2018-08-06

Wilson Harris: an ontological promiscuity

Version	Published version
Citation (published version):	Louis Chude-Sokei. 2018. ""Wilson Harris: An Ontological Promiscuity."." ASAP/J.

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/37599
Boston University

(http://asapjournal.com/)

☰ **Main Menu**　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　🔍

Wilson Harris: An Ontological Promiscuity / Louis Chude-Sokei

📅　August 6, 2018 (http://asapjournal.com/wilson-harris-an-ontological-promiscuity-louis-chude-sokei/)　　👤　Louis Chude-Sokei (http://asapjournal.com/author/lchudesokei/)

I've always thought that the problem with the literary and cultural politics of the Anglophone world was that we've never had an actual, formal surrealist movement. Yes, there are writers and thinkers in the English-speaking world that are verifiably surreal (though not members of the official movement) and many that are described as surreal*ist*, for example the writer who is the focus of this essay, the recently deceased Guyanese novelist, critic, and visionary, Wilson Harris, who passed away in March of this year. And yes, the impact of the Surrealist International was global. As I will discuss, it had a significant impact in the Caribbean, which is partly what justifies discussing Wilson Harris in this context. Though

seen as a minor or cult figure, or an example of "art brut," I'd like to help make clear his standing in a richer tradition of thinking and writing than previously acknowledged. I'd like to also suggest ways that his legacy can and should make a difference.

I'm also not ignoring the final impact and commodification of Surrealism as it made its way first to New York City and then to Hollywood only to become as much a feature of advertising and cinema as it would become a tool of now mundane representations of the human mind. Surrealism as an artistic and literary style, and a mode of psychological inquiry, was present in England as early as 1935 and its influence was felt in American art in the 1940s in advance of the arrival of actual surrealists as refugees from World War II. However, as an open and ongoing critical tendency with specific habits and practices, it hasn't gone as far politically in English as in other linguistic worlds. This is particularly the case in its fetish for wild juxtapositions and radical combinations meant to jar or shock the viewer/reader into new perceptions of reality, in which differences and oppositions seemed less alien to each other and their hierarchies questioned if not suspended. It is also the case in the movement's assumption that "reality" was itself constituted by radical juxtapositions and wild combinations — which is to say, as post-structuralist thinkers later would, an endless play of differences. These techniques have become fundamental to artistic and media practice; but the political assumptions behind them have not translated widely. Because it is the surrealist politics of *cultural* difference that matters here and its implications for power relationships. Though the impact of surrealism on the wider Caribbean or the black world in general is woefully understudied, it is this awareness of poetics and power that will manifest most strongly in the colonial Caribbean, and the broader archipelagic context that introduces Wilson Harris to the Anglophone world.

The surrealist commitment to juxtaposition and difference is best articulated by the movement's foundational notion of beauty as produced by "the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table," sourced from *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Uruguayan-French poet (and innovative plagiarist) Isidore Lucien Ducasse (Compte de Lautréamont). The founders of surrealism would hail him as prophet. This fact of their methodology has been much discussed and researched, but that scrutiny has focused on the relationship between metaphor or metonym (the former suppressive and the latter combinatory, as Jacques Lacan would have it), the role of the unconscious in making object relationships, and the implications of a radical decentering of knowledge that is made possible by juxtaposition and collage. What has been missed are the implications of Lautremont's definition — of *decontextualized mixture* — for cultural politics in a world made by colonialism and slavery.

That surrealist founder André Breton would be so inspired by the work of Martinquan poet, Aimé Césaire, presaged the movement's increasing interest in the broader cultural productions and cosmologies of native and indigenous peoples in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Oceania. This "exotic" material enabled their leveling of cultural value by juxtaposing a seemingly random display of items, images, and artifacts — a process emboldened by new technologies such as photography, film, and to a lesser extent sound. This reminds us that the surrealists saw race and colonialism as central to their logic and poetics of difference; and they would manifest through these techniques a critique one could legitimately describe as "cross-cultural" (it's not clear that those neo-surrealist movements in England or those influenced by surrealism in America fully grasped that aspect of the ideology, just as it's not clear

that the generation of Structuralist *bricolage*—from Levi-Strauss to Derrida to Deleuze and Guattari and British Cultural Studies—could make much of the racial implications of this mode of production or see in it alternative methods of social arrangement or definitions of cultural identity).

Race as central to surrealist method may have veered deeply into racial romanticism or romantic racism —examples of this are legion, so much so that it's no surprise to encounter those who will describe much of the movement as actually *racist*, especially since it was flagrantly primitivist; but anti-colonialism at least was firmly and openly doctrine, as was a desire to problematize the European subject or psyche as the "center" of knowing if not power. Describing the intent of the work as "cross-cultural" is in no way to neglect the fact that it did privilege European subjectivity while attempting to decenter it, and its fascination for non-Western or non-White cultures were manifestly patronizing, paternalistic and from our vantage point cringeworthy.

Aimé Césaire and the Negritude movement of which he was a signal part would share that primitivism and that racial romanticism. It would also not be without a similar degree of cringe when compatriots of his like Léopold Sédar Senghor dug too deeply into an alleged racial essence. Despite his own considerable essentialism, Césaire would seize on cross-cultural juxtaposition as a fully realized anti-colonial poetics from the perspective of the colonized. Juxtaposition or blending or contrast in this work was deployed against the racial modes of knowing and racist social arrangements established by French colonialism and white supremacy.

Forms of Negritude continue to be primary fallback positions for much of the Anglophone black world; but in the Francophone world it would eventually become an obstacle for the generation of Caribbean writers and thinkers after Césaire. This is truly important. The rejection of Negritude needs more attention beyond the Francophone Caribbean because it enabled possibilities we are sorely in need of exploring. Harris himself spoke of such a need when he argued that juxtaposition could or would transform racial essentialism: "the rubbing together which we may visualize between endemic malaise and Surreal vessels of the imagination provides a residue in depth which becomes I think the potential seed and branch and tree of a black creativity beyond negritude to deepen resources of memory and imagination in a plagued humanity."

The "rubbing together" of Negritude and Surrealism would allow the Caribbean to transform both into something else—a distinct conceptual space that will clear the way for, most notably, an Édouard Glissant in the Francophone world but also a Wilson Harris in the Anglophone. The work of these two writers and critics manifests—or perhaps straddles—both Surrealism and its transcendence; and given that Negritude was a movement rooted also in anti-colonial racial nationalism, both writers would side-step that as well whilst continually reminding us of its perils.

But to the rejection of Negritude: famously it was manifest in the manifesto, *Éloge de la Créolité* (*In Praise of Creoleness*) by Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant in 1989. It dared challenge Negritude (and Césaire), partly for a racial romanticism that would edify Africa and thereby anchor Caribbean identity in a singular root. In philosophical terms current with the

manifesto, Negritude prioritized an essential being over a far more dynamic becoming. "Africa" became a barrier, and the identity claims necessary for anti-colonial resistance became the burden of political independence, particularly in composite societies in the New World.

The race-consciousness of Negritude may have emerged from dehumanization, racial violence, and the deracination of slavery, and it may have led to an overwhelming desire to return to or reconstruct a fixed past; but for the *Créolistes* it occluded and prevented the necessary embracing of an already transformed and multiply rooted present, one present in their creole language. Though he may have been the great poet of neologism, of creating novelty in language, Césaire remained committed to French. And as an elected official, that commitment was viewed in line with his support for the departmentalization of Martinique rather than independence from its colonial power.

It is through Édouard Glissant, however, that we've come to discuss if not embrace the poetics and politics of *creolization* in the literary and cultural politics of the Anglophone world in the wake of Negritude. It is through him that we can then make sense of Wilson Harris in an Anglophone world that is without the historical superstructure or intellectual continuum to support or acknowledge him, save for post-colonial notions of "hybridity" fashionable a decade or two ago. Harris was of the same generation as Glissant but produced his work on the margins of the literary and cultural history sketched above. He was clearly aware of Negritude and was a critical but enthusiastic reader of the work of André Breton, Michel Leiris, and other surrealists who he engaged first from the intellectual distance of a colonial Guyana and then from the heart of empire itself, England. Just as the landscape of the Guyanese rainforests utterly dominate much of his fiction—he was a government surveyor for some years—it's hard to ignore the cultural politics of his country. After all, despite its postcolonial history of inter-ethnic tension, Guyana lacks the cultural resources or raw numbers to be ultimately defined by any of its specific ethnic groupings. That he himself was radically mixed—indigenous Caribbean/South Asian/Black/European—perhaps also made a "consolidation of identity," to use his words, difficult to politically achieve.

Creolization and what Harris would call "the cross cultural" are deeply related. They address the process by which oppositions allow for juxtaposition, collage, and bricolage but then inevitably blend and blur while reshaping the very memory or intentions of what initially brought them together. In Harris's words, oppositions and differences enact a cross-cultural dialogue in which they consume their own biases, because within them —in a phrase that should be tattooed and spray painted everywhere—is "a curious half-blind groping" towards alternate modes of community and/or modes of being or knowing "beyond static cultural imperatives." Because self and other are twins not oppositions—"carnival twinships" as he once put it—because they are performances not identities, they are each other's destiny, hence the endless mirrors, rivers, streams and reflective surfaces that suffuse his fiction rendering reality much like as through a prism. The goal was to explore and enact a model of cultural difference in which elements were not negatively opposed as was/is the case in colonial and racist modes of apprehension and social arrangement.

This is what lies beyond Negritude. As both Glissant and Harris note, Negritude merely consolidated and reified those modes of apprehension and social arrangement, even if it reversed their value or position. This is at the root of my initial complaint that the Anglophone world has yet to produce a politically valid (not self-hating) anti-Negritudist movement or a legitimately black anti-essentialist or ultimately anti-identitarian sensibility. Yes, we critique essentialism, problematize identity, and reject totalizing racial assessments; yet we ever revert to a blackness that cannot function without endless defense and justification and is rooted in totalizing racial assessments of our own. However, that endless defense might be its own justification. It's clearly the engine behind the commodification of blackness that proliferates in our knowledge industries.

An Anglophone surrealism and a post-Negritude response would likely have helped free racial thinking from the endless and oftentimes narcissistic thickets of this extreme identitarianism and would have impelled us to reimagine fundamental notions of community. Because of this lack, those attending to racial transformation and cultural becoming have Wilson Harris to represent such a break. And in a moment when whiteness, capital, and colonial power have furiously retrenched and "consolidated," the temptation for us to respond with consolidations of our own—the Negritude response—can only be avoided with effort and legitimately radical alternatives. Harris's attempt to narrate a world without centers or borders or identities was therefore prescient, far more so than Glissant, who despite his hostility to nationalism and colonial power dynamics has been easily recuperated by critics who ignore or evade his hostility to notions of fixed identity, historical "roots," or conventional notions of resistance.

Harris, however, is patently and gloriously irrecuperable, at least so far. Though his work does allow for the same amount of "post-colonial" critique as Glissant's, it is also explicitly focused on the complex process of renewing and reimagining community across cultural, racial, and historical barriers. Our notions of resistance aren't enough here. They are radically challenged in that they can feed the consolidation of identity, that "conquistadorial habit," he's called it. And his decentering of subjectivity—all subjectivity, not just that of the colonizer—was not just an attack on the hierarchies of European knowledge as it was with surrealism. It was a necessary prologue to enabling that "curious half-blind groping" mentioned earlier.

Now the consensus is that Harris's irrecuperability and his minor or cult status is largely due to his prose. It's true that its complexity and density, whether fiction or non-fiction, regularly ban him from course syllabi and the rituals of literary culture, even in the Caribbean. But considering that he was first introduced to many of us at the high point of post-structuralist theory when we were also introduced to Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, and then via postcolonial thought, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, and given that we would then engage Judith Butler and now Sylvia Wynter and Edouard Glissant, it's hard to merit his critical prose with such intractability. And in the wake of radical modernism his fiction isn't any more challenging than Faulkner's, Woolf's, or Joyce's. It really is that assault on identity, that challenge, one that goes so far in his work that the very environment as well as myth, dream, fantasy, and artistic creation are all given an equality of perspective and sentience, and therefore render knowledge, history, and resistance difficult to fathom much less claim. And his habit of

rendering the other as partial self, or seeing the self partially in the other; in his civilizational perspective that renders our struggles against the staggering vistas of History; these work against the narcissism of those who comb his work for specific evidence against specific oppressions.

But it's really all about the admittedly inelegant term, "groping," which is hard to articulate in our contemporary cultural and political climate, without its suggestion of impropriety and unwelcome sexual advances. This only emphasizes just how rooted creolization is in the notion of unwelcome physical and cultural border crossings and also how such transgressions have regularly been policed or exploited. In Harris's mythopoeia, as a historical and metaphysical process this "groping" must be "half-blind" and uncertain since knowledge, like subjectivity, is endlessly partial yet forever seeks its own reinvention. That dynamic process is central to the work, so much so that the term is arguably the most notable word in his oeuvre, possibly second only to "quantum" in its frequency. The latter is similar in that it implies probability, chance, and uncertainty, Werner Heisenberg—he of the "uncertainty principle" in physics— being an influence. But that restlessness characterizes his prose, and is what makes it difficult to settle on a specific character or setting or to fetishize specific situations or power dynamics. It's all partial, shifting, and evanescent and difficult to appropriate for specific political ends, particularly those rooted in race or identity.

Or, again, in the "rubbing together" of sex. As others have argued (Robert J.C. Young most prominently), metaphors of blending like creolization or hybridity are always rooted in sex—heterosexual sex to be clear. Speaking in metaphorical terms, cross-racial sex and desire have long been narrative clichés for cross-cultural intimacy and of course the "birth" of something different from foundational elements. The torrid plantation soft-core melodramas of Edgar Mittelholzer, the other major postcolonial Guyanese author, are far from Harris's vision. Harris is the least sexual writer one can imagine, unless one describes the sensual excess of his landscapes and language as pornographic, or argues that his ontology was libidinal in its promiscuous drive towards fecundity in both the natural world and the infinite, possible worlds of cross-culturality.

There is, though, a radicalism in that ontological promiscuity, in submitting to its breathless uncertainty. It was perhaps too quiet for the nationalism that initially surrounded Harris's work and the anti-colonial fervor that continues to feed much of the cultural and literary work of the Anglophone Caribbean; it certainly can seem a hyper-mystical or quasi-religious quietism. But when we realize that reducing meaning to binaries is not enough, and that rejecting them has largely led to reversing not transcending them; when the relationship between humans and the environment demands to be replaced by a greater mutuality, a distinctly non-human centered one; or when we realize that cultures themselves do hunger for otherness and transformation and intimacy, and that there are ways to encourage those heretical or even perverse movements that reject the inhuman logic of centralized power; when the old rhetoric of self and other has once again failed, perhaps then we will be truly ready for the *Palace of the Peacock*.

: :

The editors would like to thank Nathaniel Mackey for alerting us to Louis Chude-Sokei's interest in the work of Wilson Harris.

Louis Chude-Sokei (http://asapjournal.com/author/lchudesokei/)

(http://asapjournal.com/author/lchudesokei/) Louis Chude-Sokei is a writer and scholar whose work ranges widely in and around the literary, political, and cultural phenomena of the African Diaspora. Scholarly work includes the award winning, *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black on Black Minstrelsy and the African Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2006), *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Wesleyan University Press, 2016) and the forthcoming, *Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber and Other Essays* (Wesleyan University Press). Also imminent is a memoir with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt that traces his intellectual development across multiple nations and distinct Black cultures. Chude-Sokei is the Editor in Chief of *The Black Scholar*, one of the oldest journals of Black Studies, which was this year ranked by Princeton Journal reviews as the #1 journal of Black Studies in the United States.

POSTED UNDER   FEATURES (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/CATEGORY/FEATURES/)

TAGGED   ANDRÉ BRETON (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/ANDRE-BRETON/)   CARIBBEAN (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/CARIBBEAN/)   COMPTE DE LAUTRÉAMONT (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/COMPTE-DE-LAUTREAMONT/)   CREOLE (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/CREOLE/)   CREOLIZATION (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/CREOLIZATION/)   CROSS-CULTURAL (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/CROSS-CULTURAL/)   ÉDOUARD GLISSANT (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/EDOUARD-GLISSANT/)   ISIDORE LUCIEN DUCASSE (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/ISIDORE-LUCIEN-DUCASSE/)   JACQUES LACAN (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/JACQUES-LACAN/)   JEAN BERNABÉ (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/JEAN-BERNABE/)   LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/LEOPOLD-SEDAR-SENGHOR/)   LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/LOUIS-CHUDE-SOKEI/)   MICHEL LEIRIS (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/MICHEL-LEIRIS/)   NEGRITUDE (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/NEGRITUDE/)   PATRICK CHAMOISEAU (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/PATRICK-CHAMOISEAU/)   RAPHAËL CONFIANT (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/RAPHAEL-CONFIANT/)   SURREALISM (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/SURREALISM/)   WILSON HARRIS (HTTP://ASAPJOURNAL.COM/TAG/WILSON-HARRIS/)

Wilson Harris: An Ontological Promiscuity / Louis Chude-Sokei - ASAP/J

(https://twitter.com/ASAP_Journal) (https://facebook.com/ASAP Journal) (https://www.instagram.com/journalasap/)

(https://www.press.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/order.cgi?oc_id=2789)

Proudly powered by WordPress (http://wordpress.org/) | Theme: Awaken Pro by ThemezHut (http://www.themezhut.com).