

©Copyright 2013

Irena Percinkova-Patton

Toast to Morrison: The Trickster Paradigm in African American Literature

Irena Percinkova-Patton

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2013

Reading Committee:

Brian Reed, Chair

Sonnet Retman

Nikolai Popov

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of English

University of Washington

Abstract

Toast to Morrison: The Trickster Paradigm in African American Literature

Irena Percinkova-Patton

This dissertation is an examination of the *trickster paradigm*—an aesthetic, a principle that is specific to black creativity and narration and an enabling force behind the subversive rhetorical strategies of “Signifyin(g)” or double-voicedness, that I trace in the African American vernacular and literary tradition. Through an analysis of the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Melvin Tolson and Toni Morrison, I outline a theory of the trickster principle that is operative on several levels. My project relies on a reading of the trickster as a culture hero—figure of mediation and resistance—and codifies the importance of this figure as a “signifier” in black consciousness that has endured over centuries, encompassing acts of subjugation and transformation in response to historical changes. In addition, my discussion of the trickster tradition opens up a larger argument pertaining to the dynamics of vernacular/literary production and the ability to respond to the demands of American modernity—in terms of mobility, urbanization, industrialization, etc. I also trace how these processes of reclaiming and recovery of vernacular expressive modes and their use in written literature reveal the unsettling issue of not just coming to terms with American capitalist modernity, but also with the American modernist literary canon. Finally, the last chapter suggests a “transnational turn” as I look into the specifics of cultural contacts between two geographically distant literary traditions—the African American and the Macedonian—and their respective engagements with their folk past. This analysis brings to the fore the peculiarities of historic relatedness and a shared articulation of a people’s “spirit” in traditions that respond to the violence and annihilation of enslavement and colonization. This kind of globalization of African American literature and theory opens up a new, exciting possibility to read black literature beyond the transatlantic and transdiasporic frames. It adopts a transnational approach that emphasizes connections among “minority literatures” across nation-states and re-defines the scope of a new global multiculturalism.

Chair of Supervisory Committee:
Professor Brian Reed
Department of English

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: From Signifyin(g) Trickster to “Ba-adman” Stagolee: Culture Heroes in African American Folklore	16
Chapter 2: Heroic Tricksters in Toni Morrison’s <i>Sula</i> , <i>Song of Solomon</i> and <i>Tar Baby</i>	60
Chapter 3: “Laughing to Keep from Crying”: The Black Oral Tradition and the Double-Talk of Poetry	100
Chapter 4: “That Man in the Gutter Is the God-Maker, the Creator of Everything that Lasts”: Zora Neale Hurston’s <i>Mules and Men</i> and <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	139
Chapter 5: Different Horizons: Macedonian Traditions of the Heroic	184
Bibliography	227

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee for their valuable assistance and guidance. I owe so much of my success to my dissertation director, Brian Reed. His teaching, guidance, incredible encouragement, and generosity were essential to the completion of my dissertation. My sincere gratitude and appreciation to the other members of my committee, Sonnet Retman and Nikolai Popov, for their intellectual presence and ongoing support. Many thanks to Jennifer Bean for her insightful comments and ideas for future considerations regarding this project. Also, this dissertation would not have been possible without the exceptional guidance of professor Joycelyn Moody.

I am especially grateful to the outstanding faculty and staff of the English Department at the University of Washington. In particular, my deepest gratitude to Kathy Mork and Jennifer Siembor for their assistance every step of the way. My gratitude goes to the EWP Program and the Director Anis Bawarshi, for their continuous support that made my academic work possible.

Also, this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my professors at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. I wish to thank in particular professor Violeta Hristovska, professor Dragi Mihajlovski and professor Zoran Ancevski. My gratitude goes also to the researchers at the Macedonian Institute of Folklore “Marko Cepenkov,” in particular, Ermis Lafazanovski, and also Ana Martinoska at the Institute of Macedonian Literature, for their assistance in my research regarding Macedonian literature and folklore.

I owe much gratitude to my families and dear friends in Macedonia and in the US who have nourished me and supported me through the highs and lows of this process. My sisters, Tanja and Lidija, who were always there to listen and care, my mother for “pushing me to finish already” and my father, who even though left us much, much too soon, I am sure is watching proud that his little girl from Macedonia pursued her American dream. To my friend Sonja who cheered me on even when I wanted to give up. I thank my friends Vlado and Lidija for providing sustenance and much needed *joie de vivre* in the breaks between writing. My American family for being loving, supporting and encouraging, always.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my husband Kent and our lovely son Killean. Portions of this work were written in the most writing conducive and the least inspiring of places: my underground office in Padelford; Laura’s basement; a barbwire compound in Kabul; a charming apartment on the edge of the Old City in Jerusalem; the magnificent reading and research rooms at the Library of Congress in DC; a drafty apartment in Skopje, and finally, in my attic office in our house in Ballard, overlooking breathtaking Pacific Northwest sunsets. In our perpetual state of homelessness, Kent’s gentle reminders of “silver linings” and “almost there’s” made the world and this project real. This accomplishment would never have been possible without the incredibly sustaining power of his love, sacrifice and relentless optimism. To Kent, the most remarkable, life-affirming, generous and beautiful person I know, thank you.

INTRODUCTION

[Folklore] offers the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners, customs and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it: and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies. These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. --Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*.

The world, in Brer Rabbit's wary eyes, is a jungle. Life is a battle-unto-the-death for food, sex, power, prestige, a battle without rules. There is only one reality in this life: who is on top?--Bernard Wolf, "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit."¹

[...]Counterfeit is a term I use to discuss the ways in which black writers create their own authority in order to craft their own, alternative system of literary currency and value, so to speak, functioning both within and without the dominant, supposed gold-standard system of American culture. Counterfeit I also see as a literary counterpart to the long-standing tradition of the trickster. There are many other names for the black artists, who, like the trickster—just one prototype African Americans have embraced—seeks to go beyond expectations, both black and white. For the black author, and even the ex-slave narrator, creativity has often lain with the lie—*forging* an identity, “making” one, but “lying” about it too.” --Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: The Blackness of Blackness*.²

In his remarkable meditation on African American culture and its artistic traditions, *The Grey Album: The Blackness of Blackness* (2012), the poet Kevin Young makes it abundantly clear how central the idea of the trickster is to black artistic creation, as he reminds us that that the African American trickster tradition—related to black rhetorical strategies like “lying” and “storying”—“has just as much place in African American letters as rituals of church or prayer or music.”³

¹Bernard Wolfe, "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit" in Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 524-540.

² Kevin Young. *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2012. Print, p.25.

³ In my dissertation I move interchangeably between the terms “Black” and “African American” to refer to a culture, literature, figures and authors that belong to a heritage that is American of African descent.

For Young this “artful deceit”⁴ that is enabled by the peculiar “counterfeit” trickster tradition penetrates black creativity in its various iterations: from folk storytelling to rap and hip-hop, to jazz and blues, to poetry and fiction. My dissertation puts forwards a reading of the trickster as a culture hero—a figure of mediation and resistance—that highlights the importance of the *trickster paradigm* that Young writes about; that is, an aesthetic, a principle that is specific to black creativity and narration, an enabling force behind the subversive rhetorical strategies of “lying” or “storying” or “Signifyin(g)” in the black literary tradition.

I begin my inquiry with a tracing of the modifications of the trickster figure in black folklore and literature. S/he embodies themes of survival and is readily adapted in both the oral and the literary tradition to represent a collective worldview. In the first half of this dissertation, I examine how the trickster manifests in the folk culture exemplified by folk ballads and toasts (such as the Signifying Monkey ballad and Stagolee toasts), all the while involving the literal performance of acts of subversion and deception, as well as the manipulation of situations, people, and events. As I expand the analysis, I also focus on how narrative tricksterism involves rhetorical manipulations of language by situating the narrator (author/character) within a given cultural or social context of oppression in which subversion and deception are used to assert the individual's common humanity and freedom. I place the analysis of the trickster paradigm within a larger argument that looks into the dynamics of the vernacular/literary production and the ability to *respond* to the demands of American modernity – industrialization, urbanization, mobility, etc. My intent is to show that the reclaiming and recovery of black vernacular

⁴ Dwight Garner in the book review “A Poet’s Collage, Sampling Included: The ‘Grey Album’ by Kevin Young. The New York Times, March 15, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/books/the-grey-album-by-kevin-young.html?_r=0.

expressive modes and their use in Black writing reveals not only engagement and coming to terms with American modernity, but also with the *modernist* literary canon.

In my analysis of the different stages of folk trickster heroes, I'm primarily influenced by John W. Roberts' study *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989). I find the connections that he establishes between different types of tricksters useful as a model for understanding the continuum of trickster figures as they change in response to historical and cultural conditions. My chapters also build from the research on folklore by Roger Abrahams and his study *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1964); Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977); and Gregory E. Rutledge's tracing of the trickster as an epic hero in American literature and culture in his dissertation *The Epic Trickster: From Sunjata to Jim Crow* (2005).⁵ My line of inquiry in the chapters that deal with novelists and poets and their representations of the badman follows some of the arguments suggested by Jerry Bryant in *Born in a Mighty Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction* (2003), and Cecil Brown's tracing of the "badman" Stagolee in *Stagolee Shot Billy* (2003). My discussion of black modernity and modernism draws on the ideas set forth by Michael North in *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (1994), David G. Nicholls in *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (2000) and Daphne Lamothe in *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture and Ethnography* (2008).

⁵Other valuable sources on tricksters in the African American tradition for my dissertation include Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (1973), and Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (1978) as well as her *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore* (2002).

A look into the rich black vernacular tradition and its influence on written literature provides a valuable entry into the peculiar processes of forging a narrative history for African Americans. At the same time, an investigation into the variations of trickster (and trickster-like) figures that emerge as heroes (or anti-heroes) in African American culture help us theorize the existence of certain *subconscious* aspects of a *peoples' psyche* that respond to and valorize the trickster's unsettling and transformative behavior. Folk narratives and contemporary texts both draw on the appeal of the trickster tales that not only claim kinship with the narratives of enslaved African Americans but are also told as a means of subverting dominant language. The tricks and shenanigans of African American tricksters—spanning from the popular animal tricksters such as Br'er Rabbit and the Signifying Monkey, to John from the “John and Old Master” stories, all the way to badman Stagolee—represent multiple strategies of resistance to enslavement, executed mostly through a manipulation of language. One of the guiding tasks of this project is to look into the intricate web of historical/cultural/aesthetic processes which have enabled someone like the trickster (particularly someone as controversial and transgressive as badman Stagolee)—a manipulative figure of violence and elusiveness, one who disrupts and rebels against a dominant order, but has limited transformative and culture-building power—to move from being the trickster of mediation to a venerated hero in the black folk tradition and in literature. Some of the other questions I try to resolve in my discussion of tricksters as culture heroes include the following: What role do trickster figures play in altering perceptions of heroes, thereby subverting dominant structures? How do tricksters become elevated from initially derogatory figures of resistance to cultural tropes of triumph? How operative is this rhetorical game, enabled by the “counterfeit” discourse, the tricksters' penchant for “storying” and “lying,” in opening up a discourse on freedom? Finally, are trickster “culture heroes”—

figures of resistance born in the folk imagination, employing trickster-like strategies of resistance and subversion—emblematic of oppressed people?

The trickster's influence and his potential for change are always manifested in the medium of language. His transformative power resides here, since the trickster's fundamental role is to be an originator of language. Thus a consideration of the Signifyin(g) trope is instrumental in interpreting the mechanisms of language and discourse at play in both folkloristic and literary genres. In my critical approach, I am deeply indebted to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), the text that firmly establishes the connections between the black vernacular tradition (particularly its Signifyin(g) aspect) and literature. Gates's critical approach relies on the Signifying Monkey—one of the best known trickster figures in African American folklore—not specifically as a character, but as a *vehicle of narration*. As Gates argues: “[the Signifying Monkey] is the originator of signifying, a rhetorical strategy, a practice unengaged in information giving” (687). This particular ability that this trickster possesses is to *signify*, to talk with great innuendo, to cajole, to lie, talk around a subject, to mediate. In the studies of folklore's relation to fiction, scholars often point out that African American writers have helped *translate* black dialect and ritualized black vernacular contests (toasts, sounding, signifying, playing the dozens) into the urban idiom, just as folk “poets” and “storytellers” have used storytelling or “lying” to sublimate their feelings of aggression to achieve mastery of words in a world of subjugation where language was the only tool of power.

In my consideration of tricksters, I also look into their potential to operate as rhetorical agents, that is, to bring energy to narratives, humor, irony, polyvalence and multi-voicedness. My analysis of the “double-talk” specific to tricksters and narrative and poetic trickster

strategies draws from Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of carnival, dialogism and polyphony, presented in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984). The various forms of traditional oral expression: laughter, jest, jokes, satire, toasts, anecdote, humor, grotesque, allegory, etc. that tricksters (and trickster-like figures) employ are examples of discourse of humor which bear close resemblance to a Bakhtinian carnevalized discourse of the underclass. A consideration of this is important since it brings into question the *authoritative version* of language and cultural values in the American context, making room for a multiplicity of different voices (folk vs. official) and contrasting cultural narratives (Black vs. White). By discerning these different modes of discourse, Bakhtin shows how *dialogic language* disrupts uniformity of thought and allows for multiplicity—the polyphony that is inherent in carnival is based on the dialogical power of language, i.e., a quality of language that results from the clash of different voices (and we may add, different worldviews). I find Bakhtin's theories of discourse helpful in the analysis of folk expression, particularly in the ambivalence and potential for word-play (Signifying) the language of tricksters invites—while they are deceitful, practical jokers, the language that they embody is as well.

My understanding of the term “culture hero” is informed by Zora Neale Hurston's use of this language in her 1934 essay on folklore “Characteristics of Negro Expression” in which she states that: “John Henry is a culture hero in song, but no more so than Stacker Lee, Smokey Joe or Bad Lazarus. There are many, many Negroes who have never heard of any of the song heroes, but none who do not know John (Jack) and the rabbit” (“Characteristics of Negro Expression” 62). In the John-Massa stories that she records in *Mule and Men*, Hurston describes John as the “the great human culture hero in Negro folk-lore” (253). As the stories reveal, John is a trickster,

and he becomes a “hero” of black culture through his opposition to, first of all, God and the Devil, and then, the white master. His strategies of resistance are not clear, but his status as a culture hero is made possible by his verbal cunning and his duplicity in language (i.e. his signifying prowess). Daphne Lamothe argues that the John stories of black folklore have had such an indelible influence on black consciousness of resistance because they function as personal and collective allegories “resonating with the situations of African-descended peoples who transform displacement and disempowerment into a tenacious will to survive, and then thrive, in a hostile environment through sheer creativity and (self)-invention” (*Inventing the New Negro* 8). The culture hero thus figures as a “signifier” in black consciousness, one that has endured over centuries, encompassing countless acts of subjugation and transformation in response to historical changes. What my investigation of the trickster culture hero has shown is that, in its many valences, this figure has come to represent a cultural ideal, an idealized hero while at the same time enabling the transgressive, yet transformative force of a culture (such as Stagolee). This dissertation relies upon the existence of such a “culture hero”—a figure often associated with the trickster of folklore—while I trace the existence of “historical” culture heroes and “the trope” of the culture hero.⁶

Hurston’s ethnographic work is integral to my discussion of black modernity. Hurston combines elements of forms that were instrumental in crafting a discourse of modernity with

⁶ In his comprehensive study of epic tricksters “The Epic Trickster: From Sunjata to Jim Crow”, Gregory Rutledge explores the dynamics and the genealogy of the trickster as an epic hero in American literature and culture. He maintains that the African American storytelling tradition shows a slow return of epic potential to the descendants of Africans, tracing its remote and ancient origins to West Africa, via its movement into the diaspora with the enslaved, its evolution over centuries of enslavement and finally into African American literature as “a symptom of broader cultural forces of our modernity” (8). Thus for Rutledge, tracing of the “epic trickster” in the African American tradition represents a creation of a “genealogical narrative” of a figure to whom the trickster-hero owes much and who struggles against the limitations of the trickster status (8). Moreover, the epic trickster also struggles against the “race and *res* – Blackness and chattel”—objectification that creates for the Western gaze a stereotypical and liminal figure, “the trickster-prop(erty), easily quantified and controlled because of his or her limited subjectivity” (8).

styles and tropes from black folk culture. She advocates a reinvestigation of modernity by asserting that folklore is, in and of itself, modern art. Hurston also suggests that culture is something that is acquired through proximity to a specific environment; thus in her view, living a culture is a different experience from observing it and as a result, claiming ownership of it. She also makes a connection between language and knowledge, particularly the ability to use language to gain insight into reality. Hurston's turn to the "authentic" art of the South—folk tales, songs, spirituals—is crucial for her artistic expression and vision.

Hurston's approach to collecting folklore has enabled a safe space in which the experience of black people in America is preserved in contrast to the dominant society's attempt at "cultural acquisition and containment" (Lamothe 9). Marjorie Pryse makes a convincing case about the relevance of Hurston's ethnographic and artistic project, especially for the literary tradition of black women's writing, when she compares the effects of Hurston's *Mules and Men* on her contemporaries to that of the Bible on seventeenth-century colonial American literature. Pryse argues that *Mules and Men* gave Hurston "the authority to tell stories because in the act of writing down the old 'lies,' Hurston created a bridge between the 'primitive' authority of folk life and the literary power of written texts. The point is that *she wrote them down*, thereby breaking the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power."⁷ Therefore, in the black literary tradition, the very act of *producing* black authored texts and establishing "an authentic black printed voice of deliverance" (*The Signifying Monkey* 132) raised the culture's awareness of the close links between the black written mode and African American modernity.

⁷ Marjorie Pryse "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women." *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Ed. Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. Print, p.11-12

At the same time, Hurston's ethnographic and creative work reveals an acute awareness of the modernist predicaments that will become dominant in the twentieth century: movement, border crossing, self-location, and the making of homes away from home. As I trace the trope of the glorification of the outlaw as a figure of freedom in several poems by African American poets, it becomes apparent that the "restless searching" that will become emblematic of the "life on the move" of the "badman" has as much in common with the transitory dwelling of Baudelaire's flaneur since migration, displacement and alienation re-define the idea of home for black Americans in those many new variations of being at home in their complex state of "homelessness" in America.

Through this project, I seek to explore the forces that have helped create an aesthetic that is embedded in a folk African past, but at the same time, peculiarly American. Rightfully called "culture builders," these types of heroic trickster figures seem to gain prominence in the folk imagination at moments of identity crisis in the culture, compounded by the recurring trauma of displacement. Two such important moments of crisis in black culture in America are related to migration: first, the forced migration in the slave trade into United States and, second, the massive internal migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North at the beginning of the twentieth century. My project has not been driven solely by the desire to suggest yet another way of looking at the inextricable links between contemporary Black literature and the vernacular, folk tradition. Rather, I hope that this dissertation will provide a closer look at those particular moments in the history and life of a culture that are indicative of a transformation, that are marked by radical displacements, and as such are rife with creative potential. A look into those key events in African American history that have played a significant role in identity formation and artistic expression is important for the discerning of a

historical schematic that has profoundly informed and shaped black culture in America and its production of a literary tradition whose roots are deeply embedded in the wisdom of the folk.

One of the goals of this project is also to invite a look into two seemingly different vernacular and literary traditions : the African American and the Macedonian. This comparative analysis is partly driven by my personal experience and knowledge as an insider in one of them—I am a Macedonian-born scholar of African American literature. At the same time, this approach was propelled by a critical curiosity and a conviction that an analysis of such improbable cultural encounters opens us to consider, and—as Toni Morrison reminds us—“imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar.” As part of my project, I rely on other scholars who have realized that there is some sense of kinship in seemingly distant literary traditions that are created under the rigors of enslavement and injustice. In *Up From Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul*, Dale E. Peterson investigates comparable moments in Russian and African American literatures, while he also traces the historic forces and cultural dynamics that account for connections between Du Bois’ “double consciousness” and the double-voicedness and polyphony of Russian novelists, as well as Gates’ indebtedness to Bakhtin in formulating his theory of Signifyin(g) as “black double-consciousness.” Peterson’s study was a valuable point of entry for me as it opens up potentials for critical analysis of such “powerful gravitational pull[s] between two geographically remote literatures.”⁸ What becomes apparent in my analysis of the African American and Macedonian traditions and their interactions with modernization (American capitalist modernity and Ottoman rule, respectively) is that the act of tracing, re-tracing and re-claiming the oral, folk cultural tropes and “unwritten” forms of representation provides access to missing chapters of

⁸ Peterson, Dale E. *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. Print, p.1.

national narratives and genealogies. It also helps identify specific historic processes that govern the re-shaping of cultural memory and a forging of literary tradition that thrives on the epic potential of its folk culture heroes.

Being part of the “other” Europe, through its long journey to independence and self-definition, Macedonia partakes in a uniquely European philosophical geography and a cultural understanding in which “borders crucially enter into the very definition of nationhood.”⁹ In the political and ideological climate of the Balkans, a penchant for ethnocentric thinking has deeply engrained the idea that different nations, like individuals, have their specific peculiarities and “character” and as such they are embodied in the cultural tropes and grand narratives of a nation that thrives on keeping these defining qualities alive. Making the connection between collective memory (folk production falls into this category) and the shaping of a cultural identity becomes an important act of defining national belonging. A look at culture heroes in a given tradition as “sites” of cultural memory may draw some interesting parallels between a nation’s cultivation of memory and its sense of national identity. Literature plays a significant role in this process of enacting a cultural memory, not simply in terms of a literary canon, but as a *vehicle* of keeping heroic cultural tropes in constant motion.

Even though my analysis of the folklore stretches as far as back the fourteenth century, I specifically emphasize nineteenth century Europe as a turning point that marks the preoccupation with “national thought.”¹⁰ It is the period that will see the rise of nationalism and national

⁹ Agnew, John A. *Globalization and Sovereignty*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009. Print. p.69.

¹⁰ This novel type of philology largely takes hold in Germany in the nineteenth century, heralded by Jacob Grimm as part of a romantic-national paradigm – according to Grimm, Germanistik is a study of the anthropological essence of Germany, through a thorough investigation of German language, literature, history, legal history and mythology. This echoes mid-nineteenth century understanding of literary history as an investigation of the cultural expression of a given race in a given geographical location at a given historical moment (Leerssen 74). In the United States, the anthropologist Franz Boas introduces the concept of “culture” (Boas’s version of anthropology is close to

movements; when the belief that there is such a thing as a “national character” will be institutionalized academically. This sense of increased national awareness and its accompanying political instrumentalization in the Macedonian tradition will translate in cultural production of “the trope of the fallen hero” that will greatly affect literary image formation. This nationalist preoccupation with the heroic also solidifies the depth of ethnic binaries and the understanding of racial/ethnic alterity. In general, the complex cultural and psychological forces that are set in motion by colonization, slavery, political conflicts, wars, terrorist attacks, ethnic cleansing, etc., call up from “an unconscious inventory of images and generalized prejudice about the other” the notion of others as aliens and foreigners (Beller 11). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, several social and political developments have triggered a renewed preoccupation with identity and national belonging as powerful forces in social, political and cultural relations: the aftermath of the fall of communism and the ongoing integration of European states have each in their turn contributed to a heightened sense of “national awareness.” Mobility, globalization and the increasingly multi-cultural nature of the social fiber of modern societies in the West have also spurred redefinitions of what it means to be ethnic in relation to a national identity. I take on these broader questions in my analysis of how the culture’s preoccupation with its (un)heroic past and its reverence of culture heroes plays an important role in national identity formation.

I begin the discussion on tricksters in Chapter One with a tracing of the development of folk heroes and their various permutations in the black oral tradition in the United States. I specifically examine the Signifying Monkey narrative songs (toasts) circulating during slavery and the “badman” Stagolee folk ballad that emerges after Emancipation. The trickster figure, such as the Signifying Monkey, is dominant during the period of slavery, since he could

what in the nineteenth century would be called *Volksgeist*). *From National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History*. Joep Leerssen. Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

manipulate this reality through wit, guile and rhetorical games, thus equalizing conditions between master and slave while breaking the rules of the system that provided “Old Master” with economic, social and political advantage. This chapter specifically examines verbal tricksterism in the oral tradition where the carefully coded deceptions, dissimulations, and ironies typical of the trickster powerfully contribute to representations of individual and collective survival and progress. The “badman” hero captures the folk imagination sometime in the beginning of the twentieth century, and since then has survived as a prominent figure in African American folklore, in popular and artistic traditions. The persistence of the character, intensified by his charisma, notoriety and the adaptability of his deeds to suit the demands of different time periods, different genres, and different audiences, testify to his importance within black culture.

In Chapter Two, the investigation moves to the “badman”/ “outlaw” figure (both male and female) as sources of liberation for the black community and expression of otherwise inconceivable choices and identities in literature. I focus on three novels by Toni Morrison, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, in which she most poignantly re-invents the folk figure of the “badman” and the “badwoman” trickster types. In Morrison’s fiction, tricksters embody the “heroic” principle, a trait that has been conspicuously absent in the oral tradition. I offer a reading of the badman trickster in Morrison as an embodiment of this “Black heroic” despite his/her suspect potential for culture-building. In all three novels Morrison masterfully blends the rich, aural heritage of folk storytelling, mythmaking and communal participation with the art of the black novel. The result is an effective quality of orality in the written story and the creation of an intriguing narrative voice that often wears the disguise of a trickster.

In Chapter Three, my dissertation continues to trace the “trickster paradigm” adapted from folk culture and its influence on black poetic expression. I focus on several poets who have

explored either the “badman” motif or other manifestations of the trickster paradigm, for the purpose of highlighting the importance of black orality to the constitution of a Black poetic tradition. In addition, I look at the dynamics of the folk tradition and its ability to *respond* to the demands of modernity—industrialization, urbanization, mobility, etc. In this chapter I argue that the recovery of black vernacular expressive modes and their use in Black writing reveal not only engagement and coming to terms with American modernity, but also with the *modernist* literary canon. While folkloric transmission is primarily oral due to the prohibition of literacy, Black literature provided the opportunity to adapt and transform vernacular art forms in response to the ever-changing historical circumstances and the culture’s development.

Chapter Four discusses Zora Neale Hurston's textual production in the 1930’s as directly concerned with theorizing and representing characteristically black modes of oral expression and their relation to modernity. In *Mule and Men* Hurston combines forms that were instrumental in crafting a discourse of modernity with styles and tropes from black folk culture. In her depiction of a black woman's travels in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston represents an experience of “restless searching” that is emblematic of the modern condition and of trickster-like behavior. As a novelist Hurston seems to reflect a Bakhtinian understanding of language; there’s a discerning artful approach to rhetorical play, an awareness of the complexity of narrative black forms and the implications such understanding of language generates in her treatment of the black vernacular.

In the final chapter, I use the questions that foreground the representation of culture heroes and blackness/alterity, evident in the oral and literary traditions of African Americans, as a springboard for a comparative analysis with a geographically distant, but culturally proximate tradition, namely, the Macedonian vernacular tradition of epic heroes and tricksters. Mindful of

the rhetorical values encoded in both traditions, I trace the shifting shapes of folk and artistic identities through the culture's reverence of folk heroes. While in the American storytelling tradition Signifyin(g) develops as a rhetorical trope of subversion in black discourse, in the Balkan oral tradition—albeit in different historical circumstances—the inherent vernacular discourse of trickery serves a poignantly similar purpose: a means for the community to test the limits of meaning, improvisational creativity and wit to subvert dominant structures. Some form of “double consciousness” is certainly revisited and reflected in both traditions through the numerous forms of rhetorical doubling and masking that operate at the level of folk discourse. This signifying discourse that plays off of a constant reversal of social paradigms in the folk imagination reveals the deep chasm between the master culture and its underclass(es).

CHAPTER ONE

From Signifyin(g) Trickster to “Ba-adman” Stagolee: Culture Heroes in African American Folklore

Deep down in the jungle so they say
There’s a signifyin’ monkey down the way
There hadn’t been no disturbin’ in the jungle for quite a bit,
For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed
“I guess I’ll start some shit.”—“The Lion and the Monkey,” a toast.

Got one mind for white folks to see
‘Nuther for what I know is me
He don’t know, he don’t know my mind
When he see me laughing
Just to keep from crying.—a blues song.

It has been mainly in their folktales that they [Black people] have been able to find some relief from their frustrations and to give some aggressive expression to their hostilities. The tales have allowed the Black slave, the Black freedman, and the contemporary Black militant to act out their hostility without endangering their physical well-being. The tales have allowed them, in a sense, to revolt against their master, boss, or judge in a created world where obstacles are not quite so great and the conditions of combat are a little more equal than they are in real life.—Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin’ and Jivin’*, 1978¹¹.

Although Black badmen were invariably conceptualized as individuals who, like Railroad Bill, were accused of breaking the law and became heroic because of their crimes, their acts of lawlessness were conceptualized within a tradition of folk heroic creation that African Americans recognized and accepted as normative expressions of their heroic ideals.—John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*¹²

This chapter traces the development of the idea of African American culture heroes as they appear in animal trickster tales during slavery and in the “badman” ballad tradition that

¹¹Dance, Daryl C. *Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p.179. Print.

¹² Roberts, John W. *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. p.173. Print.

emerges after Emancipation. My analysis of the culture hero relies on an established connection between the animal trickster and the badman.¹³ I read the badman as a subtype of trickster in African American culture while I highlight the existence of a trickster tradition of resistance in black folklore that responds to changing historical and cultural circumstances. Through this investigation, I intend to highlight the importance of tricksters and their relevance in altering perceptions of what culture heroes represent and how they subvert dominant structures. The analysis reveals this ever-elusive figure of the black culture hero (whether animal trickster or urban badman) as a signifier that is “Other” in Du Boisian terms or transgressive in the vein of the “ba-adman” Stagolee. As I explore the dynamic of this culture hero’s transformation, and trace the vitality of his ethos of resistance, I emphasize the importance that the Great Migration has had on the African American storytelling tradition. As the lives of enslaved Africans and those of free blacks gradually began to change, their creative imagination and the perception of folk hero behaviors alter as well.

In the first section of this chapter I take a close look at Henry Louis Gates’s interpretation of the term Signifyin(g) as not only a historically based and politically motivated response to a dominant discourse, but also a subversive black trope employed by tricksters in folktales during slavery. I extend the analysis of the trickster figure as a vehicle of narration (and narrative parody) and investigate in particular the figure of the Signifying Monkey in the traditional folk toast, with emphasis on his interpretative prowess, provocativeness and his signifying acumen. While in the dominant folklore circulating during slavery, the animal trickster tales offered a mechanism of subverting reality through wit, guile, and rhetorical parody, thus “duping” an

¹³I follow John W. Roberts’ line of inquiry that traces a relationship between the African American’s conception of the trickster and the badman. Roberts reads the badman tradition as a transformation of the (animal) trickster tradition contained in the ante-bellum folktales. For Roberts “the trickster is a “proto-outlaw” and he views trickster tales as emblematic of a “outlaw tradition” in slavery.

unjust system that provided “Old Master” with economic, social and political advantage; after Emancipation, as black folk begin their en masse movement north, the growing importance of making a living, finding one’s bearing in the bigger American society become defining elements of the culture’s survival. Thus, in the collective folk imagination, a new type of folk figure emerges that reflects this new-found reality— the urban, slick figure of the “badman” (also known as the “bad nigger”¹⁴). In the second half of the chapter I continue with an exploration of the black “badman” tradition that emerges at the turn of the twentieth century, a tradition that fused the oral folk tradition and songs, creating a mixture and a context that both romanticized and criticized the man of violence. In the flourishing, rich black ballad tradition, the figure of “badman” Stagolee, in particular, becomes elevated initially from derogatory figure of resistance, eventually into a *cultural trope* through which his heroic quality, as well as his potential to refer to something that is of collective importance.

Signifyin(g) as a Rhetorical Strategy

Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, an insightful and comprehensive study that investigates the specificity of African American literary criticism based on a Western methodological model, and explores the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the African American literary tradition, is the starting point of my analysis. Gates looks closely into the powerful vernacular tradition that black slaves brought

¹⁴ Throughout my dissertation I will continue to refer to this figure as “the badman.” As I was writing and conducting research, it became apparent that these two terms have accumulated distinctive meanings in African American scholarship and culture. Earlier scholarship, mostly influenced by Roger D. Abrahams’s 1964 study *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* consider the “badman” and the “bad nigger” as interchangeable figures and terms of reference. As I will address this in Chapter Two, since the 1970s, it is specifically the “badman” that will be celebrated as a model for behavior worthy of heroic emulation.

with them to the New World, while his critical approach relies heavily on the Signifying Monkey—arguably one of the most popular figures in African American folklore, not specifically as a character, but rather a vehicle of narration. As Gates argues: “he [the Signifying Monkey] is the originator of signifying, a rhetorical strategy, a practice unengaged in information giving” (687). The particular ability, even talent, that this intriguing figure possesses, Gates points out, is to *signify* i.e. to talk with great innuendo, to cajole, to lie, talk around a subject, to mediate. As such, the Signifying Monkey appears frequently as a character in African American folklore that is believed to derive from the trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara. Even though, this trickster type was transported from Africa to the Americas under various names: Exu, Echu-Elegua, Papa Legba, and Papa Le Bas, the Signifying Monkey himself is believed to be a New World creation and a figure emblematic of African American folklore in particular.

One of the major scopes of Gates’s theory is to define the ambivalent and slippery term Signifyin(g), especially as it figures in black discourse. The term does imply some form of “double-talk” and trickery of the type used by the Signifying Monkey in folklore but, as Gates himself admits, it is difficult to arrive at a full consensus of definitions. To some extent Gates’s interpretation of the term is influenced by Roger D. Abrahams’ understanding of the term as argued in his comprehensive study of African American folklore *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1964). Abrahams’ most important contribution to the literature of Signifyin(g) is his assertion that Signifyin(g) is primarily “a term for rhetorical strategies.” Thus, to signify is “to imply, goad, beg, boast by indirect verbal or

gestural means” (267).¹⁵ Gates provides a long list of terms that Abraham and other scholars consider synonymous with the term: “*talking shit, woofing, spouting, mucky muck, boogerbang, beating your gums, talking smart, putting down, putting on, playing, sounding, telling lies, shag-lag, marking, schucking, jiving, jitterbugging, bugging, mounting, charging, cracking, harping, rapping, bookooing, low-rating, smart-talking*” (77-78). In his interpretation of Signifying as a figure of speech, Gates points out that Signifyin(g) “refers to the style of language, to that which transforms ordinary discourse into literature. Again, one does not Signify some thing: one Signifies in *some way* (78).

At the same time, Gates’ idea of Signifyin(g) is grounded in the poststructuralist concept of deconstruction. A deconstructive way of thinking requires that we accept that our ideologies determine our experiences and that these ideologies are embedded in our language. From a deconstructionist’s perspective, language is unstable, and even though we yearn for stable meanings in our interpretive practice, we cannot find them; meaning is always deferred, since the signifiers consistently defer meaning. This conditions us to view reality from various perspectives. These varying perspectives manifest in what deconstructionists call “discourse.” If we are to follow Jacques Derrida’s logic, our understanding of the world is determined by language; ergo our expectations, beliefs, and values are controlled by language. Meaning, then, does not lie in the texts we read, but instead in how the language manipulates the reader and how the reader’s response reflects his/her values and beliefs – Signifyin(g) very much operates on this level. Gates’ study is in dialogue with such deconstructivist views as it draws our attention to the ambiguous, unstable, decentering, dynamic nature of language, through an analysis of the relation between the Yoruba divinity of indeterminacy, Esu and the tale of the Signifying

¹⁵Roger D. Abrahams. *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1964. Print.

Monkey. By revealing a “carefully structured system of rhetoric” through this African American figure of signification, Gates brings us closer to an understanding of the intricate nature of language and its relation to issues of power and representation.

One very important aspect of cultural confrontation that Africans faced in the New World was the intersection between the African languages (Yoruba, Igbo, Twi, Kikongo and others) that they spoke back home and, of course, carried with them to the new country and the languages they encountered (English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch) which soon became the language(s) of their enslavement. Gates argues that “what we might usefully think of as the Americanization of the slave took place, most directly and forcibly, at the level of language.”¹⁶ While their cultural uprootedness became a shocking and brutal reality, Africans also soon lost their capacity to speak their own language(s). Slave owners quickly realized that full dominion over slaves could easily be achieved if they obliterated their language, religion, values and belief systems, in essence, their entire sense of order. Gates explains:

What the planters sought to do – and what they failed to do—was to make of the African’s consciousness or his or her cultural self a veritable *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which to build a new cultural and social order, and in which the very concept of “Africaness” was obliterated and erased, and the concepts of “slave,” “absence,” “evil”—and virtually every other negative connotation in the Western culture of “blackness” itself – would be reinscribed on this supposedly empty space.¹⁷

¹⁶ Henry L. Gates, Jr. Introduction : “Narration and the Cultural Memory in the African American Tradition.” *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*. Ed. Linda Goss and Marian E. Barnes New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989, p.15. Print.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

The important question is then through what means could black people, who are already cut off from their African roots, and at the same time are denied access to the dominant cultural codes of the adopted country, tell their stories in a “culturally resonant voice”¹⁸? In the face of increasing oppression and restrictions imposed on African Americans, their culture persevered as a creative space in which they combined their indigenous expressive cultural practices, their metaphysical systems, values, language, with forms they could attain from the various New World cultures they encountered. Gates points out that “[what] the horrible institution of slavery made possible was a new culture, a culture at once ‘Pan-African’ (composed as it was of several West African strands) and Western. In the instance of the African in America, a truly African-American expressive culture emerged from deep inside the bowels of enslavement.”¹⁹ One recognizable trait of this hybrid culture that took hold in the New World is that it grew surreptitiously, as an “underground culture” (Gates), passed on by word of mouth, a private culture that emerged out of a sharing and preserving of a communal experience, one that, at the same time, had to be kept away from the master’s ears, adorned with ambivalence and wit, reveling in duplicity and double-talk, retold in a rich, dense, figurative language. All of these features will translate into a prolific trickster tradition that will inform black creative imagination for centuries to come.

In the majority of recorded African American folktales that are available today, particularly if we look into those that were in circulation throughout the nineteenth century, an interesting parallel emerges. The primary difference between the secular hero figures in black folklore and their white counterparts was that the former continued the African patterns of manipulating the strong and reversing (and subverting) whenever possible the normative

¹⁸ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.17.

structure of power and dominance. On the other hand, the heroes that dominate white folklore in the nineteenth century are figures (always “heroes”) who grow proportionally with the scale of the challenges they face and whose larger-than-life images are not controlled and contained by the limits of what is possible (characters such as Davy Crockett and Paul Bunyan). While black heroes operated on the principle of opposing, subverting or reversing the might of the more powerful opponent, reducing them to their level and size, white heroes in American folklore triumphed and thrived on the expansion of the self, emphasizing promotion of individual strength over deflation of their opponents²⁰. Lawrence W. Levine provides a helpful insight into why this latter type of hero was unconceivable in black folklore prior to emancipation:

...the adoption of such exaggerated figures by the slaves [was] unlikely because the secular, individualistic orientation of post-Enlightenment Western culture was still foreign to them. [...] The creation of these kind of heroes required the growth of a more pronounced Western orientation, the decline of the sacred universe, and the growth of the individualistic ethos among black Americans. All of these developments accompanied freedom. It is not surprising then, that only with freedom did Negroes

²⁰ Toni Morrison analyzes the complex nature of this encounter in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* where she argues that European-American writers have exploited “blackness” to represent their own fears and the insecurities they felt as members of a new nation in a strange land. One of the points that Morrison makes is that black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities, since “in the construction of blackness and enslavement one could find not only the “not-free” but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the “not-me”(38). The result, as she puts it, “was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an African Americanism - a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire that is uniquely American” (38). Through her coinage of the term “American Africanism” Morrison describes what blackness has come to signify in the imagination of white Americans: “Africanism is the vehicle by which the [white] American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny”(52). Thus, the manner in which darkness has been objectified in American literature has informed the nation’s understanding of cultural identities. At the same time, the terrain that early American writers have forged in the country’s imagination created the perception (and exploitation) of the “racial other.”

fashion their own equivalents of the Gargantuan figures that strode through nineteenth-century American folklore. (*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 401)

Levine traces in particular the development of the trickster figure in black folklore and the limitations that historical context imposed on this figure, particularly the difference between ante-bellum tricksters and post-emancipation: “The wiles of the trickster have remained important, but throughout the twentieth century black folklore has made it abundantly clear they no longer proved sufficient; the central trickster figures increasingly found themselves forced to supplement their traditional tactics” (383).

In typical African American trickster tales, tricks are constantly carried out, not for the purpose of personal betterment, finding fortune (as the usual narrative motive is in many European fairy-tales), but it seems merely for the simple pleasure of taking on the challenge. In these stories and songs we are usually thrown in the middle of some sort of frantic action taken for its own sake, and at the end there is no “happily ever after,” in fact there is no before and after, just a clever trick. These tales differ significantly from the type of story common in the Euro-American tradition of storytelling, one in which moral violations and transgressions cannot be left unpunished. African American stories (and their African antecedents) typically follow the story line of a trickster hero who uses his wits to get something he wants, bamboozle his opponents and close the story with a clever commentary. The stories, usually told by a capable tale spinner, embody some larger truth about life, but, as Abrahams points out, “they are called *lies*²¹ and *nonsense* nonetheless by those who tell and listen and laugh” (*African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* 5). In them, the storyteller usually

²¹ “Lies” in black discourse refers to figurative speech, tales or stories, The black term to “lie” as J.L.Dillard, Sterling Brown and Zora N. Hurston demonstrate, signifies tale-telling and constitutes a signal form of Signifyin(g).

announces himself as a “liar,” opening with a joke, leaving the story deliberately open-ended, with a sense that it will be continued as the trickster moves on with his shenanigans, from one trick to another. Daniel Crowley offers a useful term, a “double lie” technique, to describe the interspersed remarks by the trickster story-teller (an occasional quip, a brag, and ending that goes: “... if you don’t believe me go look for yourself”) that constantly remind the hearer that that the story is “a performance by a master talker” and the running commentary enhances his reputation as a skillful liar.²² Abrahams argues that the adoption of the term “liar” in this context is probably too strong and should be used with some reserve.²³ Abrahams suggests a different word to describe this technique: “Signifying.” In other words, “playing around by pitting words against each other, characters against each other, just to see what kind of response they will get”

(6). Gates’ interpretation of the term is closest to Abrahams’:

Signifying can refer, as it does in Standard English, to the ability of a word to carry deep meanings to the surface. But when used in the black sense of the term, it draws on both the standard definition and the strategy of testing and even casting doubt on the ability to bear the conventional meanings. Signifying, then, becomes a stance toward life itself, in which the significance of a reported action cannot be interpreted as meaning only one thing, for it may convey many messages at the same time, even self-contradictory and self-defeating ones.²⁴

²² Crowley, Daniel C. *I Could Talk Old-Story Good*. University of California Press, 1966. Print.

²³ Of course Abrahams’ reference to the term “lies” here seems to be limited to an academic context. What he does not take into consideration is the fact that in black popular discourse, and in the rich vernacular tradition, to “lie” has much to do with “storying” and that peculiar strategy of masking and subversion familiar to folk tricksters. See more on this in Kevin Young. *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2012. p.29 Print.

²⁴ Roger D. Abrahams. *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. Pantheon fairy tale & folklore library. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999. p.6. Print.

Signifying, thus, is a way for the community to navigate around or through those who have greater powers, but it also “provides a context in which the community encourages its wits to test the limits of meaning by exploring the edges of believability, all of this in the service of expressive resilience and improvisational creativity” (Abrahams 6). In the following section, we will see how in folklore, enabled by the trickster’s lively manipulation of language, Signifyin(g) develops as a rhetorical trope of subversion in African American discourse. At the same time, under the constant political and economic control of whites, the usefulness of learning how to use wariness and counteractive devices of wit for black Americans functions as a powerful tactic of survival and endurance.

The “Signifying Monkey” Trickster

There are many tales in the black repertoire that depict the pranks and shenanigans of a Trickster (Brer Rabbit in the South of the United States, Anansi stories in the West Indies and the Signifying Monkey). This intriguing figure—in all its variations: a breaker of taboos, culture hero, magician, shaman, buffoon, fool, jester, a sacred religious figure or a profane clown who deifies and defies everything—typically appears in the stories as a non-heroic male whose stamina and grit are usually challenged by a physically stronger opponent (the dueling trio in the Monkey stories is usually the Monkey and Lion and the Elephant). Typically, the antics of the trickster are in relation to acts of defiance towards an authority figure. In these stories, tricksters also operate as rhetorical agents: they bring energy to narratives, humor, irony and polyvalence. Also, rightfully called “culture builders,” they seem to appear at moments of identity crisis in a given culture.

The story of the Signifying Monkey is one of the most intriguing tales of the genre. Told widely throughout the United States, it has been recorded in several phonograph recordings of folklore. The best known versions in print can be found in the seminal anthology *The Book of Negro Folklore*, collected by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps and published in 1949. At the beginning of the twentieth century, according to R. Abrahams, the Monkey trickster figure seems to be the last remnant of the animal trickster type as African American folk tales move into urban northern settings. As a diminutive animal, the Monkey is an unlikely “hero” but his appeal lies in his cleverness and ability to outsmart his opponents. It is interesting that a simian is a hero in these stories, considering the fact that the words “monkey” and “ape” have been used in racists remarks to describe people of African descent.

Collected as both a poem and a story, this tale is considered by most folklorists to be a New World confection. However, the theme of a fight or contest instigated by a trickster is widely known in Africa, supporting the idea that the plot was imported from the Old World.²⁵ In most cases, the story follows the Signifying Monkey and his interactions with his opponents, the Lion and the Elephant. Traditionally in these poems the Signifying Monkey insults the Lion, while claiming that he is only repeating the Elephant’s words; the Lion then confronts the Elephant, who beats the Lion; the Lion later comes to realize that the Monkey has been Signifyin(g) and has duped him and returns angrily—the endings vary in different versions of the tale.

²⁵ In the African trickster stories that I came across, there is no immediate counterpart of the Signifying monkey character the way he figures in African American tales. In most of the African folktales collected in Abrahams *African Folktales: Traditional Stories of the Black World*, the trickster is sometimes a spider or a monkey, while the rivals are still the lion and the elephant.

The Signifying Monkey story is usually told as a *toast* or a narrative poem which is recited, often in theatrical manner, and represents the uniqueness of African American verbal talent. Traditionally, toasts are relatively long performances, lasting from two to ten minutes, organized around a general, framing pattern, which consists of some sort of picturesque or exciting introduction, an action alternating with dialogue (the action is usually a struggle between two people or animals), and a twist ending of some sort, either a quip, an ironic comment, or a brag. As a form of black expressive art, the toast had been largely ignored by folklorists until Roger D. Abrahams comprehensive study and collection of folklore tales *Deep Down in the Jungle...Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1964) which contains material collected from a small neighborhood (called “Twelfth Street”) south of central Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s. As a black expressive form, toasts are even considered to be precursors of the blackface minstrel performances, as Abrahams points out: “there is much about the toast as an entertainment form that is strongly paralleled in the professional medium of the blackface minstrel stage” (*Deep Down in the Jungle...106*).

In the “Signifying Monkey” toast (the version that I analyze here is one of the longest, as it was told by “Charlie,” published in Abrahams’ collection of folktales *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*), there are several aspects worth exploring: the trickster’s subversive treatment of authority, his trickery through language, the assertion of masculine power, and the interplay with an implied audience.

One of the most revealing qualities of this toast is how it exposes the complexities of the monkey’s signifying prowess. The story is built around a familiar plot: a weak animal uses indirection (Signifying) to create difficulties between stronger animals, acting as an intermediary, reveling in the resulting conflict, chaos and series of insults and assaults. The

conflict in the tale is created by the monkey's pitting of the Lion against the Elephant in a clever game of signifying through mediation. This is an important aspect of the story, since this triad is often overlooked and most frequently the story is told as a tug-of-war between Monkey and Lion. Gates, in fact, stresses the importance of the three-way relationship (conflict) that is created:

While other scholars have interpreted the Monkey tales against the binary opposition between black and white in American society, to do so is to ignore the *trinary* forces of the Monkey, the Lion and the Elephant. To read the Monkey tales as a simple allegory of the black's political oppression is to ignore the hulking presence of the Elephant, the crucial third term of the depicted action. ("The Signifying Monkey..." 55)

As a true rhetorical genius, the monkey hurls a slew of insults at the Lion, claiming he is simply reporting on the Elephant's purported name-calling aimed at the Lion:

The monkey started into that signifying.

He said, "Mr. Lion, I got something to tell you today."

He said, "The way this motherfucker has been talking 'bout you I know

you'll sashay."

He said, "Mr. Lion, the way he talking 'bout your mother, down your cousins

I know damn well you don't play the dozens.

Talking about your uncle and your aunt's an awful shame.

Called your father and your mother a whole lot of names. (101-102)

In the intricate web of mediation that he starts spinning around his opponent, the Monkey cleverly reverses the Lion's status: the Lion soon realizes that his authority and noble status as king of the jungle are being challenged, which sets off a serious and physical encounter between the Lion and the Elephant, out of which the Lion is defeated and humiliated. He then returns to get his revenge on the Monkey, who in turn greets him in utter glee, continuing his signifying, adding more insult to injury:

Here goes the monkey in the tree with that same signifying.]

He said, "Look at you, you goddamn chump.

Went down in the jungle fucking with that man

And got your ass mangled and drug in the sand.

You call yourself a real down king,

But I found you ain't a goddamned thing. (102)

And after the Lion threatens that he will have his way with him soon, the Monkey continues his barrage of crude insults:

Monkey looked down, said, "Long as the trees grow tall, the grass

grows green,

You're the dumbest motherfucker the jungle's ever seen."

Said, "you motherfucker, I heard you down there pleading for your life.

At the very same time I had my dick in your wife.

You motherfucker, when the man knocked you over the hill,

I was gonna throw a party ‘cause I thought your ass got killed. (102-3)

It is in this kind of verbal blitz of insulting, bragging, smart talking, woofing, that the Monkey’s signifying acumen comes to the fore and creates a ritual of rhetorical exchange in which the Lion is defeated not physically, but figuratively—his performance is an excellent example of what Abrahams identifies as “aggressive, witty performance talk” as well as the meaning of “going deep” in a conversational context. Even after the Monkey slips and falls, and the Lion assaults him, he still manages to trick him rhetorically and run away:

“The monkey jumped back, and said, “Get your feet off my chest and

My head out the sand

And I’ll get up and beat you like a natural-born man.”

Now the lion squared back, he was ready to fight,

But the poor little monkey jumped clean out of sight.

He said, “I told you, long as the trees grewed tall, grass grewed green,

You’re the dumbest motherfucker the jungle has ever seen.

Dumb motherfucker, I done tricked you again.” (103)

In the chaotic exchanges in the incident, the Monkey’s trick of signifying consists of fooling the Lion into thinking he is speaking *literally*, while in fact, all along he is speaking *figuratively*.

Thus the Lion ends up mostly hurt not by the Elephant's beating, but by *misreading* the Monkey's statements. As Gates points out in his reading of the Monkey's language:

While the insult aspect of the Monkey's discourse is important to the tales, linguists have often failed to recognize that insult is not at all central to the nature of Signify(g); it is merely one mode of rhetorical strategy that has several other modes, all of which share the use of troping. They have, in other words, mistaken the trees for the forest. (58)

The Monkey's mastery of verbal technique in this case is executed through rhyming couplets. The toast—in which more is borrowed from the economy of the black ballad rather than the narrative methods of tales—is meant to play on the listener's emotions by its sound, diction and rhythm (Gates, in his discussion of the Signifying Monkey, speaks of “the poetry of signifying”) more so than any kind of narrative etiological ending. Formally, the lines follow a flexible pattern, similar to that of the ballad: a pattern of a four-stress line which divides and balances easily, with the balanced line as the core of the wit. However, the major structural unit is not the line, but the rhyme couplet— usually, the first line used to introduce a character (action), the second to describe the trickster, as in the following example:

Deep down in the jungle where the coconut grows

Lives a pimp little monkey, you could tell by the clothes he wore.

The fact that this toast is written in rhyme adds significantly to the overall effect of the story— listening to this tale being “performed” is probably even more fascinating. The toast, as an expressive form, as I mentioned, very closely resembles the ballad—in fact a closer investigation even shows that the black ballad has its early roots in the toast performance. The ballads and toasts become particularly popular at the turn of the century when black southerners move north,

transitioning from an agrarian lifestyle to an urban one, and wrote narrative songs which provided glimpses of Black city life. Toasts and ballads in their purest form tell a story—unlike the blues which is more ritualistic and deals more with expressing emotions and healing. The important aspect in this discussion is that the toast’s narrative revolves around a violent event, occurring in an urban setting, engaging male protagonists.

The Signifying Monkey toasts have mostly been recorded by male poets, in typically male settings (ballrooms, pool halls, barber shops, street corners). Unlike the Anansi and Br’er Rabbit tales, the trickster that we encounter here is undoubtedly a slick urban figure. Even though our first encounter with him is “deep in the jungle,” his habitat seems to transform magically into a street scene in what almost seems as Act 2 in the toast:

Now what do you think? Down on Rampart Street

Who did Mr. Lion chance to meet –

The signifying monkey.

He stomped to the right and stomped to the left.

Stomped the poor monkey clean to death.

In the second half of the toast, the Monkey’s cousin, the baboon, is determined to fight the Lion in retaliation. The story becomes darker and gloomier, the scene shifts to a clearly urban milieu, with reference to boxing fights, referees, and decidedly more violent behavior. In the midst of all these rituals of insults, naming and aggression, most of the recorded versions, including the one analyzed here, have a phallogocentric bias and there is an apparent assertion of masculine power. The two strategies of male dominance at play include operating by brute force and using

one's wits—incidentally, in most variations of the story, neither of these strategies brings victory—the story is a gloss on a parable of loud, but sure losers. In fact, all the players act like animals only to show their similarities to humans. In the world that the Monkey inhabits—which is half nature, half world-of-man—he moves between the two realms with an apparent ease: one moment he is in the jungle (“He says he thinks he’d take a stroll/Down by the water hall”), but wearing city clothes:

... a pimp little monkey, you could tell by the clothes he wore

He had a camel-hair benny with belt in the back

Had a pair of nice shoes and a pair of blue slacks

Now his clothes were cute little things

Was wearing a Longine watch and a diamond ring.

This particular description of the playful, yet deceitful and mean monkey bears a striking resemblance to another glorified trickster – the urban black “badman” who is best known for his pimping, gambling and violence. In fact, several critics have argued that the traits of the trickster can be identified also in a number of toasts that feature pimps and prostitutes²⁶. In their study of black pimps in San Francisco, Christina and Richard Milner conclude that the pimp’s attraction as hero is derived from his status as a trickster:

By the use of wit and guile he earns a rich living and maintains aristocratic tastes without having to resort either to violence or to physical labor. As a trickster, this modern Br’er

²⁶ Most of these toasts have been collected by Bruce Jackson in *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: African American Narrative Poetry from Oral Tradition*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Rabbit must learn the ways of the Fox, his cunning adversary. He must be able to observe the society around him with honesty and awareness... pimps and hustlers depend for their livelihood on an awareness of social forces and an understanding of the human psyche.

(Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps 242)

Lawrence Levine also points out that the very language of pimps alludes to the trickery implied by tricksters: “The term *trick* refers to prostitute’s customer; the phrase *to turn a trick* means to perform a sex act for money, as does the term *tricking*” (*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 383).

One other aspect of the performative interaction that builds on the rhetorical word-play is the prevalence of obscenities in the speech of the characters in the Signifying Monkey. One word in particular is constantly repeated—“motherfucker” (in this version of the toast, the word is used seventeen times; there are versions of the Signifying Monkey toast that are highly bowdlerized, and this term is frequently replaced with “monkey”). The frequent use of obscenities throughout the toast sounds like an added layer of signification which comes to full effect in the actual performance of the tale and enhances the verbal dexterity of someone as cunning and as unscrupulous as the Signifying Monkey.

Also, the repetition of an obscene word such as this is related to the particular rhetorical game of “playing the dozens” or sometimes called “Dozens”—a game of verbal duel of insults between two contestants, usually male. Scholars have come up with several theories of social justification for the popularity and origin of this practice, mostly related to some kind of venting of frustration and aggression as a result of the oppression African Americans endured as slaves and second class citizens in America. Roger Abrahams explains this practice and the abundant

use of obscene language involving women/mothers, not only as a reaction to racism, but as the black man's act of resistance to a society dominated by women. For him then, the recurrent "motherfucker" curse seems to function as a constant of some sort of violent attraction-rejection of mother-woman. He offers an analysis of the implications of this word by arguing that:

In a sense, the term is a telescoping of the whole process of playing the dozens. Because of its ambivalent capacities, the word can, at one and the same time, afford a release of mother-directed (oedipal) and mother-rejective forces. It also achieves a kind of semi-anonymous function simply because of its very wide and almost casual ritualistic use. It serves as a constant reminder that the problem of relationship with women is something which has not been solved, while at the same time it helps solve it temporarily. (*Deep Down in the Jungle...* 262)

Other scholars argue that the influence of the mother on the Black male's psyche has deep implications and ties to slavery. Daryl Cumber Dance explains this ambivalent relationship by pointing out that, due to fear of the slave master, the lynch mob and the legal system, black mothers had to teach their sons to "mask and repress his normal masculinity and aggressiveness lest these put his life in danger." They "had to in other words to prepare him for his subordinate place in the world."²⁷ Black boys inevitably resented their mothers' repression and developed a hostility that was often expressed verbally.

Both arguments overlook the African origins of the Dozens, a game played mostly by young boys in Nigeria and Ghana, Bantu and Kisii, involving hurling sexual insults regarding the

²⁷ Daryl Cumber Dance *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978, p.225.

opponents' mothers.²⁸ Although Africans lose most of their indigenous culture when they are sold into the New World, as I have argued earlier, certain inalienable cultural practices survived. The Dozens, as an example of a Signifyin(g) practice, could be one of them. Amuzie Chimezie builds a convincing argument:

[the Dozens] must have been a family or "community" game which could have easily been played in the isolated slave quarters of the slavery era. Moreover, since on account of its nature it must have been perceived as a harmless game by whites (what is harmful or threatening about niggers messing up their own mothers?), it should not be difficult to see why it could have been allowed to survive....²⁹

A close reading of the Signifying Monkey tale is important for several reasons. As Gates reminds us, the Monkey tales “describe a dictum about interpretation, whereas the language of Signifyin(g) addresses the nature and application of rhetoric” (85). More specifically, in this dissertation, an understanding of the Signifying Monkey toasts is instrumental in interpreting the mechanisms of language and discourse at play in both folkloristic and literary genres. With his rhetorical prowess and cunning, the Monkey outsmarts and dethrones the Lion because the latter *fails to read* his discourse, he misses the points because they speak different languages. He is unable to interpret his signifying since he looks upon the monkey as an outsider and an inferior.

²⁸However, in some parts of Africa (among the Igbos, for instance, the game is usually played in a family circle -- usually extended family: sisters, brothers, parents, and other relatives, and since the making of sexual remarks or the naming of sexual organs, especially in the presence of elder relatives, is taboo in Igbo culture, the Dozens (called Ikocho Nkocho) is of nonsexual nature. Amuzie Chimezie, in "The Dozens: an African Heritage Theory," argues that the sexual character of the Dozens could be explained in terms of the fact that, in the United States, “the game is virtually no longer a family-circle game.” The author makes the connection between the African and African American practice and suggests that probably this characterized the interaction between the younger and the elder members of the Black family as well: “When in America this game was removed from the family circle to the outside, where elder relatives would not probably be present, the players naturally became sexually disinhibited” Chimezie concludes.

²⁹ Amuzie Chimezie "The Dozens: an African Heritage Theory." *Journal of Black Studies*. 6.4 (1976): 401-420. Print.

In the context of the narrative parody instigated by the monkey, his rhetorical tricks (“tricks of mediation,” to borrow from Gates) and his use of a subversive black trope (his incessant Signifying) create a play on language and a response to a dominant discourse. At the same time, what becomes apparent in the course of the analysis is that any attempt to contain this kind of trickster figure and his language in academic discourse is a daunting task since one runs the risk of missing the point of his defining attributes, his shifting shapes by trying to define him and *contain* him in language. As Gates has already established, the trickster tradition defines the role of the figurative and accounts for intermediacy as an unavoidable aspect of the acts of interpretation. Reading tricksters as “problematic interpreters of the figurative” suggests not only the significance of exploring the black trope of Signifying in contemporary trickster texts (more about this in following chapters) but also the position of those who read them.

In a typical trickster story there is almost always a juxtaposition of the discursive, *signifying* aspect of narrative and the referential, *signified* aspect of the story. A trickster operates on a complex level of narration and discourse through Signifying—as we already established, a rhetorical strategy that creates double (or more) meanings on different levels. Most of the scholarly studies of trickster tales tend to focus on the trickster as a character in stories, thus taking narratives only at their referential value. Such an approach adopts a conventional treatment of language—language as transparent medium for communication of meaning—which assumes that trickster narratives can be reduced to some singular meaning. At a deeper level, the playfulness of language reveals a different order of reality: one that makes possible an ordinary interpretation of reality (the folktales, ballads, toasts) and a level of meaning that is unconventional and sacred (trickster discourse). By playing in that space between narrative and discourse, trickster stories reveal some deeper wisdom about the world and the

multiplicity of meaning always embedded in language. The features that are typically ascribed to the trickster figure—contradiction, complexity, deceptiveness, trickery—seem to be inherent in the language in which the story is being told (regardless of the fact whether one reads or hears these stories, the tale itself retains the interpretive discourse inherent in the oral performance). While the trickster is a deceitful, practical joker, the language that he embodies is as well. While the story that he stars in is usually read as exposing the absurdity and inappropriateness of his behavior, the joke is not only on the one playing tricks, but also on the reader/listener who finds his trickery amusing. The trickster is giving us insight into the way language is used to construct an ultimately, and always incomplete reality.

The “Badman” as Culture Hero

Yes, Stackalee, the gambler, everybody knowed his name;
Made his livin hollerin high, jow, jack and the game.--“Stackalee” ballad

In the folklore of enslaved Africans, the trickster tale tradition expressed behaviors and characters based on values that in the late nineteenth century would be considered that of an outlaw. However, even though the trickster tradition represents a mode of “heroic” actions for survival under the repressive system of slavery, it is also a tradition in which the central figure’s actions (such as the Signifying Monkey) are motivated above all by the oppression of those who celebrate his actions as those of a culture hero. Also, the trickster tales provided the possibility of a world in which the trickster could manipulate reality through wit, guile and rhetorical games, thus equalizing the conditions between master and slave while breaking the rules of the system that provided Old Master with economic, social and political advantage. As John W. Roberts asserts, the trickster folk tradition “in essence functioned as an outlaw tradition within the value system of slavery” (“The Badman as Outlaw Hero” 185).

At the turn of the twentieth century, in cities both North and South, African Americans were locked out of the industrial revolution. In essence they found themselves in conditions of subjugation and oppression largely similar to those they experienced during slavery, but their creative response, in terms of the folk tradition, could no longer be the same as the one embraced by enslaved Africans and expressed in animal trickster tales. Even though individual whites may still have been responsible for economic and social persecution, the Law, particularly in urban settings, becomes the antagonist. However, the law, as an “invisible” antagonistic force, turns out to be a problematic opponent for the animal trickster since it cannot be easily manipulated and duped. Thus, the ever-evolving differences between the lifestyle of enslaved Africans and that of free blacks were destined to influence their creative imagination and the perception of folk hero behaviors. While the trickster figure of the Signifying Monkey of the past had captured folk memory with its signifying prowess, a new figure, that of the black “badman” emerges as a figure of rebellion, intensified by his charisma and notoriety. From an Afrocentric perspective, the trickster represented a more appropriate focus than the “badman” for folk heroic creation based on a figure whose characteristic behavior challenged the existing power structure. However, the world that the trickster tradition created had been wedded to a perception of powerful individual control over both the lives of the enslaved and the means of material survival.

Although, undoubtedly, “badmen” existed in the period of institutionalized slavery³⁰ and wreaked havoc in the taverns and bars of the South, the classic “badman” figure emerges

³⁰ In the chapter “Badman as an Outlaw Hero” in *From Trickster to Badman*, John W. Roberts provides a good insight into the absence of the “bad nigger” as a hero in the folksongs circulating during slavery. He quotes H.C. Brearly illuminating commentary that “open expression of admiration of a ‘ba-ad nigger’ is doubtless of a comparative recent development. Even if this type existed during slavery, the singing of ballads in his honor was not a very politic method of securing the favor of masters and overseers” (176). Roberts further explains that the black view on what constitutes a “bad nigger” behavior changes after emancipation i.e., what slavemasters defined

following Emancipation, when de facto slavery was replaced by a semi-free system that still kept black men and women in the lowest strata of American society. The options that were available with the newfound mobility of free individuals changed their perception of the world dramatically. Former slaves and their children could migrate north or go west, so the idea of “escape” and removal from the shackles of miserable existence in the south became a reality that had only been accessible in dreams, fantasies, folktales, or the music of the spirituals. While living conditions were still harsh, the cunning, wit and slyness of heroes like the Signifying Monkey, which offered psychological relief under slavery, begin to lose their relevance. As this newfound freedom became equated with mobility and thousands of free Blacks took to the road, in the process they established a pattern that became a crucial part of black self-image in America at the turn of the century—that of the black man “on the move” (sometimes a musician figure, sometimes a pimp or a tramp) who has, in a way, taken over from the role of the Preacher (with the legal end of slavery, even though the black church remains an important unifying factor in the black community, African Americans no longer need it as a sanctuary, as the “devil’s” music, the blues, becomes more and more prevalent as a vehicle of artistic expression). The role of this new trickster-like figure, the black “badman,” becomes the ultimate *symbol of freedom*. The attraction of this role was immense, particularly for young black men moving North, since it allowed an escape from the humdrum hopelessness of black unemployment and also the possibility of making a living without having to rely on “the white man.” In the depictions of the inner city where crime was rampant, these songs of the life of the “badman” fused the oral folk tradition and music creating a mixture in a context that both romanticized and criticized the man of violence—he is sometimes a tragic figure stoically resigned to his fall, other times an

as “bad nigger” behavior during slavery, for African Americans after emancipation, came to represent expressions of freedom and citizenship.

instrument of protest, insisting that his violent behavior is caused by the unfairness of an oppressive system.

The Ballad of the “Badman” Stagolee

The travails and adventures of this iconic figure are best captured in the rich African American ballad tradition. The ballad of the black “badman” is a narrative based on the social events and oral literature that celebrated the life of the notorious and charismatic outlaw. It is usually delivered by a skillful performer who may take liberties in embellishing and twisting the final outcome. While the story of the badman has survived primarily as a folk legend, folklorists like to categorize it as “myth immortalized in the ballad form” since, even though traditional ballads refer to historical people, place and rituals, the “badman” ballad itself should not be treated as a historical document, but rather a product of a collective imagination and a reflection of the folk’s yearning for liberation.

Historically, the black ballad has been a product of the syncretism of the Anglo-American formal and the African tradition of story-telling. The African American ballad as a form has not been studied enough in African American scholarship, possibly because it has been overshadowed by the popularity of the blues.³¹ As a genre, it most resembles the protest and social commentary that will later be the trademark of another artistic musical/narrative genre—contemporary African American hip-hop and rap music³². Before the emergence of ballads and

³¹ Useful analysis of black rhyme schemes can be found in James Hungerford, *The Old Plantation and What I Gathered There in an Autumn Month*. New York, 1859), reprinted in Eileen Southern, ed., *Readings in Black American Music*. New York: Norton, 1971, pp.71-81. Also, more on ballads and discourse in Anthony Easthope’s “The Feudal Ballad” in *Poetry as Discourse*,

³²The ballad telling the story of Stagolee has been recorded by hundreds of bluesmen and jazz musicians. Some version of the Stagolee song has been recorded by James Brown, Nick Cave and Neil Diamond, The Clash, Pat Boone, Fats Domino, Bob Dylan, Duke Ellington, The Grateful Dead, Woody Guthrie, The Ventures, Ike & Tina Turner, Ma Rainey and Jerry Lee Lewis, Tom Jones, Beck, Mississippi John Hurt, the Black Keys and Elvis Presley.

toast narrative songs, slave songs (or field songs) were the only known forms of folk artistic expression for black people. According to music scholar Eileen Southern, songs that would contain a narrative or ballads are rare during slavery since the “unvarying routines of slave life” were incompatible with the narrative form of ballad that would entail some kind of unexpected turn of events. Because the slave had no control over his/her own body, in her view, there was no scope for adventure; the slave “knew in advance the consequences of any action he might take, and he knew that there was nothing he could do to avert the consequences” (*The Music of Black Americans: A History* 184).

However, other than Southern’s psychologically determined rationale, a logical explanation as to why there are no known black ballads from slavery could also be the simple fact that, since they were exclusively transmitted in an oral form, there would be no trace of their formal record. Malcolm Laws, one of the first scholars to draw the differences between white and black ballads, in his study *Native American Balladry: A Descriptive Study and a Bibliographical Syllabus*, points out that it was easy to trace the origin of the white ballad since “the white ballad maker frequently wrote a ballad out and had it printed and sold” (83). In contrast, Laws points out, “The Southern Negro composer, who was certainly uneducated and probably illiterate, presumably sang his ballad among his people, who were then free to do with it as they would. They could and did add to it, alter it to fit new situations, and pass it along for further folk treatment” (83). This is an important aspect of the black ballad tradition since it also points to the fluidity of the material that would be varied in response to changing social circumstance. Laws also argues that black ballads dealt more frequently with “crime, usually with murder and its consequences” and unlike white ballads which expressed horror at the committed crimes, black ballads usually described violent events “briefly and rather casually,”

dwelling on the “trials, hanging and funerals” (83). This sort of crude realism that is apparent in the black ballads was most likely inherited from slave field songs. In addition, black ballads are characterized by an intensity that is meant to hold the audience’s attention, void of the over sentimental moralizing typical of Anglo-American ballads. Also, the latter consist of long stanzas that tell a story about either a tragic love relationship or an ill-fated folk hero. One of the formal changes that was introduced in the black tradition was an interjection of more refrains between stanzas—perhaps an influence of the call-and-response pattern of field songs—which meant an introduction of an oral method of verse-making in which the author deliberately weaves formulaic material. Finally, an important distinctive characteristic of the field song that translated effectively into the folk narrative song is a recognizable “double voicing” or a Signifyin(g) quality inherited from the trickster tradition, described as “lyrics to ensure that black and white listeners came away with different understandings of the same song.”³³ The last significant change that separated the black ballad tradition from its white counterpart was the substitution of a more rebellious figure, with discernible transgressive and violent attributes, as the hero of the narrative.

As a genre, the “badman” ballad takes as its subject the “glorification” of the life of this rebel, the outlaw or the street hero –defining, celebrating, exaggerating his acts, but at the same time questioning the morality of this behavior as it dramatizes the rise and fall of an outlaw, a gambler and a pimp. In essence, the ballad offers a mirror into which the streetman gazes at himself (and his kind), to analyze his life, find reasons to laugh or praise himself, to express his understanding of the world in which he feels entrapped. Jerry H. Bryant points out that as a genre badman ballads differ from the portrayal of the badman in novels (as I aim to show in

³³ Morgan, Thomas L, and William Barlow. *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African American Popular Music from 1895 to 1930*. Washington, D.C: Elliott & Clark Pub, 1992, 8. Print.

following chapters) in the sense that the novel provides a lesson in “a destructive experience escaped,” while the ballad is “a statement of stoical, sometimes joyful, explicit or implicit acceptance of the inescapable given.”³⁴ Others have argued that folk toast and ballads are a means for releasing aggressive desires otherwise repressed in oppressive racist society and as such function as “Signifyin(g)” satires on the values of the white bourgeoisie, and should not be read as a celebration of street heroes but rather a parody of the idea of the American dream.³⁵

One of the best known ballads that glorify the life of a well-known “badman” is the legend of “Stack-a-lee” or “Stacker Lee,” “Stagolee” or “Staggerlee.”³⁶ There are a few versions of the Stagolee story (in the form of a legend, ballad or toast) in print—the one that is included in this analysis was published in the *Book of Negro Folklore* anthology, edited by Hughes and Bontemps.³⁷ The origins of the “badman” Stagolee tale can be traced back to the 1890s. The

³⁴ Jerry H. Bryant. *“Born in a Mighty Bad Land”: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*. Indiana U Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2003.

³⁵ This idea is well-argued by H Nigel Thomas in *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

³⁶The variations of the name of Stackalee or Stagolee (and other variants) in different versions of the ballad follow two contextual streams. “Stag,” as used in “stag parties” and “stag films” is related to notions of male sexual potency. “Stack” refers to the world of gambling and thus both roots of the nickname entail no contradictions since Stagolee or Stackolee was both a pimp and a gambler. The dilemma of the name is resolved when we consider Stagolee as a ragged version of “Stag” and “Lee” – in rag singing there is an interpolated vowel. Thus in this ragged version, Stag and Lee become “Stagolee” or Stack and Lee become “Stackolee.”

³⁷John W. Roberts and Roger D. Abrahams both suggest different stages in the development of Stagolee as culture hero, depending on the various genres of folk production that engage this figure. It is undoubtedly an interesting investigation—one which in itself possibly deserves a whole chapter—but, in order to keep my discussion on Stagolee more focused I will only briefly refer to differences between the toast and the ballad version in those instances when I find it relevant for my argument. Roberts (quoting Abrahams) observes the following about the rising popularity of the toast tradition vis-à-vis the culture’s fascination with the badman: “The festering unrest of black urbanites as seen in the growing tension between individuals in saloons and gambling houses in the narratives finds fuller expression in the urban toast tradition which began somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century. The toast, a long narrative poem, becomes the vehicle not only for the expression of the frustration of black urbanites but also the celebration of those who would flaunt the values of the dominant culture.” (John W. Roberts “Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea, Western Folklore” Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), pp. 179-190. p.187).

For different perspectives on the audience for toasts, see Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray B. Binderman, *The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler* (Philadelphia, 1976), and Bruce Jackson, “Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me”: Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition” (Cambridge, 1974).

legend was first part of a field holler of former plantation slaves as they migrated to levee camps down the Mississippi. Later the story moved to southern prisons where in the process of retelling (and sometimes embellishment) it is transformed into a work song. Stagolee also appears in other forms of African American artistic expression. Julius Lester's compilation *Black Folktales* includes a short story about the legendary Stagolee which contains, by far the "baddest" version of the tale.³⁸

The earliest appearance of Stagolee in ballad form occurs around the turn of the century. Charles Haffer of Coahoma County, Mississippi, recalls having first sung the ballad of "Stackalee" in 1895. Howard Odum reports that the song was popular throughout the South during the first decade of the 1900s.³⁹ Enslaved Africans might have recognized the Stagolee figure as a variant of another trickster figure from the old world, that of Shango, the Yoruba deity of thunder. But the actual version of the Stagolee ballad did not come into existence until 1895, after Lee Shelton, a thirty-one-year-old resident of St. Louis shot William "Billie" Lyons (or sometimes referred to as Billy the Lion—as in the traditional trickster archrival in the folktales circulating during slavery).⁴⁰

³⁸ In the short story, not only does Stag kill Billy, Stag tells him that, after Billy is dead, he's going to move in with Billy's wife. With this, he refutes Billy's traditional plea for his life, which was that he had a wife and kids to support. Stag then kills the police officer who tries to arrest him. The police finally think they can get him when he's drunk and passed out one night. They slip a rope around his neck and this wakes him up. He agrees to go downtown with them, but, when they try to hang him, his neck just won't break. He sits there on the noose for half an hour until he starts complaining that the rope tickles. They let him down and set him free. He then goes on to perform various exploits, including standing off against Death, by saying that he is not strong enough to kill Stag. When Stag finally dies, he goes straight to hell. Once there, he starts the cycle all over. He begins terrorizing hell, to the point where he claims he's going to run the devil out of hell, take the place over for himself and sleep with his wife.

³⁹ Howard W. Odum. "Folk- Songs and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes." *Journal of American Folklore* 24 (1911): 255-294.

⁴⁰ My engagement with the Stagolee material was informed mostly by the following studies that offer substantial insight into the historical and cultural details of this figure: John W. Roberts. "Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea." *Western Folklore*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), pp. 179-190; Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003. Print; and Jerry H. Bryant, *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. Print.

While the ballad of Stagolee glorifies the man of violence as a hero, the entire story is indicative of the need for Stagolee to exercise his authority, show off his manhood and bring satisfaction to his ego in the duel with Billy. In essence, the fight between Stagolee and Billy is a fight between two badmen. Most versions begin with some sort of introduction about Stagolee's "badman" characteristics and a "discovery verse":

It was on one cold and frosty night

When Stackalee and Billy Lyons had an awful fight,

Stackalee got his gun. Boy he got it fast!

He shot poor Billy through and through. (359)

An interesting parallel here can be drawn between the triad in the Signifying Monkey toast and the dueling trio in this ballad, namely Stagolee, Billy the Lion, and the Devil. At the time when this narrative song was in popular circulation, most Black men were either in prison or exploited as sharecroppers so they sang about Stagolee and the Devil—the Devil a personification of the white man. There is a third adversary in the ballad: the Law, represented by the police, judge and jury, but it appears that Stagolee's dueling with the Devil is a more real threat and a serious source of conflict:

When they got into a scuffle, I heard the devil shout,

Come and get this bad man before he puts my fire out.

The next time I seed the devil he was scrambling up the wall,

Yellin, come and get this bad man fore he mops up with us all. (360)

The image of Stagolee that emerges in all the variations of the song is very much in keeping with the demands of the ballad form—the narrative tends to center on the single event of Stagolee's shooting Bully Lyons over a dispute concerning a Stetson hat; in some versions, the dispute arises during a gambling episode in which Billy wins Stagolee's Stetson in a card game. In other versions, no explanation is given for the shooting of Billy except that Stagolee is “a badman.” In most performances of the ballad, Billy begs Stagolee to spare his life for the sake of his wife and children. Stagolee ignores Billy's pleas and shoots him anyway. Stagolee then flees and is hunted down and brought to trial where he is found guilty.

The real identity of Lee Shelton has been debated by scholars. In the first publication of the ballad in 1912, the University of North Carolina professor Howard Odum studied the legend at length and makes no mention of the Stagolee's real identity. Other scholars who have written on the subject, including folklorists Richard Dorson and Paul Olivier identify him as a “shadowy figure.” John W. Roberts, who has published a full-length study of this intriguing figure does identify Lee Shelton as the man behind the legendary figure, but he doesn't go further.⁴¹ In his full-length study of the badman, *Stagolee Shot Billy*, Cecil Brown provides the following information:

...there was indeed a real Stagolee, a well-known figure in St. Louis's red light district during 1890s, a pimp who, when he shot and killed William Lyons, was the president of a “Colored Four Hundred Club,” a political and social organization. In December 9, 1937, Tyrell Williams, a law professor at Washington University, wrote an article in the St.

⁴¹ John W. Roberts. “Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea.” *Western Folklore*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), pp. 179-190.

Louis Post Dispatch, claiming that the Stagolee ballad was based on ‘the killing by A Negro bully named Stacker Lee (or Stack O’Lee) of another Negro named Lyon, because Lyon accidentally spit in the Steson owned by Lee. (11)

The guiding question in my investigation of Stagolee is how this most unlikely candidate, a pimp and a “ba-ad man,” gets elevated to the status of a hero in Black ethos and constituted as a character of both resistance and survival? And more importantly, does he possess any transformative and culture-building power as he disrupts and rebels against a dominant, oppressive order?

Before we unpack these questions, it is important to stress the distinction between an ideal hero and the individual who personifies an idea of heroic action. This is particularly appropriate in looking at the “hero concept” as it develops around the image of Stagolee. Although outlaws or “badmen” exist in both Anglo- and Afro-American traditions, their roles in society are perceived differently. In his study on bandits in the Anglo-American tradition, Eric Hobsbawn concludes that:

Unlike the Anglo-American outlaw-hero, . . . [the black badman] would be classified as an "avenger" rather than a "noble robber" . . . The "noble robber" is a champion, the righter of wrongs, the bringer of justice and social equity. His relation with the peasant is that of total solidarity and identity. Although the world of avenger outlaws contains the values of the noble robber, they are defined primarily by a perception of them as cruel. Their appeal is not that of the agents of justice, but of men who prove that even the poor and weak can be terrible. Ironically, the avenger becomes a hero not in spite of the terror

and cruelty associated with him but because of it. (*Bandits, in the World, Robin Hood, Jesse James, Pancho Villa, Etc.* 34)

John W. Roberts argues that “The enduring qualities of the badman hero, Stagolee, arise out of Afro-American frustrations with the American social and political systems and represents an attempt to express and objectify those frustrations.”⁴² Although Stagolee is terrible in all three stages of his development as badman hero (in the toast, ballad and legend) he is also limited by the folk perceptions of their own possibilities during different time periods. The early Stagolee is a product of post-Civil War black imagination. While he challenges the system with bravado and daring, at the same time he receives punishment from the system. As he moves into the twentieth century, “badman” Stagolee's actions become removed from the reality of black existence. This change is indicative of the alienation African Americans are beginning to realize is their lot in American society at the turn of the century. The Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban centers and the disappointment that they experienced in these new surroundings (coupled with the Great Depression) also resulted in feelings of loss of control. The period from 1895 to 1930, when the Stagolee story reaches its widest circulation, these two key events happen in the US: the Great Migration and the sexual revolution. At the height of the popularity of the ballad, the political climate in America played a big part in the rise to prominence of the pimp antihero. Both the Republican and the Democratic Party sought to win black votes. In 1896, most African Americans in St. Louis would tend to vote Republican. However, when the Republican convention held that year failed to address their interests, many felt betrayed and broke away. This change happened to some extent due to the black pimps of St. Louis who, in

⁴² “Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea,” p.189.

alliance with saloonkeepers and gamblers, operating “sporting” clubs known as the “four hundred clubs” helped garner Democratic votes among the black community.

The bottom line of the story is that Stagolee *indeed* was a lowly pimp and a murderer who became infamous for killing a defenseless man. Perhaps, what we may be trying to ignore is the fact that we enjoy the idea of a *folk hero*, but do not want to accept the fallibility of the real man behind the myth. In fact, what makes the idea of Stagolee so alluring is the whole rhetoric of “ba-adness” that surrounds his image. Stagolee is associated with the subculture of brothels and prostitution, linked to transgressions of sex, class, order and criminality, and as a figure he embodies and immortalizes its ethos of “ba-adness.” Jazz critic Albert Goldman puts it this way:

One idea I summed up in the formula of the counterculture is the criminal culture. This meant two things, first that the roots of the counterculture as defiant revolutionary way of life lay not so much in the sources that the kids were proud to show [...] but rather in that culture that had always been the most antagonistic to conventional values and codes of behavior, the culture that had always acted out the most basic fantasies of the American psyche and created the whole underground world of drugs, violence, street argot and antisocial defiance: the criminal culture. (*Grassroots: Marijuana in America Today* 7).

While clearly Stagolee is not the most admirable human being, the folk's fascination with him as a “hero” can be traced precisely in the recurring reference to this outlaw and his proverbial “ba-adness” and how it resonates in the cultural idiom. Jerry Bryant stresses the importance of his “ba-adness” when he argues that “‘ba-adness’ is the *sine qua non* of his [the badman’s] self-respect, the essence of his identity.”⁴³ Many scholars have addressed the different meanings of the term “bad” in black and white American cultures. H. C. Brearly points out that the use of the

⁴³ *Born in a Mighty Bad Land*, p.11.

term "bad"—to show "admiration for recklessness and bravado"—"emanates out of the African tradition."⁴⁴ This conclusion is based on Melville Herskovits's discovery of similar uses of the term "bad" among blacks in other New World communities.⁴⁵ The black badman in post-Civil War America was one who acted in defiance of both the social and judicial systems with full knowledge of the consequences of his actions, as Herskovits explains. John Roberts reminds us that to be called a "bad nigger" "simply meant that one was willing to act against established social, moral, and legal codes that restricted the lives of blacks with full awareness of the consequences of those actions."⁴⁶ In essence, the appropriation of this term is a way in which Africans Americans came to revise the language of the white value system, in other words, *signify* upon the adjective "bad" in "bad nigger" overturning the normative moral (white) structure thus making "bad" (or rather "ba-ad", the special denotation of "bad" is encoded in its pronunciation, the prolonged, ragged "a") mean "good." To white people and particularly the Law, the "bad nigger" has always been *bad* (read "villainous") because he violates rules and moral codes. To Black people he is "ba-ad" (read "heroic") because they relish his exploits for exactly the same reasons. The implications of this kind of "ba-adness" is rife with potential for political and social protest, since, even though Stagolee is a pimp and a criminal, he is also a revolutionary in his own right, revolting against the white man in a white man's system. Levine puts it succinctly when he argues that badman characters in black culture are victorious because they gain their popularity not so much by harming their own people or "breaking the laws of the larger society but by smashing its expectations and stereotypes, by insisting that their lives

⁴⁴ H.C. Brearly. "Ba-ad Nigger" (1939) In *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Edited by Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1972, pp.578-585. Print.

⁴⁵ Melville J. Herskovits, "A Letter to the Editors: Some Comments by Professor Herskovits," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 39 (1940): 350-351. 182.

⁴⁶ John Roberts, "Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea," p.182.

transcend the traditional models and roles established for them and their people by the white majority.”⁴⁷

At the same time, Stagolee can also be read as a figure at odds with American modernity. The badman Stagolee tradition fits with a subculture associated with alienation, closely related to Walter Benjamin’s⁴⁸ description of the world of marginalized inhabitants. The black badman of the urban northern milieu of the first decades of the twentieth century resemble the flaneur who finds himself stifled by modernity and the city. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, many African Americans, recently transplanted from the South into the northern cities, found themselves unemployed and marginalized. Many of them become pimps and join what Cecil Brown calls “St. Louis’s ‘rag’ (Marx’s ‘lumpen’) proletariat.” (*Stagolee Shot Billy* 17). In the same vein as Benjamin’s modern hero, Stagolee is a figure at odds with his epoch, yet addicted to the intoxication and romance of modernity itself. Like the flaneur, the gambler, the worker, the rag-picker, the prostitute, the pimp Stagolee acutely embodies the prevailing tendencies of the city (in this case St. Louis) that encompasses and limits him. My reading of Stagolee as a modern hero is informed by Benjamin’s vision of the city as a locus of perpetual suffering and enduring conflict. As a modernist, Benjamin regards the city as a space of intoxication, excitement and distraction, but as a historical materialist, he rejects it as a site of bourgeois domination. Fluctuating between these two positions, vacillating between his love and hate of the urban milieu, his ideas are deeply enmeshed in the paradoxes that constitute the “heroism of modern life.”

⁴⁷ Lawrence W. Levine. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977. p. 420. Print.

⁴⁸ Most of my ideas about modernity and Walter Benjamin are informed by the study *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* by Graeme Gilloch. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

As a genuine “victim” of modernity recognizable in the gallery of characters that Walter Benjamin enlists as unlikely “heroes” of the modern city: the flaneur, the dandy, the gambler, the worker, the prostitute, the black “badman” is more than just a victim of society and more than just a mere figure of pathos. While Benjamin writes of the city thinking of Baudelaire’s Paris and the strolling flaneur (the pedestrian who finds delight and pleasure in ambling contentedly and unhurriedly through the city) as a guise adopted by the poet, the black “badman” in Stagolee lore is a different kind of stroller, one who becomes an allegory of the player or the “mack.” Stagolee belongs to a group of “exotic” pimps known as “macks” who were not just urban strollers but rather they presented themselves as objects to be observed. In St. Louis they were also called by the French word *maquereaux* and later the word was shortened to “macks” in the African American vernacular. As a true modern hero, Stagolee is looking at the world, and even though his clothes and appearance (in many versions of the ballad emphasis is put on his clothes, particularly his fondness for hats) are meant to attract attention, he is “invisible” “hidden” from society, from social history. In a way he becomes an allegory of the “mack” who cannot be destroyed because his existence is contingent upon *not being seen*.⁴⁹ As a hero of modernity he is doomed to endure it, suffer its consequences, but also engage in subverting the terror of urban existence which for black men at the turn of the twentieth century was a doubly complicated task.

Cecil Brown makes an intriguing observation that one of the ingredients in the Stagolee tale that accounts for its wide-spread popularity is “poiesis” (*Stagolee Shot Billy* 71). This vexes the question: what sort of beautiful is begotten or brought forth in this story? Perhaps the

⁴⁹ The allusion here to Ralph Ellison’s protagonist in the *Invisible Man* of course cannot be overlooked. The badman, however, is one of many recognizable types that Rinehart embodies. Jerry H. Bryant points out in “*Born in a Mighty Bad Land*” that in the figure of Rinehart Ellison “shows how far he brings us from the traditional badman figure and just how clever he [Rinehart] is in using that figure to explore his own interests” (73).

mythical quality of this alluring figure lies in his potential to refer to something that is of collective importance i.e., StagoLee the pimp transforms into StagoLee, the cultural hero. Greil Marcus explains its appeal succinctly in *Mystery Train: Images of America and Rock'n'Roll Music*:

Locked in the images of a thousand versions of the tale is an archetype that speaks to fantasies of casual violence and violent sex, lust and hatred, ease and mystery, a fantasy of style and steppin' high. At a deeper level it is a fantasy of no-limits for a people who live within a labyrinth of limits every day of their lives, and who can transgress them only among themselves. It is both a portrait of that tough and vital character that everyone would like to be, and just another pointless, tawdry dance of death. (76)

Since StagoLee's story has been formalized in the ballad and toast tradition, this narrative becomes a paradigm that informs many actions of resistance. As part of the vernacular cultural narrative it becomes, "the authentic voice of the unconscious of the race" (4).⁵⁰ Thus, it is the StagoLee paradigm that is brought forth in the oral tradition rather than the life of the real Lee Shelton that underlies the StagoLee myth. The period between 1890 and 1930, the decades during which the cultural narrative surrounding StagoLee develops and thrives among African Americans, is a turbulent period in the formation of black identity – a time when the sense of a black community is shaped largely by people barely surviving at the bottom of white American society. In the midst of such "crisis" StagoLee becomes the embodiment of the collective sentiment of community and, moreover, he becomes its symbol of resistance. Of course, this process has had various reincarnations in the long history of Black subjugation in America.

⁵⁰ David Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000. Print.

Some scholars trace it back to American chattel slavery which, in all its horror, enabled the formation of a particular African American “ethos” that has prevailed:

Slaves were able to fashion a lifestyle and set of values—an ethos—which prevented them from being imprisoned altogether by the definitions which larger society tried to impose. The ethos was an amalgam of “Africanisms” and New World elements which helped slaves, in Guy Johnson’s words “feel their way along the course of American slavery, enabling them to endure” (Sterling Stuckey, “Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery”).⁵¹

Also, the Stagolee that has so captured the folk imagination is a sexual superman—in essence, a full embodiment of the attributes of an insatiable trickster: his appetite encompasses carnal desires, he is hypersexual and hyper masculine. However, what compromises his “heroic” status is that he lacks any chivalry or nobility when it comes to women. In fact, he thrives on humiliating and controlling women, rather than protecting them. One might argue that this hostility towards women apparent in these tales undoubtedly has its roots in the inhibitions imposed on black masculinity by the white man’s society. In post-slavery America, in many instances, black men had to realign themselves with the concept of what a family is, what a romantic relationship is, where the black man belongs in the new family that survived out of the ashes of the past. The family as a basic social unit (which also brought to question the image of a patriarchal family) and the man’s role in it, needed to be recognized again. LeRoi Jones suggests in *Blues People* that: “During slavery, one of the fundamental social breakdowns the Negro experienced was the disintegration of familial ties, especially the role of the man as a complete master of the familial unit” (56). Adrienne M. Seward offers a psycho-analytical explanation

⁵¹Quoted in Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003. P.215. Print.

why someone like Stagolee, a sexually rapacious outlaw and pimp, became a hero. Her analysis takes into account the history of the slave-owning South and its culture of white sexual supremacy:

During slavery, the black man sat back and watched the white man sexually abuse black women without being able to do anything about it. After emancipation and especially beginning late in the nineteenth century, the situation was reversed: the black man had control of the women, and the white man came to the pimp for his satisfaction. Both the pimp and the prostitute looked on the white man, the ‘trick,’ as their ‘client,’ an inferior position in a business transaction. (*Stagolee Shot Billy* 88)

When one considers the restrictive social codes imposed on African Americans following the Civil War, especially after Reconstruction, one can understand the attraction that they would have felt toward one who defies the dominant order with the style and bravado of a Stagolee. Frequently, the law is pictured as afraid of pursuing Stagolee after his crime is revealed. In many ways, the types of behavior associated with the “badman” in folklore reflect a heightened example of those that African Americans have embraced in dealing with their persecution in the white man’s society since the earliest days of slavery. The differences in the factors influencing folk creation after Emancipation facilitated the rise of the “badman” as an outlaw folk hero whose characteristic actions offered a way of dealing with the Law of the white man in the urban milieu of the North. On many levels, black people, particularly black men, had waged an on-going battle against “the Law,” in their efforts to achieve social, economic and political rights in American society. In addition, in that same society, black men have had to fight against a more sinister manifestation of the “bad nigger”— “the image in the white man’s mind,” (the one

holding the Law) “that every black man is a potential ‘black nigger.’”⁵² In creating an outlaw folk hero out of this image, African Americans have conceptualized this figure within a folk heroic tradition based on values collectively recognized as the most advantageous for protecting their identity and affirming their culture’s existence.

The idea of the “badman” as a culture hero will particularly take hold in the transformative decade of the 1960s. His “ba-adness” and its identifiable element of social and political protest are traits the Black Power and Black Arts movement recognized as emblematic of their fight. Frequently, the image and the notoriety of the “ba-ad man” Stagolee were “canonized” and appropriated by black revolutionaries, like Bobby Seale, who would recite it at Black Panther Party⁵³ gatherings as a symbol of black male struggle against white oppression and racism. In particular, in the 1960’s the association with Stagolee will be instrumental in redefining ideals of black masculinity, sexuality and power. In the black vernacular, the term “Stag” becomes used as a synonym for masculinity, toughness and meanness. Geneva Smitherman explains that “‘Stagger Lee’ came to embody a “fearless, mean dude,” and that “it became widely fashionable ... to refer to oneself as ‘Stag’ as in ‘I ain’t got to brag, uhm like Stag.’ Or, ‘Don’t mess with me, cause I ain’t no fag, uhm Stag.’”⁵⁴

⁵² John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, p.215.

⁵³ In “Godfather of Gangsta,” Cecil Brown traces the influence of this legend on the Black Power Movement and contemporary rap. He points out that, Bobby Seale, the leader of the Black Panthers, used the song of Stackalee to recruit young black men to the party: “I once got the opportunity to ask him why. He replied that StagoLee represented a template for black resistance to whites that just needed to be organised. ‘StagoLee was a bad nigger off the block and didn’t take shit from nobody,’ he said. ‘Malcolm X at one time was an illegitimate hustler. Later in life Malcolm X grows to have the most profound political consciousness... So symbolically, at one time he was StagoLee... To me, StagoLee was the true grassroots.”

⁵⁴ Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, p.52. Print.

What black artists in the history of African American art and letters have responded to is an iconic value of cultural relevance that has existed in the black vernacular tradition and its cultural idiom for at least two centuries. As I have attempted to show in this chapter, this lineage can be traced back to the rich and transformative trickster tradition of duplicity, rebellion and transgression that figures like the Signifying monkey and badman Stagolee exemplify. These most salient aspects of African American vernacular tradition will translate in various permutations in the written literature, as I will show in the following chapters— both, the “man of violence” and the trickster of indirection, will profoundly engage artistic imagination and thus firmly establish their relevance as cultural tropes. Jerry H. Bryant sums it up nicely:

[Black authors] have poked, punched, pinched, and shaken him [the badman] in every conceivable way to see what he is made of. They have embraced him whole, broken him down and reassembled him, placed him against myriad backdrops and foils to bring out his seemingly infinite qualities. In doing so, along with their folk artist cousins, they confirm the badman as one of the central mythic elements in the African American experience. Over a couple of centuries of development, the man of violence changes forms and functions according to the use to which the author puts him and the social class in whose terms the author thinks. He is nearly as prevalent as the trickster and in many cases shares features with that universal being.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Jerry H. Bryant. “Born in a Mighty Bad Land”: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction. Indiana U Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2003, p.5. Print.

CHAPTER TWO

Heroic Tricksters in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*

They are the misunderstood people in the world. There's a wildness that they have, a nice wildness. It has bad effects in society such as the one in which we live. It's pre-Christ in the best sense. It's Eve. When I see this wildness gone in a person, it's sad. This special lack of restraint, which is part of human life and is best typified in certain black males, is of particular interest to me. It's in black men despite the reasons society says they're not supposed to have it. Everybody knows what "that man" is, and they may give him bad names and call him a "street nigger" but when you take away the vocabulary of denegration, what you have is somebody who is fearless and who is comfortable with that fearlessness. It's not about meanness. It's a kind of self-flagellant resistance to certain kinds of control, which is fascinating. Opposed to accepted notions of progress, the lock-step life, they live the world unreconstructed and that's it. —Toni Morrison⁵⁶

Outlaw women are fascinating—not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status as an illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men.—Toni Morrison⁵⁷

This chapter investigates the “badman” trickster tradition in the novels of Toni Morrison. I am particularly interested in Morrison’s re-imagining of the tradition of the violent, outlaw man (and woman) as representative of the Black heroic. In this chapter I provide a closer look at three of her novels—written in the period between the early 1970s and early 1980s: *Sula* (1973) *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1981). I read the badman figure as a source of liberation for the black community and an expression of otherwise inconceivable choices and identities through several protagonists in the novels. Morrison places the role of the badman and the entire trickster tradition into a new perspective where this figure becomes an important aspect of identity in the cultural code. In their estrangement from the white justice system that rests upon double standards with regards to race, black men who, under those circumstances, already exist “outside” the mainstream culture, direct their fury and rage against a world that denies their

⁵⁶ In *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate. Harpenden, Herts., England: Oldcastle, 1985. 125-26. Print.

⁵⁷ Foreword to *Sula*. Toni Morrison. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

humanity. In effect, the novels under consideration show that Morrison's narrative project, deeply embedded in the black trickster tradition, infuses with a vital oral energy the imaginative literary tradition and helps put together the pieces of an African American identity in all its complexity.

So far, in this dissertation, I have emphasized the integral part tricksters play in altering perceptions of cultural heroes and subverting dominant structures. As the culture develops, so does the ever-increasing complexity of this image as it becomes embedded in art and literature. Through their transformation from one historical era to the next, the reincarnations of the trickster carry the re-inscription of a culture's aspirations, fears and hopes. In its appropriation in literature, this particular trickster figure, the badman,⁵⁸ gets elevated from its initial derogatory usage into a positive cultural trope.

In literature, in order to make the badman a type that reflects communal values and is the bearer of transformation for a culture, an exceptional creative invention and, above all, an imaginative leap, are required since, in the folk tradition he is already assigned a rather ambiguous and negative status. As a trickster, the badman possesses a quality that some call "ministering to the community" (H. Nigel Thomas)—a function of a true trickster figure that is productive in both the oral tradition and written literature since it offers infinite potential for parodying, signifying and subverting "moral" instruction. Manipulation of language, as well as the cunning and wit involved in securing material survival, are all traits that make this trickster

⁵⁸ Earlier scholarship on African American folklore treat the "badman" and the "bad nigger" as synonymous. However studies since the 1970s more frequently distinguish between these two figures, considering the badman as a model for behavior worthy of emulation by African Americans struggling to survive in a postbellum social order continuously ruled by racial subjugation. See Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 1977; John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*, 1989. Jerry H. Bryant, "Born in a Mighty Bad Land": *The Violent Man of African American Folklore and Fiction*, 2003.

attractive to writers. In *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*, John W. Roberts offers a perspective on the creation of black folk heroes and their relevance to the development of a culture. He explains: “We must recognize that culture-building is a recursive, rather than linear, process of endlessly devising solutions to both old and new problems of how to live under ever-changing social, political, and economic conditions” (11).

In my analysis of the transformation of folk heroes, I find Roberts’ discussion of the connection between the trickster and the badman outlaw hero useful as a model for understanding the continuum of trickster figures as they change in response to historical and cultural conditions. Roberts asserts that “In essence, as the law emerged as the institutional framework within which whites defined and dealt with African Americans in the society, it had a dramatic impact on their ability to accept behaviors embodied in trickster tales as adaptable to real-life situations” (186). In his doctoral thesis on epic tricksters “The Epic Trickster: From Sunjata to Jim Crow,” Gregory Rutledge provides another illuminating perspective regarding the dynamics and genealogy of the trickster as an epic hero in American literature and culture. Rutledge’s arguments rest upon the connections earlier established by Roberts, as well as Roger D. Abrahams, Lawrence W. Levine, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., connections that delineate the kinship between the transplanted African animal trickster proper and the heroic trickster in African American culture. Rutledge writes of an evolutionary continuum of the African trickster who on American soil transforms from a trickster proper to an epic hero. While he raises the question whether the African epic crossed to America with the enslaved he vexes this with another possibility: “Is the African trickster, blended with the African epic, creating a sort

of African-American epic trickster aesthetic?”⁵⁹ For him this sort of connection makes the link between African epic hero, the African American animal trickster, the badman hero and the resulting twentieth century literary manifestations of the “Black heroic” more easily acceptable “as an anthropological and hermeneutical possibility” (109)⁶⁰.

In my dissertation, I offer a reading (through Morrison’s fiction) of the “badman” trickster tradition as an embodiment of such a “Black heroic” despite the badman’s suspect potential for culture-building. Since the possibilities for meaningful and ideal(ized) heroic action for African Americans have historically been pushed to the margins of the established social, political and legal system, the ability of this figure to test the boundaries of acceptable behavior and subvert conventional “truths” is liberating. One of the goals of this dissertation is precisely to look into the dynamics of those historical/cultural/aesthetic processes which enable the trickster of mediation and elusiveness—one who disrupts and rebels against a dominant, oppressive order, but in essence, has limited transformative and culture-building power—to move from being “the marginalized” trickster to “the valorized” hero proper, in the black folk tradition, and more importantly, in literature. The appeal of this figure in folklore is more straightforward: being forced to grapple, not only with racism, but also with far-reaching consequences of its legal and cultural apparatus – after all, racial discrimination was instituted in a democratic, constitution-formed United States—there was little else available for black men and women but the veil of wit and duplicity that the trickster ethos provides.

⁵⁹ Rutledge, Gregory E. "The Epic Trickster: from Sunjata to Jim Crow." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Section A: the Humanities and Social Sciences. 66.5 (2005): 1772. Print.

⁶⁰

In summary, there are several theories regarding the badman's status as a hero worthy of emulation in African American culture.⁶¹ One line of argument is that, while, the badman is a reflection of the despair and anger that plagued African Americans after Emancipation, he is nothing more than an angry figure whose despair translates into acts of violence and fury devoid of the potential for social change. In other words, energy as pure excess. Another point of view is that his penchant for violence is emblematic of a man who is sexually repressed, reading his violence (and pronounced misogyny) as a symptom of castration and lynching trauma. Finally, a third group of scholars maintain that the badman emerged as a response to the political, social and economic oppression of African Americans by White America following Reconstruction. These theorists make a convincing case that the African American folk imagination not only combined the recognizable traits of the trickster but also conjure figures of slavery, thereby *inventing* the badman figure who, through his lawless acts (gambling, killing), secured some of the subversive powers that the dominant social order had denied African Americans for centuries. As a result of this, in the oral tradition, a decidedly more daring trickster emerges amidst a hostile climate, as the evolution of the African American trickster shows a transformation of the "weaker" animal trickster of the folktales and slave narratives to a more robust and more violent version after Emancipation. Just as the weak African American trickster animal anticipates a strong and violent corollary, heroic slave folktales anticipated the arrival of a more "noble" hero in John Henry and later, another hero with even grander "epic" possibilities—badman Stagolee. This third rationalization for the badman's status as a hero

⁶¹ The development of these ideas can be traced primarily in Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 1977; John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*, 1989. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997), p.42 dedicates an entry on "badman" that provides a clear trajectory of the cultural developments of this figure.

seems to make the most compelling and convincing case for this figure's enduring popularity in African American culture to this day.

The "Badman" in American Novels

As I have outlined earlier, the "badman" as a culture hero enters folk imagination around the turn of the twentieth century and since then has survived as an intriguing and persistent figure in African American culture. His enduring appeal and the ability of this trickster figure to meet the demands of the changing culture, different genres, and varying audiences testify to his importance within black culture. In American novels, the "badman" appears in the 1920s and 1930s, primarily in the fiction of white writers. In later years, Zora Neale Hurston,⁶² Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Arna Bontemps and Ernest Gaines, among others, portray the "badman" hero of the oral tradition in their works, but since publications were less possible for black writers in the early years of the twentieth century, the first writers to use elements of black folklore in their writing were white.⁶³ One of the most prolific folklore collectors in the US, Howard Odum uses a character called Stacker Lee in his novel *Rainbow Round My Shoulder: The Blue Trail of Black Ulysses* (1922). However, the early white American novelists frequently miss the complexity of the "badman" figure and its profound influence on African American culture. In all the variations that he appears—a pimp, a hit man, a murderer, a wanderer, etc.—novelists seem much more self-conscious about his behavior and

⁶² Although Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* draws extensively on folklore, she doesn't draw on the "badman" figure in the portrayal of her characters. There is a sort of rebellious figure in her 1935 short-story "Mules and Men" who sells his soul to the devil.

⁶³ In Guy B. Johnson's publication of 1930 "Folk Values in Recent Literature on the Negro" in *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany 2*, he makes no mention of any African American writers.

his pathology of destruction, missing completely his potential to infuse the culture with a subversive (albeit violent) energy—the way the folk imagination more readily does. His violence is read as a self-destructive symptom, and they treat him frequently as a sociologically, psychologically and morally “reformed man” He is frequently portrayed as a man who manages to transcend the violent methods of the traditional “badman,” embraces bourgeois self-control and renounces violence for the rewards of middle-class conformity. Jerry H. Bryant explains this metamorphosis:

The fundamental middle-class bias of the novelists is reflected in the treatment of the badman figure, and it determines the great difference in tone between the badman narrative of the oral folk tradition and that of the written novelistic tradition. Neither group has a monopoly on literary merit or historical importance. Both contain gems that no reader would wish to discard, as well as flaws most readers would prefer expunged. (7)⁶⁴

Undoubtedly, the rich toast folk tradition allows more freedom for admiration of the badman than did literary works in the early decades of the twentieth century. Folk representations differ from the portrayal of the badman in novels in the sense that the novel provides a lesson in “a destructive experience escaped,” while the ballad is “a statement of stoical, sometimes joyful, explicit or implicit acceptance of the inescapable given.”⁶⁵

With the exception of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, black writers of the Harlem Renaissance generally do not employ the badman type in their writing. Folklore, full of associations with ignorant, humiliated, exploited and superstitious ex-slaves was met by a certain amount of reserve by the new emerging class of black intellectuals aspiring to align themselves

⁶⁴ Jerry H. Bryant. *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003, p.7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7.

with the American middle class during the Harlem Renaissance.⁶⁶ Some critics have argued that the artists' and scholars' reluctance to embrace folkloric material lies in the non-dogmatic nature of folktales –what George Kent in *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* calls the concept of "isness" in folk materials.⁶⁷ Folk materials, according to Kent, simply present the world as it is, without any suggestions for possible transformation. Since Black folktales not only had little explicit striving for justice, but also dealt with Blacks who were neither wealthy nor powerful, they did not provide a way to portray "dignity" (a quality seen as vital to the aesthetic success of spirituals). Therefore, folktales could not be easily appropriated into the Black aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance. This selective portrayal of the race (and its results for folktales) often appeared in the issue of whether the Black artist should use clearly Black materials to show the richness of his/her African heritage or whether he should concentrate on the similarities between the races. Writers lined up on a spectrum governed by Du Bois' earlier notion of the "double consciousness" (the African and European-American heritages) of the Black race. At one end a very few Black writers such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay emphasized the African heritage and encouraged showing white audiences how rich the

⁶⁶ During the Harlem Renaissance folktales were rarely highlighted in the pages of leading periodicals such as *The Crisis* or *Opportunity*, and W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson (who as editors, prolific writers, and leaders of the NAACP presented themselves and were accepted as the arbiters of Black taste) did not acknowledge folktales as significant artifacts of Black cultural achievement.

On the other hand, folktales were not limited to the pages of a writer such as Jean Toomer, who incorporated traditional folk motifs into his writing. The Harlem Renaissance did in fact see the publication of many substantial collections of folktales: *With Aesop Along the Black Border* by Ambrose Gonzales (1922); *Negro Folk Rhymes* by Thomas Talley of Fisk (1922); *Folklore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina* by Elsie Clews Parsons (1923); *Congaree Sketches* (1927) and *Nigger to Nigger* (1928) by E. C. L. Adams; *The Tree Named John* by John Sales (1929); Howard Odum's trilogy *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1928), *Wings on My Feet* (1929), and *Cold Blue Moon* (1930); and, somewhat later, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). However, there are two reasons why this impressive list of publications does not signal the acceptance of Black folktales by the major Harlem Renaissance writers. First, the publication of these folktales was one-sided. With the exception of Zora Neale Hurston, the editors of these collections were white. Arthur Huff Fauset was the only other major Black writer to spend significant attention on collecting African American folk tales. Second, the Black intellectual elite of Du Bois, Locke, and Johnson did not follow or accompany this publishing boom with the unanimous acceptance they gave to black spirituals.

⁶⁷ Kent, George E. *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1972. Print.

differences of Black culture were. For Hughes and McKay this meant using the contemporary folk tradition which was very well known to whites in 1920s—blues and jazz.

Toni Morrison and the Portrayal of the “Outlaw Hero” in Fiction

The publication of Morrison’s novels *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* in the 1970’s coincides with the growing momentum of the feminist movement, the dying toast tradition, and the ever increasing popularity of the super-macho hero in cinema.⁶⁸ While majority of Black feminists, in reaction to the predominant maleness of the Black Power Movement, raise their voices against the brutality and self-centered posturing implicit in the portrayals of black men, Morrison’s treatment of the badman types in her fiction seems to move beyond what some may consider a “feminist stereotype” or the rage of those that prefer the macho/superhero image.⁶⁹ Jerry Bryant points out that in her novels Morrison expresses “genuine respect for the powerful tradition of the violent man” (*Born in a Mighty Bad Land* 184). He adds: “She acknowledges its long history as a salutary outlet for the frustrations of the suffocated male, the reality of whose anguish Morrison respectfully acknowledges” (184). Her interpretation of the iconic badman is a socially lawless individual (ala Stagolee), but one that does not display his violence, brutality, immorality, and his penchant for outrage.

In the novels under consideration in this chapter, this relatively coherent figure is recognizable in the male characters of Son, Ajax, Guitar and Milkman (and also to some extent,

⁶⁸ Blaxploitation films like *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Superfly* (1972) and *Three the Hard Way* (1974).

⁶⁹ Often quoted figures in African American literature whose behavior and attitudes are informed by the badman tradition are Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Malcolm X in the Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965).

Sula, as an outlaw “badwoman”). These characters, for Morrison, convey that which is *heroic*. Even though in her fiction she mostly relies on female characters as main protagonists who are truly stalwart and enduring, her portrayal of black men as heroic – often in defiance of conventional perceptions of morality, good and evil—in all of her fiction is undeniable.⁷⁰ She shows this in the way they struggle in the face of political and social injustice, cultural isolation and strife to define life under their own terms. For Morrison, the identity of this “modern day Ulysses” is defined primarily through his journey, his “on the go-ness,” not so much the ultimate goal (or a heroic quest). While their toughness conceals hurt, confusion and indecisiveness, it seems that it is the obstacles of the *self* that creates intensity in the life of her male protagonists, and this is what Morrison finds attractive. She explains in an interview: “... They may give him bad names and call him a “street nigger” but when you take away the vocabulary of denegration, what you have is somebody who is fearless and who is comfortable with that fearlessness. It’s not about meanness. It’s a kind of self-flagellant resistance to certain kinds of control, which is fascinating.”⁷¹ These men, contemporary versions of Ulysses, outcast wanderers, as Morrison explains, “are an international legion of day laborers and musclemen, gamblers, sidewalk merchants, migrants, unlicensed crewmen on ships with volatile cargo, part-time mercenaries, full-time gigolos, or curbside musicians.”⁷² They are disaffected with the mainstream, rebels

⁷⁰ Morrison’s most recent novel *Home* (2012) is intensely focused on the intricacies of manhood. The main protagonist, a Korean war veteran, Frank Money is haunted by what it means to be a man. “Who am I without her,” he wonders, “that underfed girl with the sad, waiting eyes?” As one reviewer ponders, *Home* investigates burning questions such as these: “Are acts of violence essentially masculine, or are they an abdication of manliness? Is it possible, the novel finally asks, to consider the manhood implicit in sacrifice, in laying down one’s life?” (Ron Charles, book review “Toni Morrison’s *Home*, a restrained but powerful novel” April 30, 2012, the Washington Post).

⁷¹ *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate. Harpenden, Herts., England: Oldcastle, 1985. 125-26. Print.

⁷² *Tar Baby*, p.168.

against convention “anarchic, wandering,” “an army of “undocumented men. [...] Some were Huck Finns; some Nigger Jims. Others were Calibans, Staggerlees and John Henrys.”⁷³

By focusing on this particular type of contemporary tricksters—the outlaws that challenge things as they evoke drama, conflict and a sense of the heroic—Morrison’s project reveals a dedication to reclaiming a forgotten and ostracized segment of culture. At the same time, her seamless blending of fictive and folkloric elements speaks to the fluidity and connection between the black oral tradition and written literature.

Song of Solomon

The obvious folk tale in *Song of Solomon* is that of the ancestral Solomon, the flying African. This is an important aspect of the novel and an important revelation for its main character, Milkman Dead, in his quest for wholeness. According to the folk legend, numerous African slaves, like Solomon, flew back to Africa. This metaphor works on several levels; this piece of African oral tradition is a talisman for Milkman’s own possibility of flight—away from his past or towards a discovery of a self. At the same time, the legend provides a direct connection between oral tradition and literature, since the novel makes a sophisticated use of oral conventions—for example, throughout *Song of Solomon* there is a sense of a narrator talking to the reader, a voice that, with grace, acknowledges a kinship with the listener. There are also frequent instances where the texture of the narrative mimics that of the oral tradition through use of directness, assurance and double-edged realistic humor that is typical of folktales. Also, various characters become audience-witnesses to the other character’s sayings and doings and in their dialogue the narrative rendering possesses what Gail Jones calls “the understated blues-

⁷³ Ibid., 168.

humor of the last line.”⁷⁴ Morrison has frequently said that her strategy is to skillfully write down a dialogue that would direct the reader’s attention to the sound, make the reader *hear* as if he/she is listening to a story being told. She points out one example in *Sula*: “When Eva in *Sula* sets her son on fire, her daughter runs upstairs to tell her, and Eva says ‘Is’ you can hear every grandmother say ‘Is?’ and you know: a) she knows what she’s been told; b) she is not going to do anything about it; and c) she will not have any more conversation. That sound is important to me”(Conversation with Toni Morrison 124).

Like the best folktales, as Gayl Jones suggests *Song of Solomon* “is indirectly didactic” (177)⁷⁵. It utilizes the old folktale that imbued slaves with hope—the story that they can conquer slavery by acquiring wings and flying back home to Africa. The full meaning of the myth that was translated into the children’s Solomon’s (or Shalimar’s) song Milkman realizes only when ancestral wisdom is relearned and the ancestral obligations are fulfilled. As in *Tar Baby*, the moral of the story is that protagonists must first cast away their preoccupation with racial vengeance (Guitar), materialism (Jadine) to come back to the source of ancestral wisdom.

While *Sula* fits the model of the demon/seducer trickster, the one whose interest is only in expanding the self and in “consuming” other individuals to attain power, at the same time, through her beguiling charm, she plays upon the susceptibilities of other characters (especially men) to entice them into a sexual intrigue or induce the person to submit to demoralizing circumstances (the way she does with Jude, Nel, Shadrack). Interestingly, the main protagonist in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman, is more a representative of, if not outlaw, certainly rebel culture hero. He opposes the systems that operate to compromise or obstruct freedom. Like Stagolee, he

⁷⁴ Gayl Jones “Motives of Folktale” in *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* Gayl Jones.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,177.

brings forth new forms of being and doing, while he impacts the value systems, social order and material culture. As a hero, as the novel progresses and Milkman's quest to solve his family's secret becomes a journey towards self-realization.

At the same time, his counterpart, Guitar Baines, belongs to the truth-teller/challenger type of trickster, whose purpose is to expose the lies and hypocrisies of society, as well as contest the values that the same society accepts or leaves unexamined, such as justice that depends on violence, power that depends on an inherited status of dominance.⁷⁶ In a similar vein to the legendary "badman," Guitar is trapped in a cycle of releasing aggressive desires otherwise repressed in a dangerous and racist society. He signifies on the values of the white bourgeoisie, full of contempt for white America: "I don't give a shit what white people know or even think. Besides, I do accept it [his name]. It's part of who I am. Guitar is *my* name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does" (160). Like a true Stagolee, Guitar challenges the system with bravado and daring, at the same time he receives punishment from the system, but at some point his actions become removed from the reality of black existence: "There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one...White people are unnatural. As a race they're unnatural. And it takes strong effort of the will to overcome an unnatural enemy" (155-56).

As Trudier Harris points out, Guitar and Milkman are two sides of the same (male) self, just as Sula fulfills this part for Nel in *Sula* (51).⁷⁷ The similarities between Guitar, Sula and Ajax are worth noting. They have "golden eyes" (a mark, similar to Sula's rose shaped face scar)

⁷⁶ In her study *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*, Marilyn Jurich catalogues a long list of individual types of tricksters that she outlines in reference to roles they play in oral tales and in literature. She concludes that the tales of trickery can be summed up in four categories: "A) amusing or diverting, B) morally debatable or ambiguous, C) situational or strategic, D) beneficial or improving" (199).

⁷⁷ Trudier Harris. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Print.

which place them in a category outside of that shared by ordinary people and within a context of a membership in a wild zone that is beyond the socially acceptable limits of the rational. In an interview, Morrison calls these types of “golden eyed” heroes in her fiction “the salt tasters” since she interprets their freedom as a kind that is not only dangerous to both society and themselves, but also gives them a quality that makes them irresistibly attractive to others:

They are the misunderstood people in the world. There's a wildness that they have, a nice wildness. It has bad effects in society such as the one in which we live. It's pre-Christ in the best sense. It's Eve. When I see this wildness gone in a person, it's sad. This special lack of restraint, which is part of human life and is best typified in certain black males, is of particular interest to me. It's in black men despite the reasons society says they are not supposed to have it... It's a kind of self-flagellant resistance to certain kinds of control, which is fascinating. Opposed to accepted notions of progress, the lock-step life, they live in the world unreconstructed and that's it. (*Black Women Writers at Work* 125-26)

Both Milkman and Guitar are to some extent reconfigurations of the traditional “badman,” each of them preoccupied with the major issues for black men in America in the seventies: Guitar with Black nationalism and Milkman with the black man’s quest for selfhood. Milkman, unlike Guitar, does not fully embody the image of the badman as an enemy of the system. He emerges as the antagonist of conventional morality, one who is consumed by his own desires for self-indulgent pleasures. However, like the “badmen” of the folklore myth, Milkman is a sexually dominant male who treats his women as enemies to be conquered, best exemplified in his (incestuous?) relationship with Hagar. The hostility towards women apparent in his “type” undoubtedly has its roots in the inhibitions imposed on Black men by a racist society. In his case, it is amplified by the trauma of his mother’s nursing him until he is seven years old. His

treatment of Haggar is anything but gentlemanly. Just like the badmen of black folklore, Milkman's penis represents a powerful weapon, a mighty source of masculine entitlement. "You have never picked up anything heavier than your own feet or solved a problem harder than fourth grade arithmetics," Milkman's sister, Lena says to him. "Where do you get the right to decide our lives? I'll tell you where," she continues "from that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (*Song of Solomon* 217). His eventual decision to leave his lover Haggar comes after their affair has lost the thrill of the chase and he wants out:

Her eccentricities were no longer provocative and the stupefying ease with which she had gotten and stayed between her legs had changed from the great good fortune he'd considered it, to annoyance at her refusal to make him hustle for it, work for it, do something difficult for it. He didn't even have to pay for it. It was so free, so abundant, it had lost its fervor. (91)

At the same time, both Ajax and Milkman are fascinated and drawn to the less-needy type of women, such as Sula and Pilate, and are spellbound when they first meet them. For Ajax, the attraction is doubled because Sula reminds him of the strength and feistiness of his own mother, a conjure woman, who he admires above all: "Other than his mother, who sat in her shack with six younger sons working roots, he had never met an interesting woman" (*Sula* 126). For Milkman, Pilate is the one who could fly without wings and his desperate cry at the end of the novel with dying Pilate in his arms: "There must be another one like you," he whispered to her. "There's got to be at least one more woman like you" (336).

Like Milkman, Ajax's retreat from intimacy in *Sula* is another illustration of the type of men Morrison chooses to portray in her fiction, not necessarily violent men, but men who insist

upon their personal freedom. This, for Morrison, is an enabling quality that actually makes them interesting. She says “[there is] an incredible amount of magic and feistiness in black men that nobody has been able to wipe out. But everybody has tried.”⁷⁸ These men are seekers, like Ulysses, who brave the storms that life throws their way and manage “to live intensely and well.”⁷⁹ Ajax very much like Milkman, follows his whims, moving about a world that seems to be quite in his control –the street, the crap games, the honky-tonk and, unlike Milkman, is admired by women for his kind treatment. He seems like a man comfortable in his identity, in control of his urges, untouched by racist anger and capable of passion, but unfortunately, not commitment. He does give Sula sexual satisfaction and treats her like an equal, until the possessiveness she is astonished to find in herself, drives him away, but not before he makes love to her one last time “with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton” (134). As I have already pointed out, Morrison finds this kind of inbred sense of freedom and restlessness a positive quality that she repeatedly seeks to explore through her male protagonists. She explains:

Most of the major black characters in black literature are in motion...the big scene is the traveling Ulysses scene, for black men. They are moving...Perhaps it's because they don't have a land, they don't have dominion...It's the Ulysses theme, the leaving home. And then, there's no one place that one settles. [There's] curiosity, what's around the corner, what's across the hill... Go find out what that is...and in the process of finding, they are also making themselves...They do not stay at home and take care of their children –that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life. I guess

⁷⁸ Stepto, “Intimate Things in Place,” 384 in Toni Morrison and Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. Print.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 384.

I'm not supposed to say that. But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me. ("Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison" 25-26)

Ralph Ellison also underscores this wandering tendency in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" when he says that "restlessness of the spirit is an American condition that transcends geography, sociology and past condition of servitude" (72). This thematic pattern in the black folk tradition, as we have seen in the previous chapter, will translate as a structural pattern that will shape the written literature, the archetypal initiation/journey from the American South to the North that has pervaded African American literature from the earliest days of literary creativity into contemporary texts. However, in *Song of Solomon*, the trajectory of this movement is reversed. Milkman goes back South, initially in search of the familial gold, but symbolically he returns to the ancestral home in order to discover his true identity. In Morrison's fiction, the American South is the past, the North is the present and the characters' journeys between the two are weighted with deep social and psychological significance. An inner/outer tension usually accompanies these movements and characterizes much of the community's growth and an individual's transformation. Unlike white characters who typically want to escape their communities to find freedom, black characters in fiction seek redemption in the return to community and the ensuing resolution of their inner/outer fragmentation.

Milkman best illustrates the difficulty of negotiating these two positions and the consequent feeling of alienation of the self that moves between the two realms—the urban milieu of the present and the ancestral southern past. In the first half of the novel, Milkman most resembles the wandering, self-indulgent city stroller of the folk ballad. Like a typical victim of the modern city (similar to the folk figure Stagolee of the toast tradition), Milkman sees himself as a victim of society since he is doomed to endure it, suffer its consequences. But he also

engages in subverting the terror of urban existence and middle-class conformity that he finds suffocating—“his mind is blank, his lungs craving smoke ... he felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatred of other people,” ambling around the city “in a mood of lazy righteousness” (120). At the same he is unaware of the underlying privileges that Guitar points out:

“I know you. Been knowing you. You got your high-tone friends and your picnics on Honore Island and you can afford to spend fifty percent of your brainpower thinking about a piece of ass. You got that red-headed bitch and you got a Southside bitch and no telling what in between...”

“What’s wrong with Negroes owning beach houses? What do you want, Guitar? You mad at every Negro who ain’t scrubbing floors and picking cotton. This ain’t Montgomery, Alabama.”

“You’re right, Milkman... This definitely is not Montgomery, Alabama... What would you do if it was?”

“Buy a plane ticket.” (*Song of Solomon* 104)

The city setting also functions as a trigger for his repressed childhood memory—his mother nursing him past his baby years: “Milkman stopped dead in his tracks. Cold sweat broke out on his neck. People jostled him trying to get past the solitary man standing in their way. He had remembered something. Or believed he had remembered. Maybe he’d dreamed it and it was the dream he remembered” (77). Walter Benjamin explains the relation between the urban setting and memories in the following way: “Memory shapes, and is in turn shaped by, the urban

setting.”⁸⁰ Like a labyrinth, the journey through the city takes the city wanderer on a circling journey, within the narrow confines of the maze (Milkman feels trapped on his side of the street). The child’s unconscious memory lingers in Milkman’s adult life and in the midst of the urban crowd the Proustian-like memory surfaces: “He walked on, hardly noticing the people pushing past him, their annoyed, tight faces. He tried to see more of the picture, but couldn’t. Then he heard something that he knew was related to the picture. Laughter...somebody in the room laughing...at him and at his mother” (79). He realizes what the full memory is: “My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up and wear knickers, and somebody saw it and laughed ... and that’s why they call me Milkman” (78).

Milkman seems to embody the condition of Benjamin’s flaneur⁸¹ or rather, at least, his gaze at the outside world concerning the uncertainty and strangeness of the things he observes. However, his vision is obscured as if by a veil:

He turned around to see where everybody was going, but there was nothing to see except their backs and hats pressing forward into the night. He looked again at the other side of the street. Not a soul.

⁸⁰ Gilloch, Graeme and Walter Benjamin. *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1996. Print. p.67.

⁸¹ My reading of Milkman as “the man of the crowd” does rely on Benjamin’s image of the flaneur of modernity, but unlike Benjamin’s metropolitan hero, Milkman ultimately does abandon the city and finds himself more at home in the ancestral rural home. The flaneur is a type that prefers arcades and gaslight, looks at the city as if it were a panorama or a “phantasmagoria”, collects urban physiognomies like a botanist collecting specimens, and, as a ‘L’*iterat*’ prostituting himself on the market, shows an affinity with the commodities he gazes at in window displays. This icon, for sure, is not a type that ever existed in social history, but a literary reflection of a complex kind, resulting from a triple reading (some even argue misreading: see Matina Lauster “Walter Benjamin’s Myth of the Flaneur.” *Modern Language Review*, 102 (2007), 139–56) process from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” via Baudelaire’s Paris to Benjamin. Benjamin, as John Rignall has remarked, himself invests an epistemological figure—Baudelaire’s ‘*observateur passionné*’ denoting a manner of viewing— with the qualities of a material type, expressive of developments in the era of High Capitalism. According to Lauster, by virtue of the flaneur’s sturdy afterlife in cultural studies, where he occupies the place of a type, a nineteenth-century literary cipher of vision has thus become a myth. Also see John Rignall, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 13.

He touched the arm of a man in a cap who was trying to get past him. 'Why's everybody on this side of the street?' he asked him.

'Watch it, buddy,' the man snapped, and moved on with the crowd.' (*Song of Solomon* 79)

Benjamin formulates this process of enlightened realization in terms of waking up from a dream. (Milkman is not sure whether his memory or the experience he is having is a dream or reality). For Benjamin the central image denoting the dream is that of the phantasmagoria.⁸² Milkman views the urban environment not as genuinely "alienated" but as merely "defamiliarized" by a veil of illusion which is that of the urban crowd: "Milkman closed his eyes and then opened them. The street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from. All walking hurriedly and bumping against him. After a while he realized that nobody was walking on the other side of the street" (78). The shock of the alienation Milkman feels is mitigated by the phantasmagoric screen, the crowd in the street, which shrouds the familiar, yet alien city in a nebulous tissue. Presumably the implication is that the urban crowd, itself a potentially disturbing phenomenon (a symbol in the novel of the alienating northern urban realm that swallows up the black self) absorbs Milkman as one who feels in his element and at home in it, deriving an aesthetic thrill by moving along incognito, and therefore not (yet) being fully exposed to the shock of alienation. On the other hand, this scene of being at home in what is decidedly not "home" and viewing what is familiar through a defamiliarizing (DuBoisian) veil, portrays Milkman as a black man at odds with himself and in revolt against the demands placed on him by white society.

⁸² This idiosyncratic image of the *phantasmagoria* is typical of Benjamin's allegorical thinking. *Phantasmagorias* were a form of pre-cinematic visual entertainment, where an image was projected onto a diaphanous screen from behind and the projector moved backwards and forwards, creating in the audience a sense of Gothic thrill through the illusion of an approaching or vanishing figure

Tar Baby

Milkman's struggle to negotiate these two historical moorings for the African American individual (the ancestral romanticized South and the urban alienating North) and the resulting social and psychological effects are echoed in Son's quest for growth and self-discovery in *Tar Baby*. Son experiences a similar moment of alienation when he arrives in New York at the insistence of his lover, Jadine. A fugitive for eight years, living outside the law, he finds himself disconnected from the new urban black culture that emerges in the late 1970s: "Different laughter from what he remembered it to be—without irony or defiance genuine amusement. Now all he heard were shrieks of satisfaction. It made him shiver. How long had he been gone, anyway? If those were the black folks he was carrying around in his heart all those years, who on earth was he?" (217). This moment of sobering epiphany propels him to retreat from this supposedly "enlightening" experience and seek resolution for his fragmented sense of self in a return to the safe South where his memory of black culture is contained forever in romantic notions of a warm, welcoming rural home, the comforting dream of "[...] yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! And the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line, and the sound of six-string guitar plucked after supper while children scooped walnuts up off the ground..." (119).

In this modern version of the tar baby tale, Son is an amalgam of several types. His most apparent role is that of the Ulysses-type wanderer that I discussed earlier. He jumps off a small island in the Caribbean as a fugitive, having spent many years wandering, separated from mainstream culture (but not estranged from his authentic roots as Jadine is). He becomes a secret presence in the household in the wealthy estate owned by a white American millionaire, Valerian

Street. While everyone is asleep in the house, he steals food and becomes more and more ragged as time goes by. When he is finally discovered he realizes that he has stumbled across “a bourgeois household full of suppressed tensions, racial, marital, and generational... and he is the slop bucket brought into the parlor.”⁸³ His status as a man outside of society—one whom the human rites of manhood have passed “unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rites” (*Tar Baby* 165-166)—points to his resemblance to the transgressive “badman.” Also, it seems that it is his outlaw qualities that make the tension between various characters in the novel come to the surface. The black live-in servants, Sydney and Ondine Childs, become immediately wary of Son because they see in him as a “ne’er-do-well bad nigger” who is possibly running away from the law. He also represents a threat to their own class status, particularly Sydney, who prides himself on being a “Philadelphia Negro.” As longtime servants to a wealthy white man, they have secured a proper upbringing and safe future for their niece, Jadine—a modern woman working as a fashion model in Paris, who has devoted her life to escaping the racial past and adopting the values of the Western European tradition, defending her right to like “‘Ave Maria’ better than gospel music,” believing that “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask” (*Tar Baby* 62). Jadine is the one who actually re-enforces the Childs’ perception of Son as a “bad nigger” through her own anxiety and warning him against trying to rape her. However, while she is intimidated and transfixed by his “ba-adness” and wild appearance, she is also irresistibly attracted to him and they begin a torrid love affair that inevitably ends in conflict.

Jerry Bryant suggests that Son is “Morrison’s improvisation upon Cholly Breedlove, Ajax, and both Guitar Baines and Milkman Dead.”⁸⁴ He seems to be a more complete representative

⁸³ Jerry H. Bryant. *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003, p.185.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.186.

of the type of wanderer that she has admired in folktales and in real life— the rebels against convention who are socially lawless, but do not possess the brutality and ego of Stagolee. Morrison highlights in him not so much “his violent nature as his quest for growth and discovery.”⁸⁵ While he is a man of many identities, being “Son” (one that is dutiful, belonging) is the only true identity that matters; all his other identities are volatile, projected by others onto him, thus outside of his control: “Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one that he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke – fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at last” (*Tar Baby* 139).⁸⁶ Son seems to put the powers of the badman boaster to the service of his affection for Jadine rather than his dominance over her, even though ultimately he recognizes that certain power he has over her: “She [Jadine] is scared, he thought. In the company of a killer on an island, far away from the house, she is too scared. Suddenly he liked it. Liked her fear. Basked in it like a cat in steam-pipe heat and it made him feel *protective* and *violent* at the same time” (177). At the same time, Son possess an intimate knowledge of a tenderness beneath her confident appearance, “So it would be his duty to keep the climate mild for her, to hold back with his hands if need be thunder, drought and all manner of winterkill, and he would blow with his own lips a gentle breeze for her to tinkle in” (189).

Of all the novels mentioned in this chapter, the narrative in *Tar Baby* is most obviously informed by the trickster tradition. Toni Morrison uses the tar baby tale—both the African version and the “Westernized” alternative as it was recorded by Joel Chandler Harris entitled “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story”—as a backdrop. Since frequently in her works Morrison likes

⁸⁵ Ibid.,

⁸⁶ A notion Morrison revisits in *Beloved*: “A man ain't nothing but a man. But a son? Well, now, that's somebody.”

to question “official” and “standard” stories, her appropriation of the tar baby tale is a bit different. She explains in an interview that her curiosity lies in revealing the multiply layers of signification in the “tar baby” tale⁸⁷:

The story has a tar baby in it which is used by a white man to catch a rabbit. ‘Tar baby’ is also a name, like nigger, that white people call black children, black girls as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.
(Conversations with Toni Morrison 122)

The traditional story of the Tar Baby in American culture is well-known: Brer Rabbit is the trickster in the tale and the Tar Baby is a trap that is created to snare him. In different versions of the tale, this trap is made by various figures: the farmer, the fox or the bear. In Harris’ version of the story, the Tar Baby is created by Brer Fox who is successful in trapping Brer Rabbit. As told by Uncle Remus, the tale ends with the Rabbit getting caught. In another version of the tale, “How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox,” the Rabbit tricks the Fox into letting him go into the briar patch by misleading him into believing that he does not want to go there; at the end, Brer Rabbit escapes and gleefully informs the Fox that he has made it home. This traditional tale, symbolically pits slaves against their white masters, with the slaves emerging victorious. The trickster role here is critical since it is the figure’s trickery that enables Brer Rabbit’s escape.

⁸⁷ In a version of the Tar Baby tale collected in *Afro-American Folk Lore*, 1892, A.M.Christensen, the tar baby is referred to as “she.”

If we follow the traditional folkloric pattern of interaction in the novel, the two main protagonists, Jadine Childs and Son, are recognizable as tar babies—they are both attracted to each other and the power of that attraction ultimately is their downfall. In terms of similarities to the traditional folktale, Jadine is the more obvious tar baby since she is more readily identifiable as Valerian's creation, her white patron who pays for her upbringing and education. At the same time, Son is more clearly connected to a trickster figure, a nameless outlaw and a masterful storyteller: "Regarding her whole self as an ear, he [Son] whispered into every part of her stories of icecaps and singing fish, The Fox and the Stork, The Monkey and the Lion, The Spider Goes to Market, and so mingled was their sex with adventure and fantasy that to the end of her life she never heard a reference to Red Riding Hood without a tremor"(*Tar Baby* 225).

Ultimately, the most significant conflict between Son and Jadine becomes the clash between two opposing views in the black community. The core of their struggle in the end is not the clash between the lifestyle of the wandering badman and the sophisticated model, but the contrast between Son's reverence for his folk past and Jadine's desire to shed the past and be a new black woman, liberated from the restrictions and demands of black culture. In one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, Jadine retorts to Son's repeated critiques of her "white-washed" life style:

I can't let you hurt me again. You stay in your medieval slave basket if you want to. You will stay there by yourself. Don't ask me to do it with you. I won't. There is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better, that's all I've been trying to help you do. That is the only revenge, for us to get over. *Way* over. But no, you want to talk about white babies; you don't know how to forget the past and do better. (*Tar Baby* 271)

Son embodies the folk past in whose “male-centered culture the older women pamper their men and grant them dominion”⁸⁸ and he hopes that Jadine too will learn to appreciate this culture and embrace it, but she resists this and both balk at the other’s expectations. The narrative voice observes: “One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?”(232).

Tar Baby does not offer a neat, tidy resolution to this conflict. Instead, Morrison allows Therese, a trickster in her own right, a visionary woman in full possession of her “sacred properties” (unlike Jadine), to face Son with the difficult choice in the final scene: win Jadine back or join the army of mythical blind horsemen that have been roaming the island for centuries, thus embracing his African heritage. Therese is in fact the most effective trickster in the novel, capable of disrupting Son’s and Jadine’s conflict (Black nationalism versus assimilation) with her own version of the *Tar Baby* story embedded in the narrative. As a blind seer⁸⁹ and conjure woman (with “magical breasts” that can still nurse babies in her old age), Therese pits the two opposing perspectives against each other as she heightens the reader’s awareness of the difficulty of this cultural dilemma. Even though the open-endedness of the novel might be a disappointment for readers who expect resolution, cohesion and closure, Morrison’s refusal to settle these culturally charged questions in fact makes the narrative consistent with the trickster tradition of ambiguity, shifting of meanings and perspectives that informs it. Just like the listeners of cautionary tales, such as the tar baby folktale, who are left to

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.187.

⁸⁹ Her name, Therese invokes, the blind prophet of Greek mythology, Tiresias, famous for clairvoyance and for being transformed into a woman for seven years.

ponder the multiple meanings of narrow escapes, missed opportunities, unresolved dilemmas, readers are encouraged to work through and figure out for themselves possible solutions to the narrative's conundrum of choosing between individual freedom and ancestry.

Sula: The Communal Female Trickster

The figure of the “badwoman” type of trickster is a phenomenon that becomes celebrated in African American letters around the 1970s. The character Sula in Morrison's eponymous novel may well be the first representation in literature of this type: a daring female rebel against conventional morality and communal responsibility, one who sets herself apart from the traditional “ark of safety”⁹⁰—in fictional works prior to this moment, black women are most often created under the ark of marriage, church or nurturing—and as such, becomes a threat to safety. This trickster-like character marks a different path for black female characters and opens up possibilities for more meaningful representations of black womanhood in literature.

It is worth noting that female trickster are markedly absent from folk representation in the period following Emancipation until the 1950's. It is possible that there are no authentic examples of female tricksters in black folklore because tricksters belong to predominantly patriarchal mythologies. Also, there may be a problem with the standard itself, i.e., there may be female tricksters, but they have simply been ignored since the tellers or folklorists did not want to represent female trickery as it goes against dominant definitions of femininity. Frequently, despite the fact that typical trickster stories articulate some kind of distinction between men and women, even if the settings were matriarchal, the figure is male. While the female trickster resembles her male counterpart in showing, among other qualities, cunning, intelligence and

⁹⁰ Trudier Harris provides a brief survey of the “badwoman” in African American literature under the BADWOMAN entry in the Oxford Companion to African American Literature (1997).

adaptability, methods that involve secrecy and psychological awareness, her traits and her tricking strategies are arguably distinct. In *Madcaps, Screwballs and Con Women*, Lori Landay suggests that the exploration of the female trickster was primarily a white phenomenon. In her discussion of “passing” novels she maintains that the heroines in these novels are “liminal characters who move ‘betwixt and between’ racial social spaces, but they are not figures who articulate laughter, delight, and subversion that is central to the cultural work of the trickster”(19). She argues, however, that some of the characters, such as Aurelia and Venus in Pauline Hopkins’s serialized novel *Hagar’s Daughter* do employ disguise and trickery to attain their desires (isn’t the very act of “passing” a form of transgression and reversal of roles similar to trickster deception tactics?) but concludes that “overall the deceptions practices by women characters in nineteenth and early twentieth-century African-American literature are confessed or represented within the moral context of the ‘fallen woman’”(19).

Rather than simply using folklore themes and characters, Morrison’s *Sula* is a simulation of the ethos of folk communities, by showing how black people interact with each other, how they tell stories, spread rumors, etc. The main protagonist, Sula, a woman who lives an “experimental life,” is an outcast whose fierce independence and selfishness make her a *communal* trickster/badwoman. As Morrison points out in the Foreword to the novel: “Outlaw women are fascinating— not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status as illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men” (xvi).

Sula’s utter disregard for the community’s conventional values make her a typical trickster. In the topsy-turvy world of the Bottom, Morrison creates a different hierarchy of values in which Sula plays a transformative role. Her clear identification with evil is particularly

solidified upon her return to her hometown, when the community realizes that “he was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that he had a fourth, and that the fourth explained Sula” (*Sula* 118). In fact, it is her “evil” that unites the Bottom as the folk turn against her: “Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (118). Sula recognizes no conventional morality or boundaries, asks people rude questions and sleeps with her best friend’s husband with no moral qualms about it. However, the narrative does not portray Sula as immoral, but suggests that she simply acts *beyond* any sanctioned good/evil dichotomy. At the same time, her rejection of any kind of morality serves to sharpen the community’s values. Similarly to her treatment of the badman as “good” (i.e. heroic), here Morrison creates a female character who operates in a realm “outside” of society and yet is not judged or confounded by the conventions of socially accepted morality. Jeanne Rosier Smith observes: “We cannot, finally, judge Sula’s life, because she refutes any and all value systems on which we might base judgment. Sula is perhaps most like the trickster in her resistance to critical evaluation.”⁹¹ Also, for Morrison there seems to be no distinction between Sula’s “outrageous” behavior and that of a “badman”:

She [Sula] is a masculine character... She will do the kind of things that normally men do, which is why she is so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman... She is adventuresome, she trusts herself, she’s not scared... And she is curious and will leave and try anything. So that

⁹¹ Jeanne Rosier Smith. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. p.120.

quality of masculinity – and I mean this in the purse sense – in a woman at the time is outrage, total outrage. (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 27)

Sula's birthmark (the rose-tadpole-knife-copper-head over her eye) also marks her as a trickster as does her unbridled sexuality. In "Summoning Somebody: The Flesh Made Word in Toni Morrison's Fiction," Venessa Dickerson reads the birthmark as a complex signifier: "Not only a physical site of hyperpigmentation, but also an ontological site of hyperblackness, Sula's birthmark ... makes legible her community's need to express its own sense of hyperdisplacement" (206).⁹² Powerful and different, Sula chooses self-exploration. Morrison creates a character, points out Dickerson that "determines to paint herself in bold strokes and, in doing so, to know, if not celebrate, the amazements of flesh" (197).

On the other hand, some critics have argued that despite the trickster-like attributes, Sula lacks the ego and sense of purpose (even for selfish gains) that most tricksters have. The narrative depicts Sula as an individual who does not rely on a *self* "has no center, no speck around which to grow" (*Sula* 119). However, it is possible that the two traumatic experiences that make her a communal outcast: her mother's observation that she loves her, but doesn't like her, and her implication in Chicken Little's accidental death, push her to create a "selflessness" that is typical of tricksters. At the same time, Jeanne Rosier Smith reminds us "the trickster is often motivated by greed, ambition or social reputation" (119)⁹³ traits that neither outlaw women like Sula nor other badman characters in Morrison's fiction seem to possess or care about: "she [Sula] was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no

⁹² Dickerson argues that similarly, in the novel *Beloved* Beloved's historicized body, the body first inscribed on the tombstone, "an emblem of the flesh made word" (209) metonymically becomes the communal reclamation of the black body (history, identity) that has been stolen, abused and violated.

⁹³ Jeanne Rosier Smith. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997, p.119.

greed, no desire to command attention or compliments –no ego” (*Sula* 119). Ultimately, Sula’s kind of freedom seems terrifying because it lacks any reference to another human being. By inventing Sula as a “bad” trickster that can bring “good” to the community, Morrison also shows how far the mythic trickster’s amorality and disorder can apply to the human character. In other words, Sula shows both the power and the limits of a trickster positionality for real human beings: the freedoms it affords and the ultimate costs it demands.⁹⁴

The language that Morrison uses to describe Sula’s female-ness is similar to the adjectives she uses to describe the kind of language she strives for in her writing “unpoliced, seditious...inventive, disruptive.”⁹⁵ This similarity is indicative of the relationship between racial experience and racial discourse. Sula’s metaphysical blackness is “not melanin and certainly not unquestionable fidelity to the tribe” (48). She is a woman with choices “...modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed...dangerously female... a special kind of black person woman.”⁹⁶ In order to negotiate Sula’s “double-dose of *chosen* blackness and *biological* blackness” (48), Morrison has to opt for a double-dose word for darkness—“nightshade.”

One other aspect of Sula’s character that brings her closer to the trickster is her almost mythological existence. She undoubtedly displays characteristics typical of mythical creatures, most notably the notorious seducer, child-slayer, snake woman Lilith, the Creations’ first female trickster. My reading of Sula as a Lilith-type trickster is primarily inspired by Deebie Lopez’ study “During the Free Fall: Sula as Lilith” in which she explains: “Morrison’s Sula would have seemed to fit [the] she-demon’s profile exactly. While she is originally the less aggressive

⁹⁴ Ibid., p119.

⁹⁵ Toni Morrison ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.’ 1988.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.48

partner in her friendship with Nel, from the moment Sula arrives back from her own self-exile dressed as a femme fatale, she plays the disruptive Lilith to Nel's domestic Eve" (124).⁹⁷

In the typical manner of tricksters, Sula acts defiantly as breaker of gender taboos, partly because she had come of age in a realm that was not subject to patriarchal authority; she grows up "in a house with women who though all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes" (*Sula* 119). With the exception of Ajax, for Sula, as for Lilith, sex is a way of asserting authority over one's lover. Sula feels the "utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender" (123). In the story of Lilith in the Hebraic tradition, she is the original mate for Adam – in fact he consorts with Lilith because he had grown tired of mating with beasts. However, there's trouble in paradise when Lilith refuses to lie beneath him during intercourse, arguing that she is his equal. Their argument and Adam's plea to God to give him a new mate are recounted in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*:⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Lopez, Debbie. "Daring the Free Fall: Sula as Lilith" in *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction*. Ed. Jeanne C. Reesman, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. pp. 121-130. Print.

⁹⁸ This text is probably the most important of the founding texts for the myth of Lilith, for it introduces the portion of the story that has been most quoted, appropriated, and heralded today: that of Lilith as the first wife of Adam who flees the Garden of Eden because she refuses to be in subjection. Also, what makes this text particularly fascinating is its irreverent tone, especially in its treatment of various Biblical characters and rabbinic motifs with obvious parody. It begins, for example, with a group of men masturbating in the bathhouse and proceeds to talk "seriously" about "farts," urinating donkeys, and the copulation of ravens. More about this text in *Rabbinic Fantasy: The Alphabet of Ben Sira, Eleh Ezkerah, Rabbinic Parables, Midrash, Sefer Hasidim Zohar, the Sorcerer, Bratslav Dreams, Also New Stories*. David Albahari and David Stern. New York: Dept. of English, City College of New York, 1983.

According to the source, *The Alphabet of Ben Sirah* actually weaves together three separate threads from centuries earlier works since the story of Lilith is a very ancient legend. In the Bible, as a primary source material, Genesis mentions Adam and Eve, but doesn't mention Lilith. The idea of Lilith as a "prior first woman" before Eve arises much later. The only reference to Lilith in the Bible (Old or New Testaments) is Isaiah 34:14, probably written around 540 BC; it's a description of desolation, jackals and ravens among nettles and briars, etc.: "Goat demons shall greet each other; there too the lilith will repose. Here "the lilith" is translated as "the night demon," confusing the lili- with the Hebrew word for night. But presumably Isaiah meant some sort of demon. The notion of a lilith as a demon is probably Assyrian (say around 700 BC), incorporated into Isaiah by way of the ancient Israelite contacts with the mythologies of Babylonia and Chaldea. The Assyrians had three female demons, Lilit, Lilu, and Ardat Lilit. There's little doubt that the Hebrew lilith-demon mentioned in Isaiah was a folkloric adaptation of the Assyrian demons.

Several hundred years after Isaiah, Talmudic writings appear that describe Lilith (now as a named demon, rather than a broad category) as an irresistibly seductive she-demon with long hair (presumably worn loose, a sure sign of wantonness) and wings. She's a succubus and she seduces unwary men, then savagely kills the children she bears for them. From this, she becomes the demon responsible for the death of babies. To guard against Lilith,

[Lilith] said, "I shall not lie beneath," and [Adam] said, "I shall not lie beneath but above, for your place is beneath and mine above." She said to him: "Both of us are equal for both of us are of earth." And they did not listen to each other. When Lilith saw this, she uttered the Ineffable Name and flew off into the air of the world.

In the remainder of the story we learn that after she flees, God sends three angels in pursuit, they catch her and order her to return to Adam. She refuses, and says that she would henceforth weaken and kill little children, infants and babes. She also gives birth to countless children, one hundred of which die every day. The angels overpower her, and she promises that if the mother hangs an amulet over the baby bearing the names of the three angels, she would stay away from that home. The legend concludes that Lilith, making her home in a cave, mates with scores of demons, and finally with the Prince of Darkness himself. God creates Eve, Lilith's more submissive replacement, to be Adam's mate—out of Adam's rib, so that she couldn't claim equality. And ever since, Lilith flies around the world, howling her hatred of mankind through the night, and vowing vengeance. This final point is important in that while Lilith is constructed as a child-slaying witch, she is, nevertheless, endlessly fertile. The progression of the story also seems to indicate that Lilith's decision to become the child-slayer stems from her anger at having one hundred of her own children murdered by God every day. Thus, she maintains the balance of Good and Evil in the world.

Sula matches the Lilith model in many respects, except in refusing motherhood (although there are versions of the Lilith myth that claim that the she-demon does not bear children).

superstitious Jews would hang four amulets, one on the wall of each room of a newborn babe, with the inscription "Lilith - abi!" ["Lilith - begone!"] which some think is the origin, much later, of the English word "lullaby." The Zohar, the great book of Jewish mysticism from the 12th Century, adds yet another dimension to the story. The Zohar generally doesn't mention Lilith by name, but refers to her as the wife of Samael, the Angel of Death ... and sometimes as the wife of Satan. She sleeps with men, causing wet dreams, and she collects semen from the marriage bed. (Flowing semen is a symbol of life, the white fluid, contrasted with flowing blood as a symbol of death, the red fluid, so the demoness who kills children collecting semen is symbolically very neat.)

Debbie Lopez reads Sula's rejection of motherhood as a reinforcement of her role as a trickster, arguing that "though sexually rapacious, tricksters in general are almost never procreative" (124). Sula's sexual appetite serves more as tool of self-exploration rather than a search for pleasure and is a source of laughter rather than enthrallment:

Lovemaking seemed to her, at first, the creation of a special kind of joy. She thought she liked the sootiness of sex and its comedy; she laughed a great deal during the raucous beginnings, and rejected those lovers who regarded sex as healthy and beautiful. Sexual aesthetics bored her. Although she did not regard sex as ugly (ugliness was boring too), she liked to think of it as wicked. (*Sula* 122)

Sula's uncanny resemblance to Lilith becomes even more obvious considering the rumors that surround her: "it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing—the thing for which there was no excuse...They said that Sula slept with white men" (*Sula* 112). For the people of the Bottom, Sula (like Lilith) sleeps with the devil. This final transgression seals Sula's fate as the communal outcast and despised succubus figure.⁹⁹

The humor and irony with which Sula sees her own self (and ultimately, her death) is almost of Rabelaisian quality, embracing the trickster humor of absurdity and embracing the paradoxical reality of life (and death)—one might even argue that Sula is a *postmodern* trickster¹⁰⁰, a more evolved jester than the buffoon of the folktales, who manifests her trickery

⁹⁹ In folklore, a succubus is a female demon appearing in dreams who takes the form of a human woman in order to seduce men, usually through sexual intercourse. The succubus figure was incorporated into African American folklore in the form of shape-shifting witches who "ride" their terrified victims in the night --such figures appear in Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* (1899): "en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman" (15).

¹⁰⁰ This idea is also suggested by Debbie Lopez in "Daring the Free Fall: Sula as Lilith."

through wit and irony and is willing to play with the humorous perspective of a tragic world. True to her trickster sense of comedy, her own death amuses and amazes her, makes her smile as she experiences it as a liberating moment of letting go of physical responsibility:

[...] she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.

Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt."

(*Sula* 149)

Humor is a transgressive act because it encourages the critical eye to look the other way. Humor brings trickster energy to the narrative and it can be used to either take control, maintain power or overthrow authority. It is also a powerful tool of transgression and transformation, and also a mighty tool of psychological survival. Bakhtin, in his discussion of Rabelais, links the collective affinity towards carnival (where subliminal inversions allow for fools to become kings, servants aristocrats) with the trickster's appearance at critical junctures in the development of a culture.

As communal pariahs, Lilith and Sula "serve as scapegoats for communities that are themselves in exile."¹⁰¹ The novel's larger context invokes the travails that follow the black community's Great Migration from the South as Sula becomes a projected iteration of the community's social and economic impotence. According to historical evidence, the Lilith myth seemed to flourish at times when Jews feared for their survival and also— given the patriarchal nature of Jewish society—when the affirmation of Jewish manhood was undermined.¹⁰² In Morrison's novel, Sula's return to the Bottom (in 1937) heralds a menacing change for a society in crisis. The people of the Bottom locate all their fears in Sula as a means of control over the

¹⁰¹ "Daring the Free Fall" p.128.

¹⁰² See Debbie Lopez, "Daring the Free Fall: Sula as Lilith."

wicked forces that govern their lives: poverty, racial humiliation, infidelity, fear of death. The power of their hatred (and fear of Sula's powers) testifies to the formidability of their struggle to survive and in their eyes the effect of her "evil" assumes mythological proportions (like Lilith), since they need a scapegoat that can justify their misery and help them endure: "Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and, in general, band together against the devil in their midst" (*Sula* 118). However, when she dies "the tension [is] gone and so [is] the reason for the effort they had made" (153). After the relief of Sula's death, a "restless irritability" descends on the people of Bottom. Once the pariah in their midst is gone, they have to face the reality of their mangled lives.

Morrison's Trickster Narrative Strategies

People give a lot of credence to the intelligence, the concentration, the imagination necessary for listening to music, but never for listening to stories. That somehow seems like a dumb thing that people who can't read do. And I know how hard it is to listen, and what's engaged when you listen. -- Toni Morrison¹⁰³

In all three novels under consideration in this chapter, Morrison has brought the rich, aural legacy of folk storytelling, mythmaking and communal participation into harmony with the literary text. The result is an effective quality of orality in the written story and the creation of an intriguing narrative voice that often wears the disguise of a trickster. As Callahan points out: "In twentieth century African-American fiction the pursuit of narrative form often becomes the pursuit of a voice... the writer's attempt to conjure the spoken word into symbolic existence on the page" (14).¹⁰⁴ When this happens, the reader is immersed in the oral tradition, joins the

¹⁰³ "Author Toni Morrison Discusses her latest novel *Beloved*," interview with G. Caldwell in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson. Toni Morrison and Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie.: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. Print. p.243.

¹⁰⁴ Callahan, John F. *In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Print.

community and becomes an active participant. Morrison's project is deeply invested in highlighting the importance of stories in the African American community. They serve various purposes: heuristics, subversive communication, survival, resistance. The oral improvisation that Morrison undertakes in her fiction allows for affirmation of individual accomplishments *within* a tradition performed in the confines of a society that had denied the value of black creativity and black humanity.

Another element that contributes to creating a shared ground in Morrison's narratives is her deliberate effort to invert the *gaze* promoted by a monologic use of language in the American narrative that has historically "imagined [African Americans] and imagined for [them]" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 31). Morrison's skillful exploitation of the character-narrator-reader relationship removes African Americans from the historically fixed position of "otherness," of themselves as objects in literature, where "one could write about them, but there was never the danger of their 'writing back.' [One] could observe them, hold them in prolonged gaze, without encountering the risk of being observed, viewed, or judged in return" (36). In *Sula*, the main protagonist Sula is almost never subjected to a gaze, rather there is an "insider" narrator (the *voice* in the book) that builds intimacy and contact, thus subverting the very positioning of gaze as privilege and power. This kind of egalitarianism places all on the same footing. And more importantly, this imaginative "gaze" of black people does not mythologize. Through her persistence in the narrative, Sula "lifted into language ...become[s] folklore" as Morrison concludes in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." This resonates with Morrison's understanding of the book as a living memorial, one that wouldn't just immortalize but, at the same time, celebrate the living, ever evolving image of the black hero/heroine.

With her adoption of an already vibrant "trickster aesthetic"¹⁰⁵ and the foregrounding narrative characters who clearly embody the figure of the trickster, Morrison plays the role of a literary trickster herself implicitly challenging "an ethnocentric as well as a phallogocentric tradition"¹⁰⁶ through the decentralization of monolithic, static, univocal perspectives, focusing instead on multivocality, fluidity and plurality. In a true trickster-like fashion, Morrison disturbs established concepts and static world views. In adopting the "trickster paradigm" Morrison "reaffirms her challenge to the accepted unquestioned univocality of the Western cultural tradition."¹⁰⁷ Morrison embraces the badman/outlaw/trickster figure through an irony which she sees as the basis for the particular "black style" that her novels exemplify. She explains this as a form of black laughter, a peculiar sense of humor which has "nothing to do with what's funny at all," but rather "with taking that which is peripheral, or violent or doomed,"¹⁰⁸ what other cultures could not see any value in and infusing in with importance, like the "duress" under which the outlaw suffers. She also emphasizes that this is "part of what made us stay alive and fairly coherent, and irony is part of that— being able to see the underside of something, as well."¹⁰⁹ For her, this irony is enabled through a language that is "speakerly," aural, colloquial," while also relying on culturally embedded black codes—the public exposure of a private confidence, "a secret shared," effective building of both conspiracy and intimacy— in an attempt to translate the complexity and wealth of African American oral traditions in a language that will

¹⁰⁵ See Jeanne R. Smith, *Writing Tricksters* p.11. Smith's term "trickster aesthetic" refines the concept of "folk aesthetic" that Marilyn Sanders Mobley coins in her discussion of novels by Toni Morrison and Sarah Orne Jewett where she argues that "the goal of their art is to redeem or transform their culture through narrative fiction by reclaiming folklore" (*Folk Roots and Mythic Wings* 9).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁰⁷ For a discussion on how this "trickster paradigm" functions in a more recent novel *Love* (2003) see Susana Vega-González. "Toni Morrison's *Love* and the Trickster Paradigm." *Revista Alicantina De Estudios Ingleses*. 18 (2005): 275-89. Print.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Thomas Le Clair "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp.370-71.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 370-71.

be “worthy of the culture” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 46). The most telling sign and the “valuable point of entry” into making a racial distinction in her novels is most often how one *manipulates* language—a narrative strategy borne precisely out of the trickster tradition of oral storytelling. Morrison frequently refers to that peculiar position from which a black author writes “trying to accommodate the mere fact of writing *about, for* and *out* of black culture” (emphasis mine)¹¹⁰, while complying and responding to mainstream “white” culture. Her deliberate emphasis on the ordinariness of language, its colloquial, humorous and often parabolic quality, functions as a powerful tool of subverting and sabotaging judgments. In addition, her multivocal, heteroglot narrative strategy enables freedom from what Bakhtin calls “the hegemony of a single and unitary language” (366)¹¹¹. In a trickster aesthetic, such as the one Morrison’s fiction embodies, trickster figures and trickster authors – both fluent in the art of parodying and manipulating language—are active agents in “a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world” (Bakhtin 366).

For Gates, this is Signifyin(g), as it is used in narratives to subvert dominant modes and express irony. Whereas Gates uses Signifyin(g) as a way to revision trickster’s discourse as a “set of rhetorical practices that evoke black differences by transforming mainstream literary and linguistic conventions”(The *Signifying Monkey* 52) the same can be applicable to Morrison’s understanding of the subversion of language. Gates correctly identifies the crossing of boundaries infused with ironic energy as the true *modus operandi* of trickster-like narratives. It is this process of re-creation and re-signification through irony and wit that makes the tricksters at home even in a postmodern context. While linguistic subversion is a powerful aspect of

¹¹⁰ “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” p.48.

¹¹¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.

reinscription; for Gates, for Morrison, linguistic subversion through reinscription is necessary in order to reclaim authority. She explains this process in her writing of *Beloved*:

The slave-holders have won if the experience of [slavery] is beyond my imagination and my power. It's like humor. You have to take the authority back; you realign where the power is so I wanted to have the power. They [the slave-holders] were very inventive and imaginative with cruelty, so I have to take it back – in a way I can tell it. And that is the satisfaction.¹¹²

¹¹² “Author Toni Morrison Discusses her latest novel *Beloved*,” interview with G. Caldwell in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson. Toni Morrison and Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie.: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. Print. p.245.

CHAPTER THREE

“Laughing to Keep from Crying”: The Black Oral Tradition and the Double-Talk of Poetry

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects; there developed the literature of the fabliaux and Schwanke of street songs, folksayings, anecdotes, where there was no language center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the “languages” of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all “languages” were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face – Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”¹¹³

[...] the Jungle is an oasis in a modern world come to resemble a less transcendent sort of desert, a virtual Waste Land; yet the Jungle also provides a metaphor for the same, out-of-control world. *Down in the jungle, way down by a creek, the Signifying Monkey hadn't eaten all week.* We might not be surprised to learn that the word *jungle* in fact derives from “waste land”: [Skt. *jangalam*, desert, wasteland, uncultivated area<*jangala*-, desert, waste.]--Kevin Young, *The Grey Album*¹¹⁴

You know, poets like to do a great amount of double talking. We think very often that the modernists gave us that concept of poetry, which is untrue. Because I can go back into the Negro work songs, the spirituals and jazz, and show you that double talk of poetry. And I can even [clicking his fingers for emphasis] go to Africa, as I shall do tonight, and show you that double talk of poetry, especially in metaphors and symbols. So I'm doing some double talk here. --Melvin Tolson, Library of Congress reading.¹¹⁵

“The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs.” --Langston Hughes, “The Negro and the Racial Mountain.”¹¹⁶

As previous chapters outline, literary critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have firmly established the value of folklore to *black literary* experience. Earlier, I have analyzed African American folktales as the primary source for models of *trickster* behavior and have traced their modes of survival in written literature. African *tricksters* such as Esu Elegbara (the focus of Henry Louis Gates' study the *Signifying Monkey*) reinforced humanity's relation to divinity and

¹¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. 273.

¹¹⁴ *The Grey Album*, p.143.

¹¹⁵ Reading at the Library of Congress. Tape recording. 18 Oct. 1965.

¹¹⁶ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996. Print. p.1314

society by constantly reinterpreting and critiquing language and text; the transplanted African American *tricksters*--such as the popular Signifying Monkey of the black toast and ballad tradition, the animal trickster Br'er Rabbit, John from the John and Old Master stories and the charismatic “badman” Stagolee—are all incarnations of multiple strategies of resistance to subjugation and enslavement. Earlier chapters of this dissertation examine how *trickster strategies are manifested* in the folk oral tradition and their involvement in and performance of acts of subversion and deception, as well as the manipulation of situations, people, and events. I have also examined how tricksterism involves rhetorical manipulations of language to justify trickster behavior, typically by situating the narrator within a given cultural or social context of oppression that legitimizes his or her uses of subversion and deception to assert and share with readers the individual's common humanity and freedom.

In this chapter, my dissertation continues to trace this trickster paradigm as representative of Black modes of cultural expression, a validation of the adaptive folk culture and its intersection with a Black literary tradition. I focus on several poets who have explored either the “badman” motif or other manifestations of the trickster paradigm, for the purpose of highlighting the importance of black orality to the constitution of a Black literary tradition. Also, while in Chapter One I have explored the dynamics of the folk tradition and its ability to *respond* to the demands of modernity – industrialization, urbanization, mobility, etc.— my intention in this chapter is to show that the reclaiming and recovery of black vernacular expressive modes and their use in Black writing reveals not only engagement and coming to terms with American modernity, but also with the *modernist* literary canon. While folkloric transmission is primarily oral due to the prohibition of literacy, Black literature provided the opportunity to *adapt* and

transform Black imagination in response to the changing circumstances and the culture's development.

One of the most prolific collectors of folklore in the first few decades of the twentieth century, A.B. Botkin, argued that, counter to prevailing understanding about folklore, modernity was not a threat to traditional life; rather, the modern world draws on modern experiences to both shape existing traditions and craft new expressions. In 1928 he coined the term *folk-say* to express his theory that "folklore floats through the modern experience, finding a home in different expressions."¹¹⁷ Botkin in many ways echoed the Bakhtinian notion that the dialogue spoken on a street corner is equal in value to dialogue written in a novel or read in a critical essay. He revolutionized ethnography through his recognition that a people's folklore has great political and social significance and that federal institutions can play a role in its collection and dissemination. Botkin was one of the people who directed the field workers of the Writers' Project and the WPA to assemble the folklore and folk life of all ethnic groups and classes to ensure that America would not neglect its histories or the voices that tell them. In his book, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* Botkin re-created an oral history from the voices of ex-slaves interviewed by the WPA. This work was a realization of his dedication to listening closely to his sources and using their voices to write history "from the bottom up." He defined this application of folklore and all others as "folklore for understanding and creating understanding"—a need as important today as it was then:

These are the values that folklore can restore to the individual and that the individual should seek to recover from folklore for literature – a sense of the continuity of human

¹¹⁷"Folk-Say" and Folklore Author(s): B. A. Botkin, *American Speech*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (Aug., 1931). Published by: Duke University Press, pp. 404-406.

nature; a sense of art as a response instead of a commodity; a sense of social structure, based on social intelligence and good will; and a sense of pattern in its primitive use as a model and a guide rather than a limit. (“The Folk and the Individual: Their Creative Reciprocity” 135)

The African American experience and the journey from slavery to freedom, the slow and trying shift from the rural South to an industrialized urban North captures in many ways the very essence of “the twentieth century in its mad chaotic ferment [sic] of freedom.”¹¹⁸ According to Botkin, black folk songs and spirituals captured the imagination and spoke to a larger national audience. Therefore, the African American experience, as it is portrayed in the fecund trickster vernacular and written tradition, is in many ways representative of aspects of the destabilizing, modern *American* experience in the aftermath of the Great Depression and industrialization: a yearning for a definition of nationhood and national belonging.

Three of the most influential texts in African American literary criticism—Robert B. Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil* (1979), Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1986), and Henry Gates’s study *The Signifying Monkey* (1988)—all depart from the creative possibilities of “double consciousness” that Du Bois defined in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). For Gates, in particular, it informs his theory of Signifyin(g) in African American culture enabling the speaker to pose challenges and oppositional verbal self-assertions and allowing for a subversion by recognizing this “doubleness” that is inherent in African American identity. The concepts of “double-consciousness.” and the recognizable African American subversive masking rooted in the folk tradition of Signifyin(g) have long shaped ideas about black consciousness. Du Bois describes “double-consciousness” as the “sense of always

¹¹⁸ Botkin, “Self-Portraiture and Social Criticism in Negro Folk Song,” 43.

looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (8), pointing towards a *visual model of subjectivity* at the center of what he calls "the strange meaning of being black" in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century (3). For Gates, Stepto and Baker, this DuBoisian double consciousness is at the heart of African American artistic production. At the same time, their influential and wide-ranging theoretical statements celebrate a Bakhtinian double-voiced subversiveness and the multivalent aesthetic expressiveness born out of oppression. The dynamic of double-consciousness—which for Du Bois is indicative of a spiritual and psychological riff in Black consciousness—and its byproducts: signifying double-talk and trickster masking strategies that black artists employ and explore, as my analysis in this chapter shows, become a powerful political, aesthetic and literary tool in black writing. In my discussion on poetry, I emphasize the importance of sound as a supplement to or disruption to the visual, and a counterpart to the Du Boisian visual model of subjectivity that he sees as the center of blackness. If the visibility of blackness creates a hierarchy in African American modernity, sound is a way to negotiate it. Some of the poets I analyze, for instance, Baldwin, use verse to extend and modify the oral tradition, while Hughes and Tolson turn to signifying tropes and use poetic language as a playground that contests the rhetoric of modern power.

My analysis also builds on more recent African American scholarship, including Kevin Young's exciting take on the African American literary tradition and its long-standing relationship with the trickster tradition of duplicity—or what Young calls "counterfeit fiction"—in his study *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012). For Young, the trickster paradigm is deeply embedded in Black American culture and as such this "tradition of counterfeit and fiction, of storying—has just as much place in African American letters as

[Black] rituals of church or prayer or music”(25)¹¹⁹. In the long history of separation from one’s roots and origin, Young argues, African Americans have re-created their communal story from fragments. At the same time, black artists—working under conditions and within a dominant culture that have rendered them frequently invisible and silent—have resorted throughout American history to subversive styles of artistic expression largely by employing what Young terms a “counterfeit strategy” akin to the masking and subversive strategies employed by folk tricksters. Young’s notion of a “hiding tradition” —one that that covers and reveals at the same time the invisibility of black presence in American culture— provides interesting points of analysis. Young explains further:

...Counterfeit is a term I use to discuss the ways in which black writers create their own authority in order to craft their own, alternative system of literary currency and value, so to speak, functioning both within and without the dominant, supposed gold-standard system of American culture. Counterfeit I also see as a literary counterpart to the long-standing tradition of the trickster. There are many other names for the black artists, who, like the trickster—just one prototype African Americans have embraced—seeks to go beyond expectations, both black and white. For the black author, and even the ex-slave narrator, creativity has often lain with the lie—*forging* an identity, “making” one, but “lying” about it too. (24)¹²⁰

The meaning of “lie” here is related to the concept of “storying” as it figures in black discourse, in the same vein as Hurston uses the term¹²¹: “lie” may “mean another name for story—and lies

¹¹⁹ Kevin Young. *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2012. Print.

¹²⁰ Ibid.,

¹²¹ As I have pointed out in earlier chapters, “lies” in black discourse refer to figurative speech, tales or stories, The black term to “lie” as J.L.Dillard, Sterling Brown and Zora N. Hurston demonstrate, signifies tale-telling and constitutes a signal form of Signifyin(g).

are simply stories, and to story is in fact to lie” (29)¹²². Young further explains that “Counterfeit is the way in which black folks forge—both “create” and “fake”—black authority in a world not necessarily of their making.” (24). The black artistic imagination conducts this “escape by way of underground railroads of meaning—a practice we could call the black art of escape”(19) according to Young.

Finally, Young’s study also operates on an interesting premise that in the United States “it is black culture that is the dominant culture” (131) and that the black vernacular and black music are the foundation for the dominant language of American culture: “At our peril we ignore the fact that black vernacular, like the blues, both has a form and performs. . . . For just as there would be no American music without black folks, there would be very little of our American language.” As one reviewer puts it “Young seeks to prove what has long been proven yet somehow always needs proving: the self-evident fact that African-American culture *is* American culture.”¹²³

The “Badman” Culture Hero in James Baldwin’s Poetry

Henry Gates explains that the trope of Signifyin(g) can manifest itself through several venues: “[it] can occur as an explicit theme, implicit rhetorical strategy and as a principle of literary history” (89).¹²⁴ While in Chapter One I trace the analysis of the trickster figure as a vehicle of narration (and narrative parody) and investigate in particular the figure of the Signifying Monkey and the badman Stagolee in the vernacular folk poetry, in the first half of this chapter I aim to show how modern black poets signify on the vernacular image as they appropriate it for different

¹²² *The Grey Album*.

¹²³ John Repp , “Poet Kevin Young's 'The Grey Album' Meditates on Race.” Book review. http://www.cleveland.com/books/index.ssf/2012/03/poet_kevin_youngs_the_grey_alb.html

¹²⁴ Henry L. Gates. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

purposes. I begin my analysis with James Baldwin's poem "Staggerlee wonders" (1978) as I trace the trickster/ badman motif here vis-à-vis the poet's emphasis on his subversive potential and duplicity as means of resistance.

When in 1977 James Baldwin writes the foreword to Bobby Seale's autobiography, titled "Stagolee," he is writing with a sense that by the 1970s the badman figure has become a powerful symbol and a cultural hero; a charismatic figure of dignity and pride particularly for the poor black underclass. In the foreword, Baldwin asserts that Seale's generation had access to heroes that were more useful than his own: "Our most visible heroes were Father Divine and Joe Louis—we, in the ghetto then knew very little about Paul Robeson. We knew very little about anything black, in fact, and this was not our fault. Those of us who found out more than the schools were willing to teach us did so at the price of becoming unmanageable, isolated, and indeed, subversive."¹²⁵ For Baldwin, figures like Stagolee who represented forces that were a threat to the white man's society, provided something that figures like Louis and Father Divine did not: militancy. At the same time, the culture hero born in the vernacular tradition provided a model of emulation for young urban black men in the 1960s and 1970s a way to find out who they are and a version of masculinity that was free of the restrictions of the white man's world. As Baldwin concludes in the foreword:

The beacon lit, for his generation, in 1956, in Montgomery, Alabama, by an anonymous black woman, elicited an answering fire from all the wretched, all over the earth, signaled the beginning of the end of the racial nightmare—for it will end, no lie endures forever—and helped Stagolee, the black folk here Bobby takes for his model, to achieve his

¹²⁵ Foreword, xii.

manhood. For, it is that tremendous journey which Bobby's book is about; the act of assuming and becoming oneself. (xii)¹²⁶

This preoccupation with “becoming a man in America,” inherited from the Black Arts movement which, while it promoted ethnic awareness and self-reflection for *all* Black Americans, had an inherently masculinist focus. For Baldwin, Staggolee is a figure of protest, a violent figure at that, one who refuses to be intimidated by white oppression. While his actions are far from heroic (he kills a man over a hat; he is notorious pimp and abuser of women), the anger that black people should associate with Staggolee is re-directed at the oppressive system that he defies with his hyperbolized manliness and bravado. Baldwin’s reading of Staggolee as a site where America’s racist politics plays out echoes in many ways Amiri Baraka’s poetry of the sixties—a poetics that captures the despair of both a modern West and emerging black art, as Baraka repeatedly comes back to the question of manhood, the struggle, the “difficulty of becoming and remaining a man in America.”¹²⁷

In his own fiction and poetry—an aspect of his oeuvre frequently neglected by scholars—Baldwin, as the bearer of America’s racial consciousness and the unrelenting critic of America’s racial antagonism and Puritan sexual morality, locates that agency for self-achievement of the black man primarily in artistic expression. As an artist, Baldwin is a firm believer in the cathartic potentials of artistic expression “[a writer] writes out of one thing – one’s own experience” (“Autobiographical Notes” 7). In his poem “Staggerlee Wonders”—published in his less known collection of poetry *Jimmy’s Blues* (1978)—the Staggolee we see, unlike the badman of the toast tradition that is defined by pure excess and lawlessness, is an

¹²⁶ Foreword to *A Lonely Rage*. Bobby Seale. New York: Times Books, 1978.

¹²⁷ Baraka, Amiri, and William J. Harris. *The Leroi Jones/amiri Baraka Reader*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000. Print.

intellectual, or as D. Quentin Miller asserts “Baldwin’s Staggerlee is a cultural critic who uses his pent-up anger to probe the depths of racism in his country.”¹²⁸ Also, Baldwin gives StagoLee central stage and an immediacy absent in the folk version by the use of first-person.¹²⁹ The poem announces early that his survival depends on his maintaining mental alertness, because, as in a true trickster scenario, he needs to out-think his opponent, in this case, the white man. StagoLee would not however even think of white people:

I would not think of them,

one way or the other,

did not they so grotesquely

block the view

between me and my brother.

In addition, Baldwin’s StagoLee persona displays a sensitivity and self-awareness that are identifiable modern and are absent in the folk figure. While he is a thinker, he is also a character who is one of the people. The poem opens with:

I always wonder

what they think the niggers are doing

while they, the pink and alabaster pragmatists,

¹²⁸ D.Quentin Miller “Paying a Mean Guitar: The Legacy of Staggerlee in Baldwin and Morrison,”p.123.

¹²⁹ In his comparative study which discusses the legacy of StagoLee in James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, D.Quentin Miller suggests tracing StagoLee’s influence in Baldwin’s other works as well, including his play *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) and his novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Benn Gone* (1968). See D.Quentin Miller “Paying a Mean Guitar: The Legacy of Staggerlee in Baldwin and Morrison” in Lovalerie King, and Lynn O. Scott. *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.

are containing

Russia

and defining and re-defining and re-aligning

China.

The Stagolee we see in this poem ridicules the power structure in a series of snapshots:

Oh, noble Duke Wayne

Be careful in them happy hunting grounds.

[...]

Oh, towering Ronnie Reagan,

Wise and resigned lover of redwoods

[...]

Be thou our grinning, gently phallic, Big Boy of all the ages.

At the same time, Baldwin presents snapshots of the badman antics with a kind of humor and irony typical of the folk ballad tradition. In the America that Baldwin describes through Stagolee's eyes, whites want to see the black man perish in some "old sweet chariot" that would carry him "home" (understood either as death or Africa). But Stagolee is not ready to die. While he is a common man, he is also a trickster, a conjurer, with a special insight into people's minds:

For I have seen,

in the eyes regarding me,

or regarding my brother

...

A flame leap up, then flicker and go out,

have seen a veil come down,

leaving myself, and the other

alone in that cave

which every soul remembers.

In the end, StagoLee, in the manner of a genuine hero, manages to save himself and his people,
but sees no chance of redemption for the white man:

Godspeed.

The niggers are calculating

From day to day, life everlasting

And wish you well:

But decline to imitate the Son of the Morning,

And rule in Hell.

The “cave which every soul remembers” is Plato’s cave, white America, a reality where the black man sees mere shadows of the reality that is obscured by a DuBoisean veil. Baldwin redeems Stagolee in the end, and he comes out of it victorious:

I turn, turn, stagger, stumble out,

Into the healing air,

Fall flat on the healing ground,

Singing praises, counseling

My heart, my soul, to praise.

Baldwin’s poem adds to the vernacular tradition by giving a new (political and intellectual) dimension to a well-known culture hero. For Baldwin, Stagolee embodies the qualities that can help lift black men out of their degraded and humiliated state. He possesses true qualities of an enabling trickster: duplicity with honor, the appearance of acquiescence to an immovable force without loss of pride and manipulation that readily reveals the hollowness of white stereotypes about African Americans. Baldwin’s use of irony, allusion, sarcasm, humor and wordplay in “Stagolee Wonders” contribute to the long-standing Signifyin(g) tradition that I have argued at length in earlier chapters— a principle that often involves a revisionary incorporation of the modes of discourse endorsed by the hegemonic culture and depends on “repetition, with a signal difference” (Gates). The result of this rhetorical practice in the poem renders artistic forms seemingly deferential yet defiant, assimilative yet antagonistic. In the passage below, Baldwin creates a parody of appropriating white discourse:

Golly-gee, whillikens, Mom, real guns!

and they come with a real big, black funky stud, too:

Oh, Ma! he's making eyes at me!

In "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," Henry Gates points out the ways language masks and reveals social and political structures: "[T]here is an implicit irony in the attempt to posit a 'black self' in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation. Ethnocentrism and 'logocentrism' are profoundly invested in Western discourse as old as the Phaedrus of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as absence, a negation" (7).¹³⁰ The problem that Baldwin addresses indirectly in the poem implicates such paradoxical use of a standard language in which *blackness* signifies *absence* while trying to assert one's own blackness as a source of identity. Baldwin himself will touch upon the impossibility of rendering a black identity through a language that it distrusts (Standard English) in his essay "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" Here he also provides an important insight into the inherent "twoness" of black language and its irrevocable ties to power structures when he notes that: "It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity."¹³¹ My reason for teasing out Gates' and Baldwin's critical views at the end of this section is to point out how relevant language is to artistic modes of representation. In the poetry that is under consideration in this chapter, this "double heritage" and "two-toned" (Gates) quality of black expression reveals the complex

¹³⁰ "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. Henry Louis Gates. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.

¹³¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-english.html>

engagement of language—both spoken and written words—with both modernity and literary modernism.

Langston Hughes, the “Badman” and Modernism

Hughes is running alright, refusing the whip, fleeing from convention, preserving the self as the artist must first and foremost – then sneaking back later under the cover of night to set us all free. --Kevin Young, *The Grey Album* 184.

In this section I move from a discussion of the influence of culture heroes on the modern African American experience to a consideration of the intersections between the black oral tradition, poetic language and modernism. I propose an analysis of Langston Hughes’ rendition of the badman motif in one of his blues poems “Bad Man.” What the poem exemplifies is Hughes’ improvisation and Signifyin(g), both on the badman blues tradition and the toast vernacular tradition that elevated the badman to the status of a culture hero. I extend the discussion further and delve into the uneasy relationship between black modernist poetics, the adaptation and reclaiming of folklore in the written tradition, and literary modernism, through the investigation of Hughes’ approach in this poem and his “blues poetry” in general. Baldwin’s and Gates’ critical awareness of language is apparent in the poetry of black modernist poets, for whom the search for *a voice* meant at the same time an acute awareness of the impact of modernism on black culture and black dialect, and a way of figuring out how to navigate through them.

In Hughes’ poem “Bad Man,” in a fashion identical to the folk blues form that is the template behind it, there is a deliberate variation of the repeated lines in each stanza. As is the case with the blues, a reproduction of blues performance is again half the purpose, for blues performers regularly make slight changes when they reiterate the first line of each verse. Like many other genres of folk song, the blues use formulaic phrases, recurring images that become

almost idiomatic. With regards to Hughes' appropriation of the blues elements, David Chinitz points out:

Phrases like "Going down the road," "I had a dream last night," and "I'm laughing to keep from crying" are an important part of the blues idiom and accordingly find their way into Hughes's blues poems. There are idiomatic *images* in Hughes as well: the knife that avenges infidelity, the river that is the lethal last resort of the unhappy, the railroad that both proffers escape and threatens desertion. But Hughes frequently gives these traditional elements a new twist, turning them to his own purposes.¹³² (189)

In the poem, Hughes subtly exploits an oral element for poetic opportunities. But unlike the toast tradition that secures the badman's full identity and status, Hughes' badman is a nameless, generic, broad-brush persona. The opening lines of "Bad Man" suggest that the speaker's character is imposed on him by others:

I'm a bad, bad man
Cause everybody tells me so.

The connection between the badman folk ballads and music is the "toast" genre, a recited story in verse. The first person account in Hughes' poem stays close to the traditional telling of the Stagolee legend as a toast, where the speaker takes on the role of the badman, asserting himself as a bully: "I beats my wife an'/I beats ma side fall too/Beats my wide an'/ Beats my side gall too./ Don't know why I do it but/ It keeps me from feelin' blue," and a badman feared by all. In this way, the performance becomes an instrument that allows for power.

¹³² David Chinitz, "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes." *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996) 177-192.

I'm a bad, bad man.

Everybody tells me so.

I takes ma meanness and ma licker

Everywhere I go.

In the repeat lines, the persona affirms the common judgment by reasserting it without qualification or explanation. In fact, it now transpires that the unanimity of public opinion is cause for swagger. Thrust into the role of the badman, the speaker plays the role to the full extent, concluding:

I'm so bad I

Don't even want to be good.

So bad, bad, bad I

Don't even want to be good.

I'm goin' to de devil an'

I wouldn't go to heaven if I could.

However, the “badman's” very first sentence betrays him. The reader has known from the outset that the man's assertion of agency is largely a matter of bravado, of putting the best face on a cycle that he cannot escape. The speaker *must* be a badman; he no longer has any choice but to bear out the imposed, white America's representation of himself. In this context the confusion of “Don't know why I do it but / It keeps me from feelin' blue” makes all the more sense: the blues that inevitably befall the man who must be bad can be only be assuaged by further “badness”—in this case, by his image of a brutal lover/husband.¹³³

¹³³ Hughes's appropriation here of the badman persona is in stark contrast with Morrison's treatment of the badman as a representative of the “Black heroic” in Chapter Two.

Hughes himself questions his own positioning as a blues poet. "I guess you can't call them real folk blues," he says "unless you want to say that I'm a folk poet, myself a folk person, which maybe I am."¹³⁴ What is more prescient here is Hughes's self-identification not with a sort of "vaudeville composer" but with the folk singer of the vernacular tradition. Hughes's blues poem "Bad Man" is in fact considerably closer stylistically to the folk blues and the toast vernacular tradition than to the deliberately cultivated classic blues. Over all, Hughes' poems are more structured, have more predictable rhythm and diction than the typical folk blues. It is true that Hughes emphasizes his own reading of the blues, using the form to reinforce a particular construction of the African American character. In these ways, Hughes negotiates the difficult task of bringing the form and the spirit of the folk blues into harmony with the written word.

No doubt, any new adaptation of oral culture to literary ends has its own challenges. One of the frequently expressed notions when evaluating Hughes' oeuvre is that he is a "folk" poet whose poetry revels in the celebration of the primitive art of the folk, rather than stand as a testament to his poetic ingenuity. These modes of reading oversimplify his importance as a modernist American poet, setting his "folksy" poetry in stark contrast against a highly experimental Anglo-American modernist poetry. One of the frequent pitfalls when trying to place Hughes in a broader American literary context is "bracketing" his identity as a poet solely within the African American folk collective. In spite of all the criticism surrounding Hughes' appropriation of the blues mode, his music poetry allows for a portrayal of African American folk in a language and form that most faithfully match the Black cultural idiom. Any attempt to read Hughes' poetry merely as an example of an "authentic" folk literature also runs the risk of missing his indelible contribution to the Signifyin(g) tradition as it has been outlined by Henry

¹³⁴ Quoted in Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p.44.

Gates—a tradition of repetition and revision, enabling an ongoing modification of both white and black artistic modes; characterized by an oral/aural matrix of the black vernacular that informs the self-reflexivity of black literature and its intertextual (often subversive) relation to white American culture. Michael Borshuk accurately sums up Hughes' role in the black signifying tradition: "Hughes is not a bluesman standing at a mythical site of black expressive origins—an anonymous folk voice singing at the crossroads of Africa and America—but rather a jazzman who signifies on that tradition with an all-encompassing intertextual/intermusical approach."¹³⁵ Gates provides an even more engaged insight into the problematic position in which black writers find themselves:

Reacting to the questionable allegations made against their capacity to be original, black writers have often assumed a position of extreme negation, in which they claim for themselves no black literary antecedents whatsoever, or else claim for themselves an anonymity of origins as Topsy did when she said she "jes' grew." This second position, curiously enough, often stresses the anonymous origins and influence of the Afro-American vernacular tradition, as figured in the spirituals, the blues, and vernacular secular folk poetry as that found in the toasts of the Signifying Monkey, as if group influence, unnamed, is more enabling than would be the claim of descent through a line of precursors or even from one black precursor. This is originality at its extreme, a nameless progeniture [...]. (*The Signifying Monkey* 114)

For Gates, any black artist's relation and engagement with the oral culture—whether it operates on the level of recovery, re-inscription or revaluation—is to some extent a search for lost origins.

¹³⁵ Michael Borshuk. *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. p.50.

The influence of the folk collective in the case of Hughes' poetry and his engagement with the vernacular idiom are no doubt "enabling" in several ways.

First, his improvisation on black blues and folk roots in his poetry pays homage to the black folk that are an intrinsic part of Hughes' sense of identity. In his well-known essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1925), Hughes demonstrates an admiration for the ethnic distinctiveness of the "low down folks" with their "heritage of rhythm and warmth, incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears."¹³⁶ As Onwuchekwa Jemie puts it succinctly: "[Hughes], the artist who wishes to express his blackness [...] will find a sturdy ally in the Black masses [...] with their confident humanity, their indifference to white opinion, their joie de vivre amidst depressing circumstances [...] they are the uncontaminated reservoir of the strength of the race, the body and vehicle of its traditions."¹³⁷ In the same text, Hughes candidly reveals the unquestionable importance of Black music for Black creative imagination, and also as a means of survival as "one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America, the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile."¹³⁸

Second, Hughes' project of creating literature with jazz and blues roots, and staying close to the vernacular, meets the New Negro era's demand for originality head-on. Hughes blues and jazz poetry in many respects responds to the requirements set forth by other outspoken white modernists, such as Ezra Pound, who famously argued in his 1915 preface to *Some Imagist Poets*

¹³⁶ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996. Print. p.1314

¹³⁷ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *Langston Hughes* (qtd.in Steven C. Tracy, "Ethnic Literature and Cultural Consciousness." *MELUS*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), pp. 73-98.

¹³⁸ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996. Print. p.1314

that in order for poets to create great poetry they need: “1) To use the language of the common speech[...]; 2) To create new rhythms, which merely echo old moods [...]. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.”¹³⁹ At the same time, Kevin Young reminds us of the black dialect’s influence on a (seemingly) “White modernism” in *The Grey Album*: “William Carlos Williams has read Dunbar as a child, while whole generations of modernists, including Pound, Eliot, and Vachel Lindsay, were raised on Uncle Remus. Their work, in ways little and large, refers not just to Brer Rabbit’s tales but also to their talk: Black English, the ultimate tar baby” (130). In *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature*, Michael Borshuk makes a convincing case as he traces the connection between Hughes and white modernism, citing his literary stylization of blues as one of the traits that align his poetic project with those of Pound and Eliot. However, Borshuk warns that any such earnest emphasis of the Hughes’ engagement in “mainstream” modernism runs the risk of downplaying his relation to a distinctly African American modernism. He suggests that “Hughes and African American modernist literature should occupy a more central place in readings of American modernist literature based on the contention that ‘black’ and ‘white’ culture in the United States were inextricable in the development of American modernism” (30)¹⁴⁰. Borshuk joins the discussion initiated by Michael North in *The Dialect of Modernism* (1994) and Ann Douglas in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1993) and develops further their suggestion that American modernism is a distinctly “mongrel” tradition, one that reflects the vibrant exchange of distinct cultural influences in the United States.

¹³⁹ Ezra Pound. “Preface to Some Imagist Poets 1915.” *Imagist Poetry*. Ed. Peter Jones. London: Penguin, 1972. P.135.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Borshuk. *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

The third, perhaps most significant aspect of Hughes' improvisation on folk material in his poetry and the most direct implication of the Signifyin(g) trope is the resulting preservation of orality in the written word. Hughes' poetry (like Morrison's and Hurston's narratives as we see in other chapters) carries on the imprint of what Gates terms in the *Signifying Monkey* "the trope of the Talking Book"—a strategy employed by black artists, deeply embedded in the tradition's expressive modes that functions as an affirmation of black cultural difference through the echo of black orality. When Hughes invokes the unnamed (yet recognizable) folk speaker in "Bad Man," he not only establishes an intertextual link with the black folk tradition, he also extends a literary lineage. Gates points out that the trope of the Talking Book "reveals ...the curious tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, ...between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse" (131). He also makes this very relevant statement: "Literacy, the very literacy of the printed book, stood as the ultimate parameter by which to measure the humanity of authors struggling to define an African self in Western letters." He further argues that what *the literacy of the printed book of black writing* did is "establish a collective black voice through the sublime example of an individual text, and thereby to register a black presence in letters" (131). According to Gates, then, the very existence of an individual written text is an affirmation of an artistic black presence. In such context, in the literary production for Black writers, concepts such as "*voice and presence, silence and absence*" (Gates 131, emphasis mine) become the resonating terms of the black literary tradition.

From this perspective, Hughes' project of straddling the tension between the oral (folk informed) and the written literary discourse in his poetry, one that bears the marks of a modernist aesthetic, requires the critical tools of a distinctly black modernism. If at the heart of much modernist writing was the grim belief that traditional modes of language use do not convey the

chaos of modern life, and also, if one of the unifying qualities of a collective modernist style is suspicion of language as medium for comprehending the world—attitudes commonly shared by modernist luminaries like T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce—then this kind of willingness to create a linguistic distance (whether it is distance from a more traditional language or tradition itself) is a luxury that Black poets could not afford. Post-colonial theories have offered a better understanding of the link between modernity and modernization, which in turn led to a recognition of the existence of plural *modernities* in place of *a singular* modernity (or literary modernism in this case) as it is defined by White European Enlightenment. In the black literary tradition, the proliferation of black written voices—a process that was inaugurated primarily by the New Negro era of which Langston Hughes was a central figure—raised the culture’s awareness of the close links between the black written mode and African American modernity. Gates sums it up nicely when he writes that “In the black tradition, writing became the visible sign, the commodity of exchange, the text and technology of reason” (*Signifying Monkey* 132).

Melvin Tolson, Trickster Discourse and Modernism

We should write a poetry that is after the good-bye, that is not the long farewell but the hello after. The hereafter—a word that in itself is undead, both here and gone at the same time. *I’m a long gone daddy*—and being here, and being gone, seems what we need now. --Kevin Young, *The Grey Album*.¹⁴¹

Melvin Tolson’s poetic opus echoes in many respects Hughes’ unsettling sense of (un)belonging to the Western literary modernist canon. For Hughes, Tolson, and other black modernist poets, the search for an “authentic” voice as a poet meant at the same time an acute awareness of the impact of modernism on black culture and a way of figuring out how to navigate both. When Tolson writes that he “will visit a land unvisited by Mr. Eliot” he embarks on a modernist project

¹⁴¹ p.404.

that utilized his own culture as the premise. Rita Dove argues that Tolson's "virtuoso use of folktale and street jive [in *Harlem Gallery*] was forgotten as soon as the reader stumbled across a reference to 'a mute swan not at Coole.'" ¹⁴² Tolson's poetry possesses all the traits of a black expression; it has energy, sound, rhythm; but there is also something about his use of "*Veldt Village*" in a poem like "Dark Laughter" that goes beyond this particular cultural context and signifies on others. In only a few lines of the poem seemingly out of context, there is jazz in the mix, there is Signifyin(g), there are tricksters, but there is also reference to "idée fixe" and "Rabelaisian humor." In his discussion of Tolson in "Avant-Gardes and De-Authorizations: *Harlem Gallery* and the Cultural Contradictions of Modernism," Michael Bérubé points out that "For [his] part, albeit from an academic critical perspective, [Tolson] choose[s] to believe neither that the binnacle of imagination steers the work aright, nor that black oral narrative is somehow the refuge of wistful primitivists: the tradition that runs from "the dozens" through dub and hip-hop is alive, well, and anything but the chatter of the "simple Negro" (211).¹⁴³

The badman does not make an appearance in the poem "Dark Laughter," instead Tolson signifies the black aural mode through a re-interpretation of the signifying monkey trickster figure that possesses the same subversive potential. The poem showcases vernacular strategies of verbal signifying borrowed straight out of the trickster tradition, celebrating Black double-talk. Through a brief reading of Tolson's poem "Dark Laughter," I wish to illuminate a correlation between the vernacular strategies of verbal signifying borne out of the trickster tradition and the double-talk of poetry. Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of carnival and double-voiced discourse provide a point of entry in my analysis of the poem's emphasis on laughter and

¹⁴² Rita Dove, "Introduction" to *Harlem Gallery, and Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson*. Tolson, Melvin B, and Raymond Nelson. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999. Print.

¹⁴³ Bérubé, Michael. "Avant-gardes and De-Author-Izations: Harlem Gallery and the Cultural Contradictions of Modernism." *Callaloo*. (1989): 192-215. Print.

its relation to folklore, as well as the ambivalence and potential for word-play this subversive language of wit and signifying invites. I also find a brief discussion on Tolson's version of black modernist poetics instrumental in illuminating, yet again, this often ambivalent relationship between the works of African American artists and Anglo American modernism.¹⁴⁴

Melvin Tolson's work largely encapsulates the tensions evident in the poetry of modernist Black poets who attempted to find their place along the borders of a "new" black consciousness signaled by the Harlem Renaissance and a literary modernism consolidated by the Western model of T.S. Eliot's cohort. Some critics argue that Tolson's cultivation of himself as a kind of Du Boisian "race man" undercut the possibility of him belonging to a modernist tradition since it already re-envisioned itself as "internationalist," thus considering race, gender and ethnicity to "background" or "intrinsic" information. In Tolson's case, his poetic techniques are based on devices exclusively rooted in the African American tradition—he signifies on modernist poetry in the vein of Eliot and Pound and specifically Africanist discourse, forging an intertextual link with "a black difference" (to borrow from Gates). As it was the case with Langston Hughes, the search for an authentic Black poetic voice for Tolson meant having an acute awareness of the developments of literary modernism and its implications for black culture. This is made abundantly clear in his poetic opus which reveals an artist who adopts effortlessly modernist techniques, but at the same time remains true to a folk-based aesthetic of wit, humor and double-voicedness. A deeper analysis of his poetry ("Dark Laughter" is a good example) reveals a Tolson dictum: black folk poetry and expression is in some key respects already modern and the connection between modernism and folk art is not one that needs to be made, as

¹⁴⁴ The question whether modernism is fundamentally Euro-American is continually open for debate since it can as persuasively be argued that modernism marked the regeneration of a tired Western artistic tradition by other "diasporic" cultures: African, African American, Asian, Hispanic, etc.

much as it needs to be exposed. (In the following chapters , we will see that Zora Neale Hurston makes a similar claim, advocating a reinvestigation of modernism and modernity by asserting that folklore is, in and of itself, modern art).

Tolson, a self-proclaimed Marxist, viewed African American culture as a moment in the historical movement toward the withering away of all states. In the vein of Marxist dialectics, he understood that historical moments carry within them both the remains of a past that have been superseded as well as the seeds of a future nurtured by supplanted moments. In this respect, his understanding of black identity and national belonging goes beyond the American context. In his long poem the “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” undoubtedly his most remarkable account of his dedication to Africa (he was appointed as the Poet Laureate of the Liberian Centennial and Peace Exposition in 1947), Tolson roots his argument in the African and the African American past. The poem reveals the poet’s focus on a “diasporic self” and the intricacies of that self’s journey “from a cultural middle passage rife with colonial and postcolonial fetters, to the fullest embodiment of cultural freedom and bardic imagination.”¹⁴⁵

Tolson’s unfinished and undated poem “Dark Laughter” was found among his papers and was later included in the anthology *Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans* (2006), edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey. The poem is a recollection of his visit to Liberia, in the course of which a paramount chief met during a reception at the home of President Tubman makes a bet with Tolson about which country produces the strongest wine:

...Tonight we have with us two bards, one black, one white,

¹⁴⁵ Leonard, Keith D. *Fettered Genius: the African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2006. Print.

whose feet have left their spoors on distant shores;

from them, therefore, I want to know

what land the Great God has blessed

with the strongest wine!

The poem, which has an embedded story in which the signifying monkey makes an appearance, is reworked through multiple versions into a virtuoso performance involving said paramount chief, a black poet, known as the “Zulu bard” in the poem, one who “straddled the question with/ethnic two-ness” (“Dark Laughter”) and a white poet from Greenwich Village.

In the poem we find a familiar pattern in Tolson’s signifying poetics: the poem proceeds to elaborate language and structures that fold back upon themselves in (seems almost self-generating) *loops of difference*. It also brings forth a synergy of modernist aesthetic and irony, and a folk-based preference for compressed, cryptic, hyperbolic imagery. In his effort to prove modernism as a populist American aesthetic with African roots, Tolson revises, revisits and reclaims the dominant “master line” in “Dark Laughter.” His appropriation of a modernist stance in fact manages to displace this “model” that he is supposedly following. While Tolson runs the risk of “being flogged for marring the highly prized lines of Master Thomas,”¹⁴⁶ Aldon Nielsen remarks, he succeeds in writing poetry which challenges the “territorial claims” of the Western master text. His poetic style, far from being “a mask adopted simply to gain entry to the master's house, is a means by which Anglo-American claims to the ground of modernism are set

¹⁴⁶ “Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of ModernismAuthor(s)”Aldon L. Nielsen. Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of Modernism.” African American Review, Vol. 26, No. 2, Poetry and Theatre Issue (Summer, 1992), pp. 241-255.

aside.”¹⁴⁷ He came to see modernist poetics as having been already arrived at by African aesthetics, thus rendering the African American poetic tradition as “primary rather than merely imitative” (246).¹⁴⁸ Tolson also claimed that his esoteric modernism made him “more militantly Negro” because his aesthetic draws from both African and African American poetics. He writes in one place, “I talk with old slaves / (Deepi- Talki).”

Some post-structuralist critics have questioned the notion that black poetic genius is rooted in the African American folk tradition. Keith Leonard suggests that the formalist bardic tradition constitutes a space where cultural boundaries are expanded in direct proportion to the breadth of the poetic imagination. Even though the crux of his argument is not to privilege formal poetics over vernacular culture, he clearly prescribes cultural complexities and agency of African American formalist poetics. He suggests that vernacular culture does not hold the exclusive truth of African American creativity, but that real truth rests in the hybridity of self-constituted achievement.¹⁴⁹ Opposing black modernist poetic to an oral, vernacular tradition has its pitfalls. One must not overlook the implications of the fact that the oral tradition is represented by poets in writing. In Tolson's case, his turning to the heritage of African proverb and the traditions of pulpit performance is part of an aesthetic that celebrates and continues the richness of verbal signifying among Black people.

The very opening line: “Veldt¹⁵⁰ Village/ O/ globe of thatch palms and idols of the tribe” signals engagement beyond the American cultural context and signifies on another. In the

¹⁴⁷ Nielsen, Aldon L. “Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of Modernism.” *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Poetry and Theatre Issue (Summer, 1992), pp. 241-255.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴⁹ Leonard, Keith D. *Fettered Genius: the African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2006. Print.

¹⁵⁰ “Veld,” Afrikaans word for “field,” sometimes spelled “veldt.” A generic term used to define certain wide open rural spaces of Southern Africa.

African “veldt village” there’s a wealth of knowledge, tales “alive with the lore and ethos/ of lion hearts and hyena loins” but “without a trope,/ without a logos.” Tolson’s assertion is echoed throughout that African proverbs and storytelling, African American folk songs, spirituals and jazz music in many ways are precedents to the “double talk” and esoteric inclinations of modernist poetry. In the entire poem, he skillfully foregrounds performative features, patterns of repetition, rhythms and echoes of a folk-based aesthetic (the tale of the signifying monkey is effectively weaved through the verbal competition of the two bards) playing with high/low contrast and challenging the question of origins of ideas:

Proverb and fable and parable

Ascend the ladder of

Commedia de figuron

Comedie larmoyante.

The poem exhibits characteristics found throughout Tolson’s poetry: folk and literary allusions, juxtaposition of art with commonplace object or ideas to produce effective images and metaphors. Formally, “Dark Laughter” follows (more or less) the conventions of the folk toast: a long poem that relies on “performance,” organized around a general, framing pattern (the dueling response to the question asked by the chief: which country has the strongest wine; it is consistent with the picturesque or exciting introduction of the toast (the signifying monkey); action and dialogue (the action is usually a struggle between two people or animals in the folk toast); and a twist ending of some sort, either a quip, an ironic comment or a brag (“Poets know all men are thieves.... After all, it’s One World – isn’t it?”). As I have argued in earlier chapters, the conflict in the “Signifying Monkey” toast is created by the monkey’s pitting of the Lion

against the Elephant in a clever game of signifying through mediation; Tolson's poem presents such "triad relationship" i.e., the veldt village chief pits the black and white poets against each other:

The issue narrows:

it is

Africa versus America

to see

which has the strongest drink—

the stronger men.

Undoubtedly, the humor that is implied in the signifying rituals, both in the traditional folk toast and Tolson's poem, is meant to provide a much needed relief from a hard reality. At the same time "[the] dark laughter [that] exploded/ like/ a Molotov cocktail/against/a caterpillar tank" also signals to a force of resistance against an "official world" (Bakhtin), a dominant and an awareness of the power of ambivalence. The signifying sessions with the Elders in Tolson draw on the tradition of the trickster tale: the outer world is reduced to diminutive proportions, situations are dwarfed as the joke-tellers and their audiences are allowed to set aside, or at least minimize the defeat and restrictions imposed by the external (official) world. The signifying, then, becomes a stance toward life itself, in which the significance of a reported action is not interpreted as meaning only one thing, for it may convey many messages at the same time, even self-contradictory ones. In his response to the chief's question: which country has the strongest

liquor, the white poet conjures up a tale about his grandpa bootlegging liquor in Kentucky and making mighty strong booze:

My grandpa used to put

Rattlesnake heads in his kegs.

Only God Almighty knew how much power

My grandpa's white lightning had.

In the poem, there are illuminating dialogic moments when we clearly distinguish between two different world views of the speaking subjects:

The poet

thought:

who doesn't like the juicy roast

of a story snatched from

the spit of life?

The graybeards chewed it,

speculatively.

(After all, didn't the white man cook it?)

The white man appropriates a trickster tale borne "from the spit of life" and recounts it in front of the tribesmen in the veldt village of Africa, fully aware that he is fooling them into believing a

fantastic, fictitious story. The Elders are also weary of its veracity, since they have learnt not to trust Western tales.

Even though Bakhtin was notorious for arguing that poetry cannot be dialogic and that poetic language always runs the risk of being authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative, cutting itself from the influences of extraliterary social dialects, by discerning between these different modes of discourse, we see in Tolson a Bakhtinian style "dialogic" language that disrupts uniformity and invites a "restless interaction of cultural discourses" (Bakhtin). The polyphony that is inherent in the carnivalesque back and forth in the poem is based on the dialogical powers of language, i.e., a quality of language that results from the clash of different voices.¹⁵¹ A second important question that the poem poses is the issues of an authoritative version of language and cultural values – the trickster tale is being re-interpreted and re-appropriated by the Westerner (a folktale that most believe has African roots) in order to win the duel with the black poet, while at the same time himself donning a mask of a trickster. The poem itself seems to be set in a moment of a carnivalesque pause; the double-voiced discourse, laughter, socially uninhibited behavior, wine, transgressions of norms, invite such reading. The second stanza announces that this "Dark laughter/ flashes Rabelaisian humor." Bakhtin's portrayal of the aesthetics and multi-voicedness of the medieval peasant culture in Rabelais, referred to as "the folk," "the second world," "the unofficial world," and "popular-festive culture," portrayed in opposition to the "official world" of civil and religious authority, indeed invite interesting parallels between a

¹⁵¹ Bakhtin limited the understanding of the carnival by discussing it only as a phenomenon specific to popular culture, thus possible within specific linguistic and semiotic boundaries. Unlike the structuralists and post-structuralist (with whom the Russian critic is often associated) that view language and texts as nothing but the free play of signifiers, Bakhtin believes that all individual expression is ultimately the product of various voices that are linked to one another through the socially constituted fabric of language. (His theories of discourse involve deflating the myth of impersonal language: "there are no neutral and objective words" (Bakhtin 160) rather words hold infinite layers of complexity).

Rabelaisian medieval clash of “high” and “low” and the struggle between African oral culture and its Western appropriation in “Dark Laughter.”

Each storytelling section in the poem is followed by a piercing laughter sequence. In carnival, laughter and excess push aside the seriousness and the hierarchies of "official" life. Carnival shakes up the authoritative version of language and values, making room for a multiplicity of voices and meanings. The element at work in folk telling that induces laughter most often is the sudden reversal of roles or fortunes. Even if for a brief moment, those that are mighty are defeated or ridiculed. Under this seemingly benevolent mask of humor, aggression towards the other becomes apparent and the verbal shorthand entailed in joking works to facilitate an expression of hostility, but at the same time, provide relief ¹⁵². The joke implied in the punning represents a rebellion against authority and liberation from its effect. As Bakhtin argues, laughter has the potential to subvert “official” in a “current of slippery ambivalence” (Rabelais...66). Through laughter, "the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint... Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (Bakhtin 66). However, as Shanti Eliot points out “It is not the objects of laughter, though, that interest Bakhtin so much as the perspective laughter brings. Laughter emphasizes movement and draws attention to the forms of relationship, rather than the components within the relationship, which are often fixed in one-sided, hierarchical meaning” (130). Laughter works philosophical changes upon life and society. While it is something that is borne out of a collective experience, its most important function is internal: it defends freedom

¹⁵² Freud argued that humor and jokes bring pleasure to the speaker by disguising aggression sufficiently to get it past both external and internal censors, thus relieving the joke-teller and his audience of the need to expand psychic inhibitions (all in accordance with what he calls “a principle of economy”). Humor allows economy in the expenditure of energy by liberating feeling which normally would have to be contained – the liberation brought with this sense of relief produces pleasure. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by James Strachey. New York, 1963.

of thought. The peasants' world, as Bakhtin explains it, is a "second world," resistant to the official world and aware of the power of ambivalence, the simultaneous (and contradictory) value of high and low, death and life, rich and poor. To emphasize the creative power of carnival imagery, Bakhtin imbues ambivalence with physical force: carnival abuses, for instance, "while humiliating and mortifying [. . .] at the same time revived and renewed" (16). "The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations, and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation . . . Laughter, on the other hand, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations" (90).¹⁵³

According to Bakhtin's observation, folktales traditionally end with some sort of banquet or feast. Similarly, in the Signifying Monkey folktale, the monkey roams free and in the exuberance of victory gets drunk. Since Toslon's poem is unfinished, we can only assume that the last stanza in the manuscript that was found after Tolson's death was the beginning of the closing section:

In
 Veldt Village
 dark laughter
 beguiles the tribal censor,
 cheats the governess, reason,
 with Falstaffian relief from stock responses to
 paramount chief and witchdoctor.

¹⁵³ Bakhtin, M. Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968.

While the stanza itself is incomplete, thus leaving us with an uncertainty about the final twist, its diction reveals Tolson's acute awareness of an aesthetic that celebrates the richness of verbal signifying. The poem concludes that this roaring African veldt with its "dark laughter beguiles censor" and "cheats reason" with a "Falstaffian relief" of subversion and trickery. Folk expression does indeed provide such a medium and becomes material for indirect communication since it possesses a unique quality: it resists censorship since its mode of transmission is oral. Because of its intrinsic ability to transform depending on different social contexts, folk discourse and the trickery and double-voiced language play embedded in it allow for what Jacqueline Fulmer calls "built-in subversive potential."¹⁵⁴ The invocation of the Shakespearean character, the one who revels in burlesque and paradox, a vain trickster of sorts who embodies the transition from a more carnivalesque comedy to a modern aesthetic, homes in on Tolson's relentless pursuit in his poetry: to signify on Anglo-American modernist poetry with a black difference. The relief that this kind of laughter brings is meant to transgress that centuries-long anxiety of

the white and non-white dichotomy

the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts --

the dialectic of

to be or not to be

a Negro.

(Harlem Gallery)

¹⁵⁴ Fulmer, Jacqueline. *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ni Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007, 26.

The tracing of the links between the Black vernacular tradition and Black written literary tradition throughout my dissertation repeatedly brings us back to the same conclusion: the models of behavior which both the oral and written forms celebrate are not merely projections of fantasies or escapes, but are authentic reflections of the changing circumstances of African American culture. In addition, my continuing discussion of the intersections between African American literature and “mainstream” literary modernist theories points to a necessary reinterpretation of the monolith and canonicity of Anglo-American literary theory, and a recognition of the importance of race in the formation of an American modernist tradition. What has long been overdue is an acknowledgment of the ways in which the presence of African American writers has shaped creative choices and structures in American literature and theory. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison reminds us once again how relevant African American identity and history have been in the formation of an *American* literary tradition, while at the same time “being backgrounded in the nation’s experience.” Kevin Young echoes Morrison when he asserts that:

While there is some debate over the term—to some “Anglo” means “British” to others “white”—there is no doubt that for many the true locus of modernism remains far from the juke joint or coldwater flat where blues records spin, or far beyond Langston Hughes and “his rivers.” Though some have explored the interactions and interracialism of modernism, often in terms of racism, I want to go further—locating modernism’s origins specifically in black culture. The change, the roar, the very swing in the “Anglo” culture, might well be said to be exactly this too-often invisible African American influence.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ *The Grey Album*, p.138

Through their poetics, poets, particularly Hughes and Tolson, comment upon the making of a Black identity while negotiating the tension of the visibility of race and showing that black subjectivity can best be located in sound. As Black poets, they "write back" by using the one tradition that has enabled an assertion of the culture's literary and imaginative distinctiveness and has provided the most enabling principle of black expression: its orality. Working against multiple forms of erasure, Hughes and Tolson, as black modernists poets, employ a signifying double-voiced poetic strategy in order to give voice to silence, absence and subjugation. Their poetic aesthetic is aimed at decoding and deconstructing the texts of white dominance. Their poetic projects entail a reconstitution and revitalization of a literary tradition with a "nameless progeniture," while at the same time attempting to transform what they see as a fragmented Black consciousness.

Du Bois' theory of racial double consciousness remains as one of the most significant conceptualizations of racial identity. In my dissertation, I have traced the improvisational variations on the Du Boisian themes and tropes of double consciousness in several authors, including Morrison and Hurston. In my discussion on poetry, I emphasize the importance of sound to an understanding of the double consciousness inherent in Du Bois's conceptualization of modern black subjectivity, and argue that for black poets who have to continually negotiate race, sound opens a playground for artistic creativity and imagination. Alexander Weheliye argues a similar point when he says that "When we analyze the role of vision as it relates to the mechanisms of racism, sound emerges as a space where black subjectivity is not fixed by the look of white subjects, but is instead articulated dynamically by black subjects themselves."¹⁵⁶ Sound, as the poetry that I have analyzed shows, operates as a supplement to the visibility of

¹⁵⁶Weheliye, Alexander. "In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*. Vol. 45, No. 4, *Time and the African-American Experience* (2000), pp. 535-554, p.537.

racial identity; as a counterpart to the Du Boisian visual model of subjectivity that he sees as the center of blackness when he observes in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “[the] world [...] yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (5). In other words, black people view themselves as fractured, due to the way whites look at them. Conversely, hearing and sound do not contribute to the fractured subjectivity of black Americans in Du Bois's description. Black poets can *experience* their subjectivity through sound and *hear* themselves in music without the threat of a gaze that objectifies. Ultimately, the Du Boisean diagnosis of a “second sight” may prove to be a blessing; reading the second sight as a gift, particularly considering Du Bois's various uses of music in *The Souls*, makes us understand this gift as “the gift of [hearing and] song.” Kevin Young also provides a reading of double-consciousness not so much as a hindrance, but an opportunity for creativity in that space “between blackness as a problem and as possibility.”¹⁵⁷ He explains:

The second sight such a veil affords can be just as powerful as the forces that tear it apart. But we need not believe in the folk power of the caul to understand that, in cultures where the veil exists, while the veil is to outsiders a curtain—or a divide, or an oppressive force—to those wearing the veil, “behind” is a vantage point that may protect or mask emotion, that may only heighten the performance the curtain covers.¹⁵⁸

Regardless of this built-in subversive potential, contrasted with the manner in which sight is implicated in the mechanism of racism, sound and hearing emerge as more apt domains for the staging of black subjectivity. This awareness enables us to take the second sight as an attempt to see the creative potentials of black culture and subjectivity through the *audible*, both in Du Bois'

¹⁵⁷ *The Grey Album*, p.65.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

theory and in a wider context. Gates sums it succinctly when he writes that for each black text “visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular.”¹⁵⁹ If color and racialized identity perpetuate a hierarchy in African American modernity, then the polyphony of sound that I have traced in the poetry opens up a carnivalesque disruption of such power dynamics.

¹⁵⁹Gates, Henry L, and Sunday O. Anozie. *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1984. Print, p.4.

CHAPTER FOUR

“That Man in the Gutter Is the God-Maker, the Creator of Everything that Lasts”: Zora Neale

Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In the folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves and we depict the humor as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing. —Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*.¹⁶⁰

A FOLK is always, out of the very necessities of definition, possessed of a guiding or tutelary spirit – an immanent quality of aspiration that is fittingly sounded in its treasured rituals, in its spirit houses or masks of performance. – Houston Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

W.E.B. Dubois’s observation about double consciousness is a strategy, not a prophecy or a cure.—Toni Morrison, “Home.”¹⁶¹

The trope of the Talking Book is the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition.—Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 131.

Storying: animal tales; the spirituals as codes for runaway slaves; runaway slaves themselves; maroons; the blues code of life, tragic and comic, “laughing to keep from crying”; nothing but a good man feeling bad; nothing but a bad woman feeling good. “Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance.”—Kevin Young, *The Grey Album* 3.

This chapter segues from the tracing of trickster figures in the African American vernacular and literary traditions and presents a singular focus and examination of Zora Neale Hurston’s work and the pertinent scholarship that surrounds it. The goal is to highlight Hurston’s unquestionable relevance for any project that is invested in identifying elements of both oral and written form intrinsic to the African American creative tradition. I begin this chapter with a consideration of Hurston’s “philosophy of culture”: her particular views on the

¹⁶⁰ Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964. Print, p.80.

¹⁶¹ Wahneema H. Lubiano. *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Print.

role of black oral cultural forms in the artistic production of the Harlem Renaissance; the promise and threats of migration for both black men and women; the ambivalent relationship between “low” (folk) art and “high” art forms; and the issue of what for Hurston and her contemporaries constitutes “an authentic” black culture. The second part provides a critical examination of Hurston’s treatment and appropriation of folk material and modes of narration in *Mules and Men* (1935); while the final section offers a closer look at Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in relation to issues of gender, black discourse and modernity in the act of representing the folk.

One of the goals of this dissertation is to investigate the concept(s) of modernity and literary modernism, and their manifestations in Hurston’s writing in *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—texts in which she combines elements of forms that were instrumental in crafting a discourse of modernity with styles and tropes from black folk culture. Hurston’s novel emphasizes a modernist preoccupation with interiors and withdrawal, with the personal and psychological, dwelling on introspection and solitude. Both in her ethnographic work and her novel, Hurston investigates how social interaction and personal meditation are intertwined. As Leigh Anne Duck aptly points out, Hurston “addresses the issue of a nostalgic ‘folk’ experience by representing the possibility of reconciling ‘folk’ and ‘modern’ cultural forms in individual experience.”¹⁶² Hurston’s oeuvre—both her textual production and her anthropological work in the 1920’s and 1930’s, equally concerned with theorizing, representing, and staging characteristically black modes of oral expression —exemplifies her efforts to recover and record the vernacular roots of African American culture and art, and treat folkloric material as a rich source and valuable document of what was created as narrative history of black people

¹⁶² Duck, Leigh A. "'Go There Tuh Know There': Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk." *American Literary History*. 13.2 (2001): 265-94. Print, p.265.

in America. In particular, Hurston's approach to folk culture reveals a significant characteristic of the rich black vernacular tradition in its many facets as we have seen thus far in this dissertation: its ample potential to rejuvenate and enable creativity and artistic production. In this context, the folklore, songs and spirituals that Hurston collected, in the words of Catherine John, "*are not, in and of themselves, the culture, but rather products of the culture. The culture itself appears to be the ability to create and recreate something that is life sustaining and that moves the spirit.*"¹⁶³

In the course of this analysis, it becomes apparent that in her ethnographic and creative work, Hurston was acutely aware of the transcultural predicaments that would become dominant in the late twentieth century: migration, border crossing, self-location and the making of homes away from home. Moreover, Hurston advocated a reinvestigation of American modernity by asserting that folklore is, in and of itself, modern art: "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use" ("Characteristics of Negro Expression").

In addition, through her work, Hurston positions folk authorship in relation to a series of "identity-charged" issues such as, race, gender, and class. In more recent scholarship on modernism, critics such as Daphne Lamothe accurately read Hurston's ethnography as the enactment of a "paradoxical Black modernist gaze that *looks at* Black culture and *looks back at*

¹⁶³ John, Catherine A. "That Man in the Gutter is the God-Maker": Zora Neale Hurston's Philosophy of Culture." *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Deborah G. Plant. Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010. Print. 166.

the dominant culture” (emphasis mine 8)¹⁶⁴. Lamothe and others emphasize that Hurston and other black intellectuals, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, deservedly belong in the history of American literary modernism not because their work transcends race, but more importantly because their understanding of race in America provides “an entrance into issues of modernity” (Lamothe 9). Unmistakably, Hurston’s ethnographic work reveals an awareness of an epistemology that echoes modernist preoccupations through her involvement with the re-investigation of ways of knowing and her critical eye towards the containment of knowledge production (folklore as a repository of popular knowledge and cultural memory).

Ultimately, by means of her narrative strategies in *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston creates a mode of expression that solidifies her contribution to the trickster tradition that has long informed black creativity. If we pay close attention to Hurston’s embracing of the performative aspect of language, specifically black discourse, and read Hurston herself as a trickster ethnographer/novelist—a master of duality, manipulation of language and truth-eluding ambiguity—we can see clearly her indelible mark to the “counterfeit tradition” of storying (Kevin Young) that “worries the line” of folk storytellers, slave narrators and other black novelists and poets, for whom, as Kevin Young asserts, “creativity has often lain with the lie—forging an identity, ‘making’ one, but ‘lying’ about one too.”¹⁶⁵ Young signifies on Hurston when he argues in the *Grey Album* that “awareness of inheritance and its insider/outsider status parallels the *counterfeit* itself” (31) particularly when “counterfeit is the ‘literary lie’” (33). He sums it up thus:

¹⁶⁴ Daphne Lamothe. *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

¹⁶⁵ Kevin Young *The Grey Album: the Blackness of Blackness*, p.24.

The whole of *Mules and Men*, with its collection of folktales or lies, organized by Hurston in an almost novelistic framework, serves as a brilliant incarnation of the counterfeit. A *bootleg*, if you will. A stitching together of the folktales [...] to tell a larger (I'm tempted to say 'taller') tale of black culture, Hurston symbolizing the relations between mules and men, women and motherwit, herself and her community[...] Hurston is a recorder without a recording device, apart from participatory memory; her method mimics the way the folktales are passed down in the first place—and in this way not less scientifically but more. Memory, for Hurston, is a form of technology and another instance of storying.¹⁶⁶

Hurston's Cultural Philosophy of Resistance and Folk Art

At the time when Hurston started collecting folklore, the literary and anthropological studies of folklore were dominated by ideas that viewed folklore as surviving artefacts from an earlier culture and largely ignored the contemporary context from which the oral expression came to life, as mostly scholars used folklore as an anthropological or historical tool –a way to learn about the past and project their views onto the past. Hurston, on the other hand, was interested in folklore and its relation to contemporary culture. Hazel Carby argues that “Hurston [...] assumed that she could obtain access to, and authenticate, an individualized social consciousness through a utopian reconstruction of the historical moment of her childhood in an attempt to stabilize and displace the social contradictions and disruption of her contemporary moment.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pp.32-33.

¹⁶⁷ In “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk : Zora Neale Hurston.” *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ed. Michael Awkward. Cambridge: ProQuest Information and Learning, 2000. e-book. p.70.

Hurston's contribution to the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance is frequently defined in terms of her "intellectual assertiveness" in establishing a folk heritage as the source of, and inspiration for, authentic African American art forms. Notwithstanding that in literary criticism the Harlem Renaissance has become a convention, its significance is still rendered in terms of an imagined or created historical perspective that "privileges some cultural developments while rendering other cultural and political histories invisible."¹⁶⁸ More importantly, this particular literary history placed at the center of its discourse the issue of an authentic folk heritage. In the 1920's, the Harlem intellectuals' project of transmitting a black cultural authenticity to a predominantly white audience was defined by an urgent shift away, a change from, and confrontation with an imposed cultural representation of black people in the midst of a racialized social order from *outside*, but also marked by a confrontation *within* black intellectual circles. Alain Locke, in his collection *The New Negro*, maintained that the project of African American intellectuals and artists would be to raise the culture of the folk to the level of art. Locke's position is frequently quoted in stark contrast to the dominant interpretation of the work of Hurston, who is thought to reconcile the division between "high and low culture by becoming Eatonville's esthetic representative to the Harlem Renaissance" (50) as argued by Robert Hemenway in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. In his reading of Hurston's idealized vision of the rural South, Hemenway asserts that the positive image of black folk that Hurston was so invested in depicting is her *signifying* resistance to a widely adopted view that white oppression "has created a pathology in black behavior" (221).

Hurston's legacy in terms of her philosophy of culture seems difficult to pin down, particularly since she refused to frame her work in terms of literature as social protest or

resistance; avoided focusing on oppression and victimization; not dwelling on the “Negro problem,” but instead reversing the gaze toward depicting the vitality of the culture. Some critics have suggested that there is no name or category in academic language to define her position since she refused to be reduced to focusing on race *while at the same time* her work is a constant celebration of black life and culture. Undoubtedly, Hurston’s goal and life-long preoccupation had been invested in identifying modes of expression that were intrinsic to black culture. For her, the only authentic location of this culture, where there was the least outside influence, was the black rural South. Her project of privileging the folk in a time when the black bourgeoisie tried relentlessly to differentiate itself from a “folksy” and “rural” ancestry was a brave, radical move. Her own insistence that *authentic* black culture be presented primarily as rural and oral is her response to the dramatic transformations within black culture that were underway in the “New Negro” era and ultimately her resistance to a vision of modernity that meant obliterating the past and the south and embracing northern urban culture as “the way out.” Hazel Carby’s observation that “the creation of a discourse of ‘the folk’ as a *rural* people in Hurston’s work in the 1920s and 1930s displaces the migration of black people to cities” (76) is perhaps the most accurate definition of Hurston’s attitude towards the change and an indication of a discursive displacement of contemporary social crises. Carby’s suggestion is that urbanization displaced rural culture away from “the ethos that Hurston identifies”¹⁶⁹ and re-directed it towards modernized twentieth century gadgets, such as the record, the photograph, and the movie theater.¹⁷⁰ Other critics join Carby in underscoring the relevance of the dynamic cultural processes of modernity in defining the discourses on authenticity and vernacular culture and suggesting that, if we were to understand the processes that govern the development of a

¹⁶⁹ Catherine John, “That Man in the Gutter Is the God-Maker,” p.176.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.177.

culture, we must unpack terms such as “folk,” “authentic,” “traditional,” “modern” and treat them as mutually constitutive.¹⁷¹ In the overwhelming movement from the rural South to the industrial North, the term “folk” became a definition for masses of former sharecroppers and field workers who were on the move. At the same time, as David G. Nicholls explains in his study on modernity *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America*, “in homology with narratives of European national development, the folk provided the telos in narratives that sought to describe the development of the race into modernity” (3). Overall, studies of both modernity and folklore have treated the folk as “an assumed category of person rather than as a contested vision of collectivity” (3). Another important point to make is that the vernacular tradition that is created by the “folk” served as “an authentic voice of the unconscious of the race” (Nicholls 4), while the language of “the folk” became the unifying “trace of origin” for African American discourse.¹⁷²

Perhaps Hurston’s most convincing argument against the ways in which intellectuals transformed folk culture (by using it as a material to create high culture art) in the New Negro era is her identification of a class and gender difference in the representation “war” of the culture. Being a black woman intellectual in “a men’s world”, she could not entirely escape the intellectual practice that she found offensive, a practice that reinterpreted and redefined a folk consciousness in its own elitist and sexist terms. Her own attitude toward the folk culture was not unmediated; she did have a clear framework of interpretation, a construct that enabled her particular representation of a black, rural consciousness, but her body of work is rife with

¹⁷¹ Discussed in *Conjuring the Folk*, David G. Nicholls,

¹⁷² In her discussion of Henry Gates and Houston Bakes, Diana Fuss suggests that the reason the vernacular (the language of “the folk”) is such a dominant theme in their scholarship is the fact that it “operates as a phantasm, a hallucination of lost origins.” Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Print. (90).

contradictions that arise from her struggle to negotiate her roles as a black writer, a black woman and a black intellectual, while at the same time trying to establish critical paradigms that would celebrate an authentic identity of her beloved black folk subject.

One of the key issues informing Hurston's criticism of modernity is her belief in the false promise of Northern migration. While it is undoubtedly one of the key events in African American cultural history (featuring as well, Slavery, the Middle Passage and Emancipation) that has played a significant role in identity formation and artistic expression, Hurston's views regarding the pitfalls of Northern migration and its complex cultural repercussions in terms of gender and class cannot be overlooked. For her, rural black people were being forgotten, disappearing amidst the heady enthusiasm of the urban "New Negro" Movement. She argued that migration, while affording some positive opportunities, was violent, inextricably tied to having access to financial means, marked by class and gender limitations; its results were terrifying and devastating for the "folk"—it was particularly devastating for women who were left behind with families to tend to while men left for the North.

At the time when Hurston produced her major works, migration was one of the main factors in the description and formation of the Harlem Renaissance. Commencing just prior to World War I and continuing well after, the en masse movement to the North had a profound effect both on northern cities as well as the southern, rural communities left behind. In this movement, the consensus among the intellectuals in Hurston's time was that psychologically black people began rejecting the South's history of racial violence and lynching, escaping from poor rural farming, and seeking a better future. As a result, the deeply felt effects of such movements, border crossings, self-relocations, the making of homes away from home, become important subjects for black writers. In that respect, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's

movement among various regions of “the symbolic geography”—“the muck” as the symbolic South and Eatonville as the symbolic North—can be interpreted in relation to a version of black modernity theorized by black scholars such as Robert Stepto and Houston A. Baker, Jr. In *From Behind the Veil*, Stepto establishes fundamental narrative patterns of black identity informed by migration and contact with modernity. These patterns involve movement between a relatively enslaved “symbolic South” and a relatively free “symbolic North.” In Stepto’s theory the journey to the symbolic North is an “ascent” and implies a movement forward. At the same time, while the symbolic South is a place “of maximum oppression,” it is also a place where important personal, familial, and communal bonds are established. While the “symbolic North” is a place of “relative freedom,” these freedoms are primarily individual and often come at a cost of estrangement (geographical, cultural, and psychological) from the bonds of the symbolic South. Lonely and alienated figures often attempt to reestablish bonds with a larger community in the symbolic South, a journey Stepto calls “immersion” (167). Thus, a typical narrative pattern in fiction ends with a protagonist who comes to contact with modern individuality (and is to some extent co-opted by it), reconnects with community, and continues to be plagued by the unmitigated pressures of a *symbolic* (often romanticized) South.¹⁷³ (In Chapter Two I trace this trajectory in Toni Morrison’s fiction through the characters of Milkmen Dead and Son Green in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, respectively). According to Houston A. Baker, Jr., most of African American literature is marked by this “transience.” Baker maintains that the railway juncture, with its implication of movement, way station, migration, and the blues, represent

¹⁷³ This tendency to romanticize a Southern past is to some extent a reflection of the social changes that occur in black culture and arts in the second half of the twentieth century. The 1970s and 1980s were a period when black writers and black scholars re-investigate their attitude towards the idealized South and black folk culture. This vision of the South as a location of newfound possibility perhaps accounts for the renewed interest in the Hurston’s ethnographic work since the 1980s and in the increased interest in migration narratives in critical theory at the turn of this century. This is indicative not only of a tendency to re-visit the South as an important site of identity, but also of an attempt to reconsider its significance in the development of black oral culture.

precisely the ethos of a "liminal trickster on the move." Black literature is symbolized by a lineage that is "nomadic," the crossing signs of a railway station signifying "change, motion, transience, process" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*). Thus for scholars like Stepto and Baker, this movement holds a promise of a new beginning and change that is progressive.

However, feminist scholars emphasize an important difference. Hazel Carby, among them, argues that the move North was not the same experience for black women.¹⁷⁴ Hurston, on her part, was acutely aware of these issues and their reflection on black women's artistic expressions and their engagement with modernity. In her depiction of a black woman's travels, specifically in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston represents an experience of "restless searching" that is emblematic of the modern condition. However, she was deeply convinced of the threats and compromises—real physical danger as well as the risk of cultural effacement—entailed by this movement. In her anthropological and creative work, she sought to present another side to the promising image of the migrating black folk—observations that are made more convincing considering Hurston's own traveling experience as a black woman anthropologist. On the other hand, the cultural narrative suggests that northern migration for men represented the dream of authentic freedom—indeed, as I have argued in Chapter One, the idea of being on the move becomes the ultimate *symbol of freedom* for the black "badman." Overall, this idea is attractive, particularly for young black men since it allowed an escape from the despair of black unemployment and also the possibility of making a living without having to rely on Old Mater. By contrast, women travelers were, as James Clifford puts it, "forced to conform, masquerade, or

¹⁷⁴ Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U. S. Women's History*, eds. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Routledge, 1994), 334.

rebel discreetly within a set of normatively male definitions and experiences.” For the limited number of black women who did travel North, survival was hard, and therefore few cared to take their chances; a black woman traveling alone was a tempting target for predators as she traveled through unfamiliar territory (a movement complicated by *both* race and gender). For those women that would make it to the northern cities, the opportunities for work were scarce since factories were often closed to black women, and European and Asian immigrants competed with African Americans for domestic labor. Moreover, black women had little or no assurances of hotel residency. Being forced sometimes to sleep outside under dangerous circumstances increased the potential for rape and robbery; In addition, there was minimal or nonexistent legal protection for black women. In her study *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*, Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that migration narratives, depictions of journeys from the American South to North, are "one of the twentieth century's dominant forms of African-American cultural production"¹⁷⁵(3). Griffin addresses topics such as why African American migrants left the South, how they dealt with initial conflicts in the Northern urban landscape, where they sought and sometimes found "safe spaces" in alien cities, and why some of them chose to return to the South.

A second important reason for Hurston's resistance to embracing the transformative cultural experiences of the Harlem Renaissance and the emergence of a modern "New Negro" is her refusal to define this figure as one completely free of the influences of the past. Decades later, Toni Morrison would echo Hurston's urgency to preserve past material as a valuable historical source of cultural transformation: "We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate

¹⁷⁵ Griffin, Farah J. *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print. p.3.

is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past."¹⁷⁶ Hurston's perceived refusal to succumb to the demands of American modernity and progress likewise stems from her fear of losing, repressing and corrupting important African cultural fragments, such as folk expressive forms, particularly black music and spirituals, in a quest for the "newness" and affirmation of authenticity that the era demanded. One frequently mentioned example: Hurston undertook a scathing critique of the Fisk Jubilee Singer's performance in England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland, the first group to perform spirituals in a public domain, offering black music as (white) entertainment. In "Voodoo Imagery, African American Tradition, and Cultural Transformation," Daphne Lamothe points out that Hurston's "objection to the choir's innovations was not so much that they diluted the music's blackness with their injection of class and educational privilege; rather, she objected to the compromise, or abandonment, of the principle on which the music was based" (180). In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy takes Hurston to task and questions her need "to draw a line around what is and isn't authentically, genuinely, and really black and to use music as the medium which makes these distinctions possible" (92). Gilroy also reads Hurston's critique of the performance as a rejection of westernization, thus, in his view, a rejection all together of modernity. As a response to Paul Gilroy's critique that Hurston's romanticization of "the folk" and idealization of rural, southern black culture prevent her from embracing and acknowledging black cultural transformation, Daphne Lamothe is right in asserting that the desire to preserve a sense of tradition is by no means resistance to change.¹⁷⁷ Hurston's criticism was directed at an attempt to transform "a rough, improvisational musical form" (180) into a "higher" form of music meant to entertain a

¹⁷⁶ "Living Memory," qtd. in Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic*, p.222).

¹⁷⁷ Paul Gilroy's comments on Hurston in *The Black Atlantic* regard Hurston's contempt for the operatic performances of spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

wider audience. She says in “Characteristics of Negro Expression”: “The spirituals that have been sung around the world are Negroid to be sure, but so full of musicians *tricks* that Negro congregations are highly entertained when they hear their old songs so changed” (31). Hurston, in fact, recognizes the constructed performance in the operatic rendition of slave songs and their delivery as *false*, that is, constructed for white ears, withholding something that a different audience would recognize as *real* thus *authentic*. For Gilroy (through his reading of Du Bois), slave music, as it is addressed in *The Souls of Black Folks*, “is signaled in its special position of privileged signifier of black authenticity” (*The Black Atlantic* 91)—we cannot escape how for Gilroy Du Bois’s reading of slave music as a signifier of authenticity goes uncriticized, unlike his skepticism about Hurston’s qualification of what is and isn’t authentic about black music. Hurston’s refusal to see the operatic performances of black slave folk songs in front of a white audience as “authentic” is a result of her resistance to an overwhelming Western gaze that continued to view folk black culture as artistically inferior.

These differences in perspective are also captured within the gender dynamics of the New Negro era. Hurston was acutely aware of the fact that “the demands of modernism” that called for a new definition of blackness were envisioned primarily through a male perspective. Male artists, such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, shaped the discursive category of the folk in direct response to the social conditions of transformation, including the newly forming urban working class and “socially dispossessed,” while Hurston constructed a discourse of nostalgia for a rural community” (Carby 77). In particular, the Hurston/Wright conflict of ideas concerning the representation of an authentic black culture has been the subject of a long debate among scholars. In his critical positioning of Hurston’s involvement in the construction of black

modernist art, Paul Gilroy juxtaposes Hurston's folksy femininity to Richard Wright's urban, troubled (thus intellectual) masculinity:

Wright is [...] positioned at one wing of the great family of African-American letters while Zora Neale Hurston, the woman identified as his cultural and political opposite, is placed at the other. Her folksy and assertively feminine perspective is thought to indicate the direction of a more positive counterpart to the overpoliticised and rugged masculinity of Wright's more pessimistic and more self-consciously modernist work. Her conservatism answers his misguided bolshevism, her exaggerated respect for the authentic voice of the rural black folk is interpreted as a welcome anti-dote to his contemptuous presentation of the bestial, desperate experiences involved in being black in some metropolitan hovel. (*The Black Atlantic* 177)

Hazel Carby makes an astute observation as she revisits Wright's critique of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Hurston's recreation of minstrelsy. She comments:

Though this remark is dismissed out of hand by contemporary critics, what it does register is Wright's reaction to what appears to him to be an outmoded form of historical consciousness. Whereas Wright attempted to explode the discursive category of the Negro as being formed, historically, in the culture of minstrelsy, and as being the product of a society structured in dominance through concepts of race, Hurston wanted to preserve the concept of Negroness, to negotiate and rewrite its cultural meanings, and; finally, to reclaim an aesthetically purified version of blackness. ("The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk" 79)

Carby, like others before, interprets “the consequences for the creation of [a] subaltern subject” in each of their works as dramatically different. She concludes—in opposition to Gilroy’s positioning of the two black intellectuals i.e. Wright as the self-conscious, rugged, modernist versus Hurston, the assertive, folksy woman—by defining Wright as a modernist and positioning Hurston entrenched in “the politics of Negro identity” (79).

In their public debate, Wright found Hurston’s views politically conservative, pandering to white projections of blackness, “trafficking in stereotypes” and “politically bankrupt”(174).¹⁷⁸ She saw him trapped in “a Hegelian struggle with white power (174)”¹⁷⁹ that made the black subject of his fiction internally divided, devoid of cultural affiliation and “culturally illiterate” (174).¹⁸⁰ Wright’s move to Paris after WW2 and his subsequent publications have been generally critiqued by scholars (Arnold Rampersad among others) as being “corrupted” by his dabbling in philosophy and Freudianism, which are “alien” to his vernacular style steeped in black history. The argument is that once he moved to Europe, Wright lost touch with his vital folk sources. Paul Gilroy points out that Wright’s “eventual betrayal of the African American vernacular is then all the more profound and comprehensive because of his erstwhile closeness to the Folk whose sentimental representation supplies the yardstick against which authentic racial culture is evaluated. This reverence for the Folk bears the clear imprint of European Romanticism absorbed into black intellectual life by various routes” (*The Black Atlantic* 156).

Wright was indeed ambivalent about popular culture which for him both bore the marks of America’s long history of racism and an engaging ability for “creative improvisation” in the face of subjugation. Hurston, on the other hand, rejected the idea of subjugation and self-pity all

¹⁷⁸ Catherine John, “That Man in the Gutter Is the God-Maker,” p.174

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

together, and judged her people's sense of worth by their cultural autonomy, unmitigated by the racist society that surrounded it. Hurston defined black Southern culture in relation to African diasporic cultural forms she found in places like Jamaica, Haiti and the Bahamas, where cultural forms, such as Vodoo, survived as remnants of the Old World African practice. In this context, her cultural philosophy was informed by a diasporic reality that offered a favorable context for the concepts that Hurston tried to identify in African American culture. Wright, in contrast, adopted a psychological approach to black consciousness, steeped in Western European philosophizing and Nietzschean nihilism that left him despondent in the midst of the Parisian intellectual milieu. In *White Man, Listen!* (1957) he observes: "The black man's is a strange situation; it is a perspective, an angle of vision held by oppressed people; it is an outlook of people looking upward from below. It is what Nietzsche once called a 'frog's perspective'" (qtd. in *The Black Atlantic* 160). This comment reveals Wright's psychological grappling with self-loathing that results from the frustration of not being allowed access to the dominant culture. In many ways, it resembles a Du Boisian doctrine of double consciousness from a psychoanalytical angle. He will further elaborate and say that the "frog's perspective" is indicative of an individual who is looking from below upward, "a sense of someone who feels himself lower than others" (in *The Black Atlantic* 161). He concludes that "a certain degree of hate combined with love (ambivalence) is always involved in this looking from below upward and the object against which the subject is measuring himself undergoes a constant change. He loves the object because he would like to resemble it; he hates the object because his chances of resembling it are remote, slight" (161). A side-by-side reading of Wright's "black man trapped in a 'frog's perspective'" and Hurston's statement "That man in the gutter is the god-maker, the creator of everything that lasts"— which she wrote to Langston Hughes in a letter in 1928— might help one see clearly the

root of Hurston's and Wright's disagreement.¹⁸¹ Hurston's statement represents a worldview where the political, spiritual and cultural meet to form a philosophical stance. She wrote about this concept after having collected folklore and investigated hoo-doo in the South and her following trips to the Caribbean helped solidify this idea of the "man in the gutter is the god-maker" as a metaphor of resistance. This metaphor encompasses in many ways Hurston's cultural politics: it elevates higher the people who are placed lowest on the social and capitalist economic scale, while also allowing for a spiritual dimension to the cultural and creative production of the "folk."

A final point is that Hurston's understanding of black psychology in relation to identity (regarding the much argued issues of "selfhood" and "wholeness") differs greatly from the notions of other African American modernists. She actually was a vocal critic of the approach to modernity advanced by scholars like Du Bois, particularly his notion of a split (double-conscious) African American psyche which is constantly grappling with a self-loathing that comes from "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks with amused contempt and pity" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 8). Du Bois situates a visual model of subjectivity at the center of what he calls "the strange meaning of being black" in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century (3). For him, the African American subject position is a psychological space mediated by a "white gaze" and therefore divided by contending images of blackness—those images produced by a racist white American culture, and those images maintained by African American individuals within African American communities. It is the negotiation of these violently disparate images of blackness that produces the "two-ness" of Du Bois's double-consciousness, the psychological burden of attempting to

¹⁸¹ Published in *Zora Neale Hurston "A Life in Letters"*, 2000.

propitiate "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals" (8-9). The "doubleness" that is created between black and white and separated by a veil is also reflected by a "doubleness" within the ways in which black identity is culturally established.

This dualism does translate as double-voicedness in the black discourse through which black people for their part have their own recourse to subversive verbal masking rooted in the folk tradition of signifyin(g) that has long shaped black artistic consciousness (an argument that I have traced in the earlier chapters of this dissertation). However, in Hurston's case, as feminist critics often point out, her upbringing in relatively autonomous black culture of Eatonville, enabled her to sidestep some of the damage inflicted by white supremacist codes and, in contrast to Du Bois and Wright, view black identity and consciousness as whole, free of the "self-loathing" impulse "diagnosed" by Du Bois. June Jordan has drawn parallels between the narratives in Wright's *Black Boy* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and argues that Wright is an alienated figure who is estranged from black communal culture, while Hurston's narrative exemplifies an affirmative voice because it is grounded in communal settings and folk traditions.¹⁸² The Du Boisian and Wright's version of double-consciousness that the modern black artist faced is predicated on an imaginary space where the contact between black creative consciousness and American modernity plays out. For them, this cultural engagement and contact create psychological obstacles for the self. For Hurston, the black folk in America will not be plagued by "a pathology in black behavior" as long as their sense of selfhood and wholeness remain safely rooted in the ancestor's footsteps. Black feminists in the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century will signify on Hurston's cultural philosophy in many ways. They would be among the first to challenge specifically the

¹⁸² June Jordan, "Notes Toward a Black Balancing of Love and Hatred" in *Civil Wars*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981. Print.

assumptions of black familial pathology and gender relation, the “diagnosis of damage and pathology”—the conventional wisdom of what Ann duCille terms “the ruination school” of thought when it comes to defining what it means to be “Black in America”¹⁸³ that has loomed over the representation of “emasculated” black men and “domineering black matriarchs” in the novels by black women writers such as Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison.

***Mules and Men* and Hurston’s Narrative Tricksterism**

Mouths don’t empty themselves until the ears are sympathetic and knowing.— Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*.

In this section of the chapter I look into Hurston’s compilation of folkloric material *Mules and Men* (1935) in relation to her engagement of modernist and trickster strategies of narration. In the text, the inside/outside narrative structure enables a trickster-like passage for Hurston, a way to negotiate the different social worlds she depicts. At the same time, by positioning herself as a trickster—a figure of passage that moves between the world of the folk tales and the storytelling context—she also plays with the possibility that the narrative itself is a “play toy” put in the hands of the (white) audience.

Hurston collected the material for *Mules and Men* in the period from 1927 to 1932, under the patronage of Charlotte Osgood Mason. When the book was published in 1935, the final result was more than a collection of folklore—the folkloric material that Hurston had collected weaved

¹⁸³ Ann duCille, "Marriage, Family, and Other 'peculiar Institutions' in African-American Literary History." *American Literary History*. 21.3 (2009): 604-617. Print.

elements of fictional montage, ethnography, travel writing and autobiography.¹⁸⁴ The publication of *Mules and Men* was also significant because it broke away from the tradition of publishing folkloristic text without a context.¹⁸⁵ The consensus among ethnographers is that Hurston's decision to present the folktales in context is important because it signals a shift towards a performance-centered, contextual approach to collecting folklore. She describes her own initial uneasiness about the whole project and having decided to begin her field work in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida:

In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spyglass of Anthropology to look through at that. (Introduction to *Mules and Men* 3)

Hurston's text blends aspects of autobiographical travelogue and ethnographic study. In most of the scholarship surrounding the text, Hurston's project is praised as a departure from a traditional folkloric form. Barbara Johnson argues that one of the most dominant manifestations of the inside/outside ambiguity and structure of the text is Hurston herself who looms as a "threshold

¹⁸⁴ Hurston's anthropological method was in direct contrast to many of her contemporaries who studied a culture by briefly observing the peoples and recording as much empirical data as possible during that short period. Franz Boas, Hurston's professor and the father of modern anthropology, introduced the method of participant/observer, by which the anthropologist observed a culture, rather than the standard detached technique of obtaining information through a personal informant. Boas praised Hurston for her ability to enter into the life of southern black folks "as one of them."

¹⁸⁵ This was so in part because publishers requested that Hurston add contextual information to appeal to a popular audience and make the book longer. However, in a letter to a friend, Hurston gives a different reason; she says that her collection will contain "folk tales with background so that they are in atmosphere and not just stuck out into cold space." (In Terry, Jill. *Traditions, Tricksters, and Zora Neale Hurston's Storytelling*. 1990. Print.)

figure mediating between the all-black town of Eatonville and the big road travelled by passing whites.”¹⁸⁶ The final text of *Mules and Men* and its much argued “framing narratives” are a representation of the dual play between Hurston’s modern first-person perspective and the vernacular theory she will formalize in 1934, in her essay on African American aesthetics, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” There Hurston argues that “Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out, unconsciously for the most part, of course. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life. No little moment passes unadorned” (49). In this passage Hurston states one of the principles that inform the structure of *Mules and Men*. In accord with this principle, the text presents a series of brilliant performances that reflect what Hurston termed the black folk’s “will to adorn.” In it, she also outlines some key ethnographic terms, such as the issue of *angularity* in black life, and in the process she derives a semiotics of black performative expression that is attuned to the West African folk and aesthetic traditions. Hurston explains:

After adornment the next most striking manifestation of the Negro is Angularity.

Everything that he touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we find the same thing. Anyone watching Negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon. Every posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which a European strives to avoid.

The pictures on the walls are hung at deep angles. Furniture is always set at an angle. I have instances of a piece of furniture in the middle of a wall being set with one

¹⁸⁶ Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 318.

end nearer the wall than the other to avoid the simple straight line. (“Characteristics of Negro Expression” 59)

Hurston’s interest in the figurative capacity of black language and the way intimate experiences are translated in rich imagery and layered language is fascinating in this text. She uses folk material as if it were dialogue in a novel, while at the same time presents an image of black folk who employ folklore discourse as powerful tool to mediate power. Her collection reveals and celebrates black folkloric expression as it is conveyed in a richly traditional and individual language. From the rhymes that open several of the stories to the metaphors that greet their inception or completion, *Mules and Men* celebrates linguistic prowess. Proving that she is above all a novelist, Hurston skillfully foregrounds folk metaphors of black culture, as she makes the stories live and imaginative (in her novels, especially *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she will bring this black idiom to its fullest effect). However, the collection also calls into question its own potential to portray what the black “soul lives by” to the larger world. The very performative aspect of the text—the fact that it is published in the form of a narrative rather than anthropological study—suggests that this truly is how black folklore is experienced.

The peculiar narrative structure of *Mules and Men* adds a novelistic quality to the collection as it enables not merely as subjects in an empirical study. This “literariness” reflects the fundamental humanity of folklore expression, especially storytelling, in a way that pure empirical, anthropological report would overshadow. In most cases, the collector would be conspicuously absent in order to maintain the objectivity of the project. Part of the sophistication of the narrative structure of *Mules and Men* is that Hurston is both *inside* and *outside* of the collected corpus of folklore – inside as a participant in the folkways she is collecting and outside

as the persona who tells the story of collecting the stories.¹⁸⁷ The text further explores the ambiguity of the inside/outside relationships, recreating the folkloric tradition of storytelling *per se*, allowing Hurston a trickster-like passage between the center and the periphery of different social worlds. Mikhail Bakhtin clearly articulates the foundations of Hurston's approach to anthropology when he says:

Entry as a living being into a foreign culture, the possibility of seeing the worm through its eyes, is a necessary part of the process of understanding it. But if this were the only aspect of this understanding, it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding-in time, in space, in culture.¹⁸⁸

Representation of language is Hurston's main concern as she moves between the "literate" narratorial voice and the idiomatic black language in which the folktales are recorded. This inherent double-consciousness and double-voicedness in her text is frequently brought up by scholars, even though Hurston herself was ambivalent about the implications. Henry Gates has frequently pointed out Hurston's unique ability as a writer to speak with two voices, indeed to build a polyphony of different voices. In the Afterword to *Mules and Men*, he argues:

It is [Hurston's] usage of a *divided* voice, a double voice unreconciled, that strikes me as her great achievement, a verbal analogue of her double experiences as a woman in a

¹⁸⁷ The inside/outside structure and the narrative frame of *Mules and Men* has been argued frequently by scholars. Among them, Barbara Johnson "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston;" Cheryl Wall in "*Mule and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment;" Pricilla Wald, "Becoming 'Colored'" The Self-Authorized Language of Difference in Zora Neale Hurston."

¹⁸⁸ Emerson, Caryl. *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1999. Print. p.202

male-dominated world and as a black person in a nonblack world, a woman writer's revision of W.E.B. Du Bois's metaphor of 'double consciousness' for the hyphenated African-American. (294)

This inside/outside ambiguity in *Mules and Men* does invite an exploration of the dualities and ambiguities in her text within the multi-directional, double-voiced trickster-like quality of her narrative structure. Moreover, Gates argues that the unresolved tension between the double voices afforded by Hurston's text is an important aspect of her understanding of modernism. As he explains, "Hurston uses the two voices in her text to celebrate the psychological fragmentation both of modernity and of the black American" ("Afterword" 296). However, despite Gates' praise of Hurston's employment of double-voicedness and its relation to a fragmented self, Hurston's attitude towards this inherent double-consciousness is different. In the course of her career (mostly in her earlier fiction, such as the short story "John Redding Goes to Sea") Hurston had searched for different ways to combine the social and performative languages of the black community with the deeply personalized voice of intimate relationships and the excavation of personal identity, thus creating her much lauded double-voiced narrative, but one that's nonetheless affected by what Pavic considers, in his modernist reading of Hurston, her "dilemma of double consciousness" (179). In most of her texts, Hurston renders the characters' interior voices in Standard English while the expressive voices of communal exchanges and dialogues are rendered in the black vernacular. This in turn creates an apparent rift i.e., "the crossroads of double consciousness are reified in stylistic term and characters *think white* but *speak black* in radically disparate languages."¹⁸⁹ Later, as her writing matures, she will slowly complicate this structure, and if not close, at least bridge, the gap between the two voices. She

189

will make the most significant improvement and innovation in her most mature work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where she experiments with philosophical and aesthetic blending of her characters' "interiors lives" and the authorial narrative voice. Thus, through her affirmation and deeply felt identification with black folk expression, world mythology and African diasporic spiritual systems, Hurston transcends the DuBoisian anxiety about the inherent black "two-ness" and establishes creative and philosophical foundations of a specific type of modernism.

Hurston's account of her experience in the "communal underground" is a prime example of an "immersion narrative" in African American literature. In a frequently quoted passage, she points out the implicit theory in a typical trickster-style narration:

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song (Introduction to *Mules and Men* 3).

This is a telling example of Hurston's mastery of the folk verbal philosophy, the embedded signifying in folk telling that masks and subverts language. Throughout *Mules and Men* Hurston reveals layers upon layers of double-voicedness and tricksterism while she herself is able to straddle the double crossroads – the point where the anthropological inside/outside overlaps with the modernist interior/exterior frame of the narratives. Gates also articulated Hurston's achievement by arguing that Hurston "portrays what black people say and think and feel-when no white people are around-in a highly metaphorical and densely lyrical language that is ... far removed from minstrelsy ..." (Afterword 226). For Gates, this Afrocentricity depicted the

identities of Eatonville's people within the town (the center of the culture) rather than in relation to outside communities (the periphery that is the larger American cultural context).

The multi-voicedness that marks the inside/outside relationships in the storytelling in *Mules and Men* is apparent in the following paragraph from the Introduction, where the shifts in pronouns between “they” and “we” exemplifies Hurston’s position as a knowledgeable outsider/insider:¹⁹⁰

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather bed resistance, that is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. (Introduction to *Mules and Men* 3)

The pronoun shift marks the move from the point of view of an anthropological observer to the perspective of a black folklore participant.¹⁹¹ Also, the pronoun combination of “him” or “her” in response to the questions allows for multiplicity in the narrative voice: the pronouns would include a female questioner or a female narrator – an approach that was definitely new in

¹⁹⁰ This connection is frequently drawn by scholars in their analysis of *Mules and Men*, including Barbara Johnson’s “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” as well as studies by Henry Louis Gates, Cheryl A. Wall and others.

¹⁹¹ In my discussion of the shifting perspectives in *Mules and Men* I’m indebted to Jill Terry’s discussion in her dissertation *Traditions, Tricksters, and Zora Neale Hurston's Storytelling*, 1990. Print.

comparison to other scholarly approaches to folklore.¹⁹² In addition, Hurston joins the folklore participants through the first-person plural pronoun, while she identifies “other” questioners as decidedly white and male who “know so little about us.” However, Hurston’s insistence that “the Negro offers a feather bed resistance” reverses the movement, redirecting from an insider who recognizes the one who warns outsiders that they are not going to receive the response they expect. This movement from outside-in and outside-out serves to maintain ambiguity and the much argued multiplicity in the narrative voice. This shifting of perspectives positions Hurston’s persona as a trickster-like character, “Esu’s mouth from which the audible word proceeds, sometimes appears double; Esu’s discourse, metaphorically, is double-voiced (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 7). Hurston and her narrative approach invite a comparison to Legba who “both goes away and stays home so that he can reflect and make possible the daily Fon passage

192 The relative scarcity of woman-centered tales in the oral tradition must have been one of the revelations of Hurston's fieldwork. Although tales about women created by men, many of them virulently misogynistic, exist in some quantity, tales about women told from a female point of view in black folklore are rare. In her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Hurston notes the "scornful attitude towards black women" expressed in black folk songs and tales (64). Yet, she notes they were respected in "real life":

This scornful attitude towards black women receives mouth sanction by the mud-sills. Even on the works and in the Jooks the black man sings disparagingly of black women. They say that she is evil. That she sleeps with her fists doubled up and ready for action. All over they are making a little drama of waking up a yaller [yellow: light, mulatto] wife and a black one.

A man is lying beside his yaller wife and wakes her up. She says to him, "Darling, do you know what I was dreaming when you woke me up?" He says, "No honey, what was you dreaming?" She says, "I dreamt I had done cooked you a big, fine dinner and we was setting down to eat out de same plate and I was setting on yo' lap jus huggin you and kissin you and you was so sweet."

Wake up a black woman, and before you kin git any sense into her she be done up and lammed you over the head four or five times. When you git her quiet she'll say, "Nigger, know whut I was dreamin when you woke me up?"

You say, "No honey, what was you dreamin?" She says, "I dreamt you shook yo' rusty fist under my nose and I split yo' head open wid a axe. ("Characteristics of Negro Expression" 69)

Since also it is mostly men who are at the center of Hurston's model of black folk culture, her later attempts to situate black women within this cultural field remains problematic and debatable (as is the case in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). How women "assert their image and values as women" is not found in the folklore literature because, according to Roger Abrahams, women negotiate for respect in the "apparently spontaneous interpersonal exchanges of everyday interactions" (58)¹⁹². Only apparently spontaneous, black women's presentations in these exchanges are in fact often as formulaic as the more formal performances in which men engage. "Ideally [a woman] has the ability to talk sweet with her infants and peers but talk smart or cold with anyone who might threaten her self-image" (62).

from inside to outside and back again.”¹⁹³ In the text, Hurston, the ethnographer, embodies this figure of passage as she successfully negotiates the intimate social life of southern black folk and the broader social context of American culture. The ability of trickster figures to negotiate between the center of a culture and its circumference (and the broader social context), speak with multiple voices and reverse hierarchies of high/low, power/submission is indicative and similar to the inside/outside ambiguity created by Hurston’s narrative persona, specifically concerning storytelling situations.

In *Mules and Men* Hurston shows that through storytelling all levels of interaction can be turned upside and inside out, while she invites the interplay of trickster-like qualities—mediation, leveling of social hierarchies and multi-voicedness—and positions herself within the narrative structure as an insider to the folkloric experience she is recording, but at the same time helping create during her travels in Polk Country. As an insider, she is able to recognize, identify and share the experience, while maintaining multivocal levels of narrative voice and reversing the hierarchal relationships in various narrative situations. According to studies of tricksters in West African societies, the movement between the center and the periphery through storytelling is one of his/her defining characteristics: “Even when his [the trickster’s] only ritual is the telling of his stories, his work is, above all, synchronous... He moves past society’s circumference to ensure the permanent rediscovery of its center” (Pelton 248).¹⁹⁴ At the same time, this movement allows an “incorporation of the outsider, a leveling of hierarchy, a reversal of statuses” (Babcock 153).

¹⁹³ Pelton, Robert D. *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*. Hermeneutics Ser, No. 8. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. Print, 231.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.,

Hurston's strategy of using masking and signifying indirection contributes to a stylistic ambiguity that subverts any kind of certainty about reading. This allows an author to speak to multiple, culturally polyglot audiences so that the ones she wishes to understand her, will, and the ones she does not wish to understand her, won't. This is the heteroglot quality of the discourse that is employed. To borrow a term from Bakhtin, the discursive simultaneity of heteroglossia is "an author's speech in another language" which will "express authorial intentions but in a refracted," "parodic-travesty way (Bakhtin 55, 58, 59)—Bakhtin in particular refers to the medieval "comic folk art" to illustrate the nature of such "indirect, conditional discourse" (Bakhtin 59). Folklore provides the medium and the material indirect communication and, as such, possesses a unique quality: it resists any kind of censorship or modification by a dominant structure since its mode of transmission is oral. Its intrinsic ability to transform depending on different social contexts, as well as the trickery enabled by a multi-voiced language, imbues folkloric material with what Jacqueline Fulmer calls "built-in subversive potential."¹⁹⁵

The very structure of *Mules and Men* allows the reader to experience one of the most important aspects of the collection. As Barbara Johnson points out "Hurston's very ability to fool us—or to fool us into *thinking* we have been fooled—is itself the only effective way of conveying the rhetoric of the 'lie'" ("Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston" 328). Ultimately, what Hurston's treatment of the folkloric material shows is that rather than simply recording how folk storytelling appears in "the social life of the Negro," the text in fact *re-creates* that social life and its folk expression. In the act of reading we become privy to a "lying session" as we witness the interaction of multiple voices at various narrative

¹⁹⁵ Fulmer, Jacqueline. *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007, 26.

levels. Hurston, the trickster insider/outsider, engages with the audience in Eatonville, but also reaches out into the audiences outside of the American South as she celebrates the “lies” and the complexities of black storytelling.

“He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind”:* *Their Eyes Were Watching God

My analysis thus far focused on Hurston’s artful appropriation of folk verbal philosophy and its implied signifying that provides a playground for language in folk narration. Throughout *Mules and Men* we see Hurston unravel the multilayered, double-voiced and trickster-informed core of black storytelling, while she herself skillfully negotiates the points where the inside/outside dynamics inherent in folk storytelling engages with the modernist interior/exterior framing of the narratives she presents.

Employing knowledge of West African cultural traditions gained from her ethnographic work in Haiti, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston continues her play with double-voicedness in the narrative. Ana Maria Manzanás¹⁹⁶ points out that narratives like Hurston’s (similar to the trickster figure Eshu in Yoruba mythology) assume the quality of *dwelling on the border* of discourse. I follow Manzanás’ line of argument that the resulting double-voicedness in the novel (frequently evoked by critics, Henry Gates among them) is a strategy of deception and “an escape from the scrutinizing gaze of dominant cultures” (4) that Hurston skillfully employs in the novel. It also corresponds to what Kevin Young identifies as a crucial element of black writing, a tradition predicated on an “underground railroad of meaning” in order to survive and redress freedom: the “counterfeit” tradition of “storying” or “lying.” As Young points out “...

¹⁹⁶ Manzanás, Calvo A. M, and Sánchez J. Benito. *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003. Print.

[A]s with money, the language of the counterfeit is both circulating within a dominant power system and also resistant to it... It is a fiction not simply meant to pass along, but also to ease passage.”¹⁹⁷

In this section, I consider an additional exploration of the novel through Hurston’s blending of the discourse of modernity with elements of Black folk culture. In particular, her depiction of Janie’s travels in the novel represents a peculiar experience of modernity that would not necessarily be recognized as such. I also build on Hazel Carby’s argument that the historical conditions giving rise to modernity provoke the discourse on the folk as well. In addition, some of my ideas are informed by post-colonial criticism that relates modernity to modernization, which in turn argues for the recognition of *modernities* in place of *a* global modernity as it is defined by European Enlightenment. While borrowing from ethnography and from the aesthetics of non-Western cultures (creative approaches that are typical of Hurston’s style) are characteristic of a modernist style, these appropriations typically serve to dramatize or add weight to artist's view of modernity at the center. Hurston's approach, on the other hand, reinforces her project of acknowledging the ties that bind the center's experience of modernity to disavowed experiences of the “folk” that for Hurston remains entrenched on the periphery by placing Janie in an ambivalent inside/outside position vis `a vis the (folk) community.

I also extend the investigation to touch upon the novel in relation to literary modernism. My reading is informed by Edward M. Pavic’s identification of Hurston’s brand of modernism as “diasporic modernism” in his study *Crossroads Modernism: Decent and Emergence in African-*

¹⁹⁷ Kevin Young. *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2012. Print. p.31.

American Literary Culture.¹⁹⁸ Hurston seems to have been perfectly aware of what Bakhtin defined as the “dialogic condition,” when she writes that “Mouths don’t empty themselves until the ears are sympathetic and knowing” in *Mules and Men*. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she explores the full implications of this dictum while using it as a strategy of resistance. In the novel, Hurston’s vision through Janie’s eyes is an emphasis on meditations and cultural engagements which are personal and psychological. The two dominant modes and sentiments in the novel are introspection and solitude. The novel revels in modernist emphasis on interiors and withdrawal. Through her ethnographic work and her skills as a writer, Hurston investigates those “underground realms” (Pavlic 175) where social interaction and personal meditation are intertwined in a communal space that offers possibilities for encounters with black modernity. For Pavlic, African American modernists “carve underground spaces in which above-ground pressures are held at bay. In these enclaves they recast the intersection of black creative consciousness and American modernity. Their visions and revisions depend on seclusion and emphasize meditations whose cultural engagements are overwhelmingly personal and psychological.”¹⁹⁹

Their Eyes Were Watching God begins with Janie telling her dear friend, Pheoby Watson, about what has happened in the years since she left Eatonville, a telling that takes place during the course of an evening while they sit on the front porch. As Edward Pavlic explains it “in a shifting play of identity, the narrative converts each reader into a Pheoby” (“Papa Legba...” 69). Much has been written regarding Janie’s search for a voice (and a self) through the particular

¹⁹⁸ Several studies in the 1980s and 1990s discuss black culture’s diasporic legacies and its complex relationship to American modernity, but few of them actually touch upon literary modernism. Henry Louis Gates makes no mention of it in the *Signifying Monkey*. Another influential text, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* by Paul Gilroy an outstanding analysis of the transnational character of black culture, but even Gilroy does not offer an in-depth consideration of black literary modernism.

¹⁹⁹ Edward M. Pavlic. *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African- American Literary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. p.175.

structure of the novel, a story within a story.²⁰⁰ I find that Hurston's imagined account of Janie's inner life also offers deeper understanding of a modern self which claims to *know itself*. The narrative also pays careful attention to a folk expression (with its embedded signifying and duality) around which this black cultural *self* is constituted.

An interesting course of investigation of Janie's search for voice, or language to render her desires, can be traced through an analysis of the "kissing" metaphor implied in the phrase "mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 17). For a better understanding of the whole context, I reproduce below two important passages in the novel when Janie begins her narration to Pheoby:

"Ah don't mean to bother wid telling' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just the same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf."

"If you so desire Ah'll tell'em what you tell me to tell'em." (17)

"Pheoby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from that standpoint."

Time makes everything old so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked. (19)

Two things need to be pointed out: first, that Janie refuses to recount her story to the public "down on the muck" (the folk) but rather opts for the intimacy of the space "the fresh young

²⁰⁰ See Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, Barbara Johnson, etc.

darkness” created by sharing story with a friend; second, she counts on her friend to pass on the story “you can tell ’em what Ah say if you wants.”

The kissing metaphor figures as an important symbol in the novel. Critics have commented on the friendship between Janie and Pheoby, and some have commented on the possibility of lesbian eroticism implied in the kissing passages. Lorraine Bethel argues that, “Hurston’s vision is not only woman-identified, but also lesbian in that it acknowledges and asserts the validity of primary love relationships between women” (*But Some of Us Are Brave* 187). Bethel also points out that this intimacy speaks to the novel’s claim to traditional orality: “In presenting Janie’s story as a narrative related by herself to her best Black woman friend, Hurston is able to draw upon the rich oral legacy of Black female storytelling and mythmaking” (180). While Hurston’s fellow black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance remain subdued and restrained within the confines of the genre of the “passing” narrative and resorts to subversive rhetorical disguises and thematic maneuvers to write about female sexuality, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston openly insists on Janie’s right to erotic pleasure, thus taking on the complex sexual politics of the time.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ In order to understand the boldness and transgressions of Hurston’s project of representing female desire against the “sentimentality” that was in vogue at the time, we must consider the literary preoccupations with the treatment of desire and voice in the Harlem Renaissance. According to the black publication guidelines written by George Schuyler in 1929, which circulated among black publishers in the Harlem Renaissance, the art that was produced was not to perpetuate any kind of racist stereotypes of primitivism and sexualized behavior: “Nothing that casts the least reflection on contemporary moral or sex standards will be allowed. Keep away from the erotic!...The heroine should always be beautiful and desirable, sincere and virtuous....The heroine should be of the brown-skin type” (qtd. in *The Signifying Monkey*). While a number of black male writers did explore questions of sexuality, these restrictions were much more rigorously applied to women writers. Also, the sources for Hurston’s books, as well as her imagination, are very different from those of other black women writers who are her contemporaries. Feminist critics see precisely Hurston’s appropriation of the blues aesthetic as an emancipatory release from the early literary conventions available to women writers in the Harlem Renaissance. Cheryl Wall writes in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*:

No tragic mulattoes people her [Hurston’s] fiction. Characters do not ponder emotional dilemmas while pouring tea. Plots do not resolve themselves in sentimental clichés. The reasons for these differences are several, but one of the most important is suggested by the affinity between Hurston’s aesthetic and that of

Janie's retelling of her private story in the intimate space shared by another woman in the novel can be read in the typical pattern of the black storytelling tradition in which the painful, personal experiences are translated in a shared experience of re-telling and "re-membering" (to borrow a term from Morrison).²⁰² This is the context that determines Janie's refusal to tell her story directly to the community, a refusal that distinguishes her individual story from any directly-told and communally-shared folktale. In a literary context, in the process of transmitting Janie's story, Hurston requires an instrument of mediation between her protagonist and the folk, and a role that Janie's friend Pheoby plays skillfully. When Janie decides to tell her story through her friend—"Mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (5), she says—Hurston creates a figure for the form of the novel, a fictional world that can mediate and perhaps resolve the tension that exists in the difference between the socially constructed identities of "woman" and "intellectual" and the act of representing the folk.

The dual meaning of talking and kissing implied in the phrase "my tongue is in my friend's mouth" evokes a relationship of discursive reciprocity that defines what Carla Kaplan calls the "ethos of this novel's erotics of talk" ("The Erotics of Talk" 141). The interesting point is that Hurston foregrounds female sexuality and eroticism in an act of narrating a story. While the phrase can have a clearly sexual connotation, at the same time it expresses Janie's trust in her

the blues singer. Zora Neale Hurston was the one literary woman who was free to embrace Bessie Smith's art, who was also heir to the legacy evoked in the blues. (140)

Alice Walker also sees Hurston as part of a different tradition than the literary milieu of the Harlem Renaissance dominated by men: "In my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora *belongs* in the tradition of black women singers, rather than among 'the literati'" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 91).

²⁰² Ralph Ellison argued that there is a sense of wholeness and being part of an evolving larger culture in those black texts that are most intimately informed by the oral tradition, as it is implied throughout *Shadow and Act*, "on its profoundest level American experience is of a whole"; that behind John Henry is Hercules," that behind a specific folk expression there is "the long tradition of storytelling . . . of myth." Thus when Ellison uses black folklore in his fiction, he consciously adapts it to the myths of the "larger" American and Western cultures (in a vein similar to Morrison's appropriation of folk heroes as it was argued in Chapter Two).

friend to understand, and thus *interpret*, Janie's story for her. As Kaplan concludes: "This figuration goes beyond "female bonding" to suggest not only the intimate familiarity of their friendship and its erotic tracings, but also both the intimacy and eros necessary for a discursive 'self-revelation.' It is hard to imagine a more apt expression of an eroticized image of competent listening and satisfying talk" (142). Steven C. Tracy's suggestion in "From Modernism to Postmodernism: Black literature at the Crossroads" that Janie is part of a "tradition of the sassy and independent female blues singer, who expose[s] frank sexual feelings and issues of domestic abuse... in a public forum"²⁰³ invites a reading of Zora Neale Hurston's heroine as an expression of such a black aesthetics—one that combines the musical, the literary and the vernacular. If we decide to read Janie as the "sassy, independent, assertive woman" then indeed the darkness surrounding the porch where she and Phoeby are conversing mirrors the intimate atmosphere one associates with the stage on which a blues singer performs. However, Janie's "blues song," has a singular audience—her female friend. While she refuses to tell the story to the hostile or uncomprehending audience represented by the folks of Eatonville who do not understand "mouf kissing," she trusts Phoeby (the ideal listener/reader of her story) to re-tell it. As other critics have pointed out, Hurston revises the traditional romantic narrative with Janie—taking away her hero-lover (Tea Cake dies) and pairing her with a female friend-listener. We must not forget, at the same time, that in this private moment between the two, she also invites/trusts us, the readers, to be good listeners, different from the idealized, romanticized, (even eroticized) friend, but nonetheless privy to Janie's private story. The sum of that story, as Janie concludes in the end, is a lesson of love: "... you must tell 'em dat love ain't something lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touches. Love is lak de sea. It's uh

²⁰³ Steven C. Tracy "From Modernism to Postmodernism: Black Literature at the Crossroads" in Graham, Maryemma. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore" (284). In these last pages of the story she is narrating to Phoeby, we hear Janie finding her language to name her desire. By the last page of the novel, she retreats into a "finished silence," so that (for the first time in the novel) we can enter Janie's consciousness and hear her *thoughts* rendered through the indirect free speech of a narrator. This Janie, liberated from the community's hypocritical gaze, finally invites the horizon (her desires) and her soul (her *self*) and blends them in a remarkable synthesis of self-knowledge: "She pulled in the horizon like a great fish-net. So much of life in its meshes. She called in her soul to come and see" (286). Just like the folk songs that Hurston collected and studied—"everlasting love is a lie; love is made and 'unmade'; one welcomes it when and whenever it is found"—the folk ethos is unmistakable in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and in the palimpsestic layers of the narrative that has absorbed the voices of field songs, groups seculars, hollers, proverbial wisdom, folk wisdom, protests, laments that tell the complex story of the black experience.

The role of the listener in the novel is as important as an investigation of the folk elements in the novel. A closer look at the "porch dynamics" reveals further Hurston's natural talent for subversion when she reverses and complicates the roles that Janie plays as an insider/outsider in the "porch" scenes. Hurston's unique approach to collecting folklore in *Mules and Men* reveals the contradictions inherent in the processes through which an intellectual, and a woman, can instruct a community about what is outside of their social consciousness. In her reading of the novel, following a similar argument, Hazel Carby suggests that the problem that frames the novel—the concluding metaphor of the horizon as a "great fish-net" with "so much of life in its meshes" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 184) that Janie pulls in and drapes around herself "is an appropriate image for a writer who can recreate and represent a social order in her

narrative” (86). But what this metaphor also affirms, Carby concludes, “is the distance between the act of representation and the subjects produced through that act of representation. The assertion of autonomy implicit in this figuration of a discourse that exists only for the pleasure of the self displaces the folk as community utterly and irrevocably” (“The Politics of Fiction... 86). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Carby further argues “a listening *audience* is established for the narrative self, whereas in *Mules and Men* Hurston constructs a listening *anthropological* subject” (84). Janie assumes the subject position of intellectual (that Hurston embodies in *Mules*), and she is the only one that has the capacity to travel outside of the community. Hurston’s understanding is that through her travels knowledge can be brought back into the community—Janie confides to Phoeby that “Ah know exactly what Ah got to tell yuh, but it’s hard to know where to start at” (*Their Eyes*...181). Thus it is only as an intellectual that Janie can create a listening subject (Phoeby), grant individual consciousness, and produce understanding—the cultural meanings without which the tale is useless to the community—“taint no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it," (180) Janie tells Pheoby. What the novel also reveals is the fact that the author's position as intellectual is reproduced through the relationship between Janie and the folk. In *Mules and Men*, the porch is an arena of authentic storytelling, while in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as Carby argues “the porch is a contested territory.”²⁰⁴ In *Mules and Men* the anthropological self is positioned on a figuratively unified porch, primarily as a listener and an ethnographer (Hurston’s role). In the novel the anthropological role of listener is embedded in the folk as community and the role of recorder of the narrative is located in the mediator, Pheoby.

²⁰⁴ Hazel Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk : Zora Neale Hurston” in Cheryl A. Wall. *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

Janie's ownership of the porch—despite the suggestion by Hurston that she fights to *own her voice* while she interacts with the porch folk—is an important factor that reveals the novel's central dynamics. Hurston was well aware of the importance of material ownership for black women. In the case of her anthropological work, she herself could not claim ownership of the material—it was commissioned and owned by her patron Mrs. Osgood Mason. However, her frequent trips to the Caribbean were sponsored by Hurston's own Guggenheim grant, during which she penned her masterpiece, thus perhaps, doubly enjoying the pleasure of *owning* her words both figuratively and literally. Providing her heroine with a financial freedom that Hurston prized as an author reinforces the division between Janie and the folk. Even though Janie's physical ownership of the porch is important for the narrative, it “permeates it with a bourgeois discourse that differentiates her from the folk as community” (Carby 86) – a position that is not only Janie's but Hurston's as well.

A second issue related to the “ownership” of the porch as a site of power (whether materialistic or intellectual) is the question of how a woman can write her story within a site that is male-dominated and subjected to a patriarchal order. In the novel, the “porch” is an important verbal space (carnivalized to some extent), at the same time public and private, where Janie “struggles to gain a voice” in a culture that places a premium on speaking. The folk as a group play the role of chorus or commentators giving their own interpretations to the actions of the main characters. Also, the porch sitters in front of Joe Stark's store are mostly men. The women usually gather on the porch of someone's home, maybe Pheoby Watson's, to gossip. The men's excuse to be on the store porch is to play checkers or to watch a game of checkers being played.

The real reason, of course, is to talk and tease or “play the dozens.”²⁰⁵ This, and many other examples of verbal play or signifyin(g) in black culture enable the speaker to pose challenges and oppositional verbal self-assertions.

One of the most compelling aspects of the novel is Hurston’s appropriation of black vernacular discourse. While it replicates the rhythms and sounds of oral narration in the novel, at the same time it creates the rift between Janie and the community, since Joe Starks, Janie’s husband, forbids her to partake in its signifying rituals. Another reason why Janie is denied access to the expressive and discursive rituals of Eatonville is her gender.²⁰⁶ Janie’s struggle for a voice is related to her attempts to grasp and internalize the tropes of black vernacular in order to be able to participate in the storytelling and signifying sessions on the front porch of her husband’s store. As Gates points out “[f]or Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self” (“Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text” 75).

Hazel Carby, one of the feminist critics and theorists who has been openly critical of the attention Hurston’s life and work have received, in her frequently referenced essay, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk”(1990) suggests that Hurston is being “re-read” to “produce cultural meanings” (29). She also revisits the issue of cultural authenticity in relation to Hurston’s masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and suggests that the root of the ever-increasing interest in Hurston and a glorification of a simpler, rural past lies in the desire to avoid acknowledging the contemporary crisis of black urban America. She explains:

²⁰⁵ Rooted in black vernacular, playing the dozens is a subversive type of wordplay in which the oppressed (African Americans) use the language of the oppressor (Whites) against them without directly confronting or openly challenging the oppressor. Ranging from mildly insulting to overtly obscene, playing the dozens is a coded language that uses puns, hyperbole, humor, irony, repetition, reversal, and understatement to score points, and often includes sexual innuendo and references to “your mama.”

We need to return to the question why, at this particular moment in our society, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become such a privileged text. Why is there a shared assumption that we should read the novel as a positive, holistic, celebration of black life? Why is it considered necessary that the novel produce cultural meanings of authenticity, and how does cultural authenticity come to be situated so exclusively in the rural folk?

(89)

Undoubtedly a womanist and feminist desire to recover Hurston's neglected cultural presence has contributed greatly to the "excavation" of her work during the twentieth century. What Carby's question suggests, raised in the last decade of the twentieth century, is that the complexity of cultural transformation perceived as the search for black cultural authenticity is still one of the key questions surrounding Hurston's scholarship. She sees the privileging of Hurston's masterpiece in relation to the specific cultural moment which for her is marked by an "intense urban crisis" when "large parts of black urban America under siege; the number of black males in jail in the 1980s doubled; the news media have recently confirmed what has been obvious to many of us for some time—that one in four young black males are in prison, on probation, on parole, or awaiting trial; and young black children face the prospect of little, inadequate, or no health care" (89).

From a twenty-first century vantage point, Carby's criticism seems ungrounded, since many contemporary black women writers in the meantime have explored urban landscapes to critical acclaim, thus bringing into question her assertion that the overwhelming privileging of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* should be read as a symptom of some form of cultural "escapism." The important aspect of Hurston's cultural and literary relevance, and one of the guiding questions in my inclusion of her body of work in this dissertation, is her undeniable

influence on the establishment of a black literary tradition founded on signifying revisions and recuperations. I would like to conclude with a brief comparison between Hurston's 1937 novel and Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*, and their respective rhetorical strategies. Putting these two texts together provides a telling cultural frisson. Of course, volumes have been written on Alice Walker's signifying on Hurston in *The Color Purple*—such a comparative analysis indeed would deserve a chapter of its own.²⁰⁷ What is of particular interest for me in the Morrison/Hurston parallel is the authors' persistent preoccupation with the recuperation of the oral (vernacular) quality of storytelling in a novelistic form and the revisiting of the Talking Book trope, particularly given the time span between the publications of each novel. While in Hurston's novel, Janie can rely only on her friend's mediation of her orally transmitted story to pass it on and interpret it on her behalf to the folk, Morrison's protagonist Florens literally inscribes her story on the walls of the master's house. Both texts contain the element of confession and in both narratives the book itself *is* the confession, thus extending the tradition of "the speakerly text" that Gates defined as "a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed to 'emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns' of actual speech and produce the 'illusion of oral narration'" ("Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Test" 72). As a bonafide example of black intertextuality (understood in Gates's terms), the two narratives engage in an act of literary revision that "worries the line" (to borrow a term from Cheryl Wall) and also one that invites the emerging of a new perspective in the interaction with a revisited "mother" text. Arguing that the trope of the Talking Book—one born in the vernacular folk tradition and carried over into written black literature—is one of the fundamental ideas that inform black writing, Gates cites one of the first black women writers, Rebecca Jackson, who in

²⁰⁷ Of course, Henry Louis Gate as well dedicates a large portion of his study *The Signifying Monkey* tracing the intertextual links and revisions among Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, etc.

her 1830-32 autobiography appropriates this trope as a critique “of her black male antecedents’ usages because she refigures the trope in terms of male domination of a female’s voice and her quest for literacy” (130).²⁰⁸ Gates also makes the point that “not only does this shared but revised trope argue forcefully that blacks were intent on placing their individual and collective voices in the text of Western letters, but also that even the earliest writers of the Anglo-African tradition read each other’s texts and grounded these texts in what soon became a tradition”(131).²⁰⁹ In this respect, the process of re-visiting, recording, repeating, revising, clarifying, and inverting familiar themes, tropes and cultural forms is at the same time an act of homage and a critical undertaking. A careful consideration of lineage and intertextuality in this case goes beyond a discussion of mere literary influence and indebtedness. Morrison (or Walker) signifying on Hurston makes these novels organically bound in a complex process of revision, reimagining, critique, subversion, and more importantly, recuperation of a literary tradition and solidifying a critical epistemology of literary matrilineage. In that sense a “privileging” of a canonical text has more to do with the imperatives of extending the line between an oral tradition, whose roots have long been obscured and obliterated, and a written tradition.

I bring this line of argument at the end to highlight the undeniable relevance of Hurston’s ethnographic and artistic project for African American culture, especially for the literary tradition of black women’s writing. In a dissertation like this— one that begins with an exploration of culture heroes disguised as animal tricksters or transgressive badmen— an inclusion of Hurston’s work, even though I do not trace her treatment of culture heroes in her writing, seemed crucial. I have aimed to prove that Hurston indeed is a modernist in her

²⁰⁸ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p.130.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

outlook—she rightfully belongs to that group that Locke calls “modernists among the modern.”²¹⁰ Her acute awareness of the “performative” potential of black art and folklore, evident both in her ethnographic and artistic projects, her constant preoccupation with preserving the black folk tradition and its modes of expression, her narrative rendition of the collective experience of displacement of black Americans who were left on the margins of American modernization, contribute to a creation of a particular style of counternarratives that respond to the processes of assimilation and American modernity. Moreover, Hurston’s work is continually invested in understanding how race and language played a role in shaping the intellectual and literary climate of the 1920s and 1930s; how language encoded racial division; and above all, she understood the cultural currency of black dialect for American modernists in a time when “dialect became the prototype for the most radical representational strategies of English-language modernism.”²¹¹

²¹⁰ Quoted in *The Dialect of Modernism*, Michael North, p. 177.

²¹¹ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, Preface.

CHAPTER FIVE

Different Horizons: Macedonian Traditions of the Heroic

"On the Hill of the Dog near Prilep Marko fought for days. Each time he cut an enemy in two the two halves became two other men. Marko saw that all his fighting would come to nothing, shod his horse backwards, set drums beating in the wind, so no-one should know the castle was empty, and disappeared into the night." --Macedonian folktale

My grandmother used to know by heart the entire lyrics of [traditional Macedonian] songs with the preciseness of a garden keeper who differentiates between all the types of butterflies, although I never saw her write a single sentence. And maybe that is why she remembered the lyrics, because she never wrote them down. In the Balkans people are buried with their heads towards the East, but the heads of everyone alive here is turned towards the West. The hand from the compass of great expectations and disappointments is spinning hastily towards the west and people explain their fidelity to their country where they were born as a missed opportunity. The awareness of a different sensibility came to me first by means of sound, through the different cries of joy and pain, through the different silences that split the words. From my childhood I have listened to the sounds that were coming from the irregular eastern rhythms and the profound Byzantine melodies, but at the same time I opened my mind for the powerful recitals of Coltrane or Miles Davis, of Steve Reich or Arvo Pärt, of the enthusiastic freshness of the indie-rock bands. Into this natural clash of the different musical heritages I found the only border that could be noiselessly crossed. --Nikola Madzirov, Macedonian poet²¹²

Racially, the epic hero is foreordained to have epic potential stripped away and the status of the disreputable trickster be the limits of his upward aspirations. --Gregory Rutledge, "One Epic Turn Deserves Another."²¹³

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, the focus was mainly on themes and questions that foreground the representation of black culture heroes in the literary traditions and in the cultural horizons of African American consciousness. In this final chapter, I engage in an analysis of a rich storytelling tradition outside of the US: the Macedonian folk tradition and its bevy of folk heroes. I wanted to broaden the scope of the dissertation to include another national

²¹²<http://www.californiapoetics.org/interviews/756/an-interview-with-nikola-madzirov>.

²¹³ Gregory E. Rutledge. "One Epic Turn Deserves Another." August 2006, p.7.

literature since the parallels between the two traditions—the African American (the one I study) and Macedonian (the one I grew up in)—seem to reveal exciting similarities.

So far in my dissertation I have explored two specific aspects of African American culture in which the long standing trickster tradition of duplicity has left its indelible mark: 1) Signifyin(g) or the “the double talk of resistance” inherent in literary Black discourse; and 2) the role that trickster heroes play as culture-builders. The trickster principle, which African Americans have retained as part of the African vernacular heritage, represents one possible cultural prototype that they have adopted (and adapted) as a means of survival. In a system which was not of their making (American chattel slavery), African American men and women had to invent a coded, rhetorical strategy of “double-voicedness” that is not only a tactic for survival, but also triumph. Thus in folklore and the written literature, Signifyin(g) develops as a rhetorical trope of subversion in African American discourse since in the constant political and economic control of others, the usefulness of learning how to use wariness and counteractive devices of wit became a way of surviving and enduring.

In the Macedonian oral tradition, while undoubtedly the historical circumstances are different, the inherent *discourse of trickery*—one that, in a similar vein to the African American tradition, has its roots in an oral tradition that celebrates the victories of a trickster-type hero—coupled with a vernacular gift for transcending hardship through the vehicles of jest, humor and laughter, serve a poignantly similar purpose in this rich folk tradition: a means for a historically subjugated nation to test the limits of dominance and subvert power through improvisational creativity of resistance, wit and duplicity.

Another common thread is that both traditions rely on the appeal of trickster-like folk heroes as culture-building figures and vehicles for negotiating alterity. In both cases, we see a continuum of trickster figures as they change in response to varying historical and cultural conditions. In the decades following emancipation, circumstances change and a decidedly more daring African American trickster emerges. The evolution of the African American trickster moves from a “weak” animal trickster of the folktales and slave narratives (the Signifying monkey) to a more robust and more violent version as exemplified in the badman (Stagolee) cultural narrative. I have aimed to show in the first two chapters that, as they morph from one representation to the next, trickster heroes come to represent communal self-assertion and a counter-modernity response to America’s intent to rationalize slavery and move towards modernization. In the Macedonian tradition, the epic hero-turned trickster, King Marko, wages a centuries long struggle against an evil foreigner, “the Black Arab,” a figure that I argue, is in itself instrumental in enabling the double-voiced mode of folk narration. I further trace the permutations of the epic heroes, King Marko and Bolen Doychin (always projected as incarnation of “the good” against the figure of the colonizing “Other”) in contemporary Macedonian literature.

Ultimately, what my analysis of both traditions reveals is that there is indeed a thin line between an epic hero (the “valorized” figure) and a trickster (the “marginalized” figure) that is easily crossed in both cultures. The hero proper in both traditions is to some extent an enabling trickster that provides relief from a harsh reality. However, since a trickster is by definition a *non-heroic* figure—that is if by “hero” we mean someone who muscles his way through the ranks of enemies, whose stamina and grit overcome all odds, who perseveres and suffers and wins—the convergence of trickster and hero arises as an imaginative leap under the rigors of

slavery (chattel slavery in the US and Ottoman colonization of the Balkans²¹⁴) and its aftermath. The “epic trickster” paradigm is a useful critical tool in both traditions. In the Macedonian tradition we can identify a particular instance in the culture’s life when the survival wit of a *trickster* and the culture building potential of an *epic hero* are conjured and then blended together, in what is recognized as a metamorphosis of the hero in an effort to transcend the reality of continuing subjugation and crisis of national identity.

In addition to the tracing of an epic hero/ trickster convergence, a comparative study of African American and Macedonian creative interactions between the vernacular and the written mode of storytelling, also reveals an engaging process of literary revision (or intertextuality) that plays a crucial role in the establishment of a literary tradition. The complex cultural work required in the tracing, re-tracing and re-claiming of an oral, unwritten segment of a culture’s history is the first step in the act of piecing together the fragments of a national narrative of resistance. A study like this also helps identify specific historic processes that govern the re-

²¹⁴ The interlocking principles of subjugation of the people ruled by the Ottomans were complex. In the Balkans, historians frequently refer to Ottoman rule as “Ottoman slavery” though it had different manifestations than the institution of slavery as it is defined in other parts of the world. This system of subjugation relied mainly on brutal collection of land tax, enforcement of labor dues, violent military recruitment of youth and religious prosecution. On a much deeper psychological level, enslavement most instance, when recruits for the military were needed, Christian boys were confiscated from the population as slaves and converted to Islam. While there were no regular timetables or set quotas, perhaps a thousand boys were taken on average per year. As slaves, these boys became absolute dependents of the sultan. They were not used for the army alone: after growing up and being trained, they took on all kinds of roles in the imperial establishment. As far as religious prosecution went, Islam separated the world and its inhabitants into two zones: the world of Islam and the world of non-Muslim heretics. Distinctions of ethnic nationality were not important. The lives of the mass of population under the Ottoman system were tightly controlled, defined and divided. Place of residence also affected the rights of the common people. Peasants could not leave their land and move into cities, because the Turks feared that the countryside would be depopulated. City life was attractive because urban dwellers were exempt from certain taxes and labor dues, and from auxiliary military duties (service as wagon-drivers, for example). Peasants paid taxes in kind: about a tenth of their produce went to their timariot landlord. Much of the rest of their crop was purchased by the state at a low price to feed the urban poor. Villages were liable for some duties as a community, including cash rent for use of the sultan's land, and had to contribute labor to work the timariot's estate (Western European peasants were liable for similar but larger burdens at this time). Mountain areas unsuited for agriculture were granted to nomadic tribes who paid taxes in kind: butter, yogurt, oil, cheese and other foods needed to feed the cities or the army.

shaping of cultural memory and a forging of literary tradition that thrives on the epic potential of its folk culture heroes.

From Epic Hero to Trickster

I begin my analysis with an investigation of the historical and cultural circumstances that have provided the context for the specific “transformation” of the strong and daring epic folk hero, King Marko, into a trickster of mediation and cunning, evident in the folktales, and carried over into the national literary canon in the twentieth century. Perpetual conquest, political, cultural and religious upheavals have had a significant impact on the development of Macedonian sense of national and ethnic identity that is portrayed in the oral folk tradition. The harsh living conditions under Ottoman rule, the on-going identity crisis and the continuing struggle to simply preserve an identifying national culture in contact with European modernity has led to creation of an artistic expression marked by these circumstances and an oral tradition abundant with motifs born in the country’s long history of conquest and subjugation. This particularly accounts for folktales and songs created during Ottoman rule,²¹⁵ spanning over five centuries (from the fourteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century—a distinct oral tradition marked by the Macedonians’ struggle to preserve their identifying national features, Slavic cultural background, the Macedonian language and Christian beliefs, against the influence of Islam. This continual

²¹⁵ The Ottoman Empire was one of the largest and longest lasting empires in history. At the height of its power, in the 16th and 17th centuries, it controlled territory in southeast Europe, western Asia, and North Africa. It consisted of twenty-nine provinces and numerous vassal states, some of which were later absorbed into the empire, while others were granted various types of autonomy during the course of centuries. One of the crucial events for the history of the Balkans is the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 which effectively marked the end of Serbian (Christian) power in the region, paving the way for Ottoman (Islamic) expansion into Europe. Part of the territories in the Balkans (such as Thessaloniki, Macedonia and Kosovo) were temporarily lost after 1402, but were later recovered by Murad II between the 1430s and 1450s and remained under Ottoman rule until the First Balkan War in 1912. Previously, at the Congress of Berlin (1878) the Ottoman Empire regained territories that the previous treaty had given to the Principality of Bulgaria, most notably Macedonia, thus setting up a strong revanchist demand in Bulgaria that in 1912 led to the First Balkan War in which the Ottomans were defeated and lost nearly all of Europe.

grappling with the presence of a colonizer will translate into the folklore as an antagonistic yearning to preserve one's own national identity while negotiating the Other's.²¹⁶ Therefore, the image of the Macedonian (Slavic and Christian) hero in the folk tradition is frequently built in stark opposition to different ethnic groups—Turks, Arabs, Albanians, Roma and so forth—and this ethnical and nationalistic aspect is acknowledged as one of the most significant features of Macedonian folklore in general.

This is by no means a uniquely Macedonian phenomenon since it is a feature in various European vernacular traditions. It particularly becomes a salient component of the folk imagination during the Romantic period when ethnic identity was often actualized at a point of comparison in the clash with “outsiders” who do not belong. Henni Ilomaki argues that wars and armed conflicts are also often that point of contact with foreigners, and in his view, the vernacular tradition is a vehicle for pointing out the contradiction between the enemy and us, strengthening the feeling of sameness within one's own society. He concludes that this initiates the process of becoming “ethnically conscious” (“The War between Us and the Other” 103–105).

While still grappling with a colonizing past, Macedonian cultural production in the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century—as the Ottoman empire begins to decline—is marked by an acute sense of *national awakening* and the need to re-inscribe the borders of *cultural ownership*. This becomes an ever pressing need since a new reality becomes more

²¹⁶ Of course this sort of nationalistic and antagonistic self-definition is recognized as a larger Balkan syndrome. For instance, neighboring Serbs have had to deal with their sense of nationhood through a painful (constant) re-memory of an un-victorious past. The infamous defeat of the Serbs by the Ottomans at the field of Kosovo in 1389 is a crucial, defining moment for Serbian, but also Balkan history. As a result of the defeat and the gruesome and bloody battle that would wipe out Serbian nobility and knights, from that point on Serbia would continue to exist as “a peasant nation”—some would argue that the nationalistic, often vulgar nature of Serbian politics in modern times is to large extend a result of that long cultural legacy of the Kosovo “defeat.” It is also of great significance the fact that enshrined in national legends and epic poetry, the battle of Kosovo encapsulates and defines to this day Serbian national identity: the history of the battle – or rather legend-- of Kosovo has made Serbs remember who they are as a nation largely by remembering their enemies.

pronounced in the aftermath of the Ottoman empire's collapse: the ability to claim and maintain the country's national borders is constantly undermined by Macedonia's neighbors—Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. This turn to cultural demarcation is followed by an inquisitive and epic return to the ethnically marked past and a profound interest in recording cultural heritage. The Macedonian nineteenth century signally adopts Western European Romantic conventions and does so in a specific and regional socio-cultural context. In fact, the cultural production in this century bears the marks of two “systems”: on the one hand, it manifests traits of European Romanticism, and on the other, is considered part of (and is defined by) other multi-layered cultural systems—Slavo-ponic, Church Slavonic, Post-Byzantine or Late Ottoman—to which it geographically belongs. As this rise of “ethnocentric cultural awareness” in the Balkans and the consolidation of widespread movements aimed at securing linguistic, national and church autonomy (of Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian provenance) become more prominent towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, opposition to the resolution of the “Macedonian issue” and the nation's move towards cultural self-identification becomes more pronounced. The project of recording (thus claiming ownership) of the oral folklore tradition and the hybridization of literary genres that is affected by this process—narrative poems that glorify epic heroes; erasure of the borders between the recording of orally transmitted literature and authored texts; the search for new linguistic standards—become imperative, heralded by this bolder move towards defining national and cultural belonging.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ In Macedonia, Dimitar (1810-1862) and Konstantin (1830-1862) Miladinovci from Struga, are considered major figures in the process of systematizing Macedonian cultural heritage, which included the gathering of folkloric, ethnographic and literary materials. However, this accumulative process had been going on for several centuries. It begins with the publication of the ‘Second Gospel’ of the Macedonians, A Collection of [Bulgarian] Folk Poems in 1861; this project continued until the end of the 19th century and marks the first generation of Macedonian Enlightenment: Joakim Krchoski (1717-1820), Kiril Pejchinovic (1770-1845), J. Hadzi Konstantinov Dzinot (1818-1882), than younger representatives Kuzman Sapkarev (1834-1909), Rajko Zinzifov (1839-1877), the brothers Konstantin (1826-1897) and Andrea (1837-1897) Petkovic, Marko Cepenkov (1829-1920), Stefan Verkovic (1821-

The *epic* tradition and the creating of epic songs and narratives, in particular, plays an important role in this process. These types of grand epic narratives in the oral tradition are frequently palimpsestic creations, containing sediments of fragmented, distant events (to some extent mythologized) that portend to tell the nation's history. This "version of history" is of course appealing to the folk imagination, in particular since its main focus, the valorized epic hero (in all his hyperbolized might and glory), presents an optimistic view for the culture. An epic is, after all, "a celebration of greatness and a 'bar of history' overcome."²¹⁸ At its core, epics combine history and tale, fact and fancy, and worlds of reality and fantasy and become the grand summation of the culture since they take major turning points in history (always with valorized historical or non-historical figures who symbolize these turning points) and link them to tradition.

While the urgency of recording them becomes prominent in the nineteenth century, Macedonian folk epic songs, like other South Slav epics, have been circulating (as folklore) for several centuries, dating as late as the fourteenth century. The prevalent themes in the epic folk tradition, conquest and dispossession, coupled with the common trope of glorification of the hero, repeatedly depicted as fearless, invincible, honest, idealistic and always victorious, is marked by exceptional pathos, tragedy, melodrama, epic glorification and tale-like outcomes. The genre that is most common in this period is the folk epic song—a form of a "cultural narrative" that emphasizes "more or less stable" resemblances and differences often connected to "myths" of the national culture to which the folk tradition belongs. For Macedonian scholars and ethnographers, the rich folk tradition of songs that celebrate a charismatic hero deserves in many

1893). (Katica Kulafkova, Foreword to "Macedonian Poetry from Romanticism to Post-Modernism" Chapter in Anthology of 19th and 20th Century Macedonian Poetry, editors Georgi Stardelov et al. International PEN)

²¹⁸ "The Epic Trickster: From Sunjata to Jim Crow", Gregory Rutledge, p. 304.

respects the label “epic” due to their formal resemblance to the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.²¹⁹ However, in the Balkan context, these “epics” (frequently referred to as “the founding myths of a nation”) are shared by neighboring countries and nations. The “cultural work” that these folk creations perform is related to a verbalization of certain mythic nuclei—for instance, in Balkan context, the nucleus of the “hero” would not be as relevant in the absence of an “epic form” that has contributed to the creation of that *culturally marked* mental representation of the hero.

A significant folk figure in the Macedonian vernacular tradition that first emerges in the fourteenth century²²⁰ (but whose fame and notoriety expanded over several centuries) is Marko Krale (King Marko). Centuries-old local folklore records the heroic battles of King Marko against several foreigners that had arrived with Islamic rule, particularly the intriguing figure, the Black Arab. It is important, however, to distinguish between the epic-historical figure of King Marko and the folk-mythological creation. As King, Marko consolidated his domains and increased his reputation among the people and churches of the region. Historically, he was the son of a Serbian ruler of Western Macedonia, King Volkashin,²²¹ who continued to rule this part

²¹⁹ In her book *Kralimarkoviot Ciklus: Na Cekor do Epopeja (The King Marko Cycle: One Step From an Epic)* Nina Anastasova-Skrinjarik builds a convincing argument why the King Marko folk songs (about 70 that have been recorded in Macedonia) can in fact be considered a national epic. She treats the material through the lens of a “mythical biography of the hero” and moves away from the traditional (somewhat outdated) scholarly approach that exclusively focuses on the “fighting tyranny” aspect of the Marko songs. Her point is to highlight the heroic and epic potential as she constructs “a draft” of a King Marko epic, lining up six parts of the epic containing folk songs that together tell a coherent story of King Marko’s birth, heroic deeds and his loss of power.

²²⁰ Fourteenth century is an important turning point in the history of the south Slavic and Balkan nations. It marks the end of an era and beginning of the age of Ottoman rule which will significantly change the ethno-cultural map in the Balkans, and, to a large extent, Europe. It is an important moment of factual dissolution of several powerful Christian kingdoms which were dominated by ethnically and religiously different rulers --this fact alone creates important presumptions for modulating the ideas pertaining to King Marko among the people of the Balkans, as one of their first legitimate Christian and Slavic sovereigns and protectors.

²²¹ Although historical data on the origin of the King Volkashin and his son Marko are insufficient and unreliable, it is indisputable that they have arisen from the hierarchy of the Serbian feudal state. However, it is indisputable that there were state formations which were opposed to the north Serbian states, and were not even close to the eastern Bulgarian kingdoms in Macedonia in the 14th century. On April 15, 1345, when the Serbian king Dushan was crowned as Tzar in Skopje (today the capital of the Republic of Macedonia) almost the entire territory of Macedonia

of the Empire after his father's death. He becomes Sultan Bayazit's vassal and dies in battle against the Wallachian vojvoda Mirche, near Craiova (Romania). In 1394 the army of Bayazit and his vassals, including King Marko and Stefan Lazarevic, battle at Rovine against the Wallachians led by Mircea. Victory goes to the latter although Bayazit and Stefan Lazarevic manage to survive unscathed. King Marko partakes on the side of the Islamic invader due to his obligation as an Ottoman vassal, thus the reason why he is disheartened during this battle against Christians. King Marko dies during the event, and as legend tells the story, prior to the battle, the national hero made the following statement, '*Even if I die, I beg the Lord to save the Christians.*' Among many of the south Slavic people, and particularly Macedonians, King Marko is considered one of the last legitimate Christian rulers and protectors in the region, hence a permanent mark in the cultural memory of the people as, ironically, the Christian defender against the onslaught of Islam in the Balkans.

King Marko's poetic, idealized and heavily hyperbolized image in the oral tradition is well-known not only among Macedonians, but also in other Slavic and non-Slavic Balkan folk traditions, most notably Serbian²²², Bulgarian and Romanian.²²³ In the more "mythical" folk

was within the scope of his large state, and individual parts were governed by feudal vassals of high rank. Ten years later, after the death of Dushan (1355), his kingdom began to fall apart - due to, among other reasons, intensified strivings of the feudal lords for greater independence. It is believed that the process of the establishment of independent states and feuds between them in Macedonia began during this period. The most respected among the numerous Serbian feudal lords of that time were the brothers Volkashin and Uglesha Mrnjavchevich. Volkashin - King Marko's father - occupied various positions in Dushan's state: he was a head of a tribal state in Prilep, (a town in Macedonia where the legend of Krale Marko is extremely popular) and later became a high courtier and a despot. In about 1365, he proclaimed himself a Tzar and thus became a co-ruler with the Tzar Urosh. His brother, the despot Uglesha ruled over the Struma region. Both brothers were killed in 1371 at Chernomen (Thrace), during the Marica battle against the Turks, in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent further penetration by the Turks into the Balkan Peninsula and forestall the direct danger of Turkish occupation of their territories. This defeat marked the loss of independence held by the feudal rulers of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia. By the end of the 14th century, the Turks had subjected Macedonia to their direct authority. It was the beginning of a five century long Ottoman rule of Macedonia. After the death of Volkashin, his eldest son Marko inherited the throne and title of his father. He was, however, forced to recognize Turkish authority, as supreme, to take an obligation before the Sultan to pay tribute (jizya and poll-tax) and to provide military assistance whenever so requested by the Sultan.

version of his life, he was born under unusual circumstances and had an exciting childhood. At his birth, prophets foretold that he would “break his father’s bones,” and in order to prevent this tragedy, the infant was placed in “a basket smeared with tar” and set adrift down a fast river. As this story usually goes, fate intervenes, he is saved, thus enabling him to fulfill the prophecy. As he comes of age, the folk ballads reveal, he acquires super-human strength. He is described as a man of immense size and strength, possessing magical attributes: a mighty sword and a faithful companion, his horse Sharets or Sharko (“Dappled). The ballads also tell of siblings whom he encounters by chance while liberating them from captivity. There is a mention of a slave girl, Shiana, who he rescues from an Ottoman enemy camp and finds out that she is his lost sister. The other aspects of his personal history, particularly his treatment of women, are less consistent. According to some versions, he rejected his wife because she could not bear him children, leading her to adultery (and in some versions of the folk story, he kills her in a moment of rage). According to other variants of the story, he marries a Turkish woman who has converted to Christianity. According to yet other sources, his wife was a hero in her own right and often rescued him from captivity.

In the epic phase of Marko’s legend his strength and war prowess are extraordinary; in his numerous duels with opponents, he is always victorious. His hand-grip is such that he can squeeze drops of water out of a piece of dry, hard wood. He overcomes a succession of mighty opponents and victoriously fights against overwhelming odds. Marko drinks and brawls and follows his own wayward course, asking leave of no one. Physically he dominates his opponents, and his terrifying appearance is repeatedly described in detail: “His ‘Samur kalpak’ is pulled low over his dark eyes; his huge black moustache is as large as a lamb of six months' growth; his

²²³ He is known as Prince Marko in Serbian folk tradition, Deli Marko in Bulgarian tradition and Marko Viteazul in Romanian folk legends.

cloak is a shaggy wolf-pelt; at his girdle swings a damascened blade; on his back is slung a war-spear; a his saddle-bow hangs a mighty mace, with a well-filled wineskin to hold the balance lest the saddle should slip this way or that.”²²⁴

All in all, there is nothing complex about Marko's character; his is essentially a heroic construct, with no fine shades or subtle distinctions.²²⁵ The significant thing is that somehow he makes the necessary imaginative appeal, and his exploits as a Christian become a theme of epic production and admiration. That the folk would extol their hero at the expense of the Turk was only natural, but they also turn the tables on their conquerors. Marko's fealty to the Sultan is adroitly combined with the suggestion that the nominal servant was in reality greater than his lord, and this proves no bar to his popular acceptability. According to some scholars, the folk attraction to King Marko and his larger than life image is a result of their reverence for the man who defended the Macedonian people against the Turks, since he did fulfill his obligation as the Sultan's vassal without allowing Turkish vandalism in his territories. The people considered him an honorable protector, ascribing to his name a legendary character and heroic deeds that are superhuman. In the introduction to the English translation of the Serbian variants of the Marko Kraljevik ballads, D.H. Low considers the intrinsic duality of Marko's image and actions the reason why he captures folk imagination for so long: “[it was] in this dual aspect that he became the national hero, the ideal exemplar, the proud symbol expressive of the unbroken spirit that lived on in spite of disaster and defeat, and kept alive the confident hope that however long the night, darkness must ultimately give place to the dawn of another day.”²²⁶

²²⁴Ibid., xxxv.

²²⁵ Essential simplicity and goodness of heart are equally apparent when he rebukes one of the Turks for snobbery and unfilial conduct, and upholds the cause of the poor and the unfortunate. Like Robin Hood, with whom he has many points of resemblance, he is ever the friend of the poor and the champion of the oppressed

²²⁶ Low, David H. *The Ballads of Marko Kraljevic*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968. Print, pp. xxxv

Whatever the true story of King Marko the man *is* is ultimately irrelevant, since the folk version of his greatness has little to do with the man himself and more with the necessity of the projection of a culture folk hero in the nation's popular imagination in an age when heroes and victories were few and far between for the Macedonian people. Seeing what the "qualities" of this unlikely (in modern terms) hero are, the question worth exploring is the following: How did King Marko have such a powerful hold on the cultural imagination? Also, what is of interest in this tracing of the "legend of King Marko" is the question of a peculiar metamorphosis that takes place at some point in the cultural narrative celebrating him. This interest is related to his downfall as an epic hero (his physical power is lost) and his "transformation" into a cunning trickster (divested of hero power). Roger Abrahams writes of a discernible developmental pattern in the actions of heroes particularly in relation to oral traditions of "group[s] in which heroic action becomes less the norm in real life."²²⁷ The argument goes that when the heroic aspect of a culture is compromised, heroic narratives seem to go through a graduated three-part development:

1. Heroic stories in a warlike age where heroic values are operative. In such times, there is genuine regard for an antagonist, as well as hatred for him. He, too, has heroic virtues, and the battle is [a] heroic one. The hero and the group he represents are indissoluble.
2. The collapse of the possibility of heroic action in most aspects of life, resulting in the exaggeration of heroism and manliness in heroic fictions. The hero's masculinity is precarious, incapable of being permanently proven. He is always ready for a fight. He fights for himself; his connections with a group are tenuous. He is a superman in every

²²⁷ Roger D. Abrahams. "Some Varieties of Heroes in America." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 3, [Special Issue: The Yugoslav-American Folklore Seminar] (Dec., 1966), pp. 341-362.

way, often in relations with women (though women are sometimes rejected as unmanly). There is a complete loss of regard for the antagonist who is defeated, because he is either unmasculine or an emasculator, or both. He becomes less and less manly as the hero becomes more so.

3. The detumescence and decay of the hero. The protagonist is forced to assume a passive pose. He may do so as an aggression, in which case his passivity becomes a masochistic pose by which he is able ultimately to get the better of the antagonist (often through a joke rather than through action). Or, he may resign his masculinity in favor of a clown's role, in self-defeating acts, or in virtual suicide.²²⁸

The cultural narrative surrounding King Marko seems to follow this pattern closely. Heroic values are celebrated as most operative for the Macedonian folk suffering under the threat of annihilation as the folk hero reaches epic proportions, his flaws notwithstanding. The highly idealized and hyperbolized treatment of Marko's image reaches its full potential in the epic songs of the nineteenth century—as I have argued earlier, a period when ethnocentric cultural awareness marks one of its peaks in Europe. Marko is always rescued by popular fantasy and frequently is aided by other heroes or fairies – sometimes even another hero, Bolen Doychin (Sick Doychin) appears as his aid. In turn, his legendary opponent, the Black Arab, is solidified as the epitome of evil, as a negative alternative against Marko's protectiveness and goodness. However, at one point, having exhausted the potential for battle with mortals, he turns to the Evening Star to ask if there is anyone left in the universe that can challenge his might. In his

²²⁸ Ibid., p.343. Abrahams ascribes this categorization to Dr. Americo Paredes and his research regarding Mexican folklore; these ideas had been formulated by Paredes in a yet-unpublished paper, "The Anglo-American in Mexican Folklore. (Abrahams 343).

moment of boastfulness and arrogance, when his strength has reached its peak, King Marko makes the fatal mistake of challenging God to a duel:

Listen to me, Evening Star on

high there!

Tell the Lord to come down from

the heavens

for I wish to fight a duel with him.

As a result of his arrogance, Marko is punished and he's challenged by God who appears disguised as an old man sitting by the road where Marko will pass by. The old man asks Marko to help him "lift his tiny sack" (which in fact God has made heavy with the weight of the whole earth). Marko, still boastful, attempts to lift and realizes the bag is too heavy and he cannot move it an inch. With each attempt, Marko gradually loses his legendary strength. This is a crucial point in the epic tale since it shows Marko's rare insight into himself as he realizes the limits of his own power and his fault in tempting God:

Oh, Lord forgive me

For being so irrational

Who am I to challenge God Almighty to a duel

When I cannot even move this bag.²²⁹

²²⁹ Translation from the Macedonian mine.

As resolution, God eventually bestows an unusual blessing on Marko. He is to remain a hero like no other, but from that moment on he will fight his adversaries not with a sword, but with his word, wit and cunning. This change is usually traced by scholars as “King Marko’s metamorphosis”—after he has uttered the fatal boastful words to God (the verbal assault is usually considered a *teomachia*: literally “a battle with God”) the hero’s downfall and his “detumescence” commence.²³⁰ It is very important to note this episode in the oral tradition since it marks a significant transformation in the treatment of heroes in both the vernacular and the written literary tradition. In particular, it will become a dominant Macedonian cultural trope of “the hero who loses his strength”²³¹ in contemporary texts. In the folk tradition, the worshiped and deified culture hero of the epic folk song, whose unique quality, his physical prowess alone, has captured the folk imagination for centuries, is replaced by its mythical double, the enabling *trickster* of duality and wit.²³²

Enter Trickster...

While the narratives that surround the epic folk hero King Marko rely heavily on hyperbolized, grand descriptions of heroism, with pronounced pathos and sense of doom, Marko’s transformation as a trickster ushers in a different sentiment for the treatment of folk heroes in the Macedonian tradition— an oral matrix of gaming, of humor and mockery, of irony and self-irony as modes of auto-reflection and carnivalization of reality. The convergence between the epic

²³⁰ This word, to borrow from Paredes (see note 17), is very suggestive of a deeper psychological effect of the hero’s downfall. Marko’s loss of physical power has much to do with his emasculation, as well. Interestingly enough, this aspect of the “fallen hero” trope has not been addressed neither in scholarship nor literature.

²³¹ Of course, this trope bares some similarities with the story of the biblical Samson who was granted supernatural strength by God in order to combat his enemies and perform heroic feats and whose strength was taken away by Delilah’s cunning.

²³² Marko’s “transformation,” as far as I know, appears only in the Macedonian folk tradition. Overall, Macedonian epic folk tradition does not hesitate to highlight Marko’s shortcomings, in contrast to Serbian folk epics where he is completely idealized.

hero and the trickster can also be traced geographically—King Marko shares the same birthplace as the most popular trickster in Macedonian folklore, Itar Peyo (Sly Peter).

In the trickster genre of Macedonian folktales the most common type is the “folk anecdote” or “joke.” The culture-heroes in these tales are two folk figures, Itar Peyo of Prilep (the Macedonian trickster) and his local adversary, Nasradin Hoca (the Muslim trickster). Their shenanigans are recorded in stories told both by Muslims and Slavs, separately or together as part of the same story. The antagonism between these two is explored in the folklore through their conflicts based on ethnic and religious difference. But more importantly, on a semantic level, their conflict plays out through verbal trickery that engages a similar relationship as in African American folklore: Iter Peyo usually fools and outwits Nasradin Odja in a signifying game akin to the trickster paradigm I have traced in the African American folklore in earlier chapters.

There is a noticeable shift in this genre where, unlike the great epic songs that dealt with bravery, duels, morality, good vs. evil, the Macedonian trickster folk tradition is preoccupied more with religious and communal relationships and polarization of social inequalities: the powerful and rich “kadija,” “pasha,” “aga,” “beg,” “sultan” (Turkish title authorities) opposed to the powerless and poor “argat” (Turkish for “farm-hand”) or “raya” (the folk); in other words Islam versus Christianity with a dose of carnival and laughter. The various forms of traditional oral expression, laughter, jest, jokes, satire, anecdote, humor, grotesque and allegory explore motifs from the Ottoman era, while undoubtedly the discourse of humor is recognizable as Rabelaisian, carnivalized discourse of late medieval times.

Interestingly, in this more humorous cycle of trickster folktales (recorded primarily at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century) within mimetic images of

profane reality, the Muslim Other, the anti-hero, begins to enter the focus objectively disburdened from the ideological evaluations of the social milieu of the past. Thus, this cycle's anecdotes do not exclude the possibility of Nasradin Odja appearing as a "winner" of the outwitting, more cunning and wiser than the idealized national hero Itar Peyo. Illustrative is the "Nasradin Odja" anecdote in which Itar Peyo is duped by Nasradin Odja, to prop up a wall for three hours, as well as the "Nasradin Odja and the Workers," considered to be a "variation" of the well-known "Itar Pejo" anecdote (recorded by Sapkarev) where Nasradin Odja dupes Iter Peyo about the cow that he is taking to the fair for sale (1976, Vol. 5, 322/3).

An interesting aspect of the Itar Peyo and Nasradin Odja narratives is the approximation of these two nationally separate characters. In fact, they interfuse to such an extent that they become almost interchangeable. While, on one hand, this constant trickery between the two initiates social anxiety about Macedonians' (Christian) triumph over the mighty and far more superior (Muslim) occupier, on the other hand, the humorous double-talk of these two tricksters reveals a new consciousness. In the duality of this relationship, what comes to the surface is an interesting presence of a particular idea that has Ottoman connotations but has been appropriated in Macedonian discourse and worldview: the idea of *sevda* (meaning roughly "love," "having a passion for something") conceptualized as a praxis of longing for the Other (person, life) and for Otherness (religion, language/logos), as a kind of simultaneous solipsism and rebellion, a religious and ethnic transfer of taboos and violations. This constant dueling brings to the surface certain specific ethnographic features of a Macedonian national psyche and consciousness -- an inclination toward a particular "traditional gift for subliming tragedy into jest of humor," and "a grotesque yet effective mode of survival, catharsis, and transcendence of historical traumas"

(Kulavkova)²³³. Ultimately, the goal in exposing this world of constant reversal of social paradigms and exploitation of themes of injustice and poverty through trickster infused storytelling is for the folk imagination to reveal the deep chasm of inequality and social gap between the colonizer and the folk (“raya”), the wealthy and the poor, those who are up and those who are down. This in turn generates a corresponding critical, satirical and grotesque discourse in Macedonian culture that becomes part of the traditional context of communication and emblematic of a national spirit (“narodni duh”), abundant with humor, wit, proverbs, folk-say. It also insures the cathartic reception of a dreary reality where the subjugated (Macedonian folk) dupe and defeat the conqueror in a game of their own making.

The “Black Arab:” The Villain as a Vehicle of Trickster Narration

Trickster may not be a creature at all, but a process, a dynamic, something embodied in language that can be used to transform the world. --Eileen Kane *Trickster: An Anthropological Memoir*.

As we have seen in the tracing of the epic folks songs and the trickster folktales, the trauma of Ottoman conquest and the resulting economic and cultural subjugation of the Macedonian people have solidified in the collective consciousness and the imaginary world of the folk the projection, not only of the good Christian/Slavic hero, but also the image of the occupier: the foreigner as a universal sign of evil. This role of “an archetype of evil,” in the discourse of folk memory and in the idiomatic context of the oral tradition (epic songs, ballads, legends, folk tales, popular beliefs) is reserved for a rather intriguing figure, one who is semantically ambivalent, polyvalent and palimpsestic: the figure of *the Black Arab* (“Crna Arapina”). The questions worth exploring here are the following: What to make of the Black Arab figure in terms of his role as an opponent? More importantly, why is this figure *Black* and why Arab and not Turk –

²³³ Kulavkova, Katica. “Simplification to Paranomasia: The Re-Semantization of the Paradigm of the Turk in Macedonian Literature.” Istanbul, March, 1999.

since the region was ravaged and conquered by the Ottomans for centuries and little is known of Arab conquests? If he appears as the hero's double and his antithesis in the oral tradition, couldn't he also be considered a bona fide trickster himself?

In the oral tradition, the Black Arab appears most frequently as the arch-enemy of King Marko, but there is also another noble, Christian hero, Bolen Doychin, ("Ailing" or "Sick Doychin," who defends the folk against the ravages of the insatiable foreigner. Doychin's heroic deeds are celebrated in the popular ballad of "Bolen Doychin" which has approximately seventy-five variants—a fact that attests to its extraordinary popularity, not just among Macedonians but other Balkan nations as well. Unlike King Marko, scholars believe that "Sick Doychin" is largely a poetic construct. The Macedonian "Sick Doychin" folk song is based on an original motif: an Arab is violently attacking the honor of Doychin's home, a sick hero, who finds the strength to rise from his bed, challenge the tyrant, kill him and save himself, his town and his people from the terrors of the "the foreigner." The basis for this motif is probably a poetic echo of realistic events experienced in the harsh reality of Ottoman conquests of the region. Also, the dramatic tension in the narrative is far too familiar: there is the usual epic glorification of the good Christian hero (Doychin) as the nation's savior, on one side, and on the other, the foreigner (Black Arab or "Crna Arapina") as an embodiment of the brutality of tyrants who threaten to annihilate the existence of a suffering nation.

While the folk hero is always clearly identified as Slavic and Christian, it remains unclear which ethnicity (or ethnic Other), as well as time period, the Black Arab represents. In most of the folk sources he operates as some kind of universal enemy, highly demonized in the folk imagination; in the folk songs his name is a constant synecdoche for external threats and harbinger of misfortune. In the "Bolen Doychin" ballads (also referred to as "the Black Arab

cycle”), such as "Marko, the Arab and Marko's Wife," "Marko and Murat-Beg," "The German Queen and Marko," (in the Brother Miladinovci collection) the indication is, as was mentioned earlier, that the Black Arab is some sort of prototype of primordial evil or “symbolic” evil in the ever present binary opposition of Good/Christian/White vs. Evil/Muslim/ Black traced in the folk traditions of the region. Stylistically, the description of the Black Arab, just as in the case of King Marko, hyperbole is the most common device. He is frequently depicted as a despicable character, a rough, rowdy, violent and cruel man, striking the weak and ravaging the pure women of the enslaved population. Occasionally there is a description of his physical appearance in accordance with the typical folk manner of belittling the folk anti-hero: he is “ugly and fat, with a head as big as a kettle, a huge mouth extending from his belly to his forehead, and each day he eats bread from a whole bakery, drinks two bowls of wine and one of brandy, eats three calves [...]” (Penushliski, *Makedonski folklor – Studii i prilog* 114). Not only his physical appearance, but also his brutal actions are hyperbolized: he inhumanely taxes Macedonian people; other restrictions range between the non-sensical and the brutal sexual abuse of women: he does not allow them to get married for three years, asks for a different bride every night and a virgin during the day—in some variants of the story he even kills each girl after the night/day is over.

234

In these folk songs and ballads that depict the eternal clash between the good Christian hero and the evil foreigner, the Black Arab is almost always referred to as “black.” This becomes part of his full name as a stock epithet: “Black Arab,” the same way as the epithet “Sick” melds with the name “Doychin. While he is a Muslim, like the Ottomans; however, he is regarded as a

²³⁴ The number three and nine: Slavs have a fondness for the number three, and tend to group things in threes whenever possible. Nine is the second most popular, being three threes. Many folk tales are about three brothers, with the youngest always winning. Heaven-Earth-Underworld, Rod-Lada-Svarog, Svarog's sons, Zemlya-Kupala-Veles, the Zori, the Bogatyri, all triads.

villainous predator in his Muslim environment as well—in the Serbian version of the King Marko songs, the Sultan’s daughter feels threatened by him and asks the Christian hero, King Marko, for help. Some scholars argue that in the epics in which the Black Arab appears as the Muslim anti-hero, the cycles of folk songs featuring King Marko may have been conflated with medieval songs in which mention of the Arab world is predominant, mostly the clash between the Byzantines and Arabs.²³⁵

Other scholars who have written on this topic maintain that the constitution of the trans-historical palimpsest of “black” invested in the name “Black Arab” carries linguistic, mythical and historical layers that do not necessarily have to do with race, inviting therefore, a careful reading of *black* and its socio-cultural appropriation.²³⁶ The ethical (and ethnic) juxtaposition of *black* against *white* in the case of the hero/villain dynamics in the folk tradition is a symptom of historicized interpretations which have introduced the binary opposition of good/evil (or good-for me and evil-for me) and have secured the dividing line between the *good* Bolen Doychin or King Marko and the *bad* Black Arab (or Turk or Arnaut)²³⁷. This result in the introduction onto the cultural scene of controversial ethical differentiation of good and evil along the lines of *us (local)* and *them (foreign)*. This line of argument is the focus of a 2009 European research project for Poetics and Hermeneutics, *Interpretations: The Black Arab as a Figure of Memory*, managed by the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences. What this project helps illuminate is the fact that, even in the first decade of the twenty first century, the interpretive strategies of folkloric and historical cultural heritage are still contested. One of the main goals of this study, in relation to the topic of the Black Arab, is to demystify a well-known Balkan syndrome : “the

²³⁵ See Deretic, Milutinovic...

²³⁶ See *Black Arab as a Figure of Memory*. Edited by Katica Kulavkova. Interpretations: European Research Project for Poetics & Hermeneutics, Volume n.3, Skopje 2009.

²³⁷ “Arnauts” in modern Turkish are people of Albanian descent.

commemoration and idolatry of the defeat of one's enemy."²³⁸ While this comprehensive study is an ambitious attempt to unpack the dynamics of this intriguing relationship – Christian/Slavic hero vs. Black/Arab enemy—in the end it seems to focus mainly on the implications of this dyad for the issue of national self-awareness in the larger Balkan context. In the Preface to the volume, the editor, Katica Kulavkova, underscores that the danger of such antagonistic approach to national self-awareness via fetishization of the enemy's defeat is that it “enthrones Evil as a value” (Kulavkova xii). The result of this is a cultural preoccupation with defining national heroes *only* in antithesis to their Other. In the long tradition of a balkanized (thus divided) sense of national belonging and self-definition, what is pushed to the background of a cultural memory is the personification of the epic hero, while setting in the foreground a simulated personification of evil. For this reason in the Macedonian, and wider Balkan cultural consciousness, “memory of the Black Arab (the symbolic foreigner) is more alive than that of Bolen Dojčin (the symbolic fellow man)”²³⁹. Also, the editor offers a more simple solution to the “Black Arab” dilemma and the way it has been appropriated in the Balkan cultural context. She suggests that it may not refer to something concrete, nor to an image that has to do with a contemporary Arab or African identity; that it does not imply Arabophobia, but it is “simply considered to be one of the most symptomatic preserved names of the phenomenon ‘Black Arab’ that has been recorded in the folklore and contemporary literature.”²⁴⁰

Undoubtedly, the engagement with this phenomenon draws our attention to the political and cultural processes (Ottoman enslavement and colonization) which have influenced the social reality of Balkan nations and have solidified the depth of ethnic binaries and the understanding

²³⁸ Katica Kulavkova, xiii.

²³⁹ Kulavkova, xiii.

²⁴⁰ Kulavkova, “From a Black God to a Black Arab...p.24.

of racial/ethnic alterity. Ethnic and religious isolations, negotiations of borders, fragmentations (so-called Balkanization), and nationalism all thrive in this kind of climate. A closer look at the intersection of the different manifestations of a culture's imaginative potential—myths, legends, folklore and culture heroes—reveals that separate, nationally-defined Balkan cultures bear their own unique characteristics, while also sharing certain regional ethnographic traits. Without a doubt, the cultural function of this type of alien figure—one that is at the same time a “collective figure of memory”—plays an important role. This central figure of alterity is indeed an allegory of some original cultural function whose name is unknown and whose definitive confirmation is quite problematic.

However, we must not overlook the fact that the Black Arab is “othered” down racial and ethnic lines: his skin has a different color; he cherishes a different way of life; he is alien to the folk community (Macedonian) that *owns* the cultural space; he is cursed and stigmatized; and children are made to fear his presence. Also, this figure's great capacity for transformation (indeed trickster-like) has enabled his survival through many re-figurations in the oral tradition and later in modern texts. Therefore, he seems to possess some quality that responds to the ways folk narration functions. One interpretation for the presence of the Black Arab in these narratives that has informed my reading of this figure has been suggested by the Russian scholar J.I. Smirnov.²⁴¹ In his view, the image and the persona of Black Arab has been gradually solidified over time through the Southern Slavs' impression of Arabs during their contacts with Arabs (and Africans), even before the Ottomans conquered the Balkans.²⁴² In turn, the Black

²⁴¹ In his foreword to the *Anthology of South Slavic Epic Songs* quoted in the essay “On the Russian Hypostays of the Black Arab and its Evolution” by Tatiana V. Civjan. *Black Arab as a Figure of Memory*. Edited by Katica Kulavkova. Interpretations: European Research Project for Poetics & Hermeneutics, Volume n.3, Skopje 2009, pp.53-55.

²⁴² The presence of Arabs in the Byzantine Empire and therefore the Slavic world, as well as their Semitic predecessors is known through records of war conflicts and frequent trade. Until the advent of Islam, the greater

Arab becomes increasingly popular in the period of Turkish rule since without fear of retribution, the Slavic folk singers and storytellers could weave stories and embellish songs about the evil Black Arab, while the cunning folk listener could easily recognize the Turk in this character.²⁴³

Thus, as a signifying trope of resistance (why not borrow from Gates?), akin to the strategy employed by African American slaves to dupe Old Master (as I have examined in the Signifying Monkey ballad), Macedonian folk singers and storytellers introduce a mode of indirect narration that shares many similarities with the trickster paradigm of the African American Signifying Monkey tale—the presence of the Black Arab echoes the Elephant in the Signifying Monkey-Lion-Elephant Triad). I would like to contribute to the on-going discussion on the Black Arab principle and its relation to the Macedonian oral tradition and highlight this figure's importance as an embodiment (if not vehicle) of the trickster tradition of duplicity that penetrates the oral tradition and its treatment of culture heroes and anti-heroes. His appeal is almost as great as the hero's because he is indispensable as a vehicle of narration in this Macedonian version of Signifyin(g). This trickster principle embedded in the Black Arab figure functions as a transformative agent primarily as technique, or style of indirect folk double-voicedness. We have seen in previous chapters that in the American tradition, Africaness/Blackness had been solidified as a signifier of evil and Europeaness/Whiteness as its polar opposite. In the Macedonian context, the idea of this "foreigner" codified as a principle of evil and chaos, amplified by the alterity of his *blackness*, serves a particular purpose in the way folk narratives of resistance are created. *Blackness* here enables narrative tricksterism to the fullest extent.

part of the Arab world and the cultures under their influence lived side by side with the Hellenistic-Roman world, with the two cultures co-existing and mingling. The relations of giving and taking and the exchange of cultural goods between the Byzantines and the Arabs did not change after the advent of Islam in the Arab world.

²⁴³ Ibid., p.55.

Literary Revisions and the Vernacular Tradition

The Turkish-Ottoman layer is one of the many imprinted in Macedonian memory, history, culture, language, tradition, spirituality... Each reference to the (relatively recent) past leads to the Ottoman Empire and to its culture which has left deep traces within the text of contemporary culture. It is simply an unavoidable, real inter-text, which is more or less visible in Macedonian contemporary literature and language. There are numerous, purely literary and spiritual reasons for re-evoking the signs of that inter-text. This is exactly what Macedonian contemporary writers are doing. The image of the Turk is poli-semantic: it suggests the idea of power against the skill of slavery and liberation from slavery, an association with another religion and language toward which, in time, neither Christianity nor the Macedonian language have been left completely isolated nor indifferent, and it includes the new myth of that which is someone else's yet ours, ours yet someone else's--the archetype of the mysterious and fateful, the praxis and culture of hybridization and dialogicity.

–Katica Kulafkova, “From Simplification to Paronomasia: The Re-Semantization of the Paradigm of the Turk in Macedonian Literature.”²⁴⁴

Culture heroes borne out of the oral tradition have had significant implications for contemporary Macedonian literature. The literature written in the early twentieth century and the period between the two World Wars—predominantly social plays by Marko Cepenkov, Vojdan Cernodrinski, Nikola Kirov Majski, Dimitar Molerov, and in the early post-war theater, plays by Stale Popov— continues to trace historical and folk themes. As in the folk tradition, this body of work revisits the image of the Ottoman conqueror (sometimes identified as the Turk, often as the Black Arab) characterizing him stereotypically in black-and-white contrast, always antagonistically opposed to the image of the Macedonian folk. However, the trickster as a culture hero in the literature published after World War Two is conspicuously absent. Even in the social plays that revisit folk materials, trickster-like characters are reduced to the role of the “Fool” whose main function is to provide comedy, usually through physical humor, while he lacks the double-voiced ability of tricksters à la Sly Peter to expose inequality through verbal wit

²⁴⁴ Katica Kulafkova, “From Simplification to Paronomasia: The Re-semantization of the Paradigm of the Turk in Macedonian Literature.” Istanbul, March, 1999. p.16.

and jest. As we saw in earlier chapters dedicated to Toni Morrison and Hurston, the trickster's transformation in a literary context is precisely effected through the medium of language, which is where his transformative power resides. After all, the trickster's fundamental role is just that: to be an originator of language. In the newly established Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, artistic and cultural production had to fit within a very narrow set of boundaries. For writers and poets a turn towards the "popular humor" of the folk tradition and the carnivalesque in the trickster genre would have been politically imprudent. After all, at the heart of the carnival of laughter that the trickster paradigm invites is the idea of overturning reality, instigating revolution and challenging hierarchies, or any kind of established order. The appropriation of trickster language enables a world that operates according to its own rules, which at the same time are meant to be broken in order to keep signification evolving and vital. If we also consider the trickster's necessity to negotiate boundaries—he is a boundary-crosser, but also creates boundaries— "boundaries are not so much nonexistent as arbitrary (new or different boundaries can be created at will), and the comic play of his folly lies in his refusal to accept or recognize what seems self-evident to those who govern boundaries," we might see why artists would not adopt this kind of radical gesture in the post-war, post "revolutionary" order in the newly recognized Macedonian Republic.²⁴⁵

The second half of the twentieth century is a significant turning point in the Macedonian struggle to solidify and claim as its own both a vernacular and a literary tradition for one very important reason. In this period, for the first time literary works are written and published in the newly standardized modern Macedonian language (1945-47). While there is a growing sense among artists in this period that modern Macedonian authors should turn away from deeply rooted "folklorization" and preoccupation with the sacred to a more radical individualization, the

²⁴⁵ Helen Lock. "Transformations of the Trickster." p.3. <http://southerncrossreview.org/18/trickster.htm>.

fascination with folk tropes and heroes in the artistic expression continues after the standardization of the Macedonian language²⁴⁶ but with a more urgent need to revisit the glory days of the grand epic narratives. One of the most influential Macedonian poets in the second half of the twentieth century, Blaze Koneski, will create in this period (1950 - 1953) poetry that continues to rely on the epic elements of an inherently mosaic-like Macedonian folklore. Stylistically, Koneski's poetry of the 1950s (which includes a cycle of poems dedicated to Marko Krale and Bolen Doychin) is an amalgam of (what for some has become exhausted) traditionalist interest in the oral, mythical and historical tropes, and a turn towards a new sensitivity, a more international preoccupation with textuality (discourse in the discourse, text within a text, 'a poem behind a poem'). However, the folk themes that Koneski revisits borrow from the epic folk tradition that glorified King Marko rather than the trickster tradition of duplicity and Rabelaisian-type of humor.

At the same time, in a manner similar to African American writers and their engagement with a recuperation of an unwritten vernacular tradition—as the “anonymous” antecedent to the established written tradition—Koneski's poetic project (and that of his contemporaries) is engaged in a restoration of a national literary tradition and an establishment of a distinctly Macedonian literary intertextuality. Thus, the Macedonian folk tradition and its plethora of epic culture heroes become the intertext for Koneski's poetry. Implied mythical images, historical and collective cultural memory, the vernacular discourse and the rhythms of an oral performance, blend with the poet's personal view of the world. Koneski himself has reiterated over and over that he was brought up with a strong sense of the orality of Macedonian artistic

²⁴⁶ The revisiting of Macedonian folktales the most common intertextual link; this is evident in the writings of Blaze Koneski, Stale Popov, Petre M. Andreevski, Slavko Janevski, Zivko Cingo, Mitko Madzunkov, Bozin Pavlovski, Kole Casule, Jovan Strezovski, Vase Mancev, Slobodan Mickovik.

expression, listening in particular to the King Marko songs and tales (Koneski was born in Prilep, the birth place of King Marko).

In the King Marko cycle of poems by Koneski (“The Taking of Strength” “Sterna,” “Kale,” “Marko’s Monastery” and “Dog Hill”) the speaker is frequently an unnamed first person whose identity is implied either through the epigraph or through his possession of characteristics that would be immediately recognizable to a native audience.²⁴⁷ There is also a juxtaposition of a lyrical object in the poem, usually some obstacle, either a physical obstacle, temptation, a moral dilemma (the building of the fortress, struggling to keep the dam closed, facing God). The outcome of the clash between the two is also implied since the poet is counting on the audience’s familiarity with the folk topos. However, in Koneski’s poetry, the object becomes a more universal metaphysical symbol, portending the advent of some meaningful (if not fatal) change. Even though in the poetry Marko is still endowed with “unbelievable strength”—he grows as “muscular, as a tree”; is like a “dry underground river whose darkness still isn’t calmed down from the roar of the waves”—compared to the folk version which frequently celebrates a happy resolution, the hero’s triumph (and ultimately his metamorphosis into language) the outcome in Koneski’s poetry is a much darker one, with deeper philosophical meanings.

The poem “The Taking of Strength” continues to explore the trope of the fallen hero divested of his powers by God. It particularly focuses on the moment of awakening that immediately follows the punishment. It explores the idea that in the act of weakening the hero, God brings himself down a notch by humbling himself to descend to earth and partake in this duel of egos:

²⁴⁷ This invites, in turn, a pragmatic-functionalist perspective on the question of reception: What is this text’s target audience? How is its rhetoric and deployment of national tropes geared to this target-audience? Is there any evidence concerning the text’s reception and impact?

Oh my Lord,

The torch that burnt my wings smolders in your hands,

My whole being heaves against you,

My heart curses you,

I need no answer from you,

Humiliated

Yet I sense something in me that transcends you,

That you had, perhaps, but have taken

When you created us to take a piece from misery,

Alone

Through dust I must seek my way in life.²⁴⁸

The hero in these lines is one who is disillusioned with God and turns his back on him, almost “liberated” from his mythical power that enslaved him, owned him and determined his existence. Thus the fall itself is a blessing in disguise since alone (outside of God’s gaze), the humiliated but *human* Marko is *free*. However, the poem overlooks the outcome of this divine intervention—Marko’s transformation.

In his 2003 novel *King Marko*, Slobodan Mickovic revisits the familiar trope of Marko’s heroic life and downfall, without any apparent deviations from the folk epic *and* Koneski’s

²⁴⁸Translation mine.

poetry as its pretexts. Mickovic faithfully continues the tradition that has already been established by Koneski, counting on a recognizable dynamics of cultural tropes that already exist in the collective consciousness, accessible for an author since they are easily evoked in the audience's memory as they already have an existing relationship with such memory. Mickovic's novel clearly marks its intertextual links with its precursors in the dedication of the novel: "In the memory of Marko Cepenkov and Blaze Koneski." Also in the Foreword to the text, the author draws our attention to his indebtedness to the folk tradition and Koneski's opus who in turn owes much to the prolific ethnographer Marko Cepenkov (1829-1920).²⁴⁹

In many respects, this intertextual repetition resembles what African American scholars Henry Louis Gates and Cheryl Wall have defined as an important trope of self-definition in African American culture and literature. For Gates that is Signifyin(g), a trope of repetition with a difference; for Wall it is a metaphor borrowed from blues, "worrying the line." In the context of black literature, Henry Gates places a particular value in employing this trope to highlight how black writers—those who revisit and critique other black texts—reference each other in an act of rhetorical self-definition or what he calls a "black form of intertextuality." He details these relationships of influence and concludes that : "[M]uch of the Afro-American literary tradition can, in a real sense, be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature—the so called black experience"

²⁴⁹ Cepenkov was a well-known collector of Macedonian folklore, an interesting figure himself, not only because of the immense breadth of quantity of material he gathered, but also by the quality of that which he recorded and his narrative interventions in the folkloric material-- in many ways similar to Hurston's approach to collecting folklore as it was discussed in Chapter Four. The key difference between Cepenkov and other collectors was that he did not record folk tales as he listened to them being told, but would write them down later as he recalled them from memory. He claimed that he had an exceptionally powerful narrative memory and that whatever he heard he "sealed in [his] mind as if it'd been born there." In recording folk material from memory, Cepenkov inevitably embellished the tales in his own language. Consequently, all Macedonian folk songs and narratives recorded by him are written in a distinct and recognizable language.

(295)²⁵⁰. Accordingly, Gates argues that, in the act of creating a literary tradition, black writers “read and revise one another” as well as replicate “the same cultural codes from a shared symbolic geography” (101). In this multi-layered act of signifying, drawing on individual and shared experiences, black writers mend the fissures and fill in the gaps of a collective history and an enduring literary tradition. In *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage and Literary Tradition*, Cheryl A. Wall employs the metaphor of *worrying the line*—a specifically blues trope—to discuss, in a similar vein to Gates, the complex relationships of influence and revision in black literature. In verbal communication it can be employed to break up a word or phrase, or sometimes induce a repetition of a phrase to allow for a didactic comment in a story. As Wall outlines her strategy in the introduction, worrying the line idiom functions as “a technique ... for purposes of emphasis, clarification, or subversion” (8). Wall builds the argument around two specific meanings of *the line*—a metaphor for lineage and a line as a metaphor for the literary traditions in which texts belong. In the construction of a literary genealogy, the writers that are part of a tradition (or a national canon) draw on the imaginative resources of vernacular culture, “pay their respect to the line of African American literary tradition while worrying that line in order to recollect stories that were never written but were passed down orally from generation to generation” (15).

In both traditions, the act of tracing, re-tracing and re-claiming oral cultural tropes and “unwritten” forms of representation, such as oral histories, provides access to missing segments of the cultural narrative and literary genealogy, and is part of the process of re-shaping cultural memory—processes that I have examined in the African American tradition in previous chapters. In the Macedonian vernacular and literary tradition, figures of memory such as King Marko are

²⁵⁰ Henry Louis Gates. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*.

imbued with high narrative productivity: the basic plot of the Marko tale (the cultural topos) is apparent in every variant (or genre) that deals with him which attests to its narrative vitality. However, the knowledge of the original plot (based on which new discursive interventions are carried out) is necessary since, as Renate Lohman argues, the story becomes more interesting as it is embellished by accents added through each new retelling (*Phantasia, Memoria, Rhetorica* 192). What is apparent in the novel is precisely that: that every additional discursive intervention is marked with the author's engagement (be it political, historical, creative) and ultimately, estrangement of a (possibly) over-used cultural topos. In that respect, it has a function of memory pointing to the fact that the new text does not simply generate new meaning but it also secures cultural memory or functions as, what Lotman calls, "condenser of cultural memory." Lotman also talks about the "semantic aura" of the text that appears in the contact between the new text and the cultural memory (tradition) already existing in the people's consciousness.

Thus, this kind of tracing of the familiar Krale Marko topos points to the effects that vernacular artifacts and literary (written and authored) texts have on preserving (and altering) cultural memory. In the case of Mickovic, the author reconstructs the existing traditional intertext based on the versions that he read in Koneski, who in his case, works off of Cepenkov's recordings of the traditional myth, who is interpreting a version of a narrated folk creation with an anonymous progenitor. In this complex web of intertextuality, the palimpsestic figure of a culture hero is created. This textual record affirms that cultural images (perhaps *figure* is a better word than *image* since a figure does not only imply an iconic reverence, but also signals to narrative shaping) work and obtain their effectiveness in the cultural and communicative field, primarily because of their intertextual topicality. They are tropes, commonplaces, with familiarity obtained by repetition and mutual resemblance (and exclusivity); and in each case

this means that whenever we encounter an individual instance of a national characterization, the primary reference is not to empirical reality but to an intertext, a sounding-board, of other related textual instances and utterances. In other words: the literary record demonstrates unambiguously that national characters (culture heroes) are a matter of commonplace and hearsay rather than empirical observation or statements of objective fact.

In this respect, if we add to the equation the figure of the Other that has been part of the discussion in the first half of this chapter—whether he is identified as the opposing trickster or he himself is the vehicle for folk narration—we can conclude that, by default, contacts with different cultures by definition *are ethnocentric*, in that anything that deviates from familiar (repeated and glorified) domestic patterns is “Othered” as an oddity, an anomaly, a singularity. Such ethnocentric registrations of cultural difference have tended to stratify into a notion that, like persons, different nations each have their specific peculiarities and “character” and as such they are embodied in the cultural tropes and grand narratives of a nation that thrives on keeping them alive.

It seems that these cultural tropes that are the basis for cultural identity are best addressed within the theoretical framework of imagology, i.e. the study of literary representations of national characters.²⁵¹ As part of an imagological approach we would need to first determine the intertext of a given national representation as trope (in this case, the culture hero: King Marko, Bolen Doychin, Sly Peter, etc.) and then examine to what extent the background tradition

²⁵¹ “Imagological studies gained currency after World War Two among French scholars in “*littérature comparée*”, who tackled the topic of “How one nation sees the other.” Despite initial reservations among more aesthetically-oriented critics, we find, since the 1970s, a continuously increasing number of publications on national and social images in Romance, English, American, German, Slavonic, and recently in cultural and postcolonial studies. Thinking, judging, writing in the form of images reflects fundamental conditions of perception, imagination, and representation.” (Joep Leerssen, *IMAGOLOGY: A Handbook on the Literary Representation of National Characters*, 2003).

is passively or actively echoed or reinforced, varied upon. At the same time, this cultural trope must also be contextualized within the text of its occurrence and consider which conventions are at work—narrative, descriptive, humorous, fictional, political—which determine the status, prominence and function of such a national trope or a culture hero.

Lepa Angelina (Fair Angelina): The Absence of the Female Heroic

In what ways can women in folk tales provide assistance, remove others from dangerous circumstances, when traditionally, the female sex has been regarded as physically weak, mentally inferior, and utterly dependent on male knowledge and power? How can such a helpless and oppressed group of persons (and women have not always been so designated) even save themselves? In [tales] the woman is victimized by one man and later rescued by another man. She passes from the hands of male oppressor to the arms of male savior. In the interim she mainly suffers... -- Marilyn Jurich, *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*.²⁵²

It is a glaring fact that all figures and culture heroes discussed in this chapter have been male.

Indeed, the question of representation of the female heroic, particularly under the trickster rubric, is a vexed question in scholarship. In the American tradition, I have come across four engaging studies that investigate the female trickster: Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (1997), Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (1998), Marilyn Jurich, *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature* (1998), and Ricki S. Tannen, *The Female Trickster: The Mask That Reveals* (2007). In their focus on women writers, Landay and Rosier Smith make the crucial point that tricksters are culturally specific and that in the patriarchal societies that produced the archetypal tricksters, the very qualities that enabled the trickster to operate belonged culturally to men, as Landay puts it, “[I]n a sexist society, the male trickster clearly has the advantages of masculinity: mobility, autonomy, power, safety.” (2)²⁵³ I

²⁵² Jurich, Marilyn. *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print. p.65.

²⁵³ Landay, Lori. *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. Print.

have attempted in this dissertation to look into the gender dynamics involving trickster, trickster narratives and the female heroic in the chapters dealing with Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. More specifically, in Chapter Two, I argued that Morrison's portrayal of Sula as a female heroic trickster contributes to the outlaw tradition by challenging the masculine principle of tricksters by allowing inclusion of powerful female characters that embody the heroic.

My additional research revealed that in Macedonian literature and scholarship the question of female tricksters and representation of the female heroic in the vernacular and/or contemporary literature has not been addressed, neither by male nor female authors and critics. This obvious lack of critical interest into the specifics of gender dynamics regarding culture heroes speaks to a (still) persisting, exclusively male-focused gaze. It also reveals an unsettling absence of a rigorous feminist critical revision of the canon. With the closing section of this chapter, I hope to initiate such an engagement and invite an additional re-visiting of "the feminine" cultural trope and its contribution to the tradition that I have examined here. I propose a brief analysis of Blaze Risteski-Platnar's 1999 play *Lepa Angelina (Fair Angelina)* and his treatment of a well-known folk figure, Fair Angelina, the sister/mother/lover of the noble hero.

Fair Angelina is a riff on the well-known Bolen Doychin folk theme: a violent foreign occupier, again the infamous Black Arab (he, in fact, does not appear as a character in the play and is referred throughout as "the Libyan") is a serious threat to the honor of Doychin's home (he has had his eye on Doychin's chaste and fair sister Angelina and is rumored to be preparing to abduct her) while the sick hero, made powerless because of a curse, lies in bed in agony, tortured by his own impotence and immobility. Doychin eventually finds the strength to rise from his sickbed, challenge the tyrant, save his sister's honor, the city of Thessaloniki and his

people from the terrors of this proverbial foreign tyrant. After achieving all these heroic deeds, Doychin dies, as does Angelina.

This is more or less the basic plot of the folktale that Risteski uses as a pretext for the play. The expectation here would be that the modern text would take the culture hero as its main protagonist and address in one way or another Doychin's condition of a fallen hero in relation to the noble quest to save the nation. In his quest and suffering, Doychin is assisted by his fair sister Angelina, a heroine in her own right as the oral tradition does suggest (perhaps even a trickster; how else could she have repeatedly saved her brother from the physically more powerful Black Arab if not the covert power of female trickery?) However, the modern text homes in on one particular aspect of the narrative: *the act* that will cure Doychin and lift the curse, save the city, the requirement that brother and sister engage in sexual intercourse. Preparing himself for the defense of the city of Thessaloniki, Bolen Doychin (the defender of the city makes up his mind to go look for the relics of the god Perun, a Slavic god, hidden beneath the marble floor of the Church of Holy Sunday. While inside, in a moment of manly weakness, he kisses her and is stricken by God's mighty hand in punishment. He falls to the ground, cursed with the words: "to be sick until he takes his sister in the same manner a man takes a woman." For nine years, unaware of the cause and (the potential solution) to her brother's condition, fair Angelina obediently nurses her brother and suffers quietly, until the day the cause of "curse" is revealed to her by one of the local women.

In accordance with the vernacular tradition in stories i.e., that one cannot escape a curse, the fulfillment of god's punishment will be the key moment which will develop the fable of the play, but what is more important, the aftermath (and the moral complexity) of the act of incest will provide a new context for an archaic trope. Teetering between disgrace and affection, incest

in *Lepa Angelina* represents a symbolic act of sacrifice. This unusual model of sisterly love (propagated by the folk tradition to some extent) is not perceived as a carnal act but a sacrificial one through which the paradox of self-sacrifice (Fair Angelina's in particular) is read metaphorically. In the lyrical aspects of the text, in the discourse of the fair, saintly Angelina, the author of *Lepa Angelina* does succeed in lifting her dilemma outside the realm of narrow morality that plagues the vernacular story. The pre-existing trope of the strong, potent hero that falls out of grace and loses his strength due to vanity or sin is again revisited here, but it is not as central as it is in the folk version. In fact, Angelina (as is suggested by the title) *is* the true protagonist of the play, but her deeds and actions are decidedly *unheroic*. The play fails to transform the intertext—the folk epic of Bolen Doychin—into a modern text that would, at least as the title announces, to treat Fair Angelina as the hero of this tale. The disappointing aspect of Ristevski's 1999 play is that he in fact divests Angelina of her heroic attributes that are abundant in the folk version. As a contemporary creation, she displays none of the multi-layered dimensions of her folk counterparts. Angelina does not *do* anything, she practically does not act except that she *surrenders* to the curse. She suffers more than she acts, and she does that instinctively, as a result of some surreal love or urge to sacrifice. In all her doings she is guided by pure devotion since she is “blind by nature” and “pure of luster” (Scene 5). At the level of discourse, all her action is contained in monologues that solidify her un-heroic status. Some of her most memorable soliloquies include the following:

Fair Angelina: So it is me who is chosen from all the sisters, from all women, to take all the long centuries and join and align them in a never-ending sin, a sin that lasts over the time. Once upon a time it was a mother with her son, and now it is a sister with his brother... No, don't wait for a scream, for me to scream so loud so heavens can hear, and

gods high above... Doesn't anybody see that my brother has a sister, sister Angelina, bodiless, above the senses, because a brother doesn't need a body from his sister, because a sister is not a body, but a pure thought. (Scene 4)

Angelina's statement unmasks the concept of a *womanly sin*—as it is implied in the original sin—since in her view, her sin is an act of God's will. For Angelina, her act of sacrifice is not in vain, because Angelina has in front of her the image that she has to reproduce (in three months she is to give birth to three beautiful sons whose destiny is not known, but can be felt implicitly.) This is what her discourse reveals: “I am a proud mother of three sons, a triple countenance of my brother. Doychin, his sister's sorrow, he didn't die, or else he has risen from the dead when I gave birth to his sons, and went in them in three directions... to teach the world to goodness, to beautiful things, and to protect it from badness, from harshness...” (Scene 9).

In the end, it is the community's women that condemn Angelina's sin and consider her unworthy to live among them. The self-destructive forces of downtrodden people become apparent as the “three wicked old women” (the representatives of the folk) that project the community's social and economic impotence onto Angelina. Ezekij, the blind prophet, warns them that killing the “sinful woman” out of malice and jealousy will only breed more misery: “You'll murder Angelina in vain, oh women, jealous that you are not pregnant. While you live, wherever you go, her image will blind you, her voice remind you, of the dire fact that you are ugly and weak” (Scene 9). However, they do not heed his advice, first kill him and then stab Lepa Angelina to death. Even Sveta Nedela, the ravished saint (whom after Doychin had kissed her had transformed into a mortal) offers insight into the futility of Angelina's hope that the nobility of her “sin” will be appreciated by those it aimed to protect. As she lies stabbed, life leaving her body, Angelina's epiphany comes too late:

LEPA ANGELINA: My only wrong was that I thought that Salonica could be saved. The walls remain, bulwarks untouched, fires extinguished, the dire plague withdrawn, the city shines from afar. But inside, oh, my sons, inside people, envy, meanness, sheer malice, take over. When freedom is given to the weak, then it alters from a heavenly gift into an infernal doom that crushes conscience.

Ultimately, Fair Angelina's status as a tragic figure is solidified thus within the frame of the all-too-familiar cultural stereotype of the "sacrificed/self-sacrificing woman," the one, as Marilyn Juric reminds us, is supposed to "ennoble us, sacrifice being regarded as an act of piety, a privilege!" (*Scheherazade's Sisters* 65). I would like to hypothesize that perhaps the Angelina of the folk imagination was less detached from her own sense of identity, her actions befitting a truer "rescuer" (to borrow a term from Juric)—one that rescues her beloved and saves him from the tyrant most effectively through trickery—than the weak, weepy figure this text portrays. Considering the patriarchal nature and context for Macedonian folktales and the ethnographers' intent to focus solely on depiction of male strength and triumphs as heroic, in the cultural memory Fair Angelina remains a one-dimensional "damsel in distress"—even though in the folk version she frequently plays the role of a real heroine, while the vulnerable, weak and ill brother/lover is completely dependent on her courage, determination and trickster-like ability to deter the Black Arab from evil actions. As I mentioned earlier, any new scholarship regarding tricksters and culture heroes in the context of Macedonian oral and literary tradition will have to include a feminist engagements with these cultural tropes, and hopefully a recognition and a intertextual tracing of a (matri)lineage of trickster heroines in the Macedonian tradition as true culture-builders in their own right.

Investigations of this nature—ones that also invite a comparative analysis of the variations of trickster (and trickster-like) figures that emerge as culture heroes (or anti-heroes) in various cultures—help us theorize the existence of certain “subconscious” aspects of a national psyche. In particular, what the apparent shift between epic hero and trickster folk hero points to is the fact that, despite being elusive figures of ambiguity, undoubtedly, tricksters perform fundamental cultural work. An understanding of what types of tricksters carry the attributes of cultural heroes in a particular tradition helps illuminate certain subconscious aspects of a nation’s consciousness that responds to the trickster’s penchant for transformation. Their endurance in the folk imagination can be explained with their ability to foster change and transformation even under the most unlikely of circumstances. As Helen Lock argues “The true trickster’s trickery calls into question fundamental assumptions about the way the world is organized, and reveals the possibility of transforming them (even if often for ignoble ends).”²⁵⁴ The particular features and manifestations of trickster-like figures reflect a specific state of a culture’s imagination in the most uncertain moments of crisis—enslavement, conquest, war, cultural assimilation—when rules and boundaries of every sort are challenged. What the examples from both Macedonian and African American traditions have shown so far is that every new stage in a culture’s development inevitably redefines the culture hero it needs. When people are faced with circumstances of social upheaval the ways in which they adjust to instability differ. The on-going fascination with tricksters in stories of disparate cultures emphasizes the importance of this type to the imaginative self-perception of all societies. Their cultural function seems to have been reinvented in successive eras, however, so that while it is easy to recognize them, it is increasingly difficult to reach a consensus about their status and

²⁵⁴Helen Lock. “Transformations of the Trickster.” <http://southerncrossreview.org/18/trickster.htm>.

their influence in culture-building. What my goal has been is to show that they do seem to embody at the same time the heroic principle and its antithesis.

The parallels between the two traditions, although their timeframes, social and political contexts are different—communist interludes /socialist modernity, preceded by Ottoman rule vs. American capitalist modernity—reveal interesting cultural dynamics. In the Macedonian context, as culture heroes created in the oral tradition evolve from epic folk heroes to tricksters of indirection, they are an important segment of an oral, pre-modern phase of the development of the Macedonian culture that grapples with the influences of the Ottoman era and struggles to negotiate a sense of cultural belonging and nationhood, caught in the constant bind of alterity between Christian/Slavic *and* Muslim/foreign. As they become adopted in the second half of the twentieth century, in all their intertextual topicality, culture heroes become important segments in the process of nation/state building as Macedonia enters the socialist-communist era.

At the same time, the unsettling issue of the Black Arab exposes an interesting wrinkle in this comparative approach. Parallels between the African American and the Macedonian use of trickster-informed oral culture are similar even though “blackness” is involved differently. Perhaps what this comparative analysis exposes is a dynamic that involves race, but is predicated on power relations and modernization. In other words, it provides insight into how racial binaries are bound up in larger economic systems (enslavement and colonization), political processes (ethnic conflict) and modernization. In both cases, a resistant vernacular culture becomes an important vehicle in negotiating alterity, through a validation of specific rhetorical and expressive modes that are deeply encoded in the folk-ways and stories of both traditions.

This final transnational turn in my dissertation— that homes in on the points of cultural contact between two geographically distant traditions, the African American and the Macedonian, and their respective engagements with their folk past— reveals a two-fold argument that deserves future consideration. First, it makes apparent the peculiarities of historic relatedness and a shared articulation of a people’s “spirit” (“naroden duh”), marked by “internal bifurcation,”²⁵⁵ in traditions that respond to the violence and annihilation of enslavement and colonization. Undoubtedly, this kind of transcultural dimension of literary production and analysis will also require different interpretative models, perhaps ones that allow for the break away from the binaries of culture and knowledge, high and low; a shift from intertextual analysis, the power of the canon and hierarchy to a more lateral reading where “minor literatures” and their modes of cultural productions become normative. Second, this kind of “globalization” of African American literature and literary theory opens up a new, exciting possibility to read black literature beyond the transatlantic and transdiasporic frames. It adopts a transnational approach that places African American literature and criticism in the mainstream of global literary considerations of imperial expansion and modernization, emphasizing a connection of “minority literatures” across nation-states and re-defining the scope of a new global multiculturalism.

²⁵⁵ Dale Peterson *Up From Bondage*, p. 11.

Bibliography

Abrahams, Roger D. *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1964. Print.

---. *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999. Print.

---. "Some Varieties of Heroes in America." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*. 3.3 (1966): 341-362. Print.

---. *African Folktales: Traditional Stories of the Black World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983. Print.

Amuzie Chimezie "The Dozens: an African Heritage Theory." *Journal of Black Studies*. 6.4 (1976): 401-420. Print.

Andrews, William L, Frances S. Foster, and Trudier Harris. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

Assman, Jan. *Kulturno pamćenje*. Zenica: Vrijeme, 2005.

Awkward, Michael. *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Print.

Baker, Houston A. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Print.

Bakhtin, M M, and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print.

- Bakhtin, M M, and Caryl Emerson. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.
- Bakhtin, M. Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968.
- Baldwin, James. *Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. Print.
- . "Stagolee," Foreword to Bobby Seale *A Lonely Rage*. New York: Times Books, 1978. Print.
- Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1963. Print.
- Baraka, Amiri, and William J. Harris. *The Leroi Jones/amiri Baraka Reader*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000. Print.
- Bérubé, Michael. "Avant-gardes and De-Author-Izations: *Harlem Gallery* and the Cultural Contradictions of Modernism." *Callaloo*. (1989): 192-215. Print.
- Brown, Cecil. *Stagolee Shot Billy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003. Print.
- Bryant, Jerry H. *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. Print.
- Bontemps, Arna W, and Langston Hughes. *The Book of Negro Folklore*. New York, 1958. Print.
- Borshuk, Michael. *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Botkin, B.A. "The Folk and the Individual: Their Creative Reciprocity," *English Journal*, 27: 121-135.1938.)

---. *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*

---. "Folk-Say" and Folklore Author(s): B. A. Botkin. *American Speech*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (Aug., 1931), pp. 404-406. Published by: Duke University Press.

Bozovik, Rade. "Sinkretizam/

Callahan, John F. *In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Print.

Carby, Hazel V. *Race Men*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998. Print.

---. "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk : Zora Neale Hurston." *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ed. Michael Awkward. Cambridge: ProQuest Information and Learning, 2000. Internet resource.

Chinitz, David. "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes." *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996) 177-192.

Crowley, Daniel C. *I Could Talk Old-Story Good*. University of California Press, 1966. Print.

Dance, Daryl C. *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p.179. Print.

Dickerson, Venessa D. "Summoning SomeBody: The Flesh Made Word in Toni Morrison's Fiction" *Recovering the Black Female Body*. Ed. by Michael Bennett and V. Dickerson. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Print

- Du, Bois W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Modern Library, 2003. Print.
- duCille, Ann. "Marriage, Family, and Other 'peculiar Institutions' in African-American Literary History." *American Literary History*. 21.3 (2009): 604-617. Print.
- Duck, Leigh A. "'Go There Tuh Know There': Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk." *American Literary History*. 13.2 (2001): 265-94. Print. p.265.
- Dundes, Alan. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1972. Print.
- Elliot, Shanti. "Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore". *Folklore Forum* 30: 112 (1999).
- Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964. Print.
- Emerson, Caryl. *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1999. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by James Strachey. New York, 1963.
- Fulmer, Jacqueline. *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007.
- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Gates, Henry L, and Anthony Appiah. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993. Print.
- Gates, Henry L, and Nellie Y. McKay. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996. Print.

- Gates, Henry L. *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. Print.
- . *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- . "Narration and the Cultural Memory in the African American Tradition" in *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling*.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.
- Gilloch, Graeme, and Walter Benjamin. *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1996. Print.
- Goldman, Albert. *Grass Roots: Marijuana in America Today*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.
- Goss, Linda, and Marian E. Barnes. *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. Print.
- Graham, Maryemma. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- Griffin, Farah J. *"who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.
- Harris, Joel C, Margaret W. Brown, A. B. Frost, and Victor Dowling. *Brer Rabbit : Stories from Uncle Remus*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941. Print.

- Harris, Trudier. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Print.
- Hobsbawn, Eric. *Bandits, in the World, Robin Hood, Jesse James, Pancho Villa, Etc.* New York: Dell Pub., 1969. Print.
- Hughes, Langston, and Arna Bontemps. *The Book of Negro Folklore*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1958. Print.
- Hurston, Zora N. *Mules and Men*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print.
- Hynes, William J, and William G. Doty. *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993. Print.
- Ilomaki, Henni: "The War between Us and the Other", in *Folklore in the Processes of Community Identification*, Etnologicke Studie 1, Bratislava, 1994.
- John, Catherine A. "That Man in the Gutter is the God-Maker": Zora Neale Hurston's Philosophy of Culture." *"The Inside Light": New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Deborah G. Plant. Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010. Print.
- Jones, Gayl. *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991. Print.
- Jones, Peter. *Imagist Poetry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972. Print.
- Jurich, Marilyn. *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print.

- Kent, George E. *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1972. Print.
- King, Lovalerie, and Lynn O. Scott. *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- Kulavkova, Katica. "Simplification to Paranomasia: The Re-Semantization of the Paradigm of the Turk in Macedonian Literature." Istanbul, March 1999. Web.
<http://www.interromania.com/accolta.htm>.
- Kulavkova, Katica. "Postmodernistička artikulacija na intertekstualnosti vo Jane Zadrogaz od Goran Stefanovski." Zbornik: {Postmodern Articulation of Inter-Textuality in Goran Stefanovsky's Jane Zadrogaz} Prilep: 1997(1997).
- Lafazanovski, Ermis. *Tradicija, Naracija, Literature: Vlijanieto na Makedonsite narodni prikazni vrz Sovremenata Prozna Literatura od 20vek*. Skopje: Institut za Folklor "Marko Cepenkov." 1996. Print.
- Lahmann, Renate. *Phantasia, Memoria, Rhetorica*. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 2002.
- Lamothe, Daphne. "Vodou Imagery, African American Tradition, and Cultural Transformation." *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
- . *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Landay, Lori. *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. Print.

- Laws, G M. *Native American Balladry: A Descriptive Study and a Bibliographical Syllabus*. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964. Print.
- Lester, Julius, and Tom Feelings. *Black Folktales*. New York: R.W. Baron, 1969. Print.
- Leonard, Keith D. *Fettered Genius: the African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2006. Print.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.
- Lester, Julius, and Tom Feelings. *Black Folktales*. New York: R.W. Baron, 1969. Print.
- Lopez, Debbie. "Daring the Free Fall: Sula as Lilith." *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction*. Ed. Jeanne C. Reesman, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. Print.
- Low, David H. *The Ballads of Marko Kraljević*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968. Print.
- Lubiano, Wahneema H. *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Print.
- Manzanas, Calvo A. M, and Sánchez J. Benito. *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003. Print.
- Marjory Pryse. "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women." *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Ed. Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. Print.

Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'roll Music*. New York: Dutton, 1990. Print.

Martinoska, Ana. "Ethnic Stereotypes in the Macedonian Folklore and Their Reflection in the Macedonian Contemporary Literature." *Neohelicon* XXXII (2005) 1, pp. 71–79.

Мицковиќ, Слободан. *Крале Марко*. Скопје: Слово, 2003.

Miladinov, Konstantin and Dimitrija Miladinov. *Zbornik narodni pesni (Collection of Traditional Poems)*. Skopje: Makedonska kniga, 1983. [1st edition 1861].

Milner, Christina, and Richard Milner. *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1973. Print.

Morgan, Thomas L, and William Barlow. *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African American Popular Music from 1895 to 1930*. Washington, D.C: Elliott & Clark Pub, 1992, 8. Print.

Morrison, Toni, and Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. Print.

Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *The Black Feminist Reader*. Ed.by Joy James and T.D. Sharpley-Whiting. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. Print

---. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.

---. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print.

---. *Tar Baby*. New York: Knopf, 1981. Print.

---. *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

---. *A Mercy*. New York: Knopf, 2008. Print.

Morgan, Thomas L, and William Barlow. *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African American Popular Music from 1895 to 1930*. Washington, D.C: Elliott & Clark Pub, 1992, 8. Print.

Nicholls, David. *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000. Print.

Nielsen, Aldon L. "Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of Modernism." *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Poetry and Theatre Issue (Summer, 1992), pp. 241-255.

Nielsen, Aldon L, and Lauri Ramey. *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 2006. Print.

North, Michael. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.

Pavlić, Edward M. *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Print.

Penushliski, Kiril. *Makedonski folklor – Studii i prilog*. Skopje: Matica Makedonska.

Pelton, Robert D. *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*. Hermeneutics Ser, No. 8. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. Print

- Peterson, Dale E. *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. Print.
- Plant, Deborah G. *"The Inside Light": New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010. Print.\
- Reesman, Jeanne C. *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. Print.
- Rutledge, Gregory E. "The Epic Trickster: from Sunjata to Jim Crow." *Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 66.5 (2005): 1772. Print.
- Roberts, John W. *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. Print.
- . "Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea, Western Folklore" Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), pp. 179-190.
- Ruiz, Vicki L, and Ellen C. DuBois. *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.s. Women's History*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Seale, Bobby. *A Lonely Rage*. New York: Times Books, 1978.
- Sidran, Ben. *Black Talk*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. Print.
- Smith, Jeanne R. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977. Print.

Southern, Eileen ed., *Readings in Black American Music*. New York: Norton, 1971.

Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979. Print.

Tannen, Ricki S. *The Female Trickster: The Mask That Reveals*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Tate, Claudia. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983. Print.

The Black Arab as a Figure of Memory. Edited by Kata Kulavkova. Interpretations: European Research Project for Poetics and Hermeneutics, Volume 3 (2009). Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Terry, Jill. *Traditions, Tricksters, and Zora Neale Hurston's Storytelling*. 1990. Print.

Thomas, H N. *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Print.

Tolson, Melvin B, and Raymond Nelson. *"Harlem Gallery" and Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999. Print.

Tracy, Steven C. *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

---. "Ethnic Literature and Cultural Consciousness." *MELUS* , Vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), pp. 73-98.

Trudier Harris. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Print.

Toledano, Ehud. *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1998.

- Stuckey, Sterling. "Through the Prism of Folklore : the Black Ethos in Slavery." In *American Negro Slavery: A Modern Reader*. Edited by Allen Weinstein and Frank O. Gatell. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Print.
- Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York: WW Norton, 1971.
- Spalding, Henry D. *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor*, Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David, 1972. Print.
- Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Print.
- . *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Print.
- Walker, Margaret, and Charlotte M. Hubbard. *For My People*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942. Print.
- Young, Kevin. *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2012. Print.