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TIME AND TRANSLATIONAL IDENTITIES IN WILSON HARRIS'S THE TREE OF THE SUN

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Abstract: *Identity constitutes a key concept in twentieth-century and contemporary Caribbean literature; the notion of an exchange or translation of identity manifests a cultural necessity to overcome barriers, such as those separating racial and ethnic groups, economic classes, language differences, sexual and gender roles, or a sense of exile and marginality. In broad terms, these de facto and imagined crossings of barriers express Caribbean writers' desire to go beyond the impasse of the present: to redefine identity, reinterpret history, and put forth a new vision of human relationships. In *The Tree of the Sun* (1978) Harris uses myth and the metaphor of life writing as frameworks for time travel; the novel's protagonist, Da Silva da Silva, a painter of historical and mythic scenes and a biographer of the deceased former residents of his London flat, imaginatively enters into others' lives, crossing the barriers separating the living and the dead and bringing together Old World and New.*

The notion of an exchange or translation of identity serves as a key concept in Caribbean literature, whether in French, Spanish, or English. Such exchanges or translations manifest the desire to cross barriers, such as those separating racial and ethnic groups, economic classes, speakers of different languages, sexual and gender roles of men and women, generations (the young from the old), places (Old World and New) and time (the living from the dead). In broad terms, these de facto and imagined crossing of barriers—which Wilson Harris likens to the difficult and painful movement of the limbo dancer beneath the limbo stick—expresses Caribbean writers' project to go beyond the impasse of the present: to redefine identity, reinterpret history, and put forth a new vision of what it means to be human. In order to do this, time and space must also be conceived of differently—translated into the universals of myth, legend, and the marvellously real without stripping away the particulars of locale, events, and individuals. H.G. Wells gave us the time traveller; Harris, using the metaphor of life writing as a framework, gives us narrators and characters whose identities enable them to experience other lives (cultures and epochs) and to integrate human time within cosmic time. In *The Tree of the Sun* (1978) Harris's painter-protagonist, Da Silva da Silva, becomes a biographer of the deceased former residents of his London flat. Perusing their journal, letters, and photos, which he finds hidden behind a wall in his apartment, da Silva imaginatively enters into their lives, crossing the barriers separating the living and the dead and bringing together Old and New World histories. In its narrative structure and pervasive referencing of myth and literary reflections on time, the novel collapses past, present, and future into a single, mythopoeic interweaving of cycles of creation. We find a similar pattern in other Harris novels such as *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), *The Secret Ladder* (1963), *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), and *Jonestown* (1996), and this is certainly one of his trademarks.

In these novels Harris reconfigures various concepts of time, which may be discussed in terms of the following differentiations: 1) human time versus cosmic time, 2) existential or phenomenological time, and 3) calendar time and historical time versus phenomenological time. Human time contrasts with cosmic time; the former is limited to an individual life span, while the latter stretches into the unimaginable realm of billions of years. Harris integrates the individually human into the grand scheme of

cosmic time by way of myth and legend, and by metaphors linking human and natural creation. In terms of the second demarcation, existential or phenomenological time, Harris expands the common notion of human time by way of the metaphor of life writing (i.e., the power of story) and by a drawing out of interrelationships, translational relationships, between individuals. These strategies of narration enable Harris to enlarge the existential experience of the individual, expanding it across different generations (and epochs) and across communities and continents. Thirdly, calendar or historical time contrasts with phenomenological time; Harris breaks away from linear time and its overemphasis on the non-recursive nature of all time. He depicts an existential, phenomenological time that moves backwards and forwards; this existential time is marked by recursion, where themes and moments of existence occur with repetitive variety. Overall, Harris reconfigures the concept of time as part of a project that re-interprets Caribbean and human identity. This reconfiguration is vital not only to an understanding of the past, and for a sense of justice in the present, but also for a grasping of the possibilities for the future. In this latter sense, Harris could be termed utopian.

Harris's fiction show a keen sense of time as trace (as in artifacts and ruins of vanished cultures), and the existential experience of time expanded and reconfigured through myth and translation of identities. "I have been haunted since childhood in British Guiana, South America . . . by vanished cultures and places and kingdoms," he writes in the "New Preface to *Palace of the Peacock*" (*Selected Essays* 55). The word "haunted" could hardly have been better chosen, for Harris's novels are often preoccupied with the ghostly interplay of absence and presence that these traces of the past evoke. Folklore and myth, which bear witness to the past yet, at the same time, treat universal, timeless themes and evoke the perennial presences of the natural world, can function as translational vehicles that facilitate a movement across the gulf separating the living from the dead, and the past from the present and the future. In Harris's fiction, folklore and myth become bridges across time as well as spatial bridges between the cultures of the Americas and Europe. By way of the "cross-cultural imagination," one of Harris's seminal concepts, an individual can bridge "chasms of time" to become "a vessel of composite epic, imbued with many voices." This imaginative capacity remains paradoxical and fragile, though, because the "multitude is housed . . . in the diminutive surviving entity of community and self that one is" (*Jonestown* 5), and can only be reached by a "plunge" from the familiar self to the stranger within (*The Tree of the Sun* 45-46).

The epigraphs of *The Tree of the Sun*, which are drawn from several sources including Amerindian myth, classical Greek mythology, and modern Western literature (e.g., T.S. Eliot and Shakespeare), establish time and translational identities as the novel's subject matter. In these epigraphs, the human and the cosmic, the ephemeral and the enduring, are juxtaposed; the earth (the human habitat) and the sky (the sempiternal, cosmic background) are brought into relation. The idea of process and journeys is introduced, as well as transformations. Here is the fragment of Amerindian myth from which the novel's title is taken:

During a long series of feuds and battles with the Caribs the Arawaks used to climb into the sky by means of a foodbearing tree. One day their enemies set fire to the tree. It blazed across the ocean and as it fell there was an explosion like thunder. The Indians who remained in the sky turned into stars and formed the constellation of the Pleiades. (*The Tree of the Sun* ii)

The word "Pleiades" derives from the Greek word "to sail";¹ in the context of the novel, this relates to the various journeys and transformations that the characters undergo, especially Francis and Julia Cortez who, by the way, are dead but are brought back to life by da Silva's reading of their letters

¹ The etymology of the modern English word follows a course from Middle English, Latin, and Greek: ME *Pliades* < L *Plīades* < Gk *Pleīades* (sing. *Pleías*); akin to *pleîn* to sail.

and journal. References to the Pleiades and the tree of the sun recur in the various artistic creations that the novel's characters produce, such as paintings, a book, and a play.

The epigraph from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*—
We are born with the dead;
See, they return, and bring us with them.
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew tree
Are of equal duration.

—as well as the epigraph from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: “I must hear from thee every day i' the hour. / For in a minute there are many hours”—highlight different measures of time: time as tradition and inheritance, where boundaries between the living and the dead are traversed; generational, cyclical time; psychological time; and myth as a continuing framework for metaphors of human and cosmic time. The three epigraphs illustrate that, as a concept, time may be set in the plural, for there are different “times” that carry different metaphysical and ontological perspectives. In Harris's novel, the myths and themes introduced in the epigraphs will be mapped onto “correspondence[s] of events” within individual characters' lives; this mapping re-interprets and re-expresses the myths and themes, giving them various narratological and metaphoric expansions and transformations, which in turn give the novel its unity as well as its labyrinthine structure.

One of the themes introduced in the novel's epigraphs is that of death and resurrection, which Harris narratizes in a highly imaginative fashion. Da Silva, in the course of renovating the London flat where he and his wife Jen live, finds hidden within a safe in the wall, a book, letters, and photographs of the former, now-deceased residents of the house, Francis and Julia Cortez. The safe protects the documents from destruction during a fire that occurs in the house fifteen years before da Silva and Jen become its owners, and the documents, figuratively speaking, rise like Phoenix from the flames upon da Silva's discovery of them. Francis Cortez was half Spanish, half black-African; Julia was half English and half West Indian Creole. So it is not difficult for da Silva and his wife, also of mixed blood, to enter imaginatively into the lives of the former residents as they regard the photos and begin to read Francis's book and Julia's letters; da Silva begins to bring the couple back to life in the mural he is painting: he “slipped like a figure of paint himself, painter in sky . . . through the door of the tree of the sun into the previous, long vanished, now suddenly recalled, tenants of the house” (10). The translation of time and identities that take place is two directional: da Silva and Jen return to the past, enter into the lives of the former tenants, and the former tenants themselves return to life in the present in da Silva and Jen. Da Silva is “taken over by them page by page” as he reads their documents and paint them on the mural (11); “a spark” runs across “the divide between the living and the dead, a spark that touch[es] Julia and Francis in their graves within the flesh of a page” (13). These temporal exchanges, by way of the photographs, book, letters, and the mural, constitute a “miracle of transubstantial community” (13).

Art reconfigures time, existing at once as a trace of the past and an ever-changing, reinterpreted present that anticipates the future. Through the translational magic of story, whether folklore, myth, or fiction, readers vicariously live other lives and inhabit other times; in this sense, readers bring the dead back to life as they give birth to the future. In his journal, also entitled *The Tree of the Sun*, Francis Cortez meditates on time as an inexhaustible presence:

Here I am. I died twenty-five years ago. But here I am. I shall die twenty-five years from now perhaps and here I am, large as eternal life, on this side of the grave. It's such a fraction of time, a pinprick of time, in the age of the universe—twenty-five years—that wherever one stands and lives (on this side or the other of the grave) one is resurrected. Wherever time flies—on this bank or the other of the trench of

the sky—the centuries are pinpricks of implicit wholeness or incalculable extension in and beyond each prison of existence. That is freedom, that is the *royalty* of freedom, all men are kings, women queens (18-19)

In this passage Francis, by way of da Silva the reader, crosses the barrier between the dead and the living and asserts that the individual is not bound by his existence to a single narrative identity. He continues his explanation with a shopkeeper he encounters on a stroll in the park: “what I sought to do in my book was to relate myself through you—through others who may come to read it—to the prick of a pin upon which populations move against the inscrutable canvas of the stars. Perhaps a minute, in this context, bridges centuries, on either side of which we stand, as an index of how buried we are in time” (23). This passage juxtaposes human time and cosmic time, which are of such different dimensions that they seem incommensurable. Yet Harris’s novel uses various means, one of which is the theme of translational identities, to make connections between the two realms. Indeed, human time is not just an existential experience; it is a situation of being permeated by history and a cosmic time.

In the novel, the tree of the sun constitutes the principal metaphor of time and transformation; it recurs with variation in the titles of da Silva’s mural, Francis’s journal, and the play performed within the novel itself. The core idea of this metaphor is the engendering of creation and metamorphosis; the sun is a creator—a common theme in Amerindian religion and myth—and the fertile earth, fecundated by the sun, is an abundant provider. Harris translates these ideas into correspondences of contemporary events in individual’s lives, making comparisons between nature’s creation and art’s creation. As da Silva paints a city scene and continues to think about Francis’s and Julia’s life stories, he looks down to the street below, “crowded with a carnival of spectators who slipped in and out of currencies of deaths and lives, of masks and appearances, in and out of the foodbearing tree of the sun” (54-55). The world about da Silva manifests the “miraculous translations of a motivated creator” (54). In terms of the canvas of time that the novel sketches, da Silva’s and others’ artistic creations are analogically linked with nature’s fertility and profusion; myth and ritual (like carnival itself) become mediators between human activity and cosmic time.

In fact, because the metaphors and symbols of myth and ritual are not bound by historical specificity, they can serve as translational vehicles between past, present, and future, and expand the temporal dimension of any moment. As Paul Ricoeur explains in *Temps et récit*, “par la médiation du rite . . . le temps mythique se révèle être la racine commune du temps du monde et du temps des homes. Par sa périodicité, le rite exprime un temps dont les rythmes sont plus vastes que ceux de l’action ordinaire. En scandant ainsi l’action, il encadre le temps ordinaire, et chaque brève vie humaine, dans un temps de grande ampleur” (“by the mediation of ritual . . . mythic time shows itself to be the common root of cosmic and human time. By its periodicity, ritual expresses a time whose rhythms are vaster than those of ordinary [human] actions. In scanning human activity in this manner, ritual frames ordinary time, and each brief human life, within a time of much larger dimensions”) (Vol. 3, 192). In this vein, the character of Julia Cortez, situated in the twentieth century, is portrayed analogously with reference to Arawak and classical Greek ritual and myth and the psychological experience of time’s duration as expressed in the novel’s epigraph from *Romeo and Juliet*. The images shift back and forth between earth and sky and between the human, the inanimate, and the divine:

No wonder she found herself immersed in minutes that were hundreds of years, in which she felt herself both enlarged and diminished as she waited for Francis to return.

No wonder she smoothed her rock skirt and flesh into enterprises of invented car and re-invented ship on which to sail backwards to revived garden parties of her youth, savage symbols, carnival dances, that were in themselves a form of waiting, a form of anticipation, a form of hoping for a secret lover of

infinity buried in ancestral bone and blood, a secret white, a secret black, a secret Carib, a secret Arawak. (70)

Myth “lurks in every man’s heart,” and every man “subconsciously confesses” to this truth, Harris writes; this mediation suffuses human experience with a dignity and an “unfathomable dimension” (82). The resurgence of myth and religion in the twentieth century corresponds to an expanding sense of cosmic time and a diminishing sense of human importance in the grand scheme of things; it is the challenge of art to translate existential time into a framework commensurate with the universal. In *Black Marsden* Harris writes: “[E]very correspondence of events within an individual life [i]s an implicit and secret dramatization of buried universal themes. . . .” (103). Because myth is the storehouse of “universal themes” in the form of symbols and narratives, a writer can draw from this resource to bring about a rapprochement of the contemporary individual and the transcultural and cosmic. A cross-cultural imagination facilitates the task, making connections between disparate epochs, peoples, and events and drawing out the universal in the particular.

As the narrative unfolds, the time-scheme of *The Tree of the Sun* becomes a labyrinth in which past, present, and future intersect, with the final chapter bringing together the human and the cosmic in processes of transformation. On one level of narrative time, the painter Da Silva da Silva is reading the letters and journal of Julia and Francis Cortez, the deceased, former tenants of his London apartment; on a second level (the past recollected in the present), Julia and Francis’s story unfolds, one of whose settings is the Caribbean island Zemi; on a third level (in a projected future that turns out to be an uncanny present), a play entitled “The Tree of the Sun” is being performed on a West End stage called The Pleiades and the time is “the first decade of the twenty-first century” (91). In the novel’s conclusion, then, past, present, and future are brought together, and the living and the dead trade places. The three different time-levels become intertwined, for the characters performing the play include da Silva and his wife, who act the parts of Francis and Julia; retrospectively, the action of the entire novel might be situated in a future time that is itself enclosed within the time of a literary work, the twenty-first century play that is being performed. On the second level of time, a past recollected, Julia and Francis prepare to sail away from the Caribbean island of Zemi, and this departure stands as a metaphor for their deaths and, as in creation myths, their metamorphosis. We recall here again that that word “Pleiades” derives from the Greek word meaning “to sail”; “I have no memory of dying,” Julia says, “except in an endless procession of turbulences. One disembarks. One embarks again upon another ship. One’s here. One’s not here. . . . A procession of turbulences” (89). In these and other passages, Harris seeks to draw out the mythic dimension within common experience and to reflect on the nature of time and change, fundamental themes at the core of myth. Julia inquires meditatively:

Why leave? Why not live forever upon a static gate, static punishment without reward, static reward without end, static exile? . . .

Why move at all, why begin to die, across the ages one has constructed from deathless lives? To fulfil perhaps a theatre of nature that appears to be finished yet remains unfinished. (90)

Harris sketches the metamorphosis of the human into nature and the cosmos through symbolic names, metaphors, and other translations of the core idea of myths. For example, Julia and Francis are accompanied in their departure by Julia’s great-aunt, Sky, who walks with the aid of a cane, “rain’s multiple stick,” and who has “territorial and oceanic children” (87, 91). In her final words, Julia says to Sky: “I shall be like you, great-aunt. . . . And when my children ring from a static sea or a static mountain I shall tell them to come home, I shall tell them that home is always another journey. . . .” (91). Julia is

translated into the myths of earth, sky, and ocean; Francis, who is described as “descended from the stars” (93), holds Julia in his arms, and the ship sails away:

the prow of the great ship began to move forward, the water surged and swelled and a chorus of voices, the chorus of incarnation or human orchestra, filled the air with presences.
“Away,” cried the voices, “away, away, away.” The ship moved on and outward into the sun. (94)

This chorus of voices turns into the acclamation and applause of the audience who have watched the play, “The Tree of the Sun,” in twenty-first century London.

The novel’s conclusion bears some resemblances with Harris’s *Palace of the Peacock*’s, in which the crew of a ship experience a mystical celebration of life; in *The Tree of the Sun* the emphasis moves away from the human and toward an interrelatedness of the human, the natural, and the cosmic—toward a reconfiguration of different dimensions of time: existential, historical, and cosmic. In its labyrinthine manner, the novel translates the core idea of the epigraph’s Amerindian and Greek myths into correlations with events in the lives of the novel’s characters, who are at once living and dead, identities translated by the power of the word and the cross-cultural imagination. For Harris, the world is unfinished, always in transformation; a mythopoeic vision of its transformations allows us to plunge, like limbo dancers, across the boundaries that fix us in narrow identities enclosed by conventional notions of time and place.

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