

The Trickster as Critical Stance
in the Postmodern Fiction of
Maxine Hong Kingston, Ishmael Reed, and Thomas King

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Table of Contents	3
Norsk sammendrag	5
English Abstract	6
1 Introduction	7
1/1 Critical Stance in the Liberal-Humanist Language Curriculum	8
1/2 Critical Ways of Reading	9
2 The Trickster in Theory	12
2/1 Selfish Buffoon or Culture Hero?	12
2/2 Shamanic Concourse, Trance and Healing	14
2/3 The Heuristic Guide to the Trickster	15
2/3/1 Ambiguity and the Liminal	16
2/3/2 The Playful Antics of the Trickster	18
2/4 Trickster in Ethnic Mythologies	21
2/4/1 The African-Caribbean Trickster	21
2/4/2 The Native American Trickster	23
2/4/3 A Journey to the West: The Simian Trickster	25
3 The Problematics of Literary Ethnicity	29
4 Methodological Considerations	32

5	Analysis	34
5/1	The Choice of Authors	34
5/2	The Trickster as Literary Figure	36
5/2/1	PaPa LaBas, the Hoodoo Trickster	37
5/2/2	Coyote, the Creator-Fixer	41
5/2/3	Tripmaster Monkey	45
5/3	Trickster as Literary Discourse	51
5/3/1	Deconstruction and the Language Game	52
5/3/2	The Comic Holotrope: Humor as Subversion	53
5/3/3	Parodic-travesty Literature	58
5/3/4	Signifying	63
5/4	The Narrative	66
5/4/1	Text and Narrative: The Infinite Signifier	66
5/4/2	Narrative Chance	69
5/4/3	Narrative as a Spatial Concept: The Rupture of Plane	71
5/4/4	The Author as Trickster	73
6	Didactical Conclusions	75
6/1	Reading as a Liminal Act	75
6/2	A Third Place of Discourse	76
6/3	Critical Ways of Reading the Trickster	78
	Conclusion	82
	Works Cited	85

Norsk sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven fokuserer på tricksteren som kulturhelt i urmytologier og protagonist i postmoderne litteratur med multietniske røtter. Analysen dreier seg rundt tre Amerikanske romaner med slike trekk: Ishmael Reeds *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Maxine Hong Kingstons *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) og *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) skrevet av Thomas King. Prosjektets mål er å identifisere tricksterens språklige og diskursive kjennetegn som kan brukes i en undervisningssammenheng, nemlig tilegnelsen av kritiske kompetanser. Trickstere eksisterer i grensesonen mellom diskurser, hvor de får sine vilje gjennom lureri, sine evner av metamorfose og tvetydigheten i sine handlinger, som virker ofte til menneskehetens gode. De representerer også språklige strukturer og måter for historiefortelling som i postmoderne verk viser våre virkeligheter som sosialt konstruerte og som utpeker feilslutninger i ensidige representasjoner. Oppgaven kommer fram til at gjennom å lese og forstå slike språklige-diskursive strukturer blir elevene i stand til å bruke en såkalt kritisk språkbevissthet som hjelper å takle tvetydigheten til språket som representasjonsmiddel.

English Abstract

The focus of this master thesis is the trickster, a culture hero of indigenous mythologies and also the frequent protagonist of postmodern fiction with multiethnic roots. The analysis focuses on the trickster in three American novels of such nature, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). The aim of the project is to identify linguistic and discursive characteristics of the trickster that can be applied in an educational context, namely the acquisition of critical skills. Tricksters live on the borderline of discourses, achieving their ends through trickery, transformative skills and the ambiguity of their antics, often for the greater good of mankind. They also represent linguistic formations and modes of storytelling, which in postmodern works point to the socially constructed nature of our worlds, as well as the fallacies of one-sided representation. The thesis finally concludes that the reading and understanding of such linguistic-discursive formations enables learners with a critical language awareness that helps dealing with the ambiguity of language as a means of representation.

1 Introduction

“... the best way to talk to someone of another language is at the top of your intelligence, not to slow down or to shout or to talk babytalk. You say more than enough, o.d. your listener, give her plenty to choose from. She will get more out of it than you can say.”

(Kingston, 1989, p. 267)

The focus of this master’s thesis is on three contemporary American authors, all three with a multiethnic background. Through the analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* I will try to achieve more than simply identifying cultural as well as inter-cultural reference points between American literary traditions of Native American, African-Caribbean, and Chinese (or Far Eastern) descent. The thesis concentrates on the trickster, a once mythical figure that obtained a key role in postmodern literature with indigenous roots.

In these novels, trickster is more than simply a character, it is the death of narrative, a discourse of its own. Most importantly, it is a critical stance in the common consciousness of the storyteller and the reader that deconstructs not only the universality of Western knowledge schemes and positivist thinking but also taken-for-granted subject positions and the authority of the text and narrative over the reader. I will, following an analysis of these three outstanding novels, conclude that learning about the trickster as part of foreign language education in Norway can contribute to the acquisition of critical skills. Such skills enable students to be both more proficient readers of contemporary foreign language literature as well as more educated interpreters of ideas around culture and identity, language, and representation that is required in a 21st century, globalized context.

The most important question of this research is, therefore, how understanding the trickster as a discursive phenomenon in contemporary multiethnic American literature can help the reader in taking up a critical stance. This is not only a way of looking at the world from a different perspective but also understanding and learning from the socially constructed, arbitrary and yet ambiguous nature of language, discourse and text. It is also a sort of critical language awareness, that offers a way out of striated and ossified thinking patterns through the power of the imaginary, the subversive and the comic, in other words, the chance of figurative play on the taken-for-granted authority of the literal.

1/1 Critical Stance in the Liberal-Humanist Language Curriculum

In relation to the research question the thesis aims to contribute to the research on critical reading in foreign language education as well as connect this to the curriculum. Unfortunately, there is little attention paid to critical approaches in the Norwegian national as well as the English subject curriculum, although one can rely on some general ideas. Research in the field of critical reading and literacy as well as critical language awareness is sufficient but very few focus on the learning of such skills through reading foreign language literature.

In an attempt to find a middle way between the politics and the aesthetics of ‘multiethnic’ literature, Grobman (2005) emphasizes the effect of such texts on “imaginative capacities” (p. 140). Referring to Martha Nussbaum she points out literature’s role in cultivating the narrative imagination by opening new and different perspectives to a world, that is “inescapably multicultural and multinational”. In the liberal curriculum, Nussbaum claims, the focus on citizenship is emphasized through humanity, in other words, the recognition that “human beings [are] bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern” (as cited in Grobman, 2005, p. 139).

These are values similar to those the Norwegian Upper Secondary Education Act is founded on when referring to democratic ideals, human equality, freedom and tolerance, and international co-responsibility in § 2 of its Principle Aims (as cited in Utdanningsdirektoratet, 1993). *The Core Curriculum* further specifies the liberal aspect of contemporary education by pointing out the necessity of broad frames of reference as a means of ‘learning to learn’ and “using what one knows to grasp what one does not know” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 1993, p. 26). The chapter ‘The Liberally-educated Human Being’ also makes an important point in stating: “The international culture of learning links humanity together through the development and use of new knowledge to better the human condition” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 1993, p. 29).

The idea of specific knowledge that provides broad frames of reference follows through the English subject curriculum of LK06 (Knowledge Promotion). Here, though only briefly, the cultural aspect of language learning is brought into perspective by pointing out the importance of “providing insight into the way people live and different cultures where English is the primary or the official language”. It also indicates the role of literary texts to promote the “lifelong joy of reading and a deeper understanding of others and of oneself” as well as an inspiration of “personal expressions and creativity”. Finally, it underlines cultural insight as a way to promote “greater interaction, understanding and respect between persons with different cultural backgrounds,” and ultimately as a means

to “strengthen democratic involvement and co-citizenship” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006). This is in accordance with Knoblauch & Brannon’s claim on the cultural representation aspect of reading: “No one group is exclusively entitled to the privilege of representation, but that each has a right to tell its story, critique other stories, and participate in forming a community responsive to the needs of all its members” (as cited in Cervetti et al, 2001).

The specifics of LK06 concerning lower and upper secondary education both refer to the relevance of discussing and elaborating on “different types of English literature from English-speaking countries,” on other forms of cultural expression, as well as on “texts by and about indigenous peoples in English-speaking countries”. This is, however, often confronted by the common practical assumption that “multi-ethnic curricula should be made up of exotic, esoteric, or highly specialized courses given at only the higher levels of academe” (Auser, 1989, p. 69). As Cushman suggests, even at these higher levels there is little effort to “make this knowledge relevant, accessible, or responsive to public corners”, merely focusing on “the core values of consuming texts, maintaining a disinterested critical stance, and the interpretation of a select, though more inclusive, set of authors” (as cited in Grobman, 2005).

1/2 Critical Ways of Reading

Besides the topic of broad perspective based on specific areas of knowledge, there is another aspect of the curriculum that this thesis finds relevant, that of critical awareness. A chapter of the Core Curriculum, ‘The Creative Human Being’ stresses the importance of the development of creative abilities, namely “identifying new relationships through thinking and experimenting” or “developing new standards for evaluation and collaboration” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 1993, p. 11) as well as the critical sense of judgement (pp. 13-14). In acquiring new knowledge, beside creative thinking and scientific methods, critical thinking has a crucial role, point out the authors:

Education must find that difficult balance between respect for established knowledge and the critical attitude that is necessary for developing new learning and for organizing information in new ways. Education must provide solid learning. But it must also instil an awareness of the limitations of the current body of knowledge, and a realization that predominant doctrines can block fresh insight. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 1993, p. 15)

Objectively, one has to see that public education is dependent on a certain political agenda for being able to achieve its ends. This is encoded in its beaurocratic,

organizational structure, the power relations within the system as well as its discursive practices that ensure “that the learner takes on perspectives, adopts a world view, accepts a set of core values, and masters an identity often without a great deal of critical and reflective awareness” (Gee, 2012, p. 164).

The works of the Frankfurt school of critical theory are similarly concerned with a critique of a ‘technical rationality’ as a means of compartmentalizing world views, thereby recreating passive subjects unresilient to manipulation and control. This, ‘colonization of the lifeworld’, as Habermas defines it, ultimately leads to societies where not only socialization but also the formation of personality suffers severely from rationalized thought structures (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Facts are seen as solid data only if one’s perception allows them to be. In critical reading practice, therefore, it is of utmost importance to restate, describe and interpret texts from as many aspects and through as many contexts as possible.

Cervetti et al (2001) distinguish between two major traditions of critical reading: the liberal-humanist and the critical literacy school. The first one, they argue, favours rational, logical analysis and the language of science that often discredit literary voices as the source of valid information. Atkinson (1997) also claims that a purely analytical pursuit of logical explanations in critical thinking is insufficient and can eventually lead to logicism that is considered to be universal and therefore excludes and marginalizes alternative ways of knowing. In the research of different cultures, for instance, a distinction between ‘connected knowing’, that is, getting into the heads of other people, and ‘separate knowing’ (‘the devil’s advocate mode’) must be made (p. 78).

In a post-structuralist view, however, the advantage of scientific discourse is more of an issue of access to resources and power than of validity. For a fuller critical attitude, one has to understand that language is biased by asymmetrical relations of power and the way it becomes a means of representation. Therefore, the aim of critical skills education is the development of a critical consciousness, that is, the students’ ability to look beyond biased and stereotypical ways of identity formation and eventually to act upon such tendencies. “Once they recognize that texts are representations of reality and that these representations are social constructions, they have a greater opportunity to take a more powerful position with respect to these texts – to reject them or reconstruct them in ways that are more consistent with their own experiences in the world” (Cervetti et al, 2001).

The critical reading approach suggested in this thesis is parallel to the latter, post-structuralist way in dismissing the issue of validity and focusing on the discursive characteristics of the text as well as the metaphorical and literary aspects of language. The ultimate aim of this study is, to borrow Behrman’s (2006) words is to “encourage

teachers and students to collaborate to understand how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed” (p. 491).

The thesis will first give an overview over the theory on the mythical role of the trickster as a culture hero. Consequently, a typological guide is provided based on Hynes’ 6 point heuristics, which attempted to draw parallels between tricksters arising in different oral storytelling traditions. I will then identify characteristic tricksters in three cultural traditions, the Native North-American, the African-American, and the Chinese-Far Eastern. As a result, the focus is directed to three trickster figures that play a central role in the three selected novels: Coyote, Legba and the Monkey King. The theoretical chapter will finally conclude with a discussion of multiethnic literature, raising some issues one has to be aware of during the reading of such literature. The conclusion eventually leads to the introduction of the term *routes literature*.

This research is not intended as a typical literary analysis used in classroom environments, neither is it literary theory in practice. As the aim is to identify characteristics of the trickster that are helpful in the instruction of a critical language awareness, the study concentrates on concepts around the arbitrariness of language, discourse, text and narrative. As a first step, though, it is important to identify features in the literary heroes that represent their respective oral traditions and elaborate on how they are manifested in the context of a postmodern text. What will follow is a discussion on how tricksters are used as linguistic, discursive constructs, with a special focus on the subversive nature of their humor. The final section of the analysis focuses on the trickster as the death of narrative, namely, in which ways its discursive trickery contributes to the deconstruction of cultural preunderstandings and dogmatic thinking patterns, in other words, narratives.

The concluding chapter of the thesis will draw conclusions with didactic relevance. I will describe how reading can be a liminal activity, through which readers can enter the realm of the trickster. This is apprehending and shifting subject positions between that of reader, learner, mediator or author, which broadens the critical perspective. In the borderline third space of the classroom one better understands questions around self and otherness as well as a communal way of developing stories of ourselves. The thesis will finally contribute with some practical considerations on reading the trickster in postmodern prose.

2 The Trickster in Theory

Humorous tricksters who at the same time often represent serious social issues have been for centuries seminal characters of mythologies all around the world. Tricksters such as Coyote, Br'er Rabbit, Hermes, Loki, the Monkey King, Legba etc. are part of almost every mythology. The Trickster is both a selfish buffoon, a Dionysian tool of irreverent humor as well as a culture hero, a figure of cultural healing. Trickster figures live in the 'liminal', the grey zone between solid, measurable categories and compartments, where identities are constantly dropped and reclaimed through a 'string of ritual acts' (Salinas, 2013).

There have been numerous efforts on the part of theoreticians to map the complexity of this character as well as identify common traits in diverse oral traditions. According to Hynes and Doty (2009), if one attempts to focus on common attributes it is not the "archetypal roots in a transcendental human psyche" that need to be revealed but cultural manifestations (p. 2). Trickster stories, they argue, need to be understood in two different contexts. One in a local, tribal or historically bounded, narrow context, and the other in a broader sense, of general human cultural expression. Only when the researcher or reader is able to see these stories from both perspectives, can they understand the difficulty of finding common features of these characters throughout a variety of cultures.

2/1 Selfish Buffoon or Culture Hero?

Misconceptions in the Western mind concerning the above enigma are demonstrated by the ambiguity of two main identities that are commonly associated with the trickster: the selfish buffoon and the culture hero. The former is known for his uninhibited desire for bodily pleasures while the latter is a negotiator of cultures, "a transformer who makes the world habitable for humans" (Carroll, 1981, p. 305). In cultural theoretician Claude Levi-Strauss' understanding, the dilemma entails that while both of these are 'desirable qualities,' the first one sets out to destroy the second.

Carroll (1981) argues that from a Freudian perspective, "the maintenance of civilization depends upon the renunciation of our instinctive impulses toward the immediate gratification of our sexual desires" (p. 305). The dilemma, therefore, is how one can be a true representative of culture and a violator of its very rules at the same time. He refers to an explanation by Leach, who suggests that the purpose of myth is "to openly express

a dilemma in such a way as to provide some sort of cognitive model that allows the individual to lose sight of the inherent contradiction that the dilemma entails” (Carroll, 1981, p. 307).

Levi-Strauss supported his claim by associating Northern American tricksters with carrion eaters like raven or coyote but that categorization is all too restrictive. When analysing a wider spectre of Native American tribal myths, Carroll (1984) found that a common animal-like virtue in trickster characters is being ‘solitary’ rather than being a carrion eater. As solitary figures, they are dissociated with culture as a collective term, but at the same time within the logic of the myth entail both our direct (sexual) and indirect (social) desires, in the Freudian sense.

Understanding the trickster as a “tension releasing function for society” is only one concept of the figure, claims Priyadharshini (2012): anthropologists and psychologists have seen this character as a symbol of the primitive stage of the human psyche or of the human experience, the dark side of culture or cultural violence, as well as the balance between human potential for creativity and destruction. As Kamberelis suggested, the trickster’s antics are “new modes of being and acting from not-yet-articulated possibilities” (as cited in Priyadharshini, 2012, p. 549), or as Hyde phrased it:

[W]hat Tricksters quite regularly do is create lively talk where there has been silence, or where speech has been prohibited. Trickster speaks freshly where language has been blocked, gone dead, or lost its charm ... for usually language goes dead because cultural practice has hedged it in, and some shameless double-dealer is needed to get outside the rules and set tongues wagging again.

(as cited in Priyadhashini, 2012, p. 548)

As a summary of the above theoretical lines, it seems logical to say that tricksters usually bring new ways of seeing and experiencing where solidified practices of tradition and culture prevents one from explaining the surrounding world. Within this lies the trickster’s primary function as a culture hero.

2/2 Shamanic Concourse, Trance and Healing

Kremer (2012) also underlines the problem of identifying clear-cut truths or ‘culturally acceptable knowledge’ in indigenous cultures with shamanic traditions and rituals, where tricksters frequently appear as a counterpart for the shaman. In his view, the rational mind alone cannot offer viable explanations to such phenomena, where knowing is experienced through embodiment and ‘states of shifted awareness’. Therefore, he suggests the term of shamanic or participatory concourse:

Such con-course (*concurrere*) is a shamanic coming together in a circle in which truths are unfolded and refolded. Here communal reality creation and maintenance is reviewed through talking as well as ritualistic embodiment. This circle has space for silence, humor, theater, dance, and all the other arts (which may assume a trickster position at any point); well-reasoned claims to truth need to rub shoulders with other aspects of human reality as they all struggle to align with each other. Concurrence includes the play of the trickster. This is a practice of world creation and maintenance, a practice of care for the narrative universe we live in. Knowing is a practice of living. Living is the practice of knowing—beingknowing (to create a Heideggerian term). (p. 66)

Postmodern anthropologists like Victor Turner have observed the nature of trance states in shamanic rituals. Krippner (2005) characterizes trance or the hypnotic experience as “major shifts in consciousness, behavior, and sense of identity.” In ‘possession trance’ an invading spirit takes possession over the subject’s body, sometimes in the role of the trickster “teaching the individual life lessons through embarrassment, playful activities, or humor” (p. 101) He emphasizes that hypnotic-like procedures in native healing are especially helpful in socially constructed forms of sickness. These are often identified by indigenous cultures as “soul loss,” spirit “possession,” “intrusion,” or “invasion,” which require the healer to travel between states of awareness (“to journey to the upper world,” “to travel to the lower world,” “to incorporate spirit guides,” “to converse with power animals,” or “to retrieve lost souls”). He ultimately underlines that creativity manifests itself in rituals, shamanic practices and hypnotic-like procedures in the service of the community (p. 110).

Ricketts (2009), however, opposes the idea of drawing a parallel between the trickster and the shaman. Shamans and medicine men, he explains, are mediators between the human and the spiritual world. Through rituals and trance they journey into the realm of the supernatural to find out the cause of hardships like bad weather or poor hunting, and make peace with the spirits offended. Some of these they even make friends with while others they consider as enemies. They possess supernatural powers and thus serve as an exemplary model for the community.

The trickster, on the other hand, is an outsider with a negative approach to spirits: they are not his helpers or advisors. All it could gain from supernatural powers is goods – fish, water, fire, or prey-, obtained by trickery and theft. It is a figure with a spiritual aspect, in belonging to the realm of mythologies and tales of origin. However, it is the representative of a different, a human-centered religion, “the symbol of the self transcending mind of humankind and of the human quest for knowledge and the power that knowledge brings” (Ricketts, 2009, pp. 87-88).

Especially in Native American tribal myths, the trickster reveals itself in animal form and tries to mimic other animals that have special abilities like flying or hunting skills. Partly due to its voraciousness it eventually fails and ends up as an object of ridicule or suffers severe punishment. However, these efforts are not so much the caricatures of its own nature as the parody of the shaman who claims to possess higher powers unavailable to humans. Humor, claims Ricketts (1966), has a religious value here: it is a way for the storyteller to laugh at mankind’s futile efforts to achieve omnipotence, to admit failure and to eventually see the irony of its own existence. For the trickster knows that the complete conquest of the unknown is impossible but at least it does not fool itself with the idea of having achieved it through the worship of the divine. Ultimately, Ricketts concludes, that “while the shaman and his spirits provided them with an opening to another world and the possibility of transcending the weaknesses of the human condition, the trickster enabled them to endure what even the gods cannot cure ultimately, the absurdity of human existence.” (p. 105). This way, where the shaman is a person of appreciation and awe in the community, the trickster stands in the center of affection.

2/3 The Heuristic Guide to the Trickster

Some of the above features are characteristic of the trickster in some shamanistic mythologies, but again, tricksters are part of almost every storytelling tradition and come in various shapes and forms. In addition, as Hynes (2009) remarks, characterization requires the observer to draw borders around phenomena, and tricksters are infamous for evading such categories. Indeed, William J. Hynes provided probably the most consistent heuristic guide to characterising the trickster to this day. His six-point typology, however, is rather a loose theoretical guideline than a checklist of properties: some tricksters might possess most of these features, others show similar traits to a lesser degree.

Hynes' summarizes the six commonalities of the trickster as:

- 1 - Ambiguous and Anomalous
- 2 - Deceiver and Trick-Player
- 3 - Shape-Shifter
- 4 - Situation-Inventor
- 5 - Messenger and Imitator of the Gods
- 6 - Sacred and Lewd Bricoleur

The following chapter is an attempt to elaborate on the above points with examples from different oral traditions. It is also an attempt at making a distinction between characteristics of discursive nature, that is, ambiguity and liminality and the latter five features, which are performative examples of the former. Therefore, more attention will be paid to how the trickster's double-sided persona can be better understood, which eventually will lead to a more logical understanding of it being discourse.

2/3/1 Ambiguity and the Liminal

Jung (2012) claims that seeing phenomena from a dualistic aspect is “simply an expression of the polaristic structure of the psyche, which like any other energetic system is dependent on the tension of opposites” (p. 149). Some would argue that it is a characteristic of post-Enlightenment Western logic. Salinas (2013) regards such a dualistic mode as being too typical of Euro-American knowledge schemes and failing to accurately represent indigenous tricksters. He refers to Turner's explanation that the “trickster's ‘anti-mythological’ task is to enact and embody difference in established orders”. More than dialectical oppositions, Salinas claims, the extremities he represents can be seen in “dialogical relationships, speaking to each other, and grounded in the more primary function of crossing borders.” (p. 145)

Kremer & Jackson-Paton (2012) agree that tricksters move “between the above and below, heaven and earth; they are on the road and reign the inbetween; they are the spirits of the threshold, the liminal” (p. 65). According to Hynes, they escape binary distinctions and exist beyond borders. They are both “outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order.” They move in and out of dividing lines, “be it religious,

cultural, linguistic, epistemological, or metaphysical” (Hynes, 2009, p. 34.). Salinas (2013) argues, though, that this ambiguity does not suggest absurdity, that is, the lack of logical explanations or meaning. It does, on the contrary, challenge the consensual character of social constructions that taken-for-granted agreements and solid categories can and must be deconstructed in order to open up to new, playful, and creative ways of misreading or understanding.

Furthermore, Priyadharshini (2012) advises against the trickster being seen as merely an outsider, which would presuppose that he is completely beyond the confines of social structures and compositions. Referring to Conroy & Davies, she suggests that “the Trickster participates in and is validated by the structures he [she] simultaneously mocks and contests” (as cited in Priyadharshini, 2012, p. 551). While the selfish buffoon demonstrates the often “dubious and untrustworthy” nature of tricksters, she elaborates, these often malicious and destructive acts from a figure who stands on the margin of society are not those of a hero who strives for social harmony (p. 550). This, however, does not contradict the idea of the trickster being a culture hero as, in Bakhtin’s understanding, “the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity” (as cited in Salinas, 2013).

Symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner’s theory and research are largely based on liminality as a ritual practice in indigenous cultures. In rites of passage, that is, celebrations when a member of the community changes status or moves from one group to another, the liminal phase represents a temporary state between the ones of separation and incorporation. Such phases often result in what Turner refers to as *communitas*, “the ritual leveling process containing the potential for new social arrangements, new forms of imagination, of ritualized play” (Weber, 1995, p. 528).

In rituals, claims Turner, ‘threshold people’ or ‘edgemen’ are deprived of their previous identity and do not yet possess a new one. Their positions are “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural states” (as cited in Salinas, 2013). This, according to Turner, ultimately offers them “the freedom, the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds, the free play of mankind’s cognitive and imaginative capacities” (as cited in Weber, 1995). This freedom, or in other words chance, according to Alexander (1991), ultimately serves communitarian ends: “The primary motivation behind ritual is the desire to break free temporarily of social structure in order to transcend its existential limitations and reconfigure it along communitarian lines“ (p. 27).

Weber (1995) suggests that one has to make a distinction between ‘outsiders’, who are either temporarily or situationally set on the sidelines of the community and ‘marginals’, who simultaneously belong to two or more groups of different cultural values. Such representatives of the latter are first or second generation immigrants or people with mixed ethnic origin, who often refuse to seek comfort within their communities, their minority culture. Rather than trying to resolve the ambiguity of their position, they sometimes deliberately posit themselves on the border, claiming a critical and characteristically postmodern stance: “[c]laiming the border amounts to a declaration of interdisciplinary - and narrative - freedom: the border, porous and open, emerges as a zone capable of nourishing a rich grid of “crisscrossed” ..., multiple identities, a celebration of ambiguity as the condition of the postmodern self, and is now the space of real ... potential” (Weber, 1995, p. 532).

2/3/2 The Playful Antics of the Trickster

Beyond the intrinsically ambiguous and liminal, mythological stories of different cultures describe the trickster’s antics in five different commonalities. These are deception and trick-playing, shape-shifting, the inversion of situations, serving as a link between mankind and the higher powers, and finally, the acts of being a recycler for its own purposes. The following chapter is a short description of these antics with some examples.

Referring to Greenway, Hynes (2009) claims that most tricksters are like infants sometimes acting unknowingly, other times with a hidden agenda: both as an “unconscious numbskull” and a “malicious spoiler”, whose actions often personify disorder, misfortune and improprieties (p. 35). Deception and trick-playing often turns back on the instigator and the trickster itself becomes the object of mockery. In Sioux and Cheyenne tales Iktomi, the spider often gets into such trouble. Young (1995) recalls that one time he sticks his head into a buffalo skull and stumbles home blindly, where his wife crushes the skull with a hammer. With a devastating headache he later realizes that a mouse living in the skull chewed off much of his hair (p. 495). Hynes also recalls the Uncle Remus tales, where the Br’er Fox makes a tar-baby to catch Br’er Rabbit. When getting no response out of the doll, Br’er Rabbit starts to punch it, but in the process he gets more and more stuck to the tar-baby.

As part of the trick-playing and deception, tricksters often transsubstantiate into non-human forms like natural phenomena or other animals. One of the better-known figures in Native American myths, Coyote is a typical shape-shifter who at times shows himself

in human form only to shift back to the shape of the animal. Priyadharshini (2012) accounts for such inconsistencies by observing that tricksters are more performative than analytical: “the character [depends] less on the forms it takes and more on its performative actions” (p. 551), whether that be trick-playing, deception, shape shifting, imitation or inversion of situations. Such a character is the Native American Coyote, who can shift from an animal into a human form and back, exactly because in storytelling it serves as a figurative device of narration. Another example of shape-shifting is the Chinese Monkey King, Sun Wu Kong, who is bestowed with the power of the 72 transformations. In a battle with the Immortal Master Erlang, thus, the monkey changes into different animal forms: a sparrow, a cormorant, a small fish, a water snake, and finally the master, Erlang himself, as the situation requires.

A similar fight takes place in Chapter 2 of *The Journey to the West*, where the monkey battles with the Monstrous King of Havoc. Losing his scimitar in the fight, Wu Kong suddenly shifts into hundreds of little monkeys who raid the Monstrous King. In the meantime, Wukong snatches the scimitar and breaks the King’s skull in two (as cited in Walker, 1998). Thus, through shape-shifting and trickery, the trickster can exploit situations, places, persons, or beliefs to its own advantage, questioning the taken-for-granted rules of any ethical or belief systems. “No order is too rooted, no taboo too sacred, no god too high, no profanity too scatological that it cannot be broached or inverted” (Hynes, 2009, p. 37). Sometimes it inverts situations for his own benefit, at other times with the intention of profaning social beliefs: the stronger those beliefs are, the more outrageous the profanity is. Similarly to Ricketts’ (2009) argument, the sacred activities of the shaman in many Northern American tribes are counterbalanced by the profanities of trickster stories. Parallel to this is the figure of Herschel Osterpoler, the Jewish trickster, whose mockery, explains Hynes, is often targeted toward the rabbi, the Talmud or traditions of Jewish matriarchy.

Tricksters often imitate gods to pose a threat to belief systems or issues of tradition considered sacred. They often move between the profane and the holy with great ease and impose punishment or simply disturbance on people violating divine rules or alternately break divine taboos like Prometheus who stole fire from the gods to bring it to the people. However, they also function as a link, a translator between the transcendental and the human. Whereas Ricketts (2009) claims that tricksters, as opposed to shamans - have no relation to the transcendent beside stealing natural resources, in many mythologies they might, indeed, represent the intentions of the gods. Tricksters are often mediators between life and death or cultural transformers, who enable humans to obtain superhuman powers without being personally involved in breaking the rules, while they enjoy a degree of immunity themselves (Hynes, 2009, p. 40).

In Yoruba as well as Fon mythology, for example, the figure of Esu-Elegbara or Legba is considered the messenger and interpreter between humans and the divine. Where one's fate is written in the sacred texts, Esu is a middleman who not only translates these 'works' to humans but also offers an exit out of this determinacy if one shows respect by way of sacrifice. Similarly, Ricketts (1966) recalls the Great Plains myth of Coyote incidentally turning into an impersonator of a spiritual being after sticking his head into an elk skull.

Tricksters are often depicted as largely sexed and often distasteful characters. West African tribal sculptures of Esu accentuate his sexual desires by a large penis that also symbolizes him being an intermediary between two worlds (Gates, 1988, p. 28). Another example Ricketts (1966) recalls is of the South Western, Great Plains area of America: Coyote as the popular trickster-hero is assisted by his "excrement advisors" who come out from his belly whenever he is in trouble and offer help. The obscenity of such stories is to underline the trickster's role as a selfish buffoon, whose activities cannot only serve divine purposes but may also manifest in earthly profanities. As Hynes claims, it is the role of the sacred and lewd bricoleur, who is offering a solution with utilizing makeshift tools the original purpose of which is altered or transcended through the process. Ultimately, "any or all of such lewd acts or objects [are] transformed into occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations" (Hynes, 2009, p. 42).

2/4 Trickster in Ethnic Mythologies

As mentioned before, tricksters are a part of almost every mythology. They are well documented in the Native American as well as in the rich African folklore, and such figures also made a successful transition into America from the Far East. The following pages aim at providing an overview over some features of these traditions. As even a modest attempt of an analysis would exceed the limitations of this thesis, I wish to concentrate on three particular characters that take major roles in these mythologies as well as in the three novels of interest: Legba, Coyote, and the Monkey King.

2/4/1 The African-Caribbean Trickster

The people enslaved and transported to the American continent in the centuries before the abolition took effect carried with themselves a rich and lively oral tradition from Africa. These mythologies, though originally quite diverse in the native continent itself, have not only survived centuries of aggressive attempts of christianizing and Western indoctrination but have also been forged through the interaction of the various peoples sharing a common fate in slavery. Today, different versions of a Pan-African culture can be found all over South and North America, the Caribbean region or the African continent. They are not entirely unaffected by other religions, particularly Christianity, and have lost some of the oral characteristics but the vividness of their imagery and their religious, metaphysical and linguistic originality is still astonishing.

In his acclaimed book on black literature, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates makes an account of two oral traditions, of the Fon in Benin and the Yoruba in Nigeria. These two West-African ethnic groups are geographically close to each other and the cultures were in mutual interaction for centuries. One central figure of both creation myths is Esu Elegbara, or as it is called by the Fon, Legba. Descendants of this mythical hero can be observed today in Brazil (Exu), Cuba (Echu-Elegua), Haiti (Papa Legba), or even the United States (Papa La Bas).

Esu as a trickster is characterized by an ambiguous sexuality: it is sometimes depicted in female as well as in male form, other times as a genderless figure to emphasize the unreconciled nature of opposites, as Pelton described:

Its meaning is not so much rooted in the coincidence of opposites or in the mere passage between structure or antistructure as it is in a perception of life as a rounded wholeness

whose faces both mask and disclose each other. These faces are simultaneously present, but this is a simultaneity of process, a turning by which one face not only succeeds but is transformed into the other.

(as cited in Gates, 1988, p. 30)

Gates summarizes the role of Esu in these various traditions as the messenger and interpreter of gods: in Fon mythology he stands between the double-gendered creator, Mawu-Lisa and the Book of Fate (Fa) as a “wandering signifier” (p. 23), the only one who can read the divine text. Similarly, the Yoruba divination verses of Ifa represent formal language, the meta-level of which is none other than Esu, the interpreter. Contrary to the Western concept of a fixed, written text with a closure, the texts of both of West-African religions are open-ended, enigmatic, and “rhapsodized”. Therefore, the indeterminacy that lies in interpretation is supposed to mark understanding from truth, in other words, the elusiveness of figurative language. As Gates explains:

If Ifa, then is our metaphor for the text itself, then Esu is our metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text. Whereas Ifa represents closure, Esu rules the process of disclosure, a process that is never-ending, that is dominated by multiplicity. Esu is discourse upon a text; it is the process of interpretation that he rules.

(Gates, 1988, p. 21)

However, such texts do not simply involve stories of creation and the life of the gods, but also bear the fate of every human: Mawu creates men by turning over the text of Fa to Esu. The fate of each man is written in the Book, though not literally, and interpretation offers a rhetorical chance of avoiding a pre-determined fate. Therefore, by winning the favor of Legba, Herskovits writes, one is offered a way out of a “supernaturally willed dilemma” (as cited in Gates, 1988, p. 15).

In Haitian vodou (a.k.a. voodoo or hoodoo) rituals, the role of Papa Legba is similar: he is the guardian of the crossroads, a mediator between the god Bondye and humans, who directs everyone’s fate. Between the two realms, the cosmic and the earthly, there exist a number of spiritual powers and mysteries, referred to by a common name as loa or lwa. These “spiritual entities are not regarded as individual gods but as active agents whom Bondye has placed in charge of the workings of specific aspects of the world” (Murrell, 2009, p. 74).

In the creolized version of African myths there are ‘fiery’ spirits, called petwo (petro) loa and ‘cool’ or friendly ones, named rada loa. One has to be cautious with not offending the former, while the latter, like Legba, are generally responsible for the well-being of people. As Murrell describes:

Their virtues are not an inherent characteristic trait but an ascribed dynamic mythological state of existence; they operate in responsive relationships that require constant attention and care. This care is demonstrated in the gifts they receive in the form of food, money, respect, worship, and other intangibles in return for protection and guidance.

(Murrell, 2009, pp. 76-77)

A brief introduction to the individual's relation to his loa and the ritual practices of Vodou, this fascinating, though often misinterpreted religion is key to deciphering the text of Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, a novel largely relying on neo-hoodoo traditions. Further commentary on the loa, particularly Legba, therefore, will be offered in the chapter devoted to African-American literature.

2/4/2 The Native American Trickster

As mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter, Levi Strauss' essay, *The Structural Study of the Myth* (1955) asks the question "Why is it that throughout North America [the trickster's] part is assigned practically everywhere to either coyote or raven?" He explains this with the role of carnivorous animals in connecting conflicting notions like life and death or agriculture vs. hunting. In Levi Strauss' structural cycle "two opposite terms with no intermediary are replaced by two equivalent terms which allow a third one as a mediator" (p. 440). Life and death, for instance, becomes agriculture and war, with hunt being the intermediary between the two. Consequently, the semantic tension between herbivorous and carnivorous animals is released by the intermediary of carrion-eaters that eat meat without killing other animals. Such carrion-eaters are raven or coyote.

Carroll (1981, 1984), however, argues that the trickster appears in various other forms around the Northern half of the continent. He refers to several Amerindian studies claiming that from New Mexico to the Great Plains there are seven common forms that tricksters appear in: Coyote, Raven, Nanabush, Rabbit, Hare, Iktomi, and Nihanca. Carroll concludes that almost all trickster figures in North America take shape as animals with solitary habits: coyote, raven, and rabbit (or hare), which underlines that they are outside the confines of tribal society.

Animals appearing in human form and showing human characteristics are a common phenomenon in various mythologies as well as literary works. Richardson (2012) underlines the role of such creatures in subject formation, as they accentuate the instability of the 'I'. In tribal mythologies, he claims, humans do not fully occupy the animal's body; they rather represent the change in signifying, in other words, the

flexibility of the metaphor in the narrative. He refers to Bakhtin's idea of "the point of view in the word," or the shifting focus of the narrative subject: "Native American Indian literatures which 'author animals' figuratively and metaphorically, motivate and intend particular forms of responsible being by being situated within the points of view of the narrative" (Richardson, 2012, pp. 671-672).

Kroeber (1979) exemplifies the above through one of the most popular figures in Indian storytelling, Coyote. The impersonator of trickster-transformer, he often appears in animal form first only to be transformed into human and later back into animal with no apparent reason. Kroeber warns us from seeing such shape-shifting as an inconsistency, these transformations are rather a way of eluding any solid signification and at the same time expressing the "essentially metamorphic" nature of the world (p 76).

Coyote is a regular character in tribal stories around the South-West, California or even the Great Plains, where he appears in a great number of roles. Sometimes he is the impersonator of the Creator, other times a shape-shifter, the one who steals goods from divine powers to bring them to mankind, or simply a sacred fool. One of the best known tropes is Coyote stealing the fire, a story analogous to the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus. Ricketts (1966) explains the structure of this story in three steps: the hero journeys to the spiritual realm (either alone or accompanied by humans), he tricks or outwits the superior power, and finally steals fire (or any other valuable commodity). In this story, claims Ricketts, Coyote is both the culture hero, who serves the good of humanity, and the transformer who turns the world into a more habitable form.

In the wide array of Coyote stories the hero often finds himself in a contest with other earthly or abstract creatures. He usually tries to trick them but ends up on the losing side, often due to his greediness or sexual desires, such as in the Achumawi legend, where he races with Cloud for nice weather, and while taking a lunch-break he loses the contest. At times, such rivalries become the source of creation myths: according to the Nez Perce myth, Coyote fights Wishpoosh, the giant beaver, to gain a fishing lake. Seeing that the beaver is much bigger in size, he turns into a tree branch, and upon being swallowed by his enemy, shifts back into his original form. He then stabs Wishpoosh in the heart winning the battle and of the body parts of the carcass he creates tribes. In another better-known tale he tries to fly on the back of a bird but eventually loses balance and falls, his body scattered all over the land. The story, according to Ricketts, is a mockery of the shaman, who claims to possess supernatural powers while being nothing more than a human himself.

Despite the difference between these stories, and the apparently conflicting roles of the trickster-hero, it does not take a great leap to understand the metaphysical point of

view here, the basic dilemma concerning human agency and divine power, that is, fate. The rivalry between the trickster, and the spirit of higher power, according to Ricketts, refers to two concepts of religion: one of the shaman, that compensates for ignorance and the fear of the Other with the truth of an omniscient and omnipotent concept of God, and another, a godless one, that instead of clear-cut answers and transcendence seeks comfort in the power of humanity's struggle to succeed. Coyote, therefore, despite all his human characteristics like fallibility, sexual greed and gluttony, or foolishness, is the true transformer and creator of the world, concludes Ricketts:

The trickster does not yield to the temptation to turn aside to worship strange gods, but he holds sacred only the struggle itself and the sum of its past victories: culture, the world-as-it-is, and the world as it has been arranged and understood by man." (p. 347)

Authored animals like Coyote in North American folklore are an especially complex topic, due to the different tribal traditions and the oral characteristics of narration, by which these stories evolved and mutated into numerous other fables. The above pages were intended as a short introduction to where the character is placed among indigenous tricksters. More attention on the postmodern characteristics of this hero will be given in the chapter on Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*.

2/4/3 A Journey to the West: The Simian Trickster

"A monkey's changed body weds the human mind./Mind is a monkey — this, the sense profound" (Yu, 1977-84, p. 168)

Explaining the origins of the late Ming period novel, *The Journey to the West* (or in the Chinese original, *Xiyouji*), Subbaraman (2002) finds significant parallels between the Chinese mythological figure, Sun Wu Kong and its Rama counterpart, Hanuman, two monkey figures sharing much of the same stories and characteristics. He raises the issue whether the popular Chinese mythological hero is of indigenous origin or simply an adaptation of the Indian character. Walker (1998) describes the port city of Quanzhou, situated on one of the main maritime trade routes in Southeast Asia, as a melting pot of different cultures from the Far East as well as India and Arabia. This city was one of the major scenes for the cult of Hanuman: shrines and temples with sculptures of the monkey were erected, and oral storytelling served as a source for what later became a literary rendition of the legend of Sun Wu Kong.

While monkey myths and legends developed and were sustained for several hundred years, the most complete literary version of *The Journey to the West* was not written until the 17th century, when the author, Wu Cheng'en collected these literary fragments, mythological tales, and religious and philosophical beliefs into a 100 chapter long history. The plot of *The Journey to the West* is centered around a monk, Xuanzang (also known in the Western versions as Tripitaka) who, accompanied by four mythical figures (the Monkey, the Pig, Friar Sand, and the Dragon Horse), takes a westward journey to India in search of Buddhist scriptures.

Different accounts consider Sun Wu Kong, or the Monkey King, as the central character of the legend and the first seven chapters are almost exclusively dedicated to its life and previous history. Originally trained in the spirit of taoism and having mastered “the arts of seventy-two transformations” (Cozad, 1998, p. 136) it sets out to claim supernatural powers and omnipotence, first in the Underworld, and later in Heaven. He finally meets his equal in Buddha himself, who locks him up in his palms and buries him under a mountain for five hundred years. Finally, he returns as a convert of buddhism and as the helper of the monk Xuanzang.

While the origins of the monkey are somewhat diffuse and buried in the oral tradition, there are three antecedents of the monkey that Lai (1994) identifies in Chinese mythology: the White Ape; the monkey claiming to be the Sage Equal to Heaven, who was defeated by the god Erlang; and Wuzhiki, the Water Monkey. Walker (1998) refers to Gulik, who traces back the White Monkey legend to as early as the 3rd-8th century B.C., when some animals were believed to possess *qi* (or as it is often referred to these days: *ch'i*), that is, the mystical power of the cosmos. In taoism, she continues, the gibbon had the ability to inhale *qi* and obtain the power of the occult, as well as assume human forms and live a life of several hundred years. Legends from the Sechuan area also talk about giant, demonic apes who abduct women, which is a well documented motif in Hanuman-stories in India.

Another frequent trope is what Lai (1994) calls “the conflict between protean siblings” (p. 36): an example of this is the previously mentioned battle between the river god Erlang and the Monkey, who is supposedly a terrestrial animal. Like Proteus, the ancient hellenic river god known for its elusive and flexible shape, both of them can shift shapes and so their fight becomes a never-ending adventure of seemingly lost situations and sudden turns of fortune. In this duel, explains Lai, Erlang represents water and Monkey is the metaphor of lunar metamorphosis. Since lunar cycles and water are commonly known to be interrelated, the borders between the two personalities are blurred; in the illogicality of the myth, any of them can take up whichever form:

In myths, opposites may meet in classic *coincidentia oppositorum*, and as a part of medieval drama sinners might turn into saints and monsters end up as converts and defenders of the faith. In other words, the very inconsistencies may well provide clues for penetrating the ancient myths and their evolution. And as long as we are dealing in lunar and aquatic myths, we should be prepared for the lunacy of moons and the slipperiness of water. (Lai, 1994, p. 33)

Ironically, just as Erlang, who achieved a cult in Chinese mythology as the the water god, Monkey often appears as an aquatic hero. The reason for this, according to Lai, is that in Chinese culture all land is believed to rest on water and, therefore, any stream leads to an opening to the subterranean ocean, where one could disappear or be expelled to. To be buried under a mountain gives an access to these waters, and in Chinese myths vile creatures like Wuzhiki, the water ogre, are often confined to such fate. In *Xiyouji* the water monkey appears as an antagonist of Sun Wu Kong, trying to block the group of travellers in continuing their journey, which, again, shows how ambivalent water can be as a force of nature.

Monkey, thus, bears traits reminiscent of tricksters previously discussed: they are perplexing creatures related to the fluid medium of water; they move between life and the underworld with great ease; and they are capable of shape shifting. Finally, their story often speaks about a violent character claiming supernatural powers, who engages in a battle with a divine counterpart, and eventually meets a downfall and banishment from this earth. But beside concordances to the heuristic checklist, there is one area that gives a deeper insight into the postmodern characteristics of the Monkey King: one of religious allegory.

Yu (2008) raises a valid question regarding the plot: “why [does] the novel’s scripture-seeker require(s) an animal companion-guardian of such complexity and magnitude in personality and character” (p. 28)? Searching for an answer he refers back to the first seven chapters of the novel, a prequel of the journey itself, that covers Wu Kong’s rise, fall, and eventual conversion to buddhism. In his initial state “the random, seemingly uncontrollable movements of a monkey symbolize the waywardness of man before he is able to achieve the composure which can only come through being a disciple of Buddha” (Walker, 1998, p. 64). The journey from this form of ‘not-knowing’ through the claiming of omnipotence and eventual illumination is a trope that repeats itself through a mythological cycle.

In his battle with the Four Vedic Atlases, Monkey is defeated by an old folk hero-turned-buddhist convert, Erlang. The story, then, resurfaces during the Journey, when Wu Kong himself becomes the convert-defender fighting off pagan spirits. What Cozad (1998) described as an exogenous animal figure that reflects a juxtaposition to the ethic/religious

norm as a demonized 'Other', thus becomes either marginalized or recruited as a 'tutelary deity.' This conversion, suggests Lai (1994), is a cycle represented in the way ancient gods and demiurges were subdued and recruited in the service of new religions.

In the chan buddhist tradition the ambiguity of the story of Erlang and the Monkey, according to Lai, represents not the fight between two primeval forces, the good and the bad, but rather the belief that forces of nature, like water, can both work for the benefit or the evil of mankind. As eleventh-century author Ch'eng Hao put it: "the goodness and evil of the world are both equally Heavenly Principle. To say that something is evil does not mean that it is inherently so. It is merely because it goes too far or does not go far enough" (as cited in Cozad, 1998, p. 119).

Finally, out of the previous category emerges the subversive chan trickster: the Monkey, "the powerful other who disdains what is 'appropriate' and, as such, disdains that cosmic order which 'appropriate' norms sustain" (Cozad, 1998, p. 137). He is the embodiment of chaos in the system, who stands in contrast to the representative of traditional buddhism, the monk. This is, however, not to indicate that he cannot be useful during the pilgrimage. Quite the contrary: taking up the position of a tutelary deity he does the 'dirty work' of stealing and trickery, whenever the monk gets impeded in the "pilgrim's progress" by the "slavish devotion to the formulaic doctrines" (p. 139) of his religion. Thus, by jumping back and forth between the role of master and discipline he, again, becomes the subversive culture hero residing in the liminal:

The dialectic is therefore not one of surpassing (which still implies mastery, hierarchy, power) but rather one of subversion - the result of an 'interstitial thinking,' of an active disjunction of monolithic 'structures'" (Faure 1991: 30). Monkey is the perfect medium for such a message, since that which cannot be contained is understood to cause the "active disjunction of monolithic structures." And in the reality of that interstitial nature resides all the beauty, truth, and subversive essence of particularity, a particularity that consistently shoulders apart and overruns the constraints of a hierarchical classificatory structure, thus allowing, in this case, Monkey to spring forward as the representative of this "antiinstitutional institution" (Faure 1991: 18).

(Cozad, 1998, p. 140-141)

The following chapters are an attempt to look into how this subversive formation works in the context of postmodern fiction.

3 The Problematics of Literary Ethnicity

During the research phase of this thesis an important categorization issue turned up, namely whether there is an umbrella term under which the representatives of so different literary traditions can be characterized? To take a further step, is it correct to apply such a term merely on the basis that the authors are representatives of ethnic groups sharing the same historical predicament and simultaneously positioned within the same dominant discourse, that of American prose? Is it true that African and Native Americans alike experienced a common history of oppression and colonization, while Asian Americans suffered under the same schemata of prejudice, which resulted in a shared critical viewpoint?

As Ellison put it, “similar responses are reflected in stories that have parallel ways of coping with oppressive situations. Beyond this lay a bond that united peoples who shared a harmonious interaction with natural forces and a deep regard for the actuality and symbolism of animal behavior” (as cited in Gates, 1988). On the other hand, the trickster heroes of Reed, Kingston and King can not be exclusively seen as representatives of their own culture but they are also ‘profoundly American’, their “dilemmas of identity and struggles for aesthetic and personal liberation strike familiar chords” in American readers as well (Lowe, 1996, p. 124).

To achieve a balance between these “divided loyalties” (Lowe, 1996, p. 105) is a complicated issue for author, critic and reader alike. The term ethnic literature might already awaken some warning signals as being unnecessarily categorical and, in spite of the original intention of bringing positive focus on multicultural writing, somewhat stigmatizing. Part of the problem is, that ethnicity is hard to describe outside of essentialistic terms. Ethnic groups are not homogenous, neither are they one-sidedly affected and absorbed by the majority culture, at least not without reflection. Such communities, as Atkinson (1999) summarized, are sites of interaction, instability and hybridity, where “cultural influences from the ‘West’ have been relentlessly indigenized, sometimes to the extent that they become unrecognizable” (p. 632)

According to Ostendorf (1985), ethnicity is a conflict term, as “it involves agonistic interaction between different culture groups operating within a common, dominant social context” (p. 579). The debate over ethnic identity, therefore, is not unaffected by the question of power, which, as Foucault described, “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (as cited in Atkinson, 1999). From a critical standpoint, the term “ethnic literature” sounds misleading in that it suggests a homogenous culture submitted to and defined in relation to a majority discourse.

On the other hand, Reilly (1978) remarks that ethnicity is not only identity but also strategy; a statement that arises from a necessity to understand one's position in historical processes and simultaneously to reflect on it. The degree to which one reflects on that is a personal choice but merely being part of an ethnic group does not make an author and his body of work one of 'ethnic' relevance. Paradoxically, the audience often assume that the 'minority author' represents a certain critical stance against the dominant discourse and challenges the literary canon. Such expectations, as well-intended as they might be, are especially counter-productive where underprivileged voices within the ethnic community itself fail to be heard when favoring ethnicity over other aspects like gender.

Positioning oneself on an imaginary scale ranging from mainstream and marginal discourse, thus, has always been a diffuse endeavor. This is even more the case in the age of the postmodern where previous themes of double consciousness or shifting loyalties gave way to more complex stances of "ambivalent socialization patterns" or ironic vision (Ostendorf, 1985, p. 579). Assuming a political agenda and promoting a "pathological viewpoint" (Davenport, 1989, p. 54), therefore, unjustly dismisses writers that tend to communicate their heroes' 'ethnic strategies' less explicitly.

One can define ethnic literature as literature with relevance to the author's ethnic background. In this case the dilemma, according to Reilly (1978), is that the focus on the ethno-cultural or political aspect tends to overshadow the literary value of many a great work of this kind. Ethnic literature, he concludes, is as much of an aesthetic as a social-political issue. Similarly, Grobman (2005) distinguishes between two rivalling positions in the field, one that promotes the politics of the text and another that vouches for the creative process as the rendering of human experience. "Literary judgements," she claims, "are inevitable, and aesthetic judgements are never made in a vacuum, devoid of ideology or interest. But aesthetics need not to be reduced to politics" (p. 153).

There are different definitions referring to writers with multicultural background. Theoreticians like Reilly or Davenport predominantly use the term 'ethnic literature'. The problem with this term is being too static in suggesting that ethnicity is a given quality, appealing more to the collective rather than the individual. This way, any such work becomes a part of what Barker (2000) calls "the memory industries", remembering being a practice of both representation and reconstruction – without much agency (p. 83). Other terms like 'multiethnic', 'intercultural', or 'multicultural' are only slightly better but still largely technical and alienating. To be able to find a better suited collective term I, therefore, decided to turn to the metaphorical, relying on Stuart Hall's distinction of identities.

In Hall's definition, "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (as cited in Barker, 2000). In this sense, beyond the seeking of 'roots', identity becomes more of an active search for 'routes', a mixture of "interpellation" and "interpretation" (Barker, 2000, p. 80). This is a distinction that, in my opinion, can be applied to literary forms previously discussed, especially as it has been widely used in other branches of art like music.

If one is to make a comparison between literature and music, it seems reasonable to draw a parallel between live versus recorded music and oral vs. written storytelling on the other hand. In music, the experience of a live performance is often sustained on records. Improvisation plays an important part in that music does not necessarily lose its liveliness in recorded form. Literature as a medium is fundamentally different from music. There have been various attempts to collect and document oral folk traditions but the fixed characteristics of the written form do not serve justice to the vividness of live storytelling and the swift evolution of the story by word-of-mouth. That is the reason why speaking of 'roots literature' sounds somewhat of an anachronism.

However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use the counterpart 'routes literature'. On the one hand because it refers implicitly to Hall's widely used distinction and thus implying the presence of 'roots' in 'routes'. This way, one does not need a description or further explanation of the term, since, such as Derrida's concept of differance suggests, the meaning of the word is derivative of other words in the same semantic field. On the other hand it is a step away from technical terms and delves into the figurative by emphasizing the unique efforts of authors in search for an individual voice within different communities or discourses.

4 Methodological Considerations

Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) point out that methodology in postmodern theory often implicates an ‘anything goes’ approach. Somewhat similarly, Richardson (2013) criticizes traditional ideas of qualitative research that imagine the researcher as a kind of a machinist with a tool-kit that is practically ‘applicable’ to social sciences. He refers to Denzin and Lincoln, who suggest that bricolage as methodology can be better aimed at “the value-laden nature of inquiry.” This is especially true to topics of ethnographical nature, where an interdisciplinary standpoint can be more lucrative. As Kincheloe remarks:

A deep interdisciplinarity is justified by an understanding of the complexity of the object of inquiry. As parts of complex systems and intricate processes, objects of inquiry are far too mercurial to be viewed by a single way of seeing or a snapshot of a particular phenomenon at a specific moment in time.

(as cited in Richardson, 2013)

From a methodological aspect, bricolage involves a variety of methods applied for a specific purpose, in our case, one of educational research. Richardson (2013) claims that in areas bordering on postmodern, feminist, or critical studies such a hybrid approach represent “more equitable social relations in research contexts and likewise disrupt the ossified boundaries of disciplines” (p. 783).

For the purposes of educational research, more specifically the didactics of foreign language learning, the topic of this thesis can be viewed from the perspectives of literary theory, ethnography, hermeneutics, postmodernism or social semiotics. However, a more flexible methodology is advised to take into consideration all of the above and, at the same time, none of them exclusively. The reason for this is that language, as well as its related notions, such as sign and signification, metaphor, discourse, culture, or narrative are relevant areas of the above research fields.

Gerald Vizenor’s previously mentioned critique of traditional hermeneutics pointed out that such research is generally aimed at the validity, objectivity and authenticity of the text as well as the bias within that. With regard to literary texts, and particularly ones with postmodern traits, such efforts prove to be ineffective as the focus is diverted from the truth value of the text. In the process of understanding topics like the relationship between text and reader, language and consciousness, culture and aesthetic, subjectivity and narrative come into perspective. Such ways of knowing, as in indigenous contexts,

will eventually raise questions that transcend the realm of reading and reflecting on the text. This is a method of discursive activity Vizenor refers to as trickster hermeneutics.

Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000) explain objective hermeneutics as neither a distanced, monologic activity, nor a passive, receptive role from the researcher's part. It is rather a dialogue between the reader and the text, one that raises questions on the basis of preunderstandings. In this process one is both distanced from the text and at the same time familiar with its background. By jumping back and forth between the whole and the parts, our initial points of inquiry transform into new perspectives and new "patterns of interpretation" (p. 110). Dialogue, on the other hand is not only understood as a relation between text and researcher but also in terms of an interaction between researcher and the eventual reader of the interpretation. In this process, arguments and counter-arguments are presented and thereby, in Madison's terms, the "logic of validation" becomes the "logic of argumentation" (as cited in Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 111).

In existential hermeneutics, somewhat similarly, it is not the end result of interpretation but the experience gained by the process itself that is most important. Dialogue, here, happens between the individual and the world in which one is 'always already' situated. The contemplative subject and his object of observation are, therefore, constructed categories, and it is understanding through a largely intuitive process that brings us closer to getting to know the world, and through that, ourselves. Textual interpretation is at the same time a dialogue with other perspectives that Hans-Georg Gadamer referred to as horizons. In an attempt to understand the world of the other, one never enters these horizons completely free of historical preconceptions that can eventually disturb an objective judgement, claim Alvesson & Sköldbberg. Therefore, it is inevitable that the researcher-reader acts reflexively upon such previous knowledge by creating another plain of dialogue between obtained and inherited data, maintaining a balance between relativism and objectivism.

The discursive characteristics of a process like this become even clearer in relation to trickster texts with postmodern characteristics, where the trickster enters the scene both as an independent actor and as a subject position that can be claimed by any reader, teacher and student alike. Most importantly, as we have previously discussed, trickster itself bears discursive traits through the ambiguity of its character and the elusive nature of literary language. In an attempt to look away from traditional educational literary analysis that focuses on plot, theme and character, this thesis will concentrate on the trickster as a discursive formation.

5 Analysis

The chapter of analysis will start with a brief discussion of the choice of authors and their novels. I will, then, focus on the trickster as a literary figure, particularly in what ways the protagonists of the three stories represent the culture hero of their respective cultural traditions. The analysis will also try to identify other characters with trickster-like qualities and describe how humor contributes to the understanding of the trickster as a comic holotrope.

The discussion will, then, address in what ways tricksters bear discursive characteristics, ways of knowing, community values and oral traditions that are unique for the specific cultural-ethnic groups. I will also address the issue of the divided loyalties of multiethnicity and how the different authors approach the question of ethnical identity.

The last third of the analysis will return to the issue of narrative and plot and will try to identify trickster as more than simply a character, rather a linguistic construct that controls the structure of the novel. In other words, how multiple narratives contribute to a more complex image of the relation between marginalized groups and the dominant discourse. The discussion will eventually lead to the realization that authors can represent trickster characteristics and writing. Similarly to oral storytelling, this can also be an activity of cultural healing.

5/1 The Choice of Authors

When touching on the question of literary ethnicity, I have previously discussed the choice of routes literature as well as the three ethnic groups representing an integral part of North American culture and history. Naturally, with rich literary traditions such as these, it is always difficult to take a narrow cross section and limit our choices to individual authors. The initial aspect of the selection was to find novels that are slightly off the radar of the average European reader but still much acknowledged for their literary value. Both *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Tripmaster Monkey* seem to suit the above description, as being considered part of the larger American literary canon. Similarly, *Green Grass, Running Water* has been awarded various nationwide achievements in Canada.

The literary career of the three writers bears resemblances to each other in some aspects. Being born in the late 30s and early 40s they are all contemporaries, although they started

writing at different periods in their lives. Of the three, Ishmael Reed has the longest and most productive career as both novelist and in other genres like poetry, non-fiction, drama or as a lyricist. The son of a working class family, he gave up his studies quite early to pursue writing. His first book, *The Freelance Pallbearers* was published in 1967, which was followed by a number of novels *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), *Flight to Canada* (1976) and *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). These books are part of a larger creative universe Reed calls the neo-hoodoo aesthetic, incorporating Afro-Caribbean mythology and religion as well as a broad scale of references from Western literary traditions. *Mumbo Jumbo* is probably the best known and most mature example of this body of work.

Maxine Hong Kingston has a long teaching career and has been a fellow-professor to Reed at Berkeley. Her writing did not take off until she moved to Hawaii in the late 1960s. Her first books, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among the Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) are autobiographical novels that were given much critical praise for touching on subjects of ethnicity and feminism. However, it is *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) that really made waves within the Chinese American literary community. Though strongly criticized by fellow authors like Frank Chin for misrepresenting Chinese tradition, *Tripmaster* is a unique tableau of literary cross-references from both Asian and Euro-American descent.

Of all the three authors, it is Thomas King who contributes with the most colorful ethnic background, being of Cherokee, Greek and German ancestry. A native of California, after a stint at Sacramento State University, he travelled around the world and worked a number of odd jobs. This early period of his life is briefly documented in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*. Developing an interest in indigenous studies and oral narrative traditions, King moved to Canada in 1980 while working at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, and at the University of Guelph. His first novel, *Medicine River* was published quite late, in 1990. The book was followed by *A Coyote Columbus Story*, a collection of children's stories, and the critically acclaimed *Green Grass, Running Water*, both in 1993. The latter novel is also a superb example of classic oral stories skilfully incorporated into a postmodern structure.

Reed, Kingston, and King are, beyond doubt, masters of postmodern fiction. What makes them relatively anonymous in European schools is probably the complexity of their work and the plethora of cultural references used which makes them easier to read in their homelands. Many teachers of English would argue that the time devoted to such postmodern fiction is a time better spent on other authors with ethnic references. I would, however, point out that despite the complexity of the three novels their analysis is a rewarding classroom activity that enriches students with a unique perspective on our increasingly fragmented and referential world. I will also argue that this postmodern condition is best approached through humor and sarcasm that brings closer to us even the most complicated metaphysical contexts.

5/2 The Trickster as Literary Figure

The following subchapter intends to identify literary figures in the three novels that are modelled on previously discussed tricksters. While the name of the main protagonists, as well as explicit references indicate a conscious choice on the authors' part to invoke particular culture heroes, it seems logical to ask further questions. Relying once again on Hynes' heuristic guide, I will try to uncover which characteristics of the trickster the three protagonists represent and in what way they are representative of separate traditions of oral storytelling and mythologies. While identifying commonalities between the literary figures, it is important not to draw any fast conclusions, as with any such comparative analysis, one is in danger of cultural generalizations. Progressing further, I will point out other literary characters showing traces of tricksterism, which will eventually lead to the next section of the analysis, that is, to understand the different ways tricksters bear discursive characteristics, how they divert and control the narrative flow.

As mentioned above, protagonists taking up the role of the trickster are easy to identify in the three novels. The names PaPa LaBas and Coyote both explicitly refer to well-known culture heroes. Somewhat similarly, early on in *Tripmaster Monkey*, the protagonist, Wittman reveals his identity in a scene mocking Superman movies: ‘ ”I’ve got to tell you the real truth. No lie. Listen, Lois. Underneath these glasses“ - ripping the glasses off, wiping, them on his sleeve, which he pulled out over his hand, so it looked like one hand was missing - “I am really the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys.” ‘ (Kingston, 1989, p. 33) Such a direct signification leaves little to no doubt about the authors' intention to center their plots around specific cultural tropes, heroes whose identities immediately create ambiguity and dissonance. Be it half animal-half human, vaguely or completely anthropomorphic, these heroes represent true trickster characteristics, although in quite different ways and degrees.

5/2/1 PaPa LaBas, the Hoodoo Trickster

As mentioned, Ishmael Reed's body of work relies on the so-called neo-hoodoo aesthetic, a narrative universe inspired by Voodoo religion and Afro-American cultural tropes. Several of his heroes stand in direct reference to trickster characters: the Loop Garoo Kid in *Yellow Black Radio Broke Down* (1969), for example is a call out on a lycanthropic character (loup garous) known in French-American folklore. Similarly, the protagonist of *Mumbo Jumbo* and its follow-up *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), PaPa LaBas is a direct reference to Legba, or its creolized, North American version, Papa Legba.

Named among the 500 most important books of the Western literary canon by critic Harold Bloom, *Mumbo Jumbo* is Reed's third novel, released in 1972. The novel's plot goes back to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, often referred to as 'the Jazz Age'. Embodying the raw energy and improvisative form of the musical style, as well as the uninhibited freedom of dance, rhythm, sexuality and indigenous philosophy, there is an epidemic called Jes Grew threatening the Western world order. The powers-that-be, including the secret society of the Atonists and its militant wing, the Wallflower Order, are desperate to stop the mysterious plague from spreading all over the country. In order to prevent Jes Grew from finding a definite form, that is, its Text, they enter into alliance with one of the Knights Templar, Hinckle Von Vampton. Having the Text in possession, Von Vampton distributes it into 12 chapters and sends them out to 12 independent persons, the Jes Grew Carriers (JGCs), who are unaware of its value.

What follows is a race against time in the true traditions of the detective noir, between the Wallflower Order versus a group of black visionaries, the Mu'tafikah, and the metaphysical detective PaPa LaBas. Both parts set out to find the Text either to destroy it or to evoke Jes Grew. In the course of the plot, numerous other characters, many representing real literary and political figures, join in to what becomes an allegorical battle between a dominant, reason-driven Western philosophy maintained by the hierarchy of the Christian church and a repressed and exploited, yet colourful and plural, largely spiritual Afro-American culture represented by the aesthetic of the neo-Hoodoo.

The spelling of the name PaPa LaBas (Pa-Pa La-Bas) according to Gates (1988) is in itself a play of repetition, of "doubled doubles", a Yoruba symbolic act that here is a critique on "dualism and binary oppositions" (pp. 221-222). Such a numerical signification follows through the novel both through doubled doubles and the use of the number 3, which will be discussed later. In his appearance LaBas is remarkably similar to the popular voodoo representations of Legba: "wearing his his frock coat, opera hat, smoked glasses and carrying a cane" (Reed, 1996, p. 24). In spite of his walking-talking

persona and his human features, he is vaguely anthropomorphic in showing signs of a superhuman, spiritual force. He maintains the form of a middle-aged man throughout the whole novel, despite a 40-year gap between the main plot and the epilogue. This is a reoccurring theme in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, a sequel to *Mumbo Jumbo*, which describes him as having a “million-year-old Olmec negro face” (as cited in Lindroth, 1996). His mastery in shape-shifting and ambiguity is also emphasized when referred to as “noonDay HooDoo, fugitive hermit, obeah-man, botanist, animal impersonator, 2-headed man, You-Name-It” (Reed, 1996, p. 45). According to Zora Neal Hurston the two-headedness among conjure doctors refers to “twice as much sense” (as cited in Lindroth, 1996).

Being the true mediator between the spiritual world and humans in need of assistance finding a way with their loas, LaBas operates out of his Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, ironically named so by his critics who “sought to interpret the world by using a single loa” (Reed, 1996, p. 24) – a critique on monotheism. However, Fox (1984) suggests, that while in English mumbo jumbo stands for ‘gibberish’, the Mandingo term refers to “a process which calms the troubled spirits of the ancestors” (p. 97). The Cathedral is a building with many rooms, a “protean space” “between the physical and the occult” (Cowley, 1994, p. 1241), reminiscent of the voodoo shrine called ounfo or lakou. Murrell (2009) describes these as either a single room with several altars or a number of rooms each devoted to a separate loa. In urban spaces, he adds, families that gather around such centers are based rather on the service to a specific loa than on blood ties.

The rooms of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral are named after expressions from improvisative music and dance: the Dark Tower Room, the Weary Blues Room, or the Groove Bang and Jive Around Room stage various activities in favor of the loa. In the Aswelay (as in “As We Lay” referring to the rite of sleeping or isolation, the *kouche* – Murrell, 2009) Room the drums are served bootlegged alcohol to sleep after being baptized. The loas embody the uninhibited spirit of the hoodoo, the Work, that escapes the finite textual frame that defines many major faith systems.

The juxtaposition of the Hoodoo with Christianity and Islam becomes even more explicit in the scene called The Battle of Religions, a heated discussion between LaBas and the occultist Black Herman versus the militant islamist academic, Abdul Sufi Hamid - , who refers to the Work as ”a lot of people twisting they butts and getting happy” (Reed, 1996, p. 34). The answer to that is as follows:

Yes, LaBas joins in, where does that leave the ancient Vodun aesthetic: pantheistic, becoming, 1 which bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as the imagination can hold. Infinite Spirits and Gods. So many that it would take a book larger than the Koran

and the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and all of the holy books in the world to list, and still room would have to be made for more. (p. 35)

This apparent binary distinction serves as the central theme of the novel: on the one side are followers of the Work in search of Jes Grew that represents “all that is improvisational, genuine, spiritual” versus the Atonists and the Wallflower Order, the “artificial, controlled, mechanic” (Elias 2000, p. 121). The latter is not only restricted to Christian religion and the politics of hierarchy and oppression but also to the logicism of academic science that propagates knowledge based on positivist criteria. In voodoo terms, according to Reed, this is the work of the *bokor*, a priest that serves both good and evil loa, a practitioner of white magic, which, here is an impostor, a tool for “artistic dishonesty” (Lindroth, 1996, p. 193). The term is explained through the specific examples of Faust, a “quack”, “a humbug who doesn’t know when to stop” (Reed, 1996, p. 91), as well as Jesus and Freud, both examples of an “Atonist compromise” (p. 178).

As a counterpoint stands LaBas, “who carries Jes Grew in him like most other folk carry genes” (Reed, 1996, p. 22). He and his allies, Black Herman and the voodoo general, Benoit Battraville, impersonate the *houngan*, the wise priest, “whose power derives from his connections with the spirit world” (Lindroth, 1996, p. 193). This way, they also bear characteristics of the African-American trickster in being vessels of communication between spheres of the concrete and the abstract. The *houngan* as “ritual expert, diviner or magician, herbal therapist, and confidential counselor” (Murrell, 2009, p. 84) has gone through a long training before taking the initiation and achieving the so-called Asson by his master. LaBas’ superior role is accentuated by claiming that, similarly to Charlie ‘the Bird’ Parker, the legendary bebop saxophonist, he awarded the Asson to himself as “there was no master adapt enough” (Reed, 1996, p. 16).

The *houngan* of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral is responsible for the act of healing rites: with the help of his “technicians” he pleases the loa by regular sacrifice. If one misses the routine activity of feeding the loa, one might be possessed by evil spirits as it happens with Earline, LaBas’ daughter, who is alleged to have “picked up one ... the one with the red dress on” (p. 125-126). The red dress refers to Erzulie, who is the loa representing “female anger and rage” (Murrell, 2009, p. 77). After LaBas fails to heal her through traditional practice, Black Herman, the occultist *houngan*, “international heartbreaker” and “Fish Bewitcher” (pp. 128-129) takes over and succeeds through an impromptu healing rite. Often criticized for representing the rigidity of the old way, LaBas’ old-time trickery fails for not being flexible enough:

Well, it’s like this, PaPa. You always go around speaking as if you were a charlatan and putting yourself down when you are 1 of the most technical dudes with The Work. Abdul

was right that night ... I didn't want to say. You ought to relax. That's our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own. ... What it boils down to, LaBas, is intent. If your heart's there, man, that's ½ the thing about The Work. Even the European Occultists say that. Doing the Work is not like taking inventory. Improvise some. Open up, PaPa. Stretch on out with It. (p. 130)

The Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral as the symbolic center of black spirituality stands in comparison with another allegorical space: the headquarters of the Mu'tafikah. Meetings are held in the outskirts of Chinatown in the basement of a three-story building, which, according to Reed, resembles of Western History: on the first floor there is a store selling religious merchandise, above is a gun store, and on the upper level there is an agency advertising soap products. A multiethnic group of art nappers, led by LaBas' former disciple, Berbelang, the Mu'tafikah bear resemblance to the militant Black Panthers in their radical methods. They break into museums and steal items of indigenous art to send back to their places of origin, reassigning their initial ritual functions. One such museum is the Center of Art Detention, where “[a]rt icons are held under arrest and put on display for those in power and are unable to empower anyone outside of political authority” (Harde, 2002, p. 364). The Mu'tafikah are Promethean heroes who achieve their ends through trickery and stealing in order to bring the relief of a regained cultural identity to the people.

These actions take place within the plot of the detective novel, a genre rationalistic to its very core. Through murders, robberies and conspirations paving their way, LaBas, Herman and the Mu'tafikah act as self-defined detectives to find a rational explanation to these mysteries. However, as several papers on the topic (Paravisini-Gebert, 1986; Swope, 2002; Krishnaveni, 2011) found, in true trickster fashion, LaBas and his friends are fundamentally different from the Western stereotype of the detective in that they rather use a variety of instincts, spiritual guidance from the loa and traditions, in other words, their Knockings. When faced with lacking empirical evidence for his conspiracy theory of a “secret society molding the consciousness of the West”, LaBas reacts like this:

Evidence? Woman, I dream about it, I feel it, I use my 2 heads. My Knockings. Don't you children have your Knockings, or have you New Negroes lost your other senses, the senses we came over here with? Why your Knockings are so accurate that they can chart the course of a hammerhead shark in the ocean 1000s of miles away. Daughter, standing here, I can open the basket of a cobra in an Indian marketplace and charm the animal to sleep. What's wrong with you, have you forgotten your Knockings? (p. 25)

It is these Knockings that eventually lead them to the closing scene of the novel, uncovering the text of Jes Grew, eventually a scene of no resolution, as they have to realize that the epidemic, being a “Creeping Thing”, the ultimate form of black consciousness can not be described in terms of a text. They are, thus, detectives of the metaphysical that step away from understanding reality within the confines of rationalistic suppositions and question the validity of the positivist dogma.

5/2/2 Coyote, the Creator-Fixer

Fox (1984) draws a parallel between the trickster as an intermediary between two realities and the text itself, that serves as “an interface between imagination and action, creativity and (re)interpretation” (p. 95). Such a phenomenon can be observed in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, a piece of magical realism¹, where the plot of the contemporary novel mingles with four different creation myths bearing the characteristics of oral storytelling. Jumping back and forth between these initially separate planes is none other than Coyote, the indigenous trickster.

Green Grass, Running Water follows the story of a number of Native American characters from a Blackfoot reserve in Alberta, with different ties to their original community. Some of these heroes left the reserve years ago to pursue academic or legal careers, but are still hesitating between their urban milieu and returning to their roots. Others have long been entertaining the thought of leaving but as a result of life choices and fate still live and work on the reserve. Alberta Frank, a university lecturer, is divided between her two lovers, Lionel, an electronic salesman with an interrupted education and a midlife crisis, and Charlie Looking Bear, a successful lawyer, who is a cousin and in many ways a role model to Lionel. A character similar to Alberta is Lionel’s uncle, Eli Stands Alone, who, after living the life of a respected professor in Edmonton, moved back to his mother’s house on the reserve. This house is the only legal obstacle in the way of a giant dam built by a company which Charlie as lawyer represents.

The other narrative thread in the novel is centered around four old Indians, the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye. After escaping an institution for elderly people, and joined by the trickster Coyote, they set out on a journey to fix up

¹ Magical realism is a literary genre where a plot written in the formula of realism is often interrupted by the unexpected, the unreal and the magical. Bearing the characteristics of oral storytelling and mythologies, this genre is often used by authors of indigenous traditions.

the world. Their trip is spiced with a series of satirical retellings of well-known tropes from the Western cultural and literary canon, such as Noah's Ark, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or J.F. Cooper's popular Indian novels. Finally, the different plots gradually intertwine and culminate in all the characters meeting at the Sun Dance ceremony.

In the beginning of the novel is Coyote's own creation myth starting in the style of oral storytelling:

So.

In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water.

Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep. That coyote was asleep and that Coyote was dreaming. When Coyote dreams, anything can happen.

I can tell you that.

(p. 1)

What follows is Coyote's dream coming alive and claiming to be first Coyote himself, then by figurative turn God. This happens through a simile of coyote-dog and the turning of the word 'dog' backwards into G O D. Coyote's dream thus becomes a subversive trickster itself by imitating the imitator of gods. This simple story carries in itself practically the whole scale of Hynes' heuristic guide: the trick playing, the shape shifting, the inversion of a situation, imitating the gods ("I don't want to be a little god, says that god. I want to be a big god!" - p. 3) and utilizing language as a makeshift tool by which the Dream creates a situation of anomaly. Finally the Dream begins to have its own dream, in which, of course, everything is messed up: "Isn't that cute," says Coyote. "That Dog Dream is a contrary. That Dog Dream has everything backward" (p. 2).

The opening story is a parody on people claiming higher powers, somewhat self-ironic of the trickster himself: with his dubious methods he tries to reach higher than what one can achieve with the ordinary human skill set. Moreover, as Ricketts (1966) notes, he does so by assuming power from animal spirits by simply turning into an animal form. It is also a critique on monotheistic religions that stress the omnipotence of a single god far removed from humans who accept its design without much reflection.

The story also illuminates another important point in relation to stories of creation, made by Ricketts (1966): "Quite often in the mythology of Indian North America we find a conflict existing between the high god as creator and the trickster-fixer who also wishes to be a creator; or, alternatively, we find a confusion in the minds of the people as to whether the trickster is or is not identical with the high god" (p. 341). The outcome of this rivalry could be three ways: Coyote either becomes the creator himself, the helper of god or a counter creator. King's Coyote is somewhat ambiguous in that respect, with a

reason: while in the narrative of biblical creation the omnipotent God accepts no rival, in King's story Coyote is right there from the very beginning. If one has to argue about who the real creator is, one has to take it up with him.

From an indigenous standpoint, if one is to tell a story right from the beginnings, one has to count with Coyote being there from the start, as he is one of the first people, as William Bright suggested in his book, *A Coyote Reader* (1993), the oldest mythical character there is. He is with us humans in many ways: in his weaknesses and fears, his inability to learn from his mistakes and in his gluttony and sexual fantasies. He lives and breathes with the stories told and through his commentary we realize and learn to laugh at our deepest instincts being unfolded.

As mentioned before, the focus on bodily pleasures is a common feature of tricksters all around the world. In King's story this is accentuated by Coyote's inability to hold attention because of falling asleep or not being able to get his mind off of food. When by a narrative turn G O D impersonates the biblical God in a scene of the Paradise, the trickster jumps out of the narrator's role and appears in the middle of the story as Old Coyote stealing a fried chicken and claiming that it is his tongue sticking out of his mouth. A reference to the apple and the snake, the story concludes by First Woman (Eve) and Ahdamn (as in "Ah, damn!") getting tired of both Coyote's antics and G O D's rules and leaving the Garden of Eden. Having left behind and returning to his original position as the narrator's companion, all Coyote can think about is food:

"Maybe I should stay in the garden with Old Coyote," says Coyote. "Somebody should keep that G O D and Old Coyote and all that food company."

"We can eat later," I says. "Right now, we got to catch up with First Woman and Ahdamn."
(p. 74)

Although not exclusive to Native American stories, Ricketts (1966) points out that tricksters are often depicted as singing while in the process of creation. Donaldson (1995) adds to that that "singing possesses the power to create, transform and vitalize" (p. 39). Towards the end of *Green Grass, Running Water* there is a specific reference to such stories: by his singing and dancing Coyote causes an earthquake that destroys the dam illegally built by a corporation on Native territory. This will result in the water returning to its original flow, an important symbolic of indigenous creation myths that usually start with the already mentioned introduction: "In the beginning there was nothing. Just the water." Coyote is eventually scolded for his misbehaviour, though not in a serious way:

"Oh, oh," said the Lone Ranger. "Things are getting bent again."

"You haven't been dancing again, Coyote?" said Ishmael.

"Just a little," says Coyote.

“You haven’t been singing again, Coyote?” said Robinson Crusoe.

“Just a little,” says Coyote.

“Oh, boy,” said Hawkeye. “Here we go again.”

(s. 450)

We have previously discussed that in Native American mythologies Coyote is often described in various forms: in some stories he is the usual form of the animal known for his appetite that eases his way into a human shape in the blink of an eye, only to appear later as nothing more than a prairie wolf again. In King’s stories, it is not explicit whether he appears in human or animal form: he is simply the comic counterpart of the narrator’s voice who interrupts the story with his misbehavior and childish commentary. Smith (1997) argues that in King’s story Coyote is represented not so much as an anthropomorphic or an animal form, ‘but rather as a linguistic construct sent forth to disrupt our acceptance of certain “old stories” ‘ (p. 516).

Old stories reappear throughout the novel as creation myths of four different indigenous traditions told by four old Indians, the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye. They are organically connected to the main plot by escaping a mental institution and reappearing at several points in the stories of real life heroes. They can be also seen as what Ricketts (1966) calls the guardian spirits of the trickster: they each start an explanation of the beginnings to Coyote, who in his infantile ways keeps evolving the plot to his own liking. The stories are also disrupted and eventually spoiled by the appearance of Western literary characters and cultural tropes and fictional figures such as Adam, Noah, captain Ahab, Robinson Crusoe, Tonto or J. F. Cooper’s Chingachgook.

It would be easy to historicize and see this process as a colonialist repression of Native efforts to tell their own history. However, one has to realize that the two types of stories are equally disruptive to one another: by representing Western literary and biblical characters ironically as well as dropping Coyote in the middle of their attempts to mislead the original storyline(s) King consciously sheds light to the anomalies of stereotypical and representationist narratives. A later section of this analysis will elaborate on how these narratives define the structure of *Green Grass, Running Water*.

5/2/3 Tripmaster Monkey

Similarly to Coyote and Legba, Maxine Hong Kingston's hero, Wittman Ah Sing is a quite straightforward reference to a traditional trickster character, the Monkey King. But while King's and Reed's protagonists are clearly more than an homage to their respective mythological heroes, Kingston's Monkey has an apparently looser relation to Sun Wu Kong. In the previously discussed novels Coyote and Legba are assigned the same place in the story as in the oral traditions, their roles as spiritual guides and culture heroes consciously reflect the authors' choice to rely on those. Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), on the other hand, has been often criticized by her contemporaries for an inaccurate account of the original Chinese stories which, though unintentionally, serve false representations.²

Tripmaster is centered around the unemployed Berkeley graduate, Wittman Ah Sing, who suffers from stereotyping as a result of his Chinese-American ancestry. "Tripping" around 1960s' San Francisco, he encounters a number of characters struggling with the problems of either a multifaceted racial identity, oppressive American capitalism, sexual stereotypes, unemployment or the army draft. Many of these people join a party at the Japanese-American businessman, Lance Kamiyama's place, who is also Wittman's best friend. It is there he meets and falls in love with Taña De Weese, a white girl whom he marries the next day to avoid the draft. Through a series of visits to Wittman's and Taña's families, the reader gains an insight into the troubling dilemma between old traditions and a modern American identity. Claiming the role of the Monkey King from *The Journey to the West*, Wittman causes disturbances in many scenes shedding light on the inconsistencies and oppressive nature of the „military industrial complex“. He finally achieves peace with his heritage through writing and staging a spectacular play in Chinese tradition to create a community of people around him that suffer under similar predicaments as him.

Living in 60s America as a wannabe playwright with a Chinese heritage is a situation probably any trickster would thrive in and Wittman Ah Sing has no other intentions than to cherish the role of the Monkey. Being what Furth described as an "authentic-hipster-San-Francisco-aficionado-playwright-dutiful-son-working-stiff-impulsive-lover-sexist-pig" (as cited in Mackin, 2005), he is a man of complexity, in other words, a flesh and bone human being.

² One specifically harsh critique on Kingston comes from Frank Chin, the Chinese-American novelist who underlined the proper use of classical Chinese sources "as a litmus test for an authentic Chinese American sensibility" (Mackin, 2005, p. 512).

Due to his physical appearance, that is, his Asian looks he suffers from racial stereotyping but this is only one of the conflicting aspects of his character that is built on “the crazy and unexpected juxtaposition of culturally unlike elements” (Mackin, 2005, p. 516).

The trope of the struggling young artist in itself is a well known Western literary tradition, some examples being James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger* or the semi-autobiographical novels of Charles Bukowski and Henry Miller. In a comparison to *Ulysses*’ protagonist, Bloom, Deeney (1993) points out that Ah Sing struggles not so much with his own identity as the expectations of others, such as gaining authenticity within his own community or the affection of the opposite sex. Finding himself on the margin of these different contexts, though, is self-inflicted and is a result of his not being able to accept the norms of these. Similarly to Coyote and LaBas, he is in the liminal between a non-European heritage and a liberal higher education which could otherwise be a gateway to society in a broader sense. His self-appointed place on the border, though, prepares the set for him to stage his acts of misdemeanor that point to the inadequacies of both American society and his own ethnic community.

Now, the monkey makes a scene every chance he gets and every scene is part of a play orchestrated by this disruptive culture hero. When reading his poetry to a fellow Chinese-American girl he tries to seduce and getting the reply that his poetry sounds ‘black,’ he begins to furiously jump around the room, screaming intimidating words at the poor girl. The scene results in the already mentioned act of defining himself as King of the Monkeys as well as laying down, “[a] new rule for the imagination: The common man has Chinese looks.” (p. 34). A similar ruckus is caused by overhearing a racist joke in a restaurant. While the joke turns out to be about Mexicans, Wittman suspects that the original was intended to pun on the Chinese. The punchline being changed at the last second after the joker looked around and spotted him, Wittman breaks out in a violent rant mocking proto-immigrant Chinese:

”You like jokes? I tell you joke. What’s ten inches long and white? Nothing, ha ha. Every gringo doesn’t have one. Why you not laughing? I funny, you not funny. You nauseating. You ruin my dinner. You slur all over my food with dirty not-funny joke.” (p. 214)

The dilemma of borderline ethnicity, is probably best presented in a scene where Wittman is given a banana in the middle of his closing monologue. This act on the one hand aims to signify on his role as a monkey, and on the other, an allegory of being Chinese on the outside while white on the inside. According to Ah Sing it is also a reference to two “deficient” parts of the Chinese anatomy, the nose and the penis. (A similar reference to the nose as stereotyping appears in *Green Grass, Running Water*, where Charlie Looking Bear’s actor father is given a fake nose to look more like an Indian chief.) Wittman’s reaction is as follows:

“Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?” said Shakespearean Wittman. “No, it’s a banana. My pay? Thank you. Just like olden days-two streetcar tokens, two sandwiches, one dollar, and one banana-pay moviestar allthesame pay railroad man. Oh, I get it-top banana. Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy, I thank you. Hello. Hello. Nobody home in either ear. I feel like Krapp. I mean, the Krapp of Krapp’s Last Tape by Ah Bik Giht. He wears his banana sticking out of his waistcoat pocket. I’m going to wear mine down in my pants. Have you heard the one about these two oriental guys who saved enough money for a vacation at the seashore?... “If I were Black, would I be getting an Oreo? If I were a red man, a radish?” (p. 315)

Tensions arising from the identity dilemma will eventually also find a release in the true tradition of the Mind Monkey: through his wonderful ability to transform into any imaginary form he pleases. I have previously addressed Sun Wu Kong’s super abilities of shape shifting, to which the writer refers by describing Wittman’s Gold Mountain Trunk that was big enough to hold “all the costumes for the seventy-two transformations of the King of the Monkeys” (p. 29). This San Francisco hipster monkey takes on a new disguise in every new situation: department store hand, job seeker, middle-class college-trained boyfriend material, mama’s boy, the member of the exclusive imaginary club, the Young Millionaires, whatever the situation demands:

He pulled on his Wellingtons and stomped out onto the street. His appearance was an affront to anybody who looked at him, he hoped. Bee-e-en! The monkey, using his seventy-two transformations, was now changed into a working stiff on his way to his paying job. (p. 44)

The earlier reference to Samuel Beckett’s monological drama, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and pronouncing the playwright’s name as ‘Ah Bik Giht’ as well as referring to Superman while claiming to be the Monkey King are examples of trick playing. It is Tripmaster Monkey’s superb ability to confuse and deconstruct, only to pick up the pieces and create his unique creative universe. A plethora of cultural references from Hollywood movies to Chinese theater, from Rilke to Shakespearean drama, Kerouac and the Cultural Revolution are mixed to create a discursive space where those suffering from racial schizophrenia are offered comfort. This is the work of the sacred and lewd bricoleur, who – contrary to Reed’s Mu’tafikah who reinstates the original ritual value of stolen art - encourages his own community to take sacred items turned into commercialized junk and use them in their diluted form: “A backscratcher from a Singapore sling, a paper umbrella from an aloha mai tai, a Buddha bottle with head that unscrews – make something of it. Use it. From these chicken scraps and dog scraps, learn what a Chinese-American is made up of” (p. 277).

This kind of cataloguing, in Crow's words, the dramatizing "of great inclusions and reconciliations and lists and categories" (as cited in Tanner, 1995) is a technique often used by one of Kingston's literary role models, the great American poet, Walt Whitman. In addition to other American literary 'monkey spirits' like Ginsberg, Snyder, Burroughs, Steinbeck or Abbie Hoffman noted by Tanner (1995), Whitman's presence is felt all over the novel. Chapter titles like "Linguists and Contenders", "A Song for Occupations" or "Ruby Long Legs' and Zeppelin's Song of the Open Road", for example, are open references to Whitman's poems, and even the name Wittman Ah Sing is not a coincidence in that it points to Whitman's poems like *I Hear America Singing*, *I Sing the Body Electric* and *Song of Myself*, each a part of his epic collection *Leaves of Grass*.

Most importantly, Tanner (1995) points out Whitman's influence in one of the major topics of *Tripmaster Monkey*, as well as an area where the trickster-monkey excels: the liminal zone between the individual versus community. Having the ambitions of the playwright Ah Sing is unable to adapt to the expectations of an ordinary day job, which keeps a democratic society functional. He has, consequently, no other choice than to create a community of his own, based on 'Walt Whitman's "classless society" of "everyone who could read or be read to" (Kingston, 1989, p. 9). The last chapter titled "One-Man Show", concludes Tanner, is therefore not only a rant on Chinese identity and racial stereotypes, but also a celebration of "egotism as the source of democracy", the realization that "a communal interaction between the artist and audience is essential" (Tanner, 1995, pp. 67-68). However egotistic the Monkey might seem, thus, beyond his superficial antics he is also the hero that brings the sense of cultural healing to the people.

In accordance with that, Mackin (2015) observes that a bricolage of cultural artifacts and intertexts to create a 'kaleidoscopic, topsy-turvy mode of "claiming America" by ingesting its poetry' (p. 519) is also part of the trickster's higher plan: to create a pacifist space for social interaction. The scene of this activity is the Pear Garden theatrical troupe where everyone is invited and which is a reference to the oldest Chinese royal acting academy. Wittman describes his theater as follows:

"I'm going to start a theater company. I'm naming it the Pear Garden Players of America. The Pear Garden was the cradle of civilization, where theater began on Earth. Out among the trees, ordinary people made fools of themselves acting like kings and queens. As playwright and producer and director, I am casting blind. That means the actors can be any race. Each member of the Tyrone family or the Lomans can be a different color. I'm including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place. My idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, lunch counters, yes, and we also integrate theater and parties."

(Kingston, 1989, p. 52)

Through the celebration of an all-inclusive democracy, concludes Mackin, the Monkey creates an atmosphere of the multicultural, the ‘anomalous,’ “a peaceful mixing of trash that includes all the marginalized and oppressed within the scope of an idealized democracy.” (p. 519) Community, thus, will be achieved through a grande theatric premiere of Wittman’s play, where every single character of the book is invited to play several roles. While being a mixture of classic Chinese novels like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*, the story is only loosely based on these. Wittman’s point is to establish a community as the place of cultural healing and doing so through the respect of his cultural heritage as well as the reinstatement of the creative imagination.

It is important to notice here the similarity to Victor Turner’s previously discussed idea of *communitas*. Through the ritual of the play, Wittman and his people separate themselves from a society that classifies their subordinate citizens by merit and practical value (that is, as workforce) and create a new social arrangement. The act of performing the play is where threshold people like Wittman, Kamiyama, the Yale Younger Poet, Nanci Lee or Jody Louis can be deprived of their assumed identity and status and are provided the chance of free play to live out their imaginative capacities. This is a theatrical play that offers a breakaway from real life and at the same time provides a variety of narrative choices, that is, stories to be told about oneself.

Ah Sing’s character as the orchestrator of this carnival is an interesting one from the perspective of Weber’s (1995) previously mentioned distinction between an ‘outsider’ and a ‘marginal’. As a reminder, outsiders consciously and temporarily check out of the system as an act of revolt, while marginals usually represent two or more culturally distinct groups. Victor Turner explains several life choices of being a marginal:

What is interesting about such marginals is that they often look to their group of origin, the so-called inferior group, for *communitas*, and to the more prestigious group in which they mainly live and in which they aspire to higher status as their structural reference group. Sometimes they become the radical critics of structure from the perspective of *communitas*, sometimes they tend to deny the affectionally warmer and more egalitarian bond of *communitas*.... Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity.” (as cited in Weber, 1995)

Being a 1960s dropout of Chinese origin, Wittman is a liminal character between both of these groups and consequently none of the above choices are entirely applicable to him. Like other heroes of inter-ethnic origin, he seeks acceptance within his own community to a certain extent. At the same time, contrary to many of Thomas King’s protagonists

who achieved social status as big city lawyers and academics, Wittman is a self-proclaimed outsider who refuses to climb the necessary social and professional ladders. In the true nature of the monkey, the troublemaker and cultural healer he does not seek comfort either way. He is, however, the ritual liminar offering a resolution which is not stable but carries in itself the excitement of change, that is, the possibility to define and redefine oneself as one sees fit.

5/3 Trickster as Literary Discourse

After identifying literary characters as modelled on indigenous tricksters, one is necessarily tempted to draw further conclusions regarding notions around the text itself. This is important as all three novels are considered metafiction, that is, their subject matter is in great degree preoccupied with the nature of text as a literary form of expression. King's novel addresses the authority of the written versus the oral text as well as their distinct characteristics as discursive tools. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a search for the text that eventually becomes a question whether the collective consciousness of a community – if there is such a thing - can be translated into a textual formation. Finally, *Tripmaster Monkey* is a 'fake book' that parodies literary genres by creating a new text through a community effort of theatrical play. We have previously established that, similarly to the trickster in Native American oral storytelling, King's Coyote is a linguistic, discursive formation. The question then arises whether one can identify similar features in the other two books as well.

In his theoretical work, Gerald Vizenor has often referred to the trickster as discourse, which makes a definition of discourse necessary. Theoreticians have naturally been preoccupied with this term for a long time: in postmodern theory it was Michel Foucault who emphasized the role of discourse in power relations. I will, however, recall a more recent theoretical framework by James Paul Gee, mostly because of the important distinction he made between discourse and Discourse (with a capital D). Gee (2012) sees discourse as “any stretch of language (spoken, written, signed) which “hangs together” to make sense to some community of people who use that language” (p. 103). Discourse with a capital D is, on the other hand, a wider category, a “socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting, ... that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network” (Gee, 2012, p. 158).

Gee further identifies Discourse as being ideological in reflecting value systems. Another characteristic is that it resists internal criticism as the ones criticizing are inevitably outside the discourse, not sharing its values. Moreover, Discourses usually define themselves in relation to other Discourses and are connected to the distribution of social power and hierarchy. From these features, one might recognize that Discourses that are formed on ethnic ties are not only related to culture and language (as in discourse with a small d) but also being formed in a historical context by power relations. As an example Dayan explains voodoo traditions as a response to the institution of slavery, “the shadowy and powerful magical gods of Africa as everyday

responses to the white master's arbitrary power" (as cited in Murrell, 2009, p. 71). In this sense, voodoo, not as a religion but as a discursive framework, goes beyond defining itself in opposition to the dominant scheme but eventually also questions the nature of its oppressive institutions, that is, the arbitrariness of its principles.

In Vizenor's definition, trickster can be seen as a Discourse of its own, first and foremost because it is outside the confines of any particular Discourse. Its critical attitude is a sort of metadiscourse that asks questions about the arbitrary nature of the relation between sign and signifier, that is culturally fixed in a particular Discourse. Moreover, it does that with its own subversive way through humor and parody. On the next pages, the discussion will be dealing with the trickster's parody as a tool of deconstruction in the postmodern sense.

5/3/1 Deconstruction and the Language Game

Deconstruction, particularly in French post-structuralist Jacques Derrida's work refers the dissection of solid categories of truth as well as the binary oppositions of language, the arbitrary nature of the signifying process that "guarantee[s] truth through excluding and devaluing the 'inferior' part of the binary" (Barker, 2000, p. 112). Language, rhetoric and discourse thereby become the tool of one-sided representation, an issue of power and eventually oppression. Derrida claims that since meaning is not stable, words cannot pursue the essence of things and therefore, true representation is not possible. In postmodern literature, especially, any well-rounded truth or attempt on categorisation slips away through a play of intertextuality and only the language game remains. The Trickster thrives in the textual interplay as well as the language game, exactly because his identity escapes any attempt at definition.

Schmidt (1995) describes the trickster's "verbal acts of survival" as a means to "to re-imagine language based on one's own agenda, which has been neglected and suppressed by the discourse in power" (p. 67). Through catachresis, the subversion and deliberate misuse of words and metaphors, he is simultaneously playing with language and fighting it. Identifying words in a fixed meaning, or as American literary critic, Joseph Hillis Miller wrote, conquering "the abyss of the absurd", leads to *catachresis*, that is, the "violent, or forced, or abusive use of a word to name something which has no literal name," and "explodes the distinction between literal and figurative on which the analysis of tropes is based and so leads the 'science' of rhetoric to destroy itself" (as cited in Kroeber, 1979, p. 77).

This is a signifying process not unlike Derrida's concept of *différance*, where meaning is not an imprint of the objective world but is on the one hand traced back to other words (difference) and on the other hand is supplemented and postponed by these (deferral). In this semiotic chain, or network, meaning "can never be grasped completely; it is in the play, in the trace, in the difference" (Schmidt, 1995, p. 70). Kroeber (1979) describes the deconstructionist idea of the text as "mysterious carved signs of a lost civilization" (p. 77) that have lost their culturally specific context and, therefore, can only offer itself to provisional, fragmentary readings that require critics to play with, rather than interpret the text.

5/3/2 The Comic Holotrope: Humor as Subversion

As previously mentioned, one distinct feature that runs parallel between Kingston, Reed and King's writing is the keenness on satire and irony as a means of attacking the taken-for-granted truths of modernist thought. Whether or not they accept being labelled as deconstructionists, all three authors willingly use a number of techniques known to both postmodernist writing and oral traditions. These range from parody and pastiche, language play, signifying, and doubling to collage, multivocality, intertextual references from a wide range of literary and cultural sources and prompt shifts in style, voice and vernaculars. At times, these techniques confront the reader in such a swift succession that one almost feels overwhelmed by the multiplicity of meaning, searching for something familiar to hold on to. The effect, of course, is most of the time intentional, as J. R. Smith (1996) remarks in relation to *Tripmaster Monkey*: to create "a narrative which refuses to talk down or oversimplify" (p. 74).

One could argue that Reed's or Kingston's overuse of intertextual references is the realm of chaos, where the culturally incompetent visitor – as we all become as soon as smoked out of our relatively narrow semiotic bunkers - cannot rely on signposts or landmarks for navigation. The aim, however, is to create an aura of ambiguity where the references implicit for those inside a particular discourse are deprived of their denotative value. On a larger plan, this serves the purpose of pointing to their socially constructed nature, and through that, the inconsistencies in their arbitrariness. A slightly less overwhelming example in intertextuality than the other two novels, Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* is a genuine example of this kind of referential reiteration, although somewhat conversely. He uses four different traditions of indigenous oral storytelling to pick on familiar characters of the Western cultural canon. This creates a sense of doubt in the reader regarding some of our most implicit and basic ideals, and eventually leads to the realization of how our understanding of foreign cultures is biased. In his efforts to do

so, King prefers to jump first on the taken-for-granted truths of simply the most important written sources of our civilization: the Bible.

The basic creation stories have similar structures: First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman or Old Woman fall from the sky, are carried away by water or climb through a hole in a tree to descend into another world. According to Donaldson (1995) these stories are not strict renditions of the original Cheyenne, Kiowa, Arapaho and Commanche traditions but rather a mixture of the earth diver stories (where the mythical figure dive under water to fetch a piece of soil to turn into the Earth) and the Iroquis tale of the Woman who fell from the sky. These separate worlds are usually inhabited by strange, comic figures with their incomprehensible rules: Ahdamn, Noah, A.A. Gabriel and Young Man Walking on Water, obvious references to biblical heroes.

Their strangeness appearing from the Narrator's perspective creates an absurdity, one that bears the features of a culture clash. This separate universe is always governed by restrictions, Christian rules which the indigenous characters unknowingly break, often with the active participation of none other than Coyote, simply by following their common sense. They get into trouble for eating only a bit of the plentiful proceeds of the Garden of Eden, responding to talking animals, singing to calm down the waves that rock a boat or for simply being women. These are things strictly forbidden by rules which are deeply rooted in fundamental Christian beliefs like man's superiority over woman, humankind's reign over the animal world or the sin of bodily pleasures. The grotesque, here is created by a situation where the characters are dropped in a discourse, the rules of which they are unaware of. Within this discourse, one can get into trouble by simply acting in common sense, because its rules are not based on the laws of nature but rather on culturally situated, arbitrary principles. The critique is, thus, imposed on historically constructed formations that restrict and frustrate humanity instead of working for its good.

Probably the most important of such encounters takes place in a scene in Chapter 4, where Old Woman meets Young Man Walking On Water, who attempts to rescue a boat full of people. The man, being a direct reference to Jesus Christ, lays down the house rules as follows: "...the first rule is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. Third, no one is allowed to be in two places at once. Except me" (p. 388). These are the three rules that, according to Bailey (1995), account for the idea of Christ's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, the cornerstones of Christian faith. By failing to demonstrate his abilities to save the boat, the validity of these very principles is subverted. Young Man Walking On Water is not even sure of his relation to the people in the boat ("I will rescue my . . . my . . . ah . . ."), which is ridiculed by Old Woman: "Deputies? says Old Woman. Subalterns? Proofreaders?" (p.

389). The dogma of divine infallibility is also playfully signified on earlier in the book, in a conversation between two of the old Indians:

“How long do we have to wait?” said Robinson Crusoe.

“Not long,” said the Lone Ranger.

“Are you being omniscient again?” asked Hawkeye.

(King, 1994, p. 51)

Lowe (1996) observes that absurdity in intercultural contexts often arises from “the forced juxtaposition of seeming opposites” (p. 118). By misplacing his indigenous characters in a culturally alien ideological order, King not only creates a situation which potentially ends in a humorous outcome but also points to the ambiguity of the relation between sign and signifier. This will eventually result in the question whether any written truth can be taken seriously? One could not help but notice that this is the expertise of the trickster, who through his irreverent antics denies taboos or rules of the single written source. Coyote’s presence as a linguistic formation, thus, undermines the authority of the written text not only by questioning its truth value, but also, as Bailey (1999) put it, voting in favor of how a story is told instead of what is told.

Religious dogma is similarly the key issue of Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*: through the previously discussed rivalry of the Atonists and the Mu’tafikah he creates an even more explicit juxtaposition of opposites than King. Krishnaveni (2011) sees this as the power struggle not only between two forces but two different ways of seeing the world, “endemic to the two human types involved: one, expansive and synergetic; the other, impermeable and myopic” (p. 95). The former is represented by Jes Grew, the embodiment of the free spirit and the sense of community, and the latter, the logical and fixed Written Truth.

Cowley (1994) argues that, and this is not unlike King I should add, Reed primarily has a problem with the printed word, a cultural, rather than a biological category, that is, that of race. The contradiction of this stance lies in *Mumbo Jumbo* being a written text itself. Reed solves this problem by a complete and utter deconstruction of the genre of the novel, and detective fiction in particular. As the protagonist of *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, The Loop Garoo Kid put it: “what if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o’clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons” (Reed, 1971, p. 36).

Underlining this, Reed forms the novel as a metaplay on genre, style and modality: pictures, news clippings, citations, dictionary entries, even a hand-written letter appear almost accidentally to break the linearity of the plot and create confusion in the reader concerning the authority of a single source of text. From this perspective *Mumbo Jumbo*

is a parody of any genre that tends to take itself too seriously. The superimposition of written text over other artistic forms is similarly broken down by the introduction of cinematographic techniques. The book starts with a short introductory chapter which then gives way to the credits and the publishing information before rolling on with chapter 2. By imitating the familiar film-making technique in which the opening credits roll after a brief action-packed scene, the author makes it ambiguous whether this is a serious piece of literary work or some kind of multimodal puzzle play. This is reinforced by the closing sequences of the book: “(Locomobile rear moving toward neon Manhattan skyline. Skyscrapers gleam like magic trees. Freeze frame.)” (p. 218).

The atmosphere of the mystery noir is, then, further accentuated by scenes where secret societies like the Wallflower order take action: “Men who resemble the shadows sleuths threw against the walls of 1930s detective films have somehow managed to slip into the Mayor’s private hospital room” (p. 18). Popular movie tropes are also reflected in the choice of the 1920s for the plot of the novel. Figures of gang warfare like Schlitz, “the Sarge of Yorktown” or Buddy Jackson as well as the brutal and corrupt police commissioner Biff Musclewhite are similar caricaturistic representatives of the detective genre as the Perry Mason-like figure of PaPa LaBas. Figures of Black descent appear as a reflection of the realist tradition, this is what Gates (1988) calls “local color as plot impediment” (p. 231). Such an example is LaBas’ driver, T Malice, who provides muscle for the man, as well as street knowledge through expressions like “fagingy-fagade” (p. 49) which keep the aging hounigan up-to-date and down-to-earth. Another example is right at the beginning of the opening scene:

A True Sport, the Mayor of New Orleans, spiffy in his patent-leather brown and white shoes, his plaid suit, the Rudolph Valentino parted-down-in-the-middle hair style, sits in his office. Sprawled upon his knees is Zuzu. Local doo-wack-a-doo and voo-doo-dee-odo fizgig. A slatternly floozy, her green, sequined dress quivers.” (p. 3)

Gates explains this parodying style as a comment on social realism that tries to create an aura of authenticity with the introduction of “real” characters. Referring to Reed himself, Lowe (1996) describes these characters as cartoon images of black people whose one-dimensionality, that is being either funny or dangerous, creates tension.

Besides the social novel and Hollywood noir, detective fiction is the most important genre that the book aims its parody at, particularly because it so fundamentally reflects Western logic. Paravisini Gebert (1986) notes that “Mumbo Jumbo ‘improves upon’ detective fiction by following its structure while undermining its rationalistic suppositions” (p. 114), through “the systematic undermining of the process of detection ... by making the process dependent on chance and intuition” (p. 119). This is particularly apparent in the

recognition scene where LaBas and Herman crash the party at Villa Lewaro by arresting Von Vampton for the murder of Abdul Sufi Hamid and Berbelang. Opening a box supposedly containing the text of Jes Grew, they find out that it is empty as the text was burned by Hamid. When logical proof of Von Vampton's guiltiness is required, Herman engages in a 30-page long jive-talk historical account of the Atonists beginning in ancient Egyptian times. Of course, the explanation is discarded as "flimsy evidence" (p. 196), which results in a deadlock situation. Finally, a group of "proletariat Black women" (p. 196) and their children march in and point out the black man accompanying Von Vampton as Hubert "Safecracker" Gould, the notorious white gangster. This way, the apparent paradox of hard logic versus metaphysical interpretation is resolved by chance, which, according to Paravisini Gebert (1986), violates the fundamentals of the genre by breaking "the internal logic of the narrative pattern to which the reader of this type of fiction is accustomed" (p. 120).

Gould's front is evidently a satire on the Blackface theatrical comedy of the late 1800s, but even more interesting is the reason behind his hidden identity. In their attempt to disarm Jes Grew, the Atonists set out to create the Talking Android, an experiment to find the "Negro Viewpoint." As Von Vampton describes, the Jes Grew Carriers have no channel they can talk through. By starting a magazine, the *Benign Monster*, and employing a writer responsible for representing the black voice, the Atonists can domesticate the epidemic, persuading the people that they are not ready for it. A young African American author named Woodrow Wilson Jefferson is chosen for the job but not being able to make "a transition from that Marxist rhetoric to the Jazz prose we [the Atonists] want" (p. 100), several Black artists are approached. The characters who are modelled on real life literary figures, all turn down the offer, putting the experiment in jeopardy, until Safecracker, also nicknamed as "the Caucasian Blackamoor" is appointed. The irony of the situation is that not having the knowledge of the black perspective, Gould is inclined to desperately run around town collecting local slang and writing down the "nigger mumbo jumbo words" (p. 101) for his musical masterpiece, *Harlem Tom-Toms*. The theme of the Talking Android thus becomes a travesty of the efforts trying to describe an essential Blackness by bibliographical means.

Gates (1988) argues that *Mumbo Jumbo* is also a parody of black realist and naturalist writing, most of all Ralph Ellison's great existential novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). Underlining this, Reed even attached a partial bibliography to his book, which serves no other particular purpose than to make fun of documentarist writing. This is especially true to the slave narrative that explains the Black experience from a historicized standpoint. For Reed, claims Gates, an idealized transcendent Blackness does not exist, and consequently literary efforts that set out to textualize it with documentarist and scholarly

methods are a failure. Similarly, as all texts are intertexts and intratexts, “our notions of originality ... are more related to convention and material relationships than to some supposedly transcendent truth” (Gates, 1988, p. 224).

5/3/3 Parodic-travesty Literature

Paravisini Gebert (1986) points to *Mumbo Jumbo* as an outstanding example of Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of parodic-travesty literature. The target of this genre is primarily the monologic and authoritative discourse, the ‘direct word’ which is attacked by “the permanent corrective of laughter” (as cited in Paravisini Gebert, 1986). Bakhtin describes parodic-travesty literature as a symptom of higher level changes in cultures, particularly within a ‘given’ national literature. From a discursive point of view, such forms of parody are aimed at the understanding of language as a means of representation, and consequently, on the construction of reality through myths or grand narratives. Parodic-travesty forms, claims Bakhtin:

liberated the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net; they destroyed the homogenizing power of myth over language; they freed consciousness from the power of the direct word, destroyed the thick walls that had imprisoned consciousness within its own discourse, within its own language.
(as cited in Renfrew, 2014)

In parodic-travesty literature, the tragic monologue is interrupted not only by the previously mentioned juxtaposition of seeming opposites but also via the presentation of multiple perspectives, of multiple voices. This is what Bakhtin referred to as polyglossia, multi-linguagedness, that is, to look at language and culture from the perspective of another one, in this case, of ‘multiple vernaculars’ (Lowe, 1996). Gerald Vizenor has repeatedly noted that tragedy is a typical Western genre and stressed the importance of a comic element to break out of the Western stereotyping of ‘hyperrealities’. Similarly, Ricketts (1966) remarks that “when the religious values of humor are lost or forgotten, heroic religion is deprived of one of its principal techniques for meeting life’s defeats; and in its place tragedy enters, and despair - if heroic religion does not give place to faith” (p. 348).

While the main protagonists of the three novels are clearly identifiable models of indigenous tricksters, they are more than simply a literary rendition of mythical characters with comic features. A great deal of the humor they bring into the mix stems not only from the implicit caricature of the character but rather from being dropped down at the crossroads of sometimes fundamentally different perspectives. This would in the majority

of cases cause a clash resulting in the victory of the dominant narrative over those lacking the resources to express oneself clearly, eventually giving way to drama. The trickster's role, however, is more than that of comic resolve: as King's Coyote, it sets out to 'fix the world', to set straight the narrative hyperrealities by pointing to their inconsistencies in a backhanded way. Trickster is polyglot in giving other narratives a chance of being heard, while never taking sides. Moreover, it does that with an attitude that bears the chance of comedy in itself: it is the comic holotrope that Vizenor describes in *Narrative Chance* (1989): "Tropes are figures of speech; here the trickster is a sign that becomes a comic holotrope, a consonance of sentences in various voices, ironies, variations in cultural myths and social metaphors. Comic holotropes comprise signifiers, the signified, and signs, which in new critical theories provided a discourse on the trickster in oral narratives, translations and modern imaginative literature" (as cited in C. Smith, 1997).

Mumbo Jumbo's 'jacklegged detectives' play on the same premises: by defining themselves as detectives of the metaphysical, they play a pun on the rationalistic framework of the crime novel by coming up with explanations that transcend logical evidence. The punch line is they find out that the box enclosing the text of Jes Grew is empty as the papers were burned after being read by Abdul Sufi Hamid. Ultimately, the trick was played on nearly everyone, including the reader: while in lack of a text, Jes Grew is disposed of and is supposedly harmless, only LaBas realizes that the epidemic does not have a text because it does not need one. That is, at least not one with a fixed, written form. Thus, one would argue, that the trickster, the comic holotrope of *Mumbo Jumbo* is Jes Grew itself, and it has all the way through the novel been searching for its text without the reader noticing. Such as "a novel could be anything," Jes Grew, the creeping thing rears up its head in unexpected forms through the pages: as a newspaper clipping (p. 123), a handbill (p. 99), a picture of Josephine Baker (p. 161), a dictionary entry (p. 7), the street slang of T Malice, or the evocation of the music of hougans like Charlie Parker or John Coltrane. Jes Grew is each and one of these and ultimately none of them. This polyglot trick-player represents a variety of different voices that might be unintelligible mumbo jumbo for those outside of it, but which cleanses the Black community of troubled spirits.

Mumbo Jumbo and Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* are, in a number of ways, quite similar examples of parodic-travesty literature. Both novels greatly exploit techniques of parody and pastiche, although from different viewpoints. While Reed's parody is openly up against not only the Western genre but to a degree also against traditional black literary forms, Kingston uses parody and pastiche with a slightly different signal: she speaks from within both her own literary community and the greater Western cultural canon. By relying on the sources of Chinese literature as well as the aforementioned

literary models of Whitman, Rilke or Joyce, her ‘American monkey’ creates a context of his own by incorporating the best of both worlds.

Although Kingston’s previous work has been criticized by her contemporaries for the incomplete rendition of Chinese classical sources, in *Tripmaster* she puts the stakes even higher in relying on some of the greatest 14-16th century Chinese novels, *The Journey to the West*, *The Water Margin*, and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Kingston’s plan, though, is not to simply restage the plot in a more recent historical era but rather to copy elements of these in order to create a postmodern, racially relevant context. Indeed, similarly to King’s oral interpretations of Biblical stories or Reed’s street-talk narration of an ancient Egyptian myth, she creates tension with a potential for irony. However, her use of parody is a subtle one, in a sense closer to pastiche that pays tribute to the source material. Williams (1995) underlines this specific understanding of parody as a form of mimesis asserting ‘a relationship or membership in a tradition with the thing copied even as it questions the authenticity or “original” status of the thing copied’ (p. 84). The latter is especially important as while these classics are attributed to specific authors, all the stories stem from a variety of sources from myth to historical facts, from oral storytelling to indigenous beliefs, both Chinese and East-Indian.

The most obvious reference is naturally Wu Cheng’en’s *Journey to the West*. In her invocation of Tripitaka’s journey in search of the holy scriptures, Kingston, again, is far from being consistent with the figure of the Monkey King, but that is beyond the point. Wittman decidedly takes upon himself this role and his intention is not to slavishly reproduce the hero of the original novel but rather to take the Monkey as a starting point to cast a stone on anything that comes his way. His journey to the West is a trip of the mind through a post-war affluent America of corporate rigidity, racial intolerance and a senseless war. And the most vicious sarcasm is aimed at its institutions and the people who operate within its confines. As a true subversive monkey, he turns his predicament inside out just to look at it from a unique, quite grotesque perspective.

Wittman talks of American consumerism as an asylum for the mentally ‘sane’: “In this society, retailers define sanity. If you hate the marketplace, and can’t sell, and don’t buy much, you’re crazy” (p. 237). In the corporate reality, one’s existence is diminished into scenes of a drama where the script is already written: “The nature of human beings is also that they buy t.v.s, coffee tables, nightstands, sofas, daddy armchairs for dressing the set of their life dramas” (p. 68). If one is smart enough to critically challenge his pre-designed fate, he is eventually doomed to realize that though “liberal-arts education is good for knowing to look at anything from an inquisitive standpoint,” it amounts to nothing else than “to have thoughts while shoveling shit” (p. 240). In the long run, we are stuck with James Agee’s vision of the futility of existence: “Agee’s vision of the

malevolence of ultimate reality was that we're cattle grazing green pastures. Believing that those who are rounded up go somewhere even more wonderful." (p. 53)

'Having thoughts while shoveling shit' refers to one characteristic scene that shows how the tactics of the monkey as a comic holotrope works. In the department store he works at, Wittman attends Management Training but in true trickster spirit fails comically after treating it like school. Raising his hand and starting discussions, he makes suggestions that in an intellectually free milieu would be natural: "I move that we operate on a profit-sharing plan ... Let's run this store on co-op principles ... Does selling candy to children contribute to their good? ... I move that the sports Department stop selling guns and ammo." (p. 61) In a business environment, however, he is being put down as "disruptive at meetings" and reduced to part-time. He reflects on the situation by recalling the original story of Sun Wu Kong being tricked once into cleaning stables in heaven: "There wasn't a scene or anything. Nobody said that part-time was a demotion. He liked shorter hours. Make stockboy soon. (The Monkey King had not minded cleaning stables until somebody told him that his title, Shit Shoveler to Avoid Horse Plague, was bottom in rank.)" (p. 61). For the superficial spectator the monkey's misbehavior backfires, putting him in a difficult situation, but on a greater plan he achieved his goal, that is, to tear apart and demystify the very principle of capitalism, the demolishing effect of profit over humanity.

Beyond the defeatism in Wittman's commentary, which at times drains him of his "monkey powers" (p. 247), his humor is every bit as self-inflicted as it is vicious and demolishing for those targeted by it. Probably the most important aspect of *Tripmaster's* parody is of course aimed at his own multiethnicity, a predicament he copes with by different tactics. At times he goes out hard against "Fresh Off the Boat" Chinese Immigrants, snobbishly labelling them as "uncool" (p. 5), on another occasion he rants about Chinese Americans who surgically alter their appearance to look more Western, and often with a slight sense of jealousy over privileged whites ("White people don't have families. They're free." - p. 176). Finally, in the final chapter of the book, One-Man Show, he explodes in a rant against literary and movie stereotyping that destroys the personality of its object:

[They] are cutting off our balls linguistically. 'Me no likee.' 'Me find clue to identity of murderer.' ... Confucius say,' says Confucius. 'Me name-um Li'l Beaver,' says Li'l Beaver. They depict us with an inability to say 'I.' They're taking the 'I' away from us. 'Me' - that's the fucked over, the fuckee. 'I' - that's the mean-ass motherfucker first-person pronoun of the active voice, and they don't want us to have it. (p. 318)

This deprivation of personality is commented on by Kingston herself, who described the importance of humor in the collective ethnic consciousness this way: "I also think that being

able to laugh and to be funny – those are really important human characteristics, and when we say that people don't have those characteristics, then we deny them their humanity.” (as cited in Lowe, 1996, p. 788)

The reference to the tropes of Hollywood films is an important topic in all three novels, probably because as André Bazin suggested, it is the competent way of American cinema “to show American society just as it wanted to see itself” (as cited in Schatz, 1981). What better way, then, to impose a critique on the mainstream than to attack its own self-image? Hollywood's way of using racial characters is also dealt with by Thomas King, whose hero, Portland Looking Bear loses his lucrative job as an actor after charged with not having a big enough nose. But while King's character has no comic way of dealing with the situation and eventually gives himself to despair, Wittman ironically comments on it: “There ought to be an Oscar for the One Actor Best at Playing a Horde. . . . The director sends you back in there for the second-wave attack ‘I was killed already in the last scene,’ says the conscientious supernumerary. ‘That's all right,’ says the director: ‘Nobody can tell you apart.’ I accept this Oscar for Most Reincarnations.” (p. 324)

It is clear that as helpless as his situation might seem, he is definitely not without a plan: “Wittman may be untalented, poor, not called upon, but he will make vocation; he will make theater” (p. 250). His theater, however, will not be a sort of “chop-suey vaudeville” (p. 308); he will put up a show in the greatest traditions of Chinese theater, an improvisational piece that invokes classical pieces in the sense Williams described. His purpose, moreover, is to reclaim the ‘I’, not as in the ‘I-warrior’ of the Chinese drama, but the pacifist ‘I’. As both *The Water Margin* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which his play is based on, feature war and military alliance on a large scale as a Chinese tradition, he sets out to reform the tradition and turn it into a pacifist piece: “The highpoint of a life shouldn't be a war. At the war rallies, they performed their last, then the theater died. I have to make a theater for them without a war.” (p. 190)

In fact, there is probably no better time and setting for this than 1960s San Francisco, in the wake of hippie culture and the collective paranoia of the Vietnam war, when “[a]ny conspiracy we can get paranoid over, the U.S. Government is already carrying out” (p. 227). Wittman's mimetic parody of the classics, claims Williams (1995) is thus a parody on warfare through with Wittman's own tools. As “his own only kung fu was acting like a monkey” (p. 271), he uses the power of the carnival, which Bakhtin described as “life turned inside out,” where “all distance between people is suspended, . . . [a] free and familiar contact among peoples” (as cited in Lowe, 1996, p. 122). Ultimately, “Whatever there is when there isn't a war has to be invented” (p. 306).

5/3/4 Signifying

One needs to notice that a full-frontal attack on the authenticity of text as a fixed source is a key element in the trickster's toolkit. It is up against the single source, the single perspective and, as mentioned above, intrinsically polyglot: it reflects storytelling as a communal effort and without community there is no understanding of the trickster's machinations. The deconstructive nature of this discursive, linguistic formation gains its power exactly from the liminal vacuum between the sense of affiliation and that of outsiderhood. Those who are outside of a dominant discourse can often understand its dynamics better, and at the same time, through their inherited *habitus* (in Pierre Bourdieu's definition of the term) have the ability to approach sensitive issues within their own community with affection. Self reflexive humor, concludes Lowe (1996) is all important in creating a sense of intimacy, through which we are able to laugh at ourselves, "a classic case of trickster's basic mode of expression, direction through indirection" (Lowe, 1996, p. 106).

Such forms of interaction are in fact an important aspect of understanding the trickster as a comic holotrope. By first reminding of James English's description of humor as a social practice, Mackin (2005) refers to Freud's "triangulation of the joking transaction" that carries in itself "comedy's stable instability" (p. 514). In a comic triangulation, the teller, the listener and the target of the joke often lose their subject positions and it becomes difficult to say who the joke is played on. This transactional instability, that creates a chance for signifier and signified being constantly mixed, Mackin claims, is only apparently stabilized by the social purpose of the joke. That is why trick playing can be so effective, ruthless against sacred truths, potentially self-destructive for the trickster and therapeutic for the whole community at the same time.

Gates (1988) describes the comic triangulation as a typically Afro-American vernacular practice. He claims that Legba, the trickster-mediator takes shape in the rhetorical principle of the Signifying Monkey. Humorous stories about the Signifying Monkey, the Lion and the Elephant are part of a Black folklore that has made its way into other cultural forms of expression like music. In the traditional story the Monkey usually makes a figurative joke on the Lion by blaming it on the Elephant. The Lion, taking the joke literally, turns to the Elephant to ask for an explanation, which he refuses. As the Lion naturally cannot take revenge on the Elephant because of his powerful stature, he furiously returns to the Monkey. Gates claims that the Monkey, here, is not simply a character of the stories but rather "a vehicle of narration itself", a rhetorical strategy, the Signifier "who wreaks havoc upon the Signified" (p. 52). In this case, the joke is

played on the Lion's inability to decipher the difference between the figurative and the literal. This strategy, continues Gates, is a discursive universe, dependent on the "play of differences" and the displacement of apparent meanings (p. 53).

In his analysis of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Gates describes that such a rhetoric is performed by the play of doubles: double voices and double plot lines, the use of the number 2, a double beginning and a double ending. This play ultimately resists the idea of resolution, the potential of connecting a concept to a particular form. The book is detective fiction, without the formal requirements of detection and the recognition of truth through logical deduction. Similarly, *Jes Grew* is an epidemic without a concrete form, a text that would make it possible to repress and domesticate it. Gates, here, draws a parallel between figurative language and signifying based on "an intentional deviation from the ordinary form or syntactical relation of words" (Gates, 1988, p. 80).

Another aspect of signifying comes into perspective through one of its subdivisions, the verbal act of playing the dozens. In street talk, this is a ritualistic language play of casting insults, often obscenities at one another, just like the 'Yo' mama' routine known from Hollywood ghetto comedies. In fact, as Gates observes, a reference to the dozens is included in the name of the Mu'tafikah: 'mu' being the 12th letter of the Greek alphabet. Their rhetorical device, though, is manifested only partly through vernacular practice: they signify semiotically via the reappropriation of the original content to form by stealing indigenous art. A similar play is performed through genre parody, such as of blackface comedy, which is a backhanded reaction to a false categorization: the joke, here, is not on the Afro-American person as a caricature but rather the white man's false representation of Blackness.

Kingston's monkey is, in many ways, a follower of the rhetorical tradition of signifying and playing the dozens. As previously discussed, a lot of his attitude, his verbal aggression is directed towards people or institutions, at times undeserved. His outspoken dissing of F.O.B.'s is an example of doubling that is a process rooted in 'psychological disowning.' Cynthia Wong describes it as follows: "part of the self, denied recognition by the conscious ego, emerges as an external figure exerting a hold over the protagonist that seems disproportionate to provocation or inexplicable by everyday logic" (as cited in Mackin, 2005, p. 520). Through this process, Wittman takes up preferred layers of a Chinese identity while discarding others by poking fun at them in an almost exaggerated degree. A similar play is performed in the verbal duels with his friend, the successful Japanese American businessman, Lance Kamiyama. Wittman's sense of inferiority in relation to his friend is expressed in self-ironic commentary, and through the laughter of the audience, the third participant of the joking transaction, he eventually regains some of his self-esteem.

Signifying as a rhetorical device, thus, is the tool of indirection and implication. Gates (2014) suggests that if rhetoric is viewed as spoken discourse in writing, then Legba, the trickster represents “technique, the literariness of language” (p. 75). The same can be said about Kingston’s *Monkey*: in the jazz traditions of using ‘fake’ notations to improvise around a tune, his ‘fake book’ is the backhanded parody on genre. The end result, however, is a text that redeems itself in a context of its own where the “fake or copy no longer signifies faulty or unenlightened but reinvents itself as the real that only the enlightened can appreciate” (Williams, 1995). Ultimately, signifying is not only a play on the fluctuation of meaning, a matter of technique and figurative style but also a device of pragmatics. It reveals the ambiguity of contextual understanding and indirectly deconstructs not only the truth value but also the narrative positions of the participants in a discourse. The final chapter of the analysis will elaborate on this aspect.

5/4 The Narrative

5/4/1 Text and Narrative: The Infinite Signifier

Citing Lyotard, Vizenor (1990) suggests that postmodern is “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (p. 277), as well as the result of transformations in science, literature, and the arts that ultimately take shape in “the crisis of narratives” (p. xiii). Intertextuality, polyglossia and the breaking up of the narrative as a means of representation are all discursive devices in the hands of the postmodern writer that serve the bigger plan of eradicating the dominance of the single viewpoint and the single subject position. D. Carroll suggests that „[a]ny narrative that predetermines all responses or prohibits any counternarratives puts an end to narrative itself by suppressing all possible alternative actions and responses, by making itself its own end and the end of all other narratives” (as cited in Vizenor, 1990).

In Vizenor’s term, trickster is the death of narrative because it puts an end to ‘hyperrealities’ that often contribute to pleased readings of history, traditions, and assymetric knowledge structures. As Triggs (1959) put it, “in the area of human values there are no final conclusions” (p. 161). The postmodern trickster’s ultimate task, therefore, is to create confusion in the implicit structure of the system and to turn the false presuppositions of these narrative constructions inside out. As a sacred and lewd bricoleur it recycles texts and stories which, taken out of context and deprived of their original sense, lose their authenticity in the process.

In the context of postmodern literature intertextuality, thus, becomes a key issue, because, as Derrida suggested, every text is a tracked text that can be traced back to other sources and this ultimately undermines the concept of the originality of the text. Such ‘tracebacks’, claims Derrida, are related to the “construction of time in the formation of subjectivity”, as every text defines the ways in which it is unique as opposed to other ways in which it relies on other texts (as cited in Rushdy, 1994, p. 119). As Ricoeur pointed out, the narrative “does not simply consist in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events” (as cited in Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). This way, narratives, both in the temporal and conceptual sense, contribute to the formation of subjectivity: one’s experience as a member of a group is always historicized, situated in a historical-cultural, or biographical context, around which a more or less coherent myth is built.

The trickster's mischief towards textuality is represented in Jes Grew's rejection of its text, King's mistrust towards the authority of the written source, and *Tripmaster's* apparent sacrilege of classic Chinese literary pieces. However, the deconstructive mastery aims even further in using the trickster's magical ability of transformation, deception and inversion of situations in retelling the stories we write about ourselves. The point of origin for such a subversive activity is this: Just as text can be a physical representation of the story, it can also be its source. As intertextuality creates a network of connections, narratives evolve through cultural metaphors and artifacts, which in turn are fixed in the form of a new text and *vica versa*. This is a process that bears the infinite potential of play in itself.

As an example, Black Herman's history of the Atonists in *Mumbo Jumbo* is based on well-known cultural tropes such as of Set and Osiris, Moses or the Knights Templar. Within the book as text, his story is one of the subtexts, that serves also as a narrative within the narrative. Beginning with the conflict of Set and Osiris, the story features historical facts and references to other texts that builds up a narrative with an aura of textual authenticity. Ironically, this is also a narrative that parodies conspiracy theories that replace scientific, factual explanations with grand myths that suspect secret societies behind larger social-historical processes. However, in Hermann's narrative, there also exists a counterpoint to written authenticity, the narrative without a textual representation, that starts from the cult of Osiris founded on the joy of music and dance and man's intimate relation to nature. This idea continues with Dionysos, who „taught the Greek guides to identify the Nature that spoke through mankind. The Work” (p. 168).

The narrative of Set and Osiris reaches its climax when Moses, after being a long time discipline of Jethro, steals the ancient *Book of Thoth*, the text of The Work, describing “the original sound” (p. 178). Hoping that the text of Thoth would guarantee him access to easy knowledge through which he could be “a soloist and no 1” (p. 182), he necessarily fails when performing. He does not only misrepresent the words of the text but, most importantly, wrongly supposes that the literal interpretation of a text is identical to real knowledge. Following the lost text, which eventually becomes the text of Jes Grew, one realizes how the narrative as a social-historical form of preunderstanding can become fixed the same way as religions are founded on the dogma of the sacred text. By slipping away from myth to story, from text to historical data, from narrative to fiction, the text of Jes Grew resists the temptation to develop into such a fixed interpretation of reality.

This is transformation, trickery and the inversion of situations through language the trickster way, bearing the characteristics of oral storytelling. As the pre-literacy era had not known any texts beside the pictorial representations of the tribal experience, oral storytelling served as a way of the community representing an image of itself. Oral storytelling, moreover, did not rely on textual representation, because of its communal

aspect. Through being fixed and textualized in a literary form, consequently, it stands in danger of losing its communal function. As Kremer & Jackson- Paton (2012) described, in modernity “the awareness of creative narratives and oral storytelling have given way to scientism and denials of the storied nature of our worlds” (p. 64). In this respect, they conclude, shamanic worlds and indigenous knowledge bear traits similar to the postmodern condition, both in ambiguity, contradiction, and the deconstruction of the ultimate truth.

Just as cultural metaphors, traditions or myths are tracked, mythological trickster figures that appear in all shapes and forms cannot be understood as mere symbols deep seated in some ancient hidden meaning. They are rather the process of signifying, of language and narrative as a transformative process, as Richardson describes it: “Trickster narratives entail taking multiple and conflicting perspectives against both the conventional contexts provided by the narrative and the ways in which it interlocks with other narratives and/on the social world” (Richardson, 2012, p. 669). As much as it seems, Herman’s story is not one, single grand narrative of two conflicting powers that bring social, historical processes into perspective. It is rather the trickster’s work on the reader, who is provided a network of interlocking narratives and sub-narratives, intertexts and subtexts to create pleasurable misreadings. As Alan Velie noted: “as for readers, by reading the narrative of the trickster, told by the trickster, they are manipulated into being tricksters who will share [the characters’] outrage at the current state of things and will join them in the fight against evil, using wit rather than violence” (as cited in Donaldson, 1995, p. 40).

Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* deals with the deconstruction of a similar narrative, the history of Plains Indians imprisoned in Fort Marion, Florida. Suffering under harsh living conditions and sometimes torture, the fate of these Natives serves as a tragic narrative of defeat and elimination. In King’s story, Fort Marion metaphorically appears as a mental institute from which the four old Indians escape to save the world. Additionally, the trope resurfaces on another narrative plane, that of the creation stories of the old Indians: after First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman escape their respective biblical stories, they meet a group of rangers who confront them with being Native and escort them to Fort Marion. Through the previous discussions of these, one may have noticed that in King’s novel characters fall in and out of narrative universes: into the text of the Bible, the literary works of Melville, Cooper or Defoe, even each other’s narratives, and finally, as if by chance, find exit to the real world.

Tripmaster Monkey’s handling of the great Chinese literary texts points to another way of disrupting the narrative. As previously mentioned, war is a tradition in classical literary pieces like *The Water Margin* or *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, while the Monkey

King's earlier story from *Journey to the West* is also one that relies on tropes of violence and power struggles. Grice (2006) suggests that while the plot of these pieces "depict or depend upon war as a narrative progression," Kingston chooses to discard these elements and focus on the "creative components," such as characters and themes (p. 79). Through his play, Wittman eventually creates what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as 'apparael evolution,' the original and the 'fake' narratives appearing as "two separate entities that simulate yet distinguish themselves from each other" (Williams, 1995, p. 88). Just as *Tripmaster* is a fake book, Wittman's play is a fake narrative, where, as C.T. Hsia remarked, "in the absence of authentic history we see a conscious fabulation of pseudo-history ... several sagas of picaresque heroes depicted in settings of everyday truth" (as cited in Grice, 2006, p. 80). Such an 'apparael' relation is reminiscent of Derrida's idea of the text's concept of self and other in a temporal perspective. In Wittman's play, this narrative duplicity equals the issue of identity, that is, one's relation to his own history and present. Ultimately, as in any sort of improvisational theater, the outcome is left to chance, here, the potential in the Monkey's 72 transformations: "Studying the mightiest war epic of all time, Wittman changed – been! - into a pacifist" (p. 340).

5/4/2 Narrative Chance

Vizenor (1990) called the trickster as a discursive formation "a comic trope, a chance separation in a narrative" (p. 282), the representation of the comic, unstable, unexpected and unpredictable in the narrative flow. Therefore, what the ambiguity, playfulness and elusiveness of the trickster provides us is not only a fresh, new look at the unknown but also the possibility to do away with fatalistic or hypotragic narratives. This is in other words chance, as Carlson defined it:

[S]ites where conventional structure is no longer honored but, being more playful and more open to chance, they are also much more likely to be subversive, consciously or by accident introducing or exploring different structures that may develop into real alternatives to the status quo. (cited in Salinas, 2013)

Thomas King's narrative plays with chance through the trickster's shape-shifting and trickery to get out of a tight spot through violating the rules of a conventional discourse – the term, here, is used as a stretch of language meaningful for a group of people. King's Coyote is unable to concentrate on the Narrator's story because it is simultaneously tempted by the multiple and cascading layers of imagination and desires. Through expressing these desires out of context, he is destined to slide on the figurative banana-

peel continuously. By playing the pun on the literal, it distracts the narrative flow and is annoying the reader who is trying to focus on the story. That is, in the first place, only possible, because in a process of communication we rely on the implicit: the trickster as a linguistic formation is, thus, a subversion in our cultural preunderstandings.

One particularly funny example of the above is when Old Woman meets Nathaniel Bumppo (the hero of J.F. Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*), also as Bailey (1999) noticed, a play on onomastics, the origin of names. (Note that this is similar to Ahdam's arbitrary naming of the creatures of Paradise earlier on in the book.) Being dissatisfied with her name, Bumppo is throwing out a couple of irrelevant choices like Daniel Boone, Harry Truman or Arthur Watkins, before settling with Hawkeye. Ironically, when later on in the story she encounters a group of soldiers, she is taken to prison for using the name impersonating a white person. The twist of the story is, that the soldiers would not take any other names for an answer, not even Old Woman, as they claim there are no such characters in this story. Ultimately, what happens here is that Old Woman's identity is evaluated from different narrative positions, which, due to their mutual exclusiveness, necessarily clash with each other. Such as in the rhetorical practice of the Signifying Monkey, the joke is on those who take it too literally and are unable to deal with the proverbial.

In poetic hermeneutics, distinctly in Ricoeur's work, metaphors are understood as working on the sidelines of the narrative, supporting and 'coloring' the plot of the text. Narrative can, thus, be understood as a literary technique, by which one creates cohesion, doing so with the help of the figurative. However, in trickster narratives metaphors are unstable and ambiguous, due to the trickster's mastery in deconstructing nearly every trope that our common patterns of understanding rely on. Here, the figurative serves as a discursive device, one that reiterates the narrative at its own leisure, simply by relying on the accidental nature of the pun. Such a chance play can be observed in the shift of narrative planes, the Monkey's or Coyote's transformations in identity or *Mumbo Jumbo's* previously mentioned possession scene, which Rushdy (1994) describes as a travel in intersubjectivity.

5/4/3 Narrative as a Spatial Concept: The Rupture of Plane

We have established that tragic realities, or as Vizenor put it, ‘hyperrealities’, favour a ‘literal’ reality over one with an elusive, metaphorical nature. Referring to Leitch (1983), who claimed that literal language only exists in illusions, he observes that “[t]he literal translations and representations of tribal literatures are illusions, consolations in the dominant culture. There can never be ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ readings of the text, or the tropes in tribal literatures, only more energetic, interesting and ‘pleasurable misreadings’” (p. 278).

When Kingston, Reed and King target Western cultural tropes, what they confront is the Western representation of the minority culture, that is, the mainstream’s illusionary consolation in his own self-image, ideas like manifest destiny or the ‘white man’s burden.’ Manifest destiny, in particular, relies on the idea of an organized, ‘striated space’, versus the ‘smooth space’ of the nomad, not yet “plotted, fenced, demarcated by Western spatial practices” (Swope, 2002, p. 620). In this broader sense, the narrative of the untamed territory might also be viewed as a narrative with a spatial aspect, because it determines the arrangement of concepts into a meaningful, compartmentalized system. Although manifest destiny has a physical aspect, space, here, does not refer to the realm of the physical but rather to an ‘ideological containment’, which, claims Swope, eventually reflects power relations. Striated space is a concept based on the Cartesian subject, the centerpoint of post-Enlightenment Western philosophy, the rational, conscious individual (Barker, 2000). In this sense, in our narratives of the self, identity usually appears as a coherent, logical continuum, along which one understands and organizes the events of her own biography.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, the Atonists represent this ‘State science’ (Swope, 2002, p. 620) that enforces categorical thinking through limiting the unknown into an organized space: just as works of art belong to Art Detention Centers, Jes Grew can be pacified through its text and the Talking Android shall represent the voice of a race as an essential quality. In *Tripmaster*, Wittman experiences similar spatial restrictions in his encounters with the bureaucratic system: the college graduate’s career defined by market demand is in fact an understanding of one’s walk of life as a professional curriculum vitae deprived of one’s dreams and convictions. Finally, in King’s novel, such prototypical thinking troubles indigenous characters like Lionel or Alberta. The former is being restricted in his life choices because of a wrongly issued medical paper and a misunderstanding that resulted in his incarceration. The latter, on the other hand, is deprived of the chance of having a baby because of not being able to meet any of the categories in the ‘artificial insemination’ form.

Narrative as a spatial category, however, is probably most efficiently attacked through the parody of popular movie genres like detective fiction or western. Genre films are certainly easy targets because, as Schatz (1981) argues, they are the “[cooperation] between artists and audience in celebrating their collective values and ideals ... as components of a genre’s ritualistic narrative system” (p. 15). Hollywood genres as “system[s] of value-laden narrative conventions” (p. 22), thus, offer consolations the same way as cultural metaphors because they are “a cultural milieu where inherent thematic conflicts are animated, intensified, and resolved by familiar characters and patterns of action” (p. 21). The problem with that is, of course, that they are also representations of a majority discourse that leaves little space for other narratives.

Such systems are naturally the playground of the trickster, as Swope (2002) argued, “the meeting points between what are traditionally seen as opposing versions of space deserve special attention because out of amalgamations comes the potential birth of new spatial forms” (p. 614). What the trickster does through comic chance, particularly in Reed’s and King’s parody of film genres, is a disruption of the narrative flow, “the rupture of plane out of which new life arises” (p. 620). In *Green Grass, Running Water* such a violation of space is committed by Coyote and the four Indians that suddenly appear on the pages of a western paperback only to jump over to the movie version starred by John Wayne. The story, then, culminates in an alternate version of the movie appearing on electronic salesman Bill Bursum’s giant wall of TV screens, the Map, with the Natives’ victory over John Wayne’s soldiers. Through this victory, space is reinstated in its original, smooth and uninhibited condition, in other words, the world is fixed by Coyote and the four old Indians.

Mumbo Jumbo offers the same kind of disruption of space, only without a clear-cut consolation, a Hollywood happy ending. Krishnaveni (2011) suggests that detective fiction, as a product of post-Enlightenment consciousness, is mostly concerned with issues of “social control, surveillance, repression of the self and the world of desire” (p. 94). The metaphysical detectives, as discussed, are however not so much after unveiling the truth as a means of control over social morale. They act in favor of Jes Grew whose ultimate aim is exactly to escape the striated space, the repression of social justice. Their explanation of the crime, as Swope (2002) describes, is ultimately a “product of a supernatural, collaborative effort, a fact that is obviously disruptive to the illusion of the detective’s authority” (p. 615). As a result, Jes Grew’s fate might be a failure from the perspective of the detection of truth, but from their narrative the resolution lies exactly in Jes Grew’s ability to lie dormant and resurface time and time again. “Time is a pendulum, Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around” (Reed, 1992, p. 218).

5/4/4 The Author as Trickster

In his famous essay, *Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes suggests that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, bland and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (p. 4). In postmodern fiction the author-genius and the reader guided by the novel’s presentation of a story are identities devoid of meaning, because intertextuality, polyglossia and multiple planes of narrative require just as an active participation on the reader’s as on the author’s part.

As cited in *Tripmaster Monkey*, everyone can read or be read to and Schmidt (1995) suggests that to interrupt or overturn a traditional way of reading is in the trickster’s nature. Its narration, as in the three novels discussed, is not so much a mode of guiding the reader towards a preferred understanding but rather a way of opening new angles to what has been falsely seen true for so long. Arnold Krupat once wrote about the trickster that his “shape-changing, limit-transgressing antics provide the best guide - it is inherent in the nature of the trickster not to provide a model - to who and what we are, and, as well, to how we ought to read” (as cited in Schmidt, 1995).

As the authority in the author slowly disappears, an omniscient, though at times hardly noticeable voice takes over, leading the trickster and its protagonists even deeper into the thicket of ambiguity. Kingston, Reed and King are quite similar in hiding behind such a narrative voice, although in different ways. King’s storyteller, the “says I”, is adamant on getting the story straight by trying to control Coyote’s constant blabbering and disruptive antics. It is a narrator apparently devoid of identity that could be one of the four Indians telling his version of the creation myth, an omnipresent third person narrator, or the author himself. Narrative voices and planes, thus, overlap and disturb one another, while through the Narrator’s voice the author creates a mediational text. As Ruppert explains, such texts “move the readers implied by the text to question the way they form knowledge and meaning, but in the end it seeks to reeducate those readers so that they can understand two codes, two traditions of discourse” (as cited in Bailey, 1999, p. 45). Ultimately, through the intricate interweaving of literacy and orality its story is a commentary on the nature of storytelling itself.

A similar construct in *Tripmaster Monkey* is the voice guiding and controlling Wittman, sometimes offering ironic commentary. As Lu (1998) suggests, the author and the narrator, here, share a female voice that becomes dominant in Wittman’s fake book, of which he is the author. In the book’s narrative there exists another one, that of Wittman’s

play. Eventually, claims Lu, through a trade-down of the ‘signifying position’, the roles of authors, narrators and protagonists become interchangeable. As with King, narratives mingle and divert, while being traced back to one other, the old one resurfacing as a fake, though not a tad less original version.

Finally, by balancing between its narrative and sub-narrative (that is, the book’s story and Black Herman’s historicized mythological account), Reed conceals himself as the trickster providing an allegory on the act of reading itself (Gates, 1988). In his metaplay, as Ingram (2012) pointed out, the distinction between fiction and reality disappears as reality is being revealed just as constructed as its textual rendition. In this way, the binary image of idea and representation is blurred, as concepts like the transcendent Blackness only exist in representations, the texts of Ellison, Baraka or Morrison, jive talk, the blues, or the stories of the Signifying Monkey, in other words, Jes Grew.

These are the voices through which the author speaks, but through him/her speaks the trickster as a communal, yet every bit as independent and unique voice. It is the author as trickster who, as Anne Doueihi wrote, plays in the space between story and discourse, “between narrative structure and the act of telling a story” (as cited in C. Smith, 1997, p. 518). Ultimately, behind all fiction that reflects on the act of writing itself, one should suspect the work of the trickster, travelling between dimensions of reality and subjectivity, of word and meaning, always one foot in the ambiguous, the liminal and the humorously subversive.

6 Didactical Conclusions

6/1 Reading as a Liminal Act

As discussed before, the political and aesthetic relevance of routes literature requires the teacher to perform a balancing act of sorts. The former is far too tempting in jumping to conclusions that support already existing beliefs, often on the verge of essentialistic tendencies. The latter, at the same time, elevates such texts to the level of high culture only few have the theoretical skills – or refined taste - to interpret. Applied separately, both these approaches are fundamentally wrong in taking one important aspect out of the equation, namely, that good literature appeals to a variety of readers of different socio-cultural background by appealing to their vision of reality. Readers with life experiences of their own tend to find pleasure and motivation in reading if the literary text is relevant to these, either by reinforcing them, broadening the scope of these, or providing a release through an escape to the imaginary.

In any of these cases, reading is an active process, inviting the reader to interpret and reflect on the text, and to partake in a role play of sorts, where subjectivity is often manifested in the shifts in the narrative voice. The latter becomes even more prevalent in intercultural reading as a means of raising internal and external awareness. Goncalves Matos (2011) sees this as “[contextualizing] insights into the complex relationship between individual and collective entities” (p. 57). In its most basic understanding, reading about foreign cultures can take us on a metaphorical journey into the unknown. On a more intricate level, though, it reveals the relation between the self and the other in its complexity, and through that the socially constructed nature of reality as well:

As learners/readers realize that cultures differ primarily in the way social actors organize and interpret reality, they become more competent at interpreting cultural events in general within the fitting context. This is lifelong learning and it goes beyond the discourse about otherness or alterity to become a meeting and a dialogue with otherness.

(Goncalves Matos, 2011, p. 58)

During the process of reading and interpretation, continues Goncalves Matos, the reader is inclined to deal not only with complexity but also ambiguity that is in part manufactured by the constant shift between the literal and the figurative. The openness of interpretation, in this sense, offers a chance for the text to be situated in the reader’s cultural experience. In Bassnett

and Lefevre's words, these are "strategies through which texts from one culture can penetrate the textual and conceptual grids of another culture" (as cited in Goncalves Matos, 2011).

Gustavo Perez Firmat described reading as a liminal activity, claiming that "the critical act of limning notes in the margins is by nature eccentric" (as cited in Monsma, 1996, p. 95). Liminality, here, applies from different perspectives. On the one hand it refers to the temporary position of the reader as being both inside and outside the figured world of the story. In routes literature it can also refer to the grey zone of awareness between the self and otherness. Furthermore, in a linguistic sense, it is the uncertainty of the chance provided by the ambiguity of literal versus metaphorical.

Literary works where tricksters disturb the narrative flow with their apparently irrelevant storytelling and commentary, offer narrative chance through multivocality by "[positioning] readers in relation to the difference of the text by confronting readers with their own potential for misunderstanding" (Monsma, 1996, p. 84). In Vizenor's often used term, this is a 'trickster hermeneutics', a method of textual interpretation that has little in common with the traditional understanding of text analysis with preferred meanings but rather an interplay between the text and the reader. Trickster, here, is an iconic sign in the language game, that invites the reader to become the trickster themselves, as Vizenor put it, "the sign and semiotic being in discourse" (as cited in Richardson, 2012).

6/2 A Third Place of Discourse

As mentioned earlier, trickster hermeneutics naturally requires an understanding of working with a text in an educational setting as a discursive activity. Questions around the dialogical nature of textual analysis are of utmost relevance within the confines of the classroom, where the teacher's role as lecturer has for centuries defined the learning experience. Although the situation has been taking a different turn in the past decades, the issue of self-reflexivity in educational design cannot be emphasized enough.

The classical concept of dialogue refers to a two-way communication with equal participants that continuously swap roles as speaker and listener. We have seen that dialogue can take place between researcher and text, student and teacher, given and new knowledge, between one's own culture and the culture of the other, and through that, the self and otherness, among others. However, from the perspective of literature classes there is one aspect that contradicts the dialogical nature of textual analysis, namely that roles within the supposed dialogue are swiftly changing within the educational environment.

The teacher as the prior researcher of the text becomes a mediator between the text and the students, scaffolding them into a direction that serves the means of raising critical awareness. Students, in turn, through the openness of interpretation, create their own explanations or pleasurable misreadings, ‘undermining’ the teacher’s role as mediator. This way, reading the text is not two-way communication between teacher and student, text and reader, or researcher and object. It is rather an open process where any one of the above can take up any of the subject positions on the menu. This is parallel with Rosenblatt’s conclusion that the literature instruction in EFL education needs to be a transaction, “an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other” (as cited in Paran, 2006).

Beyond intersubjectivity, there is another aspect of understanding literary analysis in the classroom as a discursive activity, namely, that reading in an education environment is a communal practice. Just as Derrida claims that every text is tracked, every reader has an experience which she can fall back on when interpreting a text. Therefore, readers who enter the universe of a text with the excitement and chance of a new experience, emerge with new understandings, or as Bailey (1999) describes: “Even though the words on the page are fixed, each time a book is read, the different audience and circumstances in essence alter the story and create a new event, just as each retelling of a myth is a unique event” (p. 50). In the classroom, these eventually interact and develop into a communal activity, one of storytelling.

In intercultural learning, claims Goncalves-Matos (2011), the experiences of the L2 foreign reader and the L1 native speaker are blended within one personality. While learners of English will naturally lack the knowledge of the English native speaker, they possess the experience of the native speaker through their own language. The teacher’s role, concludes Goncalves-Matos, is to create a so-called ‘third space’ within the confines of the classroom in order that a synthesis of such encounter is achieved. As Paran (2006) described, the teacher’s task is “to find ways in which to help learners unlearn their previous attitudes, reengage them in texts, work with them to recapture the sense of enjoyment in literature, and help them see the relevance of what they are reading to their lives” (p. 5).

From a critical standpoint, to develop new understandings through reading does not only involve linking the text to previous experiences – especially not when the text serves as a means of reassuring ossified and restrictive forms of knowledge. Most importantly, it encompasses new ways of understanding reality through the text exactly to “unlearn” these prior misconceptions. Brunner describes this as literature’s role to ‘subjunctivize’: “[to make] strange, [to render] the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition” (as cited in Goncalves Matos, 2011). Thus, while postmodern metafiction problematizes the text as a fixed and finalized entity,

new ways of understanding, linking and relating will finally point to its openness. For it is exactly through such a discursive model of reading that one realizes: no text has an entirely isolated life as black letters on the page, a momentum of the writer's imagination eternally fixed.

6/3 Critical Ways of Reading the Trickster

Paran (2006) describes that many teachers fear not being able to provide a full explanation of a literary work or a model for producing sufficient learning outcome. There is also the worry of not being able to 'live up to' the text, of "degrading and desecrating" it through a half-hearted analysis. This is further complicated by institutional expectations like proficiency testing that rather focus on measurable results or a shortage of time. Thus, when assembling a semester reading list, there is a tendency to rely on examples of the greater canon, and little attention is given to lesser known authors and nonconform language variations.

As for the objectives of the present study, the question arises whether one can elicit objective and learnable truth from literary works where ambiguity and chance play such a key role. Can one dissect and understand the language of the figurative with qualitative methods and transform it into a dialectical model that students can adapt to a broader scale of references? From the aspect of this study, it is important that teachers occasionally distance themselves from the logical, instructable side of language and understand their subject in a wider context. As Dewey remarked, "[p]erhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time" (as cited in Paran, 2006, p. 10).

This is the lifelong process of acquisition, the learning of culture, aesthetics and critical skills through practice. Literature as a part of language instruction, in this sense, is also a form of social learning: it situates the learner in narrative universes, opening up lifeworlds through images created by language. A critical way of reading literature is relevant to L2 instruction:

Understanding the role of literature in daily life, the way in which narratives function in learning, the role of literature and narratives in education, and the language-literature link is important in understanding why literature may have a place in second language teaching more than "history, geography, the economics or the architecture of other countries" (Edmondson, 1997, p. 46) or "philosophy, art, contemporary political issues or other subjects on the humanist agenda (Horowitz, 1990, p. 162)." (Paran, 2006, pp. 8-9)

As teachers of a foreign language, we are in a special situation, because teaching a language is teaching skills for a unique form of learning. Beyond the direct, functional applicability for communicative purposes, learners are inclined to deal with a broader perspective of such knowledge, namely its self-reflexivity. Language offers a metafunction, the ability to comment on our line of thinking while at the same time influencing these thought patterns. As Paulo Freire often put it in his works, understanding the word requires understanding the world.

The purpose of learning through the trickster's antics is, consequently, multiple. Firstly, it helps readers realize the ambiguity of existing on the borders and realize that the imaginative force behind such a mindset can manifest itself not only in fatal and tragic but also in subversively comic forms. As a result of that, one might be able to question the validity of tragic narratives and understand their socially constructed nature. Secondly, students as well as teachers need to unlearn contemplating the author and her text as a source with an automatically unquestionable authenticity. The value of the text, thus, is not achieved through the person of the author or its literary value, at least not exclusively, but through its way of connecting with the reader's experience in a particular moment in her life. Similarly, source criticism in literary texts has little relevance as through intertextuality any source can become open and be used, reused and misused, for desecrating and degrading the text is exactly the trickster's design.

Just as hyperrealities are socially constructed, the reader is also expected to develop a critical eye for how texts become fixed through social constructions like narratives or cultural metaphors. According to Alvesson & Sköldböck (2000), these represent basic styles of thought, often on the grounds of what Hans-Georg Gadamer called 'the similarity in difference' (p. 134). They create coherence in the relationship between the social and the individual in the form of a social 'ethos'. This is particularly true to root metaphors, myths, rituals and narratives that define the fabric of almost every discourse through connecting the sensory, the intuitive and the aesthetic with the structural, the social and the value-laden.

Language is an arbitrary system, but also with a great deal of ambiguity that, in Gonçalves-Matos' (2011) words, "may provide an open space to reread and reinterpret difference and perception" (p. 61). From a pedagogical perspective, she claims, the translation of a text is a border-crossing experience and this is the ultimate advantage of the foreign language learner. Native speakers might have an implicit understanding of idiomatic and metaphorical meanings but language learners, on a certain proficiency level, develop meta-knowledge. By having a better picture of language as a system, the inconsistencies of grammar and the apparent illogicality of a human construction, they also gain a more conscious image of its fallacies and ambiguity that the cultural aspect brings about. By the chance play inherent in misinterpreting the public meanings of the text, one is, thus, offered the opportunity to embark on a border-crossing journey with the trickster to get away from ossified forms and generic ways of self-expression.

As Paran (2006) put it, language teaching is an educational endeavor in which learners are not consumers but conscious participants with a potential of shaping the learning experience. The most important task of the critical model of reading the trickster is, therefore, to encourage students to develop this potential into autonomous personalities with an ability to question the integrity of author and text as well as the teacher. This is an approach similar to Strickland's (1990) confrontational pedagogy that attacks ignorance as an active blockage in learning as a result of institutional functions and the authoritative role of the teacher, as well as questionable notions of absolute knowledge.

The exercise of symptomatic reading particularly suits this design in dismissing literary texts as a product of the author-genius requiring of students "unique" and "original" responses (Strickland, 1990, p. 298). Traditional readings only reproduce existing schemes of knowledge, and will eventually lead to indoctrination instead of novel learning. Symptomatic reading, on the other hand, is a "mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings" (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 1) Subject positions such as "the reader" or "the author", Strickland claims, eventually slip away in intertextuality and intersubjectivity and become only a product of discursive conflict (p. 298).

As Paran claims, the focus of the literary class has recently moved from the reception to production of literature, therefore, reading is only part of developing critical consciousness. Huang (2011) also found that through exercises focused on conscious and critical reading students achieved better comprehension of the text and also gained motivation to write. As mentioned earlier, the teacher must encourage students to move on to unique and formally uninhibited ways of producing texts such as multimodal and digital genres, chat-room storytelling or a digital research project on intertextual sources. Additionally, the teacher can, as Strickland suggested, confront the students' subject positions by collectively written and publicly critiqued essays. By the group discussion of critical response papers aimed at the content, structure and practice of the English literature course he promotes reader resistance towards concepts of cultural hegemony as well as originality and individualism.

Strong or symptomatic reading, discussions and written assignments, thus, can be integrated in a series of lessons, as Schneider (2007) pointed out, turning linguistic weakness from a liability into a resource. She also advocated a top-down model of reading that not only diverts the focus from insufficient vocabulary and linguistic units and towards textual context but also promotes greater involvement in the text and, in Berman's words, "interpretive complexity" (as cited in Schneider 2007, p. 141).

The result of result of such interrogative analysis is a postmodern ethnography, as Tyler described, “a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourses intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect.” (as cited in Lin, 1992, p. 335). This will eventually provide the teacher with objectives of both how to seek the text and how to assist students in ‘seeking and deconstructing their own texts’. In a critical way of reading this involves not only an attempt at the interpretation of the text but also an understanding of the various points of view, the intention behind language choices, bias and power relations, ultimately, the understanding of language and identity in a wider cultural-historical and political context.

Conclusion

This thesis was an insight into how the trickster works in three works of postmodern fiction. Its aim was to examine how understanding the discursive characteristics of the trickster in these novels can help the learner / reader take up a critical stance towards representation, text, and language. Although originally culture heroes in indigenous mythologies, tricksters are also linguistic modes in oral storytelling. Their ambiguous machinations, their trickery and transformative skills as well as their borderline personalities between the human and the divine made them deconstructive heroes of the postmodern. This is especially so because they represent cultures and peoples that even recently are often restricted to the painful yet sometimes comic experience of being marginalized. Moreover, tricksters represent discursive features because they illuminate the socially constructed nature of our worlds and their narrative representations. They embody the ambiguous and metaphorical nature of language and create confusion that liberates creative forces which critique our ways of knowing.

Throughout the analysis I have identified literary characters that represent three different, and yet, in some ways similar, oral traditions: Chinese, African and Native American. Coyote, the Monkey King, and PapaLaBas as postmodern tricksters are comic figures with subversive characteristics: they work on and speak from the sidelines of the novel's narrative and grab every chance to divert the reader's preunderstandings. They are openly up against the dogma, be it religious, cultural or textual, that is, the authority of the written word. Moreover, they do this by reappropriating and reusing metaphors and cultural tropes or simply placing them in a different light through their antics. The analysis also described tricksters as discursive formations, the subversive tools of parody and pastiche, of talking directly through indirection.

Finally, the novels support Gerald Vizenor's claim that tricksters as devices in postmodern meta-discourse bring about the death of narrative. The reason for this is that they create chance play in the narrative flow through which the reader can eventually become a participant in interpretation instead of a passive spectator of events. As suggested, this undermines the role of the author-genius and discourages readers from taking his or her words at face value. Postmodern multiethnic fiction, or as suggested, routes literature is, thus, a way to liberate the reader from judgmental predispositions by dropping the trickster in the midst of hyperrealities, fatal predestinations that are, however, constructed.

I started out this project with a conviction that being an educator one is required to be a radical. By this, I do not mean seeking radical solutions to the fallacies of the educational system but rather being a radical in constantly challenging our ways of thinking and to encourage students to do so. In the process, one is destined to find himself on the margin measuring his vision of reality on a par with the world views of others. A realization of how different life situations affect our experiences and ways of knowing is to regard these views as communicating ourselves to the outside world. This is storytelling, where narratives of tragedy and progress clash in a dramatic way on a regular basis, often without the promise of a reasonable give-and-take.

It is probably no wonder that a great deal of social commentary we read on public forums involves a selective source criticism. Our judgements are not so much reliant on the evaluation of objective truth but rather on our subjective lived experiences. At the end of the day, one might argue, life is not a science project. Certain critical-analytical skills can be taught and learned, but a deeper sense of critical awareness must be rooted in acknowledging the ultimate helplessness of the human experience: the impossibility of grabbing the truth.

Therefore, one has to understand that in our stories, biographical data or facts of history are only the exoskeleton, which comes alive in the creative imagination. There is no validity, only the perspective expressed in language, as Bakhtin said, the “point of view in the word”. And as worlds are multiple, culturally bound, and narrated, words are ambiguous, contextual and derivative. Any kind of interpretation, thus, is just a narrative traced back to the text it is supposed to understand. The realization of this complexity, though, should not be desperation but rather a sense of being liberated. The shell shock of this clarity might almost tempt one to create more confusion, and that is exactly the trickster’s design: to rip a temporary hole in the fabric of understanding through which one can dive into the unknown. This is the discourse of anarchy, with the anticipation of fixing the world.

When reading of the trickster, with the trickster, the role of the teacher as a mediator between text and reader becomes redundant. Stories are mediated in the very act of reading, reflecting and discussing. This is how the creative imagination gives way to a critical imagination: a way of looking without expectations. As Jean Paul once wrote: “the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers; and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men” (as cited in Rushdy, 1994, p. 118). The trickster is, thus the impersonator of the freedom of mankind to see and learn by own experience.

Learning is realizing and transcending the boundaries of our competence, not level by level but through the process of opening new perspectives. Just as learning a new language is an access to a new universe, stories are new aspects, fragments of reality. They create for us the broad frames of reference that lead to the conclusion that stories intertwine and not exclude each other. Meanwhile, the trickster helps the learner in dealing with the ambiguity of meaning, as well as the insecurity that comes with learning to break the codes. The annoyance over the mess we are making in the communication process, therefore, must come with the realization that as early as you start learning a language, you own it, because you have the infinite freedom to do what you please with it. It is the ability to subvert and reuse words, metaphors and tropes and put them back into the public consciousness. Through that, one becomes the trickster itself, actively shaping the story of the largest community, one of mankind.

I would round up this study with the commonly used figure of speech, “further research is needed”. There are a thousand different ways of reading a trickster, and up until now there have not been provided a sufficient body of studies in the field. Also, an educational model with a critical perspective grounded in the trickster’s mindset is long overdue. Postmodernism has been around as a theoretical framework for quite some decades, but it has not seeped into the spheres of lower education yet, although younger generations grow up in an increasingly fractured world of multiple realities. To be able to better understand and interpret this world, one is certainly better endowed with skills of critical imagination. Apparently, the trickster has a long way to fix the world.

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