

DEAD RISKS

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“We are hunted,” writes Wilson Harris in his novel *Jonestown*, “we are pursued by repetitive catastrophes,” and certainly, when the apocalypse came the residents of the villages and townships scattered alongside the banks and tributaries of Guyana’s Omai River could be forgiven for feeling they were living through the kind of historical return central to Harris’ fiction.¹ Just before midnight on August 19, 1995 a tailings pond filled with cyanide ruptured at Cambior Inc.’s Omai Gold Mine.² In the four days it took to close the dam’s breach, three million cubic meters of cyanide-polluted effluent drained into the Omai, creating an ochre plume that local miners claimed carried a lifeless procession of wild pigs and fish, announcing the onset of an ecological holocaust of biblical proportion.³

With its fluorescence of cyanide, the Omai spill invariably recalled the 1978 massacre at Jonestown, perhaps the most infamous moment in Guyana’s history. Reverend Jim Jones, a Hoosier preacher turned coloured redeemer, grafted himself onto the remnants of Bay Area Black and Flower Power before moving his flock to their promised land and communal grave in the Guyanese rainforest. Jonestown, in turn, has its own precedents in American millenarian traditions since the Puritan errand; in the mass suicides of the indigenous peoples of Cuba, Grenada, and Hispaniola who, rather than suffering enslavement under the Spanish, English, and French, committed mass suicide; and in the Reverend John Smith of the London Missionary Society, whose sermons promising the eventual redemption and exodus of the African race allegedly planted the seeds of insurrection in the slave populations of colonial Guiana, leading to the Demerara Insurrection of 1823.⁴

Reverend Smith, an asthmatic, suffocated to death under English guard while he awaited trial for sedition. The colony’s militia killed hundreds of insurgents during the initial insurrection. Thirty-three were executed in its aftermath and the rebel leader Quamina was gibbeted between two cabbage trees. His corpse hung for two months as a warning to potential insurrectionists.⁵ Jones and 914 members of the People’s Temple perished after he coerced them into drinking cyanide-laced Flavor Aid. To date, the effects of the Omai rupture remain contested. Montréal-based Cambior remained blithe about it, claiming that the cyanide levels in the Omai never



Omai Gold Mine, Guyana, operated by Cambior Inc.

exceeded that of tap water, that the plague of dead wildlife amounted to exactly 351 fish. More fish, they claimed, had been killed by angry protestors, who had caught them to throw at Cambior's Georgetown headquarters. The protestors, Cambior asserted, were using the "disaster" as a ruse for more foreign aid, and the real damage was in the mounting effects of the six-month closure of the plant, which Cambior alleged cost them up to \$1 million a month.⁶

Despite their denial of either corporate culpability or human and environmental consequence, Cambior reportedly paid fisherman \$150 to sign forms absolving the company of future claims. CEO Louis Gignac pressured the Guyanese government to limit its environmental assessment on the spill's impact.⁷ Residents complained of skin disorders, still births, and the depletion of fish stocks and game. After an unsuccessful series of lawsuits against the company, a \$2 billion class action suit on behalf of 23,000 of the region's residents was launched in May 2003 against Cambior and Omai's principle investors: the Guyanese government, Denver's Golden Star Resources, JP Morgan Bank, the Royal Bank of Canada, and Citibank of Canada.

Cambior dismisses the charges. Yet while Gignac called the claims "frivolous" and investor-relations manager Robert Lavallière asserted the plaintiffs were



Omai Gold Mine, Guyana, operated by Cambior Inc.

“harassing” the company,⁸ their comments disguise a pattern of corporate slackness and industrial negligence plaguing Omai. Three previous, less spectacular spills had already occurred in 1995 before the August rupture.⁹ In addition, engineers, while not allocating blame or responsibility, conceded the tailings pond’s retaining walls were not constructed to withstand Guyana’s tropical environment and admitted that the walls had known design flaws that would inevitably lead to some form of disaster.

In a broader context, the global recurrence of serious mining accidents makes one wonder if “accident” is the correct descriptive. Cyanide spills have occurred almost every year over the past decade.¹⁰ The European Commission’s Major Accident Reporting System database contains 450 cases of serious chemical accidents in the EU alone. Research institute General Cologne Re’s *Loss and Litigation Report: Pollution Incidents World Wide* lists 58 environmental damage cases while noting that their selection is not representative as it excludes both the United States and “tanker accidents and nuclear disasters.” For the mining industry environmental hazards are both a predictable occurrence and a necessary risk that, after an initial capital outlay for infrastructure, are displaced onto local populations. While the undisclosed terms of Cambior’s political insurance policy presumably responds to the liabilities of civil strife and domestic protest, Guyana’s citizens

are forced to carry the liabilities of foreign debt and potential long-term ecological consequence.¹¹

In this sense, the pacts that northern capital makes with third world countries starved for foreign exchange are a “dead risk,” to borrow the term Schomburgh, the aged mariner of Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacock*, uses to describe the inevitably catastrophic mission into the interior of Guyana at the novel’s center.¹² *Palace* transposes the quests for an elusive El Dorado that mark the beginnings of the country’s modern history on to a seven-day genesis. The crew of a vessel named El Doradonne journey into the country’s heartland in pursuit of Mariella, a fugitive slave who has killed her overseer. Throughout the novel, the crew are shadowed by ghosts and haunted by the failures of previous expeditions. “The odd fact existed,” quips the novel’s narrator regarding the crew of El Doradonne, “that their living names matched the names of a famous dead crew that had sunk in the rapids and been drowned to a man.”¹³ At the end of the novel, the crew meets a similar fate.

Harris worked as a surveyor for the colonial administration in the early 1950s.¹⁴ His journeys into the uncharted interior rainforests and savannahs had a pronounced effect on his imagination. They provided a vision of landscape as restless, unsettled, fluvial, and living—qualities that he replicates in his fiction—alerting him to the submerged histories of space, to the “eclipsed memory,” and “eclipsed perspectives of place and community” violently interred in Guyana’s earth through a chain of repetitive catastrophes: the genocides of aboriginal people in the dark centuries of European conquest, the holocaust of the middle passage and slavery, and now the effects wrought by the itinerant watch of global capital.¹⁵ For Harris, as for capitalism itself, history is enacted not only in space but also through it, and space, especially the geomorphology of Guyana and the Caribbean, shapes history’s unfolding.

Harris has described Guyana’s landscape in terms of “two oceans.”¹⁶ The first is the Caribbean Sea. Its unruly currents and tidal patterns constantly shape and reshape the narrow strip of coastal land on which the colony’s early plantation economy emerged and where, to this day, the majority of Guyana’s population lives. At six feet below sea level, the coastal land was always besieged, always shifting, subject to flooding from both the Caribbean Sea’s tidal sweep and the freshwater discharge from the “numerous etched rivers, numerous lines and tributaries, interior rivers, coastal rivers,” of the region’s heartland. The Dutch and English settlers were forced to construct an extensive system of dykes, dams, and drainage canals to protect the reclaimed, or empoldered, land on which the coastal region of the colony was built.

Guyana's vast interior savannahs and rainforest frame Harris' second ocean, and stretch to its borders with Brazil, Surinam, and Venezuela. The fluid skeleton of this land is supported by a network of rivers: the Cuyuni, the Mazaruni, the Essequibo, the Courantyne, the Demerara and the Omai. Writing on the savannahs between these rivers, nineteenth-century English ethnologist Robert Schomburgk found in the landscape a geomorphic instability predating Harris', and with it the sedimentation of the region's calamitous history:

The geological structure of this region leaves but little doubt that it was once the bed of an inland lake, which by one of those catastrophes, of which even later times gives us examples, broke its barrier, forcing for its waters a path to the Atlantic. May we not connect with the former existence of this inland sea the fable of the lake Parima and the El Dorado? Thousands of years may have elapsed; generations may have been buried and returned to dust; nations who once wandered on its banks may be extinct, and even exist no more in name: still the tradition of the lake Parima and the El Dorado survived these changes of time; transmitted from father to son, its fame was carried across the Atlantic, and kindled the romantic fire of the chivalric Raleigh.¹⁷

The opacity of Guyana's interior veils mythological cities of incredible riches and provokes dreams and desires of a delirious, almost transcendental vision of accumulation and wealth. It is a fiction of tremendous symbolic importance for Schomburgk and Harris—as well as for the historical development of capitalism in the region: beginning with the sixteenth-century explorers Francisco Pizarro, Walter Raleigh, and Francisco Orellano, and continuing through to the discovery, in the early 1990s, of the billion-dollar veins in the Omai region exploited by Cambior.¹⁸ But where Harris' writing proposes a rupture or break from a tradition of conquest and exploitation, Schomburgk contributes to a ceaselessly repeating ethnological tradition driven by conquistadorial romance. As Marshall Sahlins has argued, in the twentieth century an ethnographic bait-and-switch has occurred where, in the wake of colonialism and decolonization, Western naiveté of the tropical "Other" is replaced by the melancholic romance of the *tristes tropiques* and the sublimity of festering primitives and vanquished races.¹⁹ This naiveté obscures the violence behind the triangulated relationship of capital, labour, and nature marking Guyana's history and locating the country within the international register of exchange and accumulation.

Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil stresses the importance of the "mutual commodification" of land and labour to understanding the role of

the third world in the global economy.²⁰ The names nineteenth-century Guyanese planters gave their plantations dramatized this process. Names such as La Bonne Intention, Vryheids Lust, Plaisance, Better Werwagtig, Chateau Margo, Le Beduit, Mon Repos, Friendship, Bellefield, Montrose, Batchelors' Adventure evoked a spirit of tropical entrepreneurialism, adventurism, and romance. But, like the Sweet Home plantation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a ruse of sentimentality and romance masks violent orders of social control and labour exploitation. Ultimately, the slave "belonged to the land he tilled and hoed"; writes historian Cecil Northcott in his history of the Demerera Rebellion, "the plantation name was his surname as well as his badge of servitude."²¹

Furthermore, labour's nature had to be mastered. Otherwise, the planters risked losing their land, returning to a primordial past, and sacrificing their profits. It was African and, after Emancipation in 1834, indentured, Indian labourers who cleared the 100 million tons of water-logged soil necessary for the elaborate network of dams and drainage canals that the colony's economy required to sustain itself against the ravishments of nature. But to leave the land to these labourers was, in the minds of the colonists, to ensure its regression to a state of nature.²² An editorial in the late-nineteenth-century planter journal the *Argosy* lamenting the condition on the once-thriving Den Amstel and Fellowship plantations makes clear the dangers of freedom: "The drains and canals are all choked up;" comments the editorial, "the roads in rainy weather are nothing but a slough; and altogether the district looks the picture of the average 'Negro' settlement, where Quashie is left to the freedom of his own sweet will."²³

The *Argosy's* vision of society's degeneration at the hands of labour places labour outside modernity's progressive temporality. It also replicates the terms of historical arguments opposing both the emancipation of Africans in the Americas and the movements for third world independence and self-government and, in the contemporary context, for justifying the unchecked extension of global capitalism into the underdeveloped regions of the global south. At the same time, there is a dual movement of history here: in opposition to the rhetorics of development, growth, and progress that have created a temporal chasm between the first and third worlds, the arrow of time bends backwards and history repeats itself in Spenglerian fashion. In what might be called the corporate uncanny, the predictable recurrence of environmental apocalypse accompanies capitalism's expansion into the world's resource-rich hinterlands. And perhaps apocalypse is the ultimate gift of freedom bestowed upon the races of the south.

Notes

- 1 Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), page 21.
- 2 The Omai Gold Mine opened in December 1992. Cambior has a sixty-five percent stake. Gold Star Resources of Colorado hold a thirty percent stake, the Government of Guyana five percent. Both are passive shareholders. The mine employs seven hundred workers and provides approximately twenty-percent of Guyana's gross domestic product. Cambior can be reached at 800, boul. René-Lévesque Ouest, Bureau 850, Montréal, QC H3B 1X9, Canada, Tel.: (514) 878-3166, Fax: (514) 878-3324.
- 3 Bert Wilkinson, "Cyanide spill spreading death through Guyana: Millions of gallons dumped into river," *Houston Chronicle*, August 23, 1995, page 20.
- 4 Gordon K. Lewis, *Gather with the Saints at the River: The Jonestown Guyana Holocaust, 1978* (Rio Pedras, Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1979), page 31.
- 5 On the Demerara Insurrection see, Cecil Northcott, *Slavery's Martyr: John Smith of Demerara and the Emancipation Movement, 1917-24* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), and Emilia Viotta da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (OUP, 1994).
- 6 Joseph Hall, "Controversy at Omai: Canadian-based Cambior may be sued over a spill last year at its Guyana mine though experts say there's no lasting impact," *Toronto Star*, July 21, 1996, page B1.
- 7 Sonia Verma, "Not in my backyard," *This Magazine* 32:3 (November/December, 1998), pages 32-37.
- 8 Nicole Mordant, "Cambior in Fighting Mode," *Mineweb.com*, May 6, 2003. <<http://www.mineweb.com>>.
- 9 Desire Kissoon Jodah, "Courting Disaster in Guyana," *The Multinational Monitor*, November, 1995. <<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/42/014.html>>.
- 10 Kenneth Gooding, "Omai Spill Brings Global Fallout," *The Financial Post*, October 3, 1995, page 13.
- 11 General Cologne Re, *Loss and Litigation Report: Pollution Incidents World Wide* (March 2003), page 2. For more on cyanide spills and their ecological impact, see Robert E. Moran, *Cyanide Uncertainties: Observations on the Chemistry, Toxicity, and Analysis of Cyanide in Mining-Related Waters* (Washington, DC: Mineral Policy Center, 1998); and Robert E. Moran, *De-coding Cyanide: An Assessment of Gaps in Cyanide Regulation at Mines—A Submission to the European Union and the United Nations Environmental Programme* (Washington, D.C: Mineral Policy Center, 2002). On the risks of tailings dams, see *Tailings Dams: Risk of Dangerous Occurrences: Lessons Learnt from Practical Experiences* (Paris: Commission Internationale des Grands Barrages, 2001).
- 12 Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), page 29.

- 13 *Palace of the Peacock*, page 26.
- 14 For a detailed analysis of discussion of Harris' work as a surveyor see: T. J. Cribb, "T.W. Harris—Sworn Surveyor," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28:1 (1993), pages 33-46.
- 15 Wilson Harris, "A Talk on the Subjective Imagination," *Explorations, A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*, Hena Maes-Jelinek, ed. (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981), pages 46-61.
- 16 Wilson Harris, "The Music of Living Landscapes," *Hambone* 14 (Fall 1998), page 171.
- 17 Robert H. Schomburgk, *A Description of British Guiana, Geographical and Statistical: Exhibiting its Resources and Capabilities, Together with the Present and Future Condition and Prospects of the Colony* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1840), page 6.
- 18 "Five centuries after Columbus, nearly to the year", writes Marc Herman in his recent account of the contemporary gold rush, "treasure maps in old history books and geological maps in modern investment newsletters were identical," *Searching for El Dorado: A Journey into the South American Rain Forest on the Tail of the World's Largest Gold Rush* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), page 22.
- 19 Marshall Sahlins, "Good-bye Tristes Tropes: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History," *Culture in Practice* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), page 478.
- 20 Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), page 31.
- 21 Northcott, page 48.
- 22 Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), pages 2-14.
- 23 Walter Rodney, ed., *Guyanese Sugar Plantations in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Contemporary Description from the 'Argosy,'* (Georgetown, Guyana: Release Publishers, 1979), page 37.