Harris, Whitehead and Wynter: Forcing new imaginings through textual and ritual liminality in tertiary education

Deryck Murray

The risk of death

The University of the West Indies (UWI), in celebrating sixty years of institutionalisation this year, marks an anniversary that hails its maturity and the construction of traditions validated by its success. This cause for celebration, however, is also shadowed by a well known risk: long institutionalisation leads to dulled imagination, ossified ideas, and institutionalized hegemonic forces that push towards homogeneity. In relation to education and knowledge, it is the risk of killing original thought, blunting cutting edge critique, and missing the opportunity to construct new worlds. In the words of Alfred North Whitehead: “The danger is that education will freeze, and it will be thought, ‘This and this are the right things to know’: and when that happens, thought is dead” (Price 1954:63). Wilson Harris insists that

The true complex of one’s time is open and transformative, rather than static and imitative […]. And the necessity to enter a transformative era of assumptions beneath one’s safe crust of bias becomes increasingly imperative, if we are not to succumb to monolithic callouses and complacencies in the name of virtue or purity (Harris 1981:44).

The challenge therefore, is to heighten our sensitivity to this risk and cultivate a teaching environment that explicitly recognizes the inevitable necessity of stable categories as well as their eventual tyranny. UWI should develop and promote a technology of learning that heightens awareness of, and an intolerance to overly hardened paradigms, categories, institutions and ways of knowing. Wilson Harris, Alfred North Whitehead and Sylvia Wynter are scholars who not only exemplify this spirit but whose work engage readers in a textual form of ritual technology that forces the dissolution of old constructs while proposing new ones.

Change and Stability in the Caribbean

The present habits of thought dominant throughout the Caribbean comprise the old traditions of Europe and Africa along with their novel derivatives. In order properly to understand these ways of knowing, it is important to escape the assumption that “power” and “reason” are different in kind. Here, in agreement with Bruno Latour, it will be assumed that there is no difference in kind between “force” and “reason” (Latour 1988:153-157). Reason should be understood as one force among many that is felt when actors act individually or collectively. There is nothing extra or transcendent about “reason.” It is also important to assume that nothing in the world, including thought, is

1 I wish to thank Professor Mark McWatt for bringing this quote to my attention.
forever disconnected from the rest of the world. There is no internal mind and external world. Latour speaks of all “actors,” human and nonhuman, being able to “articulate” with each other (Latour 1999:141-142). This species of monism is similar to that advocated by Bertrand Russell who insists on the reality of “relations” that connect entities (Russell 1912:54).

European ways of knowing
The European cleavage between man and nature was well under way in Europe by the time Rene Descartes finally and absolutely separated mind from matter. Nonhumans lost their agency and any vestige of a soul. Things lost their ability to speak and were no longer agents with whom specialist sages negotiated to win their cooperation as traditional peoples believed. To put it another way, a connected, articulate and articulated nature was already dissected into man and nature. Matter was made blind, passive and forever alienated from humans. Epistemologists since then have been busy trying to construct the solid foundations of knowledge by inventing methods through which the leap from internal mental reference across the chasm to the external world could be assured.

Moreover, as Science in Europe progressed, natural historians continued to study, describe and classify things so that they were alienated not only from man, but also from each other. Science was believed to be discovering the individualized nature of things with these cleavages being reflected in the birth and institutionalisation of separate scientific disciplines (Pickstone 2000:61-105). This can be viewed as a process of “analysis.” Pickstone conceptualizes analytical science as ‘seeking order by dissection’ and argues that “analysis comes into play when objects can be viewed as compounds of ‘elements,’ or when processes can be viewed as the ‘flow’ of an ‘element’ through a system.” For example, when sea salt is reduced to either NaCl (sodium chloride), or perhaps to ‘unit crystals,’ or as electrical materials and their conductivity measured (Pickstone 2000:11-13). They are many types of analyses, even for the same objects. Each analytical science is constituted by the use of a particular kind of ‘element’ – for example, chemical elements, energy and tissues – many of which did not exist before 1750. Analysis can provide deeper classifications and displays than natural history by changing our understanding of objects. It also provides new frameworks for comparison through common ‘elements’. Mid-seventeenth century analysis would have included Astronomy, Optics, mechanics, and hydrostatics and mixed mathematics (Pickstone 2000:11-12).

Descartes eventually divided man himself into a mind and a body with different natures. However, this tendency to dissect nature was not paralleled by any tendency to dissect reason. Descartes’ dualism enabled the rise of epistemology since Aristotelianism did not include any radical separation of the mind. Epistemology as the search for truthful representation only made sense after the mind lost touch with the real world and did not arise until the seventeenth century. While Aristotle believed in a reason that grasped universals, philosophers after Descartes dwelled on the newly invented mind for universal knowledge (Rabinow 1996:28-29). The important point is that whether Aristotelian or Cartesian, there has always only been room for one correct force in Europe. It was the force of reason.
Europeans were dissecting and purifying the things of nature through a process of analysis. On the other hand, the dream of Europe was to reach the ideal of uniting all knowledge under one force called ‘reason’ that could comprehend everything even if, for the time being, there is a gap to be closed through the elimination of erroneous forms reasons. Ultimately, the one correct “Reason” would settle all disputes and provide all answers. Schooled Europeans therefore brought a way of knowing to the Caribbean that expected one reason/force to bring order to the many natures of the world.

**African ways of knowing**

African ways of knowing

African sages did not cleave people from nature so articulation with the world was always maintained. Nature and people were made of the same substance and had the same inherent properties, including agency. Actors in the world could always reconnect. In fact, African reality has also been described as connected to the point where the “concatenation of everything is so tight that to subtract one item is to paralyze the system” (Asante 1987:77). They did, however, cleave ‘reasons/forces” so that ultimate answers could be had from many different powers or forces. There was no dream of one final force that could explain all the others or settle all disputes.

Amongst the Yoruba, for example, there are numerous forces called Orisha. According to the Yoruba, the full number of these forces has never been recorded (Bascom 1980:33). In fact, there may well be an orisha for every thing and every action imaginable. This idea was first mentioned to the author by Okan Tomi in November 1998 during his (the author’s) initiation into the mysteries of Ochosi in Panama. Okan Tomi is a Lukumi priest of Oshun who at the time was initiated for over 20 years. Some insist that there is an infinite number of Orisha (Edwards and Mason 1985:1). Others simply state that “they have a legion of saints [orisha]” (Smith 1963:112). The West African ways of knowing brought to the Caribbean were therefore means of dissecting different powers/forces/reasons that the sages sought to master different by controlling the one fundamental nature of different things.

In short, while Europeans sought final answers in the ideal of one reason/force that would order the dissected natures of the world, West Africans accepted final answers from dissected forces/reasons about the one ordered nature of the world.

Further, Europeans became fond of collecting and ordering their newly dissected things while insisting that they could only be one force. Africans on the other hand were always seeking to collect forces. This African tendency was seen most clearly in the Caribbean when, in the religious language of Europe, Africans confounded missionaries by “worshipping” several African gods and even worse, being baptized several times over with several different denominations all the while never giving up their African gods/forces. A common expression describing this habit among Orisha sages in Trinidad today is “the more roads to Heaven one takes, the better” (Henry 2003:40). The same habit is seen in Ghana today where there is a shrine to a spiritual entity known as Nana Akonnedi. This force possesses a sage twice a week to visit the shrine to direct a cabinet of other spiritual beings, some of which has been assigned specific healing portfolios, to deal with supernatural cause of any affliction (Mensah-Dapaa 1979:110-111).
The Current Caribbean Constructs
A simplified typology of Caribbean constructs can now be proposed as follows:

Old world European
- One reason/force and many natures.
- The proliferation of and collection of things.
- Learnt from missionaries, schools and other formal methods that taught European ways of knowing.
- Relatively stable.

Old World African
- Many forces/reasons and one nature.
- The proliferation and collection of powers.
- Learnt informally from the family, community, church and other spiritual gatherings.
- Relatively stable.

Both old world African and European constructs gain their relative stabilities by viewing either nature (Africa) or force (Europe) as a unity.

New Caribbean Construct – Maximal creativity
- Many reasons/forces superimposed on many natures
- Proliferation of both things and powers.
- Promotes maximal change/creativity.
- Highly unstable.
- Jamaica as exemplar.

New Caribbean Construct – Minimal creativity
- One reason and one nature.
- Few new things and powers.
- Restricts change/creativity
- Highly stable.
- Barbados as exemplar.

All of the above constructs can be found on every Caribbean island with each island displaying a dominance of one type or the other depending on its history and local context.

Modern hard lines/graveyards
The UWI is situated in a Caribbean that manifests all of the above constructions and will be populated with individuals displaying several of the above lifeways. It could be argued, however, that teaching at the institution itself is dominated by a modern European way of knowing that still dreams of the free floating minds of subjects – men, and to a lesser extent, women – straining towards a united form of reasoning that orders the diverse objects of nature.

Consequently, though the University should be wary of all frozen categories and constructs, it must first of all confront the modern graveyards within which it plies its trade. The hardened bifurcation of the world into nature, whose spokespersons emerge from the Faculty of Pure and Applied Science, and culture, spoken for by all other Faculties should be explicitly destabilized to allow imaginings of other constructs. Imagining other ways of ordering the world beyond the force of Europe’s “reason” should also be encouraged. It is, however, not being advocated that the University adopt old world African ways of knowing in a shift from the old world European ways of knowing. What is being suggested is that students be given the opportunity to engage with a continuum of constructs from a hot world of highly fragmented forces/reasons/powers and natures that are constantly in flux to a cold, highly stable world that recognizes one force and one nature. In order to achieve the above, students should not be taught only how to deconstruct, they must also learn how they can become actors in the construction of new worlds through a tukontological process. The Actor-Network-Theory based tukontological model was outlined in CHiPS II in 2006 and proposed the following:

1. There is no difference in kind between ontology and epistemology because there is no difference in kind between mind and matter; theory and practice; the unreal and the real; and culture and nature.
2. The process of constructing worlds can be imagined as a musical creative process based on African triune drum orchestras prevalent in the Caribbean including the Barbadian Tuk Band orchestra from which the model takes its name. In fact, the word “Tuk” is thought to be of Scottish origin meaning “beat out.” Tukontology can be thought of as the “beating out” of worlds.
3. Reality is a process of becoming where ontological entities grow from being unreal to real.
4. Reality is constructed in three levels:
   a. The improvisational flute represents creativity. This is where novel possibilities are generated. At this level of maximal change, “theoretical” entities are almost unreal.
   b. The kettle drum represents ways of knowing or habits of thought which work on all types of more or less durable materials in the world to co-invent facts and artefacts. It is also here that we attempt to “signify,” that is to attempt to give an account/explanation for what we believe. This level articulates with both the flute and the bass.
   c. The bass drum provides maximal stability and represents the level where new ideas/actors from the flute level are fully instituted into existing constructions/orchestrations.
The entire continuum from the creative, constantly changing, almost unreal improvisational flute to the very real, stable reified bass is understood as a process of becoming that moves from fleeting, unreal entities with that only endure for short periods to those that are more stable and durable (Murray 2006). It can be seen as a process that reifies metaphysical entities. Making music is therefore not merely a metaphor, but also a demonstration of how melodic ideas become real sound.

There is a danger that readers could confuse tukontological construction with the various species of postmodernism and social constructivism and, like them, condemn it as a form of idealism with no anchor in the real, tangible things of the world. A proper understanding of tukontology would show that it is firmly anchored in the world real things. Metaphysical melodies in our heads must eventually be associated with the skilled movement of our bodies, the hard materials or instruments and air before we can hear the music. In order to avoid this confusion, the word “construction” will be replaced with the word “orchestration” in the rest of the paper. Worlds will now be orchestrated rather than constructed.

Ritual Technologies

If it is accepted that the unrestrained creativity of Jamaica and Trinidad probably derives more from new Caribbean constructs that recognize few boundaries – many forces and many natures – and that abound in those transitional African communities where the superimposition of Europe’s ways of knowing on populations is only partial so that only the idea of “many natures” is learnt without the assimilating the limiting notion of “one reason” and that this construct is not normally harbouried within academic settings, then it would seem that the University’s focus should be on how to encourage teaching technologies that promote creativity. Further, since the tendency is towards static constructs, categories, and paradigms then the emphasis must be on creativity. In tukontological terms, the focus would be on producing novelty at the improvisational flute level to force new possibilities by changing the kettle drum ways of knowing in order to remake institutions at the bass level. The word institution is used here to refer to stable groups that include both humans and nonhumans. To do this work at the flute level, the creativity that emerges from engineered zones of liminality during the rituals of traditional peoples could be harnessed.

The singularity of the writings of Wilson Harris, Alfred North Whitehead and Sylvia Wynter is their notorious resistance to any straightforward reading or rendering. They draw all comers into narratives that destabilize categories and force experiences of discomfort and cognitive incoherence that result in hesitation, a re-cognition of easy flowing categories and, in the end, the co-invention of new ways of relating to the world. They are avatars of liminality.

Wilson Harris

Harris read the following quote from Jonestown to explain what he means by “place” and “music” during an interview (Camboni and Fazzini 2004:53):
When music and unspoken prayer animate language, all proportionalties of being and non-being, genesis, and history, are subject to a revisionary focus. The Wilderness comes into its own as extra-human territory which unsettles the hubris of a human-centred cosmos that has mired the globe since the Enlightenment.

The interrelationships between the sciences and the arts – that ancient humanity may have sought to nourish within its crises and difficulties – address diminutive survivors of holocausts (such as myself) all over again in new and startling ways. (Harris 1996:97)

Before the music of tukontology, Harris spoke of the “music” of “place.” In explaining the above passage, he says:

When I speak of music, I am not thinking simply of a man-made music. I am thinking of the music that exists prior to human discourse. It exists in the cosmos, it exists, you could say, in the rivers, in the land. If you look into the sky you may see clouds moving. But those clouds form themselves in your mind into a melody, a music. It is silent yet the silence does not dispel the sense of music. Music, therefore, is older than human discourse. When it arises, it arises in the shape of an unspoken prayer, a prayer without words (Camboni and Fazzini 2004:54).

It can be argued that he was suggesting a similar notion expressed in the tukontological model where the music of an “extra human layer” found in “living landscapes” orchestrated their own order. He believes that “music is involved in a very deep-seated spirit of place, the spirit of ancestries, the spirit of origins. Music is extra-human in some respects; it is not a purely human phenomenon” (Camboni and Fazzini 2004:53-54). For Harris, “place” has many layers and it is the “extra-human layer that unsettles the hubris of a human-centred cosmos” (Camboni and Fazzini 2004:54). He objects to the current hegemonic way of knowing (and living) or cosmos that fail to register the music of living landscapes by and exercising its dominance “over many peoples who were weaker or frailer.” He confirms that for him place “has these layers that break into new relationships as well as old relationships because the old relationships arise within this sense of a labyrinth of humanity that we need to understand” (Camboni and Fazzini 2004:53-64).

Professor Mark McWatt offered testimony on the liminal intent and experience of Harris’ work when he presented a brief paper to UWI Cave Hill’s philosophy colloquium (McWatt 2005:1-8). According to McWatt, Harris believed that the “nature of consciousness and the imagination is concerned with the transcending of barriers and categories of all kind” (McWatt 2005:3). McWatt agreed with CLR James that Harris’ philosophical approach used the tools of phenomenological investigation found in the writings of Edmund Husserl, in Heidegger’s Being and Time and in works such as Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception (McWatt 2005:5). These phenomenological tools aided Harris’ journey into liminal/“limbo” explorations where he was could orchestrate new associations of concepts and things.
The bass drum level of tukontology represents those static institutions of which Harris is wary. On the other hand, the flute creative level could be understood as Harris’ “limbo.” It is at this level that Harris toils and suggests new ritual technologies for negotiating this chaotic realm. It could be said that Harris constantly works at the flute level in order to constantly re-orchestrate the bass level. He expresses it this way:

We think we have tamed the earth, but this is not true. You see the storms that occur occasionally, you see earthquakes. We do not know what lies under the surface of the earth, what forces lie there. We have to be conscious of the wilderness. Wherever we are, there is a wilderness attendant upon what we think we have tamed, what we think we have conquered. (Camboni and Fazzini 2004:54)

Alfred North Whitehead

Whitehead believed that philosophers, like the rest of nature, should strive for coherence and that this coherence should be a process of many individual beings, human and nonhuman, becoming one. The achievement of coherence is then experienced as feeling of satisfaction. At this moment the many becomes one and are increased by one. These moments, referred to as “actual occasions” of becoming then cease and the being no longer feels or experiences anything until the next “actual occasion.” Having made the demand for coherence, Whitehead was led in his philosophical speculation to explicitly confront the problem of novelty as the ultimate challenge that coherence had to satisfy (Stengers 2008:10). As Stengers puts it, “It is no longer the enjoyment of the nightingale song which matters, but also the very hope and trust the thinker entertains, that she may be able to produce new relevant propositions.” The tukontological bass level where humans and nonhumans find coherence is what Whitehead calls a “society.” It is at this bass level of social stability that “actual occasions” provide the possibility of breaking social continuity to drive a new, non conformal mode of becoming one again (Stengers 2008:10).

Whitehead was therefore concerned with work at the creative flute level. Stengers summarized his concern about static constructions in a Constructivist Reading of Process and Reality with this admonition:

We have to wonder about what we take for granted, that is to leave the settled, frictionless ground where the question of what is responsible for an eventual misunderstanding matters, while frictionless understanding is taken for granted. (Stengers 2008:7)

Whitehead assigned to philosophy the task of fabricating and testing abstract concepts that could elicit a variation of interest. Furthermore, these abstractions should induce an “empirically felt elucidation of our experience” and prompt imaginative leaps. Whitehead therefore aimed to “engineer new modes of abstractions designed to lure an appreciation of our many modes of abstraction” (Stengers 2008:3).

Whitehead’s distrust of final answers and his concern about the certainty of knowledge that leads to static teaching was founded on his own collapse of certitude. In his words
We supposed that nearly everything of importance about physics was known. Yes, there were a few obscure spots, strange anomalies having to do with the phenomena of radiation which physicists expected to be cleared up by 1900. They were. But in so being, the whole science blew up, and the Newtonian physics, which had been supposed to be fixed as the Everlasting Seat, were gone. Oh, they were and still are useful as a way of looking at things, but regarded as a final description of reality, no longer valid. Certitude was gone. (Price 1954:7)

The above lesson, still ignored in our universities, that there can be no certainty even in our most rigorous sciences, drove Whitehead write about the “the fallacy of dogmatic finality” (Price 1954:7). His caution is relevant even today:

The Universe is vast. Nothing is more curious than the self-satisfied dogmatism with which mankind at each period of its history cherishes the delusion of the finality of its existing modes of knowledge. Sceptics and believers are all alike. At this moment scientists and sceptics are the leading dogmatists. Advance in detail is admitted; fundamental novel is barred. This dogmatic common sense is the death of philosophic adventure. The Universe is vast. (Price 1954:7)

*Sylvia Wynter*

The author recalls grappling with a first encounter with both the language and content of a lecture presented by Sylvia Wynter at UWI in 2002. On the panel Chaired by Professor Alan Cobley, I sat next to Professor Wynter to perform the duties of moderator during the question and answer section. Having encountered several challenges in fully understanding the lecture, I got the distinct impression that the audience was having similar difficulties. Indeed, the challenge was signaled from the title – *On the Relativity, Nature-Culture Hybridity, and Auto-Institutedness of Our Genre(s) of Being Human: Towards the Transculturality of a Caribbean/New World Matrix* (Wynter 2002). On the following day, in a more intimate discussion session with several interested students, she confessed that she intend for the lecture to be difficult. It then became clear to me that it was not merely the content of the lecture that Sylvia Wynter wanted to use to convey her message, but also its ability to interrupt the experience of easy listening that comes with hardened categories and well travelled cognitive routes. The aim was to introduce friction and force the dissolution of a closed, unambiguous and determinate cognitive state that would first give way to the ambiguous, open and indeterminate liminal moment/s which finally provide for the possibility of orchestrating new orders.

**How UWI students will orchestrate new worlds**

One way of promoting ritual technology in the UWI is to present these and other avatars of liminality, normally unknown to Science students, throughout the university. Not in an interdisciplinary way, where these writers are presented as literature for example, since the only result would be that students from particular disciplines with frozen categories come into contact with the equally hardened boundaries of other disciplines. Rather, Harris could
be presented to science students to open them to the possibility that there could be other realities governed by other sciences. On the other hand, the philosophical and scientific texts of Whitehead could be presented to humanities students as a study in aesthetics and values as the foundation of all knowledge.

More generally, UWI could move beyond the useful but limited liminality possible with written texts and seek to use design, art and architecture to create liminal zones throughout the university. For example, the walking paths of students should be designed with stretches of familiar, meaningful walls and structures that are occasionally interrupted with brief moments of the type of synecdochical spaces traditionally constructed as liminal zones during ritual.

Liminality, however, is not the only means of making the thought of students more agile while creating new possibilities. Close attention should also be paid to the work being done by ethnographers and ethnologist who attempt to describe the metaphysics of the individual sages of other peoples. Sagacity, a project founded by Oruka that seeks to record African philosophy by interviewing individual sages and with which UWI’s Dr. Frederick Ochieng-Odhiambo has played a pivotal role (Oruka 1997: ), can now be viewed as a programme of “empirical metaphysics” that brings novel metaphysical propositions for reification through to a tukontological orchestration. Indeed, Harris, Whitehead and Wynter could be treated as sages inventing metaphysical propositions as offerings for the orchestration of new worlds.

References


