

NOTIONS OF MYTH, GESTURES OF MASQUERADE: THEATRE OF MEMORY IN
DEREK WALCOTT'S OMEROS AND TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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It may seem inevitable or convenient to submit to one frame or name but, in so doing, cultures begin to imprison themselves, involuntarily perhaps, in conquistadorial formula that kills alternatives, kills memory. Not only were Africans who came through the Middle Passage deprived of their names by slave-masters but in the twentieth century Arawaks and Macusis and Warraus and others have begun to adopt English or Portugese or French or Spanish names and to suppress their native place names or animal names...There may be no harm in such adoption provided an inner/outer masquerade or Carnival lives in the imagination and is susceptible to many worlds, to parallel universes of sensibility, in Memory theatre. And what is Memory theatre but an acceptance of amnesiac fate that diminutive survivors begin to unravel. . . .? (Wilson Harris, "Letter From Francisco Bone to W. H." 51-52)

With this observation, the character of Francisco Bone addresses the disconcerting epiphany that he 'suffered from a void of memory' that requires a re-tracing of "one's steps into a labyrinth of deprivations and apparent losses" in order to rupture positively the paralysis of this void (Harris, "Letter From Francisco Bone to W. H." 50). The notion of Memory theatre as an acceptance and unraveling of amnesiac fate by its survivors resonates ostensibly in the cultural practice of masquerade and, as I hope to suggest with this discussion, vestiges of myth. Wilson Harris's discussion of mythic traces in literary works indicates that these elements possess a significant kinship with carnival features. Myth and masquerade form a peculiar rapport within Memory theatre that may be observed through particular images or motifs that are to be found in these works. The images that I have selected for this discussion are derived from / gesture toward the Greek myth of Icarus, the Amerindian fable of the bush-baby and the legendary figure of Anancy out of the Afro-descendant imagination. These myths highlight, in Harris's perspective, regenerative possibilities that are tied to or occur amidst profound loss. The aim of this discussion therefore, will be to highlight the elements of myth and features of masquerade present in Omeros and Beloved which support these narratives' shared thematic focus on a regenerative recovery of a historical void.

The significance of myth as a traditional or legendary tale suggests an obscure relationship to the past that exists outside of a historical reality but which nonetheless bears on a dynamic understanding of ancestral behaviour. Myth can most loosely be defined as a narrative construct characterized by the involvement of gods or godlike behaviour amidst human activity in a manner that tends to address the constant as well as puzzling features of humanity. Myth, therefore, entertains a concern with the nature of instinctual behaviour, with inner motivations that are rooted in a collective fate that may appear perplexing or distressing because it participates in "an otherness akin to the terrifying and protean reality of the gods" (Harris, "The Phenomenal Legacy" 47).

In Harris's perspective, myth serves as an imaginative correlative to history because it is able to puncture the shortsightedness that accompanies an absolutising tendency within historical convention:

What is controversial and difficult to establish is the reality of vision, as the imaginative writer or artist occupies a reflected object, not as an absolute formula, costume or investiture around each living moment of time but as a doorway into apparently eclipsed proportions one needs to unravel, in some degree, if the living body of the present is to be capable of some measure of detachment from the past as well as relatedness to the past. ("Reflection and Vision" 83)

Part of myth's capacity to penetrate the burden of an absolute vision is its gesture toward an awareness of community, specifically an awareness of a communal desire or demand for regeneration. Harris points to a relationship between catastrophe and change in which large-scale calamity may be apprehended through the imagination as a signal of redemptive transformation within a beleaguered community. Myth acts, within this relationship, as a subtle articulation of a communal response to a profoundly traumatic event. In his essay, "Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination," I believe that he alludes to this connection when he states that his discussion: "touches upon certain aspects of myth and also upon the way catastrophe accompanies, or is associated with, genuine change" (97). He observes that: "[i]t is as if because of the debasement of the psyche over generations and centuries there can be no bypassing some degree of catastrophe as one experiences the regenerative potential of the muse" (97). Myth as an expression of, or reaction to, a trauma that persists through generations in the form of a life-giving resource finds resonance with the limbo feature of Caribbean masquerade.

Masquerade and myth demonstrate connections that are rooted in the imaginative syntax of the folk through cross-cultural motifs or what Harris refers to as, variables of the imagination. The limbo feature of West Indian masquerade, for example, assumes a meaningful rapport with Amerindian or pre-Columbian expressions, with "shamanistic and rain-making vestiges and the dancing bush-baby legends" ("History, Fable and Myth" 158) that also stand, necessarily, in significant relation to the "spider syndrome and the phantom limb of the gods arising in Negro fable and legend" (159). This articulation of re-assembly or renewal is identified in Harris's critical discussion as a significant motif of the womb of space and it is these motifs that "are converted by inner necessity – intuitive necessity – into original variables" (The Womb of Space 50) such as the phantom limb of the gods. The womb of space, Harris's metaphor for the cross-cultural imagination, addresses particular concerns or themes within the human psychic experience that become part of imaginative expression in the form of core images or figures. The transformation of these concerns into original variables – into these central images – is produced by a communal activity that necessarily carries the shape of its cultural content and as a result varies from community to community, from culture to culture.

The notion of intuitive necessity speaks to the deep-seated nature of a collectively psychic response to a moment of crisis or self-discovery. Harris observes that the Amerindian, the Negro in the Caribbean, "the Indian from India, Chinese, Portugese, etc., all . . . have become *original* participants in limbo and Carnival" ("The Amerindian Legacy" 167; emphasis mine). The original feature, I would suggest, stems from the idiosyncratic stamp of inner motivations, inner resources, elicited on the part of each collective participation in diverse stages of conquest. The significance of limbo, therefore, not only incorporates the Catholic threshold of purgatory but also, for example, the inner resource of African *lembe*: "which is the opening of the gate of water into a new experience" (Three Caribbean Poets 22) thereby providing further emphasis to Harris's perspective that limbo can be seen as a "new corpus of sensibility" that *translates* "African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures" ("History, Fable and Myth" 158).

The "Carnival life of the West Indies" ("History, Fable and Myth" 156) enacts within its spectacle significant gestures of renaissance in which the limbo dance, as a signature feature of this cultural expression, offers a "novel re-assembly out of the stigmata of the Middle Passage" (158). The limbo dance articulates, in Harris's perspective, the re-assembly of dismembered man or god through the metaphor of the phantom limb. The phantom limb represents both a psychic remnant of destruction and the process of reconciliation or rebirth that proceeds from that fragment of memory. The remarkable notion of the phantom limb as a source of renaissance in view of its affirmation of traumatic loss is illustrated in Harris's cross-cultural approach to diverse divine figures threaded with calamitous circumstances.

Specifically, Harris considers the treatment of “Egyptian Osiris, the resurrected Christ, and the many-armed deity of India” (158) in a relationship of partiality: each figure can be read (and transformed) in light of the behaviour of the others to reveal “a tapestry of unsuspected connections and linkages” (“Judgement and Dream” 20). Consequently, the feature of re-assembly in mythic Osiris resonates with the possibility of re-birth in the Christ figure in order to reveal a seed of re-dress within the phenomenon of destruction signaled by Kali’s presence:

One thing you see is that the many-armed Indian god may stand in relationship to the compensation of tragedies that occurred in India which we have forgotten and these people – to compensate for that – had to re-assemble a certain kind of figure just as limbo re-assembles . . . the dismembered god, Osiris. (Caribbean and Third World Imaginations 23)

The phantom limb can therefore be seen as a variable of a cross-cultural imagination in which it resists the frame of absolute tragedy and suggests a compensatory approach to a deep-seated amnesia as a possibility for redemptive recovery.

Limbo’s expression of the phantom limb occurs as part of the masquerade activity that is significant to the carnival life of the West Indies. The notion of carnival as a celebratory commemoration is played out in a meaningful investiture in the wearing of masks and costumes. The elements of spectacle and role-playing that characterize masquerading become a facilitation of carnival’s “license to assume identities, as cathartic regenerative force and as ritual of possession” (Creighton 78). In his lecture, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” Derek Walcott uses the metaphor of a village festival in order to discuss the resilience and the redemptive quality of the Antillean imagination. The festival assumes the features of an open-air theatre with the participation of costumed actors alongside the bamboo armatures of its deities. The investment in role-playing, in this context, assumes the appearance and significance of ritual possession where, through the process of the masquerade, the actors take on the identities represented by their costume. With this action, the participants become involved in a re-enactment of ancestral behaviour that has survived, outside of a historical void, as a psychic trace. This inner remnant is transformed by, as well as transforms, its active hosts into living memory. Consequently, dynamic access to an obscure yet vital past is created out of an imaginative response to those fragments produced by diverse stages of conquest.

The assembled armature functions as a literal as well as figurative carnival skeleton in that the bamboo frame of the festival deities presents a skeletal gateway or cross-cultural threshold activated by a communal re-memberment of the past. The metaphor of the Carnival skeleton expresses the renewal and recreation of obscured or broken gods, which shares in the myth’s role as the narrative devoted to the gods, to highlight a collective inner necessity for a ‘masque-series’¹ of memory:

Repetition and amnesia are with Harris the marks of a conquistadorial legacy, and this word “conquistadorial” assumes a new meaning in his lexicon, referring to a frame of mind that, though originally characteristic of the colonial West, has been appropriated by those it has conquered. It is this conquistadorial legacy that creates the palimpsest of disappearance and loss of memory on which repetition is built: “Amnesiac fate . . . haunts the South and Central and North Americas across many generations overshadowed by implicit Conquest.” To counteract the destructive effects of the

¹ The term ‘masque-series’ implies a series of masquerades – theatrical displays of masking and unmasking. This serial activity, as distinct from simple repetition, suggests a pattern of progression toward a crucial insight consistent with Harris’s concern, indicated by Bundy, with the need to “reach and rescue the hidden *traditions* of the imagination that fall under the harrow, that are in distress” (Selected Essays of Wilson Harris 138).

conquistadorial paradigm, Harris imagines carnivals or dramas of life.
(Camboni 12-13)

One of the destructive effects of conquistadorial paradigms is a tendency toward historical shortsightedness concerning the far-reaching relevance of the folk imagination in apprehending the past. This blindspot acts, albeit unwittingly, in tandem with conquistadorial habit to produce “a uniform consolidation of so-called historical features, through an account of deeds whose motivation or mind we have not penetrated [that] leads inevitably to vulgarization or tyranny” (Harris, “The Phenomenal Legacy” 44). These particular marks of conquistadorial legacy – repetition and amnesia – are directly addressed by the creative re-enactment fulfilled by carnivalesque masquerade and the form of collective, ancestral memory offered by myth.

The nature of carnival, which provides the context for masquerade activity, carries a deep-seated connection to the progress and character of conquest (colonialism/ slavery/ displacement) within the Caribbean and the Americas: “Carnival, in its most subversive and regenerative essence, gained new ground within South America, Central America, and Caribbean cultures that suffered abysmally at the hand of the conquistadores who came into the Americas on the heels of Christopher Columbus” (“Quetzalcoatl” 188). Harris points to carnival expression as a significant record of, as well as response to, conquistadorial legacies that bear within themselves connections across time and cultures. The progression of various agendas of imperialism within the Old World stretching into the New World has demonstrated that the inevitable consequence of this contact is the conviction in victor/ victim relationships in which the vanquished are eclipsed by the sun of empire. This conviction, however, does not negate the fact that: “the impact of night sky cultures within the carapace of conquest, however marginally or peculiarly visible, was becoming part of the European experience of global cross-cultures” (The Womb of Space 91). Harris offers the metaphor of the Carnival skeleton, evident in carnivalesque re-play, to illustrate a deep-seated inner response to the experience of conquest: “Conquest is native when our bones begin to question every skeleton gateway into the New World. . . . The life of the Carnival skeleton introduces us, in surprising and surprised ways, to ourselves” (“Quetzalcoatl” 188-189).

This original architecture provides access to a crucial ancestral re-memberment in the form of a “gateway of the gods” which simultaneously functions as a “psychic assembly or re-assembly of the muse of a people” (“History, Fable and Myth” 162). The acknowledgment or celebration of the gods assumes a significant relationship with the fertile capacity of the imagination.² The re-membering of the gods informs the archetypal behaviour of myth in the shape of its motifs, its resonant images. In effect, these images are susceptible to an ‘intuitive necessity’ that re-visions them into variables of a cross-cultural imagination:

One of the most persistent legends that black people nourished in the Americas and the West Indies during slavery and after was the dream of wings to fly home across the sea. Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon evokes this flying legend within a complex of intrigue and self-discovery. Jean Rhys

² Kamau Brathwaite also maintains, in his discussion of limbo as a redemptive expression of memory out of the apparent void created by the Middle Passage, that embedded within the cultural articulation of the Caribbean/ Afro-descendant imagination is a celebration (though persistently unacknowledged) of the gods not only from Africa, but other cultures involved in the creation of the African diaspora: “What we are celebrating, just as with the limbo, without recognizing it, is the presence of a god, a god coming from another culture which inhabits this landscape in the same way that other gods from other cultures also inhabit it” (Three Caribbean Poets on their Work 23). At the heart of this imaginative sensibility is the search for or celebration of ‘lost’ deities which is consistent with Harris’s notion of limbo as an access or ‘gateway of the gods’ that points to the creative resources of a people.

implies in Wide Sargasso Sea that Antoinette flies home to herself in the end. She flies up as well as back, Biblical, frustrated paradise and intuitive, pre-Columbian catastrophe / creation myth are now edged, it would seem, by an African cult of wings in a tree of life and death. ("Jean Rhys's 'Tree of Life'" 122)

The narrative motifs that are significantly rooted in myth position the text alongside the archetypal story or stories in a manner that not only rehearses the myth(s) within the narrative but also invites different ways of apprehending these archetypal images. In his discussion of a relationship of partiality across different creation myths, Harris highlights the activity of two motifs – the birth of wings and the tree of life and death – that can be seen at work in Derek Walcott's Omeros as well as Toni Morrison's Beloved. The imaginative stamp of Icarus and various creation myths that are present in these motifs alongside that produced by the folk legend of the Carib bush baby as well as the Anancy trickster in Omeros and Beloved, gestures toward the necessity as well as difficulty of unraveling an amnesiac fate. The behaviour of myth in these narratives may be observed as a further effort to move beyond a dead-end apprehension of the past to unearth alternative insights within the fertile space afforded by absent presences or voids in history:

myth, that apparition, appears in the novel, *not in a static way*. It is as if the outlines are there, they are visible but they have evolved within the unconscious; there are new complications and edges, there are new elements. It's as if when one comes into half-consciousness, half-conscious dialogue with the deep-seated past, one needs the past but the past needs one. The past remains locked away unless it can be re-visualized, taken up at another level, rehearsed profoundly at another level to release new implications, a new kind of thrust. (Harris, "Literacy and the Imagination - a Talk" 87)

One of the most significant imagistic links between the Arawak creation myth concerning the tree of life and death and the Greek myth of Icarus occurs with the overlap of 'wings' and 'fire.' The network of imagery that develops around this overlap in Omeros and Beloved yields further associations with the bush baby folktale. At the beginning of Omeros, part of the fate of the felled trees is "a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown" (4). The bonfire does its work at the same time that the swift appears to Achille overhead through "the hole the laurel had left" (6). The removal of the trees from the forest assumes the metaphorical significance of the destruction of an indigenous, ancestral community:

The bearded elders endured the decimation
of their tribe without uttering a syllable
of that language they had uttered as one nation,

the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble
of the cedar to green vowels of *bois-campêche*.

The *bois-flot* held its tongue with the *laurier-cannelle*,

the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,
while the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell
of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown

with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost. (6)

This metaphor evolves to encompass the response of the insects in the forest to the tribe's decimation, which is a retreat to "high bamboo like the *archers of Aruacs* / running from the muskets of cracking logs, *routed / by the fire's banner* and the remorseless axe / hacking the branches" (7; emphasis mine). The image of an Amerindian community withdrawing to the trees and eventually being routed by fire is at the heart of the Arawak/ Macusi myth of the foodbearing tree or the tree of life and death. This myth speaks of a confrontation between the Arawaks and the Caribs during a time of war in which the Caribs set fire to the foodbearing tree because it has become a refuge for the retreating Arawaks. The

consequence of this conflagration is that “the Arawaks were consumed, and they flew up or across in sparked wings to create the constellation of the Pleiades” (Harris, “Jean Rhys’s ‘Tree of Life’” 120). In Omeros, the trace of an Amerindian presence is signaled by the image of ‘Aruacs’ smoke’ rising to the forest ceiling which is then linked to the murderous intentions of the fishermen within the blink of an iguana’s eye, which spans centuries. Within the context of the narrative, this pregnant envelope of time indicates the possibility, albeit tenuous, of a living connection within the landscape to an Amerindian past on behalf of Achilles, a significant character in the work, and his fellow fishermen.

When read alongside the myth of the foodbearing tree, this connection also contains simultaneously a warning and thread of hope concerning the legacy of a community rooted in conquistadorial activity. The extreme loss incurred as a result of the desire for conquest offers a regenerative strand in the form of a “creation bridge . . . at a time of catastrophe when a new genesis or vision has become necessary” (Harris, The Womb of Space 50). The relevance of this observation is particularly acute for an island whose “Homeric association/ rose like smoke from a siege; the Battle of the Saints/ was launched with that sound, from what was the “Gibraltar / of the Caribbean” (Walcott, Omeros 31). Nonetheless, this connection remains, for the most part, unrecognized except through the peculiar visionary capacity and resilience of an island lizard and its gaze that contains centuries (4-5). So much a part of the landscape and as readily taken for granted, the lizard’s position not only indicates the relative shortsightedness of the men in the forest but also the manner in which significant vessels of the past are easily overlooked. The lizard’s symbolic value is foregrounded against images of loss and amnesia:

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
‘Iounalao,’ ‘Where the iguana is found.’ (4)

The swift’s outstretched wings in the space left by the tree’s absence and the amnesiac smoke produced by the fire which consumes its leaves are part of a complex of images concerning subtle resources or signals of an obscure yet vital past.

The appearance of wings in Beloved is significantly tied to Sethe’s inability to redemptively confront her past. Sethe’s instinctual response to the sight of schoolteacher’s approach to 124 is represented as the frantic beating of wings across her scalp: “Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew” (163). Sethe transforms into a “hawk on the wing” as she gathers her children into the woodshed where she attempts to permanently prevent their return to Sweet Home (157). Unlike the swift with its outstretched wings emblematic of the cross and its healing power – “And God said to Achilles, . . . Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot, / the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion” (Walcott, Omeros 134), Sethe’s hummingbird wings are symbolic of intense, indigestible trauma. The image of her hair streaming with wings consequently finds an unexpected association with the fugitive terror expressed with the Amerindian tree of life. The metamorphosis of the pursued Arawaks into sparked wings as a result of violent oppression mirrors the inner annihilation that Sethe experiences in her flight from schoolteacher. The seed of regeneration, or at least the effort at regeneration on Sethe’s behalf, necessarily grows out of the scene of disaster in the woodshed in the form of a ghost-child and its link to a difficult past.

Sethe’s visitation by a phantom-child offers a parallel to Harris’s approach to the Carib bush-baby myth. The cooking pots of the Caribs produced, according to this myth, “a sudden upsurge of bush-baby spectres which rose . . . like *wraiths of smoke* or *sparks of fire*” (“The

Amerindian Legacy" 169; emphasis mine). The wraith upsurge reveals the need for renascence and, more significantly, that this need is expressed on a psychic level. However, the possibility of renascence for the Carib community remained unfulfilled due to a collective blindness to life-giving alternatives outside of the pattern of conquest that framed their identity. The bush baby appears as an omen of demise, a warning of imminent collapse, as well as rebirth in which the latter demands "an inner divergence . . . from a consolidated given pattern which is the tyranny of history" (170).

Walcott achieves this imaginative approach to time with his depiction of Helen as a "phantom singed by a beach-fire" (Omeros 264). Helen's passage through the smoke produced presumably by burning leaves on the beach along which she takes her walk, is presaged by a psychic alert to the past in the form of a sound that "scalded her scalp with memory" (35). From the perspective of the first person narrator, Helen's beach stroll intersects with the legendary Trojan War:

And yesterday these shallows were the Scamander,
and armed shadows leapt from the horse, and bronze nuts
were helmets, Agamemnon was the commander

of weed-bearded captains; yesterday, the black fleet
anchored there in the swift's road, in the wiry nets
thrown past the surf when the sea and a river meet. . . . (35)

The shadow of a Greek battle garners throughout the narrative the spectral quality of an unwelcome haunting. The narrator's vision expresses this haunting presence as a burden of mythical proportions, incurred by the weight of a past held within a restrictive historical perspective. The narrator's unease with this burden may, in part, be a subconscious response to the manner in which myth – in this instance, Greek myth – becomes a prop in the valorization or celebration of agendas steeped in conquest. He, consequently, assumes an interrogative stance that attempts to unsettle the way this perspective has become "enshrined as a museum text in the humanities" (Harris, "Quetzalcoatl" 190): "What I had read and rewritten till literature / was guilty as History. When would the sails drop / from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War / in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop?" (Walcott, Omeros 271). Helen, as a mythical figure that specifically frames conquistadorial desire, threatens to overpower the narrator's intuitive awareness of multiple possibilities available to his visionary process. However, her passage through the door of black smoke releases other images – sparks of memory – from pasts simultaneous to the Greek overture of conquest:

. . . . A battle broke
out. Lances of sunlight hurled themselves into sand,
the horse hardened to wood, Troy burned, and a soundless

wrestling of smoke-plumed warriors was spun
from the blowing veils, while she dangled her sandals
and passed through that door of black smoke into the sun. (35)

The narrator, therefore, is able to begin to penetrate the 'passive order' surrounding Helen as a mere reflection of the character of conquest and grasp at the potential of genuine vision "as a doorway *through* the reflected object into 'eclipsed proportions one needs to unravel'" which is necessarily "*partially* achieved through a *partial* breaking down of what is passively reflected" (Maes-Jelinek 3).

Helen's passage into the sun as a wraith of time offers a regenerative parallel to the outcome that Hector experiences as a result of his Icarian journey. Whereas Helen emerges through the smoke to entertain the possibilities beyond her mythical association, Hector is relegated to a psychic purgatory in which "his spectre's punishment was / a halt in its passage towards a smokeless place" (Walcott, Omeros 292). Hector appears to the first

person narrator of *Omeros* like a bush-baby phantom: an omen out of the narrator's own psychic upheaval of self-doubt. Hector's decision to abandon fishing in favour of the promise of increased financial security to be found with driving a transport van, launches him on a self-destructive arc fed by his reluctance to confront the source of his alienation. Hector's path is foreshadowed by a significant portent of doom in the form of a star pitching out of the night sky. This omen, however, goes largely unnoticed except as an obscure, intuitive reaction by Achilles to the name given to Hector's transport van: "He watched a falling star singe the arc of its zone / and traced the comet as its declining vector / hissed out like a coal in the horizon's basin/ over the islet, and he trembled for Hector, / the title he gave his transport" (112). The image of a falling star overlaid with that of the flaming arc of a comet's 'declining vector' encourages an association between the tree of life myth and the story of Icarus. With the Arawak ancestral presence embodied in the stars that populate the night sky, the return of one of its hosts to earth may occur as a bright descent from the sky with wings of fire, thereby fulfilling an Icarian arc, that on impact with the ocean would: "[hiss] out like a coal in the horizon's basin" (112).

Hector's Icarian fate is expressed through his role as the headstrong pilot of a flame-ridden vehicle of destiny:

The Comet, a sixteen-seater passenger-van,
was the chariot that Hector bought. Coiled tongues of flame
leapt from its sliding doors. Each row was a divan

of furred leopardskin. Because of its fiery name
under an arching rocket painted on its side,
the Space Age had come to the island. Passengers

crammed next to each other on its animal hide
were sliding into two worlds without switching gears.
One, atavistic, with its African emblem

that slid on the plastic seats, wrinkling in a roll
when the cloth bunched, and the other world that shot them
to an Icarian future they could not control.

Many accepted their future. Most were prepared
for the Comet's horizontal launching
of its purring engine, part rocket, part leopard,

while Hector, arms folded, leant against the bonnet
like a gum-chewing astronaut. . . . (117)

His fame throughout the island as a reckless, speed-obsessed driver is the product of an inner despair that plagues every gesture. Hector's absolute investment in the masquerade of his newfound ambition persists until he becomes a hollow vessel, disfigured by a "frightening discontent" (231). His headlong flight remains ineffective against a "flaming wound that speed alone could not heal" (118). The eventual outcome of Hector's beleaguered actions is a fatal crash over the edge of a coastal precipice (225). Hector's subsequent appearance occurs in the form of a spectral presence in the first person narrator's journey through an underworld peopled by 'lost' souls caught in diverse traps of perdition. The nature of phantom Hector's punishment is a self-inflicted trauma that remains apparently invulnerable because of his persistent conviction in the absence of possibilities for healing – he is "a confirmed believer in his own hell" (292). Hector's lack of faith corresponds with that of the narrator's in the capacity of his imaginative vision to heal the trauma inflicted by a past shrouded in defeat and loss: "they were the found, / who were

bound for no victories; they were the bound, / who levelled nothing before them; they were the ground" (22).

Hector's 'fated crescent' spins out from his belief in an irretrievable loss to which he surrenders in a swift arc of destruction (226). His behaviour carries a similar impulse to that of Icarus and his foolhardy flight: a desire to escape that is undermined by a peculiar self-destructive shortsightedness. Icarus's motivations concerning the obvious disregard of his father's instructions for survival are puzzling. Either inept, willfully disobedient or distracted, Icarus is unable to resist the pull of the sun even with the knowledge of its threat to his welfare – the fact that he and his father are in a life and death situation is discarded in the joy of flight. However, the enigmatic nature of Icarus's willful abandon may have its roots in a form of trickster resistance to hidden agendas tied to their escape. Whilst Hector's apparently inevitable movement toward destruction expresses a fire-motif that carries a subtle link to the burning food-bearing tree – "Lodged in their broken branches the curled letters flame" (225), Sixo's actions and subsequent demise in Beloved present an Anancy trickster element to his compulsion for reckless flight.

Part of the depiction of Sixo's character is a physical description that helps to distinguish him from the other male slaves on Sweet Home – "Indigo with a flame-red tongue" (Morrison 21). This distinction, maybe unwittingly, resurfaces in one of his gestures prior to his recapture by schoolteacher almost as a portent of his fate: "Only Sixo shows up, his wrists bleeding, his tongue licking his lips like a flame" (225). This association with fire carries over into his treatment at the hands of schoolteacher and his men in their retaliation for his apparently irrational behaviour on being captured. At the point of recapture and imminent return to slavery, a physically bound Sixo grabs a rifle from one of his captors and while wielding it as a bludgeoning weapon, begins to sing. His behaviour poses no perceptible threat to the whitemen because they simply have "to wait. For his song, perhaps, to end? Five guns are trained on him while they listen" (226). Nonetheless, his apparently irredeemable behaviour leads to further violence: Sixo is tied to a tree and set on fire.

His violent pursuit and fiery demise echoes the catastrophic seed of the Amerindian myth as well as, surprisingly, his singing. Sixo, unlike Sethe and the Pauls of Sweet Home, maintains a link to his past: "Sixo went among the trees at night. For dancing he said, to keep his bloodlines open" (25). This practice demonstrates his possession of a sense of self that undermines slavery's valuation of his being as property. With such awareness, Sixo eventually "stopped speaking English because there was no future in it" (25). This silent withdrawal finally erupts into song before his death, in striking parallel to the silence Harris observes in another fictional character whose "muteness has the 'singing' seed" ("Conversation with Wilson Harris: Interview with Daryl Cumber Dance" 84). With this eruption, Sixo reveals himself but the motivations for his actions appear elusive to the whitemen as well as Paul D initially, who witness his willing embrace of death. Paul D, however, is able to eventually recognize that Sixo's behaviour "has its roots in some fertile soil where as it dissolves it becomes the seed of a new tree of life, implicitly" (Harris, "Conversation with Wilson Harris: Interview with Daryl Cumber Dance" 84). In other words, his singing pitch into the fire appears as defeat, as total annihilation, but his shouts of "Seven-O" alert Paul D to the presence of Sixo's "blossoming seed" in the Thirty-Mile Woman, which is his eventual triumph against his pursuers – the future of his unborn child offers the potential survival of his legacy.

In this respect, Sixo's intentions and actions display a trickster element that prevails alongside the fire motif that Harris offers as "counterpoint to legacies of slavery and conquest in the soil of the Caribbean" as well as, I would add, the Americas (The Womb of Space 50). An Anancy / Amerindian feature in 'wings of fire' complements the Icarus flight of escape to form a "cross-cultural body arching through mutated African cultures into

mutated ancient Greek myth" (57-58). The presence of the trickster figure within Afro-descendant imagination is inextricably tied to the circumstances of New World slavery as well as, I believe, the fire motif as they share the features of an imaginative response "born out of a necessity to compensate such losses within the human psyche." ("Interior of the Novel: Amerindian / European / African Relations" 16). The nature of such losses proliferated by the extensive violence of colonialism and slavery involves: "a *trauma* of helplessness – external conquest, internal collapse" (16). Out of such a difficult and far-reaching trauma, the desire for the birth of wings evolves through folklore as the "flying motif" [that] is well established in the oral traditions of African/ American slave longing for wings with which to return 'home'. It plays a part in Anancy or flying trickster folklore" (The Womb of Space 57-58). The yearning for flight as a means of finding home accompanies the desire to escape physical suffering, inner despair. Harris affirms that an underlying motivation or trigger for the desire to take flight, 'to evolve wings,' occurs "in the wake of some unstated, cultural / psychical castration" (62). The degree of impotence that Hector experiences, for example, as a result of his separation from his emotional center or 'home' – "*Mer* was both mother and sea" (Walcott, Omeros 231) – pushes him to take flight in an "arching rocket" (117).

The trickster figure as a subversive expression, much like the birth of wings, offers a form of escape from a shroud of helplessness. Sixo's awareness of the implications of Mr. Garner's death and schoolteacher's presence at Sweet Home prompts him to initiate an escape en masse from the plantation: "Sixo started watching the sky. He was the only one who crept at night and Halle said that's how he learned about the train" (Morrison 197). His trickster capacity ultimately undermines the image of impotence that characterizes his death. The significance of the fire motif as a psychological feature of redress to the legacies of slavery is especially acute in the face of the portrayal of brutality and accompanying silences or inarticulacy around: "[t]he people of the broken necks, of *fire-cooked blood* and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (181; emphasis mine). In effect, fire as a predominant feature in the profound scarring and violence of slavery remains within a collective recall of the past to be converted into a catalyst for genuine re-memberment: "fire that consumes remorselessly yet is not absolute, fire that consumes yet may turn around into a resource of evolutionary change and complex transfiguration of the prison house and frame of cultural habit" (Harris, "Creoleness: the Crossroads of a Civilization?" 244). Sixo's response proceeds from his belief in the possibility of renewal and it is this hope for renaissance within profound catastrophe that undermines the frame of absolute tragedy or loss.

The elements of myth and masquerade in these narratives, when read from within the possibility of addressing redemptively the themes of loss and destruction characteristic of the Afro-descendant experience in the Caribbean and the Americas, suggest that redress is intimately tied to and may be consistently re-negotiated within the patterns of conquest that circumscribe the region. The metaphor of Memory theatre incorporates the process of re-enactment integral to the masquerade and the sense of an archetypal response on the behalf of a community offered by myth. The dialogue that this theatrical re-play offers among Greek, Amerindian and African myth in the region denotes that its common possession of a conquistadorial legacy may also offer the regenerative possibilities of a cross-cultural community.

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behaviour of the imagination specifically within the complex of loss and growth characteristic of the heterogeneous cultural environment of the Caribbean.

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