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Cover image: Unidentified photographer, possibly Elsie Knocker, “Self and Jean-Batiste”, Mairi Chisholm with Jean Batiste, a Belgian Congolese soldier, undated. . Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

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Aubrey Williams: Abstraction in Diaspora

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Abstract

Moving to London in 1952, Aubrey Williams gained valuable distance on the Amerindian petroglyphs that inspired his abstract painting. But as he deepened his engagement with the indigenous cultures of the precolonial Caribbean during the 1970s—working in studios in Jamaica and in Florida—Williams was edged out of late modernism's narrative of abstraction. While retrospective exhibitions highlight the Olmec-Maya and Now *series and the* Shostakovich *series produced during William's circumatlantic journeys, both of which heighten abstraction as a medium of cross-cultural translation, the scholarship has left Williams isolated. Approaching Williams's abstraction in the interpretive context of diasporic "ancestralism," a distinctive framework addressing the diaspora's unrecoverable past, I suggest his Amerindian focus is best understood in terms of a "hauntological" mode of abstraction critically responsive to the moment of decolonisation in which boundaries that once defined the national, the international, and the transnational were being thrown into crisis.*

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The word “diaspora” comes to us from the Greek verb “to sow” and by extension “to disperse” combined with the preposition for “over” which gives us the “dia” in diameter. [1] The term fits well for an artist born in British Guiana in 1926; who moved to Britain in 1952 and started exhibiting after studying at St Martin’s School of Art in London; an artist who returned to visit Guyana at independence in 1966 and who established a presence in the Caribbean that led to a studio in Jamaica from 1973 to 1975, then a studio in Florida from 1977 to 1986, all the while maintaining his family in London, where he died in 1990. A diasporic artist such as this enjoyed attachments to multiple places of belonging, but were such attachments ultimately incompatible with modernist internationalism, the worldview in which post-war abstraction was most widely interpreted?

I frame my inquiry in this way because, although there is a valuable body of art criticism and art historical scholarship on Williams as my bibliography shows, the absence on the part of British institutions of a retrospective exhibition and monograph that would encompass his entire career reveals a degree of neglect completely at odds with the aesthetic innovations Aubrey Williams brought to twentieth century modernism through his practice of diasporic abstraction. Writing in 1988, critic Guy Brett indicted the “glaring injustice that Williams’s work was ignored and invisible in the country, Britain, where he has lived for nearly 40 years, as if it could not be compared with the work of his English contemporaries,” adding “There has … never been the opportunity to compare his handling of abstraction directly with his contemporaries like Alan Davie, Peter Lanyon, John Hoyland and Howard Hodgkin.” [2]

While I agree with Brett wholeheartedly, my critical concern is that if we focus only on the neglect, and attention toward the paintings themselves is thereby postponed, the danger is that we may end up reinforcing the oversight that isolated Williams from the narrative of post-war abstraction in the first place. This is the dilemma that snags Eddie Chambers’s account in his survey of black artists in British art. [3] Tate Britain’s posthumous acquisition, in 1993, of *Shostakovich Symphony No 3 Opus 20* (1981) and *Olmec-Maya, Now and Coming Time* (1985), along with the 2007 study day held when Tate Britain acquired letters and drawings from Williams’s archive, are indeed belated steps when, as Chambers points out, the institution had the opportunity to purchase one of Williams’s paintings in 1961, yet chose to decline (Fig. 1). But once institutional decisions are set within their historical context—and we thus grasp blindspots in the discourse of modernism as limitations built into the formalist interpretation of abstract art that held sway during Williams’s lifetime—the question is not one of patching in the gaps, but of rewriting narratives of post-war abstraction as a whole. I suggest the task is best tackled by drawing on the diaspora concept to reframe the aesthetic originality and intellectual vitality of Williams’s oeuvre. Belated it

may be, but the acclaim won by exhibitions in 2010—*Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire* at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and *Aubrey Williams: Now and Coming Time* at the October Gallery, London—attests to the deep interest Williams's work commands among contemporary audiences eager to engage with insights generated from a diasporic practice of abstraction whose globe-spanning viewpoint has grown ever more relevant since the artist's death nearly thirty years ago.

Figure 1.
Aubrey Williams, Olmec Maya - Now and Coming Time, 1985, oil on canvas, 119 × 178 cm. Collection of Tate (T06675). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

New Commonwealth Moments and the 1960s Crisis of Institutional Modernism

When Stuart Hall characterised Aubrey Williams and other abstract painters such as Anwar Shemza (1928–1985), from Pakistan, and Frank Bowling (b. 1934), from Guyana, as members of a generation who were among "the last colonials" to arrive into the post-1945 London artworld, he underlined their "universalist and cosmopolitan outlook," emphasising that they felt "they belonged to the modern art movement and, in a way, it belonged to them." [4] In the sense that the "ism" in internationalism distilled a worldview in which national differences counted for nothing in the eyes of a liberal humanist conception of art in which only the individuality of the artist was paramount, artists from the colonies were welcomed into London's mid- to late-1950s cultural scene. Just as Caribbean novelists such as George Lamming, from Barbados, and V.S. Naipaul, from Trinidad, were taken up by the literary establishment, and plays by Jamaican-born Barry Reckord were well received

at the Royal Court Theatre, so Commonwealth artists exhibiting, for instance, at the New Vision Centre Gallery run by painter Denis Bowen (1926–2006), were taken up into an understanding that abstract art formed a lingua franca, a common modernist language transcending differences that, in the art historical past, distinguished artistic styles on the basis of national schools and movements.

But as the modernism institutionalised in the 1950s was thrown into crisis during the mid- to late-1960s, mounting pressures forced cracks in such "colour-blind" internationalism. Where the crisis of modernism erupted most vividly in the United States, with protests against the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, led by African American organisations such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Susan Cahan's detailed account reveals that institutional decision makers rarely gave much thought to the foundational assumptions on which their collections and exhibitions were built. Only as a result of external pressure did an institution such as MoMA reflect on its acquisitions criteria. When the Art Workers Coalition called for a public debate on MoMA's policies in 1969, executive director Bates Lowry declined. On the day of the boycott, the museum issued a press release in a Q&A format:

> In selecting works works of art ... does the museum consider the sex, nationality, religion, politics or race of an artist? NO. What criteria does the museum apply? Quality, historical significance, significance of the moment. [5]

In the monologue whereby we witness an institution talking to itself so as *not* to have to talk with its public interlocutors, we hear the premise on which modernism upheld the autonomy of the artwork as an absolute, as something wholly independent of the artist's social background, with "quality" evoked as a stand-alone criterion transcending the social context in which artworks are created. The defensive reaction indicates an institution that felt under attack, yet the 1960s' crisis productively brought to light assumptions that had hitherto gone unquestioned. Modernist internationalism held to a "colour-blind" approach in which "the sex, nationality, religion, politics or race of an artist" supposedly had no relevance to decisions about aesthetic value, yet such an object-directed outlook did not just eliminate consideration of the artist's social identity, but it also subjected all socio-historical aspects of artistic production to a logic of disavowal.

Disavowal is when everyone agrees not to see what everyone knows is there. Whether it is the elephant in the room or the emperor's new clothes, what is left out of the discourse, and goes unspoken, is not the result of accidental

oversight but, in psychoanalytic terms, is the outcome of a process of repression. [6] Hence, coming back to Britain, Commonwealth artists were genuinely welcomed in their individuality, but the post-war reception was short lived. This was not primarily because, by the mid-1960s, abstraction was displaced by pop, minimalism, and performance, but because object-directed formalist criticism rendered all aspects of social context and social identity into a *constitutive absence*, something that had to be left out if formalism was to provide the epistemic authority on which institutional decision making relied.

The language of internationalism in twentieth century politics gives us another example of disavowal in practice. The League of Nations was established in 1920 in reaction to the catastrophic consequences of the nationalist rivalries that resulted in World War I. No African or Caribbean countries were invited into the League of Nations for the simple reason that they were not nations but colonies: their absence was constitutive of the discourse of sovereignty in political decision making. [7] Where constitutive absences are the product not of deliberate intentions but of the "political unconscious," as Fredric Jameson calls it—a product of defences and repressions arising from "narrative as a socially symbolic act"—then the rewriting of art histories that strives to do justice to the cosmopolitan and worldly differentiations introduced by diasporic artists such as Aubrey Williams cannot be inclusive if the goal is merely to patch in overlooked and neglected artists into the formalist narrative that was responsible for their exclusion in the first place. [8] Rather, the aim of revising previous narratives in light of what we now know about their exclusionary structures is to recast our understanding of the structural interaction among artists, artworks, and artworlds so as to better see the contingent conditions under which their conjunctures can be opened to reinterpretation. The diaspora concept, I argue, helps us to do just that.

Border-Crossing Migrations

"By coming to London," wrote playwright Jan Carew on the occasion of Williams's second solo exhibition at the New Vision Centre Gallery in August 1959, "Williams was able to disentangle himself from material as lush and confusing as a stretch of tropical rain forest." Stressing the back-and-forth movement of a migrant's journey, Carew's emphasis on the diasporic experience of acquiring critical distance from one's sources opens up a hitherto unexplored understanding of Williams's relationship to the Amerindian cultures that inspired his abstract painting from the start. "Separation from the sources of his inspiration made him see everything more clearly, more objectively," Carew continues, adding a somewhat existentialist interpretation on the question of belonging, yet nonetheless

underscoring the “back and forth” pattern of Williams’s border-crossing mobility: “… but his is a dilemma: if he stays away from these sources too long there is the danger of drying up. He is one of the artists in the mid-twentieth century who belongs nowhere, who must keep moving back and forth searching for new gods to put on pedestals and then to destroy.” [9]

Figure 2.
The Williams Family on the Steps of Their Home, Bourda Street, Georgetown, Guyana (Aubrey Williams, second from right), circa 1951, photograph in Aubrey Williams, curated by Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, Maridowa Williams (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 1998). Digital image courtesy of The Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA)/the Estate of Aubrey Williams.

As a youngster, Williams studied in the Working People’s Art Class set up in Georgetown by painter E.R. Burrowes, while training as a civil servant as his parents wished (Fig. 2). In 1944, at the age of 18, he completed a four-year apprenticeship scheme in sugar production. He then took up a post as

Agricultural Field Officer. Williams was first posted among cane field workers on the Guiana coast and then to the remote northwestern rainforest settlement of Hosororo. It was during his time at Hosororo that he first met indigenous Warrau Amerindians. After two years in post, Williams left British Guiana in 1952, and enrolled on an Agricultural Engineering course at the University of Leicester. He dropped out. Moving from Guiana not only crystallised Williams's decision to become an artist, but it also sharpened his developing interest in Amerindian cultures that was to become a primary source for the paintings he produced from the mid-1950s onward.

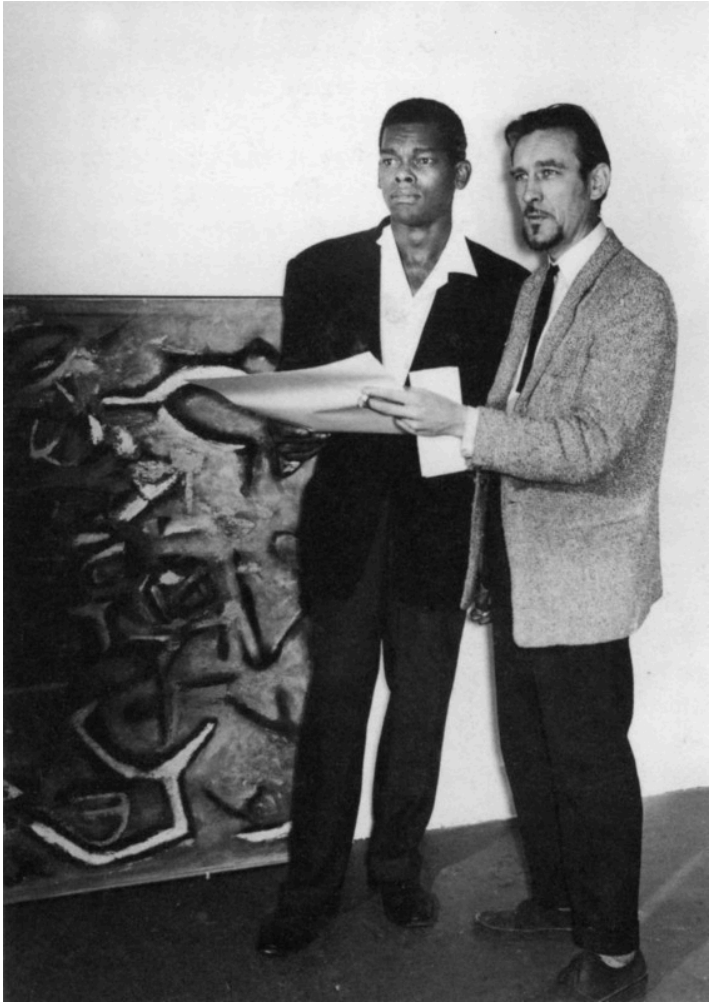

Figure 3.
Anne Bolt, Aubrey Williams and Denis Bowen Discuss the Hanging of His First Show, *New Vision Centre Gallery, London, With His painting* "El Dorado", 1958, photograph reproduced in *Aubrey Williams* by Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, Maridowa Williams (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 1998). Digital image courtesy of Anne Bolt/Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) / the Estate of Aubrey Williams.

After touring Europe for a year—Albert Camus introduced him to Pablo Picasso in Paris—Williams enrolled at St Martin's in 1954, but decided not to pursue the diploma: in his second year he chose merely to use the art school's facilities instead. [10] His first solo exhibition, in 1954, at the Archer Gallery in Westbourne Grove, was followed by two in 1959, and in 1960, at the New Vision Centre Gallery, a venue in Marble Arch set up by Denis Bowen. Born in South Africa to British parents, Bowen was a painter, art critic, and curator who ran the New Vision Centre Gallery from 1955 to 1966 with Polish painter, Halima Nalecz, and British artist, Frank Avray Wilson (Fig. 3). In 1963, in the same year Williams enjoyed a further solo exhibition at the Grabowski Gallery (which had previously exhibited Bowling), Bowen played a leading role in selecting entries to the first Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art, held at the Commonwealth Institute in London, at which Williams was awarded a prize for *Roraima* (1963). [11]

Bowen and his New Vision Centre administrator, the British artist and critic Kenneth Coutts-Smith, featured Williams's paintings in the Second Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art in 1965, also held at the newly-built Commonwealth Institute. This mid-1960s exhibition marked the end of the "New Commonwealth moment" that had started with the mid-1950s uptake of Williams's work. The ascendency of abstract expressionism from the United States was certainly a factor, as the epic scale favoured by American artists, along with the psychological interpretation of action painting, overshadowed other strands of abstraction, especially European tendencies such as *informel* and *tachisme*. Williams readily acknowledged the inspiration he took from the Tate exhibitions, *Modern Art in the United States*, in 1956, and *New American Painting* in 1959—"Pollock was our god!" he said in a 1987 interview, "Kline, Newman, Rothko, de Kooning … they were all great" [12] —but did that necessarily mean he sought to emulate the abstract expressionist paradigm?

Figural Mark Making: Displacing Primitivist Paradigms

Figure 4.
Aubrey Williams, Earth and Fire, 1959, oils on canvas laid on board, 30 × 28 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

"Despite Williams's attempt to work in the manner of his American heroes," writes Gavin Butt in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, "his paintings were repeatedly viewed in primitivising terms by British critics." [13] To the extent that Williams opted for fairly small-scale canvases, employing a variety of brushwork rather than one committed exclusively to gesturalism, it is misleading to align him directly with American abstractionists he admired. Moreover, rather than "primitivising," would it not be more precise to say the source of the problem in the British reception was that primitivism was the *only* interpretive paradigm through which institutional modernism attempted to address questions of cultural difference? With coarse crimson, gold, and black impasto markings atop an ochre ground, early paintings such as *Earth and Fire* (1959) address elemental or even cosmological themes rather than primitive ones as such (Fig. 4). Indeed, the question to put to Butt's characterisation of the reasons why Williams came to be marginalised by the

mid-1960s is whether “primitivism” is the best fit for describing Williams’s relationship to the Amerindian petrogyphs that was a distinctive feature of his abstraction?

In the earth-toned palette and dry impasto of *Bone Heap* (1959), the shapes made by whitened figures laid out on a dark ground are suggestive not only of archaic petroglyphs inscribed in the soil, but also skeletal remains, although the work’s title does not indicate whether the bones are human or animal (Fig. 5). Similarly, one might say of *Sleeping Rocks* (1959), from the same year, that even as marks suggesting rocks seem to resemble human limbs, to describe rocks as “sleeping” is to encourage a quasi-anthropomorphic interpretation such that the painting hovers and prevaricates on the borderline between the abstract and the figurative, which are not regarded as mutually exclusive categories. Their interaction results in what we could call the “figural.” This dynamic sense of hovering over categorical boundaries seemed to be a quality Williams had in common with Bowen. The jagged horizontal in Bowen’s *Crystallised Landscape* (1959) bears a title that solicits a figurative reading at the same time as the Tachist element of pigment forcefully thrown against the canvas acts as a counterpoint to the more undulating tones and gauzy colours we find in Williams’s paintings (Fig. 6).

Figure 5.
Aubrey Williams, Bone Heap, 1959, oil on canvas. 50.5 × 60 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

View this illustration online

Figure 6.
Denis Bowen, Crystallised Landscape, 1958, alkyd paint on canvas, 63.2 × 97cm Collection of Tate (T07840). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Denis A. Bowen.

Whether evoking a gravesite in *Bone Heap*, or a dormant state prior to awakening in *Sleeping Rocks*, Williams was carving out an abstract painterly practice at once highly suggestive of an immersive relationship to land, soil, and a place of belonging, while also evoking the traces or remains left behind by the aftermath of a cataclysmic event. As Williams came to identify his primary sources of inspiration in the petroglyphs created in Guyana's landscape by indigenous peoples such as the Warrau—early inhabitants who migrated up the Amazon to the coast long before the arrival of the Europeans in the modern age—it seems to me that far from putting Amerindian art on a primitivist pedestal, as if to romanticise the noble savage, and far from exalting all that is indigenous to the land in nativist or nationalist terms, the relationship Williams established between his abstract painting and the Caribbean landscape was an *ecological* relationship far more so than a "primitivizing" relationship.

"Figural" is a term I've drawn from philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who uses it in contrast to both "figurative" and "discursive." [14] Unlike picture making that requires clear-cut figure/ground distinctions, the "figural" concerns less readily legible mark making practices that are profoundly ambiguous but without being completely abstract. Where the term has a good fit for the spatial ambiguities Williams created by combining a range of brushwork techniques—from impasto and highly worked-up facture to staining the canvas with liquid pools of aqueous colour—the "figural" is a helpful designation for the interstitial ambience created by an artist who did

not perceive abstract and figurative as either/or options. “Figural” also serves as a term referring to inchoate material that carries potential for signification *prior to* the moment when bounded shape and identifiable form are imposed by cultural codes and social conventions. With rocks resembling limbs, and bones laid out as if in a funeral rite, the category-crossing dynamism of one ontological order metamorphosing into another suggests a mode of abstraction in which Williams was meddling with the boundaries that ordinarily separate human, animal, vegetal, and mineral as a crucial concern of his abstraction that was operative from the start.

Bones and petroglyphs alike have earth-bound relationships in which landscape and a sense of place is all important, yet this is also the point at which we begin to see that the remedy Guy Brett proposed might not actually provide the best interpretive fit. Scottish painter Alan Davie (1920–2014) took Celtic glyphs, Hopi sand painting, and Zen Buddhism as sources in his commitment to an earthy mode of abstraction thoroughly rooted in the West Country where he lived. Following on from the biomorphic motifs Davie explored in the late 1950s, his monotype, *Two Insects, Yellow* (1950–55), playfully introduced an element of colour (Fig. 7). Devon and Cornwall’s megaliths dating to the Neolithic Age were important for abstract sculptors such as William Turnbull (1912–2012) as well. Similarly grounded in a sense of place were abstract paintings by the Cornish artist Peter Lanyon (1918–1964), with a work as lush and lyrical as *Lost Mine* (1961), speaking eloquently to the sense of belonging Lanyon found in Cornwall as the place where he was born, where he lived and worked, and where he died (Fig. 8).

Figure 7.
Alan Davie, Two Insects, Yellow, 1950–55, monotype on paper, 30.8 × 17.6 cm. Collection of Tate (P11352). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Alan Davie (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

Figure 8.
Peter Lanyon, Lost Mine, 1959, oil on canvas, 183.2 × 152.7 cm. Collection of Tate (T06467). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Peter Lanyon (All Rights Reserved, DACS 2018).

In terms of a comparative approach, Brett's argument for aligning Lanyon and Davie with Williams holds good in stylistic terms, to a degree, for we are looking at British variants of post-war abstraction that took a vastly different direction from American abstract expressionism by investigating premodern and prehistorical sources in a lived relationship to an untamed rural landscape. [15] But whereas Lanyon and Davie were regionalists committed to their rootedness in the specificity of the English West Country, the core emphasis Carew drew out in 1959 was on the *uprootedness* that made migration across multiple sites of belonging the distinguishing mark of Williams's diasporic trajectory. Moreover, while Williams was immersed in the premodern and precolonial world of Amerindian petroglyphs, albeit from the geographical distance obtained through migration, Carew made the equally important observation that Aubrey consistently turned his attention to contemporary science. Maridowa Williams confirms that throughout the

1960s and 1970s her father avidly read *Scientific American*, *Omni*, and other science periodicals. [16] The twin poles of Williams's interest in the science of rock formation, and the science of galaxy formation, alongside his interest in archaic Amerindian petroglyphs was beautifully synthesised by Carew in the following lines:

> The Indians say that when the green skin of the living world is peeled off, then the earth becomes a coffin for the dead. And in Williams's mind are the varied patterns and shapes of this living world: superimposed on these are the new images of science, shapes under a microscope, pictures of nebulae in popular magazines, the bright blurs of trick photography and the torment of an uprooted man searching for an image of himself and of his people. [17]

I would add that at the 2014 Cambridge University symposium on Aubrey Williams, convener Tim Cribb invited Robin Catchpole from the Institute of Astronomy, who helpfully pointed out something of which those of us in the humanities might not be aware, namely that light and colour are mediums that astronomers rely on to glean data regarding the distance between, and relations among, planetary phenomena. [18] Where Williams revealed his investment in astronomy directly in such late works as *Nebula in Orion* (1985), his painterly handling of atmospherics—with whole portions of his keynote works swathed in the light and colour of nuanced haziness—showed that Williams encompassed macro- and micro-cosmic dimensions in his ecological outlook from the outset.

Interstitial Ambiences

We have not only come far and away from primitivism, but we may also be getting closer to understanding why Williams was edged out of late modernist discourse on abstraction. At a time when formalist criticism sought to secure universal truths for "American-Type painting," as Clement Greenberg phrased it, through a model in which art would self-reflexively take art alone as its primary subject matter, here was an artist from the colonies in whose cosmological and ecological consciousness art and science were not mutually exclusive, and nor were technology and petroglyphs, as each of these elements intermingle in the "figural" dimension of Williams's diasporic abstraction [19] The sheer scope, and philosophical gravitas, of Williams's combined interests, or more to the point, the inability of formalist critics to fathom their implications for late modernist art making, are among the reasons why his work came to be pushed aside.

Looking closely at Williams's sketches circa 1970, one of Brett's key insights was to reveal their protean quality of shape and line. Axe-head cones and oblong stacks call to mind Aztec, Olmec, Inca, Maya and other pre-Columbian motifs, yet as they morph into scientific drawings of cell formation, or slivers of epidermal tissue under a microscope, we see how the interpenetration of ancient glyphs and future technology informed Williams's investigative approach to abstract painting (Fig. 9). [20] In *Untitled* (1969) we see how Williams's ability to make lines and shapes "jump" from one plane of semantic association to another meant that the canvas surface, whose flatness and rectangularity were of utmost concern to formalists, had become instead a receptacle for a heterogeneous array of painterly mark making (Fig. 10).

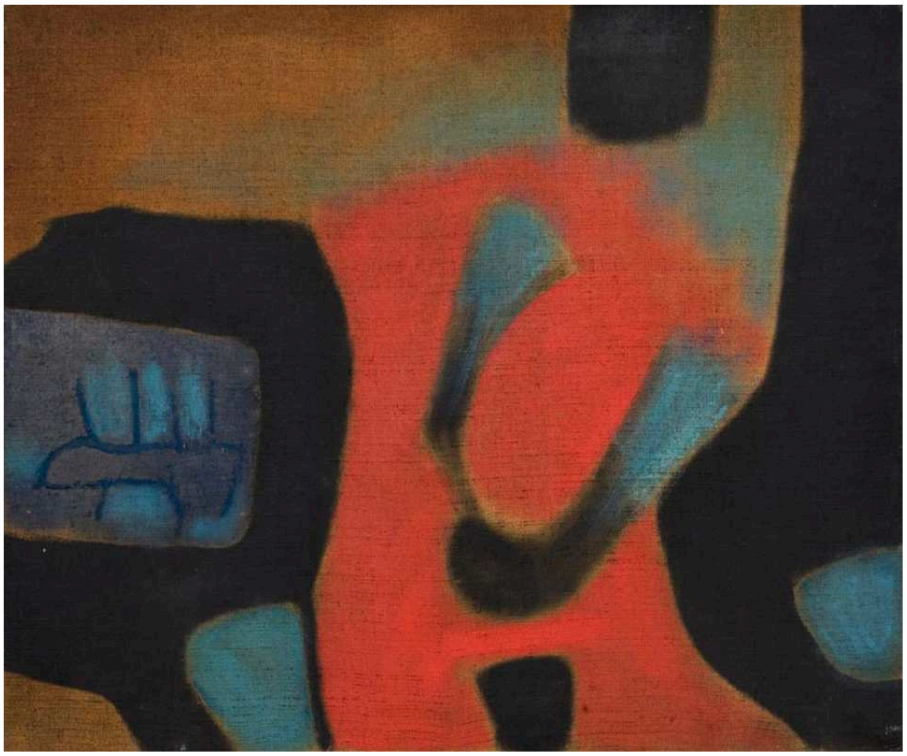

Figure 9.
Aubrey Williams, Untitled, 1969, oil on hessian, 61 × 74cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

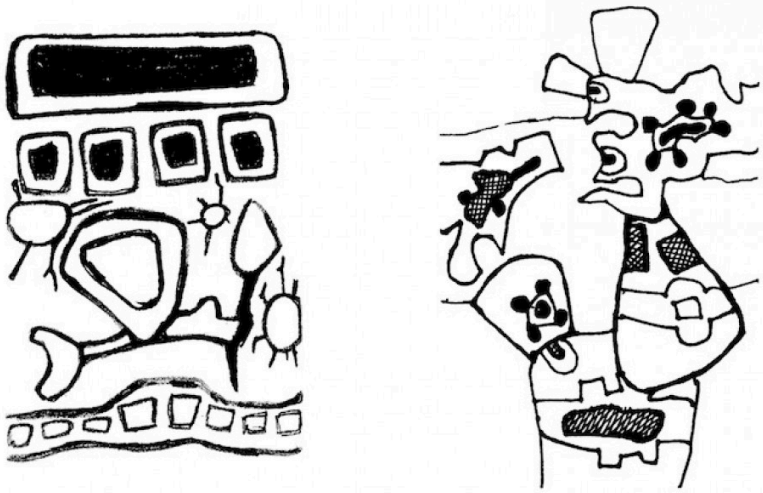

Figure 10.
Aubrey Williams, Details from Sketchbooks, 1970s, reproduced in *Aubrey Williams* by Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, Maridowa Williams (London: Institute for International Visual Arts, 1998). Digital image courtesy of The Institute for International Visual Arts / the Estate of Aubrey Williams.

Optically speaking, red advances while blue recedes, yet in the very instant we are tempted to see and read the U-shape in *Untitled* as a hollow, with patches of blue thus “behind” it in spatial terms, any hint of illusionism is scotched by the matt black forms that rise up on the right and curl around a glyph-like inscription on the left. In an era when formalist criticism saw abstraction as an eliminative process of purification that would rid painting of all that was extraneous to its fundamental essence, the insouciant impurity by which Williams experimented—and clearly delighted—in combining a multiplicity of mark making procedures within each painting set him full square against the “rhetoric of purity” by which formalist discourse saw pure colour, pure line, and pure shape as transcendental qualities that would deliver timeless truths about the very essence of art. [21] The strident impurity of a restlessly border-crossing mode of abstraction—touching on the astronomy of light from remote stars in the same breath as dwelling with skeletal remains in the bowels of the earth—was not just at odds with a purist formalism that defensively turned its back on a material world in constant flux, it also clearly departed from philosophical subject/object dichotomies by virtue of opting for a planetary ecology in which the human does not transcend the fluctuating world but is wholly entangled and immersed in its unending processes of becoming and perishing.

In 1966, as Williams began to travel back and forth between London and the newly-independent nation of Guyana, fellow artist and compatriot, sculptor Donald Locke, observed a “storm of activity” in Williams’s prolific output. Science was one of Williams’s principle sources during this time. Locke identified one such source was “a remarkable film made by a man called Haroun Tazieff who ‘collected’ and studied volcanoes.” Locke noted that “from this experience came an almost endless stream of paintings which were variously called *Magma, Lava, Volcano, Rockface*.” Insightfully concluding his 1966 article, Locke said “What is fascinating about these paintings … is that they were closely related to the subject of pregnancy and parturition which has always fascinated him. He portrays the very molten rock as if it were flesh, *finding a unique equation between two diametrically opposing natures*.” [22]

To posit a practice of abstraction able to give birth to something new—parturition—as a result of figural mark making that moves between “two diametrically opposed natures” is to recognise an interstitial outlook that subverts the fixity of subject/object dualisms. Instead of the opticality by which abstract art should appeal “to eyesight alone,” as critic Michael Fried put it in his mid-1960s defence of colour field painting, Williams plunged headlong into the inchoate state of painting’s materiality prior to the moment when meanings are attached to discrete forms, thus bringing the beholder into contact with marks on a canvas surface that are charged with the capacity to “touch” us, and to “move” us, at the *precognitive and preverbal level of affect*. [23] Displacing a purely optical model of perception in favour of a multi-sensory understanding of the embodied perceiver was all important. Where Locke observed figural shapes morphing from one plane of meaning (“rock”) to another (“flesh”)—with Brett too observing the way line and shape “jump” from one set of associations (cell formation) to another (Amerindian petroglyphs)—we come to realise we are in the presence of an *interstitial mode of abstraction* operating from a place of “inbetweenness”. By unfixing dualisms that ordinarily establish “diametrically opposed natures”—form/matter, body/soul, presence/absence—Williams decentred the formalist privilege of vision, inviting his viewers instead into an affective experience that began to chip away at the binary laws at the heart of logocentric reasoning. In a figural world no longer regulated by subject/object dualisms or the binary opposition of presence/absence, the question arises: what if life and death were no longer either/or terms, but merely way stations on an ecological continuum?

Diasporic Ancestralism

Tribal Mark II (1960) is a work asking just such a question (Fig. 11). Five plug-like shapes separating the dark grey zones at upper left and at lower right serve to hold in place the enigmatic form at the painting’s centre, but the

distribution of these five nodes also seem to intensify the Catherine wheel effect that imparts dynamic momentum to the composition. The tiny resin drip at lower right sparks the old anxiety of whether one is looking at an abstract painting the right way up; but on second glance, one notices that the drip's horizontal direction adds to the sense of a spiral-like, rotational, space whose biomorphic twists and turns have left behind the geometric preoccupations of primary interest to formalist critics. Indeed, the swirling vortex *Tribal Mark II* creates no longer implies a viewer who stands only perpendicular to the picture plane. The painting suggests a viewpoint from which its markings are to be seen from an aerial position, as though the viewer were hovering "above" the picture plane, looking down as if suspended over an archeological excavation.

Figure 11.
Aubrey Williams, Tribal Mark, 1961, oil on canvas, 76 2 × 101 5cm. Collection of Tate (T13342). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

In dried-out, bone-like colours, the firmly-delineated lines roiling in the encrusted oval at the painting's centre call to mind a foetus umbilically attached to its life-giving environment, but at the same time, this figural cluster evokes nothing so much as an exhumed Ice Age corpse preserved in peat—one thinks of Tollund Man unearthed in Denmark in 1950, although many other post-war excavations brought prehistoric corpses to light, many with their skins preserved. To come away from abstract art with a figurative reading is reductive; unacceptably so if the aim is to identify a referent, to say that the painterly mark making in *Tribal Mark II* actually depicts a foetus or a corpse. But if the aim instead is to demonstrate how figural

practice—poised on the borderline between abstraction and figuration—*produces a plurality of potential connotations by virtue of affecting us at the precodified level before such markings are fully formed*, then we begin to see how Williams put the element of formlessness—the not-yet-fully-formedness—associated with *informel* in post-war European abstraction into dialogue with ancestralism, a strand of African American modernism centrally preoccupied with questions of absence and presence, life and death, by virtue of addressing the legacy of uprooting and loss among "diasporised" peoples of African descent scattered and dispersed into the New World as a result of transatlantic slavery.

Introduced in the 1920s by philosopher Alain Locke, "ancestralism" entailed depictions of African *objets d'art* among the Harlem Renaissance generation, but in the post-war period Hale Woodruff (1900–1980) turned to motifs in Akan and Yoruba art as a starting point for abstract works such as *Afro Emblems* (1950) (Fig. 12). [24] Woodruff's pictographic inscriptions in serried boxes seem to be in conversation with the Latin American modernism of Joaquín Torres-García, although these are figural rather than figurative as they clearly elude referential identification. In positivist models of representation that assume what is absent really can be made present through acts of depiction, ancestralism tends to be misunderstood as a "reclaiming of roots," as if African motifs triggered automatically an affirmative identification on the part of Afro-diaspora subjects. On closer consideration, one realises the whole reason ancestor figures are so important in the diasporic imagination is precisely because the diaspora's forebears were unknown and undocumented as human subjects during the Middle Passage of their enslavement and were recorded, made legible to history, only as inventory, as commodity cargo.

Figure 12.
Hale Woodruff, Afro Emblems, 1950, oil on linen, 45.7 × 55.9 cm. Collection Smithsonian American Art Museum (1984.149.2). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Hale Woodruff / DACS, London / VAGA, New York 2018

Put another way, the critical project in diasporic ancestralism was never the recovery or redemption of the lost ancestor or an absent ancestry—as if the past could be restored to a state of plenitude—but an investigation into the *afterlife of the rupture* separating diasporised subjects from their place of natal origin, a traumatic rupture that left an open wound in which black diaspora subjects had to struggle to create new identifications with all that "Africa" stood for. Whether in figurative African American art of the 1920s, or in the abstraction Williams developed in the 1950s from a Caribbean-British perspective, artists working within the framework of diasporic ancestralism set out to address this afterlife of rupture not as a neutral "nothing" but as *the nucleus of traumatic affect* that made its presence felt—like a phantom limb—through its unsettling aftereffects.

Hauntological Traces

Looking at *Tribal Mark II*, I have suggested Williams's abstraction produced an undoing of the life-death dualism, offering an intimation instead of a time-stretching continuum in which the not-yet-born and the long-since-deceased are way stations in an ongoing process of becoming and perishing. Within

the immediate post-war context, the African American abstract painter Norman Lewis (1909–1979) addressed the aftermath of cataclysmic events in ways that complement the gravitas Aubrey Williams brought to abstraction. In *Every Atom Glows* (1951) Lewis spoke to the science of nuclear fission that led to the atom bomb. Lewis's *Harlem Turns White* (1954) is not a depiction of an atomic aftermath, but it nonetheless engages abstraction to address traumatic events of world-historical magnitude whose scale exceeds our human ability to grasp them in consciousness (Fig. 13).

Figure 13.
Norman Wilfred Lewis, Harlem Turns White, 1955, oil on canvas, 127 × 162.5 cm. Collection of the Estate of Norman W. Lewis. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Norman W. Lewis / Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York.

Insofar as any attempt to "represent" such events diminishes the momentousness of the trauma, reducing it to mere anthropomorphic proportions, it is not that abstract paintings by Lewis or Williams put us in the presence of the unrepresentable—for as Mark Godfrey argues in *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (2007), the "unrepresentable" is too easily misappropriated by those who claim the events never took place—but that the entire interpretive centre of gravity shifts with regard to understanding abstraction as an inquiry into aftermaths that have been among the defining conditions of modernity.[25] Instead of the progress narrative whereby many formalists saw abstraction as the culmination of modernity in art, the

interstitial outlook in Williams's ecological approach leads instead to the counterview that modernity was a history of successive aftermaths, with one disaster piled up upon others.

However, unlike American abstract artists responding to traumatic events within their own lifetime, when we see a work such as *Death and the Conquistador* (1959) we need to understand that, at age 33, Williams was metaphorically leaping back in world-historical time, inviting us to imagine the cataclysmic advent of 1492—Europe's arrival into the New World—from the point of view of those whose ancestral homes were about to be decimated by the incoming colonists (Fig. 14). As with another painting of this moment, *El Dorado* (1958), in the collection of York University, we would be entirely wrong to think we are seeing a postcolonial artists indicting Western colonialism. Such a view would be mistaken not just because in 1958 British Guiana was not yet "post," but still very much a colony, owned by the Booker McConnell sugar corporation if not the British state. But we would also be mistaken because in the nondualistic universe opened up by Williams's interstitial space of abstraction, any clear-cut binary between coloniser and colonised, between victims and perpetrators, between the doers and the done to, has now been ambiguated—if not liquidated altogether—in favour of an ambivalent scene of entanglement in which *all* identities are implicated in the historical trauma and its aftermath.

View this illustration online

Figure 14.
Aubrey Williams, Death and the Conquistador, 1959, oil on canvas, 83.5 × 133.8 cm. Collection of Tate (T13341). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

Even as figural lines in crimson, black, and white seem to emerge into anthropomorphic shape in *Death and the Conquistador* they withdraw from legibility at the last minute, as it were, leaving only a tumult of fugitive traces on the picture plane. That colonial history weighed heavily on Williams's mind in this period is evident in *Revolt* (1960), a figurative painting that depicts the "decapitation of [a] planter's wife by an unshackled slave in the 1763 revolt." [26] Although Williams returned to figuration when he produced four paintings in the *Guyana Myths* (1971) series (also in Guyana's National Collection alongside *Revolt*) it was as if such recourse to representational practice capitulated to pressing exigencies within each political moment, with the reassessment of colonial history pressing in on the 1950s era of anti-colonial struggle, and pressures to re-mythify the nation that grew in the post-independence moment of the early 1970s. Whereas such representational paintings are unsatisfying in their literalness—itself indicating the challenge of representability posed by colonialism's violent histories—*Death and the Conquistador* plunges the beholder into an immersive space in which figural evocations of life-and-death entanglements of coloniser and colonised pulsate with affective intensity precisely by virtue of the way the *not-yet-formedness* of the painterly markings stimulates our quest, as viewers, to decipher the inscriptions and, in the process, deepen our engagement with the sensuous materiality of the painting itself.

Where modernist internationalism disavowed the artist's social identity, such that the "sex, nationality, religion, politics or race of an artist" was irrelevant to aesthetic judgement, the object-directed values of formalist criticism did not just idealise vision as though it was a disembodied experience, but also entailed the anti-social attitude by which formalism turned its back on a world in constant flux, defensively retreating into the white cube as a space in which to find the self-certainty of unchangeable truths. In contrast to an object-directed stance that thinks of an artwork's meaning as deposited "in" the art object by the artist's intention, to be retrieved by the viewer, we are more likely today to acknowledge that the cultural production of meanings always entails a *social* relationship, that the value of an artwork lies not "in" the work, as if it were self-sufficiently autonomous, *but in our relationship to it*. In this way art history has come to understand that different audiences may produce divergent readings of the same work, and that meanings attributed to a work change according to the time and place of its reception. Where Williams put forward abstract paintings that do not ask for the passive intake of optical data so much as they plunge the viewer in affective experiences shot through with sensory intensities, his ecologically-minded abstraction asks us to participate in what the artwork makes "thinkable" as a result of the interstitial boundary crossing performed by its figural mark making.

Williams and the Caribbean Artists Movement

Williams took a leading role in the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM). With salon-style meetings held in his Hampstead studio before the organisation—led by Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey—convened at the West Indian Students' Centre in Earl's Court, CAM was a distinctively diasporic phenomenon as artists and writers from various island origins came together in London to formulate a pan-Caribbean outlook in the optimism of the 1960s ferment driven by the politics of decolonisation. Anne Walmsley's month-by-month documentation of CAM's activities gives us a meticulous account of the ways in which aesthetics and politics were articulated viz-à-viz poetry, novels, music, theatre, and the visual arts. [27] For my part I want to isolate just one moment, a statement that was part of Williams's contribution to the June 2 1967 Symposium on West Indian artists that featured sculptor Ronald Moody, painter Karl "Jerry" Craig, and textile designer Althea McNish. Commenting on the work exhibited, Williams said:

> I seem to see a current of organic and pantheistic philosophy in all the work shown here … Strangely, I saw many South American forms in all the work. As a matter of fact, these claw-like forms occur in all the work, and seem to be a sort of Caribbean signature theme… if you look at the work of people like Wifredo Lam, of Matta, of Tamayo … somewhere you will find this very strange, very tense, slightly violent shape coming in. *It has haunted me all of my life and I don't understand it*. [28]

Identifying "claw-like forms" as "a sort of Caribbean signature theme," Williams zeroes in on figural mark making as a practice that habours a pluripotentiality of meaning. The most important thing we need to notice about this "very strange, very tense, slightly violent shape coming in," is that Williams says "It has haunted me all my life and I don't understand it." To be haunted is to be affected by past events that are resistant to conscious understanding, events whose opacity to consciousness means the past resists narrative resolution. To be ghosted by something not present but absent, is to be haunted by the aftermath of traumatic events in the psychoanalytic sense that trauma is not a memory but the afterlife of an experience that was so overwhelming, so incapacitating, that it was never digested into consciousness in the first place. Past events that resist being filed away into the narrative storage system of conscious memory are "unclaimed experience," in Cathy Caruth's words, undigested events that roam the psyche with persecutory force since they can find no abode within the categories of consciousness that give meaning to experience. [29]

That Williams located himself in an art historical context that conjoins Latin Americans, Matta from Chile, Tamayo from Mexico—and Caribbeans, Lam from Cuba—clearly shows that however much he admired the North Americans, he did not identify himself with either the formalism or the transcendentalism that framed the dominant narratives of post-war abstraction. In 1967 Williams was making a lateral or transversal move to reframe his practice within an interpretive paradigm grounded in what today would be called "the global South," and which at the time would have been referred to as "the Third World." Implicit in such a move that no longer regarded New York or London as the epicentre of artistic life was a further shift away from an exclusively anglophone context to embrace a Spanish-speaking one as well by virtue of the prominence Williams gave to Latin American artists. In any event, the common factor in the lineage of the "claw-like forms" through which Williams connects Lam, Matta, and Tamayo is colonial history.

In *Science, Conscience et Patience du Vitruer* (1944) the angular biomorphic shapes surrounding the "glass being" of the painting's title bear "claw-like" forms that Matta arrived at through his conception of living beings as made up not of solid substances but of oscillating waves of matter and energy (Fig. 15). Claw-like forms are found in Lam's paintings such as *Zambezia, Zambezia* (1950), where a limb with three jagged edges pointing left rises from a blue female torso that also bears a horse's tail. In this and many other works, Lam was addressing the *femme-cheval*, the metaphorically hybrid "woman-horse" evoked in self-descriptions among Vodun participants who enter a trance possession state (Fig. 16). Where language conventionally separates agent and patient, subject and object, the folklorist Lydia Cabrera, with whom Lam was in conversation when he returned to Cuba in 1940, explained the undoing of such either/or dualisms in her following gloss on the *femme-cheval*:

> The phrase 'the saint rides someone' signifies that a spirit or divinity takes possession of an individual's body and acts as if it were its master … one calls 'horse' or 'head of saint' the one into whom a saint or orisha has introduced himself … [and when] one says 'the saint descends and rides his horse' [that means] 'the man or woman into whom he has introduced himself is no longer him or herself, he has become the saint. [30]

It is this breaking-apart of conventional dualisms that is at issue in the "claw-like" forms whose hauntingness was so significant for Williams as he framed his practice within a Caribbean and Latin American constellation. Since "claw-like" refers not to a figurative depiction with a recognisable referent, nor to a symbol with one invariant meaning, it is not so much a sign that

successfully correlates a graphematic element (signifier) with determinate ideational content (signified), but rather an inscription of *the multifarious figural*, marking the potential of the inchoate, the not-yet-fully-formed, to produce an excess or surplus of meanings all at once.

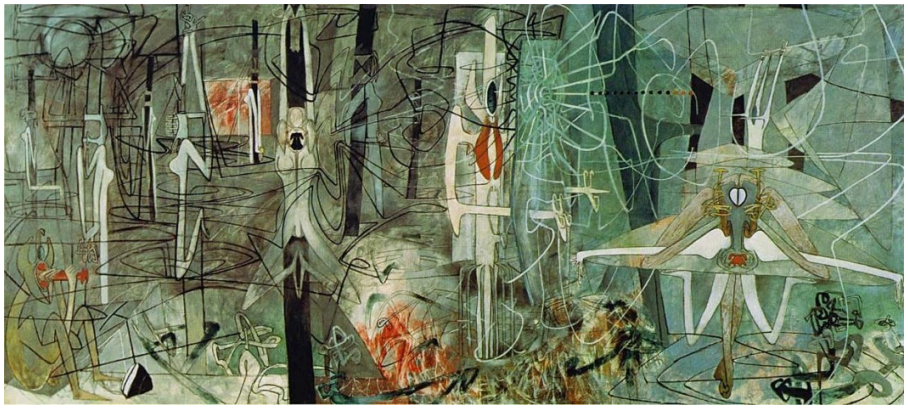

Figure 15.
Roberto Matta, Science, Conscience et Patience du Vitreur, 1944, oil on canvas, 200 × 450 cm. Private Collection, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACS London 2018.

Figure 16.
Wifredo Lam, Zambezia, Zambezia, 1950, oil on canvas, 125.4 × 110.8 cm. Collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (74.2095). Digital image courtesy of ARS, New York / ADAGP, Paris / DACS, London, 2018.

Figure 17.
Denis Williams, Composition I, 1954, watercolour. 30 × 20.3 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the Estate of Donald Locke.

My third example of such “claw-like” forms, *Composition I* (1954) is by Guyanese artist Denis Williams, who was not a family relation but an artist-cum-archeologist who, as the first Director of Guyana’s Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology , was a significant interlocutor for Aubrey Williams after Williams’s return visits to Guyana became more frequent from 1970. The potent red and black ground in *Composition I* intensifies the menacing aura that radiates from the skeletal biomorph that forms the watercolour’s white-coloured figure (Fig. 17). To the extent that colonial history provides the context for the “very strange, very tense, slightly violent shape coming in” that these three examples from Williams, Lam, and Matta all foreground, I suggest that in the presence of such figural marking we have now left behind the subject/object dualisms of the Cartesian or Kantian subject who strove to master the universe by means of representation. In the face of “hauntological” markings that have left something “claw-like” in their wake,

one could further suggest the beholder is no longer quite as human as the liberal humanist cogito that was once held in place by monocular perspective, but is now a human who is becoming undone by virtue of ghostly traces all the more affecting in their pluripotentiality since these figural marks have not yet been codified or cut up by the cultural laws and social conventions of form.

Abstraction as a Site of Decolonisation

In an earlier essay I sought to explore these aesthetic effects generated in Williams's work—disturbing and alluring in equal measure—by turning to the concept of "fossil identities" put forward by Wilson Harris. [31] I now wonder, however, whether concepts of "trace" and "hauntology" proposed by Jacques Derrida may provide more of a bridge between philosophical questions raised by Williams's interstitial mode of abstraction, and an art historical framework that can demonstrate the relevance of work Williams created during decolonisation to questions that have come to define the present as "postcolonial." In the following quote, Derrida describes *trace* as a phenomenon of the differencing activity of language. Although he is addressing the repeatability or iterability of marks that eventually come to function as signs, marks that are formalised at the point where temporary fixity brings the slide of signifiers to the closure that correlates signifier (form) with signified (meaning), he also draws attention to the ambivalent temporality whereby *trace* is both absent and present at once:

> It is because of difference that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be articulated by the mark of the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past. [32]

Simultaneously embracing the future that is yet to come and the past that has not completely gone, *trace* anticipates the later concept of "hauntology," in which Derrida discusses the persistence of utopian desires for the future, despite the eradication of hope as a result of the devastations left behind in the aftermath of political revolutions. [33] In light of such theoretical precepts, the many-sided significance of *Triptych* (1976)—one of the most important works in Williams's oeuvre—takes on further ramifications, politically as well as aesthetically (Fig. 18).

Figure 18.
Aubrey Williams, “Arawak”, “Carib”, and “Warrau” Triptych panels, 1976, oil on canvas, 243.8 × 731.5 cm. Location unknown.

From left to right, the panels are titled Arawak, Carib, Warrau, all peoples indigenous to the Caribbean region. “Claw-like” forms abound in *Triptych* in its suggestion of skeletal remains rising out of dark earth. Six “claws” spread out from an oval crab shape in the lower left panel; the figure dominating the central panel summons up from the ground a fossilised creature whose seven vertebrae form a diagonal line culminating in a sharp, angular beak. Thinking of the context in which it was commissioned, it is revealingly audacious that, ten years after independence—with decolonial futures now politically menaced by nationalism, by ethnic sectarianism, and by state authoritarianism—an abstract painter chose to appropriate the moment as one in which his intervention would create a mood of sombre contemplation. The postcolonial future that has yet to come and the colonial past that has not yet gone were thereby put before the beholder, in 1976, not in a representational dualism that wanted to say who was responsible for the stalemates of the post-independence Caribbean, but through a *hauntological mode of abstraction* in which *interstitial trace structures* punctured the nucleus of disavowal encircling all that was unsaid and unspoken in the aftermath of a new nation having been formed.

We could say that what “moves” us, what “touches” us, what “affects” us, as we behold a work such as *Triptych* is that we have entered into a strangely double-facing relationship to a past that is not completely gone and a future that is yet to come. As with *Bone Heap* and *Tribal Mark II*, what pushes through the picture plane is a sense of the hauntedness whereby the traumata of the colonial past is a present-absence—not yet fully gone because the aftermath of its devastating violence lives on in a present that has not yet arrived at a viable political alternative. A standstill such as this brings us back to the question of disavowal. In a nondualistic universe with no fixed separation of agent and patient, there can be no heroes and villains: coloniser and colonised are always intimately entangled, umbilically

interdependent in the affective space that Denis Williams, in a series of extraordinary watercolour studies done in the 1950s that deserve a seminar in their own right, called “the inner plantation.” [34]

So deeply was disavowal implanted into the colonial formation of Caribbean societies, as Stuart Hall explains in his posthumous memoir, that it was not until after independence that Guyana or Jamaica, both very different in their own right, came to speak of themselves as multiethnic societies or plural societies. [35] To say Williams’s “claw-like shape” pierced the *nucleus of disavowal* that locked vast areas of historical experience into the realm of the unspeakable, the unrepresentable, is to say that in 1976 Williams was one of the first to demarcate the ambivalence of the postcolonial condition. Likewise Wilson Harris, in his 1976 essay “Fossil and Psyche,” spoke to the predicament that literary scholars Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford parse in the following exegesis of the “fossil identities” concept:

> each living person is a fossil in so far as each man carries within himself remnants of deep seated antecedents … By entering into a fruitful dialogue with the past one becomes able to revive the fossils that are buried within oneself and are part of one’s ancestors.

Petersen and Rutherford add the all-important qualifier that while fossil identities may open

> insight into a new dimension of psychic possibilities which up until then one had been unaware of … the same search for roots can give an entirely different result and can be used to foster a narrow nationalism … What must be remembered is that fossils like living beings contain restrictive as well as explosive rooms or spaces and the fossil value of our *human and ahuman* antecedents can either act as positive forces or can become prejudices, hideous biases. [36]

Disavowal is not something people do self-consciously (which means it is a psychic defence similar to but not equivalent to the ego’s acts of denial), yet the key issue here is the sheer amount of affective labour—psychic energy—involved in keeping the unspoken unsaid.

Hall repeatedly made the point that everyone “knew” Jamaica, for instance, was a black majority society, but that it was only in the 1970s that Jamaica began to *think of itself* as a black majority society. [37] Prior to the decolonial

transformations set in motion in vernacular forms such as reggae, in movements such as Rastafarianism, and in the upsurge in literary, performing and visual arts during the 1966 to 1972 period when the Caribbean Artists Movement was at its height, what everyone knew but no-one talked about was thus an open wound: this was precisely the animus motivating Williams as an artist—the grain of sand becoming a pearl—when he said, in 1967, "it has haunted me all my life *and I don't understand it*." With this quest to understand being the driving force behind his painterly innovations, Williams intuited that a buried absence is never a neutral "nothing" but a radioactive void: the violence with which past trauma exert aftereffects is one that attracts more violence to the primal scene in which the fossil was buried. Where disavowal blocked colonial history from passing into the past, one thinks of Jonestown, the cataclysmic mass suicide that took place in Guyana's hinterland in 1978: a future event impregnated with the potential to repeat the violence of colonial conquest that Williams had addressed in *El Dorado* in 1958, a dark star from the age of empire continuing to absorb the living present into the void of its black hole.

"In art things get said in ways in which they can't get said in any other domain," said Hall in a 2007 conversation with Bill Schwarz. [38] The aesthetic ingenuity of Williams's diasporic abstraction exemplifies such an understanding of critical art as that which is capable of breaking through the unsaid, the unspoken, and the unrepresentable. As Williams deployed abstraction to map out the planetary scale of postcolonial predicaments, his figural mode of mark making is urgently relevant as it intervenes in the contemporary dilemma whereby, as Schwarz put it, "There is today so much obeisance to the idea of multiculturalism that those domains in our lives which remain trenchantly untransformed, still subject to a racial or colonial logic … lack the requisite vocabularies with which to make them speakable." [39] Paradoxical it may be to suggest it was an abstract painter who made colonial trauma speakable, but we can come at the complex relationship between words and abstract art in another way.

Coda: Cenote

Williams often seemed discomfited by the verbal medium, even though in his articles of the late 1960s and early 1970s he spoke to the decolonial moment with penetrating insight. Williams also contributed to far-reaching debates on the British-born generation of diaspora artists in events such as the 1987 Creation for Liberation panel held in London. [40] Watching Imruh Bakari Caesar's important film documentary, *The Mark of the Hand: Aubrey Williams* (1986), one senses Williams's discomfort, at times, with the interviewer's presumption that the artist's words will somehow "explain" his abstract paintings, as if their meaning will be finally fixed once we hear the artist

himself speak. There is a fraught moment when, in the hinterland where his relationship to soil and land first took shape, Williams says he would prefer listening to Shostakovich rather than carry on with the interview. [41]

It would be entirely wrong to think the artist was nonverbal. Far from it, in his 1970 essay, “Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Inquiry” (valuably reprinted in Anne Walmsley’s indispensable *Guyana Dreaming* anthology), Aubrey Williams was among the first to use “postcolonial” as a key term. At CAM’s first conference, held at the University of Kent in September 1967, Williams had said “Art is always in the foreground; it is the true avant-garde … It always seems in the history of man that the arts give the direction for the technology, for the philosophy and the very life of the people.” [42] In the context of his participation in the Caribbean Writers and Artists Convention which planned ahead for the first region-wide arts festival—Carifesta—that took place in Guyana in 1972, and in which Williams chaired the Art Sub-Committee, he followed up this line of thought in his 1970 essay. The avant-gardness, as well as the world-historical scope, of Williams’s thinking is heightened by what is at stake in the sixth heading that concludes his sequence of periods in Caribbean art history that he laid out as follows—“1. Pre-Columbian 2. Post-Columbian 3. The Colonial Brainwashing 4. Post-Colonial Vision 5. Caribbean Art Today 6. Cenote.” [43]

Cenote, also spelled *zenote*, is a phonetic translation of an indigenous Amerindian word (Fig. 19). In the language of natural history, cenote are circular pools opening onto underground caves, all concentrated geographically in the north east Yucatán peninsula because of an asteroid that created the Chicxulub crater 66 million years ago (Fig. 20). But Williams was also using *cenote* figurally when he wrote, “The Maya when involved in their process of disappearance … placed their jewellery and their most intimate objects of material value in their wells. These wells were then called Cenote. Literal translation is impossible, but near meanings would be Total or Everything of Us.” As he concluded his 1970 essay, it is crucial to notice his sixth heading does not designate a teleological endpoint: “From out of the amalgam of our Pre-Columbian past, or slave past, our quick political growth and our social awakening—these blended with our cataclysmic position in our technology-ridden world—from this Cenote must come the visual identity of Modern Caribbean Man today.” [44] *Cenote* cannot be an ending if this is the point from which a future visual identity emerges. This is also to say *cenote* cannot be fixed in the precolonial past as something belonging to the Maya or to the Amerindians alone, for the word has now become cross-culturally translated as *a double-facing trace structure*, imbued with the pastness of ancient petroglyphs while at the same time radiant with future pluripotentiality.

Figure 19.
Aubrey Williams, Cenote, 1983, oil on canvas, 95.5 × 127cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

Figure 20.
John Stanmeyer, Xkeken, Cenote, Mexico, photograph. Digital image courtesy of John Stanmeyer, National Geographic.

Aubrey Williams's work deals with an ecological materialism on a planetary scale. Like a fossil identity harbouring utopian and authoritarian possibilities, *cenote*—in Williams's handling of the term—is cataclysm's trace, an underwater archive storing archaic treasures for posterity and a place of futurity anticipating the rediscovery of an extinct civilisation. For me, some of the most memorable scenes in Imruh Bakari Caesar's invaluable film portrait are those in which we see Aubrey listening to Shostakovitch in the jungle, an image that is always called to mind for me when I see *Quartet no. 15 opus 144* (1981) from the Shostakovich series (Fig. 21). In a setting worlds away from the one inhabited by the Russian composer, we glimpse a pluriverse in which particles assemble, decay, and reassemble in the time-space continuum of *cenote*, which is not a void or a hole but a passageway from one realm into others.

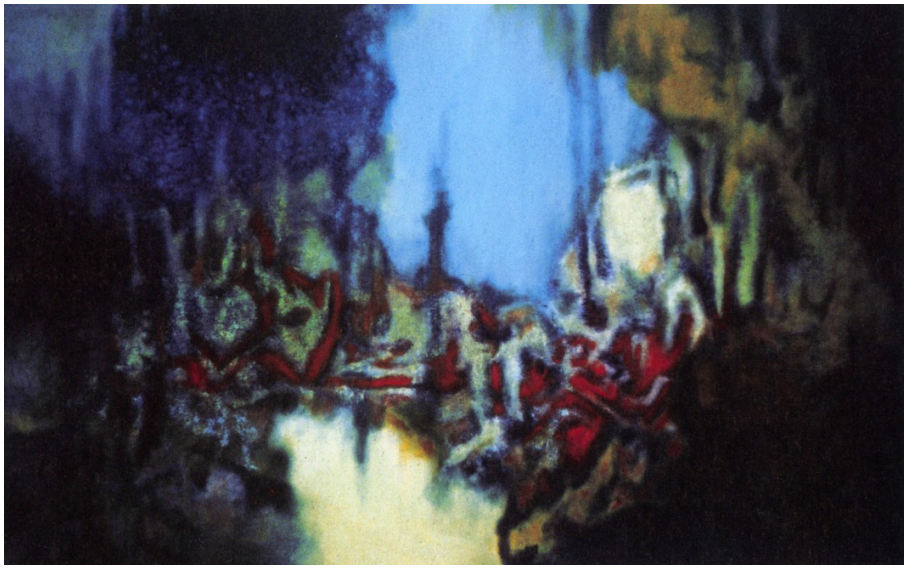

Figure 21.
Aubrey Williams, Quartet No. 15 Opus 144, 1981, oil on canvas, 132 × 208 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

Footnotes

1 A useful point of entry to the field is provided by Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, London: University College Press, 1997.

2 Guy Brett, "A World Aesthetic" [1988] in *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams*, ed. Anne Walmsley, Sydney: Dangeroo Press, 1990, 97.

3 Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History Since the 1950s*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, 10–24. Artist Sonia Boyce and art historian Leon Wainwright were among invited speakers at the *Aubrey Williams: In Profile* Study Day held at Tate Britain, 21 September 2007; the 2010 exhibitions were accompanied by the catalogue *Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire*, ed. Reyahn King, Liverpool: National Museums Liverpool and October Gallery, 2010.

4 Stuart Hall, "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-War History," *History Workshop Journal* Vol 61 n 1, March 2006, 10.

5 The Museum of Modern Art visitor handout, March 30 1969, cited in Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: Art Museums in the Age of Black Power*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 207.

6 See, “Disavowal,” Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, 1968 trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974, 118–121.

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