: Bantam, 1969), 118.

seek to unmask, by tracing the stated and static silence of woman in *Palace*, the various heterogeneous forms of heterosexual relationality that exist simultaneously with narcissistically homosexual desires for the male subject by the male subject, cathected through visions of female animism.<sup>122</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the term “native informant” to designate that space of the other that has always been present and constitutive of the European subject. A position that, she admits, is an impossible position since one does not enter as witness, but as imaginative reconstructivist, a position that entails a “mistaken” reading but a reading that must be pursued nonetheless.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, as Chow writes,

[r]ather than saying that the native has already spoken because the dominant hegemonic discourse is split/hybrid/different from itself, and rather than restoring her to her “authentic” context, we should argue that it is the native’s silence which is the most important clue to her displacement. That silence is at once the *evidence* of imperialist oppression (the naked body, the defiled image) and what, in the absence of the original witness to that oppression, must act in its place by *performing* or *feigning* as the pre-imperialist gaze.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ostensibly, I am more or less interested in theories of subalternity. Rather than merely asking, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has asked, “Can the subaltern speak?” or restoring her to any kind of authentic space, I seek the ways in which the (un)dead subaltern—animate and inanimate—couches other sexual narratives in her very destruction. At the same time, however, I remain cognizant and cautious to Victor Li’s claim that “[d]ead subalterns, in their very unrepresentability, make ideal representatives of a utopian decolonized space. Their death guarantees their inaccessibility to a hegemonic coding; in other words, their death becomes the precondition for a theory of subalternity” [Victor Li, “Necroidealism, or the Subaltern’s Sacrificial Death,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11.3 (2009), 280]. The subaltern’s death happens doubly: in Harris’s literal murdering of woman as a transcendental signifier, anatomized, and redistributed into space; and in my own critical suspension of the subaltern—in a state of death—that, sacrificially, permits any kind of critique at all.

<sup>123</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6: “I think of the ‘native informant’ as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man—a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation.”

<sup>124</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 38; emphasis in the original.



To return to Harris's admonition that it is "the very bareness of the West Indian world [that] reveals the necessity to examine closely the starting point not only of human sciences,"<sup>125</sup> we can understand that our interpretative stance must shift to take into consideration that it is the gaze of the landscape, the presence of the landscape which imposes itself (in Harris's context) onto the psyche of the male subject that propels him to project back onto the environment. In shifting the grounds of relationality between subject and object from mere objectification of an object or other by a subject, one must explore the inverse relationship of how one is *subjected* to an object or other. "The subject's elementary, founding, gesture," as Slavoj Žižek writes, "is *to subject itself*."<sup>126</sup> Moreover,

[t]he subject's activity is, at its most fundamental, the activity of submitting oneself to the inevitable, the fundamental mode of the object's passivity, of its passive presence, is that which moves, annoys, disturbs, traumatizes us (subjects): at its most radical the object is *that which objects*, that which disturbs the smooth running of things.<sup>127</sup>

Indeed, in Chow's own rendition of the inversed subject-object relationship in a postcolonial context, "Hegel's story of human "self-consciousness" is then not what he supposed it to be—a story about Western Man's highest achievement—but a story about the disturbing effect of Western Man's encounter with those others Hegel considered primitive."<sup>128</sup> In thinking through the general history of imperial encounters with the other—as marked identities written in difference with which the European subject constructs himself—one can begin to suspect the glimpses of deep logics that persist in Harris's work. Through a postcolonial lens, "this gaze," Chow writes, "which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer 'conscious of

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<sup>125</sup> Harris, *Tradition*, 14. This also refers to V.S. Naipaul's comment that "nothing was created in the West Indies" from *The Middle Passage* (London: Picador, 2001), 20.

<sup>126</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>127</sup> Žižek, *Parallax View*, 17.

<sup>128</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 51.

himself,' leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth 'reflected' in the native-object.<sup>129</sup>

### *The Womb/Rectum of Space*

Increasingly throughout the novel, the chase for Mariella withers into a resisting battle against contrary forces. After the crew's subsequent deaths (deaths they have lived infinitely) the crew begin to ascend a waterfall in Book Four, aptly named, "The Paling of Ancestors."<sup>130</sup> The crew sets out to ascend the waterfall whose "steps and balconies had been nailed with abandon"<sup>131</sup> and "[a]s they climbed upward Donne felt the light shine on him reflected from within."<sup>132</sup> As the crew finally make their way to a room with a "young carpenter,"<sup>133</sup> they discover that "[t]ime had no meaning."<sup>134</sup> In fact, Donne "had entered the endless void of himself and the stars were invisible. He was blind. He accepted every invisible light and conceived it as an intimate and searching reflection which he was helping to build with each step he made."<sup>135</sup> In their apparently final encounter with the object, they find that the woman dissipates. Donne "dipped his hand in [the stream and water with melting gold] but nothing was there,"<sup>136</sup> articulating Harris's fundamental admonition that conquest is vacuous.

What is of greater import is that the experience with the "native-object" finally, and actually, allows them to experience homosocial desires for each other. The crew enter a construct where "the whole room reflected this threadbare glistening garment [of a woman] yet the men

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<sup>129</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 51.

<sup>130</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 96-97.

<sup>131</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 100.

<sup>132</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 106.

<sup>133</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 102; ostensibly a reference to Jesus Christ as a carpenter given the cosmological and heavenly atmosphere of the palace of the peacock in which male subjects are reborn in a new light of awakening.

<sup>134</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 103.

<sup>135</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 108.

<sup>136</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 99.

are constantly looking through windows, through reflections, in order to see themselves.”<sup>137</sup>

“This was the palace of the universe,” Harris writes,

and the windows of the soul looked out and in. The living eyes in the crested head were free to observe the twinkling stars and eyes and windows on the rest of the body and the wings. Every cruel mark and stripe and ladder had vanished. I saw a face at one of the other constructions and windows from my observation tower. It was the face of one of the crew that had died.<sup>138</sup>

In the cosmic connections finally made between the palace and the universe, phenomenal penetrations which, throughout the novel have been mediated through female figures, the penultimate desire for copulation has led, actually, to homosocial impulses of looking and self-identification. While Harris writes that one must engage in a “ceaseless creative and re-creative *rapport* between old monuments and new windows upon the cosmos,”<sup>139</sup> the processes through which such “rapport” is engendered must be interrogated.

Undeniably, woman becomes increasingly less important, laying rather, the theoretical groundwork through which relationality is articulated as womb spaces. Yet, these preliminary grounds mask, as I have suggested, the subject’s incessant desire for himself, his reflection, as Chow would argue, in the “native-object” relationship.<sup>140</sup> A heteronormative narrative of conquest is thus adopted to make legible a sexuality that is translated however violently through a female subject. Woman becomes at once that which is desired and abjected. Desired in order to

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<sup>137</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 106.

<sup>138</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 112-13.

<sup>139</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 51.

<sup>140</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 53: “To insist on the native as an indifferent defiled image is then to return to the native a capacity for distrusting and resisting the symbolic orders that ‘fool’ her while not letting of the ‘illusion’ which has structured her survival. To imagine the coexistence of defilement and indifference *in* the native-object is not to neutralize the massive destructions committed under such orders as imperialism and capitalism. Rather, it is to invent a dimension beyond the deadlock between native and colonizer in which the native can only be the colonizer’s defiled image and the anti-imperialist critic can only be psychotic.”

fulfil the sexual fantasy; abjected because she functions merely as a mask for homosexual desire, or the anus.<sup>141</sup>

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva has argued that “to speak of hallucination in connection with such an unstable ‘object’ suggests at once that there is a visual cathexis in the phobic mirage—and at least a speculative cathexis in the abject. [...] More than that, a cathexis of looking, in parallel with the symbolic domination taking the place of narcissism, often leads to voyeuristic “side effects” of phobia.”<sup>142</sup> In *Palace*, Mariella functions as that “unstable ‘object’” that remains forever unattainable by the crew. Mariella is a symbolic identity that disperses into the heartland of Guyana and remains simply in the realm of representation—fractured, and cleaved. Moreover, the Arawak woman who remains bound up in the language of another, who is mediated through a male tongue, also functions as that cathectic object for the male gaze. The desire for this female symbolic, “a cathexis of looking” comes to “tak[e] the place of narcissism”<sup>143</sup>—the very homosexual narcissism which Harris denies and restructures through a heteronormative narrative of (sexual) conquest—masks male homosocial desire yet makes it visible through its constructed invisibility.

In *The Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida deconstructs friendship by tracing its numerous incantations by various philosophers. Opening with a quote attributed to Aristotle by Montaigne, “O friends, there is no friend,” Derrida charts how friendship has been unstably inherited out of fiction and canonized into a heteronormative fraternity.<sup>144</sup> Additionally, not only is friendship androcentric, but

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<sup>141</sup> The conflation of woman as a transcendental signifier and male effeminacy (and homosexuality)—and all their desires for death in Harris’s work—can be aptly summarized by Leo Bersani’s admonition that “[w]omen and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction” [Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 18].

<sup>142</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 46.

<sup>143</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 46.

<sup>144</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (Verso: London, 2005), viii.

[a] narcissistic projection of the ideal image, of its own ideal image (*exemplar*), already inscribes the legend. It engraves the renown in a ray of light, and prints the citation of the friend in a convertibility of life and death, of presence and absence, and promises it to the testamental *revenge* [...] \* of more [no more] life, of a *surviving*.<sup>145</sup>

The colonial narratives which Harris summons are inheritors of this androcentric configuration of friendship. The unnamed narrator, Donne, Schomburgh, the da Silva twins, Vigilance, Carroll, Jennings, Cameron, and Winthrop epitomize this canonical and fraternal idea of friendship. Since

[t]he whole crew was one spiritual family living and dying together in a common grave out of which they had sprung again from the same soul and womb as it were. They were all knotted and bound together in the enormous bruised head of Cameron's ancestry and nature as in the white unshaven head of Schomburgh's age and presence.<sup>146</sup>

The "spiritual family," therefore, is a fraternity—a phallogentric dream. It is a fraternity which is exemplary of Aristotle's "primary" friendship that only exists between special men, it "is not found toward many (*en pollois*), for it is hard to test many men."<sup>147</sup>

What Harris also inherits is the political work of this structure of friendship; the fraternal bonds in *Palace* are more than just descriptive or ordinary friendships; they designate a higher echelon of what the friend constitutes as a symbolic institution. This is because the bonds in *Palace* constitute the possibility of the impossibility—the male characters are spectrally dead, and continue to experience spectral alterity, yet their bonds persist beyond death, infinitely, inevitably. "Engagement in friendship takes time," Derrida writes, "it gives time, for it carries

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<sup>145</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 3; \*Translator's note: "ghostly apparition of the *revenant*, the 'ghost,' its haunting return to the scene."

<sup>146</sup> Harris, *Palace*, 39.

<sup>147</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 20.

beyond the present moment and keeps memory as such as it anticipates. It gives and takes time, for it survives the living present.”<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, “if *philia* lives, and if it lives at the extreme limits of its possibility, it therefore *lives*, it stirs, it becomes *psychic* from within this resource of survival. This *philia*, this *psukhé* between friends, sur-vives. It cannot survive itself as act, but it can survive its object, it can love the inanimate.”<sup>149</sup>

As I have argued throughout, these acts of survival—to put it in another theoretical vocabulary—which Harris articulates in both his imaginative philosophy and fiction permit the need not to forget. As Sam Durrant notes, “Harris’s prolific fictional output is best understood as a repeated rite of memorialization [...] his work leads us to acknowledge our implication in the violence and oppression that constitute the history of modernity.”<sup>150</sup> These various processes of understanding are mediated through love/desire philosophical methodologies and themes, metaphors of occlusion, (in)accessibilities and (dis)abilities, and, most pertinently, female anatomizations of environments and nature which host these plethora of imageries. As the male subject’s Romantic impulse for singularity and community in the terms of a post-Romantic, or extrahuman methodology simultaneously laced within a Romantic gesture—that is, a love for animism in the inanimate (quantum or mathematical engagements structured within love/desire phenomenal engagements)—it is no less than what Derrida asserts as “love [of] the inanimate.”

### *Theoretical Salvaging*

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, and perhaps transhistorically so. (By “misogynistic” I mean not only the so-called

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<sup>148</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 14-15.

<sup>149</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 15.

<sup>150</sup> Sam Durrant, “Rites of Communion: Wilson Harris’s Hosting of History,” *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53.

feminine in men, but that it is oppressive of women).”<sup>151</sup> Indeed, *Palace* is an apt example of a homophobia that is transhistorical and transnational. Through the triumvirate of male-female-male sexual desire, denied homosexual desire cogent of homophobia that is legitimized by a heteronormative narrative that situates woman in such a triangular relationship, Harris constructs the radical possibility of working through contradictions in the shape and form of deep, epistemological violence. What is there left to reconcile or salvage from Harris’s philosophy considering the traces and problems I have discussed above? Who could possibly benefit from an understanding of Harris’s work as such? With honesty, Harris writes that “I am not sure in what degree I have been successful in conveying a curious association of spaces, of brilliancies, of hollows, of shadows, the curious architectures of blocks of shadow, hinges of light.”<sup>152</sup> The particular interest I have placed upon Harris’s heterosexist conjugal politics in his critical and fictional work implies an interest in what I will designate as a reading (and writing) practice’s sexuality.

I ask does reading (and writing)—or language production—have a sexuality? What are or can its sexualities be? Although much gay and lesbian criticism during the 80s and 90s explored relationships between sexuality and textuality, the specific trope that I am attempting to breach considers what reading practices we have learned to perform and how they are informed by sexual politics.<sup>153</sup> I ask, however, outside of the bounds of mere thematic or content concerns.

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<sup>151</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 20.

<sup>152</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 51.

<sup>153</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985); Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, *Re-belle et infidel: la traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin = The Body Bilingual: Translation as Re-Writing in the Feminine* (Montréal: Les Éditions de-ménage, 1991); Joseph Bristow, ed., *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992); Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds., *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester

Rather, the aesthetic practices themselves as informed by various ideologies, prejudices, and attitudes towards sexuality are not mere fundamentalisms but coterminous with literary production—both writing and production within the mind of the reader.

More specifically, I am interested in Harris's articulations of relationality that disassemble static subject positions into a field of knowledge or knowability. Where what one can *possibly* know is not located in singular foci but part and parcel of heterogeneous imaginative fields. "Things which are built into character," Harris writes, "which in fact make it possible for one to bring a group of characters together in a curious kind of simultaneous sacred self-exposure and rhythm, rather than invest in polarized identities."<sup>154</sup> While I have discussed in these two previous chapters various, necessary analytical interventions of Harris's work, I seek now in the following section of this study to attempt to recover and develop from some key tenets of Harris's thinking. Mainly, my work seeks to think of non-heterosexist forms of relationality through aesthetic strategies and to what purposes they can be applied.

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University Press, 1993); Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (London: Arnold, 1997). And more recently: Lori Chamberlain, "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 315-329; Rebecca Moore Howard, "Sexuality, Textuality: The Cultural Work of Plagiarism," *College English*, 62.4 (March 2000), 473-491. Accessed April 25 2013.

<sup>154</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 51.



## Chapter Three

### Oral Thickness, or, Toward an Impossible Literature

What does it mean to write in the twenty-first century? To pose such a question it seems impossible to escape the shadow of Ezra Pound's declaration in 1934 to "make it new!"<sup>155</sup> Indeed, with the proliferation of artistic differentiation (the "death" of print culture, the birth of digital/electronic literature, new media, the collapse between "high" and "low" art, changing forms of authorship, self-publishing, and the rapid growth of MFA programs in creative writing in the United States) it seems difficult (1) as a critic to sift through the plethora of contemporary writing in order to find "good" writing; and (2) as a writer to write well enough to breach through all of the mediocre writing that exists. Ostensibly, ideas about what constitutes "good" and "bad" writing are, of course, subjective, yet there seems to be an undeniable consensus that everybody, today, is, or can be, a writer, a poet, a novelist. As Marjorie Perloff asks in the beginning of her essay "Poetry on the Brink": "What happens to poetry when everybody is a poet?"<sup>156</sup> The question then—essentially, "why write?"—seems to be predicated upon the necessity to foster innovation in order to lift oneself up from the dredges of mediocrity, normalcy, or, as Perloff puts it "déjà vu."

But what happens when a type of innovation becomes the norm, common?—and I mean this particularly in the sense put forth by Jacques Rancière. In other words, "what happens to critical art in the context of consensus?"<sup>157</sup> In chapter one I situated Harris's imaginative philosophy and its workings in *Palace* within the framework of love/desire. Chapter two set out to critique Harris's heterosexist conjugal politics in both his critical writing and novel. Although

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<sup>155</sup> Ezra Pound, *Make it New*. 1934

<sup>156</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink," *Boston Review*, May/June 2012.

<sup>157</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran. (New York: Continuum, 2010), 143.

I argue that Harris's representation of women is problematic and reproductive of textual violence, I still find parts of his imaginative philosophy critically and creatively interesting, productive, and salvageable. In this chapter, I proceed a little unconventionally, touching upon topics such as contemporary poetics and poeticity; privilege, identity politics, and responsibility; failure, negativity, and stupidity; and the verbivocovisual—all of which persist in the constant self-critique and self-reflexivity in my current text-object, *HEROISM/EULOGIES*. Touching upon some of Harris's philosophical tenets, and situating them in dialogue with other contemporary thinkers, I seek to build off of similar themes of music, subjective destabilization, epistemological limits, and aesthetic strategies of disassembling and reassembling identities into architectural fields. What I am particularly interested in is the *impossibility* of literature, that horrid impossible horizon, that great delineating aporia that must paradoxically exist and that which fails and will continue to fail to ever exist properly speaking yet must remain as an infinite and open possibility. Moreover, I am interested in the necessary erotics of language that govern our sensual engagement with the world.

### *The American Standard*

In her essay, Perloff systematically argues that trends in contemporary writing seem to exhibit a number of (predictable) structural forms:

- 1) irregular lines of free verse, with little or no emphasis on the construction of the line itself or on what the Russian Formalists called “the word as such”;
- 2) prose syntax with lots of prepositional and parenthetical phrases, laced with graphic imagery or even extravagant metaphor (the sign of “poeticity”);
- 3) the expression of a profound thought or small epiphany, usually based on a particular memory, designating the lyric speaker as a

particularly sensitive person who really *feels* the pain, whether of our imperialist wars in the Middle East or of late capitalism or of some personal tragedy such as the death of a loved one.<sup>158</sup>

Amazingly, Perloff's subsequent analyses of several contemporary poetry anthologies and the poems within, as well as editorial forewords, demonstrate a disconcerting consensus of what contemporary poetry entails—at least those published by major publishing houses such as Dove, Penguin, and Norton, which form a dominant culture of poetics of our time in the public sphere.

In the *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, editors Cole Swensen and David St. John state that:

Today's hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence. Or it might foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or a villanelle. . . . Hybrid poems often honor the avant-garde mandate to renew the forms and expand the boundaries of poetry—thereby increasing the expressive potential of language itself—while also remaining committed to the emotional spectra of lived experience.<sup>159</sup>

Perloff, of course, argues that “[w]ell-meaning as such statements are, they don't quite carry conviction. For, by definition, an “avant-garde mandate” is one that defies the status quo and hence cannot incorporate it.”<sup>160</sup> The reason I meditate over these major players in the literary public sphere (Norton, Dove, Penguin, etc.) is because they function as a form of *police* in the sense put forth by Rancière. According to Rancière, “the essence of the police lies in a partition

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<sup>158</sup> Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink,”

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink.”

<sup>160</sup> Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink.”

of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and places.”<sup>161</sup> “The distribution of the sensible,” according to Rancière, is “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”<sup>162</sup> Strictly speaking, these major publishing houses and their respective anthologies have taken a certain concept of what constitutes as an avant-garde aesthetic and put it under consensus, named it, and thus have attempted to shut down what the avant-garde should actually entail.

If we are to understand the “avant-garde” as the “advanced guard” or “vanguard”—a term laced in militarization, mobilization, movement, upheaval, politics, and violence—then we must think of it concurrently with Rancière’s concept of *dissensus*. As a form of *police*, contemporary presses which fixate the avant-garde or experimental literature to particular forms and poetic functions, has but done away with the essence of the avant-garde proper. While in the humanities the avant-garde and/or modernisms are localized to the early twentieth century for periodization purposes, abound with particular aesthetic strategies and movements (Symbolism, Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Vorticism, Constructivism, etc.), the avant-garde needs to be conceived, rather, as an *impossible* literature.

Why *impossible*? Impossible because the avant-garde, or experimental writing, or innovative writing, or new writing, or the new sentence, or whatever name that eschews being named, must enact *dissensus*, it must emerge from that “void and surplus”<sup>163</sup> since “the police is a distribution of the sensible (*partage du sensible*) whose principle is the *absence* of void and of

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<sup>161</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 36.

<sup>162</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.

<sup>163</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 34.

supplement.”<sup>164</sup> New writing must be impossible because it cannot already exist in the common, as part of “the distribution of the sensible”—it must emerge from an invisible order to fracture what is common sense or made “sensible” by the *police* and remain optimistically and infinitely open. As Perloff states, “by definition, an ‘avant-garde mandate’ is one that defies the status quo and hence cannot incorporate it.”<sup>165</sup>

Thus, to name the avant-garde to particular aesthetic strategies—rather than thinking the avant-garde in its moment as exhibiting particular strategies as it relates to a particular disruption of the common—freezes the avant-garde to specific poetics, subject positions, and expectations. Hybrid forms, parataxis, juxtapositions, metonymy, narrative intervention, anachronisms, are not *essentially* of the avant-garde; rather, the avant-garde in a specific historical moment may exhibit such techniques in order to disrupt a common sense logic or aesthetic practice. Dividing up the “sensible” to say that experimental writing exhibits *X* and *Y* characteristics creates identities and particular functions, or “groups tied to specific modes of doing”; moreover, its appearance in dominant, sensible forms (major press anthologies) creates “places in which these occupations are exercised” and, lastly, “modes of being corresponding to these places.”<sup>166</sup>

Therefore, in the context of consensus, experimental writing, on the one hand, becomes associated with difficulty, esotericism, parataxis, juxtaposition, narrative intervention, those things I have aforementioned named, etc. effectively creating specific subject positions to which one aspires to reproduce; and, on the other hand, because an avant-garde is associated with particular aesthetic moves it effectively dilutes the quality of vanguardism itself—everything becomes normal, common, expected. These aesthetic strategies are not the essence of the avant-garde. Similar to Rancière’s admonition that “politics exists insofar as the people is not

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<sup>164</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 35, emphasis mine.

<sup>165</sup> Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink.”

<sup>166</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 36.

identified with a race or a population, or the poor with a particular disadvantaged sector, nor the proletariat with a group of industrial workers, etc.,”<sup>167</sup> so, too, the avant-garde as a form of *dissensus* cannot be pinned down to particular aesthetic strategies. Rather, it must enact a presentism. “In my view,” Rancière aptly writes, “we ought to think and act in this broken time instead of invoking a messianism.”<sup>168</sup>

### *Breaking the Rules*

In contradistinction to “a certain kind of prize-winning, ‘well-crafted’ poem” (“Poetry on the Brink”), Perloff moves toward contemporary trends in conceptual poetics. Contrary to criticism that conceptual writing—evolving from *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry—has killed off the lyric “I,” that is, subjectivity proper, Perloff argues that the lyric “I” resurfaces in new ways. “[W]e have witnessed a return,” Perloff argues, “to the short lyric, but now a lyric that depends for its effect on the recycling of earlier poetic material.”<sup>169</sup> In her examples of Susan Howe, Srikanth Reddy, Craig Dworkin, Peter Gizzi, and Charles Bernstein, who either exhibit a “verbivocovisual” poetics which “are designed to exceed their dimensions as print blocks, moving outward both aurally and visually to encompass the larger field,” or conceptual poetics which “foreground the choice of source text itself, the very selection of that text and its context in generating the methods that determine its ‘copy,’” Perloff argues that “a growing group of poets is rejecting the status quo.”<sup>170</sup>

While conceptual writing indeed harbours the potential to radically reconfigure the “sensible” through the utilization of the “sensible” itself—take Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*, which

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<sup>167</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 35.

<sup>168</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 60.

<sup>169</sup> Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink.”

<sup>170</sup> Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink.”

is nothing more than a word-for-word reprint of a daily edition of *The New York Times* bound in book form—it, too, can become susceptible to certain kinds of consensus. Indeed, in a move in both plagiarism and radical poetics, Goldsmith, like many conceptual writers, raises questions of authorship, print production, legibility, textuality, and literary legitimacy. However, the transparency of conceptual writing—that anyone can copy and paste a work, slap their name on it, and declare it conceptual writing—is not as democratic as it appears to be. On the one hand, Goldsmith himself admits that

[i]f all language can be transformed into poetry by merely reframing—an exciting possibility—then she who reframes words in the most charged and convincing way will be judged the best. [...] I agree that the moment we throw judgement and quality out the window, we're in trouble. Democracy is fine for YouTube, but it's generally a recipe for disaster when it comes to art.<sup>171</sup>

Interestingly, Goldsmith does not simply do away with aesthetic judgement, and has already configured different worlds in the realm of art. This is precisely where I read Rancière, where “all language can be transformed into poetry,” considering that

[Fiction] is not a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the ‘real’, or the framing of a *dissensus*. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.<sup>172</sup>

This is precisely what conceptual writing performs. It takes the very forms of the “sensible” and re-frames it which is a form of *dissensus*; it is precisely because of this re-framing that it is an

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<sup>171</sup> “It’s Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It’s ‘Repurposing’,” *The Chronicle Review*. 11 Sept. 2011.

<sup>172</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 141.

avant-garde literature, not because of a particular poetic function but because the actual aesthetics of the artistic process breach and re-configure the “sensible.”

On the other hand, the “fathers” of conceptual writing—Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry, Bill Kennedy, Rob Fitterman—are precisely that: another instance of a canonized, white patriarchy. Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young writing in their essay “foulipo” state that

[...] we wote to Craig Dworkin and asked him what was up with all the men and thei love of estictive, numbe based pocesses and he said he didn't know but he told us a joke about a photogaph he once saw of himself and Kenny Goldsmith, Rob Fitterman, Christian Bök, and Darren Wershler-Henry, all in a line, all basically the same age, same stocky build, same bad haicuts, and black t-shirts. We could think of no photogaph of Jena Osman, Nada Gordon, Caroline Bergvall, Joan Retallack, Johanna Drucker, and Harryette Mullen all looking the same age, same build, same bad haicuts, same black t-shirts.<sup>173</sup>

While it may be true to some extent that conceptual writing is privileged for its apparent disinterest in, for example, racial politics (specifically in the works of Kenneth Goldsmith, Rob Fitterman, or Christian Bök), or, as the aforementioned passage states, gendered segregation in publicity and work reception, I am not simply interested in adopting the politics of blame.

### *Responsibility*

So what then is the responsibility of the critic, the writer? If white, male authors engage in literary experimentation it is precisely because they possess the privilege—economic, cultural,

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<sup>173</sup> Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, “foulipo, (talk for CalArts Noulipo Conference, Fall 2005)” *Drunken Boat*, 8 (2006); the letter “r” is removed—save for proper names—in this manifesto.



gendered, racial—to do so. Or, if white, male authors do write about race and sexuality, then they exert mastery over the other. I am not suggesting that either of these political stances are fundamentalisms. How, then, does one proceed? By elucidating these aporias I am not interested in meting out answers. During my own forays into writing I was adamant about not writing about race or sexuality. I had been educated in the English canon, became at once baffled and in awe of modernists such T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and found it increasingly frustrating about how to *deal* exactly with identity politics. I did not and do not want to become a queer, or gay Asian-(Canadian) writer. I read contemporary conceptual poets—such as Christian Bok, Kenneth Goldsmith, Bill Kennedy, Darren Wershler-Henry, with both intrigue and jealousy. I had asked myself: could I not simply write without talking about current academic fads coupled with feelings of tokenization, that is, identity?

In an interview on the subject of experimental literature, Alexandra Chasin, in response to the question “How would you characterize the relationship between women and experimental literature?” aptly writes

Why don't some self-identified men answer this question for a while, so I can write my books?

Yet, if we've got a failed relationship on our hands, at best a work in progress, at least we've popped the question. What about the relationship between people of color and experimental literature in the U.S.? What about representations of race and racial Others? Can we talk about that? Can white people talk about racism, exclusion, virtual segregation, along racial lines, textually and institutionally – address ourselves to these questions and to our social practices – so that people of color can write books?<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Alexandra Chasin, “What is Experimental Literature {Five Questions: Alexandra Chasin},” *HTMLGIANT*. March 28 2011. Accessed December 13 2012.

So, then, how does one talk about responsibility? Responsibility for the other? As a person of colour must I write about racial politics? Does that not merely form enclosures about who is able to speak about whom? Is it simply a nativist argument? Who is able to have mastery over whom? Do I fall into the trap of being a first world “ethnic” theorizing about the other merely on the basis of the colour of my skin? Can I write about trans- identities if I do not identify particularly with transsexuals, or trans- identities that operate between male-female binaries? What does a genderqueer poetics look like? Or, why don’t “white people”—as Chasin states—write about racism, sexism, etc.? It is easy to say that so and so or such and such a text that is a product of privilege ignores issues of race, class, gender, or sexuality, is racist, is classist, is sexist—but so what? The conversation stops there; thinking stops there. Is it not more interesting, as thinkers before have stated, to ask, what are the conditions to have created such and such circumstances? Responsibility is something of which we all have charge. But we cannot reduce ourselves to fundamentalist bickering. In a similar theoretical mode, deconstruction seems to open up compassionate ways of thinking. In an interview with Alfred Arteaga, Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak writes:

Deconstruction does not say that there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced. That’s why deconstruction doesn’t say logocentrism is a pathology, or metaphysical enclosures are something you can escape. Deconstruction, if one wants a formula, is, among other things, a persistent critique of what one cannot not want.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Bonding in Difference: Interview with Alfred Arteaga,” *The Spivak Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), 27-28.

As an aside then, while, for instance, conceptual writing may be a white male-dominated movement—as so many other things seem to be—what if we are to shift productive thinking towards non-western modes of writing?—a move that is, of course, rife with its own traps and problems.<sup>176</sup> What if we were to produce those very texts that we utterly hope to exist?

Generically speaking, experimental writing positions itself against “mainstream” writing (dominant “sensible” forms). Mainstream writing may be linear, have plots, and knowable characters. Even when modernist texts or experimental writing undergo consensus, experimental writing—*impossible* writing towards which I have gestured—is pushed further back into darker corners and spaces, ever more esoteric, difficult, and inaccessible. As I have argued above, this is not the concept of experimental writing which I wish to adopt, that of reducing what should be a dissensual literature into particular poetic functions, or modes of being. What, then, becomes politically and aesthetically urgent when experimental writing goes under consensus?

Rather than attempt to find answers to these questions, to any of the problems, contradictions, and paradoxes I have elucidated above, what if I take this very affective stance of uncertainty, despair, failure, and insufficiency as the basis of poetics itself? As Judith Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*:

investigating in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity [...] a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between

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<sup>176</sup> See Rey Chow’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Chow develops her argument from Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* whereby Weber notes the coterminous presence of ethical “worldly” work instilled by the Reformation, and the “modern spirit of capitalism” which also sought external work. Weber argues that religious salvation is similar to the work-reward structure of capitalist endeavours. For Chow, this work-reward structure can operate in even apparent emancipatory discursive networks such as the theoretical work of post-colonial scholarship. Precisely because the theoretical/representational objectification of the authentic native or other as the object of its salvation is susceptible to positioning, yet again, oppressed others into modern day captivity narratives. As Chow writes, “this contradictory narrative structure ultimately places the victim in the (modernist) position of a captive, whose salvation lies in resistance and protest [...] Resistance and protest, when understood historically, are part and parcel of the structure of capitalism; they are the reasons capitalism flourishes” (47).

success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing. Stupidity could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing.<sup>177</sup>

We should proceed then, shakily, but bravely, with persistent self-reflexivity, through this tortuous thing called living. This is my interest. While deconstruction highly informs my theoretical work, I am less interested in how to transform deconstruction into a literary practice, and more interested in an aesthetic practice that understands its own crazed point of departure and its own *impossible* horizon.

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<sup>177</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 11-12.

## Foreword

### Writing at the Edge of a Mouth

*The other does not exist: this is rational faith, the incurable belief of human reason. Identity = reality, as if, in the end everything must necessarily and absolutely be one and the same. But the other refuses to disappear; it subsists, it persists; it is the hard bone on which reason breaks its teeth. Abel Martin, with poetic faith as human as rational faith, believed in the other, in the 'essential Heterogeneity of being,' in what might be called the incurable otherness from which one must always suffer.*

—Antônio Machado (epigraph qtd. in Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*)

In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag radically calls for the re-assessment of the critique of art. "Interpretation," according to Sontag, "takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted now."<sup>178</sup> Sontag essentially calls for the folding of politics and aesthetics. Considering that "ours is a culture based on excess" whose "sheer crowdness conjoin our dull sensory faculties," Sontag argues that "it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critique must be assessed."<sup>179</sup> What Sontag identifies as excess must inform the ways in which we read such excess; that excess—and all of its political intimacies—already determine the work of art and must therefore determine our approaches to it. Such excess, as oversaturated sensorial data, must be intimated as the starting point. Thus, similar to Rancière, the aesthetic folds into the political. Rather than search for content, we must look at the *sense* itself as producers of meaning. "*Transparence*," Sontag writes, "is the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today. *Transparence* means experiencing the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are."<sup>180</sup> These words have resounded deep within my own

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<sup>178</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 14.

<sup>179</sup> Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 14.

<sup>180</sup> Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 13; emphasis in the original.

aesthetic experimentations, where the word itself—its sound, its visuality, the “verbivocovisual,” as Perloff puts it—governs the political perspectives which inform the work. It is, in my work, the understanding and disruption of sensible forms which requires the utmost attention. As Sontag writes,

[w]hat is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.”<sup>181</sup>

Although Sontag writes primarily in the context of criticism, this, for me, is what I must think through in my writing. As Perloff reminds us in *Differentials*,

[f]ormalist reading, we are regularly told, goes hand in hand with the premise that the poem is an autonomous artifact. But the privileging of the poetic function has never meant that knowledge—of the poet’s life, milieu, culture, and especially his or her other poems—is not relevant.<sup>182</sup>

Similarly, I advocate for a type of *close writing*, one which, engaging through differing modes of the disruption of the sensible, does not foreclose the possibility of reading politics in my work. The *sense* which I am interested and construct in my writing is informed by its self-awareness of its own biases and aesthetic fallibility. “For critical art,” Rancière writes, “is not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects.”<sup>183</sup> I am not interested in an overt political agenda; I do not dream that my writing will have profound effects on the social sphere. I

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<sup>181</sup> Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 14.

<sup>182</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), xiii.

<sup>183</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 149

can only write to breach a certain partition of the sensible, to show that there are alternative ways of thinking, of writing, of being. Not because I want specific bodies to encompass what I propose, but to put forth the possible impossibility of it all. Experimental writing is *impossible* because it never reaches its horizon. As a form of *dissensus*, as soon as it emerges from the void (of impossibility), it becomes part of a system of the “sensible” and thus, experimental writing can never be reduced to a particular poetic function. It is an aporia because it exists on a horizon that will never arrive, because experimental writing as a dissenting act must constantly be open to its invocation as an unknowable thing, as something existing outside of the already agreed upon terms of politics, the communicative sphere.

But what does the *impossibility* of literature guarantee us? Through its very *impossibility*, that which exists outside of the structural whole, *dissensus*, promises us the *very possibility* of processes of subjectivization, since

[p]olitics invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time—in short, new bodily capacities.<sup>184</sup>

Thus, it is not the content of my writing that hopes for political change, rather, it is the *a priori* aesthetics of *dissensus* that promise the possibility of existing in places where one did not think they could exist before. Harris similarly ascertains that

[o]ne is deprived of community when one lives in a world that is wholly given, apparently wholly objective. So ‘given’ in fact that one is overtaken by a kind of numbness within every pattern of achievement and deprives oneself therefore of the kind

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<sup>184</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 139.

of fantastic root from which an eruption of sensibility has occurred in the very process of achievement.”<sup>185</sup>

I form therefore a theoretical link between Rancière’s conception of a sensual community—that is, politics as that which is visible, a mode of sensory forms—and Harris’s similar admonition to what is “given.” Principally, that one must look beyond the mere sensory forms of reality, of what is apparent, or else be “overtaken by a kind of numbness.” Just as Harris demands that one looks beyond mere sense data—that is, what is materially given, what is visible, what one thinks is knowable—Rancière, similarly puts forth the argument that one must be aware of how politics is formed through particular distributions of sensible forms. By discovering what these sensible forms are, and by understanding that what is made known to us is itself an aesthetic gesture, true politics may then emerge as that which brings into being subjects who may understand themselves as not part of what is made sensible, or common.

Politics, then, is not simply subject matter, or events that occur in specific social spheres; rather, politics is at once every defining moment, every gesture which makes knowledge visible or invisible. Every aesthetic moment, therefore, *cannot* be separate from politics. Through this theoretical framework, I seek to stage, in my writing, the ways in which an understanding of every aesthetic gesture is and requires an erotics: language which unhinges what we think we can know, which suggests alternative ways of experiencing the knowable, and which brings to the fore our own desires for certainty.

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<sup>185</sup> Wilson Harris, *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), 61.



## HEROISM/EULOGIES

As I have argued in chapter one, Harris restages various forms of empirical desire in order to transcend them through metaphors of visualization. Indeed, subjects, who are inherently wounded, or insufficient, seek to re-integrate themselves with the phenomenal world through such processes of visualization and copulation. While chapter two detailed the problems of female relationality to man in Harris's fiction and critical writing—specifically through anatomical and environmental metaphors—I seek to restore Harris's admonition that what is apparent to us, what seems visible and knowable, must also be interrogated. An example of an erotics I am developing from Harris's philosophy in relation to Rancière's work on politics and sensible forms can be surmised from an exemplary sentence by Harris. To quote Harris at length:

At the same time as coherent void it dramatises the deeps of subjective frustration and mystery, reason, unreason, inspiration in man-made institutions to come nevertheless into suppressed, even subversive, dialogue—subversive in regard to itself—with the very inner spaces of nature-made nature as half-forgotten arts of the sea and the sky and the land to invoke within themselves a signature of parts in a creation that repudiates itself as a quantifiable property or tyranny of wholes to which one is hollow subject, repudiates itself as a polarisation of the void in the name of structure, repudiates itself as a consumer loves or all-consuming balances of terror between East and West, North and South in the world as object.<sup>186</sup>

This elongated sentence, with its twists and turns, with its refusal to explicate its metaphorical language, gestures towards a sentence that teases out various possibilities. Indeed, the reader experiences “subjective frustration” and in the labyrinth of the sentence certainty of meaning, due to Harris's enigmatic language, is lost. In order to read Harris, one would have to, I would

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<sup>186</sup> Harris, *Explorations*, 108.

argue, do away with expectations of arriving at definitive answers; rather, one must erotically move from the words and sensual metaphors—which require alternative thinking, or visualization—in order to interrogate epistemological expectations. It is in this theoretical mode that one can perhaps bear witness to what Roland Barthes calls “the birth of the reader.”<sup>187</sup>

I am interested in forming theoretical linkages between Harris’s attempts to decompose and reconstitute subjects into architectural fields and theories of sociability and relationality.<sup>188</sup> Initially, Harris commences with subject positions who are already hybrid—yet singular—and anatomize them through dispersions into horizontal landscapes that deter our expectations for empirical truth. Given the heterosexist conjugal politics which coincide with imperial narrativity (realism)—an admonition that does not reduce one to the other as a causal relationship, rather a coterminous observation—I seek to ask broadly if one can conceive of polyamorous or non-monogamous ways of reading. Reading practices, which for me, emerge concurrently with—but not causally reduced to—sexual politics of sociability and cruising. I consider cruising as a possible site of aesthetic strategies similar to Tim Dean’s admonition that cruising can be considered “less as a localized gay male practice than as an ethical philosophy of living that is available to anyone, irrespective of gender and sexuality.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), 875.

<sup>188</sup> See, for instance, Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and an intro. by François Dosse (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>189</sup> Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.

A contemporary example of a reading and writing practice that I believe requires a type of “cruising” methodology is Gail Scott’s *My Paris*<sup>190</sup>. In an interview in *Lemon Hound*, Scott writes that

[t]here is a false idea of how time moves forward in being and in consciousness that impacts the way people are taught to read novels, or to expect from cinema narrative, etc. In *My Paris*, I invented a sentence based on present participles that allowed time to go back, yet “forth” through the present within the space of each sentence or section. This became the time of she who dissolves into the crowd, who seeks no or minimal agency, which seemed a useful contribution to the whole business of travel writing.<sup>191</sup>

Indeed, Scott’s sentences in *My Paris* play with such readerly expectations. The narrator begins by saying: “Like a heroine from Balzac. I am on a divan. Narrow. Covered with a small abstract black-and-white print.”<sup>192</sup> Is it her body that is narrow, or the divan—or is it both? Like the blending of the subject into an architectural mosaic, Scott scatters and re-configures bodies and language into stratified compartments. In fact, Scott’s sentences are cut up in order to divide the sentence’s trajectory towards knowledge into multiple, simultaneous instances—an aesthetic move that echoes the subject’s deconstruction and re-assemblage into her environments. The desire inherent in a rational, linear sentence is disavowed, and Scott’s writing demands that our approaches to reading alter.

Rather than experience reading as a “one-way street” in its most literal, singular avenue, one must approach, I would argue, with reading practices informed by different sexual

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<sup>190</sup> Ostensibly, a more in-depth account of the ways in which to read Scott’s novel through the theoretical lens of relationality and sociability is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, I gesture towards ideas that I am continually working through in terms of reading and sexual politics in my work.

<sup>191</sup> Gail Scott, “A Conversation with Gail Scott,” *Lemon Hound* (2010). Accessed March 10 2013.

<sup>192</sup> Gail Scott, *My Paris* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), 7.

politics.<sup>193</sup> As Leo Bersani states, “[s]ociability is a form of relationality uncontaminated by desire.”<sup>194</sup> Similarly, conventional reading desires that are aligned with linearity must be suspended in lieu of a reading of sociability that allows one’s reading practice not to be suspect to a conjugal politics of knowledge and singular attainability but multifarious experience.

Appropriately, subjects in Scott’s work become stratified across various narrative tissues: “I learned in the early drafts of *The Obituary* that breaking Rosine into some of her parts was a way to help to re-distribute novel time.”<sup>195</sup> Scott, like Harris, anatomizes her subjects, yet unlike Harris, her subjects are not male, nor do they seek emergence—rather recession. As Scott states, “[t]his became the time of she who dissolves into the crowd, who seeks no or minimal agency.”<sup>196</sup> Indeed, “[c]onjuring French Stein-opposite,” the narrator writes, “writing so ‘objective’ or factual—narrator seeming ghost.”<sup>197</sup>

In a similar vein, *HEROISM/EULOGIES*, concerns itself with emerging and receding processes of subjectivization; shadows of identity. At its core, it is about transient subject positions who make their way across a textually imagined American cartography. It is about a pilgrimage for the dead; it is about the collecting of human remains; it is about a sex-worker who specializes in roleplaying rape scenes; it is about being interpellated as a racialized figure when one or many does not identify as such; it is about a transgender person seeking medical attention; it is about being born into cultural exile; it is about a piece of furniture on an island, it is about a certain odour; it is about maternal loss; it is about daddy issues; it is about the Mekong Delta; it is about the architecture of people; it is about a bathhouse in ruins; it is about violent

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<sup>193</sup> Additionally, Scott meditates over Walter Benjamin’s own forays into the Parisian arcades as she develops from *The Arcades Project*, and, by suggesting “one-way street,” I am also gesturing towards Benjamin’s essay of the same name in which reading is anything but “one way.” See Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund F.N. Jephcott and K. Shorter (New York: Verso, 1992).

<sup>194</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 45.

<sup>195</sup> Scott, “A Conversation with Gail Scott.”

<sup>196</sup> Scott, “A Conversation with Gail Scott.”

<sup>197</sup> Scott, *My Paris*, 29.

family histories pushed to the bowels of one's being; it is about one or some or all of these narratives. If *HEROISM/EULOGIES* is “about” anything it is about narrative. It is about making one's way, as a reader, from one word to another not simply for content but for *sense*—sensuality.

In my work, politics—whether it is read as racial, feminist or, queer—is not something to be unpacked from content, from story, rather at the level and location of the act of writing itself. Narrative voices shift mid-sentence, sentences can be read backwards and/or forwards, words are invented, words undergo erasure, languages are invented and caricaturized, and the narrative employs at once the voice of a victim and an oppressor—equally and easily interchangeable, shape shifting, porous and malleable. What I am interested in is the possibility of the syntagmatic itself—that is, the sentence. When sentences end abruptly, are split into several unconnected instances, when words are uttered in those spaces that provoke discomfort, confusion, uneasiness, and loss—it is in this very space of negativity that I urge something, or someone to emerge—that desire for understanding which becomes its own object of criticism.

*HEROISM/EULOGIES* is excerpted from a larger book-length project. There are sections with state names—ordered by their founding dates—which contain, for the most part, dream sequences by the various subjects in the text. Interspersed throughout the text are additional, yet more coherent sequences that track four constant subjects: (1) the narrator, (2) “The Mekong,” (3) a woman who looks like “The Mekong,” and (4) Lising. The narrator dreams of “The Mekong,” and seeing a woman who appears to be her begins to follow her. Lising, insane, insidious, and emerging from any dark part, seeks to christen the woman, then kill her. The woman, unbeknownst to all these subjects who follow her remains devoted to driving into the horizon. These quests and desires for subjects become effaced and muddled, disassembled and

reassembled in the dream sequences. Desires for others fizzle out and become questioned. There is music in my work, impressions, intuitions, and au/oralities that allow the reader to move from one word to another even if rationality begins to dissipate. The erotics of moving from one word to another—with destabilized meaning—is purposeful; intended to bring the very prejudices and desires the reader may have for epistemological certainty, or understanding, to the fore. It is my intention to raise the question, “what does this mean?” and push the reader enough to make them interrogate that very question. If anything, the narratives are exemplary of a broken constancy—at any point, the language hinges on its own vulnerability, its own susceptibility to breaking down. I cannot imagine a beginning or an end, but materially these things must *commence*.

HERO

ISM/

EULO

GIES

DELAWARE

*Glamour in the dent. Hollows. His wild is night.*

The leather blinds it. Soft. A sharp edge rises up in me or just a thought about cardamom or galangal. The hurt is in me. A ceramic bowl perfectly cracked in half—that look of a. I know the stroke of the carbine’s but. Leftovers, turnpikes. Headlights on bookends. Rinsing for the arrangement of skin. A herder’s mouth. Lopsided, burden. Its head was a trophy my head. Fish bones are coddled up in that space where I often say no, dreamboat and glitter. Splashback, scum, le nouveau riche. I had fun on the banister. I had fun in the lake. A hunter lays himself. A marmot knows. Sisyphus could be dead or—that name my mother used to say. I have had my share of them. Magnificent wood and periwinkle. Blown up, dust up. These bitches come down at me. Harking, harking ill. I am pushing, I am pulling, this baby, this baby ain’t got a name—this baby’s all glitter, glam, and fuck. This baby is all glitter, glam, and fuck. This baby is wreck and all. This baby is coming, coming clean. This baby, this baby, I’ve got you down baby.



*Wandering, Zambeza, Luana, Gideon. Manusha, Jacarta, Ashram, the spokes. Carving, Cadmus, Shemshee/Shenzee. Walkerton, the beach, Spouts and Spigots. Cum dog, horn dog, hassle-free, twenty-four hour drive in. Legs, the raw, a bent elbow in the stakes.*

I am standing on the I—. waiting for the way out. I leave one smashed city for another. The desert a ridge between us. A man will drive up to take me to the corner. Then another to the forest. Then another across the bay. Another yet another. Always one more for the road. Street signs go out of me. Such is the way out. It is never a question of driving. It is never a question of moving. It's about the sluggishness of it all. Entropic, gushing. Slanting, how about reclining. Exuding all of one's capacities into moisture. I get into cars and I get out of cars. I have never left my house. I have never stepped out onto pavement. Parotic, or parasitic—I don't know. But I'm moving, sure. Furthering oneself from one's own. I leave. A trail of me. A broken heel. On the shoulder. Cracked lipstick on the guard rail. Powdered flesh on the curbside. A chipped tooth in the ire. There is only ever the hint of where I am going.

*Here, again.*

K+c comes down to hunger. It moves from city to city never itself lifting up or forward. It lurches and sloths. It lifts one heavy leg after another into the back of a truck, a limousine, a bus, a charter, a passenger's seat, the lap of a lick who does. They call me a Pirahana or Pariah *hey* I'm not the one schooling little boys with mangoes—those flesh wounds come from minced bamboo shoots. So sweet the juice of boys. I am overflowing with the smell of leeks. I'm sliced up like iceberg. Lettuce. It pays well to sit down, the knees—a bend. Toes curled, nail polish few men will see. Coconut water dripping down the side of my throat. K+c. carried over the Rhine. Is brought back from the dead. Is hauled into churches. Is lunged into Asphodel—that is, a motel on I———. It pays well to sit down, a toilet seat—barely hovering, too lazy to line the thing right. A man pays me to come down. A man pays me to come down. A man pays me straight up and right. A man pays me to say never the night. A man does this and that. A man says get up straight and jack all you ain't done yet no there's more soup and pasta and legumes to fry you down all night you aint done yet bitch at all you aint done come 'round biting.

Turning lucid the hospital bed one gigantic stream across the face. K+c undergone such and such surgeries. The dream is awake. They's a better man now. Can grow into a proper walk now. Can spread those beautiful pristine teeth across scarring placard of skin now *like a good boy* so many things to make a man proud he'll stand up straighter no longer live the flesh bone down to a single harmonious note it'll stop all that queer up in the attic don't you know. It wasn't sawed off just fished out. Then the move: some unwarranted cosmetic surgery: a flat chin made pointed just like all regular folks the jaw shaft not looking right when it's just all flat like that angled dumb looking, ~~Chinese~~.

I have a dream about The Mekong. The husk of a palm tree. We are both standing inside it—an oval-shaped milk bath. The Mekong is braiding my hair. She is telling me things but all I see are thin sheets of foam. I open my mouth and swallow the milk. Then there is a beach and several young boys and girls and girls and off in the distance a lighthouse that has been abandoned for fifty years. The Mekong turns her back to me. I have a dream that my foot came out of her snow. I hear only the tar of it when I wake up. There is a mountain in my ankle. Something dragged up from an ocean or two. For a moment, I am reminiscent of palm trees, coconut. Then the lights change and I cross the distance into a single bar of night.

*The closing of a door and the dark lets itself out of a mouth.*

*There's this dream where I have not let enough light in. I'm that woman staring bleakly into the field. I've loosened myself of all my temper. There is a great burden in lifting snow. I don't remember getting into the car but now I'm driving into the steel light. It's a thick bar across my heavy eyes. The horizon line always remains a constant. At every point we start again, the dream. It's every street corner, every street lamp, every closing door is ignition. I am always walking in on myself walking out.*

## GEORGIA

Heralding a sigh it comes clean to think of myself as do. Lowery, antidote—marmot pus-skinned burgeoning. Lising is a statue. He follows me into dust. He comes at me from corners. His profile like any other—is every other. From that maddening palm he slits a flower. Curls of smoke in his nostrils. A heavy breath flattened against my face, my belly. those motels make it easy now *say* it's not easy being like this, like us *say* i've got the pat in you *say* it's like that time and that time again *say* you've been around before hollering those schemes licking up that lipstick *fine* what a boot to squeeze you down *honey* it just might be easier if you know it this way or that *don't*,

*baby*. I don't follow the normans right through. Haberdash is enough of a thing. The hum of bangers drolled under the flesh. His lip is like that. *Lising that's enough* is the voice of a mother calling back from no place.

*Lising is the sinister twin. His name of course is one of. –*

*There is an odour to him. He set out from the same smashed city along the traces of K+c. Licking up his teeth he is down for more than hunger. His suit is a grey one. He likes cash bars and minarets. He set off in 19—. He's been dead for such and such a time. Born again in the light of the Father. I am there, the martyr, the Christener, he says against his own reflection with black faces of mud. His face is a magnet for scars. His suit is a grey one. He has been following K+c. but has already been in every motel K+c. has yet to be in. Lising has been following the K+c. in search of the woman—the woman being entirely irrelevant. He is out to shush her, bad her into the ground, a grave. He has terrifying visions in the night dreaming up The Mekong. The clean must be made unclean. He's out there chasing the shadow of a dream. He's mistaken the woman for another. He's out there like me looking for the milk. Purity. He has yet to learn it's all but foaming at the mouth, it's all but bubbling at the edge of our reams.*

## MASSACHUSETTS

I tell them that this city is my city. These streets are my streets. In the chimney you see me breathing. In the headlights you see me laughing. The sewers rise up in me. They tell me I am wrong, wrong, dead wrong. I must be of the S—o. I tell them that the windows are my words. Those cars have sent me forward. When I scream there are no walls, no crossings, no pedestrians in sight. I must be of the S—o. I left my head in the Savannahs, my arteries in the heart of the Congo. I am sleeping sideways along the Nile. Where I have been is nowhere. I know no trajectories, no calcium in the belly. In the body of Africa I placed a sleeping vessel. I threw my arms up in the Himalayas. I have left echoes in the deep American South. I know that the oceanic barriers are erect and without flood. The Polynesian Islands have known the traces of my teeth. A rover, a rover—won't you come play red rover. They ask me where my ornament is. Those decadent teeth must be of ivory. These shallow, shallow pools of lead. They make noises that do not sound like noises with which I am familiar. They make noises and they sing. They ask me if I am made of silk or satin. They want to know where I am hiding the bowels of A—. They ask me why I am not red enough. They ask me why the Mekong does not drain out of me; why she does not sit kindly in the bottom of my blinding. They want to put their fists through me. They want to take me down and slide me under mattresses. They want to hold my wrists up and straddle me. They want to love love so much love me. They take me down to the gutters, the worms, say I should be capable of snorting haunting barg. You are of an ilk that eats anything. You are of an ilk whose cuisine can beautify anything. You are of an ilk. I want to know what the orchestra is saying, you without a name to sit on. If I am on the metro they are the first to seize me. Where are you from where are you from where are you from. Your decals are not ornament. Your jeans are inauthentic. Why are your skirts without tassels. Those heels belong on the treadmill. We're going down deeper, deeper still, without want or worry. The lights are brick. There are people sifting dust. They follow me into dusk. Alleyways are no longer interesting. The wrought happens on concrete, on sidewalks, on curbsides. There are people without looking. I am sprawled on the asphalt city. I have known thicker smoke. I have felt harder air. I've shot too many birds, I've slept too many cattle. They give me their hands and demand divination. A language that speaks prophecy is unknown to me. I have never known a tortoise. I have never mangled its corpse. Its shells are a fiction. Its affinity a murky dream. They bring the saddleback and tongue. Can I walk a crippled walk when this is done. The breastplate has undone itself. Flat, flat, is a discordant thing. I am bringing up the reels. The hair is smolden. The cosmetics are off. Again they ask me why my bone is not showing. Bone, bone—what bone. I have been hollowed out of glass.



## SOUTH CAROLINA

When I come home to my father who is a dead father in making. I have not removed his boots or trench. The stink of him is glistening. I cannot dust up his echoes, nifilden his cuticles. There are traces and traces which cannot simply be emptied out. I cannot divest my dishes or cutlery. A knife is a knife that will always carry his name. The blood of a stag is in me. The fur of its cuff peeled off and seared. I am the running mast. My father he has raped me without touching. He sits in a place immovable without weight. I refuse to concede ghostlier. I refuse that he is dead the moment of my being. I have known harsher children. When we burned him his corpse was not his corpse but a tincture of rock and rot. My mother not my mother in bewilderment that there are people who practice the burial of the dead. I would rather flay him and tarnish, my mother speaks through me, settle down, settle down, its mesmer calls us back.

I just can't seem to put my dreaming feet down *like that*

NEW YORK

The powder comes on easily. It does not rub off as quick or off at all. I leave traces of myself in cafes, in restaurants. Along bar stools and bathroom mirrors. When I walk into a place the scent of me is killing it. I shot my ankles in rivers of salt. A barmaid or a barman. Tar, tar, gun metal and wrought. His hand, he can shoot boulders. I tell myself to think of them as rats. The grow of it is tiring. When I was five I came to this city and she rose up in me like a towering belly. My mother had been dead when she brought me to these planks. I saw her in the mouth of the Rhine. I don't know when. Sometimes I think of her. Most of the time I am mire, mire—widows no mire.

*But baby* those brothels seemed brilliant I mean luminous. I didn't mean to sit down *baby* let's stop calling them brothels bathhouses that *bain coloniale* run wood down in mister, miser. He was just another like you another. It's not fair that the grimp is up. You're off in whatever country with all that fresh juice don't blame me *baby* I have been thinking too much about the white flesh of lychee how many times a stalk a stalk a stalk yet another stalk until *there, baby* a sac of mangosteen rising in the belly. It was there in the streets of Ph.—P. that you dared to sling a hand—grapple that sliver of moon on my tongue. That burning of the night: two men—one shirtless—fisticuffs in the street. Blood on that mother. Those dogs eating snake that night we had cold fried spider.

That city rained on me. A free weight lowered onto the side of the skull. Night rushes in and then children collecting garbage at dawn much like seven or eight years of age. Those hats *that's my father's hat. Dead in that war where the B— lost his head.* So many of them not smashed but cut down and stolen sold to those men with loud voices loud bearings and rings of gold.

The kingdom rises up in us another day. That eroded city. Hush *baby* that history is but dampened yet that history doesn't know it's but a single curl in that hewn of a stretch in that hewn of a thing you call mother mother. *baby* I've got it down right in the mouth no more mythologies those dead faces can't clear my name.

## RHODE ISLAND

I come out of the stroke but. The room of my mother is a room in waiting. Inside my mother there is vanilla and gloss. Floral, heptic. She turns a certain hue towards burden. She cracks her teeth on malice. She sits in the room and sleeps in the room. She sews herself together to rooms and walls. The overcoat is burning. The thread is latching sea. This isn't an umbilical cord, she says, what have I been waiting for the sun, the sun, lightness without a name. I will take the blind angle of history. I will sit on an epoch to know its name. I see the mars of children. People scream at me and in me. They think, holy, holy, you're a ghost without a name. I know my father do you. I know my mother do you. I know how the sun's apogee relates to your internal turmoil do you. I know the foggy skin came purple do you. I know what lightning bursts do you. I know the wooden cradle do you. I know the burning memory do you. I know the skulls in cartography do you. I know the blood in my toenails do you. I know the scars of my grandfather do you. I know the guns in my pelvis do you. I know the mandates of men do you. I know the greed of tigers do you. I know the red slipping do you. I know the screaming in the veil do you. I know the mists of our past do you. I know wildlife in his arm do you. I know the rattling of caged butterflies do you. I know the simple dirt do you. I know the rolling fields of guilt do you. I know the tree and its magic do you. I know the horror without the face do you. I know the limb without bone do you. I know the limb without the stick do you. I know the limb without the cloth do you. I know the limb, I know the limb, do you, do you. I know do you. I know, do you. I know a stupa once stood high and mighty and effervescent.

*Driving into the steel light. Again. I have a dream about that woman.  
She makes me thirsty. I turn over on several bars of light. Crisp  
moonbeams. Tubular bars of white chocolate. I must stop for a drink.  
I need the juice in me; the honey and suckle.*

*She's staring into me from a dream. I could very well just be  
Mad. It's a distinguishing thing. I drive past the point where I died. I  
try to remember but it's all steel and tight. There's the hunt for me  
and I'm running out.*

Let me write my letters in ways which will not conundrum.  
Conjuration at best is that mighty hole out of which newness begs its name. Let the serpent go, let the Midas go; dreary, dreary. Or, not one but two this thing called entropy: the flattening of death, oozing sepulcher, righteous knowledge in shuffled mouth liquefied in terrestrial misnomers; graves, tombstones, mausoleums, coffins, hatch-backs, trunks, closets, floorboards, garbage bags; a body only ever goes down.\*

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\*Morning is the active crush: wet belligerent and wanting: stone, stone—that might monumental. A twenty for your slapstick; a fifth to take it home. The raw barrier sheathed in snow, virginal, always virginal. Plump and squeezed in—thongs. He likes the whip and mortar; blood on the spick. The canvas truck slowly scaling a high mountain; in the distance some wet boots and crawfish; in the distance some jugular spread out across the sky. Home, in a distant mess; hark, like the one I've known; terror, in the bottom of the crawl.

## KENTUCKY

~~Huasho win wa~~. The skittish remains skittish. The filth, my apparatus. I dressed in the dredge of my enemy. Liquid with the prostitution of my own—. What, a what. A terrible in brandy. The one shot, glock—buck-toothed, made for brothels and fruit. Should I have mangoes of for desire. Should my teeth be made of paper. My arms are scrolls for your temper. I fit in small places. The attic, a coffin, the rind, the heel. One in the river, one in the lake. Here, a hand; there, a blade. Silencer, run silencer. Too many mistakes, and the only lying across a bed splayed and cut and mangled and used and known and made invisible with every voice that does not speak but profane pristine. They make pigs I make pigs. Stuffed and curdled. ~~Win shutsetsiltshkslikli silk twee gneew'yow'ank'ran jip 'urfn fan m'ml'm~~ 'z'ay'go. They tell me to speak a language I do not know how to speak. Do they intimate a mother not my mother. I wonder what an egg looks like in the mouth of a boulder. How can I deny what has never been—. ~~Yin na ah nong~~. Are you listening there is a bother. I lower myself on the stone slab inside me. ~~Kakuwa~~. I do not come ping a long dearth. This language forms inside my mouth and it is not yours or mine or ours or theirs or not.

## TENNESSEE

The hair does not touch me. It is set in alabaster, row. It knows the turn of a Cornish. It lifts one leg, then another, then another. The hips, squat. The bones, wringing. All its muscle comes gelatinous and ire. Its mouth circumference tides the afternoon. Teeth on teeth on teeth on teeth. It's light and white and clear and smooth and translucent and hairless and blemish-free and glow. It's slick and thin and frail and patter. It knows one hand from one hand when standing undertow.

When I arrive I am already dead. I cannot stop dreaming of The Mekong. There's a woman driving into the steel of night. There's the filth that creeps up on me when I think to do it again. We met once at the mouth of the river, mighty. Mighty, mighty, I'm a warbling thing.

## MISSISSIPPI

Here I am fucking the dead. I said here I am fucking the dead. I take two by two and steel. The dream comes easy. Here I am fucking the dead. I bust up the drawling. I spit my teeth out into air. I know the desert is a cadaver. I have seen you butchering butcheringtate. I am like willow unencumbered. These fists are anvils; they'll dust up all the air. I've carved shadows into backsides. I've scarred the mouths of many men. These fists are made of anvils. You think I walk without calling for a stare. I have smashed cities with my youth. I have made street names blush in hue. The sewers crack like my teeth. These cars do not know marrow. These statues I spit them up bleach. It names itself on the landing of the stone. It sees only itself in the mark.



She's staring into me like that dream. Her skin is milk and when I touch her it flashes over me vitalistic and violent. I ask her where I know her from what her name is if she is fond of beaches and in a blink I am left with milk foam on the edge of my seat, gruel at the edge of my mouth.

Her car is gone and I don't ever remember her driving up I don't ever remember her putting those flowers into my hair I don't ever remember her telling me

I want to be that one chasing the dream. A name is easy to make clean again. In an instant I am out there again on the I—. flagging down cars like flagships hunting down the shadow of a dream. The Mekong's scent is strong on me. What does it mean to start looking on against a thing that can only slump itself in the glimpses of a constantly closing I—.

## ILLINOIS

I make my way across cities these men have grown me. I touch and touch and so a woman pleases me with brine. She urinates and scuffs her voice at me. Tells me I am the dregs of her footing. The fungal growth in her spine. She wishes I were here without concrete. She wishes I came to her knowing full clarity. I cannot apologize for the lack of knowing not knowing. These streets are named and they will bind me. I follow Alexander to the South Shore of Smith. I take Q to the Seventh. Johnston, Vaughan, and Westminster converge in me. Do I do see them in the windows staring. A history waiting to reawaken itself in my traces. A hard, cut shadow chisels itself in my backside. These are constellations with mythology. May I remap the cosmos with fuck and fuck. I see the eye of Ra where Orion stalks me. Capricorn replaces itself with dynamite fur. The electric in the stead of Cancer. Cygnes dissolves in my memory and there is nothing, nothing, sweet.

The chambers know me farther. Men sit down and women sit down and then there is talking. Shall I wear the pearls of my father. The drag king shot down for lumber. His body bricked in homes. I am no horror story, I am the flowering of the dim.

## ARKANSAS

Memphis, Memphis. I must make my way to Memphis. Memphis is a healer and a horse—savage and noble. A sterling made golden it is the wrought made known. He is that sturgeon.

*Lising is the officer, the dark. The waning, the trees. He's in the forest, the grub. He's darkened asphalt and limestone. He's the beggar man. His suit is a grey one. He's coming up from the bar. He's turning left, looking down. He's the machine gun in the alley. The rot, the man—pot-bellied. He's coming up for air. He's the banker who dreams of fish. A man with his carbine. He shoots tenderly. His suit is a grey one. He's coming out clean. There, the martyr, the Christener.*

*There ain't no answer. There ain't going to be any answer. There has never been an answer. That's the answer.*

MONTANA

TIME IS A DIFFICULT SIGNATURE—

K+c on motel bed. Reflecting, finally. Given up looking. Been caught by the dark. *I, the martyr, the Christener*. Finally saying *her* name. I was supposed to bring my dead body to the edge of the country. I couldn't stop the dream. There's a want in knowing but it's the want that gets us best. Fluorescent Asphodel sign flickering. Vacancy. None. He's put the hurt in me but he's a ghost, a ghost. Time's sexuality brings me closer. Bedside, drapes, canister. The narrow beam of light across motel carpet. A pile of vomit. Dancing flies. The mirror stained with dirt. A toothbrush on the lip of the sink. I've been chasing the shadow of a dream. K+c yelling behind me. K+c getting up and out of me. Slanting towards the room door. Saying: g'night, g'night, one take for the road. K+c opening and closing door. Starting up the car. Driving off, back—

THE MEKONG—knows it the moment I come in. She looks at me with fear and fervour—with spice and adamantine. I know the smell of bamboo, the smell of war. Green tea, or oolong, she asks. She waves away at flies—telling me each one has its proper name. I tell her that the firmament is a beautiful thing. The Mekong is a single river. I have tried to drink her milk. I have tried to say that this is her history. There is a story about a young boy who travels from the mountains into the jungle into the mountains into the city to a river by the lake. He comes from Ph———. He says he has left his mother and father who are both very sick and in need of medicine. He comes to The Mekong and asks for forgiveness. The Mekong asks the boy for what exactly it is he is to be forgiven. The boy remains genuflect with his hands in prayer at the temple of his head. The boy seeks only forgiveness. The Mekong asks a final time for what he is to be forgiven. The boy remains genuflect with his hands in prayer at the temple of his head. The Mekong does not fulfill the boy's request. She gathers up her sterlings, her wisps, her ribbons, her silken tentacles of milk and ivory. The Mekong collects and inhales all of her limbs, her strands. The Mekong sucks them up until she is no longer a river but a woman singular and clean. The boy remains genuflect with his hands in prayer at the temple of his head. The Mekong for a final time says she cannot help the boy. The Mekong turns her back until she is soap stone moving monumentally from one great village to another.

The dream is coming loose. Each object giving rise to thinking. Each thought giving rise to humour, burning. Here a hint, or hurl. I begin. To feel my way out. An arm across a banister. Infinitesimal, never. Ending—. There's the clutch of his grasp. His dream tackling mine. *Hers* stretching outward not forward but outward. I am caught between his wanting to know *hers* wanting out, away, dispersion. I see my claw in his cheekbone. Foot emerging from his mouth. He coughs up baldly. There is progression here, a single road, surely, one can see. The steel light. It's a misnomer, a falsity. It's a fence, or fortress. We're driving into it—. Catastrophic, harmonies. When I stop looking out I will have found myself waking up, walking out, turning. It's the city that moves, not I. I'm the woman. In the lake. *Hers* is a dream. I've already heard. But. She's never stopped talking. She's always been talking.

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