

Memory of a Landscape: Resurrection of the Past and a Community in the Works of Wilson Harris

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Abstract

In the early stages of political independence, nations in the regions formerly colonized by the European empires had to face a problematic situation. Trying to define their new independent identity, some of them had to deal with the complicated question of their origins. Shared cultural tradition and history belong among the main principles through which identification processes take place. In the absence of a clearly defined tradition and under the influence of existing (yet ambiguous and misleading) historical accounts, the formation of a strong individual and collective identity becomes very difficult. The Guyanese author Wilson Harris explored the topic of history and the alleged 'historylessness' of postcolonial communities from his earliest works, which correspond to the time when Guyana gained political independence. Moving beyond the postmodern theories of historiography, Harris questions the fixity of the representation of the past abiding by Enlightenment epistemic principles. Searching for alternative sources of the past and ways to capture it, he discovers a powerful image of a landscape (geographical as well as psychological) which, for him, becomes a bearer of memory through which the past can be rediscovered.

Keywords: historylessness, postcolonial, collective memory, time-space, absent presence, memory, landscape

With the disintegration of the British Empire, new states began to emerge after the Second World War. However, gaining political independence was only one step towards attaining freedom from colonial oppression. Very soon, artists and scholars realized there was also a need for other, less obvious forms of independence. Art became a powerful tool through which the struggle for cultural and intellectual independence could find its expression. There are many ways in which art, and especially literature, contributed to postcolonial debates. In the countries that had been subject to decades of European supremacy, the exploration of the region's history and its representation was one of the important areas which needed rethinking. Although regions with a colonial past share many aspects with regard to their history and its representation, the region of the West Indies is quite unique when compared to countries such as India or the postcolonial states of Africa. Because of its turbulent past and the extremely ethnically complex composition of its society – brought together during a short period of time from various corners of the world – this region has often been described as lacking its own tradition and history. In his novels, the Guyanese author Wilson Harris addresses this extremely problematic issue – the alleged 'historylessness' of postcolonial communities in the West Indian region. This article sets out to explore Harris's alternative approach to history and its sources – an approach which has in a way moved beyond the postmodern theories which stress the instability and narrative nature of historiography. Using the example of Harris's work I would like to show how multiple sources of memory can serve as sources of information about the past, thus contributing to the formation of a more stable identity – something which is so important for any community, especially if the community is still in the process of formation – as was the case of Guyana at the time when Harris started writing his novels. Besides discussing more conventional sources (such as mythology), I would like to highlight how both the geographical and psychological landscape can be understood as an important carrier of memory, which can be retrieved through creative imagination and thus become an important source of identity for places where more traditional sources of evidence of the past have been misused, suppressed, or are genuinely absent.

Harris's approach to history and the past in general differs diametrically from the western approach which builds on the 'realistic', scientifically grounded observation, collection and recording of historical data, with its chronological understanding of time and the stability/fixity of space, typical of Enlightenment epistemology. Although postmodern criticism has questioned the relevance of such an approach to history, revealing the significant limitations of traditional historiography especially in terms of its alleged objectivity, the way in which the West Indies (as well as other postcolonial countries and regions) are described still very much follows the old stereotypical representations. Moreover, if we look at the basis of the postmodern understanding of historiography promoted through the works of

Hayden White and other scholars, we will discover a similarly hegemonic (though opposite) metanarrative. As Patrick Karl O'Brien notes when reviewing White's book *An Engagement with Postmodern Foes, Literary Theorists and Friends on the Borders with History*, historians are not likely to succumb to absolute post-modern relativism, just as they no longer insist on the simplistic meta-historical narrative of an 'Enlightenment Project' (O'Brien). Already in the 1960s, Wilson Harris was wary of overly simplistic categorizations and approaches. While in his novels as well as his theoretical works we can clearly identify history as a form of narration – Harris calls West Indian history a fable (Bundy 21)¹ – he resists the absolutism associated with postmodernity. As Hena Maes-Jelinek claims, he especially opposes postmodernism because of its focus on discursivity and its unavoidable nihilism (Introduction xv). Such an approach distances art from its active participation in the socio-cultural sphere and leads to passivity – something in stark contrast to Harris's philosophy.

Even though contemporary readers have at their disposal various texts criticizing the historiographies based on Enlightenment principles, these accounts still dominated the education systems in former colonies at the time when these nations were granted their political independence. It is therefore not surprising that their influence on the formation of the West Indian identity is profound. In a culture where the acknowledged sources of information about historical events in the region are biased towards the requirement for written accounts and eye-witnessing to give value to the information, the lack of such scientifically proven accounts of the past has a significant impact on the ideas of the origins and history of one's nation. In the case of the West Indies, events taking place before the European colonization are often deemed to be insufficiently supported by evidence to be seriously acknowledged as relevant. In such circumstances, what is called for is a different perception of the past and a search for alternative sources of 'evidence' of this past – i.e. sources other than those acknowledged by official historiography.

Harris's perception of the world, and with it his understanding of the past and history, is more in accord with the principles of quantum mechanics and Einstein's theory of relativity than with the ideas of postmodernism. The relativity of one's perception is explored through the naturally paradoxical nature of things – which does not, however, lead to negativism. Harris is aware that "all the imageries are partial"; however, he also believes that they are "attuned to a wholeness one can never seize or structure absolutely". There is always some kind of a thread uniting the images that together form the whole image, which may well be inaccessible to us in its totality, as our understanding is always incomplete, but that does not deny its existence or relevance. (Harris, "Unfinished Genesis" 252).

Embracing the paradoxical nature of the universe, Harris casts doubt on the hegemonic perception of 'reality'. Instead of the traditional western concept of history as embedded in the past and unwinding linearly towards the present, Harris is interested in the past in its more complex forms, and its relationship with the

present and the future in other ways than official historiography is able to convey. Part of the discrepancy stems from his exploration of the quantum concept of space-time as another of the paradoxical unities of the universe. Due to this philosophy, Harris's novels are built on the principle of associative connections between images which are not ordered chronologically, and which are able to simultaneously operate on various temporal levels as well as in different settings. Such a writing technique, but also the consequent interpretation of the text by the reader, requires what Harris calls a "new architecture of consciousness" (Harris, "Amerindian Legacy" 175). He wants to encourage the reader "to read differently, to read backwards and forwards, even more importantly forwards and backwards" (Harris, "Unfinished Genesis" 252) – just as this approach is possible in the case of quantum physics, where time and space can be explored both forwards and backwards (Dubois 199).

It is clear that history and its representation is by no means a straightforward topic which can be easily grasped – not even when approached from multiple points of view. Harris is exposing the 'fable' of the West Indian history by challenging the deterministic reading of history promoted in older historiographies written by Europeans, and also the presentation of history through education systems both in the West Indies and in Europe – a presentation which contributed significantly to the perception of West Indian history on both sides. The first written accounts about the region came mostly from the pens of European explorers and travelers.² Not surprisingly, then, the official accounts usually presented the history of the West Indian region as if it had begun with the arrival of Europeans. With the absence of an existing written account of an earlier history, and with a majority of the population originating in different parts of the world, this model was in fact strengthened, and its deterministic interpretation of history – with its high degree of persuasion – helped to maintain and deepen the feeling of subjugation.

For Harris, a reliance on limited sources of knowledge, but especially the one-way deterministic reading of those sources, is absolutely detrimental not only to an individual's (self)identification, but also to one's general ability to think more in a more complex way – a type of thinking which is necessary for overcoming stereotypes in our perception that are closely bound to the culturally transmitted dichotomies such as that of the colonizer and the inferior Other (the colonized). Harris expresses his worries about hegemonic control of the representation of history in his novel *Jonestown*, where he explains why simplistic tendencies in our thinking are so frequently accepted. He writes that "it may seem inevitable or convenient to submit to one frame or name, but in so doing, cultures begin to imprison themselves, involuntarily perhaps, in conquistadorial formula that kills alternatives, kills memory" (Bundy 51).

The earlier history of the indigenous West Indian population was virtually lost because of the prevailing oral tradition of the native tribes, but also because of several waves of conquests between these early inhabitants – including the de-

feat of the Arawak population by the Caribs, followed by the violent and bloody conquest of the region by the Spanish and later by other European nations, which almost entirely destroyed the remaining native population and thus not only the possible witnesses of historical events, but also their mythologies and the narratives through which the early past could have been retrieved. With such biased and limited historiography of the region, and given the extremely limited sources of oral tradition that may have preserved stories of earlier events, the writer has to explore other means available to him to reach further back into the past in order to uncover possible sources of West Indian identity rooted deeper than the time of European colonization. Harris therefore sets up on a journey to discover what is left of those more traditional sources of the past – and also to find other alternatives which might shatter the simplistic, biased frame of West Indian identity.

Harris finds a powerful source of the past in geographical and psychological landscapes. He is talking about the memory³ of the landscape, which offers alternative visions of the past that are retrievable through imagination. In a way, it is the complex concept of memory, rather than only historiography, which becomes a source of the past in Harris's fiction. In contrast to stereotypical accounts of the past relying solely on historiography, Harris explores the possible plurality of interpretation of such historiographies, while also adding memories preserved within European, African, and Ancient Meso- and South American mythologies,⁴ but also dreams and the above-mentioned landscapes. By combining various sources of memory, Harris overcomes the limitations of historiography and keeps the past of the region and its peoples alive and full of potential interpretations. Harris uses landscape imagery, as well as various mythologies which he incorporates into this landscape, as sources of memory, conveying the past through a variety of experiences. In comparison to traditional "progressive history" (Van Brunt), which obeys the laws of Cartesian logic, memory must be approached rather intuitively. Harris, in fact, argues for "the primacy of an intuitive imagination to recover what appears lost without trace or very little trace in the past" (D'Aguiar 13). So in the situation of the West Indies, where the recorded 'facts' about the region's history are so scarce, the past is more readily achievable through the creative process of imagination which can be intuitively revived from various sources of memory.

I believe it is the nature of memory itself which privileges memory over historiography in its attempts to recover past experiences and in its ability to create a more complex identity of an individual or a community. This does not mean that a complex identity is always necessary in order to achieve personal happiness and fulfillment. A very simple singular basis of identity (such as strong feeling of nationalism, ethnic affiliation, religious belief, and so on) can be sufficient to create a feeling of stable and strong identity. However, a complex identity is necessary in order to form an individual and/or community capable of perceiving their own identity as satisfactory, while not positioning it in opposition to other forms of identities in order to create a form of safety barrier.⁵ Such a satisfying complex

identity, which does not define itself in terms of opposition to an “Other”, is highly desirable in the postmodern world, where the global movement of people as well as information is contributing to the fragmentation of traditional units of (self-) identification such as the nation. A more flexible process of (self-) identification allows more space for the creation of solidarity across various identities by perceiving differences as features that are distinctive yet not oppositional or threatening to the identity that one identifies with.

When searching for one’s past with which to identify, memory is a much more flexible tool than traditional western historiography thanks to its capacity for incorporating paradoxical experiences without rejecting their coexistence. Moreover, it overcomes the limited perception of divided time and space and the notion of their alleged fixity, which is typical of western historiography. It unites time and space, because memory gives us the opportunity to (re)live⁶ the past at present through new perspectives. Furthermore, it also unites the past event with a particular way of recollection(s), thus connecting the past with our present experience and understanding of the world. It reflects our personal development as well as the cultural transmission of an experience. Herbert Marcuse describes this paradoxical relation of art and time as follows: “what is experienced through the medium of sensibility is present, while art cannot show present without showing the past. What has become form in the work of art has happened: it is recalled, re-presented. The mimesis translates reality into memory” (67). In a way, this idea shares some basis with quantum physics and its axiom that “posits the existence of multiple, parallel and multi-dimensional universes and associations between different forms of being” (Maes-Jelinek, “Latent Cross-culturalities” 490). In other words, at the moment when the writer describes some experience, he or she immediately translates this experience into a subjectively perceived memory. This memory can then be retrieved again at the present or in the future from this particular subjective representation by being (re)lived from a new perspective in the mind of the reader under different circumstances than those under which they were recorded. Thanks to this, a new dimension is always added to the experience – which can never be simply copied but is instead ‘updated’ by every instance of imaginative recreation.

Memory allows for the fluidity of experience and its transformation, because it is not static and its perception and understanding may change – due to the observers’ ability to interpret it, and also through the possibility of changing one’s point of view. This has one very important consequence, which is highly relevant for postcolonial debates and especially the question of the trauma of the painful or “lost” past. Due to the transformatory potential of memory, it allows one to deal with one’s traumas and fears, which are often rooted in the past. Unlike western historiographies, which often present that past as fixed, unchangeable and therefore constantly threatening its victims through the feelings of loss, damage and inferiority (as well as victors through their guilt), memory allows us to transform the past through its imaginative recreation. Another point of view on a traumatic

event that took place in the past makes it possible to reassess the event and make our understanding of it and its consequences more positive. However, to be able to reassess the traumatic event from the past, we need some form of recollection of that past which is traditionally provided by historiographies.

As has already mentioned, the history of the West Indian region is often perceived as having begun with the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus and continuing in subsequent waves of colonization (and later decolonization). Therefore it is rather a history of the European influence in the region than the actual history of its population – a point often made by West Indian authors such as George Lamming or Jamaica Kincaid. Because of this limited perception, the West Indies have often been seen as a space without its own history, or only with a history of conquest and colonization – a bitter standpoint which can be found, for example, in work of V.S. Naipaul (Ramchand 208). Even though the “absence” of history is obviously a false presupposition, the harsh presence of the idea is not alleviated by its fictionality. In circumstances where a lack of historiographic evidence – as well as its bias caused by the limited point of view – dominates the official records, it is not easy to challenge the stereotypical image of “absent” history. Wilson Harris realizes the importance of the past in the formation of personal as well as collective identity, and it is through the creative exploration of memory (be it the memory of an individual, community, landscape, myth, dream, or the ungraspable memory of the whole universe) that he tries to resurrect this past that is not so readily available. He says that “we are all shaped by our past; the imperatives of a contemporary culture are predominantly those of a relationship to this past, to history, to culture. Yet in the Caribbean and in Guyana we think and behave as though we have no past, no history, no culture. And where we do come to take notice of our history, it is often in the light of biases adopted from one thoroughbred culture or another, of the Old World...” (qtd. in Cudjoe 10). Harris insists that this sense of historylessness is self-created, and that the ‘void’, which many see as defective, is in fact “pregnant” with memory, as it is “peopled with the victims of history” (qtd. in Maes-Jelinek, “Palace” 30). This void is “as dense as the landscape he discovered when he led expeditions in the Guyanese jungle” (Maes-Jelinek, “Dynamic Perception” 520). This last comment shows one more point, and that is the importance of landscape in Harris’s fiction and its potential for carrying the signs of the past. However, landscape is not just a passive carrier of signs; it is alive, developing and ever-changing. Because of this, we can even speak of its memory. Harris manages to combine the images of void and emptiness with the ideas of potential, ‘pregnancy’, and richness within that void. What makes history, landscape, identity or culture seem void is, I believe, not its actual emptiness, but rather its inaccessibility. With an open ‘inner’⁷ eye, however, it is possible to intuitively discover its multifaceted nature and disclose some hidden realities that are not accessible through the ‘material’ eye.

In the early stages of political as well as cultural decolonization, some intellectuals called for a return to 'authentic' roots (mostly those connected to the African tradition) to recover parts of the newly recognized nations' identity and/or past. However, such a practice soon proved insufficient. The main drawback noted by postcolonial critics was the simplistic reversal of roles, which in fact merely mimicked the previous practices of the colonizer, thus copying similar principles to those that they were trying to oppose. The second drawback was that a refusal to accept the colonial period as part of one's past and identity did not mean a return to one's actual roots, but instead deepened the 'inauthenticity' of 'pure' roots which did not genuinely reflect the newly evolved environment. Harris rejects both the "total recall of an 'authentic' African past or a sentimental privileging of indigenous Amerindian cultures as 'true' ancestry" (Green 11).⁸ Harris understands that in order to come to terms with their complicated past, its violence and injustice, the people of the West Indies (and not only them) must acknowledge all the sources of their identity, including those that were responsible for the pain inflicted on them. He is attempting to transform the painful memories into those that can also harbour some positive potential, even in the darkest of experiences. Thus memory helps to recreate historical experience from various viewpoints, showing both the positive and negative aspects it engendered.

Despite its subjectivity and the inevitable personal and cultural bias of the observer, memory serves as an important source through which past experiences can be accessed, transmitted and imaginatively transformed or (re)created during processes of exploration as well as transmission.⁹ Individual as well as collective memory (conscious and unconscious/intuitive) is one of the vital sources for Harris's creation of identity and placing oneself within the universe, as it is through memory, as Hena Maes-Jelinek notes, that experience can be retrieved – no matter how lost or forgotten it seems – because it "never dies completely but rests in a fossilized state of near-extinction" until it can be resurrected through exploration of memory (Maes-Jelinek, "Unimaginable Imaginer" 225). She points out that experience "forms an inexhaustible pool" which cannot really be wholly grasped, but which nevertheless surfaces in a variety of forms contributing to the formation of our self-knowledge (Maes-Jelinek, "Unimaginable Imaginer" 218).

Part of the importance of memory and its ability to retrieve experience is also the possibility to pass this experience on to other individuals and/or communities. Art serves here as a medium which, through the workings of memory, revives but also transmits and transforms experience that might otherwise be lost or deemed 'non-transferable' without personal experience. The role of art is irreplaceable in this respect, because it involves the emotions which are encoded in, but also retrieved from, the work of art. Art can emotionally involve the perceiver, who can, through 'open' and informed reading, embrace and share the emotions connected with experiences he or she need not personally have lived through. By becoming emotionally involved, the reader shares the pain and injustice (as well as other

emotions) of those who lived through the experience, thus improving his/her understanding of such experience by associating the conveyed emotions with similar feelings experienced during the reader's own life, and allowing one to identify with other people through the similarity of emotional experience.¹⁰ In this way it is possible to aspire towards greater personal sensitivity to forms of injustice present in current societies, and therefore, through individual and later communal responsibility, to strive towards the elimination of such instances that arouse negative feelings. Promoting feelings of solidarity with suffering people by '(re)living' their experience through the medium of art, and by experiencing feelings of pain and injustice conveyed through art, the reader/perceiver may be moved towards personal involvement in the lives of the suffering people, and he/she may thus accept a form of responsibility that may lead to attempts at stopping and preventing similar injustice in the future. Memory is a form of emotionally laden experience, ideally suited to arouse such feelings. Moreover, it allows the events represented to be grasped from several points of view at once, without excluding the paradoxical nature of the perception of such experiences and their complex, plural, and even transforming interpretation. With regard to the feeling of insecurity and indistinct (self)identification caused by the idea of one's uncertain anchorage within the history of the region or cultural tradition, even just the sharing of an experience can help people overcome trauma by giving it a form and exposing the feelings connected to it.

Harris embraces the immense imaginative power of art, with its ability to incorporate various forms of memory and its creative potential leading to changes in our perception of the universe – which enables us to (re)live, as Durix points out, the forgotten moments of history (101). The important thing is that those moments of history can be (re)lived several times and from various viewpoints, offering the observer (or the 'participant'¹¹) experience in all its richness without the limitations traditional western historiography often requires in order to gain the required sense of stability and objectivity demanded by official records of history.

Harris's fictional communities contain within themselves memories of parts of history and the past that seem lost or nearly forgotten. He talks about 'absent presences', 'phantom limbs' within individuals, communities, but also landscapes. Through his novels, he resurrects from the 'womb of space' (an image often reflecting the idea of being 'pregnant' with memories and potentialities) the almost forgotten Arawaks or the Caribs, who once again become a living presence in the universe. They emerge from the "landscape saturated by traumas of conquest" (Harris, *Secret Ladder* 8). According to Harris, all men are "living fossils" bearing within themselves their history, so that, for example, "the black man of today's Caribbean bears the compressed and combusive energy of historic suffering and labour [...] the potentially revolutionary fossil of the coal image, but also the crystalline beauty of the diamond image..." (qtd. in Burnett 65).¹²

To uncover the multiplicity of ‘absent presences’ and to avoid the limiting point of view of dominant historiography, I have already pointed out that Harris makes use of several sources of memory to uncover the full potential of a particular experience. Apart from mythologies, it is the physical/geographical landscape and the psychological landscape of the human mind – reflected in intuition and dreams – that form probably the most significant source of memory. Mythology, dreams, and physical surroundings are incorporated into his complex vision as a valid source of memory and information about the past, but also the present and the future, because through continuous imaginative (re)creation in works of art all these sources allow us to revive parts of memories collaborating in the creation of our personal identity and that of the community that shares them.

While mythology (and even the subconscious protruding through dreams) have been considered useful sources of memory, landscape seems to be somewhat neglected in this respect. Nevertheless, landscape is very closely bound to memory. It preserves memory, which can be retrieved through imaginative insight in the same way as it is preserved within the myths of the region – a region in which landscape plays a significant role, shaping imagery as well as physical form. An important feature of Harris’s approach would be his understanding of nature and landscape as a living entity. He criticizes a “man-made capacity to treat living landscapes and riverscapes and skyscapes as passive furniture” (Maes-Jelinek, “Unimaginable Imaginer” 228).¹³ Through imaginative exploration, landscape is given new relevance not only in the search for one’s self, but also in the intuitive recovery of the past that contributed to the creation of our self and that of our community – and, as a matter of fact, the whole universe (which, for Harris, are ultimately intertwined). The following example comes from the novel *Palace of the Peacock* and illustrates how alive landscape can be in Harris’s vision. It also contains an image of a landscape from which parts of the region’s past can be discovered (the conquest by the white colonizers and their violence against the slave population on sugar plantations):

The river of the savannahs wound its way far into the distance until it had forgotten the open land. The dense dreaming jungle and forest emerged. Mariella dwelt above the falls in the forest. I saw the rocks bristling in the legend of the river. On all sides the falling water boiled and hissed and roared. The rocks in the tide flashed their presentiment in the sun, everlasting courage and the other obscure spirits of creation. One’s mind was a chaos of sensation, even pleasure, faced by imminent mortal danger. A white fury and foam churned and raced on the black tide that grew golden every now and then like the crystal memory of sugar. From every quarter a mindless stream came through the ominous rocks whose presence served to pit the mad foaming face. (21)

Harris's experience with the Guyanese landscape is not only artistic, but also scientific. He unites these points of view – which are traditionally seen as antithetical – and gives both of them equal relevance in shaping his understanding of the world, because he believes that “in the midst of the known and scientifically knowable world, there persists in nature, in ‘lost’ communities, in the individual human being, an unfathomable mystery which must be approached imaginatively and made to balance the achievement of civilized man, if the latter is not to be defeated by his own conquests” (qtd. in Maes-Jelinek, “The Writer” 27–28). Before becoming a writer and a scholar, Harris lived and worked in Guyana as a government land surveyor until the end of the 1950s, when he emigrated to England. The knowledge of the savannas and bush of the Guyanese interior that he gained as a land surveyor has provided a setting for many of his books, and the Guyanese landscape is one of the dominating themes in his fiction (Maes-Jelinek, “Wilson Harris” 139). *The Guyana Quartet* draws heavily on his experience as a land surveyor. In fact, *The Secret Ladder* is set exactly in the area that Harris surveyed in 1951–1952 with the same purpose as the character of Fenwick – assessing “possibilities of damming the area to provide a supply of constant irrigation for coastal rice farmers” (Louis 104). Harris puts his ‘scientific’ eye for detail to good use and combines it with his emotionally laden perception as an artist. It is through such a complex vision, combining artistic insight and close observation of his surroundings, that he realizes the continuous change in the landscape, its infinite transformation, as well as its mystery – which can be intuitively approached, but never fully grasped (Maes-Jelinek, “Unimaginable Imaginer” 218). The fullest understanding and interpretation of the landscape and its memory can therefore be reached only through a combination of close observation and imaginative exploration.

The previous example suggests the importance of the geographical landscape as a rich source of West Indian memory. However, to speak solely about the geographical landscape would be misleading. Consciously or intuitively, with help of imaginative art and self-recognition, man can uncover traits of the past hidden within himself as well as within his surroundings. In both instances, in the case of Wilson Harris, we can talk about the landscape – the inner landscape of the human psyche and the geographical landscape of the material world, because in Harris's work these two landscapes are intimately interconnected.¹⁴ Man and landscape share the same experience. In Harris's novels we are often confronted with complex images of exploration, rape, conquest, rebirth, which resonate with several layers of meaning. Furthermore, in most of Harris's work, landscape stimulates man's intuition, and thus helps him to approach memory imaginatively, with an open mind. As Maes-Jelinek writes in her analysis of *Palace of the Peacock*, landscape mirrors man's inner states and often serves as a catalyst that modifies them. She emphasizes the importance of “the glaring contrasts and uncertainties of the Guyanese natural world” that serve as “a phenomenal and spatial equivalent of the psyche, and the two blend in the narrative” (*Palace* 34).

Focusing more specifically on the geographical landscape (especially that of the Guyanese interior), it is depicted as a living organism with its own memory, reflecting changes in the past within its physical structure. It contains signs of lost nations as well as the presence of a heterogeneous population created by the violent past of colonialism. The landscape is being constantly changed, but it also changes those who enter it. In a reality where conscious individual and collective memory can fail,¹⁵ landscape holds within itself memory which can be retrieved from individual signs through the process of creative imagination. The ruins of ancient settlements overgrown by forest still retain the memory of those who built them, and diverted riverbeds bear witness to the agricultural schemes of the colonizers. In a similar way, Harris's landscape images incorporate reflections of historical events such as the introduction of slavery, the plantation system and slave revolts, or the search for El Dorado. These subtle signs can be uncovered by an attentive observer who might be able to recover the past from them by questioning these signs and allowing them to 'speak' for themselves from the depths of the past.

Moreover, as I have already suggested, the physical landscape in Harris's fiction serves also as a parallel universe and an image for the inner self. Voyages into the jungle, and the search for El Dorado, the Mariella mission or the native people, reflect the search for one's 'inner' or 'spiritual' eye, which can be understood as a route towards fulfilment, complete and complex self-perception, self-recognition, finding one's identity or reconciliation with one's past, present and future. In a society where history has such a problematic place in the formation of an identity and self-perception, memory (and ways to revive it) becomes a key source enabling us to create such an identity through imaginative insight into experiences that are retrievable from that memory. By combining symbolic meaning and physical representation within one image, Harris combines several sources of memory to describe a particular experience, thus giving it multiple perspectives. Perceiving simultaneously several interpretations, and therefore acquiring different meanings from one experience, enables us to bring together the facets of experience that were previously separated by a more limited form of perception – a form of perception which was insufficient for an authentic expression of the West Indian identity.

To give an example of such a multilayered use of landscape in Harris's works, we can choose one of the early images which use landscape as both a symbolic and physical substance. It is the image of a conquest, and the depiction of the conquered land as a woman.¹⁶ Although this image is also quite typical of the hegemonic western tradition and its depiction of conquered lands,¹⁷ Harris incorporates it into his work – despite its controversial connotations. Not only is the image of a conquered land/woman shown from the viewpoint of the conquered (though the conqueror's perception is also present), but the idea of a conquest or rape is depicted as far more complicated, with various feelings of love and hate accompanying the experience, reflecting the complex relationship between the conqueror and

the victim. It is not even clear at some points who is the conqueror and who the victim of the conquest. This image is problematized in several of Harris's novels, such as *Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *Four Banks of the River of Space*, and *Heartland*.

This is not a particularly original use of an image to symbolize conquest - both from the position of the colonizer (mostly depicted as a woman conquered, subdued and taken under the 'protection' of a civilized man) and from the position of the colonized (the symbolic rape of an innocent indigenous female, resulting in damage or complete destruction). Nevertheless, Harris views the entire enterprise as having a more complex nature, often aiming for a hope of a positive outcome despite its springing from such a destructive action. Thus the conquest of the land or the rape of a woman (the rape of the land) coincides with images of continuation, resurrection and the creation of new life, the realization of the consequences of one's actions and the horrors one is able to cause, which can lead to a better understanding of one's self and an acceptance of responsibility for the universe one creates and is being created by.

Apart from reflecting historical events of the region, landscape in all Harris's novels also serves as a metaphor (if we can talk about metaphor at all, because physical nature and the psychological inner nature of man are inseparable in Harris's perception of the world) for individual and communal consciousness. The voyages into the interior - the jungle - parallel an inner search for one's identity, recognition, and understanding. A search for El Dorado (the City of Gold, or the City of God) becomes a search within one's heart and soul, uncovering unconscious realities and memories accessible only to the 'seeing'/'living' spiritual eye, not the 'dead' material eye which permits only limited perception - and on which we often rely too rigidly, refusing to accept what we cannot 'objectively' measure, touch or observe with our eyes (this would be the limited vision of the 'dead' unseeing eye).¹⁸ Harris's landscape, in this respect, represents both the actual material substance and the 'unconscious' of the psychological world. In accord with ideas of quantum reality, the physical universe is intertwined with the unconscious inner universe of human beings, where we can find similar traces of the past, retrievable through close observation supported by imaginative creative insight. Thus the journey of the characters in Harris's novels into the interior of the Guyanese territory also gradually becomes "a regressive trip up the river of memory" (Durix 98) and a voyage through the time-space, where the past continuously interferes with the present and therefore also the future. Both physical/geographical and psychological landscapes preserve similar kinds of signs/memories through which they can speak to us if we open our mind (our living-seeing spiritual eye) and allow the signs to speak to us.

When observed attentively, on the geographical level, within the imagery describing physical surroundings (trees, rocks, rivers, waterfalls and so on) we can discern signs of the early attempts by various communities in the West Indian re-

gion to penetrate the interior. We can find traces of expeditions in search of gold. We can experience the transformation of the forest and the plains due to irrigation schemes designed for plantations – schemes which altered the tidal regimes of rivers and the form of riverbeds, thus changing the whole complex organism of the landscape and its workings. On the psychological level, if we transgress the limitations of our perception circumscribed by our upbringing and our own intellectual capacity, these images of penetration (rape), exploration, transformation or resurrection are paralleled by similar occurrences in the lives of communities that are gradually emerging in the West Indies, as well as on the level of individual characters – characters which not only represent these communities, but also serve as an image of a more general ‘individual’ of the wider universe.

By exploring the previously neglected geographical and psychological landscapes and eliciting other “unexpected correspondences” – such as those between “pagan myths (Guyanese and Greek) and Christian history and belief, between nature and psyche, and in the perception, both scientific and imaginative, of the cosmos and human consciousness” – Harris transgresses the restrictions of historiographical perception of individual, communal, human, and universal origins (Maes-Jelinek, “Unfinished Genesis” 231). Maes-Jelinek notes that Harris’s work offers “an almost unlimited number of relationships on all levels of experience and their transformation into a ‘genuine open dialogue’” (“The Writer” 27–28). Such a multiplicity of images, and the overarching metaphor of creation of the West Indies, is found in the passage from *The Secret Ladder* where Poseidon’s house is described by the main character Fenwick. It looks like an

... exotic mission house, created equally by destiny and accident [...] it had an air of both foreign and native, ideal and primitive, at one and the same time; and yet it seemed so precariously and absolutely right, belonging so truly in this natural or unnatural context of landscape, that the thought of an imposition, of pretentiousness or absurdity in the life of the crumbling building, seemed equally ridiculous and impossible. [... It had a] stamp of a multiple tradition or heritage. (199–200)

Thanks to his ability to draw parallels between spaces and times, Harris allows the previously separate experiences to be seen as sharing similarities, and therefore, despite their difference, the writer/reader/participant is able to identify more readily with experience that would otherwise probably seem quite unfamiliar and inaccessible. Harris’s novels build bridges between cultures and individuals by showing them the fluidity of the past and therefore the irrelevance of insisting on its fixed interpretations, thus teaching greater tolerance for different ways of perception.

Landscapes become sources of infinite resurrection of experience through their unobtrusive memory, which is not prescriptive, unlike the memory presented through traditional historiographies. Experience carried by the memory of the

landscape can be (re)lived again and again, offering a never-ending flux of new perceptions. Living fossils of a landscape (geographical and psychological) are made accessible through imaginative artistic (re)creation. The role of art in the transformation of our perception of history and the past is irreplaceable in this respect, because as Samuel Durrant says, “art can transform history into a sacred morsel or sacrament”, something we can “consume in remembrance” (qtd. in Maes-Jelinek and Ledent, 210). Through representations of the dead, lost, or forgotten we uncover “a latent potentiality of mourning”. Characters such as the dreamer, but also the writer and the reader themselves, become involved in the process of mourning by witnessing the experiences and thus recognizing “their implication in and responsibility for history” (Durrant qtd. in Maes-Jelinek and Ledent, 213–214).

In the last section I would like to discuss one more element of Harris’s artistic expression that is in accord with his understanding of art and its role in the transformation and resurrection of the past through the exploration of various forms of experience preserved within the memory of landscape(s) – language. Language itself becomes an extremely important instrument in Harris’s representation of landscapes and its memory. It is presented as a living fossil, and Harris argues for its capacity to reflect ‘dormant’ presences in the same way as the landscapes that it describes. Despite the often-questioned usage of English (or other European languages) in literatures from former colonies, Harris speaks strongly in favour of its capability to convey the complex meanings he is searching for. He is convinced that within the English language itself “there exist the voices of dead cultures [–] the Macusi, the Carib, the Arawak; [...] pre-Columbian tongues that have been eclipsed. What one is saying is that when these ancient tongues come into play they affect the rhythm of the English language”. He is positive about the capacity of English to encompass “a configuration in the English language, springing from the fact that the English language in South America secrets within it the tongues of ancient peoples who have long vanished” (Gilkes 31–32). We can see the direct influences of the ancient tongues when he is describing the geographical landscape. It soon becomes obvious that Amerindian place names dominate the descriptions of the interior, while Dutch, French and English names prevail in the demographic sphere. The nomenclature of rocks, waterfalls and tributaries reflects, as Bundy notes, the vital influence of Amerindian guides on early Dutch traders, on official descriptions of Guyana (British Guiana) such as “Adriaan van Berkel’s *Travels in South America between Berbice and Essequibo Rivers* (1670–89), on explorations and surveys of the then unknown interior, such as Charles Warton’s *Wandering in South America* (1825), Richard Schomburgk’s *Travels in British Guiana* (1840–44), and lastly on inventories of the region’s mineral wealth, such as Sir John Harrison’s *Geology of the Gold Fields of British Guiana* (1908)” (19).

For Harris, landscape is “like an open book”. However, this does not only mean images of the landscape he describes, but also the music/language of the land-

scape – “the preternatural voices in rivers, rapids, giant waterfalls, rock, tree” that he is trying to capture and convey through the English language he uses as his medium (qtd. in Bundy 40). Literature offers him an opportunity to combine the visual with the musical/auditory, creating a much more complex representation that overcomes the connotations of writing in an ‘inauthentic medium’ – as English is sometimes seen by those who are antagonistic to the cultural heritage of the former colonizing power.

The poetic nature of Harris’s novels, the musicality of the language and the vivid imagery in his texts, play on several senses at once, opening up yet more new possibilities of perception. In this way, Harris’s style of writing may be viewed as one which opens the reader to intuitive perceptions and gives access to various traditions that contributed to its creation, all more or less hidden within its imagery, sound, structure, thought, etc., and which are retrievable through imaginative and creative insight into a text, but also into the inner spaces of the readers themselves. Hena Maes-Jelinek praises Harris for his “perfect coalescence of content and form”. She observes that “Harris believes in the interrelatedness of all elements in life. Nature, humanity, fauna and flora partake of the same essence, are partial materializations of an ‘unfathomable’ wholeness, unfathomable God or Spirit towards which his characters progress but never reach” (“Un Musica Poesis” 495). This claim reflects the basic principle of Herbert Marcuse’s idea about the true authenticity of art – which, for me, corresponds closely to Harris’s artistic expression, in which he combines rich descriptions featuring sources of perception that stimulate all the senses. Harris’s novels are neither mimicking nor blindly oppositional – features for which some of the early works of postcolonial literature tend to be criticized. He manages to gain authenticity “not by virtue of its content (i.e., the ‘correct’ representation of social conditions), nor by its ‘pure’ form, but by the content having become form” (Marcuse 8). Every aspect of Harris’s art reflects his understanding of the interconnectedness of the universe where the past cannot be separated from the present, geographical landscape from the inner landscape of a man, or a work of art from a world it represents and those who create it – whether by writing it or reading it. What once looked like a hopeless void from one perspective can become a rich source full of creative potential. In Harris’s novels the memory of the Guyanese landscape definitely becomes one of these sources.

Notes

¹ Harris employs the idea of the fable of history very often, using his paradoxical approach and juxtaposing two elements which western methodology presents as oppositional. History, or rather historiography, is traditionally presented as something true, stable and unchanging, while fable is understood as fictional – i.e. not true. Harris deconstructs

this idea by showing that even official history is a form of narrative, an image created from a limited point of view, and by no means objective or with unquestioned veracity.

² An example of an available text is Sir Walter Raleigh's account of his journey into Guyana and one of the first written documents about the region that reached Europe – *The Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana; with a Relation of the Great and Golden City of Manoa, which the Spaniards Call El Dorado*. Other sources of early information preserved in written form include Adriaan van Berkel's *Travels in South America between Berbice and Essequibo Rivers* (1670–89), Charles Warton's *Wandering in South America* (1825), Richard Schomburgk's *Travels in British Guiana* (1840–44), and inventories of the region's mineral wealth in Sir John Harrison's *Geology of the Gold Fields of British Guiana* (1908), mentioned later in the text.

³ Memory is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as “your ability to remember things” and is therefore ascribed as an ability to people only. However, in the sense in which it is used in this essay it also refers to the ability of all living things (because Harris considers nature and the whole universe to be a living organism) to preserve the memory which can then be retrieved.

⁴ Officially recorded historiographies are used only marginally, and they are presented from various viewpoints. From the myths and beliefs Harris does not restrict himself only to those that originated in the region; he also takes into account those that were transported with the new population as well as disseminated through the education system. In his works we can find references to traditional western mythology (Greek, Biblical), African traditions (Bush babies, mama Legba, etc.), or early Mexican and South American cultural heritage (the tree of life, Quetzalcoatl, etc.), and also newer narratives about El Dorado and other conquistadorial images.

⁵ This ‘safety barrier’ – which is seen as necessary for the creation of a comfort zone for those who have created it – is, I believe, one of the major problems of negative identity formation. This essay attempts to pursue the possibility of creating an identity, and a feeling of comfort and safety surrounding it, without the necessity for such a barrier.

⁶ The format of the word ‘(re)live’ combines the meaning of living again through a familiar experience, but also living it anew – either because of the different perspective added to our understanding or because of encountering such an experience for the first time and therefore living through it for the first time, while also re-living the experience of the author who conveys it to us through his work of art.

⁷ Harris talks about the flexible inner/spiritual eye in contrast to the fixed material eye.

⁸ This vain longing is depicted, for example, in *The Far Journey of Oudin*, where one of the brothers – Hassan, whose grandfather came to Guyana from India – sets his heart on returning to this land of his father's ancestors to find peace of mind.

⁹ I mean several possibilities of transformation of memory – first during our own exploration of our memory, but also its transformation while trying to access the memory of somebody else (for example as a reader), and transformation through the creative process

of representation of that memory (in writing, but also in any other form of art which expresses the artist's vision of that memory).

¹⁰ I mention pain and injustice among the various other emotions that can be retrieved through art, because these emotions tend to arouse feelings of responsibility and personal involvement in the perceiver, thus leading to feelings of solidarity and attempts to erase possibilities of creating feelings of pain and injustice in the lives of other people. These problems are discussed, for example, in Swanson Goldberg's and Schultheis Moore's book *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (Routledge, 2012).

¹¹ It is highly desirable, in my opinion, to push the reader (or any other receiver of a piece of art) away from impersonal detached observation towards his or her emotional involvement with the piece of art and what it represents.

¹² Including the complex perception of the substance in this image as well as its transformational qualities.

¹³ References to landscape in this paper understand the term in its broadest sense, including what Harris in this quote calls riverscapes and skyscapes.

¹⁴ The image of landscape could also be broadened to include the physical landscape of the human body, which is also present in Harris's work; however, for the purposes of this paper I shall omit this as a separate category, because it is merged with both images of geographical and inner psychological landscapes, and it could cause confusion if further distinctions were drawn.

¹⁵ I talk at this point about conscious memory as memory that is recognized and directly at hand, because it is either directly remembered from personal experience or recorded by official sources. However, this type of memory may not always be available. On the other hand, intuitive memory is always present, even when it is not searched for or when it is not retrieved at all. It can also be described as a phantom limb – something that is missing, yet we can feel its presence, and through the imagination and memory we can revive its presence in our mind's eye.

¹⁶ The image of conquest also develops on the psychological level into the images of violation of one's morals and integrity.

¹⁷ See for example the map "Imperial Federation", Map of the World Showing the Extent of the British Empire in 1886 on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Imperial_Federation_Map_of_the_World_Showing_the_Extent_of_the_British_Empire_in_1886_%28levelled%29.jpg or some allegorical representations of America on <http://clements.umich.edu/exhibits/online/american-encounters/american-encounters-women.php>

¹⁸ A dead 'unseeing' eye does not necessarily mean impaired physical perception by sight in this case. Harris naturally values close observation and the ability to notice important details/signs in one's surroundings. The dead/unseeing eye may refer to impaired perception by one's physical eyes, or by the 'inner' spiritual eye (whose 'sight' can be similarly limited).

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