

## A shape which represents an eternity of riddles

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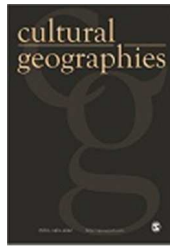
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**A shape which represents an eternity of riddles: fractals and scale in the work of Wilson Harris**

Journal:	<i>cultural geographies</i>
Manuscript ID:	CGJ-14-0099.R2
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	fractals, scale, Wilson Harris, materiality, aesthetics
Abstract:	<p>This paper undertakes a geographical investigation of the potential application of the concept of fractals to Wilson Harris’s understanding of the relationships between language and landscape. Alan Riach , briefly describing a fractal as “an irregular action or shape, such as a cloud or a coastline...”, has famously argued that Harris’s poetry and prose (his work notoriously blurs this boundary) “...is caught up by the shifting fractals of political energy on a global stage...”</p> <p>Retracing this essentially metaphorical use of the term fractal back through its physical geography routes, the paper begins by briefly exploring the complex meanings of the term as it is used to describe dynamic geomorphological processes, particularly the changing shapes of coastlines and rivers. Bringing this into relationship with Wilson Harris’s most recent work <i>The Ghost of Memory</i>, as well as his own commentaries on his work as a whole, the paper argues that the application of the adjective “fractal” specifically to landscape as it is described in Harris’s work is not purely metaphorical, but usefully describes the conditions for the relationships between language and landscape that Harris has spent a lifetime expressing. This tentative and contested geographical understanding of natural features of the environment as in this way not static but “in constant motion and unfinished” can therefore form the beginning of an understanding of Harris’s critique of environmental degradation as disconnection. The paper will end by briefly exploring the potential value of Harris’s work in relation to literature and spatiality.</p>

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3 **A shape which represents an eternity of riddles: fractals and scale in the work of**  
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5 **Wilson Harris**  
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9  
10 **Abstract**  
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14 This paper undertakes a geographical investigation of the potential application of the concept  
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16 of fractals to Wilson Harris's understanding of the relationships between language and  
17  
18 landscape. Alan Riach<sup>1</sup>, briefly describing a fractal as "an irregular action or shape, such as a  
19  
20 cloud or a coastline...", has famously argued that Harris's poetry and prose (his work  
21  
22 notoriously blurs this boundary) "...is caught up by the shifting fractals of political energy on  
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24 a global stage..."  
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31  
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51  
52 relation to literature and spatiality.  
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55  
56  
57 **Keywords:** Fractals; scale; Wilson Harris; environment; aesthetics; materiality  
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3 **A shape which represents an eternity of riddles: fractals and scale in the work of**  
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5 **Wilson Harris**  
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10 **Introduction**

11 The distinguished career of Wilson Harris as a poet, novelist and literary critic has  
12 deservedly received much comment amongst those interested in Caribbean literature<sup>3</sup>  
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4<sup>5</sup>. However it is the enduring impact on his writing of Harris's pre-literary background as a hydrographic surveyor who led research expeditions into the Guyanese interior that makes his work particularly interesting in relation to the ongoing dialogue between geography and literary studies.

Harris's formulation of a "living text landscape", which is a recurring element of his work, developed out of this distinctively physical and *mathematical* engagement with landscape:

"As a surveyor one is involved in mathematical disciplines, and astronomy... I sensed, as a surveyor, that the landscape possessed resonance. The landscape possessed a life, because the landscape for me is like an open book, and the alphabet with which one worked was all around me."<sup>6</sup>

In terms of its "living" element, this view of landscape as active rather than passive is very familiar to physical geographers and other earth scientists, who are concerned on a daily basis with geomorphological processes, or the ways in which landscapes change over time. That there has been and continues to be movement in the seemingly still landscape, albeit slow enough to sometimes be appreciable only over millennia – mountains rising, valleys being carved out, continents shifting – is an experience of landscape that is part of the surveyor's trade.

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5 Harris brings this awareness into his literary writing as a multi-scalar recognition of  
6  
7 restlessness that is textual only in a very physical sense. For example, Harris explains  
8  
9 that when he goes back to Guyana, he remembers his 1930s boyhood, when he used  
10  
11 to go swimming near the Fort in Georgetown. He reflects that by the 1960s the sea  
12  
13 had receded in this spot by six or seven feet, so that there was now dry land in the  
14  
15 exact place where he used to swim. Hence thirty years later, if he imagines that child  
16  
17 swimming in exactly the same place, what he sees is the ghost of a child “swimming  
18  
19 in dry land”<sup>7</sup>. For Harris, this moving physical landscape is a “landscape of the  
20  
21 imagination”: it is a text that can be read by humans who partake in the earth’s  
22  
23 creativity.  
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29  
30 Harris’s work could be typified then overall as a career-long meditation on the spatial  
31  
32 dynamism of the Caribbean, in both its human and its physical aspects. It combines  
33  
34 reflections on ancient Amerindian concepts and language forms (for example the bone  
35  
36 flute), which articulate with European, African and Asian postcolonial cultural forms  
37  
38 (such as Haitian vodun dance and Greek mythology). However all of these encounters  
39  
40 happen *through* a creative literary imagination that Harris insists is integral to the  
41  
42 physicality of the landscapes of the Guyanese interior. For this reason Harris extends  
43  
44 Jung’s concept of “collective unconscious” into the notion of a “universal  
45  
46 unconscious”, which determinedly combines human and physical, psychic/spiritual  
47  
48 and material, in a multi-lingual, multi-script textuality:  
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51  
52 "universal unconscious" encompasses living landscapes as well as the human  
53  
54 psyche, the implicit eloquence in the shape of rocks, the markings on rocks  
55  
56 made by fire and water, messages or hieroglyphs left by ancient cultures. Some  
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3 of these hieroglyphs are untranslatable but they are a ceaseless spur to the  
4  
5 human imagination to discern priorities to human discourse. The tree that seems  
6  
7 voiceless whispers not only in its leaves but within an invisible orchestra or  
8  
9 carbon attunement between wood and element. Not to speak of the inner  
10  
11 horizons in which is a kind of book in parallel with the growth and decline of  
12  
13 civilizations<sup>8</sup>.  
14  
15

16 This deliberate conjoining of expressions of the human imagination with the shaping  
17  
18 of rocks caused by geomorphologic processes, alongside countless elemental and  
19  
20 temporal affinities between the physical and the human, speaks of a universe in which  
21  
22 spiritual and material, “word and world”<sup>9</sup> [9 670] are not separate but operate as  
23  
24 repetitions or patterning within one shared dynamic. Due to this patterning within  
25  
26 complexity – this “shape which represents an eternity of riddles”<sup>10</sup> - I argue that the  
27  
28 relationships between human history, aesthetics and corporeality in Harris’s work can  
29  
30 be understood through the concepts of fractals and scalar abstraction.  
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36 This paper undertakes a geographical investigation of the potential application of the  
37  
38 concepts of fractals and scalar abstraction to Wilson Harris’s vision of connectedness.  
39  
40 The paper will begin by exploring the notion of fractals as it is used in geography,  
41  
42 specifically in relation to scale and scalar abstraction. In this section fractals will be  
43  
44 understood as putting into place a notion of complexity with patterning, which leaves  
45  
46 space for both integration and differentiation of the human, the environmental and the  
47  
48 aesthetic. It will then offer examples of how scalar abstraction can usefully be  
49  
50 deployed in relation to Wilson Harris’s work, drawing on and extending Alan Riach’s  
51  
52 concept of “fractal poetics”. The article will conclude with a brief exploration of the  
53  
54 possible implications of deepening and extending ongoing dialogues between  
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3 geographical and literary studies, by applying a wider range of geographical concepts  
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5 to literary works.  
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### 9 10 **Fractals and scaling: an eternity of riddles**

11  
12 The concept of fractals is employed in a range of disciplines and its usage is linked to  
13  
14 an engagement with features of the environment that are too unpredictable or  
15  
16 ephemeral to be subject to fixed or straightforward rules. For example, Benoit  
17  
18 Mandelbrot<sup>11</sup> classically introduced fractal geometry through the question “How long  
19  
20 is the coast of Britain?” Eglash<sup>12</sup> neatly explains the understanding of fractal  
21  
22 geometry that comes out of this question: “Fractals are characterised by the repetition  
23  
24 of similar patterns at ever-diminishing scales... If you look at the coastline of a  
25  
26 continent... you will see a jagged shape, and if you look at a small piece of that  
27  
28 coastline... we continue to see similar jaggedness.” It therefore becomes impossible  
29  
30 to finally determine the length of the coastline of Britain: fractals reveal an infinite  
31  
32 repetition of jaggedness at smaller and smaller scales. Fractals can therefore be  
33  
34 understood primarily as a way of revealing and approaching complexity.  
35  
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40  
41 In geography fractals have become a way of measuring and recognising scale – scalar  
42  
43 abstraction or parameterization<sup>13</sup>. That is to say, in highly complex natural systems  
44  
45 that change in shape over time, fractal measurements allow geographers to recognise  
46  
47 *repetition* or patterning of similar irregular shapes at closer and closer proximity,  
48  
49 within what appears to be a totally unpredictable shifting irregularity. The first point  
50  
51 about fractals and scale then, is that in a phenomenon with a fractal dimension (i.e. a  
52  
53 degree of self-similarity at a range of scales), whether it be a river network<sup>14</sup> [14] or  
54  
55 urban design<sup>1516</sup>, or indeed textile design<sup>17</sup>, one is able to perceive similar irregular  
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3 patterns repeated almost irrespective of one's proximity to or distance from it: in other  
4  
5 words fractals mean that "the spatial behaviour or appearance of a system is largely  
6  
7 independent of scale"<sup>18</sup>. This scalar self-similarity within a shifting complexity will be  
8  
9 important in looking at Harris's work in the next section: Harris describes a complex  
10  
11 and dynamic, but fundamentally connected, universe.  
12  
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15  
16 In both physical and human geography, scale itself is understood in increasingly  
17  
18 relative, rather than absolute terms<sup>19</sup>, less as fixed or inevitable and more as  
19  
20 produced<sup>20</sup> through socio-political, economic or geomorphic processes<sup>21</sup>. The second  
21  
22 point about fractals and scale in geography then, is that self-similarity of fractal  
23  
24 patterns within a system can therefore allow geographers to engage in exercises of  
25  
26 scalar abstraction that can form a basis for investigation of these underlying  
27  
28 geomorphological or socio-political processes: "the examination of the fractal  
29  
30 dimension is useful for separating scales of variation that might be the result of  
31  
32 natural processes"<sup>22</sup>. It is worth highlighting the caution in this remark: observable  
33  
34 fractal patterning is only an indicator of *possible* regularities within dynamic  
35  
36 processes that are less easy to observe. There is always room for randomness. As  
37  
38 Phillips<sup>23</sup> observes in relation to river networks:  
39  
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41

42  
43 The fractal dimension can be said to derive from fundamental physical  
44  
45 properties of fluvial systems only to the extent that randomness is an inherent  
46  
47 component of fluvial process-response relationships. Topological or geometric  
48  
49 morphometric parameters do not necessarily have direct interpretation in terms  
50  
51 of processes or mechanics.  
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3 Again, the *contingency* of scalar relationships must be kept firmly located in the  
4 context of the irreducible *complexity* of dynamic processes: the “fractal poetics”<sup>24</sup> [1]  
5  
6 of Harris’s work does not describe a fixed or mechanistic universe.  
7  
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10  
11 The third point about fractals is that they can also indicate temporal scales, not just  
12 spatial ones: “Fractals can scale along different dimensions, specifically the spatial or  
13 geometric but also through time...”<sup>25</sup>. In other words, one may see self-similar  
14 irregular patterns of change if one looks at a time-series of a system with a fractal  
15 dimension over a week or over a year or over a century, such as the movement of  
16 prices in a stock market; equally one can see self-similar patterning repeated over a  
17 range of spatio-temporal scales, as with the growth of cities over time and space<sup>26</sup>.  
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29 Temporal scaling is an important consideration in terms of deploying fractal analyses  
30 in literature. There is an established history of using fractals, in terms of repeated  
31 patterns over a range of spatial or geometric scales, in visual arts and design,  
32 particularly in computer-aided design and simulation<sup>27</sup>. Beyond this Eglash<sup>28</sup> for  
33 example, has noted that fractals are an ages-old element of African visual aesthetics,  
34 whilst fractals have been identified as an important element of classic European  
35 architectural design<sup>29</sup>. The deployment of fractal approaches in textual, rather than  
36 visual, aesthetics calls attention to scaling over time as much as over space. This  
37 potentially has several effects: it stimulates non-linear approaches to thematic  
38 development; it suggests a range of possibilities for identifying forms of self-  
39 similarity in narrative form; and it raises intriguing questions about the textual  
40 processes that might lead to self-similarity at a range of scales.  
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3 The next section briefly draws out illustrations of scalar abstraction from Harris's  
4 work, in an attempt to develop some of these issues further, and the conclusion  
5 suggests other possible ways forward for using scalar abstraction and other  
6 geographical tools in literary studies.  
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### 11 12 13 14 **Spatial scaling: body, landscape, aesthetics**

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16 In Wilson Harris's<sup>30</sup> most recent novel *The Ghost of Memory*, the principal character  
17 (who is unnamed) is shot as a terrorist and falls "from a great height" into a painting  
18 on a gallery wall. This fallen character converses with Christopher Columbus, another  
19 character who comes to see the painting every day, about the role of the unconscious  
20 in art and life. Though the premise may sound rather esoteric and ethereal, this  
21 remains a very sensual novel about direct connections between the physical, the  
22 spiritual and the aesthetic. For example, the main character reflects on his injury in  
23 solidly corporeal terms, repeatedly linking the wound in his body with environmental  
24 hazards:  
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36 "The wound I had received had made me more sensitive than ever, not only to  
37 my limbs, back, body, but to millions who had perished instantly in volcanoes  
38 and earthquakes. I was a phantom assembly in the canvas of space sharing a  
39 knowledge of the devastations of Nature that bring us back to the fleeting  
40 origins of creation within/without ourselves."<sup>31</sup>  
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47 This passage is illustrative of the insistence on connection in the novel, with a shared  
48 capacity for creation and expression that links bodies, environments, and aesthetics in  
49 a shared system. Intriguingly this connection points directly beyond the novel itself to  
50 the world inhabited by the reader, hinting that not only might the Christopher  
51 Columbus in the novel be read as the historical explorer, but also that the unnamed  
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3 character in the novel might be identified with Jean Charles de Menezes, the young  
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5 Brazilian man who was shot by the police in London in July 2005, after being  
6  
7 mistaken for a terrorist suspect:  
8

9  
10 This remark of his – all the materials one is given to wear – made me conscious  
11  
12 all at once of how I had been mistaken for and shot as a terrorist! I had lost my  
13  
14 passport and had felt a tide of anxiety rise within me when the armed police  
15  
16 approached me. I was South American, Venezuelan/Brazilian. I knew I would  
17  
18 be sent away from the City.... I was ridden by anxieties.<sup>323334</sup>  
19

20  
21 This is not of course meant to be taken literally<sup>35</sup>: it is a work of the creative  
22  
23 imagination. However it does push the reader towards a sense of direct connection  
24  
25 with the novel as a work of art, rather than a disinterested sense of spectacle.  
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28  
29 From the repetition of this capacity Harris abstracts a distinctly spatial scalar  
30  
31 association, which he calls the “ladder of space”<sup>36</sup>. He pictures this in the novel as a  
32  
33 ladder within the painting, stretching between earth and heaven, and which the  
34  
35 character climbs to seek “the *height* of a solidity of feelings in Art”<sup>37</sup>. As the italics  
36  
37 suggest, the notion of height is not incidental here, and links to a notion of scale in  
38  
39 which height gives a distance that allows a sense of the larger scale, with all its  
40  
41 connections laid out in their solidity, in this case the connections between art,  
42  
43 environments and living bodies.  
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49  
50 In abstracting these spatial scales, Harris employs the artistic work, the natural world  
51  
52 and the human body as different positions of proximity and distance from which this  
53  
54 capacity can be seen. For example in the artwork, both the spectators and the  
55  
56 character in the painting are able to experience this capacity from their different  
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1  
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3 vantage points: “they (the spectators) stood in the painting on the huge wall in the  
4  
5 gallery on which the canvas was laid. I called on them silently to feel what was  
6  
7 happening to me – as it was happening to them whether they knew it or not...”<sup>38</sup>.

8  
9 Again in the physical environment, which is itself inside a painting, both the creatures  
10  
11 inhabiting the environment and the narrator experience this shared capacity of  
12  
13 indwelling:  
14

15  
16 ditches sparkling with diamonds that turned into a shining fish... drowning in  
17  
18 air. It had jumped to the River but had been caught in a net. It fluttered like a  
19  
20 living machine... Such is a work of Art. Caught like me.”<sup>39</sup>

21  
22 Finally from the vantage point of the living and dying body, Harris explains the  
23  
24 importance of being able to understand this capacity, this indwelling of the aesthetic  
25  
26 and spiritual in the physical:  
27

28  
29 We are born and re-born within and beyond ourselves. We may care for our  
30  
31 parents when they are ill... But the change that has happened in us means a new  
32  
33 orientation in which we become virtually parentless. We need a wider and  
34  
35 deeper relationship in which to employ ourselves<sup>40</sup>.

36  
37 This ‘wider and deeper relationship’ is not restricted to genetic heritage (with its  
38  
39 racialized and essentialised violences), but is found within the relationships of the  
40  
41 human body with other bodies (human and animal), with the landscape and with the  
42  
43 aesthetic. In turn, these wider relationships, more decisive than they are definitive<sup>41</sup>,  
44  
45 are revealed in the novel through processes of fractal repetition and their attendant  
46  
47 scalar abstractions.  
48  
49

50  
51 In abstracting such a diverse scalar association it is clear that Harris is not dealing  
52  
53 with a realist spatial continuum that might run from local to regional to global for  
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3 example. These scales are not differentiated by physical size necessarily – they do not  
4  
5 simply “nest” one inside the other like Russian dolls. This has two implications. First,  
6  
7 Harris’s vision in *Ghost of Memory* may be seen as scaling across different orders of  
8  
9 materiality<sup>4243</sup> that associate one with another through the shared universal  
10  
11 unconscious that produces this shared capacity. In this sense, though it is saturated  
12  
13 with worldliness in its references and implications, this scaling is a pure abstraction: it  
14  
15 is created through recognition of the particularity of this shared creative and  
16  
17 expressive capacity and the universal unconscious that makes for its repetition.  
18  
19 Crucially, it does not assume any other uniformity – the corporeal, the environmental  
20  
21 and the aesthetic are not collapsed one into the other. They continue to be diverse and  
22  
23 dynamic even though they are connected.  
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29  
30 Second, this scalar abstraction need not be understood as subject to the rigid  
31  
32 hierarchies for which the concept of scale has often been criticised<sup>4445</sup> – Harris  
33  
34 recognises self-similarity between the corporeal, the environmental and the aesthetic  
35  
36 as scales at which creative and expressive capacity are experienced, without offering a  
37  
38 necessary hierarchy of size or level between them. I want to insist that what I am  
39  
40 calling a process of abstraction in Harris’s work is nonetheless scalar rather than  
41  
42 simply serial, i.e. that Harris is not just noticing similarity in a series of unconnected  
43  
44 spheres. When the main character (who shifts continuously between his different  
45  
46 states as character in this novel, as figure in a painting, and as a real person shot as a  
47  
48 terrorist) experiences the indwelling of creative capacity, he recognises himself as  
49  
50 located within landscape, within the aesthetic domain *and* within the domain of the  
51  
52 living. Crucially, he is always located within each – it is only their priority, their  
53  
54 relative proximity to the individual one might say, that changes. So these relationships  
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3 are much more scalar than serial, though dynamically so – the corporeal, the aesthetic  
4  
5 and the environmental are nested one within the other, but they shift constantly in  
6  
7 terms of which is nested within which.  
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10  
11 This shifting prioritisation within a diverse and dynamic universe brings us closer to  
12  
13 Riach's<sup>46</sup> understanding of Harris's "fractal poetics", in which he uses the concept of  
14  
15 fractals as a metaphor for the restless creative force in Harris's writing. Riach argues  
16  
17 that Harris "...is caught up by the shifting fractals of political energy on a global  
18  
19 stage..."<sup>47</sup>. Because of the shape-shifting dynamic of his imagination, Harris's work  
20  
21 is able to deal with the multiple landscapes, aesthetics and histories of the Caribbean  
22  
23 and beyond, without ever resolving them into one over-riding explanatory dynamic or  
24  
25 outcome. The work therefore expresses a constant state of becoming that can elicit  
26  
27 fear, but can also be a source of hope: "The ambivalent nature of fractal movement,  
28  
29 creating substance and dissolving it, may as easily lead to the presence of actual  
30  
31 angels as to the relentless pursuit of the furies"<sup>48</sup>.  
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38  
39 It is worth pressing this point slightly further before continuing with the analysis. By  
40  
41 talking about Riach's use of fractals as metaphorical, and suggesting that the concept  
42  
43 of fractals could be used in relation to scalar patterning within the text, there is of  
44  
45 course no intention to suggest that metaphor is either static or outdated. As Riach  
46  
47 amply shows here, metaphor is enormously productive, creating meaning through  
48  
49 striking transferences, and representing deeper resemblances that vibrate in their  
50  
51 unexpected truth<sup>49</sup>. What the present analysis suggests is that when fractals are used  
52  
53 as a geographical tool, to identify self-similarity at a range of scales in the novel, they  
54  
55 do something *other* (not more) than the metaphorical. To identify scalar relations  
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3 within the novel is ultimately to deploy what might properly be termed a  
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5 *geographical mode of analysis* in order to recognise patterns that are already present  
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7 within the text. In this sense, using scalar abstraction in this way is not so much  
8  
9 literary as *literal*, in that it brings out the material or “‘thingy’ reality” of the novel,  
10  
11 which is a combination of patterns in the text that we perceive sensually, interacting  
12  
13 with the meanings of the words that we more readily understand<sup>50</sup>. In the next  
14  
15 section, through an analysis of temporal scaling, this article addresses the well-known  
16  
17 metafictional elements of Harris’s work, in which the work extends outwards to  
18  
19 incorporate the writer and the reader.  
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### 22 **Temporal scales: fragments/shifts in the stream of time**

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24 In the temporal dimension, Harris’s work scales through the temporality of creativity.  
25  
26 The structure of *Ghost of Memory* refuses linearity, a simple narrative of beginning to  
27  
28 end. So the novel begins with the realisation: “I had been shot. A bullet in my back...  
29  
30 I fell from a great height, it seemed, into a painting in a gallery in a great City... *I had*  
31  
32 *been shot because I was deemed to be a terrorist.*”<sup>51</sup>. Chapter after chapter there are  
33  
34 encounters and dialogues, between the character and Christopher Columbus, with  
35  
36 Tiresias the blind seer, with a troupe of actors putting on a play that is linked with the  
37  
38 painting etc. As a direct result of each of these encounters, the revelation of  
39  
40 connection - between the character’s wounding and larger massacres, between  
41  
42 violence and environmental change for example – is made repeatedly, and then at the  
43  
44 end of the book the character experiences the same revelation again, as if for the first  
45  
46 time, from a comment made by Christopher Columbus: “This remark of his – the  
47  
48 material one is given to wear – made me conscious at once of *how I had been*  
49  
50 *mistaken for and shot as a terrorist.*”<sup>52</sup>. This repetitive structure does not stop time in  
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52 the book – there is a sense of time passing day by day, and ultimately the mounting  
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3 frustration of Columbus with these encounters leads sequentially to his destruction of  
4 the painting in the final pages – but the repetition makes the linearity of time  
5 relatively insignificant in comparison with the eruptions of revelation that come out of  
6 dialogue between characters.  
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14 This repetitive revelation through interaction between characters links back to some  
15 of Harris's earlier literary criticism, in which he says that his characters are to be seen  
16 as an ensemble expressing a complex shared capacity – they are “related within a  
17 personal capacity which works in a poetic and serial way so that a strange jigsaw is  
18 set in motion like a mysterious unity of animal and other substitutes within the  
19 person.”<sup>53</sup>. It is in their interaction, time after time, that characters repeatedly reveal  
20 the contours or shape of the shared capacity that I am suggesting is the fractal  
21 repetition from which Harris abstracts scale. As his nameless character puts it, in the  
22 context of Columbus's angry accusation that he is limited<sup>54</sup>: “That is why I seek new  
23 shapes – not just for their novelty but as a way of approaching what is insoluble yet  
24 may be real. The approach of an open Mind which evolves – if I may so put it –  
25 through fragments, through shifts, in the stream of time.” Each individual is partial in  
26 their view of this capacity, “bowled over in the rapids of history”<sup>55</sup>, but through  
27 interaction each individual can open up beyond their limitations, and perceive  
28 historical shifts that are more subtle than the all-or-nothing sequential movement from  
29 one civilisational epoch to the next.  
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52 Although the temporality of the narrative reveals the repetitive and non-linear  
53 insertion of these encounters and revelations, it is the nested and shifting temporalities  
54 of creativity that show their scalar patterning. Within the novel, the nameless  
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3 character understands himself, during a conversation with another character from the  
4 painting he is in, as moved by the same creative force that drove the artist who  
5 painted him, so that he is capable of influencing the artist's actions in painting him<sup>56</sup>:  
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9 I knew – as a quantum creature in a quantum creation – that I possessed a  
10 peculiar independence and was capable of turning on him and making him paint  
11 differently as if I myself were involved in the arts of creation – involved in an  
12 involuntary force of the unconscious beyond myself and within myself.  
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18 So the moment of creative impulse within the painted character turns back onto the  
19 moment of artistic creation through painting, not following it sequentially but  
20 connecting with it as self-similarity.  
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27 At a larger temporal scale, Harris has described a repetitive tradition of creativity in  
28 the writing of novels, in which the same creative impulse writes both the characters  
29 and the author. Harris has famously critiqued the literacy of “block functions”<sup>57</sup> by  
30 which people are forced into a narrow range of instrumental ways of reading and  
31 writing, linked to the realist narratives of government and productivity. He suggests  
32 that there are other forms of creative literacy that draw on the “unpredictable  
33 movement of consciousness-in-unconsciousness”<sup>58</sup>, i.e. on the capacity to think  
34 beyond these realist narratives to the capacity for universal consciousness. For  
35 example, he argues that a writer who is alive to this capacity may find in drafts and  
36 redrafts of his/her own work a literacy of the imagination, finding myths that “lie like  
37 fossils in the ancient past, that come alive within his (sic) own work so that the  
38 substance of tradition...begins to re-enact itself...”<sup>59</sup>.  
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3 Beyond this, Harris goes so far as to say that, in a dynamic relationship between  
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5 scales, this same pattern of creativity as kinship repeats so that “The characters create  
6  
7 the writer as well”<sup>60</sup> (83). *Jonestown*<sup>61</sup> begins with a letter from the main character,  
8  
9 Francisco Bone, to the author, in which Bone commissions Harris to edit the book that  
10  
11 he (Bone) has written. Beyond this Riach<sup>62</sup> tells the story of a lecture given by Harris,  
12  
13 in which the novelist says that one of his characters, Aunt Alicia, has torn up his  
14  
15 lecture and told him to “Speak out of your vulnerability. Speak from within the  
16  
17 resources of your creative experience.” The effect of this awareness of connection  
18  
19 between writer and characters is a sense of both creator and created having been and  
20  
21 still being created by larger creative forces in nature and culture, and this shifting  
22  
23 temporality (past and present merging and overlapping) brings a vulnerability to both  
24  
25 author and reader, a sharp awareness of being both created and creator, a state of  
26  
27 being that is constantly in process within dynamic environmental and cultural  
28  
29 systems. Nielsen<sup>63</sup>, describing these nested and dynamic relationships, in which the  
30  
31 creative moment scales outwards and inwards through time, says: “It is not a simple  
32  
33 matter of denying “natures” to characters and their authors. With Harris it is, rather, a  
34  
35 matter of writing the multiplicity of natures and writing as the production of nature.”  
36  
37 Creativity in Harris’s work is therefore fractal in its irregular and complex  
38  
39 temporality; its characters, as well as its author, are constantly and unpredictably  
40  
41 redefining the contours and substance of this shared capacity for expression.  
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50 On a yet wider temporal scale, Harris discusses cultural practices as a scaled  
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52 repetition of awareness of connection over hundreds of years and across civilisations.  
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54 In *The Amerindian Legacy*<sup>64</sup>, Harris discusses the history of conquest that runs  
55  
56 through the Americas, arguing that this does not begin with the arrival of Europeans,  
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3 but that the Caribs were also conquerors of the Mayans before them. Harris argues  
4 that, as both conquerors and victims of conquest, the Caribs were peculiarly able to  
5 recognise at the moment of conquest the “necessary diversity and necessary unity”  
6  
7 between people, and that this recognition has the potential to erode the  
8  
9 conquistadorial character that has continued to plague humanity. He argues that this  
10 awareness of the presence of “alien cultures” within the self manifested itself in a  
11  
12 range of cultural activities and reports of supernatural happenings around the time of  
13  
14 European conquest:  
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20 That new darkness or dawning renascence lay not simply in the ritual morsel of  
21 the enemy they devoured or the flute they fashioned from his bone, but from a  
22 sudden upsurge of bush-baby spectres which rose out of their cooking pots like  
23 wraiths of smoke or sparks of fire.  
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32 Harris is clear however that he is not here arguing for the Caribs to be understood as  
33 guru ingénues, that stalwart of the European colonial imagination<sup>65</sup>. The Caribs, like  
34 the Europeans, were by no means always aware of this unity, so that when the Caribs  
35 were all but eradicated, they continued to reproduce conquistadorial themes,  
36 becoming mercenaries or policing the jungles on behalf of the Dutch and the English.  
37  
38 Harris introduces this “renascence of sensibility” as equally capable of being accessed  
39 by all humanity, and as having been accessed by all humanity, at any of a range of  
40 temporal scales: the moment around the cooking pot, which is part of the period of  
41 established cultural ritual, which is part of the centuries of European colonialism,  
42 which is part of a much longer historical period of conquistadorial narratives, which  
43 itself is part of the longer period of “the clash of cultures and movements of peoples  
44 into the South Americas and the West Indies”<sup>66</sup>.  
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5 Harris abstracts this range of temporal scales from the repeated fractal re-emergence  
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7 of this mode of consciousness, this capacity of the awareness of the other in the self.  
8  
9 He begins with “This scale of the native as host consciousness” then reads “back  
10  
11 through the shock of place and time for... thresholds of capacity that were latent...an  
12  
13 art of subsistence of memory”<sup>67</sup>. He begins with the event of the bush-baby  
14  
15 phenomenon, places this in the context of longer lasting cultural practices relevant to  
16  
17 the Caribs in particular, such as the bone flute, then places these within a larger  
18  
19 temporal scale that includes the enduring importance of cultural practices of vodun  
20  
21 dance or hospitality. At each of these temporal scales, these cultural practices  
22  
23 manifest this latent capacity for recognising the other in the self. It is by recognising  
24  
25 the patterns of the emergence of the other in the self – these fragments or shifts in the  
26  
27 stream of time – that creative alternatives to conquistadorial realist narratives can be  
28  
29 discovered: “If one polarizes the world dreadfully, the oppressor and the oppressed,  
30  
31 then one is no longer in a position to understand who the oppressor is... To  
32  
33 understand that, one has to rehearse the implications.”<sup>68</sup>.  
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## 40 **Conclusion**

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45 This paper has spent some time looking at the ways in which notions of scalar  
46  
47 abstraction based on fractals can be deployed in the study of Wilson Harris’s work.  
48  
49 This is a particular concept of scale, and a wide range of less measurable versions of  
50  
51 scale are used routinely within geography<sup>69</sup>. Fractal scaling is used here precisely  
52  
53 because of its specificity: it highlights dynamic, shifting relationships, but at the same  
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55 time insists on a measurable self-similarity. In relation to Harris’s work this allows  
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3 one to insist on the *partiality* of self-similarity, that is, to see repetition and connection  
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5 over time and space without a complete identification that would remove diversity  
6  
7 and specificity. For Harris's work, which insists on the necessity of avoiding  
8  
9 absolutes *specifically in order to see connections*, this partiality is crucial:

10  
11       Absolutes, I feel, reinforce partialities until they conceal them from view. This  
12  
13       has helped to promote genocides, holocausts. It promotes terrifying divides *we*  
14  
15       *cannot see* between the conscious, the subconscious, the unconscious, between  
16  
17       Brain and the Mind of love.<sup>70</sup>  
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23 I am suggesting, then, that in deploying fractals and scalar abstraction in this study of  
24  
25 literature, the notion of measurability can undergo a kind of "transformation"<sup>71</sup> in  
26  
27 which the emphasis is on specificity and limitation in relation to themes. Certainly  
28  
29 Harris's training as a surveyor means that these concepts can be demonstrated as  
30  
31 explicitly woven into his work as themes, and the writer urges the reader towards this  
32  
33 transformation. It might be possible to deploy notions of fractals and scalar  
34  
35 abstraction in relation to other writers, particularly in terms of exploring thematic  
36  
37 development in non-linear ways, i.e. looking at how each part relates to the whole.  
38  
39 Franco Moretti<sup>72</sup> for example has carried out this kind of work, re-presenting themes  
40  
41 from literary history in a range of non-linear forms, such as maps or graphs. In terms  
42  
43 of fractals, interesting questions then arise around what might be meant by self-  
44  
45 similarity, and about the possibility of more direct "translations"<sup>73</sup> of the notion of  
46  
47 measurability: it might be appropriate to use computerised and mathematical models  
48  
49 for example, in order to capture meta-textual processes that might produce various  
50  
51 measurable forms of self-similarity. Jerome McGann's<sup>74</sup> work on digitisation and  
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53 textuality for example suggests this possibility.  
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5 More broadly, this paper makes a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between  
6 literature and geography. Geographers have been exploring literature for some years,  
7 firstly in appreciation of the ability of creative fiction to eloquently express the  
8 experience of place<sup>75</sup>, and more recently in terms of the materialities of what is  
9 becoming known as the “text event”<sup>76</sup>, i.e. the located and mobile interactions  
10 between writer, text and reader<sup>77</sup>. Equally, students of literature have for some time  
11 been very aware of issues around migration, transnationality and globalisation<sup>78</sup>,  
12 drawing increasingly on complex spatial theory to explore changing experiences of  
13 space and place<sup>79</sup>. This paper suggests that, just as geographers have become aware  
14 that closer attention to literary techniques would allow more awareness of form rather  
15 than a simplistic focus on content alone, literary studies might be able to usefully  
16 deploy a wider range of geographical tools and techniques as it engages increasingly  
17 with material concerns, such as environmental change<sup>80</sup> and the effects of digital  
18 worlds on corporeality<sup>81</sup>.  
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38 The application of geographical concepts to Harris’s work is an important staging  
39 point in this deepening dialogue because this work insistently challenges the  
40 boundaries between the textual and the material, and points repeatedly to the pressing  
41 contemporary issues that make it necessary to do so. Ultimately Harris’s work has a  
42 strong message about the role that the creative literary imagination can play within the  
43 world, if it remains alive to its connections with the materialities at the heart of  
44 contemporary global catastrophes, such as environmental destruction and global  
45 insecurity:  
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The destruction of the rainforests of the globe may seem remote to dwellers in cities. But we need imaginations that are sensitive to inner-city decay and the lungs of the globe orchestrated into forests and rivers and skies. We need to build afresh through the brokenness of our world....<sup>82</sup>.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

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