

WRITING, READING AND ALTERED CONSCIOUSNESS IN JONESTOWN

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“Write upon the Skin,” he said. “Use quills plucked from the Eagle or the Vulture. Write upon the walls of rotting, colonial institutions, test every fragment of a biased humanities, break the Void by sifting the fabric of ruin for living doorways into an open universe.”¹

Jonestown

In *Jonestown*, his most recent novel, Wilson Harris revisits the November 1978 Jonestown massacre, in which the Reverend Jim Jones led 913 of his followers, including 276 children, to mass suicide in the Guyana jungle. Based on the horrific, and still astounding, historical record, *Jonestown* follows the physical, intellectual, and spiritual journey of a fictional survivor of the massacre, Francisco Bone. The novel is presented as Bone’s “Dream-book,” handed over to Wilson Harris for editing (a narrative approach Harris uses frequently). As we read this novel we are reminded of its existence as a processual artifact, a working through of traumatic experience through writing. Through the device of Bone’s Dream-book, *Jonestown* confronts the forces, discourses, and kinds of consciousness that engendered the Jonestown massacre. This confrontation, presented in terms of a transformative, often harrowing, spiritual journey, foregrounds the relationship between writing, reading, and alterations in personal (or transpersonal) consciousness.

Jonestown’s explicitly self-referential design and its self-reflexiveness throughout encourage us to view it as an exploration of the consciousness-altering capacities of writing and reading. In this way, the novel enacts a confronting of the traumatic colonial past through literary experience. What may on the surface appear to be a “postmodern” self-reflexiveness in the novel, turns out, upon closer inspection, to be the linguistic trace of a psychic/spiritual journey undertaken by the traumatized self—a self always, for Harris, containing “hidden strangers,” other selves, and always incorporating present, past, and “future” communities.

Harris contextualizes the tragedy and enigma of the Jonestown community by linking it to the enigma of other lost settlements in the Central and South Americas. In a prefatory “letter to W.H.” written by Francisco Bone, the narrator wonders: “Was Jonestown the latest manifestation of the breakdown of populations within the hidden flexibilities and inflexibilities of pre-Columbian civilizations?” (4). Like the “unsolved disappearance of the Caribs in British Guiana,” Jonestown poses a “riddle of precipitate breakdown” (4). The following text, Bone tells us, issues from his drifting into “an abnormal lucidity upon chasms of time” (5). In this visionary quest through writing, he becomes “a vessel of composite epic,” a multitude housed in the “diminutive surviving entity of community and self that one is” (5). To appreciate the radical nature of this visionary quest through writing, one must first attempt to discern the model of consciousness and literary experience underlying Harris’s approach to literature. After outlining this model, we can begin to see how the writing of *Jonestown* seeks to function as a facilitator and guide to spiritual transformation for its narrator, author, and readers.

¹ Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1996), 216. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

All of Harris's work seems to emanate from the desire and need to alter human consciousness through deep immersion in the creative activities of writing and reading. Reading literature is more than a metaphor for reading life or "reality"; literary activity becomes a model and a vehicle for understanding and altering the phenomenological relationship between the imagination and the world. In his phenomenological meditation on "the poetics of reverie," Gaston Bachelard discusses what he calls "the remarkable psychic productivity of the imagination,"² a viewpoint reminiscent of Harris's concept of the "unfinished genesis of the imagination." The reader who envisions subjectively the poetic image merges his or her creative imagining with that of the author, thus experiencing, through the medium of language, the phenomenon of "poetic intentionality."³ For Bachelard, poetic reverie is a spiritual phenomenon, one that "puts us in the state of a soul being born."⁴ The creation and "living" of the poetic image increases awareness, adding "an increment to consciousness, an added light, a reinforcement of psychic coherence." The "swiftness or instantaneity" of such a reinforcement can lead us to dismiss its significance. Nevertheless, Bachelard asserts, "there is a growth of being in every instance of awareness." This increase of consciousness, or consciousness-as-act, remains "completely positive or kinetic." Finally, Bachelard speaks of a "phenomenology of the creating image which tends to restore, even to an average reader, the innovating action of poetic language." Such a phenomenology restores the imagination "to its proper, all-important place as the principle of direct stimulation of psychic becoming. Imagination attempts to have a future. . . . A world takes form in our reverie, and this world is ours. This dreamed world teaches us the possibilities for expanding our being within the universe."⁵ The Dream-book of *Jonestown* foregrounds the activity of engaging and increasing the scope of consciousness through immersion in poetic imagery and reverie. The book comes to be seen as spiritual exercise, an opportunity for and instance of healing and prayer, a sign of faith in the future of the imagination and the soul.

From this perspective, the focused, meditative practice of reading (in this sense akin to yogic or Buddhist varieties of meditation, in which one also assumes a prolonged and quiescent physical posture) offers an invitation to remove our consciousness from the self-dominated, linear, rational, and limited reality in which we normally exist. Filled with dense, rich, resonant, and ceaselessly permutating poetic imagery, *Jonestown* illustrates Bachelard's notion that the poetic image "opens a future to language."⁶ Serious engagement with a work such as this necessitates a particularly contemplative state of mind. Such engagement requires a willingness to surrender oneself to an active, uncertain, and associational exploration of an overwhelming profusion of concepts, perspectives, and poetic images, often juxtaposed and layered in surprising and fascinating ways. The reader enters into a kind of spontaneous play, much like musical improvisation (we find numerous references to music in *Jonestown*, e.g., 16, 21, 97, 123 et passim). Clearly produced from within a surrender to intuition (as Harris has stated repeatedly) this kind of writing calls for its reader to similarly surrender to the play of intuitive clues, to participate in and contribute to its performance. The ultimate value of this contemplative state resides in its easy translatability into one's ways of interacting with and being in the larger world. The combination of surrender to intuition and expansion of

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, translated by Daniel Russeell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

consciousness through imaginative adoption of multiple, shifting, and contradictory perspectives nurtures a loosening of fixed notions of identity and “reality” and stimulates an openness and ability to encompass paradox, difference, and faith.

In my reading of Harris, literary experience can be seen as a kind of religious practice, one that disrupts or displaces the linear subjective narrative of our experience—what he calls “linear bias”—and displays the existence of multiple levels of consciousness, time, and space. Because these multiple levels exist simultaneously and atemporally around us and within us, the past, often in the form of mythical repetitions and patterns, always inhabits our present reality. Harris adapts and refashions the Eurocentric novel form, utilizing it as a magical instrument for inspiring and projecting personal and social transformation through fluid confrontations with history, myth, and memory. His books are more visionary meditations than novels with discernible characters and plots. His quest is not to provide intellectual diversion or entertainment but rather to engage the individual reader in ways that provoke subtle but possibly far-reaching change. He has written of a spiral that “runs up from the sources of the imagination” and carries a “regenerative seed in it.”⁷ Conditioned, traditional responses and models of novel writing and reading lack or suppress this regenerative seed. He continues:

It is possible that complex self-judgments may occur within the heart of humanity that may bring about far-reaching changes. But this is a frail and precarious matter. It requires alterations in ourselves. It requires us to find different ways of reading reality, for we tend on the whole to be conditioned to read reality in certain ways, and our normal ways of reading reality do not always possess this regenerative seed.⁸

It should be noted at this point that the idea of altering subjective consciousness as a spur toward or precondition of producing change in the world outside the individual seems at odds with much current literary theory, especially that based on Marxist, materialist perspectives. From a materialist perspective, “changing consciousness” through aesthetic engagement might be viewed suspiciously, if at all, as the privilege of a fortunate, literate elite who would not have had the opportunity to dabble in such intellectual luxury were it not for the material circumstances into which they were born. Such suspicion views “changing consciousness” as little or no different from “art-for-art’s sake” aestheticism and thus aligns it with the imperialistic, class- and gender-stratified Victorian society that spawned aestheticism and refigured modernism (and Harris can be productively viewed as a late modernist writer).

This dismissal of the value of altering subjective consciousness, though, assumes that changes in subjective consciousness do not equal or affect social and material changes. In other words, dismissing the value of changes in individual consciousness presumes that one knows what individual consciousness is and how it functions in relation to social reality. Harris challenges unexamined or fixed assumptions about consciousness by demonstrating the cultural constructedness and contingency of our notions of the individual subject. As Maes-Jelinek puts it, Harris reverses “the Marxist view that society makes man,” averring that “changing the world first requires alterations in the self.”⁹ In a recent talk, Harris noted his belief that

⁷ Wilson Harris, ‘The Fabric of the Imagination’, in *The Radical Imagination : Lectures and Talks*, edited by Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège : L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1992), 69.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hena Maes-Jelinek, ‘Another Future for Post-Colonial Studies ? : Wilson Harris’s Post-Colonial Philosophy and the « Savage Mind »’, *Wasafiri* 24 (Autumn 1996), 3-8 ; 5.

Civilization has not solved (and I believe never fully will) the mystery of consciousness. And, as a consequence, over the years in which I wrestled as an imaginative writer with the value of consciousness I found myself aware of the vanished places of cultures in the “world’s night” within the flesh of the living as it participates in extra-human faculties. Thus it was that I became aware of a changing fabric in which individual character—enshrined in the conventional novel—incorporated other living presences within the surviving reality of [the] person. Thus it is, for example, that Francisco Bone in *Jonestown*, conscious of himself as a diminutive surviving entity of holocaust, says of himself “one is a multitude.”¹⁰

The nature of consciousness remains a mystery that will never be fully plumbed; therefore, to assume stable, monological notions about subjectivity, personal consciousness, and identity and to replicate them in literary expression is to lock oneself within a stifling conceptual prison-house.

For over thirty years Harris has been aligning the linearity and realism of the conventional novel with the imperialist mentality, a mentality that makes basic, unquestioned assumptions about the nature of reality and subjectivity and attempts to persuade the reader to accept this cosmology and epistemology as natural and “true to life.” In his groundbreaking 1967 essay “Tradition and the West Indian Writer,” Harris contrasts the notion of a literature emanating from a “vision of consciousness” with what he calls the more familiar novel of “persuasion” or “consolidation of character.” For him the conventions of the latter have locked many twentieth-century writers in the stultifying framework of the nineteenth-century novel, a form based on apparent “common sense” and that involves “the tension of individuals—great or small—on an accepted plane of society we are persuaded has an inevitable existence.”¹¹

In contrast to this, characters in Harris’s fiction are composites: of selves, of archetypes, of real and imagined pasts, and of global human and even non-human varieties and levels of consciousness. Eschewing the inevitability of the “self-sufficient individual” and of a strictly linear temporal progression, *Jonestown* reflects Harris’s welcoming of “strangers in the self.” Awareness of these “strangers” entails a suppression of the ego and a trusting faith in the reliability of intuition. According to Harris, “The intuitive imagination is not an egotistical enterprise.”¹² Rather, he asserts, “It is an enterprise that comes out of the strangeness of one’s life.” He attempts to summarize this intuitive process:

Some stranger within oneself seems to assist one and then one can indeed begin to surrender some of one’s own biases and prejudices and view something in a new light which one had previously considered only in a purely conventional way.¹³

The process of imaginative transformation and re-visioning of history and “fact” begins in *Jonestown* with the initial re-christening of Jim Jones as Jonah Jones, a name that

¹⁰ Wilson Harris, Talk given at the Royal Festival hall on 6 May 1998 when the Faber Caribbean Writers’ Series was launched. Forthcoming in *Caribana*, 6 pp., 3.

¹¹ Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967), 29.

¹² Wilson Harris, ‘The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 27, 1 (1992): 13-25; 96.

¹³ *Ibid.*

early in the text begins to resonate on a number of levels. “Jonah Jones” serves as a locus for a conceptual cluster linking biblical parallels, connections to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (Jones as Ahab figure), from there to a series of nautical metaphors, including the construction of a “Virgin Ship,” to Ulysses’s voyages, to the Sirens’ song, to matriarchal goddess figures, and so on. The single character thus becomes multidimensional, splitting off in numerous directions and suggesting cross-cultural associations and idiosyncratic readings of a number of symbols, stories, and metaphors. In the novel’s own terms, these “spontaneous linkage[s]” made between “the organs of the past and the present” constitute “a kind of synaesthesia or stimulation of different moral ages or visions” (34). Because of this “transference of psyche,” the literary character becomes a web for focusing conceptual energies and instigating a fluid, unpredictable collapse of the notion of the self-sufficient, isolated individual, perhaps paving the way for a “new birth of consciousness” (40).

Francisco Bone’s text records his psychic/spiritual journey—from being the former “left-hand man” of the charismatic cult leader Jim Jones, to his survival and flight from the Jonestown massacre. Jones, Bone, and another man named Deacon (Jones’s right-hand man) have taken a community of believers to Guyana “to build a new Rome in the South American rainforests within the hidden flexibilities of civilizations that had collapsed in the past.” However, as Bone later realizes, “We brought all our prejudices and biases with us in half-ruined, half-intact form.” (126)¹⁴ As he writes his Dream-book, creating a “Memory Theatre” of the imagination, Bone contemplates his complicity with Jones, product of a civilization “addicted to violence” (88) and locked inside “patterns of realism that we reinforce into absolutes” (92). Addiction to violence and addiction to realism complement and reinforce one another, bolstering belief in a horrific, senselessly violent world that cannot be changed except through further violent action. As we assume the passive subject positions dictated by the “factual” empirical reportage of a media-saturated “reality” we assume a position of apparent powerlessness and resignation. As Baudrillard puts it in a different, but relevant, context: “All media and the official news service only exist to maintain the illusion of actuality—of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of the facts.”¹⁵

Harris indicates that to move beyond the horror and incomprehensibility of the journalistic record on the Jonestown massacre we must re-conceive fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of reality, consciousness, and our relationship to the natural world. Moving beyond these patterns of realism that have been calcified as unchallenged cultural “givens” involves our willingness to expose ourselves to the kind of multilayered, disorienting, bewildering, complex, and often poetically beautiful textual experience Harris models in his writing. The surrendering of certainty, of fixed epistemological coordinates, and of belief in the inevitability of linearity comprise the prerequisites for engaging on a meaningful level with a text like *Jonestown*. It is as if the surrendering of textual control and mastery are intended to prefigure, to adumbrate, the relinquishment of the consolidated, dualistic model of consciousness underlying the self-centered, imperialistic, colonizing mentality—a mentality we see in Jones’s setting himself up as an authoritarian religious leader, a form of fascistic spiritual imperialism. It is exactly in this sense that Harris’s writing constitutes a kind of religious faith,

¹⁴ See also Hena Maes-Jelinek, ‘Tricksters of Heaven : Visions of Holocaust if Fred D’Aguiar’s *Bill of Rights* and Wilson Harris’s *Jonestown*’, in Gilbert Debusscher and Marc Maufort, eds., *Union in Parition : Essays in Honour of Jeanne Delbaere* (Liège : L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1997), 209-223 ; 219.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Procession of Simulacra’, in Brain Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism : Rethinking Representation* (New York : New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 253-281 ; 280. Cf. Wilson Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London : Faber and Faber, 1993), 122, 145.

a belief in the power of the intuitively written word and of the “literate imagination” to create the conditions that will make truly radical, re-visionary change possible in the material world.

As we attempt to follow the written trajectory of its narrator’s shamanic journey into a theater of memory and imagination, *Jonestown* strives to engage us in a similarly consciousness-altering excursion. To immerse deeply and meaningfully into this work, a novel in which characters travel freely to the past and the future, to worlds before and beyond life and death, and speak with apparitions of the dead and quasi-mythical beings, one must adopt a particularly open, fluid state of mind. There must be an active surrender to an uncontrollable, ultimately unprocess-able number of images, impressions, and juxtapositions. *Jonestown*, like every Harris novel, contains so many complex images and concepts—capable of being conjoined in so many ways—that it appears incapable of being exhaustively grasped. As a result, as readers we are put in a position of choosing how to correlate and compare (how to “read”) these conceptual constellations in a manner that will be not only idiosyncratic but contingent—subject to change over time—as well.

In this way Harris creates an aesthetic object that echoes and mimics the profusion and complexity of the natural world—a textual object that appears as multifarious and unintentioned as the precise layering of petals within a rose or the oblique pattern of lines drawn by successive waves on a beach. Harris reminds us that the inspiration for his writing emanates largely from his experiences as a government land surveyor in the rainforests of Guyana:

Human discourse seemed to me *partial*. I was driven to acknowledge that partiality in extra-human voices in the trees, in the rivers, of primordial landscapes from deep interiors to the coasts and the ocean. . . . Thus it was, across the years, in my journeys in the rainforests of South America—which commenced in 1942 and ended around 1956—that I gained the numinous substance which characterises my “rejection of the conventions of the twentieth-century novel” which absolutize human discourse.¹⁶

In *Jonestown* Harris indicates that absolutist conceptions of time, space, identity, and the world underlie the tragedy and the attendant incomprehensibility of what occurred in the Jonestown settlement. The novel creatively mythologizes the Jonestown tragedy in order to attempt to fathom the cross-cultural matrix around which it formed. For example, as Bone travels into the past and re-visits a wedding banquet in 1954, he experiences a premonition of the Jonestown that will be built in the 1970s. He asks himself, “A hospital in spectral Jonestown in 1954?” He continues, “Jonestown lay still submerged in the collective unconscious! It had not yet been built in 1954. This was true but I could see it lifting onto a wave of the future” (197).

Time in the novel thus appears as an imaginary spatial geography across which characters move and address memory. Commenting on the blending of temporal perspectives in the novel, Maes-Jelinek notes that this blending brings “to light parallel situations and motivations and intimates that the past changes, is active in the present, and offers meanings to which one may have been blind.”¹⁷ Memory, like writing in the novel, becomes a fluid, animate, and plastic medium—one that invites our concentrated immersion and remains unpredictably responsive to our participation with it. It resembles memory as imagined in a

¹⁶ Wilson Harris, Talk at the Royal Festival Hall, 1.

¹⁷ Hena Maes-Jelinek, ‘Tricksters of Heaven’, 216.

recent essay by Michael Lambek, "The Past Imperfect: Remembering as a Moral Practice": "Memory here is more intersubjective and dialogical than exclusively individual, more act (remembering) than object, and more ongoing engagement than passive absorption and playback."¹⁸ Lambek's reconceptualization of memory (based on his experiences with the Malagasy of Mayotte and northwest Madagascar), abandons "accuracy as the only criterion by which to evaluate" it, and moves "toward seeing memory as always and inevitably culturally and socially mediated and hence subject to evaluation along a number of dimensions whose relative importance are open to debate."¹⁹ *Jonestown* encompasses this non-Western conception of memory--memory and writing as imaginative processes that plumb the depths of traumatic experience in order to understand its sources, alter the perspectival lenses through which we view our experience, and create the basis for a re-invigorated future.

Francisco Bone's *Dream-book* tells us that he survives the trauma of the November 18, 1978, "Day of the Dead" in the Jonestown settlement in two senses. Having barely evaded the murderous Jonah Jones—who is himself shot and killed by his "right-hand Angel," Deacon—Bone must then struggle to survive the trauma of having witnessed, and even been complicit in, such horror. In 1985, after years of wandering, he settles in New Amsterdam, Guyana, and begins writing his book. By endeavouring to encompass the tragic story of the settlement within a framework that includes the history and mythology of the region, Bone creates a space in which historical and mythical patterns may be overturned through imaginative exploration. A deceased former school-teacher, Mr. Mageye, becomes his magus-guide, leading him on a hallucinatory odyssey of self-deconstruction and potential rebirth.

As Bone goes through a kind of "dark night of the soul," contemplating the relation between Jones and his flock—between predator and prey—Mr. Mageye informs him that there are hidden texts of "wilderness music" that can never be "absolutely translated" (or translated into absolutes). These hidden texts, he tells Bone, "infuse an uncharted realm, a mysterious density, into every chart of the Word." As "music and unspoken prayer animate language," they insert "a sensation of uncharted realms, extra-human dimensions," without which, Mageye warns, "one is destined to freeze or burn in an absolutely human-centered cosmos inevitably promoting dominion . . . as its hidden agenda" (102-103). In opposition to the "man-made frame" of "social realism," he concludes, "There are intangible graces that we cannot seize but whose tracery exists in a web or a vein or the music of a bird or some other creature" (103).

Bone consorts with some of these graces, shedding or sometimes gathering layers of memory and identity, and gaining dialectical insights that provide temporary shifts in consciousness, but which finally resist closure. At the end of the text, wearing a mask of the character Deacon, Bone confronts Jonah Jones and delivers a sermon to him. Discoursing first on the economic shackles that hold South American countries in debt to wealthier nations (like the United States), Bone ponders the future generations seemingly entrapped by this contemporary "Waste Land of Politics."

These generations, he exhorts, need to ask themselves profoundest questions about the life and death of the Imagination, the limits of materialism and realism, the necessity to

¹⁸ Michael Lambek, 'The Past Imperfect : Remembering as a Moral Practice', in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., (New York : Routledge, 1996), 235-254 ; 239.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

transgress boundaries into the hidden caveats of ancient civilizations, to leap beyond conventional codes of racial or cultural individualism and into cross-cultural epic born of diverse re-visioned legacies and inheritances . . . (217)

Bone is then confronted and put on trial by a group of masked judges, who see him only as Deacon and take him to the edge of a cliff. Driven over the edge, Bone falls finally into “a net of music” (233).

Straining toward redemption, the text eschews closure in favor of evolutionary, ongoing transformation. Through his weaving of the fascinating and bewildering web of text that is *Jonestown*, Harris alerts us to the difficulty, and rewards, of confronting trauma in a manner that productively destabilizes fundamental preconceptions concerning the fixed nature of literary discourse, and by extension of the self and the social, physical world surrounding it. The music-space of *Jonestown*, along with its abrogation of fixity and closure, exemplifies Homi Bhabha’s notion of a “Third Space of enunciation,” a discursive space wherein cultural meanings and symbols “can be appropriated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”²⁰ As Maes-Jelinek notes, the novel seeks a reversal of destructive “behavioural mechanisms” through recourse to “the individual consciousness.”²¹

Jonestown invites its reader to follow the disturbing and captivating text of Bone’s Dream-book through passages of reversal, fragmentation, terror, and mystical ecstasy. Rather than simply representing such a subjective journey, though, the novel displays it in process, in the act of its seemingly aleatoric unfolding. Reading *Jonestown* gives us a lesson in writing *Jonestown*. We discover that it was created by refusing to envision a predetermined frame or scheme and is instead marked by the bifurcations, improvisations, insights, and associations that branched and unfolded in the author’s consciousness at the moment of imaginative creation. As its readers we are invited to release our notions of logical coherence and isolated, stable identity and to reconfigure—or dis-configure—the reading consciousness in ways that enable that consciousness to participate in a transformative struggle and dance with language.

²⁰ Homi Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, in *The Location of Culture* (London : Routledge, 1994), 19-39 ; 37.

²¹ Hena Maes-Jelinek, ‘Tricksters of Heaven’, 222.