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Olmec Colossal Heads in the Paintings of Aubrey Williams

Ian Dudley

*Our true identity is heavily with us awaiting expression by our artists.*¹ (Aubrey Williams, 1970)

Aubrey Williams’s (1926–90) *Olmec–Maya* series is a central constituent of the artist’s late oeuvre. It was first presented in a major solo exhibition of 40 large paintings at London’s Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery in 1985.² Entitled *The Olmec Maya and Now*, the show marked the culmination of an engagement with Indigenous American themes reaching back to the start of Williams’s career in the 1950s, while demonstrating the full extent of his extraordinary technical virtuosity. Despite their significance, the series has drawn little institutional or critical attention and has almost completely eluded comprehensive in-depth analysis. One possible determinant of this reception is Williams’s distinctive juxtaposition of non-figurative abstraction alongside figurative elements, which has not readily fitted within established approaches that present these modes as mutually exclusive. This disjuncture is compounded by the relative obscurity of reference points from the perspective of Eurocentric art history. However, as artist and critic Errol Lloyd noted in one of the few contemporary reviews

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of the series, such factors also belied the historical exclusion of Black artists, which has operated as a conspicuous dimension of British cultural imperialism underpinning Williams’s own trajectory.³

One exception is the writer Wilson Harris (1921–2018), who treated the *Olmec–Maya* paintings on several occasions, albeit briefly, beginning with a lecture series entitled *Cross-Cultural Crisis: Imagery, Language and the Intuitive Imagination*, which he delivered in 1990.⁴ Harris gravitated around the idea of art’s emancipatory power being immanent within its generating forms of imaginative free-play. Such free-play might disrupt the oppressive psychological conditioning through which human subjectivities have been governed across colonial and neocolonial stages of capitalist modernity. This potential was explored through reflections upon his own literary work alongside cultural sources from Guyana, the Caribbean and beyond.

In the second lecture, ‘The Absent Presence: The Caribbean, Central and South America’, Harris raised the notion of ‘racelessness’ and the confounding of traditional racial categorisations within the demographically heterogeneous contexts of the post-Columbian Americas. This functioned as a stepping-stone towards imagining the emergence of new forms of universality from non-Eurocentric cosmopolitanisms.⁵

Amidst these cross-cultural discussions, and pursuing his pan-

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American subtext, he turned to his Guyanese compatriot’s *Olmec–Maya* series, projecting a slide of Williams’s 1984 oil on canvas painting *Night and the Olmec (plate 1)*. Its Mesoamerican theme is displayed through imagery drawn from the region’s pre-Columbian artistic traditions. This is arranged over a nocturnal abstract background, which, through its shadowy, unstable geography and temporal ambiguity, evokes ideas of chthonic and uranological formation, shamanic vision, and unconscious revelation. Foremost among these ancient figures is a frontal view of an Olmec colossal head. Its dominating presence stares heavily from the composition’s lower left quarter, tilted slightly towards the left as if floating in a dream. The stone mass is rendered noticeably alive, like a vivid portrait, with a mournful expression suggested by its misty gazing eyes and downturned mouth. These features are articulated via contrasts between deep gullies of shadow and ridges of lighter grey tones. Lilac, cyan and white highlights illuminate the contours through combined flecks, drips and stains picking up the canvas weave. The marks convey the stone’s ancient form and texture out of the abyssal darkness, while retaining a ghostly translucency. Despite the presence of other motifs, Harris fixed attention on the head:

The curious thing about this work is that the Olmec figure depicted there and orchestrated within a rhythm of tone and

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colour reminds us of theories advanced by writers such [as] Irene Nicolson and Ivan Van Sertima that Africans visited America long before Columbus. The impressive Negroid features of Olmec sculpture seem African. One has to remember, however, that Olmec genius is no longer purely African in a conventional African sense. The Olmec no longer entertains the ambitions, the desires, which you would associate with a twentieth-century African state. Some ancient, subtle erosion has occurred, a rhythm of inner and outer capacities that give illumination to Aubrey Williams’s New World Olmec canvas.⁶

While this ‘ancient, subtle erosion’ remains mysterious, Harris’s brief summary makes clear that Williams’s mobilisation of Mesoamerican motifs, particularly the colossal head and its theoretical connections, was not straightforward. Rather it represented a complex interweaving of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial histories, identities and poetics across Atlantic spaces.

This preoccupation with the heterogeneous powers animating *Night and the Olmec* reemerged in a dedicated lecture delivered by Harris at London’s Whitechapel Gallery in 1998 during a retrospective exhibition devoted to Williams.⁷ Harris again read the central motif in cross-cultural terms, although now as a channel for past and present voices from human and

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supernatural worlds, particularly from Indigenous America.

Collectively the voices protest the destructive cultures of

Western individualism and consumerism:

The Olmec head is ancient but alive, it becomes a living presence, and the strange rebuke it brings summons a chorus born of diverse Self. Not only Olmec but tree-gods from which we fashion tools and become insensible to the silent rhythms with which they still address us.⁸

Similar reiterations concerning the complexity of the Olmec imagery appear in another paper on Williams’s work by Harris, co-authored with Michael Mitchell in 2014.⁹ Harris’ commentaries on Williams represent important speculations not only in lieu of critical disinterest in the series, but particularly because *Night and the Olmec* and its central motif are not unique within it. Three further works in the series also portray Olmec colossal heads, *Chato Presence* (1982), *Chato III* (1984), and *Hymn to the Sun IV* (1984), (*plate 2*, *plate 3* and *plate 4*). The prominence of the motif suggests that it held considerable significance for Williams and that by identifying it as an avatar for the complexities constituting the artist’s work, Harris recognised an important critical opening. Accordingly, this essay re-examines all four iterations of the colossal head motif in the *Olmec–Maya* series in order to clarify their

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interconnections and the forms of cross-cultural bridging they represent in relation to political and aesthetic dimensions of Williams's practice. It locates their production within the artist's trajectory and wider overlapping historiographic contexts, which they unite, including art, literature, archaeology, anthropology, histories of colonialism, decolonialism and diaspora.

Using the paintings, related works, unpublished correspondence and interviews, artist statements and critical literature, I shall analyse how the rich symbolic multivalency Harris read into *Night and the Olmec* obtained throughout Williams's mobilising of colossal heads as a central motif. As such they encapsulated multiple aspects of colonialism's complex histories and inheritances, particularly relating to Amerindian and African heritage in the modern American context. By evoking these different cultural lineages, Williams sought to memorialise the traumatic histories of encounter, transformation and resistance produced under the violence of European imperialism. The archaeological recovery and valorization of these suppressed traditions linked to his conceiving his paintings as forms of monument. Such retrospection also informed ideas of decolonial consciousness and agency that he, like Harris, was concerned to activate through creative practice as a foundation for building new postcolonial possibilities. These possibilities might signal a route beyond the overlapping matrix of global crises confronting

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collective humanity during the postwar period, which encompassed existential anxieties, socio-political divisions, economic and environmental problems.

Williams emphasised and multiplied the metaphorical interplay inherent in the motif’s selection by altering compositional arrangement, adjusting the colossal heads’ prototypical features, varying the integration of figurative and non-figurative elements, and adding titular clues and notes suggesting different interpretative paths. Various then, Williams’s reworking of this key motif, as indeed the *Olmec–Maya* series as a whole, embodies more complex forms of interrelationship with the wider historical moment of their production and with other strands of his practice than might first appear. This essay begins by outlining two vital contexts: firstly, the background of Williams’s engagement with pre-Columbian Mesoamerica before the *Olmec–Maya* series and its links to his wider treatment of Indigenous America, especially concerning Guyana; secondly the context of Mesoamerican archaeology surrounding this engagement, particularly the historiography of the Olmec and the colossal heads. These important biographical, historical, methodological and historiographic foundations enable analysis of the four versions of Williams’s ‘New World Olmec canvas’ as part of the *Olmec–Maya* series in the later sections of this article, where I elaborate and extend the multivalent cross-cultural potential imagined by Harris.

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Aubrey Williams and Indigenous America: Guyanese– Mesoamerican Genealogies

The historical geography of Guyana provided a central inspiration and subject matter for Aubrey Williams’s work. This focus reflected his origins and foundational experiences in that country. Born in 1926 in Georgetown, capital of what was then ‘British Guiana’, he spent the first decades of his life in the former British colony before moving to Europe in 1952. After settling in London, Williams emerged as a professional artist.¹⁰ Art became a vital means of spiritual reconnection with his homeland. It enabled connections to transnational cultural circuits stretching across the Atlantic from the Caribbean to Europe and Africa, retracing lines of colonial history, which had engendered Williams’s birthplace and would be reinscribed in his painting.

Guyana’s independence struggle against British imperial rule represents a vital backdrop for understanding the artist’s early formation and later postcolonial vision.¹¹ However, the event of primary artistic importance was his experience of living with the mainly Warao Amerindian community at Hosororo in the country’s northwest from 1947–49. This was while working as an Agricultural Field Officer, the career for which he originally trained. Amidst the rainforest and river surroundings, Williams’s encounter with Indigenous social and artistic worlds

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alongside their philosophical and cosmological underpinnings represented an aesthetic epiphany. The impact was similar to the way that Harris’s tours of Guyana’s interior during his early surveying career became a rich resource for his visionary fiction.¹² Williams described his experience as providing a ‘visual liberation’ of lasting influence, which underpinned the development of his painting from the 1950s onwards and catalysed ongoing forms of cross-cultural investigation into the wider historical complex of Indigenous peoples in Guyana and beyond.¹³ ‘These Indians and their life is [sic] always with me’, he told art and literary historian Anne Walmsley in 1972, adding ‘those two years among the Warrau Indians were probably the most important period of my entire life.’¹⁴ This grounding manifested throughout Williams’s work. Visual intimations of the enigmatic calligraphy of the country’s ancient Indigenous petroglyphs, known as *timehri*, are distinguishable in paintings from the earliest period.¹⁵ This echoed titular references to Guyanese landscape and history, particularly Amerindian toponyms and ethnonyms.¹⁶ Alongside this, natural and elemental allusions combine formally into suggestions of transformation and genesis, evoking the entangled physical, mythical and spiritual worlds, in which the artist had been immersed. Basket weaving, featherwork and other Indigenous art also furnished content through colour schemes and mythical iconography connected to animals and other elements belonging

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to Guyana’s Indigenous cosmos.¹⁷ Speaking later in Imruh Bakari’s 1986 documentary *The Mark of the Hand*, Williams underlined the significance of such Amerindian sources by stating that *timehri* was ‘the word for art for me’.¹⁸

This foundation precipitated enquiries into the broader sphere of Indigenous America, which Williams pursued throughout his career. These embraced the Andes and Mesoamerica, particularly pre-Columbian cultures of the latter, leading eventually to the *Olmec–Maya* series in the 1980s. Titles referencing such wider contexts or their colonial invasion by the Spanish occur from the late 1950s onwards.¹⁹ Like his Guyanese works, the precise relation such evocative labels had to the abstract fluid and luminous arrangements of organic forms, calligraphic structures and protean grounds characterising Williams’s earliest practice remains obscure, although mystery itself was something he associated with these sources and positively cultivated alongside connections to elemental forces.²⁰

From around 1968 Williams’s Mesoamerican referencing developed in more sustained forms with series named for Mayan sources including *Chacmool*, a type of sacrificial altar sculpted as a reclining god, *Cenote*, the sacred wells found across the Yucatan peninsula, and *Bonampak*, an archaeological site in Chiapas, Mexico, known for its murals.²¹ These seemingly non-figurative works employed simplified schemas of flattened

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colour set into rounded, sculptural forms and loose geometries, though maintaining an enigmatic relationship to their titles. Further series in the 1970s continued these more abstracted lines, such as *Quetzalcoatl* (1973), the plumed or feathered serpent and Mesoamerican deity.²² Simultaneously Williams began figurative experiments however, incorporating recognisable pieces of Mesoamerican art and material culture into paintings, following similar developments in his Guyanese work. Paintings from the *Maya Altar* and *Toltec* series (1973–74) included elements such as a mask, a maraca or sceptre, hieroglyphs and human figures.²³ The range of sources, including sculpture, painted books and murals, and their clear rendering, anticipated the later *Olmec–Maya* series. Though the Olmec seem not to feature significantly among major paintings earlier in this transitional phase, they do give name to a still relatively abstract series in the later 1970s.

Recognisable Mesoamerican elements appeared in other strands of Williams’s work, including Guyanese inspired works, representing deliberate bridging between these two Indigenous contexts. He indicated their elision in the text accompanying his Camden Arts Centre solo exhibition in 1971, describing them together as joint inspirations under the general category ‘pre-Columbian’.²⁴ Accordingly, paintings from this period sometimes contain Mesoamerican symbols even when primarily constructed around Guyanese references, such as *Carib Guyana*

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Timehri (1974), which includes a Mesoamerican number nine symbol in red in its bottom right, consisting of a bar representing five, and four dots representing ones. Mesoamerican and Guyanese iconography both appear in Williams’s Olympia murals created in Jamaica in 1976.²⁵ Pertinently, Williams referred to the Carib snake motif deployed here and in the works *Carib Guyana Timehri*, *Triptych*, *Dalhousie Murals* (1978), and *Kamudi* (1987), as the ‘plumed anaconda’, deliberately associating it with *Quetzalcoatl*.²⁶ Its fragmented appearance recalls similar chains of abstract staccato forms in the series of that name. These overlaps anticipated the *Shostakovich* series, first exhibited in 1981.²⁷ Here, despite the paintings’ radically different inspiration, allusions to Mesoamerican and Guyanese contexts remained visible in fractured references to architecture, stone- and featherwork alongside mythical imagery of the sun, serpents and world trees. Such cross-cultural juxtapositions and syntheses epitomise the dialectical relation of sources, which Kobena Mercer highlighted as the essence of Williams’s ‘polyvocal abstraction’ and aptly linked to the significant density of Wilson Harris’s multifarious prose.²⁸

Archaeological Bridge

Williams clarified his increased focus upon Mesoamerica from the later 1960s and his bridging between the region and Guyana

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in two theoretical statements: 'The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean' (1967) and 'Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Inquiry' (1970).²⁹ Written after Guyana's 1966 independence to address the position of Caribbean art within decolonization, both connect Mesoamerican and Guyanese contexts in terms of shared environment, history and culture. Significantly, the second even identifies Mesoamerica as the ancient migratory origin point for Guyana's Amerindian peoples:

Historians now conclude that the first Conquistadores of the Caribbean were of Maya extraction. For convenience we have to call these people CARIBS, though the name was a Spanish mistake. The migrations were via longboat through the Caribbean. It seems that the migrations took no pattern, covered a short period of time (possibly a little more than 1000 years), and after a sudden last surge of true migratory activity with the passing of the height of the Maya culture, petered out in the South American Selva. It must appear that the people moved with very little of their truly high art, barely depending upon basic crafts in their 1000 or so years of unbolstered existence in the Islands; thus the remnants of their high art can now only be found in areas of the beginning of the journey (the Yucatan) and its end in the northern jungles of South America. We also now know the

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exquisite quality of this high art at Bonampak, at Uxmal in the Yucatan, and in the meagre but magnificent artifacts of the upper Amazon, Northern Brazil and the Guyana Highlands. If part of the mystery of art is what can only be called the visual manifestation of man’s consciousness - then, rich indeed is the Caribbean Visual Art Inheritance as yet barely tapped.³⁰

The ‘meagre but magnificent’ Amazonian artifacts that Williams linked to this idea of an extended culture area across the Caribbean basin were *timehri*, the ancient petroglyphs that were an ongoing inspiration to him.³¹ Despite the fundamental importance for understanding the evolution of the artist’s Mesoamerican strand vis-à-vis his Guyana and other work, the explicit connection made in this passage has attracted little attention. This is interesting considering that some critical scepticism elicited by Williams’s Mesoamerican work related to his investing in a context so removed from Guyana.³² As I underline later and despite its Mayan focus, this genealogy remained important for Williams’s foregrounding the Olmec and the colossal head motif within the *Olmec–Maya* series. It also aligns with Wilson Harris, whose 1970 short story ‘Yurokon’, published the same year as Williams’s text, thematised similar pan-Caribbean links. The writer underlined their significance in his own exegetical texts, including the lectures first discussing

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Night and the Olmec, which refer to ‘a bridge that comes from ancient Mexico into South America, into the Guyanas’.³³

Though speculative and poetic, these postcolonial bridgings parallel scientific consideration of intraregional linkages within archaeological literature.³⁴ This professional scholarship represents a vital context for understanding Williams’s interests, especially major developments within Mesoamerican archaeology in Mexico, USA and Europe from the 1940s onwards. Significant advances in deciphering Mayan hieroglyphs beginning in the 1950s catalysed this flourishing, alongside the publicity generated by high-profile discoveries, particularly by US-led excavations reported in periodicals such as *National Geographic*.³⁵ Popular introductions disseminating the latest understandings further grew this mass appeal, producing popular culture manifestations and also pseudo-archaeological literature. This background is important since Williams never visited the Mesoamerican and Andean archeological sites or museum collections on which he based his work.³⁶ Rather the artist used various image sources for preparatory and large-scale works. These encompassed books and other publications, postcards, photographing television documentaries and visiting UK collections, including the British Museum in London. Though during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the relationships between Williams’s sources and finished works

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seem obscure, some examples showing how he mobilised such materials are identifiable.

Works on paper in the Tate Archive in London show not only straightforward recording of Mesoamerican sources, such as *Sketch of a Mayan statue* (c.1950s), but also formal experiment, as in *Five Stylised Sketches of Statues* (c.1970s) (plate 5).³⁷ The latter series of drawings based on the iconic reclining Chacmool sculptures centres on one rotated top view, which emphasises the geometry of its round head and angular sacrificial receptacle across the chest, rendered as a circular ring and square frame. A painting from the corresponding apparently non-figurative series, *Chak Mool* (1967), features identical geometric shapes in the form of a black ring and light blue square, elementary structures recurring across numerous works, including the *Maya Altar* and *Olmec–Maya* series. The former series further instances these processes. Both *Maya Altar*, with its complementary combinations of intense mid-blues, oranges and ochre tones, and *Maya Altar 2*, with its jades, turquoises and deep greens contrasted with bright, sandy yellows, softened with browns, deliberately redeploy colour schemes from the Bonampak murals.³⁸

While the Olmec seem less prominent among major works from this period, two preparatory studies show Williams working with colossal heads. Firstly, a monochromatic oil sketch from 1970 depicting a section of colossal head La Venta

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Monument 1 (*plate 6*), one of four found at the north Tabasco site.³⁹ At 2.46 m in height and 6.13 m in circumference, and displaying no significant damage, it is one of the largest, best preserved, and hence most reproduced examples since its first professional excavation and publicising by archaeologist Matthew Stirling from 1939–1940 during surveys jointly sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society (*plate 7*).⁴⁰ Williams’s carefully observed and sensitively handled portrayal conveys a vivid emotional sense, although the upper lip is less defined than the source sculpture. His very particular cropping at the brow, chin and side of the right eye recalls a similar close-up image on the cover of Michael Coe’s 1968 *America’s First Civilization: Discovering the Olmec*, a possible source image.⁴¹ A second rougher conte chalk on paper sketch from 1975 experiments with showing the same head in full, but with a more angular outline than the rounder original monument (*plate 8*).

Williams and Olmec Monumentality: A Brief History in Pre- and Post-Columbian Time

Before examining how these earlier Mesoamerican interests led into Williams elevating the Olmec colossal head motif within the *Olmec–Maya* series, it is important to identify key features in the pre-Columbian history of this archetypal Mesoamerican culture and their *post*-Columbian historiography. I begin

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outlining the archaeological positioning of the Olmec within the broader regional horizon, before highlighting cross-cultural associations that were attached to their sculpture, particularly the colossal heads, since their ‘rediscovery’ in the 1860s.

Olmec culture existed in the Southern Gulf Coast area of Mexico from around 1450–400 BCE, inhabiting sites around the Tuxtla mountains and adjacent lowland areas of the Papaloapan, Coatzacoalcos and Tonalá river basins, in what is today Vera Cruz and Tabasco states.⁴² The Olmec are associated with the ‘Preclassic’ or ‘Formative’ period in Mesoamerican archaeology (ca. 2000 BCE – CE 300) preceding both the ‘Classic’ period (ca. CE 300–900), known for the flourishing of the Maya and the apogee of Teotihuacan culture, and the ‘Postclassic’ period (ca. CE 900–1521), known for the consecutive appearances of the Toltec and Aztec before the Spanish invasion.⁴³ It is the Aztec from which the name Olmec derives, specifically the term *Olmeca*, which the former applied to the Gulf Coast area and its people. The toponym has been said to mean ‘land of rubber’ in Nahuatl. The corresponding ethnonym was adopted by modern scholars and has since been used to describe the culture, which flourished in this region over two millennia before the Aztecs.⁴⁴

In the decades before Williams’s *Olmec–Maya* series, archaeological discourse cast the Olmec as the original archetypal model for other regional Mesoamerican cultures, a position based upon the early dates attributed to their sites and

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objects.⁴⁵ As leading US authority Michael Coe stated in 1962, the Olmec were ‘the most ancient Mexican civilisation’, and that ‘there is not now the slightest doubt that all later civilisations in Mesoamerica, whether Mexican or Maya, ultimately rest on an Olmec base.’⁴⁶ This was reflected in the frequent application of the label ‘mother culture’ (‘cultura madre’) to the Olmec, promoted by Mexican scholars prominent within dating debates in the 1940s, including Alfonso Caso and Miguel Covarrubias.⁴⁷ The marked use of the term ‘civilisation’ should also be underlined. Not only were the Olmec presented as the central originating point of regional cultural development and influence, but also as a complete transformation and advance from everything before, which Ignacio Bernal described as merely ‘a prelude to civilization’.⁴⁸ This foundational reputation is significant when considering Williams’s turn to the Olmec, both in relation to the aforementioned Mesoamerica–Guyana genealogical bridge and for its critical resonance with European colonialism’s discourse of civilization.

The monumental stone sculpture thematised by Williams has been central to defining the Olmec in these terms. As Poole writes ‘no prior or contemporaneous culture in Mesoamerica matched the Olmecs for the number, size, or sophistication of their monumental carvings.’⁴⁹ For Bernal, their achievement alone justified the term ‘civilization’.⁵⁰ The colossal heads are the most recognisable form of these carvings due to their

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imposing size and gazes, large earplugs and characteristic headdresses, comprising prominent forehead bands and side straps. Carved from hard volcanic basalt using stone tools, seventeen heads exist across the major Olmec centres, Tres Zapotes and nearby Cobata, San Lorenzo and La Venta, ranging from 1.47 m to 3.4 m in height and weighing between six and fifty tons.⁵¹ While their impressive features, expressions and head adornments are individualised, their overall stylistic treatment remains consistent. They likely represent prominent individuals, probably dead rulers, although the exact purpose and nature of their conception remains speculative.⁵²

Nevertheless, their location in relation to altars, architectural and landscape features underlines their importance in circumscribing and defining 'the very centre of governance and sacred ritual'.⁵³

They were part of a period of cultural flourishing that also involved the development of writing and calendrical systems, as evidenced by other monumental sculpture. The total body of Olmec production suggests a vast hierarchical organisation, planning and ceremonialism, multiple levels of craft specialisation and extensive trading networks, which potentially imply imperial power relations.⁵⁴ It is estimated to have involved the labour of more than 1500 persons working over several months to transport each block from its source in the Tuxtla mountains to its final destination.⁵⁵ While this monumental expressionism has been linked to a transforming

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metaphysics of power within Mesoamerica, writers have also understood the heads in more universal existentialist terms.⁵⁶ Beatriz de la Fuente describes them as being animated by the divine light of human consciousness, which is simultaneously capable of supernatural communion. In this respect, they concretise the enfolding of human temporalities into cosmic eternity.⁵⁷ As I will develop, Williams would mobilise multiple aspects of this monumental power alongside other interpretive strands.

African Connections

Beyond the primary associations of the Olmec colossal heads outlined above, it is also important to highlight a line of pseudo-scientific claims about the sculptures, which first emerged with publications announcing their metropolitan ‘rediscovery’ in the second half of the nineteenth century. The author of these accounts, antiquities speculator José Melgar, proposed that rather than portraying Indigenous American peoples, the colossal heads represented African subjects, indicating a pre-Columbian African presence in the Americas. Such claims were periodically renewed into the twentieth century, including by writers such as Ivan Van Sertima, who Harris mentioned when examining *Night and the Olmec*. As I describe, Williams’s own familiarity with these theories suggests their relevance for considering his adoption of the heads.

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Melgar’s contributions appeared in Mexican journals in the late 1860s and early 1870s, following his own encounter with a colossal head sculpture on a sugarcane hacienda at the site known today as Tres Zapotes in 1862, where a farmworker had unearthed it some years earlier.⁵⁸ It was later labelled Monument A.⁵⁹ Melgar’s 1869 text described his being not only impressed by the head’s magnificence as an artwork, but by its particular facial features and what he thought they represented:

what impressed me more was the Ethiopic type that it represents; I reflected that undoubtedly there had been Black people in this country, and this had been in the earliest times of the world⁶⁰

To support this unorthodox claim concerning pre-Columbian African presence, Melgar presented an illustrative engraving after a photograph of the head, possibly adapted to emphasise the supposed indicative features.⁶¹ Alongside he gathered an eccentric collection of textual ‘evidence’. This included late seventeenth century apocrypha by D. Francisco Núñez de la Vega, Bishop of Chiapas and Soconusco, extracted from nineteenth century works by Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, Alexander von Humboldt, and Manuel Orozco y Berra, and reportage of a lecture by Suez Canal Company Director, Ferdinand de Lesseps, given at the Universal Exhibition in Paris

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1867, which interpreted the Atlantis section of Plato’s *Timaeus* as referring to America.⁶² Melgar restated his speculations in 1871, identifying further ‘evidence’ from findings at Chitzen Itza and Palenque, and his own collection.⁶³

One of Melgar’s sources, Manuel Orozco y Berra, then incorporated these speculations in his 1880 history of pre-Columbian Mexico.⁶⁴ From this source the Olmec heads’ African associations entered Anglophone scholarship in the 1920s in Leo Wiener’s *Africa and the Discovery of America*.⁶⁵ Despite rejection by mainstream Mesoamerican archaeologists since the 1940s, explanations of Olmec sculpture along these lines persisted, resurfacing with particular strength in the later 1960s and 1970s, just as Williams adopted the colossal heads in his work.⁶⁶ Prominent proponents included Alexander von Wuthenau and Ivan Van Sertima, mentioned by Harris, for whom the heads represented central definitive evidence of pre-Columbian African presence. Illustrations in Wuthenau’s 1975 book, *Unexpected Faces in Ancient America*, juxtaposed a modern National Geographic photograph of a ‘Nuba chief from Kenya, Africa’ with an image of colossal head La Venta Monument 1, previously sketched by Williams.⁶⁷ The same National Geographic photo appeared on the cover of Van Sertima’s *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, published the following year in 1976. Here it formed half of a composite image split between itself and

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colossal head Monument 5 from San Lorenzo, foregrounding the heads’ pivotal role in the book’s claims.⁶⁸ Despite thorough rejection and disproving by archaeological and historical specialists, Wuthenau’s and Van Sertima’s theories have enjoyed considerable appeal.⁶⁹ This has included major figures of African diaspora critical theory, such as Abdias do Nascimento and bell hooks, who have promoted the works in terms of their decolonial revisionist potential.⁷⁰

Before considering how different aspects of Olmec historiography relate to Williams’s colossal head paintings, it is necessary to highlight the artist’s connections with the network involved in this reemerging pseudo-archaeological tradition and to clarify his orientation towards its ideas. Van Sertima and Williams belonged to overlapping literary and artistic circles in Guyana and Britain, including the Caribbean Artists Movement, and were associates of fellow Guyanese writers such as Harris and Jan Carew.⁷¹ Williams had produced book covers and illustrations for Carew’s novels, including *The Wild Coast* in 1958 and *Black Midas* in 1968.⁷² It was through Carew that Van Sertima encountered Leo Wiener’s work and the topic of pre-Columbian African presences in the Americas in 1970, which was complemented through contact with Wuthenau.⁷³ Carew specifically mentions the Olmec heads while praising Wuthenau’s and Van Sertima’s work in a 1976 essay called ‘The Origins of Racism in the Americas’.⁷⁴ This appeared in an

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anthology published for the second edition of *Carifesta* in Jamaica, in which Williams also participated.⁷⁵

These connections strongly suggest Williams’s familiarity with the Olmec heads’ African associations. However, clearer evidence of his engagement exists in correspondence between Anne Walmsley and the writer Andrew Salkey. Referring to a postcard depicting colossal head La Venta Monument 1, which Walmsley sent to Salkey from the Olmec museum park at Villahermosa in Tabasco during a visit to Mexico in 1973, the latter wrote:

I’ve kept it [the postcard] next to my desk, ever since I received it, and once, Aubrey [Williams] visited me, and he did exactly as you hinted he had said to you: he said, “My ancestor, man! Can’t you see the resemblance?”⁷⁶

This anecdote is interesting for suggesting Williams’s personal engagement with the reemerging pseudo-archaeological discourse around the time he began sketching the motif but before its use in the *Olmec–Maya* series. It is also notable that the complexity, which Harris found in the latter works, was also applicable to Williams’s own self-relation to the heads. Williams was Guyanese of mainly African heritage, though he underlined the essential multiculturalism of his background, including Amerindian ancestry on his mother’s side.⁷⁷

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Alongside his artistic grounding with the Warao, such personal aspects might be linked to the aforementioned Mesoamerica–Guyana bridge when considering the significance of Williams’s various identifications. The final sections of this article explore how these factors relate to his variations on the colossal head motif within the broader context of the *Olmec–Maya* series overall.

The *Olmec–Maya* Series

The frequent use made of Mesoamerican sources by Williams during the 1970s culminated with the *Olmec–Maya* series of 40 paintings made in the 1980s. A strong visual and conceptual coherence unites the works, although several loose groupings are distinguishable within their aesthetic treatment of the cosmology, religion and polity of the Olmec, Maya and connected cultures. Significant clusters emerge around key themes and motifs, including Chacmool, Quetzalcoatl, the sun, the moon, time, and Olmec colossal heads, which assume a new prominence in Williams’s major work. Several tendencies in treatment also appear. Compositions characterising one strand combine figurative and non-figurative elements into dynamic and intensely coloured arrangements, typically juxtaposing recognisable and often fragmented imagery and pictographs drawn from Mesoamerican artworks, which emerge over abstract, protean backgrounds evoking the same sense of

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biomorphism, geomorphism and psycho-cosmic space portrayed in *Night and the Olmec*. This clarity enables frequent identification of source artworks, and even illustrative sources, further illuminating Williams’s working practices. For example, the painting *The Keeper of the Temple* (1984) obviously represents the so-called ‘Jaguar Throne’ from the Castillo at the site of Chichén Itzá in Yucatán state, Mexico, while its distinct high angled viewpoint and spot distribution indicate direct working from a photograph of the sculpture in the 1978 edition of Ferdinand Anton’s *Art of the Maya*.⁷⁸ Another example is *Quetzalcoatl III* (1984), which (despite its title) is based on two sculptured busts of *Cociyo*, the Zapotec god of rain, thunder and lightning, which formed part of an elite structure at Lambityeco, Oaxaca, excavated in 1968.⁷⁹ Williams’s source was a photographic depiction on another postcard collected by Walmsley during her 1973 Mexico visit, which the artist borrowed.⁸⁰ In another more abstract group, easily recognisable imagery is absent or indiscernible, though still evoking phenomena related to series themes, particularly elemental nature and temporality. However, some ostensibly non-figurative works conceal hidden figuration using similar sources to the first strand. While the dramatic play of bright heightened colours over darker grounds is generally typical across most of the works, a few employ monochromatic palettes, although

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these still retain the striking formal definition characterising the wider body.⁸¹

The embrace of such figural clarity by Williams has met with varied critical responses.⁸² Writing in the exhibition catalogue and subsequent texts, Guy Brett described the juxtaposition of figurative and non-figurative modes as emblematising relationships between human culture and environment reflecting ecological concerns that informed the artist’s own theoretical framework, while recognising the broader constitutive role different Indigenous sources played in what he called the artist’s ‘world aesthetic’. He still questioned whether Williams entirely overcame problems arising from modern engagements with ancient sources particularly, and wondered if they were ultimately ‘illustrative and extraneous’ to the substantial core of his painting that he considered most powerfully expressed through abstraction.⁸³ Reviews by Errol Lloyd reiterated similar concerns, but are especially notable for linking Williams’s and Harris’s work before the latter’s turn to the *Olmec–Maya* series and via their mutual resort to Indigenous histories catalysed by formative experiences in the Guyanese interior.⁸⁴

Such problematics and potentialities anticipate Mercer’s characterisation of Williams’s painting as operating precisely in terms of such dialectical relationships and their disruption of Western abstraction’s disinterested purity with questions of

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identity and context, which distinguish it as a diasporic practice.⁸⁵ Leon Wainwright’s reconsideration of the *Olmec–Maya* series attempts to reconcile figurative and non-figurative relations along related lines connectable to other strands of the artist’s production. The foregrounding of recognisable signs of pre-Columbian America is similarly framed as disrupting the fetishised purity of modernist abstraction and Western perspectival and representative regimes. Wainwright links this reorientation towards non-European sources to anti-imperialist or decolonial agendas sympathetic to critiques of environmental exploitation under capitalism. These associations resonate with themes of revolutionary fire and dramatic transformation evoked by elemental aspects of the Mesoamerican series and other works, reflecting wider phenomenological and cosmogonic interests. A connected ontological dimension of the figurative–non-figurative juxtaposition is the implied temporal contrast between fragmentary or discontinuous moments in time and the continuous or eternal.⁸⁶

Multiple Framings

The general overviews these discussions present tend away from the more sustained consideration of specific figurative motifs that Harris’s focus on *Night and the Olmec’s* colossal head entertained. Accordingly, while the artist’s own general framing of the *Olmec–Maya* series has informed critical accounts, the

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individual catalogue notes, which Williams wrote for thirty six paintings, remain overlooked.⁸⁷ Alongside titles, these notes signal vital aspects of inspiration and content. Though potentially as cryptic as clarifying, in combination with the two contexts already described, the texts help unpick the enigmatic nature of individual works and the sources that were reimagined by them. They confirm the relevance of Harris’s ideas about Williams’s colossal head motif yet support interpretative directions reconcilable with the above critical accounts and the artist’s theoretical framing. Before pursuing this multifaceted analysis with the four individual colossal head paintings, it is important to elucidate Williams’s general framing, particularly as it contained developments upon earlier critical texts relevant to his embracing Olmec subjects.

Three primary sources outline his critical framework:

Williams’s brief statement in the *The Olmec Maya and Now* exhibition catalogue;⁸⁸ a conversation between Williams and Guy Brett concluding the film *The Mark of the Hand*;⁸⁹ and the conversation with artist, curator and critic Rasheed Araeen published in *Third Text* in 1988.⁹⁰ Williams’s catalogue statement summarised his interests according to two key ideas: ‘I have been immersed in Pre-Colombian Art and Artifacts for more than half my life - primarily for their intrinsic aesthetic values and, growing with time, its warning’.⁹¹ This first interest in ‘intrinsic aesthetic values’ encapsulates the artist’s

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longstanding inquisitive and celebratory incorporation of Indigenous America's artistic and philosophical traditions into his paintings. As highlighted above, this began with foundational experiences in Guyana and expanded into wider horizons, including Mesoamerica, which he conceived as genealogically linked. Where his 1970 text outlining this bridge referred only to the Maya, Williams now spoke of the 'Maya Civilization' developing from 'the fantastic benefits inherited from the Olmec',⁹² incorporating the latter in terms of their 'mother culture' and 'civilisational' associations. The second aspect or 'warning' related to the idea of the Maya having suffered a sudden and catastrophic decline marking the end of the Classic period (ca. CE 900). This decline is typically referred to as the Maya collapse or Classic collapse, although today is usually understood in terms of more nuanced conceptions of protracted and diffused phases of cultural transformation and reordering in relation to both human and environmental circumstances than these names imply.⁹³ Williams cast the events in relatively dramatic and absolute terms, reflecting his sense that their apparent suddenness and scale were under explored scientifically and their premonitory relevance ignored by a wider public:

these people [the Classic Maya] vanished in a very short space of time leaving only tarnished artefacts due, I feel, to

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their inability to cope with their technology and the changes their achievements engendered within the metabolism of their living environment and ecology; exactly the position we find ourselves in today.⁹⁴

Elaborating further to Brett and Araeen, Williams identified this feeling of irredeemable failure to keep up with technology, which he saw manifested through ozone depletion, environmental pollution, deforestation, species loss and global pandemics, as the essence of the ‘modern human predicament’ and the source of ‘anxiety’ informing his work.⁹⁵ He described this anxiety as growing over time.⁹⁶ Williams’s texts from the late 1960s period referenced above certainly contain nascent forms of these concerns, including with reference to the Maya collapse.⁹⁷ Both his agricultural training and understanding of the exploitative realities of colonial capitalism informed this sensitivity, though its growth also maps onto broader post-war developments of environmentalism and forms of planetary consciousness that gained increasing momentum from the 1960s, having been earlier catalysed by the explosion of the first atomic bombs.⁹⁸ Considered alongside this dual framing, the Olmec elements appear most compatible with its aesthetic dimension, particularly since Williams termed his environmentalist evocation of past-present apocalyptic equivalence ‘the Maya metaphor’.⁹⁹ Examining the colossal

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head paintings demonstrates connections between Williams’s Olmec and contemporary postmodern anxieties, as Harris’s Whitechapel lecture had suggested.

Chato Presence: Introducing the Olmec Colossal Head Motif

Three of the colossal head motif paintings that I examine belong to the overtly figurative category of works within the series: *Chato Presence*, the already described *Night and the Olmec*, and *Chato III* (*plate 2*, *plate 1* and *plate 3*). The fourth painting discussed, *Hymn to the Sun IV*, belongs to the more abstract tendency (*plate 4*). The analysis sequence follows the catalogue listing order, which corresponds to their production dates, 1982, 1983, 1984 and 1984 respectively, and thereby shows the progressive developments of the motif.¹⁰⁰

Chato Presence typifies the works constructed around recognisable figurative elements, as its size and landscape proportions do the series. The Olmec head, or rather a cropped view of one cut between the brow and upper lip, stands as the picture’s focal point, staring out from the lower lefthand quarter. Like *Night and the Olmec*, this facial section is rendered with an expressive realism, with a mottled surface of grey, hints of ochre and brown, and dark shadows dramatically emphasising the carved lines of its prominent features; white and pink highlights picking up the canvas texture evoke the weathered stone. The head is framed by a loosely outlined black rectangular box,

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echoing the overall dimensions. The contents of this picture within a picture appears based upon La Venta Monument 1, although since little is known about each head’s original subject, I attach minimal importance to the specific choice in these terms.¹⁰¹ A key illustration for Wuthenau and Van Sertima, the head also featured on Walmsley’s postcard to Salkey, which elicited Williams’s ‘ancestor’ comment, and in Williams’s earlier 1970 sketch, which seemingly served a preparatory function for *Chato Presence*. In the latter work, the fact that the head occupies the left side of its frame, the treatment of the brow and nose, and the lack of definition of the top lip, all replicate features of the sketch.

The boxed-in face is surrounded by eleven smaller similarly outlined trapezoid shapes - four above, three below and two either side. The ensemble recalls stylised sun motifs in other paintings by Williams.¹⁰² The frontality of the Olmec head is opposed by the contrasting profiles of three smaller orbiting heads: one in the upper left above the top left corner of the sun container looking across the canvas; two further adjacent heads are placed lower down on the opposite side, from where they gaze back along an eyeline shared with the colossal head. The characteristic facial outlines and adornments of these three smaller heads replicate Classic era Maya carvings and paintings, particularly late-Classic designs of the type found at sites such as Yaxchilan, Bonampak and Palenque in the southern Mexican

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state of Chiapas.¹⁰³ These static figurative elements hover over a dynamic non-figurative background of vibrantly coloured washes and mottling, in which a blaze of red, orange, yellow and white surges upwards from the lower central portions like a fiery stream of hot lava, meeting contrasting swathes of dark green, blue and turquoise that evoke the damp cool of cave and forest.

The catalogue entry, which Williams wrote for *Chato Presence*, provides invaluable insight into its conception: ‘The Chatto [sic] (Colossal Stone Olmec Head) is looking in on a ritual through an aperture in a temple.’¹⁰⁴ The composition then was conceived as an animate illustration of an active Mayan ritual space into which the living Olmec head looks, mirroring the audience’s gaze into the pictorial space, though also peering out of the canvas architecture into their domain. The confirmation that the titular ‘Chato’ refers to the Olmec colossal head underlines the sculpture’s centrality within the scene, though raises questions concerning its meaning, since it is not a common archaeological label. In Spanish, ‘chato’ means ‘flat’ or ‘snub nosed’, and as this section develops, the connotations of this label are important signals for building a picture of the motif’s complexity.¹⁰⁵ The centrality of the head vis-à-vis the Mayan elements highlights the Olmec’s archetypal role within Mesoamerica’s ‘civilisational’ horizon. The containing device’s solar associations reinforce this originary sense, which contrasts

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with the Mayan profiles’ connection with culture collapse, of which the *late*-Classic date is further indicative. Therefore the portal, which the painting opens between Olmec and Mayan epochs, combines ideas of cultural lineage and environmental anxiety consistent with both aspects of Williams’s framing. Regarding the latter, the Olmec presence might occupy a judgmental position, peering in on the ritual activities of their legacy’s doomed inheritors. Considering also the specified spatial dynamics, this ethical gaze falls not only on the Maya in the picture, but upon the contemporary space of the viewer outside, reinforcing those equivalences Williams drew between past and present catastrophes.

The cultural lineage which the Olmec originates has additional significance because of the ‘bridge’ that Williams, like Harris, conceived as uniting the Indigenous worlds of Mesoamerica and Guyana, to which he linked his own practice through his early Warao grounding. As described above, the artist saw such aesthetic lines and the worldviews they reflected as a rich potential for Caribbean artists working in the decolonial context, an idea based naturally on their originating independently from and preceding European ‘civilisational’ influence under colonialism. As he told Araeen, erasing the latter was his lifelong project.¹⁰⁶

Williams’s engagement with this pre-Columbian lineage from his postcolonial position was also entangled with those

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questions of post-Columbian transformation, which Harris raised when discussing *Night and the Olmec’s* recollecting the theories of Van Sertima and others. Williams signalled his interest in mobilising these cross-cultural associations precisely by his choosing ‘chato’ as referent for the colossal head. This seems to be an allusion to the heads’ relatively broad flattened noses, one of the key characteristic features underlying their misportrayal as African subjects since Melgar. This Spanish usage recalls the modern Mexican context where these theories developed, although as I clarify in the examination of *Chato III*, there was a further literary source behind Williams adopting the term. Nevertheless, the speculative tradition initiated by Melgar and the racially essentialist discourse informing it is inevitably rekindled through the label’s reiteration of the Olmec head’s ‘flatness’. This is intensified by its opposing the pointed angularity of the Mayan profiles, a combination of front and side viewpoints recalling ‘type’ photography in colonial anthropology as a subtle indictment of imperialist visualities.¹⁰⁷

The African ‘presence’ in the Americas that Williams evokes is less likely just the straightforward pre-Columbian kind proposed by Van Sertima. Rather it embodies the complex post-Columbian subject envisioned by Harris, in whom actively obtain cultural memory and experience shaped through the colonial epoch. This grand consciousness encompasses the traumatic passages of slavery, but also lineages of resistance and

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struggle that produced emancipation and later political independence. The catalogue’s slippages between spellings of the Spanish ‘chato’ with single and double ‘t’ might be understood as evoking the English word ‘chattel’, i.e property, in order to associate the objectifying horror of human subjects as commodities with the motif. Such connections are reinforced by ‘chattel’ and related terms such as ‘capital’ sharing an etymological root in the Latin word ‘caput’, i.e. ‘head’.¹⁰⁸ Williams reiterated the significance of past enslavement within his historical consciousness in writing and interview, and directly addressed themes of African agency within this context in the 1960 painting *Revolt*.¹⁰⁹ The colossal heads’ power associations might be reconfigured around these mnemonics to reimagine the motif as a sign of decolonial agential assertion, even Black Power. Considered alongside the critique of colonial ethnographic visibility, this reclaiming of agency also functions mimetically, encompassing notions of control over self-representation through artistic practices as essential to postcolonial freedom. As Mercer suggests these poetically introduced African aspects do not erase original Indigenous identities but stand alongside. They acknowledge collective experiences of catastrophic loss and trauma, survival and transformation through Guyana’s history from genocidal foundations.¹¹⁰ The idea of multiculturalism encompassed here equally accommodates other key historical junctures, including

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indentureship, which have further shaped Guyana’s historical diversity. Williams’s identification with the colossal head as ‘ancestor’ carries profound meaning in this respect, particularly considering his emphasis upon the multiple aspects of his own background. *Chato Presence* activates the Olmec head motif as memorial to this complex inheritance. Thinking in terms of Mercer’s framing as a development of Harris, as well as related discussions of Caribbean identities by Denise Noble, the sun-head-portal seems concerned both with looking back towards the mourned for ‘unknowable ancestor’, but also with widening historical perspectives to overcome the repression and severance of original identities under colonialism.¹¹¹ These functions are consistent with Williams’s broader description of his paintings as forms of monument.¹¹²

Night and the Olmec

Williams transferred similar structural concepts into *Night and the Olmec*. The work, which so fascinated Harris, represents a second attempt to configure the same components, although with a greater dynamism. Like *Chato Presence* the motif is based on La Venta Monument 1, yet its full rather than cropped appearance assists portrayal of its more vivid emotional complexity, which more closely reflects the 1970 sketch, as its adapted shape resembles the 1975 drawing, particularly its angular jawline. The rendering therefore combines ideas from

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both preparatory works. It is also balanced by a smaller Mayan element in the form of a singular late-Classic profile in the upper right staring back across the canvas, the glimmer of a hand under its chin. This matches the furthest right example in *Chato Presence*, although here its forms are elegantly illuminated by a thin cyan outline, mirroring the colossal head’s colour regime, with scumbled emphasis along the nose and forehead signalling a compositional line leading diagonally back down towards the Olmec’s brow. A vermilion filling adds solidity to the six beaded necklace and adjacent fixings, along with thin strips on the earplug and headband partly constituting the adornments. The weight of these details is balanced by a red quadrilateral box with angular corner projections containing a smaller yellow triangle, which sits between the two primary motifs. It recalls typical hieroglyphic symbols of Mesoamerica’s interconnected graphic systems. Fragmented echoes of these forms flash and dissolve into gaseous veils of colour over the abyssal background.

The catalogue note describes the painting as ‘A colossal Basalt Olmec head set in a surrealistic environment of mixed symbols.’¹¹³ Despite lacking the loaded details of the description of *Chato Presence*, the repeated structural contrast between Olmec and Maya components reestablishes a similar nexus of signification, although formal adjustments invite interpretive variations. Emphasising the sculpture’s geological makeup

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recalls its volcanic origins and the deep time preceding the emergence of human cultures and their progression towards 'civilisation', which the carved stone generally emblematises. This theme of emergence, ubiquitous in Williams's oeuvre, and the schematisation of cultural sequences out of prehistory, accord perfectly with the reestablishment of the genealogical relation between the figurative Olmec and Maya elements and the non-figurative cosmic ground. The colossal head's full appearance as the solid dominating pictorial presence enforces its status as an image of military and spiritual power associated with the hierarchical control of ceremonial, economic and agricultural cycles, as well as warfare, which underpinned its production and monumentality.¹¹⁴ The hieroglyphic symbol foregrounds connected questions of writing, not just relating to its role defining Mesoamerican and other 'civilisational' categorisations, but also as an epistemic and aesthetic technology synonymous with the historical exercise of imperial power and domination.¹¹⁵ The more ethereal Maya profile restamps finitude upon these imaginary regimes.

Considering those past-present cataclysmic equivalences that Williams perceived in these presences, this meditation upon the waxing and waning of ancient rulership and authority potentially extends into the political upheavals witnessed in Guyana during his lifetime, from British colony, to independence and the slide into dictatorship. The mournful emotionality of the

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Olmec head is interpretable here less as sympathy for power and more as an existential reflection on the position of individuals facing overwhelming events. Following Harris’s notion of the monument as a conduit for different voices, this mourning also consists in recognising those multiple ancestral presences embodied by the head and their collective histories of colonial trauma. The dissolution of the Mayan architectural fantasy structuring *Chato Presence* into the ‘surrealistic environment’ of *Night and the Olmec’s* background conjures a visionary dreamscape of forest, river, cataract, cave and mountain, evoking those shared historical geographies, through which Williams linked the pre- and post-Columbian worlds of Mesoamerica, the Caribbean and Amazonia. This psychological channel back to the quasi-mythological ‘hinterland’ or ‘bush’, which carries ideas of original Amerindian presence, points to its essential role within Williams’s artistic formation and the broader Guyanese imaginary.¹¹⁶ The label ‘surrealism’ is significant here as representing a quality Williams associated with the Indigenous imagination from his time with the Warao, as is his describing this regional topography as ‘naturally “abstract”’ in comparison with overly ‘ordered’ environments elsewhere.¹¹⁷

Yet while the Olmec head stands as an icon to non-Western human-landscape interrelations, the ideas of African presence and vision associated with the motif, specifically connected to

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histories of enslavement, also imply reading the abstract environment in terms of later colonial spatial dynamics, in which the forest represented a space of freedom opposed to the plantation's imprisoning order. Here the Olmec head becomes the 'ancestor' figure of the escaped Maroon, that pan-American symbol of African resistance, autonomy and sovereignty against the violence of racist European imperialism.¹¹⁸ The animate quality and sense of existing in and through time, which Williams implies through the motif's vivid emotional aura, again resonate with Noble's discussions of historical consciousness. That such ancestries of originality, survival and resistance have continued as living resources within formations of modern Caribbean identities and the 'ongoing processes of change and becoming' through which they have been constituted since colonialism and beyond.¹¹⁹

Chato III

Williams's exploitation of the Olmec head's existential potential culminates with *Chato III*. The smaller squarer dimensions, structural arrangement, colouration and source monument of this painting departs significantly from previous works. The colossal head now appears towards the righthand side as lone subject without Mayan profiles and dominating a much larger proportion of the frame. It floats over a characteristically dappled background of ochre tones interspersed with areas of

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white, grey-green, red and orange, although rather than appearing front on, it is turned to its right side towards the three quarter view showing the head adornment’s side strap and earplug projecting forward. This in the round presentation increases the sense of weight and pictorial depth.

The head is based on Monument 1 from San Lorenzo, one of ten heads from the Vera Cruz site.¹²⁰ Like the La Venta example, it was also first professionally excavated by Matthew Stirling, although slightly later in 1946, but is similarly known for its good preservation and imposing dimensions, measuring around 2.84 m in height and 1.98 m in width, making it one of the heaviest (*plate 9*).¹²¹ The illustrative source is the cover of novelist David Westheimer’s 1974 archaeological adventure caper *The Olmec Head* (*plate 10*), where the statue is nicknamed ‘Chato’, or ‘Flat Nose’, undoubtedly the origin for Williams’s use of the term.¹²² The motif is rendered after this photo with the same expressive naturalism as earlier paintings, with similar techniques conveying surface, weight and age. Once more, Williams invested it with obvious emotional animation, although the primary mood signifies anxiety rather than melancholy. The suitability of the sculpture’s appearance in the source photo for conveying an anxious disposition might explain the use of this image.

The straightforward catalogue note ‘Colossal Mayan head, usually of primal basalt’ scarcely betrays the complex layers of

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association evoked by the combination of expressivity, motif and title.¹²³ While the ideas of Indigenous origins (Mesoamerican and Guyanese), which the head memorialises, remain active, the nervous psychological aspect directs interpretation towards threats of modern catastrophe, which Williams identified as the core anxiety informing his later work. The abstract white area alongside the head, between chin and eyeline, suggests the distinctive shape of a mushroom cloud, just as the highlights marking both eyes and helmet may recall the reflection of a distant explosion. Rather than directly engaging the viewer as before, the head gazes clairvoyantly beyond us into futures unseen.

Yet the title ‘Chato’ retains those histories of colonial cross-culturality that were the foundation of the artist’s identity and practice, as does the possibility of reading the abstract white form (alongside the head) as a cartographic glimmer of continental Africa. Considering the personal identification that Williams maintained with the motif, it is tempting to understand the complex synthesis of associations that *Chato III* unites in a single sculptural image as a portrait of the multifarious anxieties he described to Araeen as distinguishing postcolonial artistic subjectivities:

The human predicament in the postcolonial environment is so profound that it is a double negative. One can feel a

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private tragedy of being manacled, and still with a bandage around your mouth. And outside oneself there is this whole colossal problem of social and ecological nature. In this respect I think the postcolonial artist is the true artist of the world.¹²⁴

If, as Beatriz de la Fuente suggests, Olmec colossal sculpture is essentially concerned with fundamental human questions of origin and destiny, *Chato III* recasts this in a postcolonial mould.¹²⁵ The colossal head’s centrality portrays not only the artist’s ‘tragic excitement’, but also the shared ‘double negative’.¹²⁶ Williams’s conception of the postcolonial artist as the true global creator resonates with Harris’s discussions of the motif in connection with the emergence of new forms of universality out of American colonial cosmopolitanism.¹²⁷ This complex of associations underpins *Chato III*’s dramatic foregrounding at the start of Bakari’s *The Mark of the Hand*. The camera slowly pans out from a closeup of the painting’s face to reveal the artist working at his desk in front of it, just as the stirring opening of Shostakovich’s eighth symphony fades and Williams begins speaking.

Hymn to the Sun IV

Williams’s colossal head variations take a final enigmatic turn with *Hymn to the Sun IV*. Evoking the primal forces and

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elemental phenomena celebrated by its title, this highly abstract work appears devoid of recognisable figuration. Like many paintings carrying the *Hymn to the Sun* name, it appears to exemplify the non-figurative compositions within the series. Towards the top a dense midnight blue ground is broken by clouds of lighter blue; yellow gas rises from a red and purple curvilinear mass visible in the central lower section through a shimmering net of white and yellow highlights. This mysterious form suggests an underwater shell, coral or vent but is actually a concealed cutaway section of the lower portion of an Olmec colossal head.¹²⁸ The dark upturned curved line in the centre marks the mouth. The mushroom of white and light yellow highlights underneath are the lower lip and chin. Around these the darker purple and red form with its speckled scumbled bottom of orange, maroon and light blue illustrates the wider lower jaw. This final motif version returns to La Venta Monument 1, the familiar source from *Chato Presence* and *Night and the Olmec*. Its modelling replicates both latter work and 1970 preparatory sketch.

Williams's catalogue note dissimulates this figuration behind an abstract description: 'A rendition of heat and light.'¹²⁹ This emphasis on elemental rather than cultural aspects aligns with the title of the painting itself. Both textual framings reflect a greater concentration upon processes of biogenesis and abiogenesis relative to the previous colossal head works. By

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focusing on the critical physical metamorphosis engulfing the motif, questions arise about if the transformation implies the final stage of disintegration or the first point of emergence. It remains indeterminate whether the painting imagines a literal collapse or burning up of this archetypal monument, its magical volcanic formation, or simply the appearance or evaporation of an illusory mirage, or how these connect to any context of human or extra-human causality.

Various ideas related to the previous three works might be assigned to this tantalising painterly rendering. These might include reflections around the Olmec’s own eclipse between BCE 400–BCE 100, which anticipated the Maya’s, alongside more modern apocalyptic threats, or the illusive nature of ancestral connection and memory in the colonial context.¹³⁰ However, such specifics dissolve into contemplation of the cosmic mysteries captured in the painting’s multifaceted and dialectical plays between creation and destruction, cultural and natural form, figuration and non-figuration, legibility and illegibility, literalism and metaphor, permanence and impermanence. The lack of eyes, whether through erasure or imminence, negates the previously activated viewer-self-consciousness, enabling unimpeded aesthetic absorption.

The ambiguous moment, which *Hymn to the Sun IV* captures, is far from being a complete departure from previous colossal head images. Rather it fills in natural stages in the cycle

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of becoming, being and oblivion, which is embodied by this mini-series. In this respect the Olmec head paintings variously reflect the essential thematics of Williams's works. The progressive appearance and disappearance of the colossal head motif recalls the movements of astrological bodies within cosmological cycles, and through this further connects with core Indigenous interests. In the pan-American mythological world the appearance of astrological bodies and other seemingly eternal aspects of the visible world, such as geological formations, is typically linked to magical actions and transformations of original mythical ancestors, including their ascendance into skies or mountaintops, exemplified in Mesoamerican creation accounts such as the Mayan Popol Vuh and equivalent Guyanese cycles.¹³¹ The solar associations Williams assigned to his archetypal Olmec motif through the sun container in *Chato Presence* are suggestive here. They also recall conceptions of the sun as the primordial ancestor in Guyanese accounts where, following his disappearance, he is sought by his children, the Makunaima, humanity's original ancestors. The passage from nature to eternity (and vice versa) described by *Hymn to the Sun IV* therefore captures the motif in a matrix of cross-cultural bridging, ancient genealogical connection and transcendence of everyday phenomena, which epitomises the radical vision of Williams's and Harris's shared decolonial poetics.

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Notes

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¹ Aubrey Williams, ‘Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Inquiry’, in *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams*, ed. Anne Walmsley, Sydney, Mundelstrup and Coventry, 1990, 28.

² Guy Brett and Aubrey Williams, *The Olmec-Maya and Now: New Work by Aubrey Williams*, Commonwealth Institute, London, 1985; Anne Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, in *Aubrey Williams*, eds. Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros and Maridowa Williams, London, 1998, 94 and 102.

³ Errol Lloyd, ‘Aubrey Williams: Myth and Symbol’, *Artrage*, 9: 10, 1985, 4–5.

⁴ Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, Liège, 1992, 67–116.

⁵ Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, 89–91.

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⁶ Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, 91. Harris’ use of ‘Negroid’ follows Van Sertima, see Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, New York, 1976, xvi–xviii.

⁷ Dempsey, Tawadros and Williams, *Aubrey Williams*.

⁸ Wilson Harris, ‘Aubrey Williams’, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 2: 1/2/3, 2000, 29–30.

⁹ Wilson Harris and Michael Mitchell, ‘The Mother of Space: a conversation for three voices’, unpublished manuscript, 2014. This was presented at *Now and Coming Time: A Symposium on Aubrey Williams, Painting and Writing in Guyana and the Caribbean*, University of Cambridge, April 2014.

¹⁰ For Williams’s early biography, see: Imruh Bakari, *The Mark of the Hand*, London, 1986; Rasheed Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, *Third Text*, 2, 1987/8, 29–30; Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 65–73; Anne Walmsley, *Transcript of Interview with Aubrey Williams for book Great West Indians*, 1972; and *Transcript of Interview with Aubrey Williams for book Great West Indians with corrections/additions by Aubrey Williams*, 1972.

¹¹ Independence occurred in 1966. The evolving struggle is documented in Cheddi Jagan, *The West on trial: my fight for Guyana’s freedom*, London, 1966.

¹² Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966-1972*, London and Port of Spain, 1992, 24–26; Andrew Bundy, ‘Introduction’, in Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, London and New York, 1999, 1–7, 16–19.

¹³ Aubrey Williams, ‘A Glimpse of Caribbean Art’, in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 13.

¹⁴ Walmsley, *Transcript of Interview with Aubrey Williams for book Great West Indians*, 4 and 6.

¹⁵ See for example *Death and the Conquistador* (1959).

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¹⁶ See for example *Hosororo III* (1957) or *Carib Mark* (1961).

¹⁷ See for example *Triptych* (1976) or *Cacique* (1984).

¹⁸ Bakari, *The Mark of the Hand*.

¹⁹ See for example *Inca VI* (1964) or *El Dorado* (1960). Donald Locke also refers to paintings titled *Maya*, *Atahualpa*, and *Chimu* in a 1966 article for *Kaie* journal, see Donald Locke, ‘Contemporary Guyanese Painters: Aubrey Williams’, in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 71–72.

²⁰ Lorraine Griffiths, ‘Bridging the Artistic Gap’, in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 93–94.

²¹ Robert J. Sharer and Loa P. Traxler, *The Ancient Maya, Sixth Edition*, Stanford, 2006, 51–53, 448–450, 562, 565, 575–578, 753–754, and Plates 10–15; and Robert J. Sharer, *The Ancient Maya, Fifth Edition*, Stanford, 1994, 392, 402, 654–655.

²² Gordon Brotherston, *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through their Literature*, Cambridge, 1992, 270–277.

²³ These 1970s series are linked to a period working in Jamaica from November 1973 to early 1974; Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 84–86; Claudia Hucke, *Picturing the Postcolonial Nation: (Inter) Nationalism in the Art of Jamaica, 1962–1975*, Kingston and Miami, 89–94.

²⁴ Williams referred to works owning ‘a great deal to pre-Columbian Indian artefacts—mainly Aztec, Toltec, Maya and Inca motifs—together with Guyanese pre-Columbian Indian visual Iconography’, see Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 84; see also Williams, ‘A Glimpse of Caribbean Art’, 13–14.

²⁵ Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 88.

²⁶ Aubrey Williams, ‘Dalhousie Murals’ in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 29.

²⁷ Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 92.

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²⁸ Kobena Mercer, ‘Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling’, in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer, London and Cambridge, 183, 187–192.

²⁹ Aubrey Williams, ‘The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean’ in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 15–20 and Williams, ‘Caribbean Visual Art’, 21–28; Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 80; and Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement*, 99–100.

³⁰ Williams, ‘Caribbean Visual Art’, 21–22.

³¹ Subsequent archaeological research suggests *timerhi* may be of Arawak origin and even earlier dates than Williams speculated (ca. 3000 BCE), see Denis Williams, *Prehistoric Guiana*, Kingston and Miami, 2003, 92–93, 153–161, 238–240, 301–302, 408–412.

³² Stephanie Harvie, ‘Appendix A Interview with Dr Denis Williams on 7th October 1991 at the Walter Roth Museum, Georgetown, Guyana’, and ‘Appendix B Interview with Stanley Greaves on Friday 4th October 1991 at Tait House, Georgetown, Guyana’, in *The Search for a Guyanese Identity: The Evolution of the Fine Arts in Guyana with Specific Reference to the Works of Aubrey Williams*, MPhil Thesis, University of Warwick, 1993, 175–179, 180–181; and Denis Williams, ‘Aubrey Williams in Guyana’, in Dempsey, Tawadros and Williams, *Aubrey Williams*, 44–45.

³³ Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, 77–78 and 82–87; Wilson Harris, ‘New Preface to Palace of the Peacock’, in Harris, *Selected Essay of Wilson Harris*, 53–54; Wilson Harris, *The Sleepers of Roraima: a Carib Trilogy*, London, 1970, 61–81.

³⁴ For discussion of such links, including the Warao, see Peter T. Furst, *West Mexico, the Caribbean and northern South America: [some problems in New World inter-relationships]*, Los Angeles, 1969, 2–7, 23–30; ‘Radiocarbon

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Dates from a Tomb in Mexico’, *Science*, 147, 1965, 612–613; and Williams, *Prehistoric Guiana*, 19–20, 28–32, 406–425.

³⁵ Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, *Reading the Maya Glyphs*, New York, 2001, 7; John Montgomery, *How to Read Maya Hieroglyphs*, New York, 2003, 21–33.

³⁶ Information on sources in this paragraph is based on Harvie, ‘Appendix C Interview with Maridowa Williams and Anne Walmsley in London on 23rd June 1991’ in *The Search for a Guyanese Identity*, 185–192, and my own conversations and correspondence with Maridowa Williams and Anne Walmsley.

³⁷ See <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-200112-1-5-9/williams-five-stylised-sketches-of-statues>.

³⁸ As noted above, Williams had named another series after these late Classic period murals and referenced them in ‘Caribbean Visual Art’. They had only been re-uncovered in 1946, and remained relatively unknown even in the 1960s. See James B. Lynch, Jr., ‘The Bonampak Murals’, *Art Journal*, 24: 1, 1964, 23–27; and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Murals of Bonampak*, Princeton and Guildford, 1986.

³⁹ Christopher A. Pool, *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica*, New York, 2007, 107.

⁴⁰ Stirling, *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Washington, 1943, 2–3, 48–60, and Plates 42–44; Matthew Stirling, ‘Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle’, *National Geographic*, 78: 3, September 1940, 309–334.

⁴¹ Michael D. Coe, *America’s First Civilization, Discovering the Olmec*, New York, 1968.

⁴² Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 1–11 and 93–105; Ignacio Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca, Segunda edición*, Mexico City, 1991 [1968], 17–26.

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⁴³ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 6–8; Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec, Revised edition*, London, 1996, 6; Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs*, London, 1992, 42 and 44.

⁴⁴ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 4–5; Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 13–15 and 42; Ángel Maria Garibay, ed, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España Escrita por Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, México, 1992, 34, 573, 608–614.

⁴⁵ Naturally, more nuanced ideas regarding the emergence and interrelationships between various Mesoamerican cultures have developed in recent decades, see Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 15–17; Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 46.

⁴⁶ Michael D. Coe, *Mexico*, London, 1962, 83–84.

⁴⁷ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 16; Miguel Covarrubias, ‘El Arte “Olmeca” O De La Venta’, *Cuadernos Americanos*, 28: 4, 1946, 177–178; and *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, New York, 1957, 50–54; Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 17 and 42–45, 163, 222–227, 231–233, 235–237, 240–243, 245–246, 250; Coe, *Mexico*, 84; Haydeé López Hernández, *En Busca del Alma Nacional, La arqueología y la construcción del origen de la historia nacional en México (1867–1942)*, Mexico City, 2018, 14–30, 98, 141, 151–152, 162, 200–211, 237, 280–304, 311–321, 327–328, 347–348.

⁴⁸ ‘un preludeo a la civilización’. My translation from Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 13–17 and 63, 66–67, 71–72, 178, 181–182, 188–189, 244–245, 248–249, 256; López Hernández, *En Busca del Alma Nacional*, 141–143, 228, 232, 238–243, 294–295, 318–321, 328.

⁴⁹ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 105–106.

⁵⁰ Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 73; Beatriz de la Fuente, ‘Cabezas Colosales Olmecas’, in *Obras, Tomo 3, El Arte Olmeca*, Mexico City, 2011, 193.

⁵¹ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 106 and 108–110.

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⁵² Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 106 and 117–118; Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 74–77, 117–118; Fuente, ‘Cabezas Colosales Olmecas’, 259–60.

⁵³ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 102, 121–124.

⁵⁴ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 103–104 and 108; Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 53–54, 69–71, 124–125, 130–136, 150, 153–154, 163, 248–251.

⁵⁵ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 102–103.

⁵⁶ Paul Westheim, *Escultura y cerámica del México antiguo*, Mexico City, 1985 [1980], 32–33.

⁵⁷ Fuente, ‘Cabezas Colosales Olmecas’, 193–194, 260–261.

⁵⁸ J.M. Melgar, ‘Antigüedades Mexicanos’, *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística*, 2, 1, 1869, 292–297; and ‘Estudio sobre la antigüedad y el origen de la cabeza colosal de tipo etiópico que existe en Hueyapán, del Canton de los Tuxtlas’, *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística*, 2, 3, 1871, 104–109; Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 40–41; Eric Taladoire, ‘Melgar, Fuzier y la cabeza olmeca de Hueyapan, Veracruz’, *Arqueología Mexicana*, 18: 104, 2010, 21–25; and Eric Taladoire and Jane MacLaren Walsh, ‘José María Melgar y Serrano ¿Viajero, coleccionista o saqueador?’, *Arqueología Mexicana*, 22: 129, 2014, 81–85.

⁵⁹ Stirling, *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, 16–17 and Plate 4.

⁶⁰ ‘lo que mas me impresionó fué el tipo etiópico que representa; reflexioné que indudablemente habia habido negros en este país, y esto habia sido en los primeros tiempos del mundo’. My translation from Melgar, ‘Antigüedades Mexicanos’, 292.

⁶¹ Taladoire, ‘Melgar, Fuzier y la cabeza olmeca de Hueyapan, Veracruz’, 24.

⁶² Melgar, ‘Antigüedades Mexicanos’, 292–297. For Melgar’s sources see Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, *Idea de una nueva historia general de la América Septentrional*, Madrid, 1746, 114–119; Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des Cordillères, et monumens des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique*,

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Paris, 1810, 72 and 148; Manuel Orozco y Berra, *Apéndice Al Diccionario Universal de Historia y de Geografía*, 1: 8, Mexico City, 1855, 730; Plato, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Oxford, 2008, 12-13.

⁶³ Melgar, ‘Estudio sobre la antigüedad’, 104–105.

⁶⁴ Manuel Orozco y Berra, *Historia antigua y de la conquest de México*, 1, Mexico City, 1880, 109–111.

⁶⁵ Leo Wiener, *Africa and the Discovery of America*, Vol.3, Philadelphia, 1922, 322.

⁶⁶ Alfonso Medellín Zenil, ‘Monolitos Inéditos Olmecas’, *La Palabra y el Hombre*, 16, 1960, 88; Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeca*, 33–36; Fuente, ‘Cabezas Colosales Olmecas’, 256, 259; López Hernández, *En Busca del Alma Nacional*, 48–49, 88–99, 110, 120–124, 177, 252.

⁶⁷ See Plate 15a and 15b in Alexander von Wuthenau, *Unexpected Faces in Ancient America, 1500 B.C.–A.D. 1500: the Historical Testimony of Pre-Columbian Artists*, New York, 1975. See also Wuthenau, *The Art of Terracotta Pottery in Pre-Columbian Central and South America*, New York, 1969, 123–131, which is a translation by Irene Nicholson and Wuthenau of the 1965 German edition.

⁶⁸ Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus*, 23–33, 263–270, Plates 27–30; Stirling, ‘Stone Monuments of the Río Chiquito, Veracruz, Mexico’, *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 157, Anthropological Papers, Nos 43–48*, Washington, 1955, 12–13 and Plates 12–13; Poole, *Olmec Archaeology*, 107.

⁶⁹ Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, Warren Barbour, ‘CA Forum on Anthropology in Public: Robbing Native American Cultures: Van Sertima’s Afrocentricity and Olmecs,’ *Current Anthropology*, 38: 3, 1997, 419–20, 422–428; and ‘They Were NOT Here before Columbus: Afrocentric Hyperdiffusionism in the 1990s’, *Ethnohistory*, 44: 2, 1997, 201–206, 215–

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217; Ronald W Davis, ‘They came before Columbus: the African presence in ancient America’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11: 1, 1978, 147–150; Glyn Daniel, ‘America B.C.’, *The New York Times*, 13 March 1977, 8 and 12.

⁷⁰ Abdias Do Nascimento, ‘Quilombismo: An Afro-Brazilian Political Alternative’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 11: 2, 1980, 143, 147–8, 178; bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Boston, 1989, 114–115.

⁷¹ Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement*, 24–26, 149, 158–159, 162, 170–172, 180.

⁷² Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 72; Jan Carew, *Black Midas, adapted for schools* by Sylvia Winter, London and Harlow, 1969.

⁷³ Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus*, ix, xiii–xv; and Ivan Van Sertima, ‘Tribute to a departed Scholar - Alexander von Wuthenau’, *African Civilizations*, 1995, 238–240.

⁷⁴ Jan Carew, ‘The Origin of Racism in the Americas’, in *Carifesta Forum: An Anthology of 20 Caribbean Voices*, ed. John Hearne, Kingston, 1976, 70–71.

⁷⁵ Walmsley, ‘Chronology’, 88.

⁷⁶ Andrew Salkey, *Letter to Anne Walmsley*, 25 April, 1974. See also Walmsley’s *Scrapbook* for Mexico 1973. Conversations with Maridowa Williams have also confirmed the close sense of self-identification that Williams felt with the Olmec head.

⁷⁷ Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 42–43. In 1972 he stated ‘my great grandmother on my mother’s side was a Carib - you can see it in my eyes, and in those of my daughter, Maridowa (which is a Carib name)’, although in 1986 he referred to ‘Arawak blood somewhere on his mother’s

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side’; Walmsley, *Transcript of Interview with Aubrey Williams for book Great West Indians*, 6; and Bakari, *The Mark of the Hand*.

⁷⁸ Ferdinand Anton, *Art of the Maya*, London, 1978 [1970], Plate 271.

⁷⁹ Michael Lind and Javier Urcid, *The Lords of Lambityeco: Political Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Xoo Phase*, Boulder, 2010, 107, 112–113, 149, 166, 190–3, 228.

⁸⁰ Walmsley, *Personal Communication*, 27 November 2017.

⁸¹ See for example the paintings *Sun Hieroglyph* (1983) and *Olmec Stasis* (1984).

⁸² Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 42.

⁸³ Guy Brett, ‘Aubrey Williams’, in Brett and Williams, *The Olmec-Maya & Now*; ‘A World Aesthetic’, and ‘The Art of Aubrey Williams’, in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 89–92, and 97–100; ‘A Tragic Excitement’, in Dempsey, Tawadros and Williams, *Aubrey Williams*, 31–32.

⁸⁴ Lloyd, ‘Aubrey Williams: Myth and Symbol’, 4–5; ‘The Olmec–Maya and Now’, *Race Today*, 16: 5, 1985, 26.

⁸⁵ Mercer, ‘Black Atlantic Abstraction’, 185.

⁸⁶ Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the transnational Caribbean*, Manchester, 2011, 29–33, 37, 39, 41–42; and *Phenomenal Difference, A Philosophy of Black British Art*, Liverpool, 2017, 77–81.

⁸⁷ The exceptions are *Olmec Stasis, Now & Coming Time I, II, and III*, see Aubrey Williams, ‘Exhibits’, in Brett and Williams, *The Olmec-Maya and Now*.

⁸⁸ Williams, ‘The Olmec-Maya and Now’, in Brett and Williams, *The Olmec-Maya and Now*.

⁸⁹ Bakari, *The Mark of the Hand*.

⁹⁰ Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 25–52.

⁹¹ Williams, ‘The Olmec-Maya and Now’.

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⁹² Williams, ‘The Olmec-Maya and Now’.

⁹³ Sharer and Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 499–587. For a consideration of the topic as an archaeological problem before the *Olmec–Maya* series, see T. Patrick Culbert, ed., *The Classic Maya collapse*, Albuquerque, 1973.

⁹⁴ Williams, ‘The Olmec-Maya and Now’.

⁹⁵ Bakari, *The Mark of the Hand*; Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 38–46, 50–52.

⁹⁶ Williams, ‘The Olmec Maya and Now’.

⁹⁷ Williams, ‘The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean’, 19; and ‘Caribbean Visual Art’, 22, 28.

⁹⁸ Gary Haq and Alistair Paul, *Environmentalism since 1945*, London and New York, 2012, 1–16.

⁹⁹ Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 43.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, ‘Exhibits’.

¹⁰¹ Pool, *Olmec Archaeology*, 107.

¹⁰² See the paintings *Cosmic Storm* (1977) and *Quartet No.8, Opus 10* (1980).

¹⁰³ Sharer and Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 431–470; Westheim, *Escultura y cerámica del México antiguo*, 152–153.

¹⁰⁴ The spelling discrepancies follow the catalogue, see Williams, ‘Exhibits’.

¹⁰⁵ *Collins Spanish Dictionary & Grammar*, 2004, 73. I would like to acknowledge and thank Maridowa Williams for initially suggesting this possibility.

¹⁰⁶ Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 52; Wainwright, *Timed Out*, 37, 51.

¹⁰⁷ Exemplary in the Guayana context is Theodor Koch-Grünberg, *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco, Ergebnisse einer Reise in Nordbrasilien und Venezuela in den Jahren 1911–1913, Fünfter Band: Typen-Atlas*, Stuttgart, 1923.

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- ¹⁰⁸ “chattel, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford, June 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/30963, accessed 23 August 2018; and Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford, 2002, 286–290.
- ¹⁰⁹ Williams, ‘Caribbean Visual Art’, 22–24; Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 43, 52; Wainwright, *Timed Out*, 25–29.
- ¹¹⁰ Mercer, ‘Black Atlantic Abstraction’, 185, 192–199, 202, 205; Kobena Mercer, ‘Aubrey Williams: Abstraction in Diaspora’, *British Art Studies*, 8, 2018, 6–9.
- ¹¹¹ Mercer, ‘Black Atlantic Abstraction’, 196; ‘Aubrey Williams’, 6–9; Denise Noble, *Decolonizing and Feminizing Freedom, A Caribbean Genealogy*, London, 2016, 77–78, 84, 90–92.
- ¹¹² Brett, ‘Aubrey Williams’.
- ¹¹³ Williams, ‘Exhibits’.
- ¹¹⁴ Bernal, *El Mundo Olmeco*, 125–127, 129–130, 135, 252, 255–256.
- ¹¹⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris, 1955, 354.
- ¹¹⁶ Harvie, ‘Appendix A Interview with Dr Denis Williams’, 169–171.
- ¹¹⁷ Walmsley, *Transcript of Interview with Aubrey Williams for book Great West Indians*, 4; Williams, ‘The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean’, 19.
- ¹¹⁸ Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas*, Kingston, 2, 36 109–110.
- ¹¹⁹ Noble, *Decolonizing and Feminizing Freedom*, 64–66, 84–85.
- ¹²⁰ Poole, *Olmec Archaeology*, 107.
- ¹²¹ Stirling, ‘Stone Monuments of the Río Chiquito, Veracruz, Mexico’, 5–6, 9–10; and Matthew Stirling, ‘On the trail of La Venta man’, *National Geographic*, 91: 2, 1947, 137–172.
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- ¹²³ Williams, ‘Exhibits’.

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¹²⁴ Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 40, 44.

¹²⁵ Beatriz de la Fuente, ‘Arte monumental olmeca’, in *Los olmecas en Mesoamérica*, ed. John E. Clark, México, 1994, 215.

¹²⁶ Araeen, ‘Conversation with Aubrey Williams’, 46.

¹²⁷ That is in the 1990 lecture series discussed in the introduction.

¹²⁸ I would like to acknowledge and thank Gerard Houghton of October Gallery for identifying and sharing this insight in his paper ‘Painting and environment in the work of Aubrey Williams’ at the aforementioned *Now and Coming Time* symposium.

¹²⁹ Williams, ‘Exhibits’.

¹³⁰ Bernal *El Mundo Olmeco*, 157–158, 162.

¹³¹ Dennis Tedlock, ed, *Popol Vuh, The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life, Revised Edition*, New York, 1996, 141–142. P. Cesáreo de Armellada, *Tauron Panton, Cuentos y Leyendas de los Pemon*, Quito, 1989, 27–34, 41–43; Johannes Wilbert, *Folk Literature of the Warao Indians*, Los Angeles, 1970, 216–219, 229–230; Walter Roth, *An Inquiry into the Animism and Folk-lore of the Guiana Indians*, Washington, 1915, 130–136.