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Carnival and quantum theory

Metaphors of identity in Wilson Harris's *The Carnival Trilogy*

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One of the most striking qualities of Wilson Harris's later work, is how difficult it is to understand who is who and what happens. Rather than the usual narration of characters' lives, somehow woven into a plot, later texts seems to convey images and theoretical dialogues, connected through nonlinear and confusing plots. *The Carnival Trilogy* unites three novels originally published separately – *Carnival*, first published in 1985, *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 1987, and *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, 1990. These three novels share a common storyline – a man dreaming about his past in a fictional Guyana. In the trilogy, the surreal play with images and ideas is far more important than the story of characters and their lives, or anything that is of the more realistic, palpable sort. Fred D'Aguiar has helpfully labeled the Harrisian form of story line as "thought-plot," where "ideas replace action with ideas, or thought is action itself" (13). Often, the main character of the text appears to be fluid thought taking varied shapes.

In his ambitiously experimental writing, Harris creates a narrative structure which is multiple and flexible, and opens up a space for an apparent infinity of images, stories and perspectives. It is a highly abstract form of narration, in which the reader looks in vain for characters to identify with, and yet identity is a central concern. In the following I will focus on two of the author's metaphorical fields which take up a central place in the trilogy's thought-plots and which strike me as interesting contributions to the rich and fascinating discussion on Caribbean identity: quantum theory and carnival.

Let me start with the more complex metaphor. While famously difficult and weird, my claim is that understanding a few basic ideas of quantum theory simplifies the reading of *The Carnival Trilogy* and adds a surprising new angle to post-colonial Caribbean ideas on identity. Harris's interest in quantum theory seems to have been sparked by his reading of a book entitled *Quantum Reality*, in which the physicist Nick Herbert explains how quantum theory conceives a worldview of "simultaneous possibilities." In the epigraph to *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, Harris quotes the following sentence from *Quantum Reality*.

"Quantum reality consists of simultaneous possibilities, a 'polyhistoric' kind of being... incompatible with our... one-track minds" (Nick Herbert. *Quantum Reality*, quoted in *The Carnival Trilogy* 263). Quantum theory postulates a surreal view of things that does not correspond with the way we generally experience the world. According to Herbert,

The quantum world ?...? is not a world of actual events like our own but a world full of numerous unrealized tendencies for action. These tendencies are continually on the move, growing, merging, and dying according to exact laws of motion discovered by Schrödinger and his colleagues. But despite all this activity nothing ever actually happens there. Everything remains strictly in the realm of possibility (Herbert 27).

According to Herbert, there is a fascinating debate amongst physicists on whether quantum theory is still at some level connected with reality. Is there a quantum reality, or is quantum theory simply mathematics gone wild? I will have to abstain from commenting on this debate, I will, however, postulate that a quantum *fiction* exists, particularly in the 'thought-plots' of *The Carnival Trilogy*. What Herbert calls "unrealized tendencies for action," in the trilogy manifests itself in literary terms through 'real' action being backgrounded and uncertain, and dreams with endless possibilities being foregrounded. Thus, the trilogy uses quantum theory, which explains why everything, including dying several times and traveling through time is possible in its logic.

After having read Nick Herbert's *Quantum Reality*, I understood that one of the basic ideas of quantum theory states that everything is interconnected. While "old" Newtonian physics see atoms as the smallest unit of being, and claims that these are solid and separate entities, quantum theory adopts a radically new view of the universe and claims that the world is "all quantumstuff." Quantumstuff being "a physical union of particle and wave" (Herbert 64).

According to Herbert, “this alternation of identities is typical of all quantum entities, and is the major cause of the reality crisis in physics” (66). I spent quite some time trying to imagine this simultaneity of particle and wave, and of course it is practically impossible. For the purpose of reading *The Carnival Trilogy*, however, I find it is useful to visualize the concept of “quantumstuff” as a big fluid, and malleable puzzle, or an infinite number of tiny elements that can be randomly disconnected and reconnected. The narrative consequence of this malleability, which applies to space as well as time, is that linear storytelling becomes obsolete. Linearity is replaced by the concept of “polyhistory,” or simultaneous possibilities. It is a fragmented view of time and space in which everything is possible, but, paradoxically, nothing really happens, since “everything remains strictly in the realm of possibility” (Herbert 27).

I have borrowed the term “polyhistory” from Herbert for my analysis of Harris. It strikes me as a useful analytical tool to describe the quantum theoretical view of existence as a series of simultaneous and interconnected possibilities. If we look at this “polyhistory” concept through the lens of the Caribbean identity discussion, the appeal of simultaneous possibilities becomes clear. According to J. Michael Dash, Caribbean ideas on identity have currently reached a third phase. In the first phase, essayists like Louis Joseph Janvier, Hannibal Price and Antenor Firmin argued against late 19th-century racist theories. In what Dash labels the second phase, Aimé Césaire and the Négritude movement played an important role, and “the specificity of the region was subsumed under the construct of neo-Africanism” (Dash 787). In the third phase of the identity discussion, of which Harris is part, cultural separatism and a binary opposition between Western and African heritage is transcended. The stress is put on “creolization and interculturalism, “ and on the possibility to “achieve wholeness beyond fragmentation” (Dash 788). Like Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Alejo Carpentier and Édouard Glissant, Harris sees “cross-cultural creativity” (Dash 792) as a means of overcoming the trauma of history. The “polyhistory” concept is thus a way of transcending binary systems of thinking and conceptualizing multiculturalism without the need for hierarchizing or choosing. The individual no longer has to decide whether he or she is African, European, Asian, or Amerindian. He or she can be all at once, none of the above, and/or some of these things some of the time.

This perspective on existence, which leaves room for a simultaneity of possibilities is particularly liberating, since it claims that a multicultural identity need not imply a fragmented self. Not only is the multicultural self possible, but it is in tune with the way the universe is built at its smallest and most basic level. In her book *The Quantum Self*, the physicist and psychologist Danah Zohar reaches startlingly similar conclusions on the liberating aspect of quantum theory for our view of ourselves in relation to the universe. Zohar's thought seems unconcerned with post-colonial theory, even so, her ideas are closely comparable to those of Wilson Harris. She maintains that the world view of old Newtonian physics, in which atoms were seen as solid and separate, created an unnecessary feeling of alienation for the modern subject. Zohar writes that

it was assumed that being, at its most basic, unanalysable level consisted of tiny, discrete particles – atoms – which bump into, attract or repel each other. They were solid and separate, each occupying its own definite place in space and time (10).

In quantum theory, however, with its “Principle of Complementarity,” neither the particle nor the wave state of the electron is complete in itself - both are necessary to give us a complete picture of reality. This provides us with a whole different basic understanding of the universe. Suddenly, what Homi Bhabha has termed “hybridity,” seems to be the natural state of things in general. If the electron is wave and particle at the same time, it is not only possible, but even natural for a person to feel, say, African and European and Asian at the same time. Furthermore, new combinations of all kinds of hyphenated identities theorized by Bhabha as taking place in a “Third Space” seem more than feasible in a universe where everything is interconnected anyway.

According to Zohar, the basic credo of everything being interconnected positions quantum theory very close to holistic movements and Eastern mysticism, and can be seen as part of a world view that in the words of one philosopher is “all organic and fuzzy and warm and cuddly and mysterious” (Zohar 57). For Harris, however, the idea implies a view of history as an “*Infinite Rehearsal*” (title of the second part of the trilogy) of simultaneous possibilities, and enables him to conceptualize a surreal, yet harmonic view of post-colonial multiculturalism. It would be a mistake to think that we have all reached this radical form of acceptance of simultaneity, but in my view we should seriously consider these ideas since they appear to contain an extremely liberating potential.

The idea of carnival substituting the idea of genesis

Quantum theory provides Wilson Harris with one conceptual grid for the representation of everything being interconnected and simultaneously possible, but he doesn't stop there. The other main image he uses is more culture specific: carnival. Like Mikhail Bakhtin, and, more specifically in the Caribbean context, Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Harris uses carnival as a metaphorical concept. According to Vera Kutzinski, Harris, Glissant and Benítez-Rojo conceive carnival as “a permanent revolution, a ceaseless metamorphosis that displaces the idea of Genesis.” She quotes Édouard Glissant as follows: “Composite peoples, that is those who could not deny or mask their hybrid composition, do not ‘need’ the idea of Genesis, because they do not need the myth of pure lineage” (Glissant quoted in Kutzinski 1994:141).

The conception of carnival displacing the idea of genesis is central to Harris's trilogy. It is visible in the constant transformation of characters and nature, as well as in the “polyhistoric” narrative structure, which develops a quality of timelessness, and depicts existence as a “continuity of encounter”(TCT xi). If we define identity as the answer not only to the subjective question “who am I?” but also to the collective question “who am I like?” we may understand why in a multicultural setting the desire for a narration of origin is difficult to appease. If, like Wilson Harris, for example, you come from a family of mixed English, Hindu-Indian, Afro-Caribbean and Amerindian descent, which culture do you belong to? And how do you tell your personal history? The timeless way of thinking, stressing the moment rather than the narration of origin implies that past and future disappear, the emphasis being entirely on the moment, on the instant of carnival. It is in this way that carnival replaces the idea of Genesis, since the origin of things is not to be traced to a mythic point in the past. Rather, every moment in time is mythic, and every moment in time engenders something new. In this sense, carnival *is* Genesis.

This conception of carnival, as well as the use of quantum theory as a metaphor is particularly visible in the following scene from *The Four Banks of the River of Space*. On his trip down a surreal version of the Potaro river, Anselm, the narrator encounters live “processional sculptures from the Waterfall.” This is one of the superbly surreal images Harris creates in his texts – try to take your time to visualize this dream-landscape. Earlier in the text, these live

processional sculptures emerge out of the eroded, undulated rocks. In the following passage, Uncle Proteus,¹ one of Anselm's relatives he encounters on this trip, explains why everything is in a constant state of metamorphosis.

‘Watch the *river of space*, watch this dream space, dream-rib, metamorphoses, watch the live processional sculptures from the Waterfall. They bring the key...’ ‘...?’ ‘The key to carnival ‘...?’ is rooted in imperial and colonial disguises. The key to carnival lies in a *displacement of time-frames* to break a one-track commitment to history. The key to the reformation of the heart breaks the door of blind consciousness into shared dimensions, the dimension of subconscious age and the dimension of childhood. They cross and re-cross each other within levels of Dream (TCT 325).

What Harris writes about in a creative and symbolic way is the overcoming of social trauma by mentally disengaging from a “one-track commitment to history.” Harris thus not only visualizes identity as a process, as a continuum of character-masks, but also deals with the relationship between identity as a process and history. His vision of history is ‘polyhistoric,’ influenced by quantum theory (cf. the metaphors “river of space,” “displacement of timeframes” in the passage above), as well as by carnival. I once came across an article by Jörn Rüsen, a German historian who asks the question “can yesterday be improved?”² Harris's answer seems to be: ‘think carnival!’

Quantum theory and carnival may appear to belong to quite separate realms, but Harris brings them together, and creates a narrative vision of history that differs from a standard Western linear view.³ For Harris, history need not be seen, indeed should not be seen as time's arrow, upon which event A logically and irrevocably causes event B. “The key to *carnival* lies in the *displacement of time-frames* to break a one-track commitment to history,” he writes, uniting metaphorical uses of carnival and quantum logic in one sentence. What carnival and quantum theory are here shown to have in common is the multiplicity of layers. In carnival, a mask is worn, implying a second, parallel, assumed identity. Quantum theory does the same thing to the narrative time line of history: it provides the idea of simultaneous possibilities, masks if you wish, broadening the spectrum of narratives and/or performances of the individual who realizes his or her polyhistoric background (and future). As Durix describes Harris's confusion

¹ In Greek mythology, Proteus is a lesser sea god, in some versions of the legend said to be the son of Poseidon. He is old and wise and has prophetic powers. Furthermore, he is legendary for his capability to change his appearance at will (Herter 1196). It thus makes perfect sense that Harris here makes him speak on the subjects of carnival and metamorphosis.

² Jörn Rüsen “Kann gestern besser werden?”

³ Notions of history are inextricably linked to notions of time, and as conceptions of time, conceptions of history are culture specific.

of masks: “These ‘carnival heirs,’ ?...? wear masks which they soon recognize as so many layers of themselves to be acknowledged as a potential wealth and not as a sign of irremediable fragmentation” (64).

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