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Title of Research Paper: An evaluation of the intuitive fusion of the Haitian vodun possession trance/dance and the ancient Mayan linguistic representation of the past, present and future time in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*.

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Abstract

The Guyanese/British writer, Wilson Harris, in his theoretical essay "Apprenticeship to the Furies", Harris argues with hindsight that the ancient Mayan "concept of blended pasts and futures … was intuitively alive in [his] own work" (233-234). Above all, Harris contends that such pre-Columbian vestige has an "intuitive ...correspondence" with "the black West Indian presence" in his fictional narratives ("Jean Rhys's 'Tree of life'" 119-120). This essay will demonstrate that Wilson Harris has intuitively infused the ancient Mayan linguistic representation of the past, present and future time with the Haitian vodun possession trance/dance in his first novel *Palace of the Peacock* to create a cross-cultural and re-visionary narrative. The fusion of this black West Indian shamanistic vestige with the eclipsed pre-Columbian language in Harris's first novel inhabits or belongs to an intuitive rather than explicit dimension. It is unlikely that Harris was consciously aware of the contradictory mosaic inhabited by African and pre-Columbian spectres that were secreted in *Palace of the Peacock*. The involuntary association of such diverse legacies generates the psychical/physical 'language of the imagination' that fractures the traditional frame of the linear narrative of the Anglophone Caribbean. This essay will be guided by the Alfred Metreaux's anthropological perspectives of Haitian vodun. This research will also be steered by experts in the field of Mayan linguistics such as Scott Johnson and Olivier LeGuen. Wilson Harris's theoretical perspectives of the Haitian vodun possession trance, the 'depth resources of language' and the 'configuration in the English language' will serve to undergird the central argument of this discussion. The findings of this paper will reveal that the intuitive merger of the African and pre-Columbian hidden textualities in Harris's first novel have resulted in a re-visionary linguistic dynamic that celebrates the enigma of an inheritance that is both dialectically mixed and impure.

In his theoretical essay "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?", the Guyanese/British writer, Wilson Harris claims that his revisionary and cross-cultural agenda springs from his "intuitive" or "involuntary association" (240) of invariant or divided cultures. These re-visionary and cross-cultural perspectives are illustrated by Harris's intuitive fusion of the Haitian vodun possession trance/dance with the ancient Mayan linguistic representation of the past, present and future time in his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*. This essay seeks to substantiate that the intuitive connection of the Haitian vodun possession trance/dance and the ancient Mayan grammatical representation of the past, present and future time in *Palace of the Peacock* results in a cross-cultural and re-visionary narrative.

What exactly is Wilson Harris's intuitive imagination? Harris claims that "as an imaginative writer" he is "subject to uncanny lines sprung from his unconscious/subconscious memory." Such lines, according to Harris, appear "within the drafts of fiction" that he writes. Harris further contends that he sees such lines as 'intuitive clues' ("The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination, 249). Moreover, Harris asserts that his fictional works inhabit or belong to "an intuitive rather than explicit dimension" ("Jean Rhys's 'Tree of life'," 119). In other words "it is unlikely" that Harris was "consciously aware" of the Haitian vodun possession trance/dance and the ancient Mayan concept of blended pasts, presents and futures "that seems to … secrete itself in the margins" of his first novel and, as a consequence, "there exists in the narrative indirections" of his earlier novels "that peculiar blend of opacity and transparency that alerts us to the force of the intuitive imagination in building strategies of which it *knows* yet does not *know*" (Harris, "Jean Rhys's 'Tree of life'," 119).

The Haitian vodun possession trance/dance is intuitively represented in the opening lines of *Palace of the Peacock*. Here is an excerpt of those lines from this novel:

> A horseman appeared on the road coming at a breakneck stride. A shot rang out suddenly, near and yet far as if the wind had been stretched and torn and had started coiling and running in an instant. The horseman's stiffened with a devil's smile, and the horse reared, grinning fiendishly and snapping at the reins. The horseman gave a bow to heaven like a hanging man to his executioner, and rolled from his saddle on to the ground. The shot had pulled me up and stifled my own heart in heaven. […] I dreamt I awoke with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye. (*Palace,* 19)

This passage depicts the disturbing dream experienced by the protagonist Donne, in *Palace of the Peacock.* It is significant to note that Donne's staggering dream and vision bears an uncanny correspondence to Haitian vodun shamanic initiation belief. The prospective shaman or the *houngan* of Haitian vodun is called to his mystical vocation through ecstatic dreams. Such a perspective is noted by the anthropologist, Alfred Metraux. Metraux claims that in Haitian vodun, the following premise applies to the *houngan* initiation: "Spirits who have chosen a man…as a vessel for supernatural powers and have decided to keep him in their service, make their will known to him…by a symbolic dream" (*Voodoo* 66).

Furthermore, the metaphorical aspects of Donne's ecstatic dream are best explained through the shamanic notion of possession in Haitian vodoun. Metraux explains that:

> The relationship between the *loa* [or spirit] and the man seized is compared to that which joins a rider to his horse. That is why the *loa* is spoken of as 'mounting' or 'saddling' his … horse. [This] invasion of the body by a supernatural spirit [is echoed in] the often used expression: 'the *loa* is seizing his horse.'" (*Voodoo* 120)

In *Palace of the Peacock,* Donne (the initiate) is chosen as a shamanic vessel by a 'spirit' or *loa* through this type of symbolic dream. The dream signifies that this powerful psychic reality from

his unconscious has erupted into his outer world and is attempting to communicate with him. This bridging of communication between the spiritual dimension and our causal or linear reality is the central concern of this paper. Such linkages between the physical and the psychic dimensions are acausal and subsequently fissures the logic of a cause and effect nature of human perception. It is important to note that the overlap state of two different space-time realities in the Haitian vodun possession trance has been evaluated by Wilson Harris. According to Harris, within this overlap or "protean reality of space", the possessed individual's "conventional memory is erased" and a "primordial or deeper function of memory begins to exercise itself" ("The Writer and Society" 50-51). The perspective of a 'primordial memory' also brings into focus the 'language' that suffuses these overlapping planes of existence. Such synchronistic or psychophysical language also contains a re-visionary thrust as it modifies the linear tense structure of the English language in the opening lines of *Palace of the Peacock.*

In this context, it is significant to point out that this retreat from conventional reality and sensation is consistent with the non-linear representation of space and time in the ancient pre-Columbian languages. Did Harris's intuitive imagination foster an unconscious alliance between such a pre-Columbian language and the Haitian vodun possession trance to represent this primordial or psychophysical notion of space and time? This question deepens and complicates the central premise in this essay, which is Harris's imaginative ability to represent the Haitian vodun psychic entities or those "numinous inexactitudes" (Harris, "Profiles of Myth", 205) in our partial causal reality by intuitively infusing the non-linear grammatical structure of the ancient Mayan past, present and future tenses within the linear tense structure of the English Language in *Palace of the Peacock.*

The hidden suffusion of the ancient Mayan representation of the past, present and future tenses within the English language of *Palace of the Peacock* is noted by Wilson Harris. In his essay "Apprenticeship to the Furies", Harris affirms that the "ancient Maya possessed a concept of blended pasts and futures" and "Long before [he] knew of it the idea was intuitively alive in [his] own work" (233-234). It appears that the ancient Mayan 'concept of blended pasts and futures' was a kind of "enigmatic force" that inserted itself into *Palace of the Peacock* was also the prime corollary for a "kind of fissure in the authoritative fixture" ("Literacy" 84) of the English language adopted by the Anglophone Caribbean. This enigmatic pre-Columbian linguistic force seems to erupt in the following line from *Palace of the Peacock*: "A shot rang out suddenly, near and yet far as if the wind had been stretched and torn and had started coiling and running in an instant" (19). According to Harris, it is "a line running into the past, through the present, and implicitly into the future" ("Literacy" 84). The paradoxical nature of time in the sentence is emphasized as all actions occur simultaneously. This simultaneity of 'blended' actions is created by the use of the words "suddenly, near and yet far" and "in an instant." Subsequently, one is left to wonder if the actions are either in the past, present or the future. The reader's linear expectations are broken as there is some sort of complicated overturning or dismantling of sequential time. Moreover, the compression of events appears to be under the domination of a 'blended' past, present and future as Harris attempts to give representation to the emergence of the psychic entity.

Harris's linguistic attempt to give agency to psychic realities that breach our conventional logic of linear exactitude requires an evaluation of the sources of tradition that have intuitively affected the opening lines of *Palace of the Peacock*. Such a perspective is emphasized by Harris who argues that this line "not only dismantles linear realism but is "a line that runs so deeply into the resources of the tradition which have apparently vanished" ("Literacy" 84).

On crossing the frontier of the authoritative text or attempting to break free from the uniformity, linearity and the realism[1] of an English language that governed Anglophone Caribbean writing in the 1960's, Harris found himself addressing the deep-seated problem of the limitation of the English language and the problem of tradition. What exactly does Harris mean by this term 'tradition'? Harris argues that a writer's craft may be fostered by primordial, fossilized or buried traditions that lie in the writer's language or the "depth resources of language" ("Quetzalcoatl" 189). It is Harris's view that writers are unaware that their talents are "nourished by much deeper sources" or "deep resources" within the "layers" of the imagination. Harris further adds that the writer who is conditioned to write in a linear uniform manner "tends to write and live on the surface and to eclipse those deep and incredible resources." However, according to Harris, the writer who begins "to sense the life of those resources" will subsequently bring "different texts, different stories … into play" ("Judgement and Dream, 18-19).

Harris further claims that within the 'primordial resources' or deep layers of his native South American English language lie fossilized vestiges of the vanished pre-Columbian languages. In the literary essay, "The Landscape of Dreams", Harris's asserts:

> The point is that the novel is written in the English language, but within the language itself there exists the voices of dead cultures, I mean … the 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, and because of that something peculiar happens…. What one is saying is that it is possible to have a configuration in the English

[1] Harris argues that his "fiction … diverges from realism….Realism is authoritarian in the sense that it has to stick to one frame. It cannot bring other texts into play. Realism has to work with one text. Very much like a journalistic text: one text, a single frame. When you bring other texts in, you question that text and then you begin to unleash resources which begin to come into play and to saturate the narrative. The narrative therefore begins to shift its emphasis and what is one thing now seems still to be like that, but it changes within itself and becomes other things *as well*.."Judgement and Dream," *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks by Wilson Harris*, 26.

> language, springing from the fact that the English language in South America secretes within it the tongues of ancient peoples who have long vanished, but they still exist in the English language and are able to throw up that kind of configuration. (31-32)

The notion of a 'configuration in the English language' gives much credence to the premise that the ancient Mayan grammatical constructs of the past, present and future time have involuntarily secreted themselves within Harris's native English language. It is therefore an 'involuntary association' or those implicit "gifts born of unconscious momentum … that one culture unselfconsciously … offers to another culture" (Harris, "Creoleness" 242).

At this point in the essay, one needs to also understand the ancient Mayan representation of tense in order to justify the uncanny correspondence it achieves with the opening lines in *Palace of the Peacock*. The linguist, Scott Johnson in *Translating Maya Hieroglyphics* claims that "it is likely that the Classic Maya were not using a tense-based system but rather an aspectual one." Johnson further notes that "most modern Mayan languages are not tense based" and "employ an aspectual system that is not based on the time of an action's occurrence but rather on the completion of an action." Consequently, according to Johnson, in these type of languages "an action can be either completive or incompletive, depending on its current state" (184).

The ancient Mayan grammatical structure of a 'completive or incompletive action' is further explained by Scott Johnson. According to Johnson, "some languages use tense to describe the occurrence of past, present or future such as the English pattern of "ate," "eat" and "will eat." However, Johnson claims, that "other languages use aspect, which describe events as completive or incompletive (ongoing)." Most significantly, Johnson claims that "aspect is difficult to translate into English, because it is a fundamentally different system, but it might sound like "already eaten" as completive and "eating" as incompletive" (185). This lack of tenselessness is also explained by

the linguist Olivier LeGuen. LeGuen claims that the English sentence "Lila entered while Joe was speaking on the phone" would have to expressed in modern Yucatec Maya as "Joe is speaking on the phone and Lila enters." Here the Yucatec Maya version of this sentence "can be a present, past or future event" (217). Although the linguist Scott Johnson argues about the difficulty of translating the ancient Maya grammatical use of aspect to describe the past, present and the future, the following analysis from *Palace of the Peacock* will nevertheless demonstrate that Harris had intuitively manipulated the English language linguistic feature of the progressive aspect to accommodate an ancient language that is aspect-based and not tensed based.

In English grammar, the progressive aspect indicates an action or condition continuing in the present, past or future. The linguists, Isle Depraetere and Chad Langford, state that the "progressive aspect ... represents a situation as being in progress or as ongoing." They further add that this "may be the present moment in time, but the reference time can also lie in the future or in the past" (144). Above all, aspect is always connected to tense in the English language.

Furthermore, progressive aspect grammatical structure of English is formed by adding a tensed form of the auxiliary verb such as, *be , do, have, will, shall, would, should, can,* etc., with the *ing* form of the verb. Above all, the time of reference of the -*ing* form of the verbs could be identified according to the tensed auxiliary verb that comes right before it according to the English grammatical rules. For instance, the tensed auxiliary verb *is* in the sentence, "David *is* falling in love" is in the present tense, therefore, the present participle 'falling' refers to a progressive or continuous action in the present tense.

However, Harris's use of the *ing* form of the verb becomes tricky and elusive in his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*. The following line from *Palace of the Peacock*, "A horseman

appeared on the road coming at a breakneck stride" (19) demonstrates Harris's use of the *–ing* verb form that presents a reality that cannot be pinned down as the past, present or future tense:

This line is part of the opening paragraph of Harris's first novel, and one recognises that Harris does not use a linguistic marker to form the progressive aspect in the present participle "coming" in the line "A horseman appeared on the road coming at a breakneck stride." Instead, Harris uses this *ing* form of the verb without the tensed auxiliary verbs such as *be*, *do*, or *have*. Consequently, the *ing* form of the verb *coming* in the line "A horseman appeared on the road coming at a breakneck stride" does not indicate whether the reference time lies in the present, past or future.

However, if Harris had used the progressive aspect, according to the rules of English grammar, to speak of a past time, this line might have been written as "A horseman appeared on the road and was coming at a breakneck stride.' Harris, through the intuitive elimination of the progressive aspect linguistic marker, seems to dismantle the English language notion of past, present and future in favour of an *incomprehensible* notion of reality that consists of a jostling of the past, present and the future. This "interweaving" of the live language (English) and the fossil language (ancient Mayan languages) "implicitly raises a reality" or "a *quality* of voice and expression unlike conventional, one-track progressive realism" (Harris, "Merlin and Parsifal" 62). Such '*quality* of voice' is viewed by Harris as that linkage between the psychical and the physical. For this reason, Harris terms this '*quality* of voice' as the "psychophysical … medium of communication" ("Merlin and Parsifal" 59).

Moreover, the creation of this acausal reality gives agency to the spiritual inexactitude of the Haitian vodun *loa*. This intuitive re-modification of the progressive aspect formulaic code prevents Harris from confusing spiritual inexactitude with the static logic of human perception.

Subsequently, the non-human dimension is not reflected as passive and inanimate in our partial linear reality but as an apparently 'real' world.

It is significant to note that such imaginative bridging of different cultural epistemologies represents Harris's application of the "quantum imagination" ("Creoleness" 246) to create the "revisionary" narrative and to explore the "issue of complex linkages and mixed traditions" ("Creoleness" 247) in his fictional works. Harris can therefore be viewed as the visionary writer who makes that "quantum leap" ("Wilson," 54) and infuses the pre-Columbian presence with the black West Indian presence in his first novel. The opening lines of *Palace of the Peacock* deepens Harris's re-visioning of the rigid formulaic structure of the English Language in a cross-cultural black West Indian and ancient pre-Columbian space. Furthermore, such a "phenomenon" gives one room to reflect upon the black West Indian presence within the pre-Columbian and post-Columbian vestiges in Harris's other novels.

Above all, it is this type of theoretical analysis that makes Harris one of the most original literary artists and critics in the Anglophone Caribbean. The intuitive correspondence Harris achieves with the Haitian vodun possession trance, the ancient Mayan linguistic representation of tense and his re-visionary and cross-cultural literary production is outstanding and there are other implicit variables or examples that further highlight his originality and which need to be further investigated. Such a view is expressed Harris, who claims that "Insufficient attention has been paid to such phenomena and the original native capacity these implied as omens of rebirth [or] subtle and far-reaching renascence" ("History," 158) in Caribbean literary production.

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