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THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURES: WILSON HARRIS, POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE, AND THE CURRICULUM IN TROUBLED TIMES

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In this essay, the author calls attention to the radical reconfiguration and rearticulation of identity and belonging taking place in modern life as a consequence of the rapid movement of people and cultural and economic capital across national borders. Indeed, culture is now a primary object of antagonist feeling and ethnicization. He argues that this provides both a challenge and opportunity to educators as they now are forced to confront the multiplicity and plurality of languages and cultural form that are now defining the modern classroom. Drawing on the work of the Guyanese philosophical novelist, Wilson Harris, the author suggests that postcolonial literature, like that of Harris, provides a model for the thoughtful encounter between human groups and an avenue for communicative action that might help to confront the growing pattern of cultural balkanization that now dominates social and educational life in many different settings.

Introduction

Proof like Doubt must seek the hidden wound in orders of complacency that mask opportunist codes of hollow survival (Wilson Harris 1985:7).

As we enter the new millennium, the extraordinary diasporic movement of people, ideas, and images across national boundaries has begun to pose major challenges to educational and curricular organization in the school systems of industrial countries of the West. These challenges are particularly fore-grounded in areas of educational and social life that have become flash points of tension as the radical presence of diversity now threatens old ways of curriculum organization associated with Eurocentrism and monoculturalism. Some of these key flash points of tensions are in the areas of language, identity, and community — sensitive markers of group affiliation that often get articulated to discourses of cultural balkani-

zation and racial and ethnic antagonism. The great challenge that faces curriculum educators in these times is to find a non-alienating way of re-narrating and reformulating the meaning of the material realities and challenges associated with diversity. Educators must formulate a new curriculum methodology in a manner that the broad and varied populations that now attend our universities and schools can feel engaged and connected beyond the particularism of personal history and origins. I will argue in what follows — by drawing on a central exemplar — that postcolonial literature provides models of thoughtfulness and reflexivity that can greatly assist educators as they attempt to negotiate the competing interests, needs, and desires generated by the diverse populations now attending our educational institutions.

This chapter looks at postcolonial literature as a space for the exploration of this radical diversity, not simply as a problem, but as an opportunity for a conversation about establishing a normative basis for communicative action in the curriculum. I write as a critical educator invested in a project of communicative action or dialogue that might get us beyond the implacable categories of Eurocentrism and the reductive forms of multiculturalism that have become such integral parts of the crisis language of curriculum reform in the area of race relations. In invoking postcolonial literature, I am pointing toward a re-deployment of the vocabulary of difference that might help practitioners to humanize an increasingly commodified, instrumental, and deeply invaded curriculum field. I use as an exemplar of this new materialist humanism (what one postcolonial author calls 'the visualization of community' Gilkes 1975) the work of the Guyanese philosophical novelist, Wilson Harris. I look at his novel, *The Palace of the Peacock* 1960.

Harris' urge to write began when, as a young man, he worked for the Guyanese government as a land surveyor charting the interior of Guyana. Harris reports an avid interest in the philosophical writings of Hegel and Heidegger, whom he first read as a teenager. *The Palace of the Peacock* is a picaresque or quest novel, much like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which the main characters are pitted against nature in the journey of their lives. But in Harris' novel, nature is problematized. It is the fecund source of metaphors and allegories about the contested lives of human beings, their oppression of each other, and the open possibilities that reside within collective action and communal spirit and determination.

The motif of possibility

Our literatures did not passively accept the changing fortunes of their transplanted languages ... Soon they ceased to be mere transatlantic reflections. At times they have been the negation of the literatures of Europe; more often they have been a reply (Paz 1990:5).

Some years ago, I attempted to outline the possibility of validating or proving the truths that may occupy certain twentieth century works of fiction that diverge, in peculiar degrees, from canons of realism. I sought such proof or validation by bringing the fictions I had in mind

into parallel with profound myth that lies apparently eclipsed in largely forgotten so-called savage cultures (Harris 1985:7).

I have come to the feeling that there are certain words, phrases, terms that I do not like, even when I am using them in my own writing: words and terms such as 'origins', 'center', 'the best', 'the brightest', 'hierarchy', 'pure', 'Western', 'civilization', even — 'culture' (although I am sure to use the last one several times before this essay is finished). These words relay and circulate a certain kind of hypocrisy of completeness and self-sufficiency in curriculum theory and design and in the practical matters of everyday human life. Educational theorists and policy makers invested in these words — these lines of demarcation — now stand clumsily in the doorways of cultural commutation that link human groups to vast underground networks of feeling, sensibility, and promise. Words such as 'origins', 'Western' and 'center' have led us to blocked visions, suspended horizons, and ineluctable retreats. They serve to repress interlocked histories and trestles of association. They paste over the fault lines that, have for some time now, ruptured the undersides of imposed identities deep beneath the glistening surfaces of 'Europe', 'Africa', 'Asia', the 'Caribbean', the 'Orient', and the 'Occident'.

So here we are, at the end of the twentieth century, fighting old, stale atavistic internecine wars in the heart of the curriculum field and in the trenches of educational institutions. It's an old saw among academics that the battles in academic life are as vicious as they are because the stakes are so small. Maybe proponents of such a point of view are right. And, it is partly our deep investment in words like 'center' and 'Western' that has gotten us in our present curriculum trouble — our present impasse between the Wild West and the rest of the world. In this new world order, each person grazes on his own grass, so to speak, and in a tortured sense, turns the key on his own door. These lines of psychic tension and demarcation are powerfully registered in current debates over multiculturalism and curriculum reform. The debaters radically oppose the literature and cultural production associated with the canon to the new literatures of postcolonial writers and indigenous minority novelists and poets. It is assumed by some of the more conservative thinkers, such as William Bennett 1984 and Dinesh D'Souza 1991, that East is East and West is West and never should or must canonical and non-canonical literatures meet in the school curriculum. Some more reformist theorists, such as Molefi Asante 1993, assume that, since the dominant curriculum thrives on the marginalization of the cultures of minorities, that minority identities can only be fully redeemed by replacing the Western and Eurocentric bias of the curriculum with non-Western minority literatures.

Of course, when talking about this economy of oppositions, one cannot forget the rather unfortunate pronouncements of Fredric Jameson 1986 in an article he published in *Social Text* some years ago entitled 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism'. In this article, Jameson asserted that third world literary texts were 'necessarily allegorical', and should be read as 'national alle-

gories'. According to him, third world fiction lacks one critical historical variable that helps to establish the modern Western realist novel, namely:

a radical split between private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as a the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx (Jameson 1986:69).

Without this split, third world fiction can all be reduced to a single narrative paradigm: 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society' (p. 65). Here, Jameson has placed third world fiction into a very limited box. This is not to say that Jameson's intuitions about third world fiction are entirely off the mark — Harris's work is after all deeply allegorical; but Jameson's problems begin when he takes a partial insight and recklessly presses it out into a totalizing usurping epiphany — filling up the periphery and the globe.

I must admit that I have reached a kind of exhaustion with a certain usage of the language of difference — a quiet weariness with the language of negation and fatalistic oppositions. This essay represents a new effort to articulate a motif of possibility — a vision of curriculum that is socially extended, but at the same time deeply invested in the fictive worlds created in postcolonial writing. In these imperfect worlds of imagination, literature leads the way and sociology clumsily follows — happily, without the burden of 'controls'. It is an attempt to, in Harris's words 'visualize a community' — a community of lost or broken souls — the community of Donna Haraway's cyborgs, of Gloria Anzaldúa's border people, of Gabriel Marquez's El Macondo, or the folk of Harris's Mariella, dwelling in the interior of Guyana — the mythical rain forests in which the *Cauda Pavonis* or *The Palace of the Peacock* 1960 might be glimpsed.¹

I believe that the challenge of multiculturalism is the critical challenge of curriculum in postmodern times — it is the challenge of living with each other in a world of difference. I believe that postcolonial literature — even more so than postcolonial literary theory and criticism — has sought to foreground this challenge of living in a world of difference in late-century society, and as such presents us with fictive maps in which power and communication are conceived as operating horizontally, not vertically, not top down as in encoding-decoding, but rhizomatically in the sense that often cabalistic passageways link the mighty and the meek on shared and complex terrains. And some times close up the meek prevail. For example, Harris' *The Palace of the Peacock*, tired of abuse, Mariella — Arawak woman and colony — shoots Donne, the colonial oppressor. Her action is that of a shaman of the folk. The landscape of power is altered in the twinkling of an eye. Donne, the reader, later discovers, is that part of the folk reproductive of the old colonial will to power — the colonizer in the colonized — that Mariella as Shaman and representative of the folk will redefine. It is within the context of these asymmetrical relations of colonizer and colonized that this literature takes

on special significance, but the matter is never straightforward, as we will see in the example of Harris's novel.

Historical filiation of the postcolonial novel

Of course, the implications of this literature for curriculum cannot be grasped without some attempt to follow its materialist filiations, distributed as they are in the histories of classical and modern colonialism, but even more recently, since the sixties, in the footprints scattered across the late-twentieth century megalopolises — London, Toronto, New York, Paris, Mexico City. These footprints register the presence of the daughters of the dust, the migratory waves of humanity now conquering the West. The state of exile is also the state of rupture of old paradigms, of lost selves, and new affiliations, the locus of emergent self-discovery. In its most compelling forms, postcolonial literature struggles to embrace the old and the new, multiple worlds, divided loyalties, and passionate desires of the Other. As the Sri Lankan writer, Michael Ondaatje, puts it in *The English Patient*, this literature celebrates those 'nationless ... deformed by nation states [who] ... wished to remove the clothing of their countries' (Ondaatje 1992:138-39). These literary works document the other side of the postmodern — multicultural worlds from which there are no longer exits for retreat. Postcolonial writers are fabricating the new subjects of history and are seeking to install these new subjects within the folds of contemporary imagination. These new subjects are patched together and fitted out with leaky souls. They are flawed or broken human creatures — born in the crucible of cultural modernization, not at all, as some writers such as Roger Kimbal 1990 or Dinesh D'Souza 1991 might argue, stilted prototypes of sociological tracts singing hollow histories of oppression and damnation. And they are not for that matter, as Afrocentric writers such as Mike Awkward 1989 might suggest, existing in some prelapsarian past standing up before Adam and Eve.

Emergent postcolonial literatures register a new structure of feeling, of overlapping and cascading epochs of time, of drifting space, of free associations, of the ample desires and insatiable appetites of the center and the periphery rolled into one. As such, they offer a new late-twentieth century paradigm of curriculum, a poetics of a curriculum without borders. What we are witnessing at one level is the very transformation of the canons of English, French, and Spanish literatures as Pico Iyer 1993 maintains in a recent *Time* magazine article:

Where not long ago a student of the modern English novel would probably have been weaned on Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley, now he will more likely be taught Rushdie and Okri and Mo — which is fitting in an England where many students' first language is Cantonese or Urdu ... Thus the shelves of English bookstores are becoming as noisy and polyglot and many hued as the English streets. And the English language is being revolutionized from within. Abiku stalks us on the page, and triad gangs and 'filmi' stars. Hot spices are entering English, and tropical birds and sorcerers;

readers who are increasingly familiar with sushi and samosas are now learning to live with molue buses and manuku hedges (Iyer 1993:70).

Transforming the canon, Wilson Harris and the new community

And I saw that Donne was ageing in the most remarkable misty way (Harris 1960:49).

What might a community of lost or broken souls tell us about curriculum in late-century America? This is the question that Wilson Harris 1989 poses in his essay, 'Literacy and the Imagination', where he suggests that solutions to the problem of literacy in the Americas must begin with the recognition of the inadequacy of programs of imposition such as agricultural extension programs and urban literacy projects that distrust the cultural resources that reside within the masses themselves. In other words, he argues that educators tend to have what he calls 'illiterate imaginations'. Harris's observations on literacy point us in the direction of the resources of the folk — of the popular — the kind of cultural resources of interpretation and action that Paulo Freire 1970 discovers in his literacy work with the Brazilian peasants in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. And, in another way, this is what Gloria Ladson-Billings and Annette Henry 1990 have been calling for in their notion of a 'curriculum of relevance'.

Harris has provided an en fleshment of an answer to the problem of 'illiterate imaginations' in books like *The Palace of the Peacock* 1960, *Whole Armour* 1962, *Companions of the Day and Night* 1975, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* 1977, and *Genesis of the Clowns* 1977. I want here to focus on *The Palace of the Peacock* as a meditation on a broken community and its set of propositions about a possible reintegration of this community of lost souls. I want to suggest that the way Harris negotiates canonical notions of literary genre, form, characterization, narrative and social vision has a lot to teach us about the practice of curriculum in the world of difference that has overtaken our social institutions, if not our social consciences. I should say that I turn here to Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* 1960, but I could have turned to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 1970, or Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* 1990, or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* 1981, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* 1992, Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* 1992, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* 1992, or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* 1987 or *Jazz* 1992, or, finally, Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* 1985. All of these novels follow, broadly, a path of deflation of classical realism of the nineteenth-century novel and an implosion of an overmastering or ruling narrating subject. Instead, they put in place the angular points of view of a polyglot cast of new characters, protean personalities and kaleidoscopic visions, open-ended possibilities, and journeys from confinement to transformation. The vast majority of these authors, as Pico Iyer (1993:70) notes:

are writers not of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, born more or less after the war and choosing to write in English [or Spanish or French]. All are situated at the crossroads from which they can reflect, and reflect on

new forms of Mississippi Massala of our increasingly small, increasingly mongrel, increasingly mobile global village. Indians writing of a London that is more like Bombay than Bombay, Japanese novelists who cannot read Japanese, Chinese women evoking a China they have seen only in their mothers' stories — all amphibians who do not have an old and a new home so much as two half-homes simultaneously.

Where is Wilson Harris to be placed among this motley crew of writers? In some ways, he is a precursor. Like the writers mentioned above, he was 'born after the war'. But the war that is a point of reference for him is the war that fed the often biting satirical poetry of the British war poets, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves. It is of course World War I. Harris was born in Guyana in 1921. He is, as Robert Fraser 1988 tells it, a child of mixed Amerindian, Indian, African, and European blood. He began his professional life as a scientist, a land surveyor, working on the mapping of the often tricky interior of Guyana. 'Guiana' (Guyana) is an Amerindian word meaning 'land of many waters'. Waterfalls abound and many, like the majestic roaring Kaieteur Falls, charge the interior with a sense of terror and sublimity. The awesome nature of this terrain served as an initial inspiration for Harris. Wandering about in the interior of Guyana, Harris spent enormous amounts of time reading Heidegger and Hegel and meditating on time and the psychic dimensions of human life, and the way in which the unpredictable and surprising topography of the Guyanese interior, landscape seem almost to insinuate itself into the human personality. The rich unpredictability of the Guyana interior in part, precipitated his early writings as an imagistic poet of the interior (Fraser 1988). But most of Harris' work, such as *The Palace of the Peacock*, would be written and published in London.

The manipulation of imagery, of metaphor, and symbol constitutes the central activity in *The Palace of the Peacock*. The novel serves a larger purpose of putting to melody a rendezvous with history — a re-encounter between the colonizer and the colonized in different times and different places, in multiple personas, in real time, in dream and myth, in life and death. Together, the colonizer and the colonized must share a mutual responsibility for the future which, in *The Palace of The Peacock*, can only be glimpsed or constructed after an excruciating revisiting of the past. In the novel, Harris attempts to place twentieth century humanity in conversation with those who have been designated as the people of 'savage cultures'. But it is these same savage cultures of the interior of Guyana that support the weight of civilized existence in the coastal suburbs. To tell the story of this kind, in which multiple cultural systems of interpretations dialogue with each other, Harris must rent the fabric of the classical realist novel. Instead of the fiction of omniscience, with its privileged narrator sitting on top of a hierarchy of discourses (see, for example, C.L.R. James' *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* 1978, in which James talks about the bureaucratic deployment of characterization in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*), Harris produces a form of fiction that, in his own words, 'seeks to consume its own biases through the many resurrec-

tions of paradoxical imagination and to generate foundations of care within the vessel of place' (1985:9). *The Palace of the Peacock* is about the possibility of validating subaltern myths as opposed to colonial accounts of history. In some ways, Harris is saying the folk may yet have the last laugh. For instance, the Caribs of Grenada, it is told, in one seventeenth century confrontation with the French, leapt off a mountain to their deaths rather than surrender to the colonizers. The Caribs record this event in myth and folk-tales in which their ancestors who plunged to their deaths in the seventeenth century ascend to heaven in a flock of stars. On earth, the hill from which they jumped is call *la Morne des Sauteurs* or 'Leaper's Hill'. And at night, presumably, the stars continue to shine down in comment. The stars are, in the Carib mythology and astrology, the reconstitutions of their ancestors' broken souls (EPICA Task Force 1982:9).

The extractable story of Harris' novel takes the form of a journey of reclamation, of rediscovery of the colony of Mariella. Mariella is the metaphor for alienated or hidden self — the living resources of the oral traditions of the folk — culture based on use value, outside the exchange relations of co-modification. But on board the canoe or pontoon that sails up the Cuyuni river in the interior of Guyana are the polyglot broken souls of a subordinating history. Colonizer and colonized must journey, must reach deep into their own souls for new systems of communication that might settle old conflicts. Of course, the quest narrative goes back to the beginning's of the novel: Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the great stories of adventure of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *The Miller*, *The Clerk*, *The Nunnes Priest*, and the rest, the extended narrative improvisations and oral documentaries of the African griots — Amiri Baraka's original 'Blues People'. With the arrival of the modern novel, we have the founding myths of the mariners, renegades, and castaways, as C.L.R. James 1978 notes: Daniel Defoe's *Crusoe* in *Robinson Crusoe*, Herman Melville's Ahab in *Moby Dick*, and the tormented protagonists of Joseph Conrad's travel fiction, Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* and Nostromo of *Nostromo*.

But the crew that sets sail on the pontoon in *The Palace of the Peacock* — in a sense represents condensations and fragmentations of these prototypes. The new imaginary spaces which the characters in this novel inhabit are considerably deflated and impacted — bodies press sensuously against each other. Harris' characters embody the dialectical tensions of self and other, past and present. There is Donne, the tormented captain and leader, named after the master of the literary technique of conceit — the metaphysical poet, John Donne. In *The Palace of the Peacock*, Donne is colonizer and agent of dominating instrumental reason, but it is his materialism that blocks his wholeness of being. His abuse of Mariella — Arawak, Shaman-woman, and colony — leads to one of his many deaths in the novel, when Mariella takes revenge. Donne is also the colonizer mentality in the colonized who issues decrees: 'Donne I suddenly felt in the quickest flash was in me' (p. 33).

Vigilance is the ship's pilot, an Amerindian seer, on whom Donne and the crew must rely for his supersensitive vision to help them navigate and escape the perils lying in the bedrock of the river. There is Cameron the Afro-Scot of 'slow feet and fast hands' (pp. 25-6) in pursuit of deep materialist fantasies — the pork-knocker panning the river bed for ancestral gold and other precious metals. There is the musical Carroll, an Afro-Carib youth, and player of the Carib bone flute. In his hands, the oar becomes a fully tuned violin. There is Schomburgh, the German-Indian, fisherman and wise uncle to all. There are the Portuguese da Silva twins, at war with themselves and the world, constantly, self contradictory. There is Wishrop, Amerindian (Chinese?), and Jennings the mechanic, Anglo-Saxon, married to the folk. And finally, there is Mariella, Shaman-woman ancient and yet youthful, as permanent as the stars. She appears at unexpected moments, everywhere, constantly altering the environment and chemistry of associations in the pontoon. Ultimately, Harris tells us this is one spiritual incestuous family that dreamed up their different origins:

Cameron's great-grandfather had been a dour Scot, and his great-grandmother an African slave mistress. Cameron was related to Schomburgh (whom he addressed as Uncle with the other members of the crew) and it was well-known that Schomburgh's great-grandfather had come from Germany, and his great-grand mother was an Arawak American Indian. The whole crew was a spiritual family living and dying together in the common grave out of which they had sprung from 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 unshaved head of Schomburgh's age and presence (Harris 1960:39).

Unlike the nineteenth-century realist novel of individual psychological interiority, the specific emotions and dispositions of each character are distributed among the other characters in the novel. Donne's superciliousness can be found expressed in the da Silva twins. He is like the river boy, Carroll, filled with fear and wonder in the face of the majestic waterfall the crew must cross as they take their perilous journey up the river. His craven materialism is reproduced in the obsessed and self-commercial Cameron. These characters on board the shallow pontoon on the journey of their lives are peculiarly flat or hollow entities — broken individuals who need each other to be fully complete. There is no depth or latency to them. They flash on the surface of the novel. They are in some ways 'parabolic' characters, to use the language of the West African critic, Emmanuel Obiechina 1978. They introduce a symbolic motif that implicates themselves and the world. Their sharp edges fade and their personalities bleed into each other as the novel progresses. Harris is doing his best to suggest that they are in fact one subject of history, one community. We often find it impossible to tell these characters apart. At some point, their individual characteristics are diffused throughout the crew. One gets the picture of a painter furiously experimenting with an expanding rainbow of colors in an infinite palette. One is reminded here of Peter Greenaway strobic

alternations of light and color in his film, *Prospero's Books* 1991. Unlike Captain Ahab's Pequod, there is no deck in Harris' novel. These characters are anti-heroes fomented in the belly of the beast — clutching each other in fear and uncertainty as they struggle up river in their shallow dugout or pontoon. Nobody is traveling first class here. Their seven-day journey is demarcated by seven deaths, seven dissolutions of the sovereign subject. This journey, is, in part, Harris' great effort to recreate the Carib resurrection myth. In Carib mythological structures, human actors have no trouble traveling from life to death and back again, completing a mythical cycle of transformation. Of course, this corridor from life to death is also opened up in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* 1987 and *Jazz* 1992, in the film-making of Julie Dash in *Daughters of the Dust* 1992, in Jorge Amado's *Dona Flor and her two Husbands* 1969 and in the dramatic fables of Derek Walcott such as those in the collection of his plays, *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Stories* 1972.

Harris 1970 also points us to the Renaissance fusion of art and science in the practice of alchemy. The seven-day journey in *The Palace of the Peacock* may thus be compared to the seven stages of the alchemical process during which the *massa confusa* (the *nigredo* or chaos) is immersed (*ablutio*, a stage similar to Christian baptism or 'death by water') and exposed to a series of chemical and physical changes — through to a stage of purification (*albedo*), to the final *aurum non vulgi* or *Cauda Pavonis* (the peacock colors), which represents a unity in diversity (This is what the Guyanese critic Michael Gilkes 1975 calls 'the wedding of opposites').

In *The Palace of the Peacock*, the crew exists in the original state of *nigredo* (chaos); their journey through the rapids (*ablutio*), leads to a creative life-in-death transformation, for which Carroll's role as Shaman is crucial: 'Who and what was Carroll? ... the living and dead folk, the embodiment of hate and love, the ambiguity of everyone and everything?' (p. 69). All these references to mediated change point to a process of inner transformation. Here, again, we see Harris's use of parallel or overlapping time. Carib Resurrection mythology and Egyptian-derived renaissance alchemy come together to tell a story of the strange and the familiar in the 'infinite rehearsal' of the folk and colonizer in the rivers and forests of the interior of Guyana. The journey up the river and towards the rendezvous with Mariella leads to a series of transformations of the crew in the old pontoon. Each member of the crew is now partially freed from the self-governing, materialistic, and particularistic fantasies that dominated his relationships with his crew-mates. This sense of growth in knowledge and understanding is the effect of shared responsibility, mutual liability, and the washing away of implacable masks of sedimented identity and reason. The alchemical vision enlarges to contain the whole range of objects and persons in the novel. The action unfolds within a decentered and decentering sense of place and context. And the novel builds laterally but always furiously toward a final proliferation of images — fragments cobbled together in the *Cauda Pavonis*. This hollow but latent epiphany which Donne and his crew experience at the top of the rapids as they face their symbolic deaths is a reworking of Odysseus's enchantment, resistance, and

partial surrender to the voice of the Sirens — his primitive self and other. Harris breaks through the conventional one-dimensional attitudes and responses to color, light, darkness, touch, smell, sound, and taste that inform our common sense encounters with each other and the world.

In his essay 'On Culture and Creative Drama', Richard Courtney 1988 talks about a resurrection myth associated with the Amerindian peoples. This myth is the creative foundation for the exploration of human predicaments of the type experienced by the characters in Harris' novel:

Each of these Indian peoples have a major myth which tells how a young hero [heroine] leaves the actual world (dies) and seeks his spirit from whom he obtains 'power', returning with it to his village (resurrection) so that he can use this power on the people's behalf (Courtney 1988:6).

In *The Palace of the Peacock* this subaltern or revolutionary power derives from an unflinching self-critique and openness to contradiction, discontinuity and difference. What Donne and his crew see and experience at the top of the rapids is the tenuous links that connect them to each other and to hidden moral resources within themselves:

The crew was transformed by the awesome spectacle of a voiceless soundless motion, the purest appearance of vision in the chaos of emotional sense. Earthquake and volcanic water appeared to seize them and stop their ears dashing scales only from their eyes. They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued all together, and they knew they would perish if they dreamed to turn back (Harris 1960:62).

Conclusion

The great task of teachers and educators as we enter the twenty-first century is to address the radical reconfigurations and rearticulations now taking place in educational and social life brought on by the proliferation of diversity. As Harris suggests, we must find the 'subtle links' of affiliation across the self and other, across our insistent particularity and the imperatives of interdependence and multiplicity that define the modern world.

In the curriculum field in education there has been a dangerous tendency to simplify these matters. For example, current curriculum debates over multicultural education and the Western canon too easily oppose the literature, traditions, and culture associated with the canon to the new literatures of minority and indigenous groups, Western civilization to non-Western cultural practices, and so forth. It is assumed that since the dominant curriculum thrives on the marginalization of the culture of minorities that minority identities can only be fully redeemed by replacing the Western and Eurocentric bias of the curriculum with non-Western minority literature and cultural knowledge. The work of postcolonial writers such as

Wilson Harris directly challenges the easy opposition of the canon to non-Western and third world literature and the curricular project of content addition and replacement that now guides some multicultural frameworks. My point of departure in this essay, follows a theoretical and methodological line of thinking that draws on the historical and genealogical work of Michael Berube 1992, Gerald Graff 1987, and John Guillory 1990 who all in various ways argue for a non-canonical reading of the canon. In a strategy complementary to theirs, I have sought to uncover the deep philosophical preoccupations that animate third world writers like Harris in their encounter with master narratives of the West. There is in fact in the postcolonial literature a vast project of rewriting that is well on the way — a project that I wish to suggest that teachers and students in American schools cannot any longer remain blissfully ignorant of. Such a project of rewriting guides us toward reading literature both intertextually and contextually — reading literature ‘contrapuntally’ as Edward Said 1993 suggests. That is to say, we might now read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* by the light of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* through the eyes of J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* or Derek Walcott’s *Pantomime*; William Shakespeare’s *Tempest* under the microscope of George Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile*; Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in concert with Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*; and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* within the knowing gaze of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

What I am pointing toward is the need for educators to begin to let the sensibility of a complex, interdependent world into the lives of students. To challenge the tragic images of mainstream television and textbooks and to expand our own sensibilities in America by embracing the world. Postcolonial literature, it seems to me, works through a different set of propositions about human actors than the ones that seem to have taken hold in education lately: the origins claims, the centric claims, the West versus the rest, and so forth. These are all tired binarisms that have led to the regimentation of identities — each man turning the key on his own door. The great challenge of our time is to think beyond the paradox of identity and the other. This is a challenge to rejuvenate linkages of being and association among all peoples in these new times. It is also a challenge to follow the lost steps set in the cross-currents of history by those dwelling in the light of the *Cauda Pavonis* or the palace of the peacock — the final rendezvous with difference beyond the psychic interior of our human forests.

I believe books like Harris’ *The Palace of the Peacock* open up this new terrain in which we find ourselves confronting the other in us. What postcolonial literature such as *The Palace of the Peacock* point us toward is the need to rethink our approaches to issues of culture and identity in the curriculum field. Such a new approach to curricular knowledge must begin with rejecting the simplistic economy of the canon versus the Third World opposition which now dominates the debate over the issues of diversity and education reform. A new critical approach to curriculum must involve rethinking the linkages of knowledge, culture, and association among all people. It means thinking relationally and

contextually. It means bringing back into the educational discourse all the tensions and contradictions that we tend to suspend and suppress as we process experience and history into curricular knowledge. It means abandoning the auratic status of concepts such as 'culture' and 'identity' for a recognition of the vital cultural porosity that exists between and among human groups in the modern world. It means foregrounding the intellectual autonomy of students and teachers by incorporating an open mindedness and a sense of inquiry that comes from letting traditions debate with each other. In this way, we leave ourselves as open to suggestion and transformative change as the characters in Harris' *Palace* ...

NOTE

¹ It might be helpful for the reader to take a look at some of the following articles and books in which these concepts of subaltern communities are discussed. Donna Haraway 1990 discusses the concept of 'cyborg' (or the subaltern, feminist actor who attempts to build communities of resistance across 'contradictory worlds' of interests, needs, and desires). Gloria Anzaldua 1987 talks about the people who exist between the colonizer and the colonized — people, who inhabit the 'third space' or, in her language, 'inhabit both realities' of a colonizing United States and a colonized Mexico (1987:37). Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 1970 people of 'El Macondo' have to negotiate the ruptures generated in the transition from their peasant world to a highly industrialized and modernized context. And, finally, Wilson Harris's 'Mariella' is both a site of colonial domination and the site of the new identities of the emergent peoples of Guyana and the Caribbean. Mariella is the colonial/postcolonial outpost that is at the center of the narrative of *The Palace of the Peacock* 1976.

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