Wilson Harris and Human Alienation
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Duane Edwards is a 3rd year student at the University of Guyana reading for a degree in Sociology. He is the President of the University of Guyana Students Society (UGSS). Taking Hegel's circular epistemology as his starting point in the analysis of Caribbean experience, Edwards is convinced that the psyche of the West Indian people has been short-circuited forcing them to develop legal, political and economic systems with the symbolic inputs of European exploitation. Therefore, rather than deliberately correcting the history of exploitation in the region, the Caribbean has perpetuated a colonial historical reality in disguised form. Edwards claims that the writings of Wilson Harris are pregnant with incipient ontologies, epistemologies and ethics that are uniquely West Indian and that can be used as the bases of a uniquely Caribbean and West Indian Civilization. He also agrees with Harris that the West Indian people are on a civilization building mission and should be more occupied with that project than with being second and third rate imitators of the projects of others.

Alienation and the Modern World

Few living in the 21st century would deny that human alienation is a defining feature of our age. It can be plausibly argued that no other people have been beset by loneliness, dread, abandonment, despair, and alienation to the same degree as the modern, 21st century subject. Pre-modern humans had their God, their natural environment, kings and queens, tribal chiefs, cultural practices, and most importantly, family and fellow community members. But for the modern subject God is in many ways dead (as echoed by Nietzsche), the natural environment is slowly being destroyed, kings and queens have been dethroned, tribal chiefs have been decimated, cultures have been denigrated, families have been broken apart and fellow members of society (neighbours particularly) are far away even when they are geographically proximate.

But what is alienation and why is it such a dominant theme in modern social, political, and philosophical thought? Moreover, why is it useful conceptually in describing contemporary society? The first question is very important, and sets the stage for this essay. "The fact to which the term alienation refers are objectively, different kinds of dissociation, breaks or ruptures between human beings and

their objects, whether the latter be other persons, or the natural world, or their own creation in art, science and society; and subjectively, the corresponding states of disequilibrium, disturbance, strangeness and anxiety" (Heinemann 9). For the sociologist, this dissociation results from the decline of the limited local community characterized by close interpersonal relationships, extended family structures and group ethics. For Marxists, alienation is caused by private property and a division of labour which fosters atomism and individualism. For others, this rupture results from the modern subject's adjustment to a machine age and a technologically dominated world. While the aforementioned views associate alienation with shifts in the external environment, many philosophers instead attribute it to the finite and isolated character of man's existence as a stranger in the world.

Why is Alienation such a Dominant Theme?

To understand why alienation is such a dominant theme in modern philosophy and society, a comparison of pre-modern and modern societies must be made. Previously, human beings lived in societies that held complex beliefs about God; often God was viewed as an ever-caring father at the apex of communal life. In addition to the belief in God, there was a deep connection with nature as well as meaningful bonds with community members but most importantly, a direct command over the means of subsistence. Modern mass societies, on the other hand, are increasingly atomistic and individualistic. The belief in God, in spite of its spiritual and psychic value, is seen as proof of a weak and unscientific mind, with nature reified and exploited in a quest for material wealth and power. Fellow human beings are viewed instrumentally (they are taken as mere means to an end), and therefore one's commonality with others is protected and regulated by the codices of a hegemonic, systematizing legal system. This basic comparison highlights the reality that humans have become increasingly alone contemporarily, and it is this existential aloneness that haunts them, filling them with despair, abandonment, and detachment.

Harris on the Alienation from Nature

Wilson Harris deals with many topics in his writings, including alienation. His appreciation and response to the crisis of the modern era has many similarities with other 20th century philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, artists and writers. It

cannot be denied however, that Harris' scope and conceptualizing offers us something radically new. One type of alienation Harris addresses in his writings is alienation from nature. For Harris, rainforests are the lungs of the world and the landscapes and riverscapes which have been perceived as passive, as furniture even, or as areas to be 'manipulated,' possess life themselves and are "like an open book and the alphabet...it takes some time to really grasp what this alphabet is, and what the book of the living landscape is" (Harris, 'Selected Essays' 40). The language of the rain forest's interior is a language of silence. This silence which represents for modern subjects a "void in civilization" is, for Harris, filled with music that requires "an inner attunement of ear and eye to sounding waters and painted skies, painted earth." Our inability to attune our ears to the inner music of silence emanating from the landscapes, riverscapes and oceanscapes represents our alienation from nature. This alienation points to a broader 'illiteracy of the imagination' and an inability to read "reality differently from slavish alignment to literal frame or code", that is, to instead read "by way of indirections that diverge from formula or code..." (Harris, 'Jonestown' 204)

It is instructive to quote Harris at length here on his concept of 'silent music':

> When I speak of silent music, I am intent on repudiating a dumbness or passivity with which we subconsciously or unconsciously robe the living world. Living landscapes have their own pulse and arterial topography and sinew which differ from ours but are real – however far-flung in variable form and content – as the human animal's. I am content on implying that the vibrancy or pathos in the veined tapestry of a broken leaf addresses arisen consciousness through linked eye and ear in a shared anatomy that has its roots in all creatures and in everything. (Harris, 'Selected Essays' 44)

The fact that we are not attuned to the 'silent music' and language of the living landscape reflects our alienation and estrangement from nature. This alienation which in of itself might not appear of concern to those who have grown accustomed to viewing the world as human-centered, is nevertheless symptomatic of a more profound problem with humanity – a problem which will be discussed more clearly later on. Harris was also concerned with our failure to listen and attune ourselves to the cry of nature, which if taken seriously, would result in far more eruptions necessitating our

listening ears. Who would doubt that the many violent hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, signs of global warming, food and water crises are anything but nature crying out in a violent language? Harris however was not simply a mere romantic by decrying man's alienation from nature; unlike Rousseau, Harris' ideal man is not a man of the past. Moreover, the destruction of nature and our alienation from it is tied in part to technological developments. It would be absurd to wholly sacrifice these developments simply for the sake of preserving nature in its 'pristine' form. Harris was aware of the unspeakable human benefits derived from utilizing and transforming the resources of the natural world. What he called for instead was the "'re-sensitizing of technology' to the life of the planet" (Harris, 'Selected Essays' 44).

Social and Political Alienation

Hegel's philosophy of man, made clear in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, helps in some ways to frame discussions of 'alienation'. His phenomenology begins with consciousness in relation to its object. For Hegel, consciousness is always intentional – it is always consciousness of something. This something is the object of consciousness. Consciousness then tries to overcome the distinction between itself and its object. This unifying task is achieved in the "law-making operations of the 'understanding' in which the objective law it is dealing with are patently subjective creations" (Kainz 25). It is this same dialectical method that Hegel employs in his *Philosophy of Right*. He begins in civil society, the sphere of universal egoism, where man is threatened by other men who are pursuing their own needs and desires. This threat is overcome by the law-making and unifying operations of the state which represents the final and objective expression of the ethical idea, man in his highest form. But this highest expression of his ethical self represents for man, the individual, an alienation from his fellow man and from himself because the only relation he has with others is a *juridical relation*, a relation held together by civil codices and regulations. Being the highest expression of the ethical self, the state (a patently subjective creation) assumes a life separate from, but absolutely paramount to individuals, families, communities and other social groupings to the extent that "if the particular will [the will of the individual or a social group] is explicitly at variance with the Universal [the state], it assumes a way of looking at things and a volition which are capricious and fortuitous and comes in opposition to the principle of rightness. This is wrong…" (Kainz 64). Right and

wrong, according to Hegel, are concepts only attributable to the state.

Just as nature represents for Hegel an alienation from the 'creative mind,' the all-powerful state for Harris, with its political and legal trappings, represents an alienation for the creative minds who are members of the state. Therefore, according to Harris "in the death of politics... may gestate a seed of revisionary, epic theatre rooted in complex changes in human and animal nature..." (Harris, 'Jonestown' 8). Just as one's alienation from nature is both symptomatic of, and portends alienation from, fellow human-beings, one's alienation from one's fellow human beings reaches its highest expression in the state, and is hence symptomatic of alienation from one's self. Unlike Hegel, Harris possesses an anarchist aversion to systems, structures and the reification of human thought and life. As a thinker with an affinity to the existentialist movement, Harris shares many similarities with Heidegger and Jaspers. Just as Jaspers pays much attention to abnormal and schizophrenic personalities in general, Harris' central concern is the exploration of the disrupted psyche of the West Indian man (Davis 49). Just as Jaspers "attempts to penetrate the reality of possible world-views, and to understand their emergence from certain psychological types from forces which he calls 'ideas'" (Heinemann 59), Harris was also in search of those cross-cultural vectors that link cultures – links found in the cross-cultural imagination, for example.

For Marx and Marxists, the economic expression of this alienation is revealed in the fact that under capitalism, man is reduced to a commodity – his relation with others is also a commodity relation. Even the expression 'market yourself' stripped of any metaphorical undertones, is equivalent to saying 'alienate yourself'. Human beings as makers of commodities become in the process of production a commodity to the extent that it is only one's labour capacities that are valued in bourgeois societies. "Everything is inverted", remarks Heinemann, "what should be a reality, the choice [freedom] of the individual, becomes a mere possibility and what should be a possibility [the commodification of man] parades as a reality" (61). Marx's solution to the commodification of humanity is the socialization of the means of production, achieved by a proletarian revolution. The proletarian class representing the highest expression of exploitation is the only class in Marx's view that can bring about a classless society. Harris appreciated the plight of the working class, the "helplessness of the animal of fate destined

to labour in the promotion of privileges, but never to be accepted as equal participants in sorrow, or joy, or ecstasy of flesh and blood." Unlike Marx however, Harris doubted the ability of the working class to bring about the redemption of humanity. He asks:

> How can the rich save the poor...the poor the rich, the thief the saint, the saint the thief, the judge the judged, the judged the judge unless they discard contentment, or a self-righteous creed [communism], self-righteous parasitism [capitalism], and build dimensions of self-confessional, self-judgmental art, that take them into recesses and spaces that may pull them into and beyond themselves.

It is not that Harris failed to appreciate the capacity of the oppressed to initiate and facilitate projects of redemption, but whenever such people coalesce and become fixated into a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself mentality, what Paget Henry refers to as 'ontic closures', they create other sorts of problems. A failure to recognize this may keep us locked into a deadly cycle of violence.

Harris' Solution to the Problem of Alienation

It might be helpful here to reiterate that for Harris, alienation is in part the comfort and simplicity we embrace which undermines our impulses for freedom. For Harris and many other existentialists, freedom usually comes with too much responsibility; individuals readily prefer a simple, mundane, inauthentic, alienated existence as an escape from the responsibility engendered by freedom. Humans often prefer symmetry and simplicity rather than a tragic fate. To watch a suffering neighbour for example and to stay silent is far easier than speaking out in his/her defence. To place the burden and responsibility of one's neighbour's situation on anything or anyone other than myself is of course, much more comforting. In surrendering our responsibilities consciously or unconsciously, we also surrender our freedom and our humanity, becoming in the process alienated and reified. One is therefore comfortable insofar as one lives in blessed ignorance, separate from the suffering of others.

The Harrisian solution to alienation encourages us to embrace an ethics of freedom and responsibility:

> In an extremely important sense all of Harris' fiction and his criticism since the closing years of the 1970's is an implicit

challenge to each and all of his contemporaries, readers and writers alike, to shake off those crippling parochialisms, and to join him in exploring the increasingly indispensable cross-cultural imperatives of his new revolutionary, re-creative, global, vision." (Hamlet, 207)

Harris' ethics of freedom and responsibility has some similarities with Sartre and Levinas. For all three thinkers, freedom does not necessarily take on the passive meaning of 'absence of restraints', but rather, freedom is active and can only be properly experienced in resisting oppression and systems which perpetuate dehumanization. Thus freedom is not the vulgar, 'everydayness' of being able to go to the supermarket and choose between two brands of goods. Freedom becomes real and meaningful in extreme situations. Man is freedom, but man can only experience himself as such by acting in extreme situations. It is only then that man becomes known to himself.

To understand Harris' ethics of freedom and his response to the problem of alienation, it is helpful to describe his metaphysics. In his *Caliban's Reason*, Paget Henry does a wonderful job of elucidating and making explicit Harris' ontology of consciousness. He begins by highlighting Harris' notion of consciousness. This consciousness should not be confused with Descartes' *cogito* which is used as the starting point of modern analytic philosophy. In Harris' own words, "when I speak of the unconscious [universal consciousness] I'm not only speaking of the human unconscious but of the unconscious that resides in objects, in trees, in rivers. I am suggesting that there is a psyche, a mysterious entity that links us to the unconscious in nature" (quoted in Henry 95). This universal consciousness exists in relation to the particular manifestations of self, society and nature, three spheres of existence with their own laws and quantum codes. Although self, society and nature exist on their own quantum layers and possess their own logic, the Harrisian "consciousness holds the key to their unity, interpenetration and transcendence" (Henry 96). The infinity and the boundlessness of this consciousness place it beyond the grasp of the human intellect which can only access it by means of the traces and images which it leaves behind in its interaction with the ego, society and nature on their respective quantum planes.

Harris' philosophy of the interaction of consciousness and the ego is similar to Sartre's categories of 'being' and 'nothingness'. 'Nothingness' in its interaction with 'being' negates it; similarly,

Harris' consciousness is involved in a kind of affirmation/negation interaction with the ego. The ego is an intentional structure; it is therefore constantly engaged in the creative construction of edifices that become so absolute that it tends to separate itself from the ground of reality upon which it was constructed. Some concrete examples of such ego-establishment on the quantum planes of self, society and nature might provide a further elucidation of Harris' philosophy.

The policeman who tortured a 15 year old boy in Guyana by setting fire to the boy's genitals, all under the pretext of fulfilling a 'police duty' places his partial reality, his alienated self (as a policeman), above his humanity. The state, the modern bureaucracy and capitalist systems which promote absolute rationalization and depersonalization are all manifestations of the collective ego establishing itself and building stone walls around its own existence, all while basking in the illusion that its very partial reality is the only reality. Technological progress which ignores the fragility and vulnerability of nature (which it exploits for raw resources) is an example of ego projection. The ego in all three cases "cut off from the guidance and symbolic inputs of the universal consciousness by its tendencies to ontic closures...imprisons itself in partial and limiting appropriations of reality" (Henry 121). But before the ego can become totally rigidified in the atomic person, the oppressive state, or in insensitive technological progress, consciousness asserts itself and brings about a void by dismantling the edifices of the ego, opening up the ego to new possibilities out of which it can again proceed with its creative activity. Harris' entire metaphysics can be summed up in the anarchist phrase '*destruam et Aedificabo*', or destroy and rebuild; the more absolute the establishment, the more necessary its disestablishment.

As stated earlier, the above summary of Harris' ontology of consciousness is central to understanding his ethics. The Harrisian ethics is one that embraces freedom, responsibility and cross-culturality. For Harris, freedom is not associated with licentiousness and moral perversity. Rather, such perversity "is a measure of alienation [which] we embrace within the gravity of freedom" (Harris, 'Jonestown' 166). Freedom means to resist with the radical and uncompromising imagination all ontic closures, and to open oneself to the infinite possibilities of the Harrisian unconscious. Such ontic closures manifest themselves in a life of everydayness, where one disregards others, or a life that is detached and

unresponsive to manifestations of oppression and discrimination. This is a life in which the individual ego brackets itself from the rest of humanity and becomes morally complacent to the extent that one becomes naturally blind, naturally deaf, and naturally numb to the misfortunes of others. In his own words, "one lives in blessed ignorance of what the other suffers."

This ontic closure can also manifest itself in history as a prison - this is particularly relevant to the Caribbean. Centuries after the *soi disant* (so-called) abolition of slavery and decades after masquerade independence, Caribbean people are still subject to slave institutions, slave politics and slave economics. One comedic manifestation of this tautology of history lies in "winner-take-all" politics in Guyana where the ascension to power of one party seems to be associated with the victory of one race over another. This is comedic in the sense that the "freedom" and "independence" which should have been taken as the opportunities to completely abolish slave institutions established by Europeans are now used as the means to perpetuate those institutions. This is tragic in the sense that the perpetuation of these institutions results in lost lives, poverty, powerlessness, marginalization and further exploitation. Failing to draw upon the resources of the cross-cultural imagination, we become trapped in history, haunted by the apparitions of the dead-in-the-living. "An innermost change in all institutions has to be paid for the gift of freedom..." (Harris, 'Jonestown' 177) or else man himself becomes the price that has to be paid for the irredeemable, unchanging institutions. In other words, either it is institutions which change to accord with the humanity of man or man changes to accord with the inhumanity and insensitivity of unchanging institutions. The following remark by Desmond Hamlet demonstrates Harris' insistence on the need to draw from the resources of the imagination to combat the structuralization of our being.

In all his fiction and his criticisms since Da Silva's cultivated wilderness, Harris skilfully analyzes the complexities and rather urgent imperatives of the cross-cultural imagination, pleading...for a new sensitivity to, and a new awareness of, the crucial necessity for students and practitioners of the creative imagination to convert rooted deprivations into complex parables of freedom and truth (207).

For Harris, freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. To be free is to be responsible, and vice versa. The first phase of responsibility is self-confession and self-judgment. Self-confession entails coming to terms with and being true to oneself. The converse of self-confession is self-deception. Self-deception is another characteristic of an inauthentic and alienated being. Sartre defines it as consciousness directing its negation inwards rather than outwards (Sartre 242). It has already been demonstrated how the Harrisian unconscious relates to the ego. In this relation, what the Harrisian unconscious affirms inwardly, that is, its infinite possibility, it also affirms outwardly by negating any absolute structuralization of its being. It is by this process that a person lives genuinely and in good faith. Self-deception, on the other hand, entails affirming ones humanity inwardly, but negating it in one's words and action. We can again refer to the example of the torture of the 15 year old boy by the police. For that particular policeman, his police work which philosophically represents one of his possibilities as a human being becomes for him his *only* reality outside of which he does not exist. Because of this self-deception, it is easy for him to commit any amount of atrocities to another human being since he is merely engaged in "effective" police work. Another example is race. We give to our skin colour and hair texture a particular set of meanings from an infinite possibility of different meanings. By so doing we become trapped into being Africans, Indians, Amerindians, etc., to the extent that these ontic closures become the totality of our being. By living in this self-deception it becomes easy to live in utter isolation, detached from the problems of the 'other'.

It is this self-deception that Harris confronts in all of his writings. For him Guyana is poor, but graver than its economic poverty are the poverty of being, the poverty of morality, and the poverty of the cross-cultural imagination. The poverty of the cross-cultural imagination manifests itself in the fact that 45 years after independence, after Africans, Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, Amerindians all fought for independence, Guyanese have failed miserably in developing that particular cross-cultural ethic which boldly and revolutionarily declares that 'an injustice against one is an injustice against all'. In the place of self-deception, Harris implores us to engage in the profound art of self-confession and self-judgment; thus in lieu of alienation, we must embrace freedom with all its responsibility and gravity.

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