

ABSTRACT

POWELL, ETHEL ANNE. Ghosts of Chances for Redemption via Abjection in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* and Others. (Under the direction of Deborah Wyrick.)

This thesis explores, in three works of literature, possibilities for redemption via abjection. Julia Kristeva's semanalysis is the primary theoretical tool with which Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) is examined as a nascent work in Caribbean literature. Next, and central to this thesis, the Guyanese Wilson Harris's *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960) is discussed within Kristevan context and within Caribbeanist literary critical context. Mariella, a central and fluid character in *Palace*, acts as a semiotic agent of destruction and of abjectly sublime redemption for Donne and his crew of river boatmen in pursuit of Other ethnically mixed peoples in Guyana's interior. Donne's moment of epiphany, wherein he comes to understand how inhumanely he has treated Others, is followed by his "second" death and rebirth in a celestial palace (along with the rest of the crew), marking his and their transformation from abject slavers to abjectly sublime and redeemed beings. The semiotic linguistic characteristics of *Palace* are investigated: while written in the style of Magical Realism, *Palace* contains lexical and dialectal features stemming from African and Amerindian influences. Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" (1965) is the final work examined. Via legacies of plantation slavery and ensuing discrimination against freed African-Americans, many works of Southern U.S. literature contain qualities of postcolonial literatures, particularly the element of abject Otherness. In "Revelation" Mrs. Ruby Turpin's ideas about abject Others are transformed, as she is transformed from an abject avatar of white Southern racism and classism, into an abjectly sublime person who receives a "revelation" of her wrongs righted in a celestial march of *all* human beings. Her "revelation"

is markedly similar to Donne's in *Palace*, both in what she sees and in the language employed to describe what is revealed to her. In *Palace* and in "Revelation," characters are redeemed *by* their limitations, *by* recognition of their abjections, and thus *from* these abject restrictions. Although Behn's narrator aborts her encounter with an Other, she comes very close to actualizing abject sublimity as is evinced in a fractured and digressive narrative, indicative of the narrator's conflicted psyche. At least she is conflicted about New World colonial enterprises and their institutions of brutal enslavement. Rather than abjure abject Otherness, perhaps readers—students of life and of literature—would embrace abjection, the eschewed Otherness within, as a critical agent for and means to the sublime.

**GHOSTS OF CHANCES FOR REDEMPTION VIA ABJECTION
IN WILSON HARRIS'S *PALACE OF THE PEACOCK* AND OTHERS**

by
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Chair of the Advisory Committee

DEDICATION

**This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to James Ray Brown, Sr.
July 27, 1936--January 18, 2005
He loved music; he was an artist. He would have loved Wilson Harris.**

Ooh, ooh now baby, tell me how have you been?
We all have missed you, and the way you grin.
The day is necessary, every now and then,
For souls to move on, givin' life back again and again.
Fly on, fly on, fly on my friend.
Go on, live again, love again.

Life without you, all the love you passed my way.
The angels have waited for you so long, now they have their way.
Take your place.
--Stevie Ray

BIOGRAPHY

E. Ann Powell, a North Carolina Emerging Artist Grantee in music, a Regional Artist Grantee in Music, an Inductee into the Carolina Archives of Music, will continue her educational pursuits at North Carolina States University in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program with a concentration in Postcolonial Studies. She will be applying for doctoral admission in order to continue work in Postcolonial Literature and Cultural Theory. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at the University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2000, with majors in English, Spanish, and Creative Writing. She has studied and worked at the University of Valencia, Spain and in the Dominican Republic. She holds another undergraduate degree in Addictions Counseling. Her maternal grandmother is Ethel Mae Brown of Morganton, North Carolina. Her parents are Lloyd C. and Joan E. Brown Powell of Drexel, North Carolina. She is the oldest of four children. Her younger brothers are Jeffrey C. Powell, Douglas C. Powell, and Michael R. Powell. She has too many nephews (to list in this space) and one niece. Full-length CD compilations of her musical work are available by writing: PO Box 275, Drexel, NC 28619.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Pages
Introduction.....	1
Chapter I. Dismembering Narrative in Limbo Land: Desire and Anxiety in Encounters of an Other Kind in Aphra Behn's <i>Oroonoko</i>	18
Chapter II. Wilson Harris's <i>The Palace of the Peacock</i>: Ghosts of Chances for Redemption in Abject Sublimity	
(a) Harris in Caribbean and Critical Context	32
(b) Mariella's Fluid Ghosts of Chances—The Abject, Redemptive Conduit	39
(c) He's Come Undonne	47
(d) Falling into Infinity	58
(e) On the Margins of Semiotic Language	67
(f) <i>Palace</i> and its Others in <i>The Guyana Quartet</i>	74
Chapter III. Infinite Closure: Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and the Abject Sublime	80
Concluding Discussion	87
Notes	89
Bibliography	91

Ghosts of Chances for Redemption via Abjection in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* and Others

Introduction

“The storm that brings harm also makes fertile.”—Patti Smith from *Easter*

This thesis explores, via three literary works, redemptive possibilities for the Self through encounters with abject Otherness that exist inside and outside the Self. Wilson Harris's novel, *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960), is the primary text with which I engage in order to demonstrate abjection's “power of horror” and abjection's power to heal. In a discussion of Harris's text I employ Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic and linguistic theories that deal with abjection's potential to transform the abject into the abject sublime. Viewing *Palace* through the lens of Kristeva's semanalysis reveals a strikingly complementary and useful relationship between Harrisian text and Kristevan theory. While Kristevan theory elucidates Harris's text, Harris's text supports and intersects with Kristeva's theory. Harris and Kristeva are interconnected by their theories of phenomenology, psychic spaces, and textual discourse, in which abjection, in its various disguises, is welcomed as a space of motility wherein *fertile repetitions* engender *redemptive process*. I precede this discussion with an analysis of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), the first “New World” novel, which is set in a contiguous geographical space of Surinam with Harris's *Palace*, situated in Guyana. I conclude this thesis with an application of Kristevan theory to Flannery O'Connor's short story “Revelation” (1965), set in the Southern United States, in a psychic space ruptured by the abject Otherness of white self-ignorance evinced in racism, classism, and an obsessive

anxiety about the contingency of one's place in heaven dependent upon one's social status on earth. These abject obsessions are remainders of the United States' participation in colonization with its horrific effects on African slaves. *Palace* and "Revelation" more closely parallel one another in narrative resolutions wherein abject characters are redeemed by abjection's capacity to remedy error. *Oroonoko* manifests abjection's power to psychically displace and wound Behn's narrator, who comes away from her colonial experience divorced from abjection's redemptive agency.

At this juncture I will offer working definitions of abjection, the semiotic order (including definitions of the semiotic chora), and pre-symbolic thetic phase and rupture¹ to which I often refer in this thesis. The abject, according to Julia Kristeva, is the raw crudity *about* humans, such as amniotic fluid, sperm, feces, urine, uterine fluid, afterbirths, murderous impulses, horrifying thoughts and deeds, the skin of a man stripped from his back while tied to a whipping post, colonial projects wherein native peoples are denied the right to eat, are starved, ridiculed, humiliated, denied the most basic of rights, killed: in short, the abject is what we, as humans are often *about* but are loathe to admit. The abject tends to reside within an imaginary or semiotic order, often associated with the maternal, the unpredictable feminine, because life issues from within a numinous, unimaginable, unthinkable, illogically motile *chora*, or *imaginative, gestative womb*, and then comes forth in a violent action, thrusting a disgusting, unruly blob of "gradou" (a Cajun word that initially meant the stuff one finds in a sofa when taking out cushions; it is now used as more ambiguous and polite substitution for "merde") from a feminine gap or wound into a predictable, linear, concrete, and focused symbolic order. Certainly, without the masculine

gap or wound that generates sperm, this semiotic chora or semiotic order could not exist.

Thus both male and female are agents of semiotic development (*Powers of Horror* 1-11).

Before the semiotic can move into symbolic Selfhood, the evolving human must create a thesis that states its purpose in order to separate and individuate from the semiotic Self-as-M(o)ther, and enact thetic rupture while remaining *within* the semiotically ordered. Thus, the thetic phase and ensuing thetic rupture consists of *semiotic DNA and* allows for the understanding of Self as distinct from Other. *But* because its allegiance is with semiotic *coding*, which includes *rejection* (the being *was* expelled or rejected by the semiotic womb), this burgeoning Self is unlikely to be any more absorbable by the Symbolic Order's Law of the Patristic than it was content to be subsumed within the Semiotic Order's Law of the Matristic (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 66-67). Those who cannot complete this thesis, this statement of Self, along with thetic rupture of the symbolic, live in higher or lower level functioning within narcissistic crisis.

At the lowest level of functioning, some people develop no sense of Self distinguishable from a M(other), Father/Other, or Church, State, School/Other. Either "[t]oo much strictness on the part of the Other" or "the lapse of the Other" (*POH* 15) may initiate narcissistic crisis in which the "I" may not develop. These people can envision no way in which the "I" is discrete from the initial Other as law, or any way through which the "I" is separate from the initial Other as lawlessness. Such people cannot sense or act through a distinct Self apart from the initial Other. Everyone is their mirror. This state of being is natural for a baby. However, as this person goes through developmental cycles, he or she will remain an exile to him or her Self unless he or she is willing to endure thetic phase and thetic

rupture, wherein one strays in order to become a discrete Self. According to Kristeva, “the more he strays, the more he is saved” (*POH* 8).

Kristeva does *not* negate the need for the symbolic, the apparently less abject order. Indeed, we could not utter a coherent sentence or write a coherent sentence without the incorporation and utility of that order. However, to privilege the sterile, factual, and linearly driven symbolic order over the fertile, imaginative, and erratically driven semiotic order is to marginalize fecund possibilities, such as thetic phase and rupture, that may allow one to enter into the symbolic order as a healthier person, a more confident person, and thus a person more open to an interconnectedness to which sheer linear law may be blind. Indeed, the semiotic may be rendered more manageable and the symbolic more perspicacious when the mobile semiotic ruptures the symbolic, painting the symbolic with an imaginary capacity and returning to its semiotic position effected by the linearity and conscientiousness of the symbolic order (*RPL* 130-152).

While Harris obviously works within the symbolic order—he writes—he allows the rebellious semiotic to enter and disturb his symbolically ordered realm of perceived reality. Rather than denying phenomenological contradictions, Harris insists that we must *see* beyond contemporary societies’ contradictions in order to envision ways in which such contradictions make our societies “fertile, how time can be transformed from a prison into a womb of creative change” (Adler 55). According to Kristeva, in order for us to avoid the “embarrassment” of applying “necrophilic methods” to “contemporary phenomena” which isolate experience, we must “decenter the closed set and elaborate the dialectic of a process within plural and heterogeneous universes” (*RPL* 13-14). Harris might substitute “realities” for Kristeva’s “universes.” Both writers are interested in disturbing phenomenological

restrictions that prevent us from experiencing, from *seeing*, what already is: the possibility of infinite perception is situated within contradictions and plural realities.

In contrast to Harris's and Kristeva's elevated attention to abjection and plural realities, contemporary society tends to abjure, isolate, and subordinate the abject, the paradoxical, and the seemingly incongruous within psychic experience. Harris is committed to breaching tautologies that limit our psyches in order to "disclose unsuspected inner/outer dimensionalities that one may call 'unfinished genesis of the imagination'" (Kutzinski 17-18). In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva discusses "a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered" in a "time of abjection [that] is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (8-9). Harris and Kristeva welcome the recondite or subconscious properties of abjection into awareness because these properties, if functioning on a conscious level, unhinge partial perception and thereby may redeem us via revelation or imaginative insights into ourselves and others.

For Harris, language should not be "fossilized": a writer should allow language "to bend [. . .], to reshape itself," and the writer will begin "to wrestle with the language in a different kind of way, so that the language secrete[s] into itself metaphoric images to do with architecture, to do with painting, to do with music . . ." (qtd. in Williams and Riach 58). Eschewing realist writing, the Harrisian text appears to have written itself, with the author serving as textual mediator. Kristeva remarks in *Desire in Language* (1980), that for "the so-called 'realist' writer, writing *is* speech as law (with no possible transgression). Writing is revealed for him who thinks of himself as an 'author,' as a function that ossifies, petrifies, and blocks" (58). While the Guyanese Harris and the Bulgarian Kristeva do not share

identical philosophies, the parallels between the two writers' theories relative to phenomena, the psyche, and literary discourse are striking.

I believe that Harris's and Kristeva's complementary philosophies are highly ethical and useful tools for the global student. Both Harris and Kristeva present exemplars of realistic and propitious gnosis that may evolve into healthy praxis for the people of a modern world who tend to believe that all "things fall apart," period. The end. What if all "things fall apart" in order to reinscribe, to reconfigure the thing fallen and fragmented? What if apathy falls apart in order for compassion to effect empathic action? What if the center is grown more malevolent and continues to establish itself as center only by the negation, abjection, marginalization, torture, and destruction of the Other against which it defines itself as superior? Then, the center cannot and should not hold, because the center has depended upon the Other for its identity, while it has simultaneously annihilated the Other.

The modern world is welcome to continue its comfortable rejection of life-affirming thought and behavior in favor of the contact module's—any media device's—tired announcement, the twenty-four-hour-news god's sensationalization of nihilism that reiterates a confirmation of the futility of existence (while simultaneously projecting false optimism about the same existence.) Harris, Kristeva, and those of us who will, revive the adamancy issued from Stockholm in 1950: we embrace Faulkner's challenge and "decline to accept the end of man" (Faulkner 4). While Harris declines to accept a beginning or end of humankind, insisting that we "infinitely rehearse" traumatic reenactments in order to redeem ourselves from destructive imitations of "the horror," Kristeva insists that the semiotic chora disrupts the symbolic order's hubristic certainty of finitude that declares that a human text or literary text must be bound and hermetically sealed in an eternal moment of static refuge.

Relative to Postcolonial discourse, although entire civilizations may be subjugated to colonial rule, and while it would *appear* that the colonizer or neo-colonizer eradicates and supplants any semblance of culture or mythos of conquered and traumatized peoples, both Harris and Kristeva believe that narrative articulations of traumatic pasts permit individual and collective renewals whereby perceptions of traumatic events may be reframed. Harris and Kristeva embrace the abject Otherness of both colonizer and colonized. The colonizer (or neo-colonizer) is not simply an unscathed victimizer who situates the colonized (or neo-colonized) in a perpetual cycle of victimized/victimizer. The symbolically ordered evening news-gods would have us believe that this is the alpha and omega of human existence: someone removed from an Other's immediately experienced violence is desensitized and yawns at nonsensical brutality. Then, there is the child of that Other, born fist-first, beyond that unaffected yawn and in the midst of that brutality. The cycle of harm and revenge renews. Politicians and, quite often, academics celebrate the somnambulist, indifferent to the human road-kill which he or she tramples to death and then stumbles upon, and/or the avenging human survivor as avid necrophiliac. Harris and Kristeva decline to accept this finite *celebration* of humankind, the abject "end of man."

Harris and Kristeva invest the abject with therapeutic and healing powers within abjection's *process*. If the abject Other is a fractured remainder derived from colonialism's (or neo-colonialism's) splitting, gashing *process*, is a hybrid Otherness not also capable of mending wounds created when worlds, cultures, and realities are divided into Other worlds, cultures, and realities? Literary texts and critical analyses involved with cross-cultural germination, conception, gestation, decomposition, and recomposition in hybridity as hopeful *process* offer realistic possibilities for amalgamated gestalts birthed beyond reductive

historical determinism and its nihilistic double, an impasse impacted in victimization and revenge.

Thus far, I have attempted to set out, in general terms, the complementarities between Harris and Kristeva. I have also suggested why I am attracted to this project: it allows the forging of a highly ethical manner of reading, writing, analysis, and—indeed—of living. The remainder of this introduction will profile the major components of this thesis.

A critical discussion of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* antecedes a Kristevan semanalysis of *Palace*. An examination of Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" follows in order to create a bridge that crosses time/space and links Colonial literature to Postcolonial literature. The condition sustained in all three works is anxiety about abject Otherness acting upon narrated Selves or characters. *Oroonoko* is set in Surinam, which borders Guyana and shares its riverine landscape. *Oroonoko* exhibits an unusual narrative structure marked by slippage, nascent cross-cultural discourse, and frustrated panic about the margins separating Self from Other. Behn's novel offers an inchoate literary prototype of the semiotic chora, of the Self negotiating Self through the Other, as evinced in *Palace* and "Revelation." In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Kristeva writes that we can embrace the Other, or the stranger *outside* of us, when we recognize that the Other is first *inside* of us. The Other is not

the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. (1)

This recognition of Other in Self is the logical conclusion of Kristeva's work in abjection as put forth in *Powers of Horror*. While Aphra Behn could be (and has been) brought to task for creating her colonizing subject and thus privileged narrator in *Oroonoko*, her digressive, slipping, indeed, *traumatized* narration attests to her narrator's recognition of herself *among* abject Other(s) in Surinam. For this courageous Self-positing, Behn's narrator earns my respect. She is touched, amazed, and shocked by her non-resistance to an Other's experience in a colonial project to the extent that she cannot convey the story of Oroonoko or of Amerindians in a linear fashion. Her digressions and pronominal confusion prove that she cannot resist the intrusion of abject alterities or eruptions of the semiotic into her symbolically ordered English reality. While Behn's narrator ultimately rushes back to her safe, symbolically ordered and privileged position as an English colonizing subject, she at least allows her reality to be disturbed by the semiotic Other, thus demonstrating her tolerance for this order of foreign, abject Otherness. Historically, a total denial of any admirable and acceptable quality in the Other has created the world's darkest and most devilish moments.

Recently, Harris was awarded an honorary doctorate from The University of Macerata, which is located on the eastern coast of Italy, twenty-five miles from an Adriatic Sea that also borders Croatia and Bosnia. In his acceptance address to that university, in 2004, Harris asserts that

. . . a profound cross-culturality [. . .] comes to play in the narratives I employ.

Such cross-culturality is unfamiliar to some readers. Why is this? Is it that they are traumatically convinced that cross-culturality—in its engagement with other cultures, ancient and modern—is foreign to them? Such

foreignness to others (such a resistance to alterities) is understandable, I think, when one scans tradition closely. But the consequences—the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, institutional racism, the gross and terrible exploration of native and aboriginal peoples—are so marked, so hideous that I find myself wondering how they could be so totally dissociated from the ritual habits that inform our sensation of fixtures of tradition. (4)

Harris espouses amazement that European colonial experiments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced exclusivity and exhibited an absence of the conquered Other in the “all-white novel” with its “all-white characterization . . . which excluded, or placed on the margins, those who differed in pigmentation or in otherness of insight” (5). While Aphra Behn does ultimately marginalize her Other characters, it is astounding that for a good portion of the text, she aligns her narrator as a marginalized Other, a woman, with African slaves, Oroonoko and Imoinda, as well as with native peoples. The narrator is an authority without political agency. Nevertheless, she posits her colonized, objectified self and the marginalized Other as central to the novel’s discourse. Although Behn’s narrator backs away from the openings she fashions, she cannot completely close the gap that leaves the narrator’s colonizing Self ajar to influence by the colonized Other. Therefore, *Oroonoko* is a nascent work in cross-cultural Caribbean and global discourse.

The Palace of the Peacock is Harris’s first installment of *The Guyana Quartet* (1985). Although the body of this novel is *about* a group of *dead* men, a crew of ghosts, boating up a river, *Palace* presents a vision of hope for the *living*—for formerly colonized and developing or “third world” peoples.

The optimistic vision that *Palace* imparts is not without conditions. This possible “ghost of a chance” (*Palace* 23) of redemption from cyclic victimization and victimizing is contingent upon an individual and/or collective willingness on the parts of injured (formerly colonized) peoples to abjure realities fixed in victimization and the interactive behaviors that tend to ensue from a psychical space inhabited by resentment for the wrongs done to one person or to twenty, to a culture, a region, a nation, or to entire civilizations. While often a Herculean task, the recognition of one’s contribution to a continuing colonial experience is paramount to one’s redemption from the horror and abjection that one experienced as the colonized: by reliving the terror of the colonized experience and by reenacting the cruel abjection of that experience upon an Other, and especially an Other of the developing or “third world,” one becomes a colonized colonizer, a victimized victimizer. One becomes a perpetrator of violence. One becomes abject, cast out and away from intrapersonal resources requisite to compassionate interaction with one’s fellow human beings. The epistemology and behaviors of unhealed, untreated aggrievedness evince a repetition compulsion in abjection in order to gain mastery over master hurts or abject injuries. *Palace* takes the reader on a journey of such a repetition compulsion. The redeeming power of abjection or horror, as Julia Kristeva’s semanalysis reveals in *Powers of Horror*, resides in abjection’s regenerative and gestative capacity. In short, immersion in abjection’s destructive capacities to wound also yields abjection’s ability to create a fecund space for therapeutic resolution of a repetition compulsion for mastery. Repetitions of abject colonizer behaviors performed by the formerly colonized, and therapeutic revelation and resolution within abjection, are supported by the text of *Palace*.

Although *Palace* shares stylistic and structural features with many postmodern texts, it is *not* a typically postmodern text, because it is vested in cosmic purposefulness. This text mourns post-colonial fragmentation, while it invokes mythical ghosts of pre-colonial spiritualities *along with* the mythic structures of European imperial spiritualities that displace and haunt pre-colonial spiritualities. These pre-colonial spirits, once summoned, taunt, haunt, and dislodge rituals and spiritual beliefs of European Others. Thus, *Palace* reinscribes or reveals an imaginative reality created from hybridized and pluralized cultures that need one another in order to produce a cross-cultural and whole cosmology in the present.

Therefore, I argue that this text's narrative discourse insists upon a polycultural and polyphonic *marginality* reading, as well as a *magically* realistic reading. *Palace* delivers a language that inundates the reader with collapsing binary oppositions and syntactical impurities because well-behaved syntax that obeys symbolic law does not guarantee access to meaning, particularly in cross-cultural narration. In cross-cultural discourse, whose symbolic law is to be obeyed? The law of pre-colonial symbolic syntax, discourse, and text; colonial symbolic syntax, discourse, and text; or post-colonial symbolic syntax, discourse, and text? A slippery work, *Palace*, engages with pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial syntactical discursive *textualities*. *Palace* wants to slide into new significance. It stimulates the reader to reframe schematics such as third world/first world, colonized/colonizer, victim/victimizer, dead/alive, along with Arawak/Portuguese, sky/earth, sight/blindness, and falling/motionless. The apotheosis of tautology might involve an application of Derridean deconstruction to *Palace* because Harris's work self-deconstructs: *Palace*'s discourse is linked, collapsed, jettisoned, and reconfigured in a womb (or semiotic chora) that births a hybrid phenomenological and literary creation.

In *Powers*, Kristeva argues that the semiotic chora is the proper *mobile* dwelling of the abject, the transferring space where *margins* of self and other are breached and birthed. A fecund, frightening passage, a rebirth canal in “the straits of memory” (*Palace* 62) delivers Harris’s ghost characters to redemption. In *Desire in Language*, Kristeva describes her theories of narrative semanalysis; abjected, or cast out and away from the symbolic order’s ambit, and into the semiotic realm, the natal and prenatal *process*

bounces back to me echoes of a territory I have lost but that I am seeking within the blackness of dreams” in the “territory of the mother” where “I listen to the black, heterogeneous territory of the body/text; of the other who thought she was I, of me who thought I was the other, of me, you, us . . . (163).

These memorial processes parallel Harris’s mingling of mythical icons in a reality that recognizes a hybridized vision of colonizer/colonized and dead/living birthed into a third state, into a *beyond*. This *beyond reality* is imagined from memories of Carib Indian bone-flutes, from the limbo/limb of multiple consciousnesses wherein African spider/trickster gods are recreated within mythic memory of Quetzalcoatl welcomed into a palatial memory of the peacock. The peacock is perhaps the most ubiquitous of all mythological icons, occurring in Islamic, Greek, Hindu, Sufi, Roman, and Christian traditions. Spiritual syncreticism is the healing reality that *Palace* seeks to transmit through Harris’s marginally and magically realistic literary content and style.

Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Revelation,” republished in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), is situated in the Southern United States. According to my logic, the work is Postcolonial. African slaves were colonized in an Old Southern United States.

African *American* free people labored to exercise that freedom within a New Southern United States, or a Postcolonial United States. In this O'Connor short story, a metaphoric New Southern United States, an abject, unfamiliar Other, confronts, is thrown at, and strikes its target in a metaphoric Old Southern United States, or abject Self, that is already in the process of interrogating its own purity. This collision of worlds opens a fresh wound in the mind and heart of the antagonist/protagonist, Mrs. Turpin, wherein consideration of a new paradigm, or revelation, convulses within its own semiotic choral abjection in a reluctant but finally redemptive birthing process.

Relative to the institution of slavery, I deliberately refuse the binarism that would morally privilege a Northern to a Southern United States. *All* states in the United States of America were/are colonizers of African slaves, and of African-American *free* people, just as *all* states in the United States are involved in the complicit maintenance of colonies of Native Americans within the United States today.

I'm not trying to shift United Statesean literature into Postcolonial gear: Sam Durrant has already accomplished that task with his *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison*. (Many other critics have admitted Toni Morrison, in particular, to Postcolonial Studies.) I *am* troubled when any institution is concerned with a political correctness that partially perceives and thereby totalizes the United States and its literature: if the entirety of the United States may be situated only as a colonizer or neo-colonizer, such a positing universalizes at the expense of colonized or neo-colonized peoples *within* this country's governance. Insult is heaped upon injury when marginalized peoples cannot take their place at the table in Postcolonial discussions of colonial suffering and therapeutic possibilities for mending colonial wounds. It

is one abject behavior to participate in African slave trade, to benefit *industrially* from that slave labor, and is quite another, an even *more abject* action to pretend that the enslavement of African Americans was/is an isolated, historically determined moment, lacking any residual remainder or reminder of that moment. Does false humility in partially perceived reality help us to understand, to make amends to, or be able to listen to neo-Jim Crow, *abject* targets? What do we *not* learn from Black Elk, Lady Day, Harlem, Junaluska, Watts, Selma, Spanish Harlem, “enemy combatants,” Guantanamo and/or Puerto Rico, when we do not *engage* with them? I think we miss the opportunity to learn from the experience of the Other: few people in the United States are ineligible to become the marginalized, abject Other. Often, without our awareness and thus without our permission, we are *miseryin’* in smug paucity. Suffering is unavoidable but misery is optional.

Also, perhaps I’m too practical: if the neo-colonizer (the great-great-great-great-grandchild of the colonizer) could not merely become accountable for what he or she does/did, but might search inside him or herself in order to understand what defect within his or her character justifies transgenerational enactments of harm, murder, torture, and marginalization done to Others, then conscience *might* be engaged in the decisions one makes relative to his or her roles played in the destructive or constructive plights of others. At the highest level of ethics, the virtue ethically directed person, the person who enacts the behaviors of accountability without doctrinal guidance and without fear of consequence if he or she does *not* behave compassionately (rather than adhere to guilt-driven or fear-driven ethical behaviors, which are, at worst, self-perpetuating behaviors), will do unto others as he or she would be done unto, even if he or she has never been taught golden *rules*. If guided by a higher ethic, *within*, we would seek to become responsible to others and behave

compassionately for the purpose of our becoming serene or at peace within ourselves as interactive members in a global community. Donne, in *Palace*, and Mrs. Turpin, in O'Connor's "Revelation" (much like Huck in his epiphanic moment), are both guided by such virtue ethics.

At this juncture, I would be thrilled to enact consistently and witness consistent enactments of *any* kind of ethic that refuses to harm an Other, whether for Utilitarian/consequential or deontological (codified) reasons. Therefore, finally, if responsibility, accountability, and humanitarian behavior that yields serenity are too much to expect of neo-colonizers, then *maybe* the neo-colonizer's progeny would renounce his or her entrapment in consequential or Utilitarian ethics: one cannot enslave without becoming enslaved. If doctrinally urged decency and/or a desire for internal peace among the privileged are beyond compassionate conscience, perhaps hubris and consequence for barbarous behavior would stay the *addict*. The etymology of addict can be traced to the Latin, *addīct-us*. It means, "assigned by decree, made over, bound to, devoted" (*OED*): in short, an addict is enslaved. *Maybe*, our internal texts would then be closely read and this text would begin to *bother* our prideful consciousnesses. *Maybe* we would read our rationale as comparable to Jefferson's addled reason in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which grapples with psychic fissure much as Behn's *Oroonoko* does. Albeit less obviously disjointed than Behn's narrator, Jefferson *does* appear to wonder, occasionally, whether he is a colonizing subject or a colonized object. Whoever or whatever one enslaves or colonizes, one is reciprocally enslaved or colonized by. This is one of Wilson Harris's most emphatic points that can be derived from a reading of *Palace*. He does not privilege the colonized as pitiful victims of colonizers because he believes that the colonizer (especially if the colonizer is the formerly

colonized) is “self-righteously deprived” (Williams and Riach 59). The colonizer is enslaved in a *fruitless* repetition compulsion for mastery over some initial hurt or *imagined* hurt, while learning nothing he or she considers beneficial from the people he or she colonizes. *Palace* demonstrates that in *cyclic blindness*, with partial perception, we are potential colonizers *and* colonized: enslaved. However, if we are mediated by conscience to a psychically shifting moment, we may be released in a redemptive process. I thus posit O’Connor’s “Revelation” as a Postcolonial work involved with redemption via abjection, and with a virtue ethic that issues from an internal space *within* Mrs. Turpin’s character. Her shifted morals may move the reader beyond a mandatory ethic of consequence that insists on enslavement by the enslaved, and beyond a deontological ethic that permits class and race discrimination with Biblical justification in *Proverbs* 10: 4 (the diligent, contrasted with the lazy, get rich) or marks of Cain and sons of Ham.

I

Dismembering Narrative in Limbo Land:

Desire and Anxiety in Encounters of an Other Kind in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

“Bodies in the sand/ Tropical drink melting in your hand/ We'll be falling in love/ To the rhythm of a steel drum band/ Down in Kokomo/ Aruba, Jamaica ooo I wanna take you/ To Bermuda, Bahama come on pretty mama”—*Not* Brian Wilson in/on “Kokomo”

Oroonoko is the first novel written in English to be situated within and to discuss a colonial enterprise. Albert Rivero claims that *Oroonoko* could be a “work of mourning” and memorial, attesting to “the passing of [Behn’s] youth and aristocratic ideals” (447). Many critics have noted that Behn suffered a loss in the fall of the Stuart dynasty and have insisted that *Oroonoko* is an elegy to Charles I. *Oroonoko might* certainly be inspired by Behn’s remorseful recollection of Charles’s martyrdom. I choose to open the text in different ways and suggest readings that do more than find analogies to the life and death of a political figure.

However, I would like to discuss briefly why so many critics do attach *Oroonoko* to Behn’s (and much of the world’s) “remorseful recollection” of Charles I’s execution. One of the consequences of his death was the Oliver Cromwell-led interregnum. The interregnum constituted a political time/space that not only opened England to abject wounds but extended the nation and its self-image into abject woundings of other lands and peoples. Cromwell’s “Western Design” propelled the English Navy (or its surrogate pirates) into the Caribbean in a serious way, ratcheting up the English colonial project from haphazard plantations in Barbados, into control of Surinam, of Jamaica, and of other islands in the

Caribbean. Thus, at the time in which *Oroonoko* was set, actual colonial governance—as well a large-scale plantation economy—was new, exciting, and anxiety-producing undertakings. Assuming that Behn actually had traveled to Surinam (or even that her novel was based largely on accounts by first-generation English colonists there), the unsettling mixture of adventure, greed, and danger may account for the rather fractured representation of English colonization in *Oroonoko*, a representation central to my interests here.

Robert Chibka, for instance, is not overly pleased with Behn's narrator's treatment of colonialism in his "Truth, Falsehood, and Fiction in *Oroonoko*." One of Chibka's complaints with Behn's narrator is that "she manipulates pronouns brilliantly in order to place herself half in and half out of the community of Europeans" (227). While Chibka is concerned with *Oroonoko*'s truth-claim relative to fiction, he at least marks an easily detectable component of narrative disorganization. Although Chibka acknowledges *Oroonoko*'s narrative slippages, he prefers a politicized (and a necessary) reading that Behn's narrator cannot argue *against* slavery because she is a colonizing subject, nor *for* it because she is a colonized object. Chibka's assertion that Behn's narrator manipulates *Oroonoko* and the reader is a good point noted, but is there not something else at work in the novel's inconsistencies? I think so, and I also have to admit factors such as Behn's ill-health when she wrote *Oroonoko*. Of course, her failing health in the year before she died may *not* be a dynamic in *Oroonoko*'s weird narration: *The Fair Jilt* was also written and published in 1688. The latter novel does not demonstrate narrative inconsistencies; therefore neither ill-health nor an inability to write well in the new genre, the novel, may convincingly explain *Oroonoko*'s oddities. I think that Behn's narrator panics in proximity to the Otherness she encounters in Surinam.

Behn's narrator is geographically and psychically displaced, presaging Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and Naipaul's Salim in *A Bend in the River*. (Of course, a pioneer work in any fictional endeavor necessarily anticipates its followers.) Behn's displaced narrator creates an imaginary/semiotic order in Surinam, where she becomes the vulnerable, fascinated, compelled, and simultaneously repulsed slave and master to/of abjection within a fictional enterprise that is both autobiographical and biographical or otobiographical. Narrative digressions, gaps, slippages, and pronominal inconsistencies in *Oroonoko* indicate narrative anxiety *and* desire, fascination and repulsion about, for, and with a New World confrontation with abject alterities.

These encounters of an Other kind include the narrator's abject identity as an English colonizing subject (if one concedes the abject barbarity of colonial expeditions), contrasted with the narrator's identity as an abject female colonized object. First, the narrator is Other to her abject Selves. Next, the narrator is Other to abject Amerindians—to their persons, languages, customs, riverine landscapes—and to untamed, abject, West Indian fauna and flora. Finally, the narrator is Other to a prince-become-slave, to her abject Other "Hero," Oroonoko. Thus, the narrator is constantly threatened by abject Otherness. She is decentered upon having been decentered—*dis-membered* in a limbo of Otherness. Thus, the narrator's displaced mental and emotional *dismemberment* reflects a muddled psyche that cannot focus or adhere to narrative linearity.² Behn's *Oroonoko* does not seamlessly seal the abject gaps or wounds inflicted by a colonial enterprise. The abject *form* of Behn's narrative semiotically ruptures the totalizing symbolic order of a colonial enterprise in order to reveal the abjectly brutal *content* of a colonial enterprise. The narrative form strays along with Behn's narrator.

How does *straying* relate to Behn's disorganized narrator? Kristeva writes of the person wandering in abjection: "[T]he more he strays, the more he is saved" (*POH* 8).

Behn's narrator must *stray*, is internally urged to return to the semiotic order (Surinamese landscape, Amerindian and African presences) to complete her thesis. Enactment of thetic rupture would insist that the narrator return to the semiotic (her Self as a colonized object), construct the thesis that distinguishes her Self from the semiotic so that she may initiate entry into the symbolic order (as a colonizing subject Self), pass through that order and finally return to the semiotic, in order to *reenter* the symbolic order in a cycle that includes imagination, logic, and redemption. However, Behn's narrator does *not* complete thetic rupture, because she wants to belong to *both Other* worlds *simultaneously*: that of a colonizing subject and that of a colonized object. Ultimately, Behn's narrator runs to the symbolic order for refuge, imitating her initial European phallogentric Other: "This apprehension made all the Females of us fly down the River, to be secur'd [. . .]. We met on the River with Colonel *Martin*, a Man of great Gallantry, Wit, and Goodness" (Behn 92). Yet, she cannot fully enter the symbolic because her Self is shattered by both semiotic and symbolic orders that she has neither fully left nor remained within. Behn's narration is fantastic, imaginative, but not logical or redemptive. *Oroonoko* does *not* exemplify redemptive abject sublimity: Behn's narrator remains traumatized because she wants to live with one piece of her Self in a semiotic world (for the purpose of the lawless excitement she extracts from that order) that is *not hers* and with another piece of her Self in a symbolic world (for the purpose of *lawful* security and privilege that she maintains within that order) that she has rejected.

While abject sublimity is hardly present in the narrated *content* of *Oroonoko*, wherein a postlapsarian world is further felled, or chopped down (literally for Oroonoko), perhaps the desire for abject sublimity is represented in a scattered, *straying*, narrative *form*. Who (but talking heads in the evening news, a smug fascist or sensate anarchist) could tell a story of horrific cruelty in a linear and precisely sterile narrative structure? Often, in art, in literature, a narrating conscience emerges that cannot reconcile that which one would be apart *from* but is incidentally a party *to*. The quasi-ethical narrator, having witnessed inhumane barbarity, *might* not insist upon wearing her civility cloak, *might* not bind the text with linearly concise queries and precise ripostes. Thus, Behn's narrator evinces a desire for the abject sublime in peripatetic narrative structure. Although this text may not attempt to redeem colonial brutality, its scattered narrative structure provides evidence that the narrator's sense of the humane is split by the appallingly sadistic behavior of her fellow colonizers.

Consequently, Behn's narrator is conflicted among her Selves. On the one hand, she is a colonizing subject. She is a party to and reaps the reward of excitement in a colonial experience because she is English (and, apparently, wealthy and politically connected). These rewards come to the narrator through the institution of slavery, through conquered and enslaved peoples. Marginalized, humiliated, degraded people pick up the check for the colonizers' feast. On the other hand, the narrator is a woman, a colonized object, and as such, is Other to English colonizers, just as Surinamese Amerindians and African slaves are Other to her as a colonizing subject.

Behn's narrator see-saws as load and force on either side of a fulcrum that divides the narrator as subject and object. Hence, Behn's narrator is pronominally conflicted. When

Behn's narrator wants to distance herself from her barbaric compatriots, she employs "they" but, so as not to indict *them* (as she is one of *them*), she must also use "we" in the same sentence with "they." Although "we" is used as psychosocial support for a morally superior distance from "them," the reader may never discover who "we" really are, other than an undetermined group of women, otherwise not discussed in the text. When the narrator wants to assert authority over the text and to juxtapose herself *with* Oroonoko, she employs, "I." After Oroonoko is savagely beaten by the colonizers, for example, Behn's narrator writes, "and while *we* were away, *they* acted this Cruelty: For *I* suppose *I* had Authority and Interest enough there, had *I* suspected any such thing, to have prevented it" (Behn 92 italics mine). After Oroonoko kills Imoinda and then disembowels himself, prior to the final gruesome dismemberment scene, the narrator writes:

We were all (but *Caesar*) afflicted at this News, and the Sight was ghastly; his Discourse was sad; and the earthly Smell about him so strong, that *I* was perswaded to leave the Place for some time (being my self but Sickly, and very apt to fall into Fits of dangerous Illness upon any extraordinary Melancholy); the Servants . . . , promis'd all to take what possible care *they* cou'd of the Life of *Caesar*; and *I*, taking boat, went with other Company to Colonel Martin's, about three Days Journy down the River; but *I* was no sooner gone than . . . (98-99 italics mine)

they hacked Oroonoko/Caesar into pieces. Maybe the narrator is confused about pronoun use because she forgets *who* she is *supposed* to be, what status and decorum she *should* but *cannot* socially maintain *because* of *where* she is, geographically: she is in psychical

relationship with a diversity of peoples, customs, cultures, and landscapes that mirror her abjection as a colonized object.

Therefore, could there be several *texts* at work in *Oroonoko* involving the relationship between *autobiography* and *biography*, between the Euro-identified Self of the narrator in relationship to the Other(s)— abject Amerindians *and* the narrator’s abject proximity—her too-close, carnivalesque relationship to Oroonoko? Is the “rub” literally, the rub? Such frottage with *savages* and *heroic savages* would be prohibited if not for the possibilities of social violation within a colony in Surinam.

Carnavalesque narrative structure, as a negotiation between semiotic and symbolic orders wherein an imaginary, semiotic order will not be subordinated to a law of the bounded symbolic order, “exists,” as Julia Kristeva writes in *Desire in Language*, “only in or through relationship . . .” where “two texts meet, contradict, and relativize each other. A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and object of the game” (78). Behn’s narrator writes, “I was myself an Eye-Witness to a great part, of what you will find here set down; and what I cou’d not be Witness of, I receiv’d from the Mouth of the chief Actor in the History, the Hero himself . . .”(Behn 37). Immediately, the boundless stage of carnivalesque, semiotic tradition is set. We may henceforth anticipate an antirational exploration of the text as a licensed exploration of the abject body in “relationship” with Other abject bodies, as a dreamscape language pregnant with space, gaps, slippages, imaginative contrasts, and digressions in narrative—in short, an ambiguous, polyphonic novel. Why?

When Behn's narrator is writing in apparently autobiographical mode, she is also in self-reliant, unOther/untouched autoeroticism. She is a differentiated Self, a colonizing subject. However, the premise of *Oroonoko* as a novel is that it is a *biography* of Oroonoko as told to the narrator. The narrator ear-witnesses Oroonoko's speech in order to tell his story, while the narrator eye-witnesses Oroonoko's body or text, in order to speak the truth of Oroonoko's story. Both ear-and-eye witnessing dislodge the narrator from the autoerotic practice of writing in autobiography. As *Oroonoko* becomes Oroonoko's story, along with the narrator's story, the narrator becomes Object or Other to Oroonoko's Subject or Self. Not only does the narrator engage in onanism but frottage. For a white, English woman, this contact would be taboo; however, the narrator is in Surinam, in a boundless tropical stage of carnivalesque Otherness.

Behn's narrator *touches* the natives, *brushes* against them, as practice for her brush with the more forbidden Oroonoko. As the narrator is about to tell the reader how Oroonoko and other slaves are transported across the Middle Passage, she anxiously digresses: "But before I give you the Story of this Gallant Slave, 'tis fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new *Colonies*" (38). The reader might anticipate a rational narrative progression wherein "the manner of bringing them" is delivered. However, the reader is confronted with narrative abortion, digression. Instead, the reader is told about the colonizers' trade with Amerindians in "Marmosets . . . with Face and Hands like an Humane Creature"(38). Interestingly, the narrative's linear discussion of trade in human beings is interrupted by a discussion of trade in *animals* that *look like* "human creatures." The narrator hesitates in order to delay her encounter with Oroonoko. Why? One reason might be that she would postpone treating the reality of semiotic abjection inherent within human slavery. As

Chibka insists, the narrator wants to distance herself from her Self as a colonizing subject.

Another reason for this digression might be that she hesitates to brush or rub against the primary Other, her “*Hero*.” The deferral of his abject means of slave transport serves not only political but personal purposes for the narrator. A part of her wants to remain born of the fatherland, an Englishwoman, and a colonizing subject, a Self. Another part of her is curious about Oroonoko because he represents birthing within the law of an even more distant and semiotic order. He is a colonized object, an Other, as a part of the narrator’s Self is Other, as woman. In essence, she fears and desires doubling or coupling with Oroonoko’s semiotic power. She is anxious about speaking, about encounter with him, the Other who might become a Self that reduces her to complete Otherness. She is perhaps afraid and yet hopes that Oroonoko’s semiotic world will cut into her own and *decide*³ her world, forcing her to be one or the other: colonizing subject or colonized object.

While digressions indicate both a fear of and a desire for being cut into or away from the whole of a symbolic order, that which substitutes digression for logical narrative progression also combines binary oppositions, even as the narrator would separate and totalize the parts in symbolic order. She can’t: the “Marmoset” has human features (38). The narrator can’t deprive the Amerindians of Surinam of their beauty, although she makes an illogical attempt to do so in order to protect her Self from the truth of her social violation. The narrator sensuously eye-touches and writes that their skin would be beautiful if not for its “Colour.” The narrator describes this *skin* as “reddish yellow . . . after a new Oiling . . . the colour of new Brick but smooth, soft, and sleek” (39). The narrator has evidently *touched* the “soft” skin of these would-be beautiful, “smooth” “reddish” natives. Moreover, the narrator’s “decency” may be questioned in the following: “They are extream modest and

bashful, very shy, and nice of being touch'd. And though they are all thus naked, if one lives forever among 'em, there is not to be seen an *indecent* Action, or Glance" (39 italics mine). Apparently, the European narrator's encounter with the exotic semiotic makes her want to *touch* and take liberties with the *natives* via glances. How can she know they issue no indecent glance unless she gazes upon them? Little wonder the narrator postpones Oroonoko's arrival: she's already waist deep in abjection, taboo touching, and enjoying it. She's in a Surinamese semiotic magical kingdom.

The semiotic orders of landscape, of wild creatures—the following (possibly salaciously intended) description is written within the same digression that began with the aperitif drop that insisted it would flow into “the manner of bringing them” and did not—the grotesque and the sublime (indicators of carnival), merge in the untamed, “Natural” space of Surinam and may well be a lascivious play on words: “For Skins of prodigious Snakes, of which there are some threescore yards in length . . .” (38). If any other woman writing at or near this time—if Cavendish had made such an observation in *The Blazing World* (1666)—if any woman other than Aphra Behn had written this line, made this observation of snakes sixty yards long, I might not be alarmed. But this *is* Aphra Behn, noted for her ability with sexual punning. If read aloud, “For Skins” sounds like foreskins. At the very least, sixty-yard-long snake skins and big fluttering “Flies” “presented to ‘em,” reaffirm the notion of the sensate, of the narrator's touch, of her rub against an Otherness in a landscape's *content* inclusive of Amerindians, while the narrator prepares for the added *content* of Oroonoko's presence.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that writing might be a supplement to speech but if it is, it is a “supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech

already significant” (281). Derrida comments upon Rousseau’s *Confessions*, wherein Rousseau laments that he masturbates too much. However, Derrida mitigates Rousseau’s obsession with his obsession by insisting that “it has never been possible to desire the presence ‘in person,’ before this play of substitution and the symbolic experience of auto-affection” (154). I amend Derrida’s substitutive order: all supplements supplement an already signified supplement, therefore I suggest that writing (along with or rather than speaking), is auto-affective but seeks the presence “in person” of a speaking person in order to become oto-affective. In *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida insists that autobiography and biography (or otobiography) rely upon one another: biography is always Other-driven. It is otobiography and is thus dependent upon the ear of the Other (51) and vice versa. Hence, as the narrator writes Oroonoko’s biography or otobiography, the narrator’s autobiography is written by the biographer, Oroonoko,

The narrator must rely on her physical brush with Oroonoko in order to relate his story. The narrator also realizes (nearly too late) that this encounter is publicly tribadistic, as Oroonoko becomes anOther in *discourse*. Oroonoko, and the landscape of the exotic/erotic text, speak the narrator into being, while she perilously assumes varieties of positions as Other/Object/ Self/Master/Slave/Mutant. The narrator must attend to the hand of her written creativity and she must submit her ear to the nascent cries of her speaking creation:

Oroonoko, the Other, is a memento of the narrator’s self. This hybrid narrating Self occupies, and frenzies the narrator’s capacity with principled linear text. Thus, the narration pitches to and fro, because while the narrator’s autobiographical writing might be autoerotic and safe, Oroonoko’s biography, an otobiographic or ear biography, echo biography, involves the narrator’s encounter with an Other’s spoken word in a speaking land, ear-and-eye witnessed,

too well-received and ancillary to the extent of usurpation of the self-reliant narrator within her *lack* in autoerotic writing.

The narrator, and Other women, have “the Liberty of Speech” with Oroonoko/Caesar but the narrator is, in particular, called “*Great Mistress*” (Behn 74) by Oroonoko.

Oroonoko’s doubt regarding his captors’ intentions speaks fear (and desire) of the narrator into her: “He besought me to suffer no Fears upon his Account, for he cou’d do nothing that *Honour* shou’d not dictate” (75 italics mine). While this phrase is perhaps intended to mean, “Ok, fear not, upon my honor, I won’t kill you,” it could also imply a reversal of the Petrarchan conceit of “Great Mistress” there in the wilds of Surinam, with smooth-skinned naked Indians running about. In short, if Oroonoko is telling the narrator that he will not satisfy *her* animal lusts because of *his* “honour,” then his “Great Mistress’s” desire *might* be satiated upon *her* command to forgo *her* honor. The narrator might be called upon by Oroonoko to choose to either live within her symbolic, safe world as a colonizing subject *or* to live within her treacherously interesting world of which she is already a part, as a woman, as a colonized object in semiotic Otherness.

Oroonoko’s statement regarding “Honour” terrifies the narrator. She freezes. Immediately there is enough talking, speaking for this narrator. Frightened by her own boldness, she fearfully backs away from whom she has become via close speaking with the Other. She sublimates her semiotic lust by putting Oroonoko into “Action and in Arms”: “He had a Spirit all Rough and Fierce, and that cou’d not be tam’d” (75). Thus, perhaps the narrator’s libidinal energy is spent by Oroonoko as he is “Running/ Wrasling/ Hunting/ Chasing/ Killing” (75). However, these activities are not enough for *him* who is “still panting after more renown’d Action” (75). Indeed, the narrator is the one who “pants” for “more.”

She is insatiable. Perhaps the narrator's *dishonorable*, deliciously abject intentions in regard to Oroonoko could be questioned. In Behn's poem, "The Golden Age" (1684), the speaker mourns the passing of an Edenic era in which "Nymphs" and "Maid[s]" could "wanton[ly]," "Innocently play" with "securely dwel[ling] Snakes" (226-27). The speaker's greatest disdain is aimed at "Mankind"['s] "[invad]ing" "Honour." In the poem, the symbolic order's "Honour" is a "rap[ist]" "upon the Virgin Earth." "Honour" is "the Error and the Cheat/Of the Ill-natured busy Great,/Nonsense, invented by the Proud,/Fond Idol of the slavish Crowd" and unknown "in those blessed days" (226-27). "Honour" "damn[s]/A Woman to the Sin of shame; Honour! that rob'st us of our Gust,/Honour! that hindered mankind first . . . Thou Miser Honour" keeps a woman from having or being a "generous" time (Behn 229). Does honor invade the reading sensibilities of modern readers and deny an opening to a sexual reading of the narrator's semiotic urge toward Oroonoko?

Kristeva writes that the underlying unconscious of carnivalesque and abject interaction is "sexuality and death" (*DL* 80). Since Behn's narrator can't write (the symbolic order's law restricts her to "honour") or because she fears that she *can* write (the semiotic order releases her from duty to "honour") a sexual enactment with Oroonoko, then she will write carnivalesque death for him. The narrator's self-loathing and ensuing revenge upon herself for having become vulnerable to her *own* "fierce and rough" passion that cannot be "tamed" in a semiotic order, while she is impotent to act upon that passion within an English symbolic order invading a "Natural" realm in Surinam, is transferred to Oroonoko. The narrator's Self-abjection is formulated in the objective correlative of Oroonoko's death scene to which she is conveniently not a witness. Oroonoko has learned to "take Tobacco" so his executioners give him a pipe to smoke while the executioner

first cut off his Members, and threw them into the Fire; after that, with an ill-favoured Knife, they cut off his Ears, and his Nose, and burn'd them; he still Smoak'd on, as if nothing had touch'd him; then they hacked off one of his Arms, and he still bore up, and held his Pipe; but at the cutting of his other Arm, his Head Sunk, and his Pipe drop'd; and he gave up the Ghost, without a Groan, or a Reproach. (Behn 99)

Oroonoko's murder is explicitly abject. As Kristeva explains, "Menippean experience is not cathartic; it is a festival of cruelty" (*DL* 89). Behn's narrator cruelly but neatly concludes her English and semi-symbolic writing practice, which metonymically could signify lost Stuarts or symbolic Father-Law. However, the narrator returns from her textual voyage, her discursive brush with the Other, having recuperated little in the way of linear law, and not *with* a souvenir of colonial conquest, but *as* one. She is rendered the ghost of her symbolic order's chance.

II

Wilson Harris's *The Palace of the Peacock*:

Ghosts of Chances for Redemption in Abject Sublimity

“We forward in this generation/ Triumphantly./ Won't you help to sing/ These songs of freedom?/ 'Cause all I ever have:/ Redemption songs”—Bob Marley from “Redemption Song”

(a) Harris in Caribbean and Critical Context

“[A] Wound in the past may so overwhelm the Imagination of a culture or a civilization that humanity becomes a pawn or robot extension of the parenting past, a parenting past that has atrophied or become a museum fixture. A void is created between the parenting past and its soulless progeny in the present and the future”—Wilson Harris⁴

The Barbadian George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) is concerned with African West Indian identity, as the “castle” of black skin is the only self-representation his protagonist, “G”, may know or be known by. The St. Lucian-Jamaican-Trinidadian poet and playwright Derek Walcott's speaker in “Codicil” is “Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles,” while Walcott's *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958) recalls African oral traditions and African identity encountered by colonized peoples in the midst of colonial projects that fragment the African Self. V.S. Naipaul's autobiographical, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) engages with a hybrid identity that may never integrate for existential and/or socio-economic betterment: Mr. Biswas is born with six fingers and is thus condemned by fate to downward

mobility. The Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid's bildungsroman, *Annie John* (1985) subverts colonialism and imposed heterosexuality in a quest for identity. I love Caribbean literature. I admire the spirit, however tortured and fragmented, of Caribbean peoples. I've lived, worked, and studied in the Spanish-speaking (or a patois of Spanish) Dominican Republic, where at moments, I thought I would lose my mind while my heart broke, trying to understand how an entire people can survive in unimaginable abjection, in ghettos set away from tourist enclaves where mottled African-German, African-Jamaican-Spanish-Haitian ghetto dwellers sold "authentic" Taino wood carvings! While I speak to psychic disintegration in the "Spanish-speaking" Caribbean, psychic disintegration is also a dominant trope in late twentieth-century Anglophone Caribbean literature. I don't address identity disintegration simply because it makes me uncomfortable; I want any and all people to feel the hopeful possibility that our wounds may be healed.

Wilson Harris's writing punctures the establishment of disintegration in Caribbean literature: the primary themes in his works and especially in *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960), his first novel, is psychic reintegration of submerged memories in the subconscious of Caribbean peoples and the need for rehabilitation of those memories in a cross-cultural imagination that celebrates the redemptive and healing power of the abject mongrel rebirthed beyond his or her wound.

Theodore Wilson Harris (1921—) first published poetry under the pseudonym, Kona Waruk, in *Kyk-over-al*,⁵ a Guyanese literary magazine. Harris chose the nom de plume after, Konawaruk, the name of a mountain range and a tributary of the Essequibo River in east central Guyana, the largest river between the Amazon and the Orinoko (Gilkes 32). (The Orinoko River is a possible source of Behn's title and her hero's name in *Oroonoko*.) Harris

explored the interior of Guyanese rivers in the late 1940s when he was employed as a surveyor for the government. Profoundly inspired by his expeditions in the rain forest, Harris later recalled, he began to formulate a philosophy of discontinuity that reconstitutes identity in an interconnectedness and flow of overlapping time and space. Two specific occurrences in the rain forest propelled him further toward a thetic rupture with sequential thought processes. Once, he observed two deciduous trees on the bank of a river in autumn. One tree was shedding its leaves, while the other tree beside it was budding new, green growth. On another occasion, his surveying crew was boating up a river at a point, where three years before they had been pulling an anchor, had nearly capsized, and had saved themselves only by cutting anchor. Going up the same river, pulling a different anchor in higher waters, they once again hit a shallow. Instead of cutting anchor this time, they pulled the anchor in order to motor to a bank and safety. When they eventually came to the bank, the crew realized that *this* anchor had become stuck on the anchor they had lost three years earlier, which they dragged up with the newer anchor (“An Autobiographical Essay” xviii--xx). As demonstrated in the stories of the trees and of the anchors, Harris pays attention to a *remarkable ordinariness* that brings about psychic shifts in him. Ethnic factors—his mixed Portuguese, Amerindian, and African lineage—have perhaps made Harris susceptible to the numinous. Cultural factors *along with* a cultivated perspicuity have certainly shaped his vision of cosmic unity within the mottled crew the reader encounters in *Palace*.

Harris has published two full-length books of poetry: *Fetish* (1951) and *Eternity to Season* (1954). He has written and published twenty-five novels, from *The Palace of the Peacock* in 1960, to *The Mask of the Beggar* in 2003. In nearly ninety published essays, he discusses his own and other Caribbean and non-Caribbean literature, art, and philosophy. His

full-length books of criticism, containing similar commentary, are *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967), *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* (1970), *Fossil and Psyche* (1974), *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (1983), and *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, in *Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination* (1999). *The Palace of the Peacock* has been translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian.⁶ Joyce Sparer Adler began writing critically about Wilson Harris's work in 1968. Hena Maes-Jelinek began her Harrisian scholarship in 1971, while Michael Gilkes was the next committed Harrisian scholar with his first installment of criticism in 1973. Since then and primarily in the late 1980s, Harris's work has generated a large amount of critical study, primarily from Australia and New Zealand (Maes-Jelinek 249-272).

C.L.R James describes Harris's work as "difficult," "original," and "audacious" (5). Adler writes that the Harrisian text is "reputed to be forbiddingly difficult" and that "the right approach is not the effort" with which the reader enters into a Harris novel, but "rather the most receptiveness, going along with the current of the work . . ." (1). Gilkes, in his introduction to *The Literate Imagination*, continues in this vein, acknowledging that the first reading of a Harrisian novel might be a "baffling" (1) experience:

The importance of [Harris's] work, I believe, lies in its humane, far-sighted concern with the paradox of a bountiful world in crisis because of our insistence on what Blake called "single vision and Newtonian sleep." It is an art of fiction which calls in question accepted social, historical and intellectual conventions to which we cling for safety and comfort, but which leave the world locked in implacable confrontations. (9)

I think that which most “baffles” the modern reader of Harris is not confusion or difficulty but perhaps disdain for Harris’s work because Harris refuses to accept the limited and miserably disintegrated perception of the world that many postmodern writers advance. I think the surge in Harrisian criticism can be attributed to closet optimists who refuse the end of humankind.

Harris does not unconditionally reject *anything*. For instance, in “The Enigma of Values” (1973), he discusses materialism, asking for a “penetra[tion] [of] complex self-deceptions as well as the complex values with which we have invested objects or orders that we have come to take for granted” (142). In short, if one opposes materialism as a concrete and isolated value without considering its latent oppositional content, then a blind Marxist scholar, for instance, locks out and marginalizes materialism, in much the same way that the colonist locks out, and marginalizes the primitive *savage*, the native, the African, or Aboriginal person. Anything in Harris’s world that is removed, and neatly fitted within a closed paradigm, excludes possibilities within and for hermetically sealed and shelved phenomena. Harris favors only possibility and inclusivity. His major complaint against colonists or neo-colonists is that they have failed to learn anything from the people they/we have conquered. We, or they, deprive ourselves of potential personal and collective spiritual augmentation. I am reminded of a phrase often heard in twelve-step programs: “Take what you like that you hear here, and *learn* from the rest.” No experience or idea, however much we oppose it, is without potential value if we delve into it *and* whatever within its content urges our opposition to it. We *may abject, cast out and reject* such a thing after examining it, but Harris is rightly suspicious of knee-jerk abjection. (*That* is what colonialists did to the

people they conquered!) Our immediate disgust might teach us something about our own abject selves, heaven forbid.

On the other/similar hand, Harris *is* perhaps politically uncommitted (to any one or more politics) because he is unwilling to reject categorically all aspects of colonial projects that have harmed indigenous peoples. In *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English* (1990), Harris criticizes Chinua Achebe's "punitive logic" (18) in *Things Fall Apart*; Harris argues that Achebe replicates, inversely, the binarism that drives colonialism and neo-colonialism. In *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1973), Harris criticizes fellow Caribbeanist George Lamming's novel, *Of Age and Innocence*, for its "public voice [. . .] and the compulsions which inform the work [which] appear to spring from a verbal sophistication rather than a visual, *plastic* and conceptual imagery" (37 italics mine). Harris's criticism of Lamming is that Lamming's characters lack a "specific perception of the erosion of involuntary social, cultural and religious codes" (20) that might explore buried but *active* social, cultural, and religious traditions that infect, influence, and contribute to the genesis of tragedy in Lamming's characters. Harris believes that no one is an innocent victim in his or her own tragedy (39). If one is alerted by Harris's use of the word, "plastic," and hears an echo of Blake, Coleridge, early and late British Romantics, one might be on a Harrisian trail of thought as evinced in this early poem, "Charcoal" (1954):

Bold outlines are drawn to encompass
the history of the world: crude but naked emphasis
rests on each figure of the past
wherein the golden sunlight burns raw and unsophisticated.
Fires of brightness are sheltered
to burn the fallen limbs of men: the green
spirit of leaves like smoke
rises to mark the barrow of earth
and dwindles to perfection. The stars

are sparks
 emblems of fire
 to blacken the limbs of each god who falls:
 spendthrift creation. The stable dew-drop is flame.
 The dew burnishes each star in preparation for every deserted
 lane.

Time lies uneasy between the paintless houses
 weather-beaten and dark.
 The Negro once leaned upon his spade
 breathing the smoke of his labour
 the arch of his body banked to shelter or tame
 fury and diamond
 or else like charcoal to grain
 the world. (*Eternity to Season 23*)

“Crude and naked” are markers of a Romantic conceit that insists upon organic supremacy over the synthetic. United with the natural sublime, the decaying human is resurrected in a fiery imagination that creates either diamonds or charcoal, *graining* or imprinting the infinity of human beings on a universal text. “Charcoal” speaks to human immortality. In Harris’s reality, humans do not have to die while merely breathing the frozen fumes of the deep inferno that seep into our static first circle of hell: we *can* merge with oppositional elements, with nature, with ancestors, with spiritual guides, incorporate mythopoesis in past, present, and *future* cultural values, and become resurrected as “charcoal” pressing a “diamond”-studded world. Therefore, Harris asks for perpetually new theoretical and literary forms that address the heterogeneity of the modern world without penalizing or privileging any faction within it. If the elemental world of fire, (along with air, earth, and water) produces diamonds as a result of conflagrating union, then what makes it so that the same world, composed of these elements with heterogeneous *human* components cannot die to our abject pet peeves? Why can we not burn with our abject selves in order to resurrect ourselves, in a *coniunctio* via the imagination? Harris thinks (and I think) we can be alchemically altered, authentic,

and self-individuated communities of a heaven on earth that already *is* if we dispense with life-denying “punitive logic.” If we want heaven on earth, all we have to *do* is cease to abject our abjections, and forgo our limited vision. We don’t have to half-live in anxiety about abject Others if we can embrace abject Otherness within our own beings who yearn to be sublime Selves.

Harris is not interested in reviving some ancient, pre-colonial, Edenic Caribbean. He’s not interested in recapturing a unified “original reign of the same whose repetition is the continual rearticulation and repetition of the same; [i]t is only the future that redeems the past. Harris’s writing opens up a space beyond redemptive nostalgia” (Benjamin 90). Indeed, Harris is committed to the rebirth of humankind via the abject feminine (not female) wound that destroys and resurrects the human in a genesis of the sublime imagination.

(b) Mariella’s Fluid Ghosts of Chances—The Abject, Redemptive Conduit

“It was the music of her undying sacrifice to make and save the world”—Wilson

Harris, *The Palace of the Peacock*

“The mother’s body becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora [which] is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated”—Kristeva,

Revolution in Poetic Language

“What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”—Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

As Mark McWatt writes in “The Madonna/Whore: Womb of Possibilities,” Harris’s characters “function more like diagrams of processes within the creative imagination, what [Harris] has called ‘agents of personality’ as opposed to ‘Sovereign principles.’ It is important to grasp this distinction when approaching the question of characterization in the novels of Harris” (34). I concur: characters in *Palace* as representations of fluid energies. While I by no means offer a feminist reading of *Palace*, the most protean and ubiquitous character in *Palace* is Mariella, and she is the character and agent with whom I will first engage.

While all of the *characters* in *Palace* disrespect “borders, positions, and rules”—because they are *dead*, for one thing—Mariella’s character enacts more functions than other diagrams of personality representations in *Palace*. She is more than *involved* with Donne and his crew members, in their ghost lives, and in their former lives: she is an *agent* of birth, death and rebirth. Her name suggests the ocean/sea, from the Spanish, “mar;” y (and) can be phonetically substituted for “i,” while “ella” is the third person feminine subject pronoun in Spanish. Thus, in Spanish her name is “Ocean/Sea and she.” The name has special significance because Donne’s is a boatman crew. The external *action* of the novel takes place on an open boat moving upriver to capture the people, or “folk,” whom Donne rules and uses to work his ranch. The navigation of this river and its treacherous rapids is central to what one may loosely call *plot*.⁷

In the first passage of the novel, the only one that does not take place on the river, Donne repeatedly shouts, “Mariella” (20). Mariella is Donne’s and his crew’s “obsession” (26). Mariella is Donne’s abused slave and mistress (20-21). She kills Donne either in Donne’s dreaming-double brother-narrator’s dream or in another reality; she is a “vulgar

musings executioner” (27). She is the object of the narrator’s dreaming lust: “I stroked the firm beauty of her flesh” (21). Mariella is the devilish “muse of hell” and “hag [. . .] half-woman and half-log” that the narrator must “mount” in a “wet dream” (43). She is also the Mission named Mariella, dwelling “above the falls and the forest” (24) to which she has retreated after killing Donne (26-27). Perhaps Mariella represents the spirit of the rebellious folk who live at the Mission in order to evade Donne’s cruel task-mastery.

She is Carroll’s mother (68), Vigilance’s step-mother *and* sister impregnated by Carroll: “he saw her as an old woman in the future, wrinkled and wise, the memory of her mythical incestuous child come again—living and strong as life. It was as if he came to his spiritual mother at last . . .” (73-74), yet Vigilance and Carroll are step-brothers (67). Carroll’s imagining of Mariella as old and wrinkled presages Mariella’s later appearance as an old Arawak woman. Vigilance is Schomburgh’s nephew; Carroll is Schomburgh’s suspected son from the relationship Schomburgh had with Mariella when he was a young man (66). McWatt refers to Harris’s characters as diagrams of personalities. Rather, they are protean energies. Mariella is the Arawak woman who nurses Wishrop to health (after Wishrop kills his wife, her lover, and the catechist who had married them, and then shoots himself). Wishrop then shoots and kills the Arawak woman/Mariella (57). Mariella is also the “buck woman” at the Mission whom one of the Da Silva twins impregnates the first time he is killed on their journey up river (45). In addition, Mariella is the moon-headed and woman-bodied rock formation that the boat strikes in the river and that drowns the crew in their first death.

Mariella’s gestative and murderous capacity is the apotheosis of abject Otherness in *Palace*. She is the agent of creation, destruction, and redemption via rebirth. She is the

crew's living-dead desire and fluid landscape or natural deliverer. To chart her narrated genealogy is like charting Guyana's abundance of webbed rivers and estuaries. In the river Vigilance sees the rock and cries out in warning:

I detected a pale, smooth patch that seemed hardly worth a thought. It was the size of the moon's reflection in streaming water save that the moment I saw it was broad daylight. The river hastened everywhere around it. Formidable lips breathed in the open running atmosphere to flatter it, many a wreathed countenance to conceal it and half-breasted body, mysterious and pregnant with creation, armed with every cunning abortion and dream of infancy to claim it. Clear fictions of imperious rock they were in the long rippling water of the river; they condescended to kneel and sit half-turning away from, half-inclining and bending towards the pale moon patch of death which spun before them calm as a musical disc. Captain and bowman headed Vigilance's cry turning to momentary stone like the river's ruling prayer and rock. They bowed and steered in the nick of time away from the evasive, faintly discernable unconscious head whose meek moon-patch heralded corrugations and thorns and spears we dimly saw in a volcanic and turbulent bosom of water. We swept onward every eye now peeled and crucified with Vigilance. The silent faces and lips raised out of the heart of the stream glanced at us. They presented no obvious danger and difficulty once we detected them beneath and above and in our own curious distraction and musing reflection in the water. (32)

The partially submerged body of a rock-woman, pregnant with a submarine graveyard, alerts the crew to a realization of “the first breaking dawn of the light of our soul” (33). Thus, Mariella, shape-shifted into the river’s bed and current, serves as a conduit of emerging self-awareness for the ghost crew and of their collective need for atonement in their second journey and their second dying process. Mariella is the primary vehicle of a mute semiotic order and abject sublimity in *Palace* to this point in the novel. Later, we will see how she and other semiotic and abjectly sublime agents contribute to Donne and his crew’s redemption. Mariella is a fluctuating and unpredictable “diagram” of destructive and gestative energy. Kristeva writes:

The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating chora, in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality. (*RPL* 40)

Mariella is a stabilizing and destabilizing force. She acts as a voiceless Virgilian guide to Donne and his crew in their second deaths when she assumes her form as the old Arawak woman.

The “buck people” at the Mission of Mariella flee when they see the ghost crew. The crew, narrowly escaping premature second deaths, camp for the evening. Donne can find only one of the people, an old Arawak woman whom he arrests and brings with them in order to guide them to the escaping people. The sudden appearance from the forest of Others, both that of Donne and the Arawak woman, awakens the dreaming narrator to his terror of being, to a memory he can no longer repress: “I shook my head a little, trying hard to free myself from this new obsession. Was it possible that one’s memory and apprehension of a tragic

event would strike one's spirit before the actual happening had been digested?" (*Palace* 48). The narrator begins to understand that he is becoming a Self with Donne. His cruel Other brother is no longer a removed and safe alter ego to the narrator. The dreamer-narrator understands that he too is culpable in Donne's brutalization of the folk, because the dreamer-narrator can no longer maintain a shadow of Self separate from Donne's abject Self. In short, the narrator is being born of Donne, and thus abjected or cast away from Donne's "womb" or chora, in which he has been sheltered without a distinct Self. He is beginning to know his abjection. Kristeva writes, "I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me.' . . . An Other who precedes and possesses me, *and through such possession causes me to be*" (*POH* 10 italics mine). The narrator is "caught in a principle of never-ending anxiety and fear, and it was impossible to turn back" (*Palace* 38-49). Kristeva continues: ". . . [A] repression that one might call *primal* has been effected prior to the springing forth of the ego [. . . I]ts return, in a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise, or more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of abjection, notifies us of the limits of the human universe" (*POH* 10-11). Donne's double, the narrator, might wish that he were morally superior to Donne, who is aging rapidly in his "rage and ambition," but while a storm comes upon them, the rest of the crew are "rooted in the soil of Mariella like imprisoned dead trees" (49) unable to "live" or "face" Donne's tirade. Only the narrator can hear Donne, because he is aware that his limit extends into an abject Self, a "possession" that "causes him to be" with the most abject aspects of Donne's being. As quickly as the storm passes, both Donne and his dreaming brother begin an attempted but aborted process of change and exchange. The re-appearance of Mariella, in the form of the Arawak woman

implicates the ostensibly more ethical narrator as an abject Self in an abject colonizing project.

Mariella, disguised as the Arawak woman on the first day of “The Second Death,” is described as a shape-shifter. While she guides the crew upriver through the perilous rapids above the Mission of Mariella, she is neither a benign nor a malevolent force acting upon the crew; they have purchased their own fates with her and her race of people conquered by the Law of European, Christian Fathers. Mariella is also a *being*, an energy that has survived many deaths and acts as both guide and midwife to the ghost crew dying to be reborn into a reintegrated future.

As a neither benevolent nor a malicious force, Mariella closely parallels the pre-colonial Arawak Amerindian idea of the zemi. The zemi is an aspect of animistic cosmology in which gods or spirits can be animated residents in natural objects, forces, elements, animals, or in human beings. The zemi itself is neither good nor evil, but how the power of the zemi is used by animist practitioners can be either helpful or harmful. For Harris the zemi exists “not only in itself, as it could be experienced in the physical world as a stone or shell, but it also contained and generated other possibilities of itself. These might be other shapes, other forms, other existences, and parallel universes of possibility” (Drake 69-70). On the boat, the old Arawak woman’s demeanor consists of an “air of wisdom that a millennium was past, a long timeless journey was finished without appearing to have begun, and no show of malice, enmity and overt desire to overcome oppression and evil mattered any longer” (*Palace* 61). However, Mariella as zemi allows herself to become a vehicle through which the folk are avenged and the crew become aware of their wrongs enacted upon the folk. In “the straits of memory” the “fury of the stream” became “the ancient spit of all flying

insolence and the voiceless and terrible humility of the folk” (62). The old Arawak woman’s kerchief and her wrinkles transform into “breakers of foam;” her “crumpled bosom and river grew agitated with desire,” while “the ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew”—she at once becomes young, beautiful, free, and strong as she merges with the power of the river. She stops their ears from the Siren’s seductive call to turn back. If they were to turn back, they not only would “perish” but would not be rebirthed. Thus, Mariella is both the “witch” (*Palace* 63) who may destroy them and is also the “archaic mother” often “feared for her generative power” (*POH* 77). The zemi, in Harrisian philosophy “represents structure of personality” (characterization in this novel), “of history, of cultural configurations, of the physical universe, and it may be described as asymmetrical—that is, decentered” (Drake 70). Off-center, and suddenly cognizant of “the spirit that had raped the old woman,” and their “own answering doom,” the crew begins to pray. Carroll, Mariella’s son, stands. He is the first to be called to birth via death in the river, leaving the crew with a “sense of disconsolate flying compassion and longing” (*Palace* 64). These hardened pursuers of the folk, Donne’s racially mixed ghost Gestapo, colonized colonizers, are beginning to recognize that they have been wrong, an acknowledgment prerequisite to redemption. Thus, because of their feelings of compassion (affect), along with their power of self-discernment (judgment), the crew’s abject status is rendered, as Kristeva would interpret their psychic states:

a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning. .

[Abjection] preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separate from another body to be. . . [t]he sublime object dissolve[ed] in the raptures of

a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of dazzlement in which [we] stray in order to be. . . both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling.” (*POH* 10-13)

Compassion, the capacity to feel for or suffer with another person, combined with the ability to determine the nature of one’s wrongs, evolves abjection into the abject sublime. Mariella is the conduit through which the crew may spiritually reintegrate.

(c) **He’s Come Undone**

“And though you came with sword held high/You did not conquer, only die”—
Procol Harum from “Conquistador”

Donne is the primary diagram of process that represents the energetic thrust of the first European colonizers. Although he points “to his dark racial skin” (*Palace* 51), claiming that he already belongs to the “family” of the folk, Donne behaves in a maddeningly devilish manner toward his “family” (22). Harris leads the reader to a spiritualized (*not* religious) and imaginative relationship between Donne’s “character” and John Donne by introducing the first chapter of *Palace* with a quotation from Blake. This Blake citation, possibly one of the most *obscure* quotations from Blake regarding the imagination, comes from the second letter of a series addressed to Thomas Paine in *Annotations* to Bishop Watson’s *An Apology for the Bible* (an attack on Paine’s *The Rights of Man*): “If Moses did not write the history of his acts. it takes away from the authority altogether it ceases to be history & becomes a Poem of probable impossibilities fabricated for pleasure as moderns say but as I say by Inspiration”(qtd. in Erdman 616). Blake insists that if the authors of the old and new

covenants, Moses to Paul, did not write their texts, they cannot write the history of activities and events: their writings were inspired poetry. Harris is questioning the historicity of religious texts by using this quotation to imply that religious texts are not necessarily true but are inspired poetry, or mythopoeia. Then, Harris cites I Kings wherein Elijah (whose flaming chariot “rock” is cited in Ezekiel’s fiery “wheel,” along with more esoteric explanations of The Canon Wheel, foreshadowing Vigilance’s ascension and Wishrop’s spider-wheel) laments that God has abandoned him, will not speak to him. God does finally speak to Elijah, in “a still small voice.” The reader might be remiss not to assign some Christological importance to Donne’s name, because Harris’s epigrams allude to this signification. Another epigram is an excerpt from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” In the poem, yes, a ship sinks, thus situating *Palace*’s river excursion and the crew’s ensuing death by water. However, in this Hopkins’s poem, God is “lightning and love” and is given the imperative, “Wring thy rebel, dogged in den,” (Lancashire 67-70). The idea that God is both destructive and generative, and that the rebellious human is abject and in need of correction, implies a kind of Gnostic sense of a multi-faceted God; *indeed I return and refer to the idea of this thesis that by “diving into the wreck” of abjection one may be redeemed by the abject sublime.*

Therefore, the energy of Donne’s name invokes something possibly Christological. I don’t believe that John Donne’s life and work are divided; I see the same John Donne in “The Flea” but a different aspect of divinity acting within the poet and within the poem excerpted for *Palace*. In “Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness,” the speaker asks, “Look, Lord and find both Adams met in me;” (Abrams 615). I think that the Harrisian “character” of Donne only *appears* to live two distinct lives. A different, doubled divinity within Donne

emerges to absorb his abjection and rebirth it. Harris leads the astute reader to ask “does this author mean that abjection and redemption may be two sides of the same coin?” Yes, but not without an immense attention to detail. Doubled-divinities within energies (including Donne as John Donne if one accept the idea of double lives and work in John Donne) and their transformative returns have everything to do the plurality of possibilities Harris has exemplified in the pages of *Palace*. The exploration of one character’s name and the introductory epigraphs indicate the complexity of Harrisian syncretism.

Gregory Shaw briefly refers to John Donne in a blurb about “ancestral murders and poets” (158), in his discussion of Donne’s name. Shaw treats Donne’s name as a pun on the French past participle of the verb “donner,” which in its transitive form means “to give.” Therefore, “donné” means “given.” As a mimic and actual conquistador, Donne is a given, “a basic premise or assumption” (158) according to Shaw. Of course, according to Shaw, Donne embodies “a monolithic vision” of “conquest,” but is also “done-in and done-for,” which I would think somewhat reduces Donne’s status as a colossus. I understand what Shaw means, but is it necessary or ethical to nullify colonial powers, their cultures, and their religions in such a totalizing manner while Harris is trying to rebirth and transform a legacy of nullification of colonial presence in the West Indies?

Colonial religion is also a critical concern in Sam Durrant’s *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*: Durrant expounds upon the impossibility of a mainstreamed, European-identified religious symbolism in *Palace*’s last chapter, “The Paling of Ancestors”:

While the epigraph from Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse/Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows’ (97), emphasizes the Christian dimensions of this title, the word paling was initially

used to describe the boundary fence that separated the part of Ireland under British rule from the rest of Ireland. Christ's home turns out to be in barbarian territory. Because Harris's vision of liberation operates on a political level as well as a spiritual one, it becomes possible to read the final section as a mode of communion that brings into being a collective, a mode of mourning that announces—in that liminal space between self and other, chartered and unchartered territory—the possibility of community. (75)

I understand Durrant's positing of Christ in "barbarian territory" in order to foil English hegemony (over the Irish during the Middle Ages via the paling and over Caribbean colonies in the modern era), but fail to understand how a "community" and a "collective" necessitate a "vision of liberation" that "operates on" "political level[s]." I resist Durrant's totalizing and centering of Harris within a political realm that mourns the "wound" of colonialism. Harris has emphasized his rejection of remaining in the colonial "wound," because focusing on this "wound" breeds either "intolerance [fanaticism] and indifference [nihilism]" (Harris qtd. in Rowell 196).

Thus far, according to Shaw and Durrant, the character of Donne is a "given ancestral murderer" on the "wounded" "barbaric" side of the paling fence with Christ. This dim vision appears hopeful to my sight because healing is needed most, perhaps, at the site of a barbaric wound. But then Harris claims "optimism" as his "main fault" (Fabre 42).

The at-one-ment journey up river begins with Donne as the primary character, leader, representative of reason, colonized colonizer of the symbolic order, and subject/object of narcissistic crisis. Donne, at the onset of the journey, is aware of the Other only as inferior to himself and a reflection of his fanciful idea of his Self. Because Donne is in narcissistic

crisis, his superego is easily undermined by anarchic drives. In perpetual narcissistic crisis, he is maddened by the sheathed and volatile matrix of the jungle, by the unruly folk, and by Mariella. Those abjections acutely and particularly seduce, threaten, and beckon from Donne's primal repression and memory of loss via non-individuation in the Law of the Would-Have-Been Father. His awareness of the inferior Other, along with his fear and lust in primal memory driven by his body, summon the conquistador to be dissolved by the primary redeemer, or Mariella, the briny fluid seed of creation and the violent womb or chora of the river.

She is the jungle folk woman, pregnant with silenced wisdom, nurturing and protecting. Then, she is rock-wall Mariella, the weeping perineum, the permeable bond between colonized/colonizer, finitude/infinity, death/life, between damnation/redemption, between hell/heaven, sight/blindness, between blindness/sight and jouissance in revelation. Thereby Mariella, as the primary semiotic character, provides the "ghost of a chance" that Donne's narcissistic struggle within the symbolic order can be further exiled to fascinated victimization rendering a revelation at the moment when death intervenes in Donne's ghostly life. She represents Donne's possibility of salvation through the abject sublime in birth.

Harris's symbolically ordered act of writing creates a medium for a transformation of the doubled, hysterical, and grotesque characters of the symbolic order into the abject sublime in *Palace of the Peacock*. Initially, if the reader adheres to Kristevan psychoanalytic theory, that reader might presume that Donne is securely situated in Kristeva's symbolic order or Lacan's Name of the Father: "One has to be a devil to survive. I'm the last landlord. I tell you I fight everything in nature, flood, draught, chicken hawk, rat, beast and woman. I'm everything . . . every blasted thing to the laboring people" (*Palace* 22). However,

Donne's secure position within the symbolic order is soon challenged. The possibility of narcissistic crisis via the agency of the semiotic order is suggested when Donne says, "Our parents died early . . ." and "I looked after you, son . . . Father and Mother rolled into one for a while. I was a boy then" (23). Having studied many theories regarding the etiology of various psychological disorders, I find Kristeva's theory of the origins of narcissistic crisis to be the most plausible:

Two seemingly contradictory causes bring about the narcissistic crisis that provides, along with its truth, a view of the abject. Too much strictness on the part of the Other, confused with the One and the Law. The lapse of the Other, which shows through the breakdown of objects of desire. In both instances, the abject appears to uphold "I" within the Other. The abject is the violence of mourning an "object" that has always already been lost. (*POH* 15)

The reader does not know how old Donne was when his parents died. He says he was a boy, but *boy* is of indeterminate chronological age. And perhaps exactitude of age is irrelevant. Perhaps "narcissistic crisis" is not the exclusive domain of chronological developmental psychology. Donne at some point enters into narcissistic crisis because he suffered a "lapse of the Other," or Others, against which the "I" could encounter and locate the Other as abject object to the subject of self. He does not individuate. His fear is that he will be, at any moment, reabsorbed into the maternal and paternal; both his sperm and egg are failures within a nightmare of powerlessness. Donne not only must fear the "violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (*POH* 13), in the mother, but must fear an absorption into the father as well. Therefore, Donne has to create himself without Others against whom to struggle for his "I."

He neurotically creates a double within himself, a “borderline” personality (72) or diagnosable narcissistic personality disorder, whereby a mask, or false self is constructed and presented to the world in order to compensate for his unconscious, unindividuated self. The possible Donne, somewhat represented by the Dreamer-brother, must go through all endured by Donne, because he is both a narcissistic projection of Donne and a reverse vision and forward dreaming of a redeemed Donne: “I looked after you, son” (*Palace* 23). Donne, however he might present himself as “everything” or “midwife, gaoler, judge, hangman” (22), is more constructed in the imaginary, feminine, and neurotic as a narcissist than he is in his symbolic fantasy as ruler of “the world” (23). As the most conflicted member of the crew, Donne is the most likely candidate among the crew to be reborn in death, in abjection, into a family that has no need of family.

The narrating, dreaming double-brother of Donne writes of the river as a choral birth canal: “One’s mind was a chaos of sensation, even pleasure, faced by imminent mortal danger” (24). He then describes a possibly fetal and narcissistically directed feeling of loss, trapped in a birth canal, a place of intense self-awareness, presaging infant need: “I felt an illogical disappointment and regret that we were temporarily out of danger. Like a shell after an ecstasy of roaring water and of fast rocks appearing to move and swim again, and yet still and bound as ever when the foam forced its way and seethed and curdled and rushed” (25). In parallel fashion Kristeva writes, “Narcissism then appears as a regression to a position set back from the other, a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven” (*POH* 14). The wish to have fossilized a moment of excitement is Romantic narcissism. As Donne’s narcissistically projected double, the dreamer-brother increasingly exhibits a degree of the crew’s desire for mastery in the repetition compulsion of birth or rebirth.

Harris's narrator alludes to Donne and his crew's preference for residence within the abject semiotic chora or womb aligned with abject death, a space wherein no being may suffer knowledge of an individuated self:

The life they had clung to and known before was turning into a backward incoherent dream of the first insensible death they had experienced. Even so a groan rose to their lips and a longing to re-establish that first empty living hollowness and brutal habitation. Surely ignorance was better than their present unendurable self-knowledge and discomfort. (80-81)

Where no being may *suffer* self-knowledge, no being can be held accountable for its external mobility and behaviors enacted upon Others. The chora is a boundary. It is a destination for these living ghosts. However, to arrive at that space of stasis, the crew must die. Death is a noun. Dying is the present participle of a verb or action. Responsible action is specifically what Donne and the crew want to avoid. Dying, like being born, is necessarily abject—traumatically rejecting—but it is even more frightening when the dead know that they will become newborn, awakening to lives which will repeat themselves in renewals of sameness if the crew, lodged in the birth canal of the river, insist on individualistic re-enactments of desire without a sense of Self that *can* know the social limits of what the Self may perform without harming an Other. Donne's crew hates their Self-knowledge because each member has become aware of his hideous past conduct in relationship to Others. The neonatal Self and its permissible desires are established by the Other. If not, the nascent Self resides in Self-abjection, which is the emotional state of the crew at this impasse between living death and abject sublime redemption via rebirth.

A passage from *Power of Horror* may explain the crew's fear:

I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens him self on that account, 'all by himself,' and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him—all gifts, all objects. He has, he could have, a sense of the abject. Even before things for him *are*—hence before they are signifiable—he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject. A sacred configuration. Fear cements his compound, conjoined to another world, thrown up, driven out, forfeited. What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father; that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly. What solace does he come upon within such loathing? (5-6)

Kristeva's question is answered by Donne's fatherless fear and angst within the desire for mastery in the repetition compulsion. He rules all, but is miserable, abject, hated and feared by his indentured servant-laborers and by a mistress he has abused and viewed as abject Other. When Donne and his crew arrive at the mission of Mariella, the abject folk flee in fear of these ghosts.

The narcissistic Donne may abandon, because the act of abandoning is an action solely within the assumed control and god-like self-construction and right to govern of the narcissistic domain. However, if there is one experience the narcissist cannot tolerate or permit, it is being abandoned. Only through others may the narcissist truly exist: although Donne presents himself as self-sufficient, the converse is true: he is addicted to narcissistic supply which is granted by the containing of, or presence of, the Other or Others. Donne's

relentless refusal to be abjected, rejected by the folk, sends him further up river, beyond Mariella.

Mariella is the most likely candidate capable of luring Donne to a rebirthing reintegration, because Donne lives less within the Law of the Father than he externally presents, and is therefore vulnerable to Mariella's amorphous semiotic capability of deliverance to life by death. Kristeva writes that "before being *like*, "I" am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*. Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, *is a precondition of narcissism*" (13). Kristeva further argues that the image "in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed" (13). The foundation of Donne's Westernized culture and narcissistic mask is based on the repression of all abjection. As quickly as the repression of abjection is relaxed, abjection is free to disobey the Law of the Father, or fatherless, to transgress within the symbolic order. Mariella offers Donne redemption via transgression of that which he supposes himself to be. She kills him, but that is not enough for her or for him. He must become aware.

Kristeva maintains that awareness can issue from transformative time:

The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame. Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth." (*POH* 8-9)

Harris utilizes similar images to convey the beginning of Donne's awareness: "The storm passed as quickly as it had begun . . . Donne was free of the hate he had shown, I thought, and a smile had been restored to him ingenuous as youth" (*Palace* 49). Donne suggests that perhaps his dreaming double-brother is correct, that he, Donne, has been too ruthlessly harsh on the people. He has a wish of "changing [his] ways" (50), which is interrupted by his eating. Food reminds him of his materiality. "Since the food *is* an 'other' for" Donne's spiritual Self, by the action of eating, he expels, spits out and abjects his spiritual Self. (*POH* 3). Donne remembers his temporal being, and revelation is aborted for the moment. Still, *something*, some change, is gradually coming upon the entire crew. Carroll's musical laughter sounds the alarm of alteration: "Something had freed them and lifted them up out of the deeps, a blessing and a curse, a reverberating clap of thunder and still music and song. The sound was jubilant and obscure and tremulous in their ear like a dreaming sword that had cut them from the womb" (*Palace* 55).

Mariella further insults and goads Donne and his crew into being born of, within, and on her "space." She creates a space of chase, of what Kristeva has called "a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved" (*POH* 8). The crew presses on, tracking the abject folk by boat in the chora of river. Harris writes Mariella's infinitude and ubiquitously protective, destructive, and *instructive* quality into the old Arawak woman: "The great cloud sealed our eyes again and we saw only the spirit that had raped the old woman and invoked upon us our own answering doom in her daemonic flowing presence and youth" (*Palace* 63). Through Mariella's presence in the old Arawak

woman that Donne and his crew may choose rebirth via a series of nested abject deaths, which invoke the abject sublime of redemption.

(d) Falling into Infinity

“But I’d rather be a free man in my grave/ Than living as a puppet or a slave—Jimmy Cliff from “The Harder They Come”

“Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down/ Coming for to carry me home/ But still my soul feels heavenly bound/Coming for to carry me home”—“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”

Carroll, the musical son of Schomburgh, the son of Mariella, the African paddler who has laughed at the crew (including himself), contemplating a second chance to right their wrongs, is the first to *fall* into the river of death and rebirth. He “stood up quickly as though he’d been inspired” and slips into the water. Kristeva writes that waste *falls* from the body until the body surpasses the limit of material substance:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. [A]s in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show *me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. (POH 3)

Thus, the abject sublime is summoned in Carroll's fall:

The crew were filled with the brightest seeming clarity of tragedy, as cloudless as imperfectly true as their self-surrender to the hardship of the folk they followed and pursued: the cloudy scale of incestuous cruelty and self-oppression tumbled from their eye leaving only a sense of disconsolate flying compassion and longing" (*Palace* 63-64).

Schomburgh—the German/Arawak Amerindian bowman, fisherman, “infinitely omniscient” (46), who warns the crew that they will go to their deaths (53) if they continue to pursue the folk, Carroll's father, and the lover of Mariella—is the next to die. He passes away quietly in his sleep. The crew buries Schomburgh next to Carroll: “One death, a cross for father and son” (75), suggesting crucifixion and foreshadowing resurrection.

Wishrop, the forty-year-old assistant bowman who rarely speaks, claiming that because he has lived on the border between Venezuela and Guyana, he speaks better Spanish than English, the apparent murderer who once killed the “inevitable Arawak woman” (57) (Mariella) who had nursed him to health, is the next to fall into the water. Perai eat Wishrop's flesh, transforming him into “a spidery skeleton crawling to the sky” (82). His spidery “gambol” evokes Anancy, the West Indian trickster-figure derived from the West African god Ananse (Gilkes 46).

Palace is crowded with images of, and references to, spiders: “The crew swarmed like upright spiders, half-naked, scrambling under a burden of cargo they were carrying ashore” (25). “Spider's web dangled in a shaft of sun, clothing my arms with subtle threads as I brushed upon it. The whispering trees spun their leaves to a sudden fall wherein the ground seemed to grow lighter in my mind and to move to meet them in the air” (28).

Jennings's outboard dwindles into "an indefatigable revolving spider" (81). Wishrop's "webbed fingers" cling to "the spokes and spider of a wheel" (81). "The boat crawled, driven by the naked spider of spirit" (81). "Vigilance drew himself up like a spider in a tree" (83). Donne's boat rights itself "and the crew were all accounted for except for Wishrop's spider and transubstantiation" (83). "It was this spider and wheel of baptism infinite and expanding" (83-84) that Vigilance sees from his point of ascension. "The wall that had divided him from his true otherness and possession was a web of dreams" (114). His feet marched again as a spider's towards eternity. It was a prodigal web and ladder he held out to him . . . " (115). Harris probably employs spider imagery for at least two reasons. First, the riverine landscape of Guyana resembles a spider's legs and web. Second, Anancy subverts and conjoins with Christian symbols in order to reintegrate, sycretically, a future that combines pre-and-post-colonial mythos.

Vigilance, Carroll's Amerindian cousin, the seer, does not die on this particular river journey (even though he's already dead): "this self-same crew had been drowned to a man in rapids below the Mission" (37). Vigilance follows the pointing of the old Arawak woman to a flock of skeleton ducks in the depths of the water "with wings pointed like stars" (82). As she points, they fly into life and Vigilance ascends with them to watch the crew from above. "The truth was he no longer felt himself in the land of the living though the traumatic spider of the sun crawled up and down his arms and his neck and punctured his sides of rock" (83). Either Vigilance has become the rock cliff and/or he represents a resurrected Christ and/or a transfigured Anancy. The old Arawak rises with him to show him a flock of parrots, one with a silver ring around its foot.

One of the da Silva twins (*both* are presumably of Portuguese descent) sees the parrot with the silver ring and is convinced that the bird is the buck woman (Mariella) he impregnated but did not marry, thus breaking the folk's law. Da Silva says, "Is me lady bird . . . It must be fly away from she for a morning outing. The little bird tekking a morning outing . . . I know it. Last year when Ah been with she in the Mission Ah feed it meself often . . . Is me mistress bird" (88). Cameron—red-faced, Scottish and African (39), with a "hard bitter style of words" (41), possessing a dull and violent energy, and associated with building fires for the crew (44)—mythologically parallels Achilles or Ares. He chides da Silva: "Is vulture bird you really feeling and seeing. You is a menagerie and a jungle of a fool" (87). Cameron then picks up a rock and hits the parrot/mistress/Mariella. Cameron continues to abuse da Silva verbally. Da Silva stabs Cameron and kills him. Cameron's surname is da Silva (along with the other two da Silva's). Donne screams at da Silva to ask him what he has done to a "brother friend" (90). Thus, the Cain and Able story is reinscribed, as Vigilance and the Arawak woman observe the fratricide from the wall of the cliff above the river.

On the fifth day beyond the Mission of Mariella one of the da Silva twins simply disappears. The remaining three members of the crew, da Silva (Cain), Jennings (a young African), and Donne (the narrating dreamer-brother has vanished but will return) can go no further by boat. Before them stood "the highest waterfall they had ever seen": "they were plainly astonished at the immaculate bridal veil falling motionlessly from the river's tall brink" (100). The next (and last) fifteen pages of *The Palace of the Peacock* struck me, when I first read them, and continue to move me as I read them, in a way that no piece of literature has ever . . . The ineffable is beyond words. Donne's process of redemption via awareness

begins with his admission to his brother that he is beginning to lose all of his imagination.

Earlier in the novel Donne expresses his Gethsemane-like confusion:

I hate myself sometimes, hate myself for being the most violent taskmaster—I drive myself with no hope of redemption whatsoever and I lash the folk. If they do murder me I've earned it I suppose, and I don't see sometimes how I can escape it unless a different person steps into my shoes and accepts my confounded shadow Still I suppose . . . there's a ghost of a chance . . . [of] changing my ways . . . not being so beastly and involved in my devil's schemes any more. Perhaps there's a ghost of a chance that I can find a different relationship with the folk . . . I suppose it's what I've always really wanted. (50-51)

While Donne is pulled back from this moment into his obsessive material regard, something has been seeded and voiced in him. Now at the waterfall, Donne bids farewell to his motor and boat as he, da Silva, and Jennings prepare to climb the shoddy ladder nailed into the rock of the waterfall:

[H]e knew there was some meaning in his farewell sadness, something that had duration and value . . . the memory of the house he had built . . . returned to him with the closeness and intimacy of a horror and a hell, that horror and that hell he had himself elaborately constructed from which to rule his earth . . . this dreaming return to a ruling function of nothingness and to a false sense of home was the meaning of hell. He stared upward to heaven slowly as to a new beginning from which the false hell and function crumbled and fell

A longing swept him like the wind of the muse to understand and transform his beginnings: to see the indestructible nucleus and redemption of creation, the remote and the abstract image and correspondence, in which all things and events gain their substance and universal meaning. However far from him, however distant and removed, he longed to see, *he longed to see* the atom, the very nail of moment in the universe. It would mean more to him than an idol of idols even if in seeing it there was frustration in that the distance between himself and *It* strengthened rather than weakened. The frustration would disappear he knew in his sense of a new functional inspiration and beginning and erection in living nature and scaffolding. (100-01)

Donne receives his wish—"frustration and desire" in the distance between himself and the "very nail of moment in the universe"—as he comes to an impenetrable window through which he sees a young carpenter in a room. He tries to attract the young man's attention but the young man looks through him. He saw that the carpenter's face was "cut from the cedar of Lebanon" and his hair was parted in the middle, falling into a "harvest" on either side of his face. "His fingers were made of the same wood, the nails made of bark and ivory." The carpenter has an old hammer, an old chisel, and a saw. "Donne felt himself sliced with this skeleton-saw by the craftsman of God in the windowpane of his eye." While a swallow flies in and out of the window, Donne begins to hammer on the window-wall. "He had never felt before such terrible *desire and frustration* all mingled. He knew the chisel and the saw in the room had touched him and done something in the wind and the sun to make him anew" (102 italics mine).

Donne has previously thought to himself that he did not care about the distance between himself and this “nail of the moment of the universe.” His “spiritual eyes were being opened . . . there was no earthly excuse why he could not reach [the carpenter].” Donne hammers; the carpenter continues to look through him. “Nothing broke the distance between them . . . it was DEATH with capitals” (103).

I would argue that this sequence with a comet, a sky metamorphosing into animals, wounded, side-speared animals, the moon repaired, the ghostly leaves stampeding as people besieging the carpenter’s window—is a syncretic reinscription of *Revelation*. The carpenter finally shuts his window and Jennings falls. “Darkness fell upon the cliff and they wondered whose turn would be next to fall from the sky as the last ghost of the crew had died and they alone were left to frame Christ’s tree and home” (105-06).

Donne and da Silva climbed upward and came upon another window in the wall. Looking in the window they saw a woman, wearing only her ancient hair, and a child standing at her feet. In the straw-strewn room are “a crib and a stall that might have been an animal’s trough” (106). “The light in the room came from a solitary candle with a star upon it, steady and unflinching, and the candle stood tall and rooted in the floor as the woman was” (107). Donne, staring into this room, “knew he was truly blind now at last” (107). Kristeva’s characterization of abjection as a means to revelatory redemption is applicable to Harris: “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (*POH* 9).

Donne comes to his epiphanic moment:

A singular thought always secured him to the scaffolding. It was the unflinching clarity with which he looked into himself and saw that all his life

he had loved no one but himself. He focused his blind eye with all penitent might on this pinpoint star and reflection as one looking into the void of oneself upon the far greater love and self-protection that have made the universe. (*Palace* 107)

Donne is the willing and fascinated victim of “blindness” whereby he sees “his own nothingness and imagination constructed beyond his reach(108) . . . without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire,” (116) or in the chora of heaven’s womb. Freed from “material restraint and possession It was finished and they fell” (108). On the perineal wall of Mariella, of death and of birth, Donne is, “jettisoned. Parachuted by the Other in a topology of catastrophe” (*POH* 9) and redeemed before he falls. He is only beginning to know jouissance in the abject sublime: “they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk” (*Palace* 110).

On the seventh day from Mariella, “the creation of the windows of the universe was finished” (111). The dreaming brother-narrator has merged with Donne and the first person singular (as communal) is resumed. Heaven and hell are inverted: “We stood there . . . feeling for the shadow of our feet on the ground” while the narrator-Donne takes his first “wooden” steps (111):

I had never before looked on the blinding world in this trusting manner—
through an eye I shared only with the soul, the soul and mother of the
universe. Across the crowded creation of the invisible savannas the newborn
wind of spirit blew the sun making light of everything, curious hands and feet,
neck, shoulder, forehead, material twin shutter and eye. They drifted, half-

finished sketches in the air, until they were filled suddenly from within to become living and alive. (112)

The abject-sublime child is born, and willingly looks to the Other: “The stars became peacock’s eyes, and the great tree of flesh and blood swirled into another stream that sparkled with divine feathers where the neck and the hands and the feet had been nailed” because “[t]his was the palace of the universe and the windows of the soul looked out and in. The living eyes in the crested head were free to observe the twinkling stars and eyes and windows on the rest of the body and the wings. Every cruel mark and stripe and ladder had vanished” (112-13).

Healing is evinced by the ability to look *in* to one’s self as well as *out* from an Other. All the men of the crew appear whole and healed in different windows of the palace while Carroll whistles the cry of the peacock, “a sad and glorious music . . . [t]he dark notes rose everywhere, so dark, so sombre, they broke into a fountain—light as the rainbow—sparkling and immaterial as invisible sources and echoes . . . sorrowful and mystical” (113). Harris’s narrator-Donne describes the healing union of the semiotic with the symbolic order in rebirth:

And it seemed to me as I listened I had understood that no living ear on earth can truly understand the fortune of love and the art of victory over death without mixing blind joy and sadness and the sense of being lost with the nearness of being found. Carroll whistled to all who had lost love in the world. (113-14)

Kristeva writes in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, “there are not verbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music for example)” (*RPL* 24).

Thus, music represents the abject sublime because music requires the energies of both the semiotic and the symbolic orders functioning harmoniously. Carroll was the first to break with living death, to state his thesis and to enact thetic rupture into the symbolic order. As Kristeva notes again, “Poetry, music, reminds us of its eternal function: to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it” (81). The abject sublime is free: “Truly free works, musical composition for example, will have naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and it is as a new subject that he will enter into the process of immediate production” (106). The narrator-Donne concludes:

One was what I am in the music—buoyed and supported above dreams by the undivided soul and anima in the universe from whom the word of dance and creation first came, the command to the starred peacock who was instantly transported to know and to hug to himself his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire. It was the dance of all fulfillment I now held and knew deeply, canceling my forgotten fear of strangeness and catastrophe in a destitute world. (*Palace* 116)

The conquistador’s El Dorado, once sought, has found the abjectly sublime surrendered conqueror and has resurrected him in the possibility of a new human *being* rather than the “done” human *doing* that he was.

(e) On the Margins of Semiotic Language

“I is ole tree girl/rough outside/wid years of breaking bark/feeling de damp/yuh is seed/burstin new groun/so sing girl/sing/dere’s more to you/dan skin”—Jean Binta Breeze from “Testament”

“Gal, I now remember Das ole man want see me important tonight-tonight, so I gat fo go out.”—Rooplall Monar from “Bahadur”

While the language of *Palace* is interested in a polyphonic voice that “seeks to consume its own biases,”⁸ the dialogue and “plot” of *Palace* demonstrate reduplication as its most obvious trait. For instance, Akan, a family of languages spoken extensively in Ghana, (previously the African Gold Coast, homeland of many New World slaves), has many dialectal branches in West Africa. These languages and dialects exhibit reduplication as a linguistic feature. Emmanuel Nicholas Abakah calculates (the majority of his essay is written in linguistic mathematical data language) that “the meaning of reduplicated forms of verbs indicates repeated action while reduplication of the adjective indicates intensity” (193). While African languages can account for reduplication in the Guyanese Creole spoken in *Palace*, the Barbareño Chumash of the Hokan language group (including Esselen), spoken by the indigenous peoples of Southern California, according to Philip Laverty, employ reduplication “to indicate plurality or intensity” (67). Therefore, it is possible to imagine that reduplication in Caribbean Creoles may come not only from African but also from Amerindian language impact in “a returning to the Siberian unconscious pilgrimage in the straits where life had possessed and abandoned at the same time, the apprehension of a facile beginning and ending” (*Palace* 61). In this passage the narrator is referring to the old Arawak woman’s silent, semiotic demeanor of non-resistance born of “wisdom” learned from her peoples’ consciousness before and after crossing the Bering Straits. While we are probably all of “African” origins, “Mother,” Africa, had speaking children. To deny their linguistic influence on Caribbean language might be an action of exclusivity. Also, in the Oceanic

language, Niuen, spoken in New Zealand and Niue, reduplication is predominately verbal, as in “fukefuke” ‘to open up’” (Haji-Abdolhosseini, Massm and Kenjii Oda 476). *Palace* is a fascinating text relative to reduplication because its plot exhibits reduplication of action. Adjectival reduplication is evinced in its lexicon revealed in dialogue—“fine-fine” in Carroll’s commentary on the narrator’s condition after he faints (30), “funny-funny” in Wishrop’s ideas about the camping spot (38), “sure-sure” as da Silva recognizes his mistress in the lady bird (86), and Jennings calls da Silva’s murder of Cameron “stupid-stupid” (94). The dialogue among the crew abounds with reduplication, while the narrator and Donne do not utilize this Creole convention, perhaps establishing their characters as representatives of the conquistador/colonial era; while they are set apart from the rest of the crew, this gesture may indicate that they are in greater need of redemption for the wrongs of colonizers.

Harris’s use of language in *Palace* corresponds to that which Kristeva asserts in *Revolution in Poetic Language*: Phenomenological experience should not be isolated. The conscientious writer should “decenter the closed set and elaborate the dialectic of a process within plural and heterogeneous universes” (13-14). Hena Maes-Jelinek discusses Harris’s approach to phenomena and writing:

Harris’s probing into the process by which ruin (an illusory *tabula rasa*) can actually offer a seed of creation . . . is concomitant with his quantum perception of world and experience. The theory proposes that all the possible *alternative* quantum worlds are equally real, and exist in parallel with one another. Harris’s ‘quantum Imagination’ can be said to underpin both his fictional rendering [s] . . . and his definition of literacy as perception of a multiplicity of texts, [. . .] as opposed to illiteracy, which he sees as a

psychological and metaphysical phenomenon excluding the presence of the other. (238)

The literate, polyphonic writer, according to Harris, *must* listen to the Other(s). Kristeva insists that the polyphonic novel forces one to “read, listen, immerse yourself in its language, discover its music, its gestures, its dance; and have its time, its history, and all of history join in a dance” (*DL* 159).

Harris melds binaries—he doesn’t collapse them, as they need each other—in a dialectical and polyphonic “dance.” This paradoxical “dance” of language might be why Harris has been called “difficult.” On the first page of the novel, for example, the reader confronts this dancing, shifting, seemingly incongruous language: a shot rings out “near and far” while the wind is “stretched and torn and . . . coiling and running in an instant,” and the narrator awakes from this dream with “one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye” (*Palace* 19). Yes, the reader accustomed to Magical Realism probably won’t find this passage difficult. Perhaps Harris includes, in his style of Magical Realism, that which is *marginalized* to non-animate status in many parts of the world. Certainly animism informs Harris’s philosophy of narrative language. Harry Garuba asserts a kinship between animism and Magical Realism. He writes that not only can animism be explained “as belief in objects such as stones or trees or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are *located* and *embodied* in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits (267) but that “animist logic . . . destabilizes the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic” (270).

It also

subverts the authority of Western science by reinscribing the authority of magic within the interstices of the rational/secular/modern. Animist culture thus opens up a whole new world of . . . *prepossessing the future*, as it were, by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented. It is on account of this ability to prepossess the future that continual re-enchantment becomes possible. (272)

Thus, for Harris “the wind” contains redemptive/gestative possibilities in the present issued from the past and continuing into the future via a “myth and magic” that may heal/realize the birth of a future *always already* present in parallel realities. Quite simply, all things, human, non-human and *concepts*, are alive and contain the spiritual powers of gods in Harrisian discourse: “Donne was truly blind now at last. He saw nothing . . . He trembled as he saw himself inwardly melting into a nothingness and into the body of his death” (*Palace* 107). Blindness is alive with sight. The body of death is filled with the content of a redemptive nothingness.

Perhaps the passage from *Palace* that most obviously demonstrates the living powers of *given* oppositional forces is the narrator’s description of the waterfall: “. . . [B]efore them the highest waterfall they had even seen *moved and still stood* upon the escarpment. They were plainly astonished at the immaculate bridal veil *falling motionlessly* from the river’s tall brink” (100 italics mine). How can a waterfall move and still stand? How does something fall motionlessly? If one has *seen* a waterfall, it first appears not as a static form: it moves in stillness; it seems as though it falls motionlessly or in one continuous motion of falling again and again. The waterfall’s water is a “bridal veil” because Donne will be wedded to his

death/rebirth by raising himself up through this veil of water. Thus, the waterfall character is alive with possibilities for the human character. Harris, as Russell McDougal writes, cannot assign a noun an “objective reality” because while a noun is “the essence of place and of character,” nouns contain enlivened habitations of psychical “projections” birthed in the magic of their creation and thus represent “subjective community” (96), not “objective reality.” Kristeva suggests that nouns and the process of naming must be subjectively modified because of their relationship communing with the semiotic, wherein nouns and relational place names are first learned:

[N]aming, always originating in a place (the chora, space, ‘topic,’ subject-predicate), is a replacement for what the speaker perceives as an archaic mother—a more or less victorious confrontation, *never finished with her*. By indicating, as precisely as possible, how the units and minimal operations of any language . . . *revive, model, transform, and extend the pregnancy* that still constitutes the ultimate limit of meaning . . . (291 italics mine)

Therefore, meaning doesn’t exist in “objective reality” but in “subjective community” with the fertile operation that prepares a human being to name his or her experience of place and character. The process of situating (which involves the naming of “place and character”) begins in a space—the womb—and since this speaker is a situated inhabitant, dependent upon an Other, he or she remains semiotically creative and subjective in an “extended pregnancy” or community with others. These Others, according to Harris, include all things that live in the speaking subject’s world. Harris’s narrative, his use of language is healing because it includes the archaic, never finished, confrontation with the (m)other, in rivers, vessels, and umbilical cord “nooses.”

The most extended metaphor throughout *Palace* is the “noose.” Harris explains the noose as a “haunting”⁹ presence in his “Note” preceding the 1988 edition of *Palace*. Harris is certainly “difficult”: his tendency to explain his work threatens to deflect explanation towards potentially misleading authorial intention.

The umbilical cord is the conduit through which a fetus is nurtured. However, the umbilical cord can also kill the baby, particularly during the birth process. The “noose” is first alluded to by Harris in the novel’s first paragraph: “The horseman gave a bow to heaven like a hanging man to his executioner” (*Palace* 19 italics mine). A gate is a “warning taller than a hanging man whose toes almost touched the ground” (21). The narrator experiences a moment of vertigo that might remind one of hanging or of being in the womb: “The trees rose around me into upward flying limbs where I screwed my eyes to stare from underneath above. At last I lifted my head into a normal position” (29). Later, “a burst of congealed lightning hung suspended in the atmosphere” as “seasons and years had wrenched from [Donne] this violent belt of youth to reshape a noose in the air” (49). Less violently and addressed to more generative powers, “Something had freed them and lifted them out of the deeps, a blessing and a curse . . . like a dreaming sword that had cut them from the womb” (55). The noose nurtures Donne’s life when he slips on the wall of the waterfall: “He slipped and gasped on the misty step and a noose fell around his neck from which he dangled until . . . he had regained a breathless footing” (101). Therefore, the “noose” as an agent of abjection and the abject semiotic in birth has the capacity to nurture and to harm.

Another narrative trait that marks *Palace* is Harris’s compounded use of coordinating conjunctions. His favorite is “and,” which is used often to link binaries. One might pick any page of the novel: “They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the

pursuer and the pursued all together . . . ” (62). “[A]nd that their living desire was ambivalent and confused as the origin of the first command they dimly recalled and knew in the grave of memory” (55). Perhaps the most surreal vision in *Palace* is: “Tall trees with black marching boots and feet were clad in the spurs and sharp wings of a butterfly” (113). Harris’s parataxis echoes Biblical syntax: perhaps he is rewriting one book’s account of humankind’s fall, wandering, redemption, salvific vision but within a heaven already married to earth.

(f) *Palace* and its Others in *The Guyana Quartet*

“If you can't imitate him, don't copy him.”—Yogi Berra

Palace of the Peacock was the first novel in a quadrilogy by Harris. In chronological order these novels included, after *Palace*, *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962), and *The Secret Ladder* (1963). In 1985, these novels were compiled in *The Guyana Quartet*. Vis à vis the “Others” in *The Guyana Quartet*, *The Palace of the Peacock* is the seminal work. While my preference for *Palace* is subjective, I will briefly examine these Others relative to *Palace*.

All of the novels in *The Quartet* commence with dream sequences with the exception of Fenwick’s meditative state in *The Secret Ladder*. In *Palace*, the narrator begins, “I dreamt I awoke” (*GQ* 19). “Oudin knew it was still a dream” (123) in *The Far Journey of Oudin*. In *The Whole Armour*, “Abram dreamed he was crawling in a wood (243). Fenwick undergoes “mental punctures . . . with the parody of self-abuse and violent reflection and fateful recrimination” (357-58). The narrative technique of the dream or meditative state in each novel blurs the boundaries between the multiple realities it invokes. The persistence of dream

states throughout *The Quartet* is a *type* of “possession dancing.” Victoria Toliver writes that, “For both *Vodun* and Macusi communities possession dancing provides a meaningful form for expressing the coexistence of spiritual and physical entities within a shared body in space” (174-75). (I expressly insist *type* because in possession or trance states, one is, from my understanding, not asleep. Of course, I’m not sure that any Harrisian dreaming character is asleep either. I do not want to make an assertion of relationship that I sense but cannot equate as *the same as*, even if Toliver seems to want to move in that direction; my mediating, conscious *mambo* stays me from such perilous leaps.)¹⁰

The Far Journey of Oudin, suffers a sophomore slump relative to *Palace*. A possible cause of the novel’s failure (compared to *Palace*) is that it deals essentially with one people of Guyana, East Indians. Harris simply seems to work better and achieve his goal of a collective community rebirthed in potentiality when he deals with immensely mixed ethnicities. Although the origin of Oudin is mysterious and he does defeat the devilish money lender, Ram, akin to the way in which Ti-Jean defeats the devil in Walcott’s *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, the book does not yield redemption, or hope via cultural rebirth, even in Beti’s impregnation by the dead Oudin or by her eating Oudin’s contract with Ram, which would, if Ram could find it, deliver her and her child to Ram’s greedy possession. Since Ram will never find the written contract because the illiterate Beti has learned to eat the *word* of the more literate elite, the word which is sure to disserve her, perhaps there *is* hope that Beti will give light to a new being who may redeem her from her indentured servitude. As East Indian dialectic in and with the West Indies, *The Far Journey of Oudin* is certainly more *hopeful* than V.S. Naipaul’s treatment of the East Indian in the West Indies. Harris’s shortcoming in *Oudin* might be a result of the spiritual applied to extreme materialism, which is not an

exclusively Harrisian flaw—indeed he may be pointing out to us that one can simply not serve two masters of which the most prized is mammon. Therefore, if radical cupidity in the face of confused spirituality is a premise of the novel, Harris mirrors the discontent of our global culture: greed is normalized, money is god, and we flounder spiritually. Jeremy Poyting argues that *Oudin*'s materialism demonstrates the “entrepreneurial spirit” with which East Indian characters confront “their uprooted condition” (110). But what is entrepreneurial about killing one's mentally retarded half-brother in order to inherit one's father's estate? Stephanos Stephanides's contention that Beti represents Kali, as devourer and bearer of life seems insufficient. (133). The relationship is visible, yet two moments in the novel (one in which she eats the contract which would enslave her to Ram and another when she becomes pregnant with Oudin's child) do not support Stephanides's over-reaching statement. *Oudin* is also replete with reduplicative adjectives revealing lexical and dialectical similarities to *Palace*.

The Whole Armour is more easily comparable to *Palace*'s optimistic vision. *Armour* rarely uses adjectival reduplication; the characters are of mottled ancestry. The assignment of a singular meaning to the Harrisian text is an exercise in futility. *The Whole Armour* comes closest to expounding upon something Harris once stated in an interview with Mark Williams and Alan Riach: ““You know I'm not a member of any church, though I would claim to be a kind of Christian Gnostic, if you like”” (56). Harris describes the Church as tyrannical and in collusion with “suppliers of machinery of war or have stimulated in the commercial field gross, materialistic ambitions” (*Selected Essays of Wilson Harris* 256) In *Armour*, Abram is the possible father of the bastard-child Cristo. Cristo's mother is Magda, a prostitute. Cristo is in love with Sharon, as in the rose of Sharon, and as in the fertile land promised to God's

chosen people in the Bible. Sharon is beautiful, but every man who loves her dies, except Cristo. Sharon's father Peet as in Peter, the metaphorical rock of the metaphorical church accidentally kills her second fiancé, Mattias. Mattias may be a cloaking for John the Beloved.¹¹ Cristo wanders for forty days in the jungle where he has a spiritual experience (he ostensibly kills the tiger or jaguar within him) and returns to impregnate Sharon and to face the authorities who seek him. The redemption in *Armour* is generational as evinced in Cristo's insistence to Sharon that

We've got to pick up the seeds again where they left off. It's no use worshipping the rottenest *tacouba* and tree-trunk in the historic top-soil. There's a whole world of branches and sensation we've missed, and we've got to start again from the roots up even if they look like nothing. Blood, sap, flesh, veins, arteries, lungs, heart, the heartland, Sharon. *We're the first potential parents who can contain the ancestral house.* (GQ 334-35)

Even with a cursory reading of the Judeo-Christian Bible, one can assign *some* Judeo-Christian interpretation to this novel, given that its title comes from *Ephesians* and is quoted in the epigram preceding the novel. Yet Gregory Shaw in offers other significations that are intriguing. He enlists Blake's "lost child" with Amerindian folktales of tigers or jaguars that steal and raise children, while combining these conceits with T.S. Eliot's association of Christ with the tiger and the supplanting of the Aztec Quetzalcoatl myth (in which Quetzalcoatl returns) with the conquering Euro-myth of Christ's return as references for Cristo's character. Magda is a "perverted totem" and "castrator of her own children" while Sharon is "a chaste Diana . . . the white witch of the land" (111). While Shaw uses Western poets to meld Cristo with Quetzalcoatl, he avoids any and all Judeo-Christian significance in

Armour. My understanding is that a new and distinctly hybrid generation of people will be born of Sharon. The reader may assume that the young Cristo is captured by the jungle-police and dies but lives on in Sharon's child. Shaw's interpretation demonstrates referential possibilities *and* shows how far many critics go in order to avoid Judeo-Christian meaning in Harris's work.

The Secret Ladder contains a host of racially mixed characters who speak in reduplicative language. The gist of the story is that Fenwick, an educated urbanite, a river surveyor of East Indian, African, English, French, and Amerindian ancestry, comes to a realization that as a tool of the government, he is killing his ancient African father's (Poseidon) remaining descendents by taking measurements of the river's motions. The government of Guyana intends to flood the Canje River and its savannahs, where Poseidon's people eke out an existence. *Ladder* is the most "realistic" of the novels in the *Quartet*, except that—as Nathaniel Mackey argues—one cannot move beyond Poseidon's name. His name is a dub extracted from "Greco-expectant aspects" that "exemplify a colonizing reverie" for Atlantis (Mackey 123). *Ladder* is Harris's most self-reflective novel in the *Quartet*. Harris seems to identify closely with his character Fenwick, who is ignorant of the ways of the poorer men of his crew. They want to be told what to do. Fenwick doesn't understand this concept. He wants to be democratic and peaceful but has no respect for his crew's manner of living, which demands thievery and violence. Although these men steal, cheat, and beat their women, they do not want to see the land flooded. Fenwick must learn that he is more violent than his men, to whom he secretly thinks himself superior: he must climb Poseidon's "secret ladder of conscience however crumbling and extreme the image was" (*GQ* 371) in order to understand that his actions are not isolated from the marginalized

or from the main. Relative to the other novels, the most different aspect encountered in *The Secret Ladder* is Harris's dry humor. His wit is not an authorially self-effacing presence until this novel. In one frame of the novel, for instance, Fenwick is discussing his encounter with Poseidon with Stoll, a member of the crew: "I met someone in the river. The meeting disturbed me in a way I had never been before." Stoll comments that he doesn't understand Fenwick, who responds, "I realized at the time—in a way I had never seen it before—that we all sink or swim together." Stoll responds, "It all sounds like Greek to me, Mr. Fenwick." An African man named Poseidon? The name of Fenwick's dinghy is *Palace of the Peacock*. *The Palace of the Peacock*, by contrast, is not humorous but abjectly sublime. What is graceful about *The Secret Ladder* is that over a period of years and after success as a novelist, Harris has learned to laugh at himself as he writes his "redemption songs."

III

Infinite Closure: Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and the Abject Sublime

"Then like the blind man that God gave back his sight/ Praise the lord I saw the light."—Hank Williams, Sr. from "I Saw the Light"

"I can see clearly now the rain is gone/ I can see all obstacles in my way/ Here is that rainbow I've been praying for/ It's gonna be a bright bright sun shiny day"—Johnny Nash from "I Can See Clearly"

Another author, Flannery O'Connor, is very capable of self-effacing and sardonic humor aimed at . . . any uncritical, unthinking person. Her short story "Revelation" (1965) parallels *Palace* in that her antagonist, Mrs. Ruby Turpin, is spiritually evolved into a protagonist, as were Donne, his dreaming-twin narrator, and his crew. O'Connor constructs her version of the abject sublime on the soil of the Southern United States, whose literature can be usefully be seen as a variety of the postcolonial (primarily but not exclusively because of the legacies of plantation slavery) and culturally affiliated with Caribbean literature. The arc of New World texts to which I have applied Kristevan paradigms, extends to an area and a practice close to home and close to who I am and might be as a writer and a human being.

A condition necessary for redemption, as was witnessed in the nested sequence of deaths by falling into water in *Palace*, is a descent into some kind of void or hellishly elusive and unbearably frustrated desire for contact with some power(s) that might ease the pain of existential crisis. In *Mystery and Manners* (1960), O'Connor explains that the South has experienced "the Fall":

When Walker Percy won the National Book Award, newsmen asked him why there were so many good Southern writers and he said, 'Because we lost the War.' He didn't mean by that simply that a lost war makes good subject

matter. What he was saying is that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country. (59)

O'Connor goes on to say that the Southerner is doubly blessed with "the Fall, [and] in having means to interpret it In the South we have, in however attenuated a form, a vision of Moses' face as he pulverized our idols" (59). When asked why Southerners tend to write about grotesques and freaks, she replied, "Because we are still able to recognize one" (44). Not *all* white Southerners share this sense of "fallen guilt" and need for redemption for the hubris that permitted the enslavement of Africans and the colonization of Indian nations. One hears the ignorant protestation, "*I didn't do it!*" from people who believe in the linearity of time and/or assume that because African-Americans can eat with whites (in the same fast-food restaurant at which African-Americans often work), "slavery" is over. These are the same people who might feel a bit more kindly toward the Indian and who assuage their sense of responsibility to the colonized Indian by thinking that the Indian is doing very well economically with gambling establishments.

If *any* deity can so love the *world*, then it stands to *reason* that the same deity can hold the *world* accountable. Harris addresses the issue of accountability and redemption in Donne's evolution on the wall of the waterfall. There, Donne realizes that although he is of mixed ancestry, he has colonized Others. On the waterfall's wall he looks into himself and sees "with unflinching clarity" that "all his life he had loved no one but himself" (*Palace* 107). Immediately after he achieves this admission of accountability, the terrible "longing" he felt only a page earlier is transformed into a freedom from "material restraint and

possession” (108). Thus, Donne, who longs for a presence to replace his admitted selfishness, is accountable for that selfish behavior, and is thereby freed from his abjection by his attainment of the abject sublime. Abjection, in *Palace* and in “Revelation,” is the agency through which hopelessly abject characters are redeemed.

In “Revelation” Mrs. Ruby Turpin enters a doctor’s squalid waiting room. She is a respecter of social class, dress, hard work, and faux manners. A five-or-six-year-old boy’s “nose ran unchecked” as Mrs. Turpin pushes her husband, Claud into the one empty seat in the abject waiting room (213): “The table was cluttered with limp-looking magazines and at one end of it there was a big green glass ash tray full of cigarette butts and cotton wads with little blood spots on them” (214). Mrs. Turpin enters into a conversation with a “stylish lady” and they both discuss being blessed with “good dispositions” even if they both declare a need “to reduce.” Turpin is over-weight. Jeffrey Folks writes that Turpin’s large size indicates her “[Struggle] to escape the imprisonment of her obese body and of her opinionated mind” (Folks 114). O’Connor’s story is replete with such symbolism.

Beside the “stylish lady” sat a “fat girl of eighteen or nineteen, scowling into a thick blue book . . . entitled *Human Development*. The girl raised her head and directed her scowl at Mrs. Turpin as if she did not like her looks” (215). This young, “fat” girl with abject acne, continues to scowl at Mrs. Turpin, who smiles at the girl but continues to survey the room. “Leathery” old women are dressed in feed-sack material, with “lank-faced” younger women whose lips are snuff-stained. They are “white-trashy” according to Mrs. Turpin’s thoughts, and “worse than niggers any day” (216). In the background, a black gospel hymn is on the radio. Mrs. Turpin continues her social stratification by examining people’s shoes. When she can’t sleep at night, she is obsessed with who she would have been had she not been herself,

if “Jesus” had given her a choice of being a “nigger or white-trash.” She always concludes that she would rather be a “clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (217). Also when Mrs. Turpin can’t sleep, she names “the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been . . . and then next to them . . . were white-trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-and-land owners” to which she and her husband belong. Above them were people with more money and bigger houses, but this is the point where Mrs. Turpin always gets confused because the richest man in town is a “colored dentist.” Ultimately she falls asleep scrambling all the classes together in a box car, “being ridden off to be put in a gas oven” (217). Mrs. Turpin is unaware that her classificatory actions are not in keeping with her professed religiosity, because she *too* would be exterminated in her obsessive dream. Donne and his narrating twin brother also obsessively “dream” of superior socio-economic status over the folk. They too are not conscious of the likelihood that a ruled people will rebel against their oppressors: “Rule the land,” Donne tells his brother-narrator-double, “and you rule the world (*Palace* 23).

Turpin’s attention turns to the daughter of the “stylish lady,” the young woman who smirks and scowls at her, while she thinks others in the room should have purchased “a wash rag and some soap” with their green stamps. One of the “white trash” women comments upon how “nasty” and “stinking” hogs are. Turpin is offended, because she and Claud have a clean hog pen: “They’re cleaner than some children I’ve seen,” she says, and “cleaner by far than that child right there,” she thinks (220). Obsessed by her sanitized hogs, Turpin will ultimately come to her revelation leaning on the rail of the pristine pen and looking into it as though she were receiving “light-giving knowledge” (237). In *Palace*, Jennings, in control of

the outboard on Donne's boat, either dreams that he sees or actually sees a tapir, an animal that looks and behaves much like a hog. He believes that the tapir is crucial to the crew's survival: "if we find the door where the wild tapir pass we can land and live" (*Palace* 95). Thus, in *Palace* and in "Revelation" the swine family provides a means to possible survival and redemption.

In the doctor's abject waiting room, Turpin and the "stylish lady" continue their judgmental conversation wherein Others are damned. The young girl with the book is becoming increasingly angry. Little wonder. "Mary-Grace goes to Wellesley College," the "stylish lady" says. "In Massachusetts," she adds "with a grimace" (223). Mary-Grace knows too well the abject hypocrisy in which she was raised and to which she has returned for the summer. Mrs. Turpin thinks that having lived up North has not helped Mary-Grace's manners (225). Indeed, perhaps "up North" she is learning about more tolerant development in human beings. The "stylish lady" continues to accost Mary-Grace indirectly as an ungrateful child who complains and can't take criticism (226). Mrs. Turpin is giving thanks to Jesus aloud, repeatedly, for her good nature and her gratitude, when Mary-Grace throws the book, *Human Development* at Turpin, and then physically attacks her (227). Folks writes that the title of the book that is thrown at and hits Turpin "implies Ruby's belittling defensiveness" and its "origin in a fear of or resistance to development, an unwillingness to acknowledge the spiritual and moral dimensions of which she, and all human beings, are capable. Ruby's denial of her potential is tied to fear of self-relinquishment" (Folks 117). On the wall of the waterfall, in *Palace*, Donne is redeemed by his relinquishment of Self. Paralleling "Revelation" with *Palace*, "Mary-Grace" can be related to "Mariella" as an

untamed, abject catalyst through which Turpin may come to recognize the wrongs she has done to others.

An addled Turpin looks down on a restrained Mary-Grace, peering directly into her eyes. An epiphanic moment occurs for Mrs. Turpin as she looks into the girl's eyes: "There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did *know* her, *knew* her in some intense and personal way beyond time and place and condition" (228 italics mine). Mrs. Turpin wants to know if Mary-Grace has anything to say to her. This is the indirect way that a "lady" asks for an apology. And Mary-Grace, the double to Mrs. Turpin, does have something to say: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (228).

Because Turpin *does* believe that Mary-Grace *knows* her, the young woman's abject imperative haunts Turpin. That evening at sunset, Turpin goes to the hog pen, as if to prove or to disprove the statement of Mary-Grace, or Mary Full of Grace. She reviews a litany of people she could have been, lazy, white-trash, "filthy," to have deserved Mary-Grace's remark. She is watering down her hygienic hogs with a hose, questioning how she can be saved, bound for heaven, and from hell at the same time, screaming down into the pasture when finally she demands of God, "Who do you think you are?" (237)

Mrs. Turpin remains with her head bent, staring at the hogs in the dim light of the pen, "as if she was absorbing some abysmal light-giving knowledge" (237). She raises her head to the sky with only a purple streak left in it, and raises her "her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes":

She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first

time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And *bringing up the end* of the procession was a *tribe* of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that *even their virtues were being burned away*. (238 italics mine)

The language in the above passage is remarkably reminiscent of that which Harris employs in the revelatory and redemptive denouement of *Palace*. In “Revelation” semiotic Otherness in the New Southerner represented by Mary-Grace literally strikes the symbolically ordered Otherness of the Old South represented by Turpin, and collapses the latter world and character upon itself in an epiphanic moment of Self and Other recognition. Both texts conclude with a celestial body of redeemed persons. Antagonistic characters evolve into abjectly sublime protagonists.

Concluding Discussion

The crucial point of this thesis is that certain literatures engage with abjection, do not judge abjection, and do instructively mirror the impact of abject behaviors on our and others' lives. It is my resolute belief that the study of literature, more than the study of any other social science, may teach us, as readers, how to conduct ourselves in relationship with an other(s). Through literary characters' actions, in fallen antagonists, we may perceive our wrongs done unto self and other. And via deep connections with literature, we may share an epiphanic and healing moment with redeemed protagonists. By way of art's joyous and instructive functions, we may see ourselves as we are, and thus we may amend our harmful thoughts and behaviors.

In order to acquire this level of consciousness, we must have enacted what Kristeva calls "the thetic phase" of human development. The abject begins to become sublime when we utilize our behaviors born in/of abjection and develop a thesis, "I am. And because I am, I exist in relationship to others." We then pass through the symbolic order with this thesis imbued with semiotic powers of imagination. While the imagination of the semiotic order disrupts the logic of the symbolic order, the symbolic order regulates the unruliness of the semiotic. The thesis may be refashioned: "I am, and because I am, I have the capacity to hurt myself and others. Intentionally harmful behaviors are not creative and are unethical." Thus, we may behave in ways that are creative and ethically focused in the abject sublime.

Yet, for many people, and in varying degrees, the symbolic order's superego capacity is inflated in order to compensate for the thesis that was never stated. A symbolic and wonderfully legislative capacity is tilted toward tyranny. An inauthentic symbolic order is likely to tell us that if we have behaved hurtfully, certainly we were provoked: our rage may

be rationalized in *this* symbolic order that is *not* one. Our self-absorption may be glorified as self-preservation in this substitution for the symbolic order. Such a pseudo symbolic order permitted the brutal behaviors of New World colonizers: Banister pretends to represent order but is the vicious leader of the band of colonizing thugs who dismember Oroonoko. Donne fakes a symbolically ordered management of the folk when, indeed, he is their tormentor. Ruby Turpin plays God and designates, based on class and race, the earthly status of others; her social stratifications thereby justify her treatment of others. Although unregulated selfishness is often a human trait, nevertheless, this attribute does not preserve the self but destroys the self and others. Rage is of the semiotic: it is irrational and hurtful. The symbolic order is critical to our ethical development but when it only mimics order, it becomes an agent of unfettered violence and of harmful disorder. We may be redeemed from hurtful, disorderly behaviors by renewal, by beginning again in the abject semiotic which allows us to be human, but also urges us to state our position in a thetic phase that declares a self and its desires relative to the presence of others. We move on into the symbolic order, still imaginative and semiotically ordered and thus receptive to the seeds of higher levels of ethical conscientiousness. A radical transformation in the symbolically ordered sublime, influenced by the receptive semiotic, creates a generously divine human form that enables us to perceive a heaven on earth, an infinity that *does* exist both within our selves and within others. Behn's narrator brushes against this healing vision but pulls away from it, while Harris in *Palace* and O'Connor in "Revelation" maintain a perception of reality wherein the abject fallen may sublimely rise in a paradise of creativity, consciousness, and conscientiousness. I invoke the reader to look through the page, across the window of literature to perceive a reality that refuses to accept the end of humankind.

Notes

¹ The thetic phase, according to Kristeva (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 48-9), occurs after the mirror stage and precedes entry into the symbolic order. The thetic phase consists of a breaking away from the semiotic in which a human being positions him or herself as a Subject and with identification distinct from that of his or her primary caregivers. Necessarily, (because the subject has not yet be effected by the symbolic but has been created from the semiotic) thetic rupture involves the semiotic order's breaking into the symbolic order and disrupting the symbolic.

² In this sense, the first purportedly realistic English novel evinces the discursive traits of the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias's magical realism in his 1949 masterpiece, *Hombres de Maíz/Men of Corn*. Oroonoko's character predicts Gaspar Ilóm and Márquez's Buendía family's apocalyptic end in *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967)/*One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1969).

³ Desidere from the Latin means to cut into or away from a thing in order to distinguish it from its whole (*OED*).

⁴ Wilson Harris quoted in Rowell. Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Wilson Harris," *Callaloo* 18.1 (1995): 196.

⁵ *Kyk-over-al* is taken from the name of a 1.5 acre-island at the junction of the Mazaruni and Cuyuni Rivers in Guyana. < <http://www.landofsixpeoples.com/news02/nc205059.htm>>.

⁶ Jean-Pierre Durix discusses the difficulties and joys of translating Harris into the French: "Like the characters in the novel, I had to be 'crushed at the bottom of the waterfall' of language in order to appreciate the marvellous openness of Harris's expression." Jean-Pierre Durix, "Translating Wilson Harris," *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*, ed. Michael Gilkes (London: Macmillian, 1989) 95.

⁷ Plot is also an essential term used in surveying. Harris was a surveyor and encountered the agents that caused him to think in terms of parallel realities relative to narrative structure within Guyana's interior in his capacity as a surveyor.

⁸ This quotation is from "Author's Note" amended for the 1988 edition of *The Palace of the Peacock*. Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988) 11.

⁹ 10.

¹⁰ A mambo is a priestess in Vodun who guides the “initiate” in a trance or possession dance, among her other positions as leader in ritual. The reason I insist that Harris’s characters may be as asleep as they are awake when in the novel(s) it is implied that they dream, for instance, is because Harris believes that we live in interstices between realities: we, thus negotiate our lives in the twilights or cracks between the worlds of day and night, according to his idea of quantum phenomenon that I have addressed in this thesis.

¹¹ In *Acts* 1:23-26 Luke writes that two men among them were appointed to bear witness of the resurrection, because Judas was not “available” to be an apostle. The younger John is not accounted for in Luke’s roll call of those present in *Acts* 1:12-14. Thus, John the Beloved might be disguised as Mattias in 1:26. What is *interesting* is that Harris is probably aware of this masking of the John who theoretically wrote *Revelation*. I think it’s convenient that Peet kills Mattias/John as the first lover of Sharon, as the writer of *Revelation*, particularly since I think Harris revises John’s vision in *Palace*. The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Herbert G. May (New York: Oxford UP, 1977).

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