WILSON HARRIS
"HISTORY, FABLE AND MYTH IN THE CARIBBEAN AND GUIANAS" (1970)

Harris, Wilson. "The Limbo Gateway." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 378-82.

Drawing upon Jung's concept of Art as therapeutic, to wit, its capacity to "discover what it is that would meet the unconscious needs of his age" ("On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" 83), Harris's thesis in this seminal essay is that there is a "philosophy of history" (378) that lies "buried in the arts of the imagination" (378) of the Caribbean and South America. By this, Harris means that it is in the arts of the region that those healing archetypes can be found which will assist the peoples of the so-called New World in transcending the traumas of enslavement and enforced migrations and, thus, the psychic self-division and alienation consequent upon the region's brutal history, so aptly described by Fanon. His concern is, thus, with what he describes as the "epic stratagems available to Caribbean man in the dilemmas of history which surround him" (378), that is, with those compensatory cultural measures to which the inhabitants of the New World have recourse in the wake of the ravages historically wrought by European imperialism, slavery and racism.

Harris asserts that the "native West Indian imagination" (378) vents itself in at least two kinds of myth which in turn, he argues, inevitably inform the literary and other cultural practices of the region. These include those "related to Africa" (378) (i.e. which "reflect an African link in the Caribbean" [378]) as well as the "vestiges of Amerindian fable and legend" (378).[1] By stressing these two kinds of myth, Harris is underscoring two of the most important but historically repressed legacies informing the cultural make-up of the New World and, thus, the psyches of its inhabitants. Harris is particularly interested in the archetypes to be found in such myths. These archetypes are the psychic residue less of universally typical human experiences than of historical experiences specific to the region [colonialism, etc.). One such African archetype he calls 'limbo,' the very designation of which gestures simultaneously towards both the sense of being nowhere (the victims of the African diaspora were sentenced in effect to permanent exile from their homeland as a result of which they are in 'limbo') and the psychic division to which Fanon alludes and figured by the dismemberment of the human anatomy (the reference to 'limb'). One manifestation of the limbo archetype can be found in the limbo dance, a "well-known feature of Carnival life in the West Indies" (378). In an effort to trace the archetype back to its originating experience, Harris theorises that limbo probably originated "on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders" (378). The limbo dance is, viewed from this perspective, historically rooted in and thus recalls the fact of enslavement which has been the dominant factor in the history of the region.

Harris believes, however, that the limbo myth "needs to be re-activated in the imagination" (379) of the Caribbean basin in such a way as to take into account what he describes as the other neglected "perspective" (379) which is equally implicit in the limbo motif. That is, Harris wants to stress that limbo is not solely a symbol of the historically undeniable fact of oppression but also, perhaps more importantly, of the cultural connections

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[1]Harris's term 'imagination' (he speaks elsewhere of the 'cross-cultural imagination') is roughly synonymous with Jung's collective unconscious. He points out that both 'fable' and 'myth' are "employed as variables of the imagination in this essay" (378). The term 'variable' suggests here that such fables and myths are our only means of access to the 'imagination' or cultural unconscious of the region which is per se never accessible to consciousness.

that exist with Africa. Limbo is an "archetypal" (379) symbol of "sea-change" (379), that "reflects a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a change of miles" (379).

Moreover, Harris is intent upon demonstrating that such cultural connections link the Caribbean not only to Africa but to the other Old Worlds (to be precise, Europe and Asia) whose peoples populated this region. It is often overlooked, for example, that the role of the Middle Passage was not restricted to the transportation of slaves. The Middle Passage was the avenue by means of which thousands of immigrants of all descriptions arrived in the Caribbean over the centuries: for example, after slavery ended, immigration from India and China was encouraged in order that labour needs be met. The nature of the Middle Passage, thus, "varied with each century and each method of transport" (379). Harris goes so far as to contend that the "waves of migration" (379) to the region are all also "possessed" (379) the "stamp of the spider metamorphosis in the refugee flying from Europe or in the indentured East Indian and Chinese" (379). In alluding to the spider, Harris may have in mind several things simultaneously: the spider-like contortions to which the slaves were forced to resort in their cramped quarters on board the slave ships, the process by which the spider sheds its old skin (an image of the process by which peoples of different ethnic backgrounds upon arrival in the region were impelled to shed their old identities and acquire new ones) and the spinning of the web (it is here that one begins to put one's finger on the syncreticism which he argues is something "close to the inner universality of Caribbean man" [379].)

Given this link between the limbo and spider archetypes, the limbo motif t0o be found in so many cultural practices in the region undoubtedly, therefore, also has connections to the Anancy or cunning spider fables that originated in West Africa and which were transplanted to the New World with the Middle Passage (hence, Harris speaks of the "*limbo-Anancy* syndrome" [379]). For a Jungian, Anancy is, like Brer Rabbit in Europe, a variant of the archetypal trickster-figure, a rogue type who survives by his very wit and his deception. The trickster is the archetypal figure of mischievousness, unexpectedness and disorder whose values are opposed to and even subversive of the status quo. Jung thought of the trickster as performing a function in the psyche similar to that of a cathartic safety-valve, compensating for and offering alternatives to the attitudes predominant in the collective. The trickster helps, Jung theorised, to restore psychic balance in a one-sided consciousness. The subversive value of the Anancy archetype ought to be obvious in a region marked by the oppression of the many by a few.

Harris also is of the view that the limbo archetype can also be glimpsed in what he terms the "shared phantom limb" (379) (he has in mind the appendages which stilt-men attach to their own limbs) that has, he suggests, become a "subconscious variable in West Indian theatre" (379). The emergence of a formal West Indian theatre had its antecedents, he theorises, in the stilt-walking that used to occur on Boxing Day. At this time, performers would dance on stilts that had the appearance of "elongated limbs" (379) while others "performed spread-eagled on the ground" (379). Significantly, the motif of the phantom limb glimpsed at such times, he suggests, "possesses archetypal resonances that embrace Egyptian Osiris, the resurrected Christ and the many-armed goddess of India, Kali" (380). In short, it gestures towards the "re-assembly of dismembered man or god" (380) betokened by those myths which are found throughout human culture and not just in the so-called New World. Harris's point is that we have taken too long to "perceive . . . an activation of unconscious and sleeping resources in the phantom limb of dismembered slave and god" (380). In other words, the archetypal myth to which limbo alludes involves both dis-memberment and re-memberment, disintegration and reintegration. His point is that the limbo archetype is not predicated upon a nostalgic yearning for the region's roots in a more glorious past that is now lost forever. The "total recall of an African past" (380) is impossible, he argues, "since that

African past in terms of tribal sovereignty" (380) was "traumatically eclipsed with the Middle Passage and the generations of change that followed" (380). Rather, the limbo myth looks towards a future of reintegration, rather than the past of disintegration, connoting the "renascence of a new corpus of sensibility" (380) that can "translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures" (380).

Harris does not leave out in this regard the Amerindian heritage of the region, including its "shamanistic and rain-making vestiges" (380) and the "dancing bush baby legends of the Caribs" (380) in his new architecture of Caribbean cultures. Indeed, he contends that there were "Amerindian gateways between cultures" (380) that painfully witnessed long before limbo to a "native suffering community steeped in caveats of conquest" (381). (He is thinking in part here of the encomienda system which decimated the native population of the region under Spanish colonisation.) If "we look deep into the rubble of the past" (381), he suggests, we will realise that these "Amerindian features enhance the limbo assembly . . . the spider syndrome and phantom limb of the gods arising in Negro fable and legend" (381).

What he describes as "this ground of accommodation, this art of creative coexistence" (380) and the "strangest capacity of renewal" (380), one "born of great peril" (380), is one of the "utmost importance and native to the Caribbean, perhaps to the Americas as a whole" (380) precisely because it points the Caribbean away from what he terms "apartheid and ghetto fixation" (380). The "omens of rebirth" (380) to be found in the limbo and other overlooked myths have been neglected, albeit with the best of intentions, by historians and cultural critics "intent upon indicting the Old Work of Europe by exposing a uniform pattern of imperialism in the New World of the Americas" (380). In so doing, they "conscripted the West Indies into a mere adjunct of imperialism and overlooked a subtle and far-reaching renascence" (380). Unwittingly, he writes, such scholars "ironically extended and reinforced old colonial prejudices which censored the limbo imagination as a 'rowdy' manifestation and overlooked the complex metaphorical gateway it constitutes in rapport with Amerindian omen" (380). In other words, our historians "militant and critical of imperialism as they are here--have fallen victim . . . to the very imperialism they appear to denounce" (381).

By contrast, Harris conceives of the Caribbean as a "gateway society" (381), one involved in "an original re-construction or re-creation of variables of myth and legend in the wake of stages of conquest" (381). Inherent in the limbo archetype, from this perspective, are patterns of death-rebirth, disintegration-reintegration, and dispersal-connectivity. This "dislocation of interior space" (381) (Harris's focus is on the "inner time" [381] of the psyche, that is, the collective unconscious, which most historians of the region ignore in favour of studying the 'outer time' of human action) serves as a "corrective" (381) to what he describes as a "uniform cloak or documentary stasis of imperialism" (381). Consequently, archetypes such as the limbo offer the inhabitants of the region a "profound art of compensation" (381) that "seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes . . . and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead muse and god" (381).

Archetypes such as the limbo have the capacity to give rise to a "new kind of drama, novel and poem" (380). Such an activation of unconscious and sleeping resources in inherent in the limbo myth "possesses a nucleus of great promise--of far-reaching new poetic form" (380). This new genre can produce "creative phenomena of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates" (381) and become a necessary corrective to the bulk of West Indian literature which has become synonymous with "historical documentary and protest literature" (381) and which paints the West Indies as "utterly deprived, or gutted by exploitation" (381). Such a change of perspective offers "genuine possibilities of original change in a people severely disadvantaged" (381), he does not deny, "at a certain point in time" (381). In short, the "limbo imagination of the folk" (382), expressed especially but not solely at carnival time and similar moments and which can be

glimpsed in more 'sophisticated' literary and dramatic forms , involves a "crucial inner re-creative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest" (382) that Caribbean literary critics and historians ignore at their own peril.