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Abstract

This essay examines the use of trickster imagination and the appropriations of trickster mythology by writers from formerly colonised countries as a rich and relevant arsenal of material for their project of cultural transformation and critique. It shows the trickster figure as an ambivalent image and discusses the functions of laughter in trickster imagination. One of the most famously recorded trickster figures is Coyote, the trickster of American Indian mythology (Radin 1972). Coyote is a somewhat unfortunate being.

ANGI BUETTNER

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INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the use of trickster imagination and the appropriations of trickster mythology by writers from formerly colonised countries as a rich and relevant arsenal of material for their project of cultural transformation and critique. It shows the trickster figure as an ambivalent image and discusses the functions of laughter in trickster imagination. One of the most famously recorded trickster figures is Coyote, the trickster of American Indian mythology (Radin 1972). Coyote is a somewhat unfortunate being. He suffers accidents like getting his head stuck in the empty skull of an elk, which forces him to stumble about until he falls into a river, or he is shot full of holes after having been trapped by Rabbit. Coyote has also been known to burn his own anus, or to have most of his penis eaten in an accident with a chipmunk. The trickster is a multiform, as well as a multicultural, figure. The shapeshifter of usually animal form who can change through all kinds of disguise is prominent in myth cycles of almost every culture, and is kept alive particularly strongly in Indigenous cultures.¹ In many of the tales, fellow animals make a fool of the trickster and have just as much fun at the trickster's expense as the reader when reading these stories.

Trickster stories, however, are not just stories of embarrassing failure, but often also stories of success. A North American Indian story from the Winnebago myth cycle recounts the creation of the world. Wajkdjungkaga, the Winnebago's trickster figure, scatters all living creatures across the face of the earth with one enormous fart, which leaves them laughing, yelling and barking. Lawrence Sullivan, who retells this myth of origin in his short overview of tricksters, informs us that this is 'an ungracious parallel to the Winnebago's solemn account wherein Earthmaker creates a quiet and static world order in which each species remains in a separate lodge' (Sullivan 1987a 45).

This short account suggests what epitomises trickster tales right from their beginnings — laughter. Trickster tales appear wherever there is a hearty laugh, whenever things become so solemn that they provoke laughter. In many cultures and their mythical cycles, sacred accounts of the creation of the world are often accompanied by analogous myths that challenge their ritualised seriousness. These alternative myths tell the story of how tricksters create the 'unofficial', dirty and physical worlds we live in, of how the creation of the gods is counterbalanced by a different creative agency — the chaotic and comic acts of the trickster. It is

striking how these myths of origin almost always relate to the origin of laughter. Laughter and creation are closely linked. Laughter either precedes the bringing into being of something new (the world or such cultural goods as language), accompanies creation, or or immediately succeeds it.

This essay is about how trickster tales do not just induce laughter but are about the creation of laughter itself. Looking at some examples of myths from primarily South American backgrounds that have this point as their central theme, I aim to show how in the telling of myths laughter has been seen and used as a tool for specific ends. From there I ask what Trickster's comic vision is — what is represented in the stories, but also what is used as a rhetorical strategy for continued mythmaking — and what relevance such a trickster imagination might have for the postcolonial condition. If Trickster tells us about the creation of laughter, what kind of laughter is brought into the world with him or her?

LAUGHTER, TRICKSTER IMAGINATION, AND POSTCOLONIALISM — POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF ARTIFICE

In the first volume of his famous *Mythologies*, Lévi-Strauss records a whole series of myths from South American regions, mainly central Brazil, that are based on the theme of laughter. The main characters in Tucuna mythology for example, Dyai and Epi, embody the pairing of the solemn aspects of creation with the nature-and-culture bridging aspects of trickster creation, which is usually motivated by hunger and sexual desire. Dyai and Epi are twins. Dyai created humanity, the arts, laws, and customs, but Epi was a trickster,

a muddler, and an impudent fellow; if he wanted to take animal form, he often changed into an opossum. It was he ... who discovered his brother's secret wife in the bone flute where Dyai had hidden her ...; this wife, Tul, was born of the fruit of *Poraqueiba sericea*. He forced her into betraying her presence by making her laugh ... at the fish leaping to escape from the heat of the fire, while he himself undid his belt and danced, so that his penis quivered like the fish. He raped his sister-in-law with such violence that the sperm spouted from her mouth and nostrils. She immediately became pregnant and was too big to go back into her hiding place. (171)

This is an etiological tale about the opossum, whose forked penis, according to Lévi-Strauss, caused the belief that it copulates through the nostrils and that the female sneezes its young into its marsupial pouch (171). Trickster laughter here makes someone laugh so that she reveals her presence. It serves as a means for the fulfilment of the trickster's sexual drive. This theme of inducing laughter that destroys victims' camouflage — their place of hiding or disguise — which provides protection from tricksters' desire, or often from the wrath of the gods, can be found frequently in trickster myths. Trickster laughter, however, is also used for ends other than the fulfilment of desire:

After bringing men forth from the bowels of the earth, the demiurge Orekajuvakai wished to make them speak. He ordered them to stand in single file one behind the other, and sent for the little wolf to make them laugh. The wolf performed all sorts of

monkey tricks ... he bit his tail, but all in vain. Whereupon Orekajuvakai sent for the little red toad, whose comic gait amused everybody. After the toad had passed in front of the row for the third time, all the men began to speak and laugh heartily.

(Lévi-Strauss 123)

This little episode illustrates that trickster laughter is not just about the often-dirty tricks trickster plays but also, and importantly, about what laughter creates. Here it is the ultimate gift of culture, language. Notably, the two alternative creators, a god and the trickster, are placed within one story. The demiurge needs help to finish his creation, and speaking and laughing are joined in a causative connection. It is also interesting that for this act, not just anyone will do. The wolf performs all sorts of tricks, but he doesn't have the power of the trickster; it is the little red toad who can make 'men' laugh that performs the trickster's work.

Lévi-Strauss employs a series of myths revolving around laughter to illustrate his argument about the raw and the cooked which he sees as the disjunction between nature and culture. He argues that this contrast underlies all myths relating to laughter (132). Within this framework, he adds to the myths that recount the origin of laughter by showing how certain myths establish a connection between laughter and fire, which is primarily desired for cooking. In these myths, the monkey and the *prea* (a guinea-pig like animal with a short muzzle) are the main agents involved in tricking their way to the fire, which is usually stored in the mouth of a primordial being (128–32). But it is Lawrence Sullivan who recounts a myth that is most clearly connected to laughter. Hasimo, a mythic bird-man of the Venezuela-Brazil border region, steals fire from a primordial alligator which stores the first fire in its mouth. Hasimo shoots excrement into its face, which forces the alligator to laugh and Hasimo snatches the fire from its open mouth (1987b 52). Lévi-Strauss's and Sullivan's myths are just two examples of how laughter and cultural invention are related. Trickster brings cultural goods and cultural practices into being: fire, food, hunting, painting, business transactions and many more, which he usually steals from the gods and brings to human beings. It is this function that forms the basis and logic of the trickster imagination. It is important to note, however, that the techniques deployed to fulfil this function are part and parcel of Trickster's comic vision. With their ingenuity, lying and stealing, mocking and teasing, or sometimes just by chance, tricksters invent and create the natural as well as the cultural world (Hynes & Doty 15, 213; Hyde 8), and it is these strategies that make them the embodiment of vitality, imagination and creativity in so many myths of origin.

Cheating, cunning, deception, and trickery belong to the most effective, most widely used and oldest strategies of survival in nature. According to evolutionary biologists, the first attempts to trick others appeared about 540 million years ago, when the sense of sight started to evolve. Defenceless organisms found themselves suddenly exposed to the hostile glare of stronger adversaries. With the pre-Cambrian animal diversification and animals that moved volitionally the

dynamic play of prey and predator was unleashed. Life before shows no evidence of predation; it was tethered or floated randomly (Raff). For reasons easy to grasp, zoologists argue, those newly spied on were in a rush to recede into invisibility again. Under this pressure, evolutionary creativity was called for and many species discovered a growing arsenal of optical tricks and ploys to deceive their pursuers. They began to invent camouflages, to experiment with colours, shapes, textures and designs, and finally, to perfect the deception by slipping into other identities or mimicking them. This plight activated an immense creativity and led to an enormous diversification. So one can find, for example, poison arrow frogs whose bright colours warn predators of their lethal chemicals; chameleons, the masters of camouflage whose astonishing ability to change colour allows them to merge into their habitats; or insects and lizards mimicking plants or bark, or their own predators.

Concepts of biology have been drawn upon by postcolonial writers and critics in order to demonstrate the genesis, or evolution, of the imagination in the context of violated civilisations (see for example the work of Wilson Harris). The question of how and in what form imagination in formerly colonised cultures goes on to develop after the often near extinction of its old form by the imposed imagination of dominating cultures is a vital one. Its mutations tell a lot about how newness and change — brought about by the all-too-often catastrophic events concomitant with imperialism and colonisation — are dealt with in the arena of cultural production and politics. Mimicry as a means of adapting to, as well as coping with, one's environment — in this case the new environment as formed by the cruelties of a colonial past — is a concept that has been used and discussed at least since V.S. Naipaul's novel, *The Mimic Men*, appeared in 1967. But whereas for Naipaul mimicry is uncreative, Walcott, argues in 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?' that:

Mimicry is an act of imagination, and, in some animals and insects, endemic cunning. Lizards, chameleons, most butterflies, and certain insects adapt the immediate subtleties of color and even of texture both as defense and as lure. Camouflage, whether it is in the grass-blade stripes of the tiger or the eyed hide of the leopard, is mimicry, or more than that, it is design. What if the man in the New World needs mimicry as design, both as defense and as lure? We take as long as other fellow creatures in the natural world to adapt and then blend into our habitats, whether we possess these environments by forced migration or by instinct. That is genetics. (55)

In the context of the politics of adaptation to new environments, Walcott brings together the concepts of mimicry, imagination and genetics.

The question that poses itself is what kind of evolutionary creativity is invoked by the plight of the postcolonial condition, the need to adapt and to evolve as a reaction to imposed changes.² Walcott's statement about mimicry hints at the type of creativity and imagination that is at play — one of artifice and trickery in order to defend. Artifice is connected with the question of instrumentality. Mimicry as the art of mischievous imitation is one strategy of survival. It is a concept

of special interest in the context of postcolonialism. Mimicry, for both Naipaul and Walcott (as in evolutionary biology) is dependent on a mirror in order to be successful; it needs to feed on models. As in biology, where the development of prey and predator is inextricably linked, there is a dynamic play between 'colonisers' and 'colonised'. In their coexistence, both feed on each other, and the borderline between contestation and complicity is at best thinly drawn. Once seen, not only does the prey have to conceive of ploys to defend itself, but the predator too, has to be inventive in order to react to changes in its prey. A play of mutual impetus for evolution and creativity is initiated and predators profit as much from the deceptions and camouflages developed by the prey as does the prey itself.³ In postcolonial contexts, then, it is interesting to look at whether a similar co-evolution exists between colonisers and colonised, with a promotion of adaptation and diversity by evolved interaction among 'organisms' toward a mutually beneficial arrangement, or whether the two groups change independently. The Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, for one, sees conqueror and conquered as being involved in a shared process, although this, for him, is primarily a process of mutual erosion because of the workings of creation and destruction implicit in the division of the world into dominant and subdued cultures. Harris's concern is the shaping process worked by this experience on exploiter and exploited alike ((Harris 1999a 189; Griffiths 191).⁴

The biological context of mimicry lies at the very core of postcolonialism and the postcolonial condition. Homi Bhabha, in his essay, 'Of Mimicry and Man', identifies mimicry as a core mode of colonial discourse (86), and as one of 'the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge' (85):

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat ... comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'. And that form of *resemblance* is the most terrifying thing to behold. (90)

Bhabha quotes Lacan in the epigraph to his essay: 'The effect of mimicry is camouflage'. Bhabha does not mention it, but the figure embodying mimicry in many postcolonial texts is Trickster. The most crucial aspect of Bhabha's notion of mimicry is the '*ambivalence* of mimicry', which he defines as 'almost the same, *but not quite*' (86): '... the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (86) [emphasis in original]. Trickster imagination is the strategic performance of mimicry, of becoming mottled against a mottled background (as Lacan describes mimicry in Bhabha's opening quote). Trickster lives in the 'ambivalent world of the not quite' (91), but through his cunning and misfortunes relentlessly reveals the tight web spun by mimicry:

imitated and imitator are woven into a web of interdependent existence and becoming, where difference threatens to disappear but never does, and where the result or direction of the becoming is never predictable or controllable. Mimicry thus becomes mockery — of both imitated and imitator — with all its effects of the comic and threat.

Artifice and deception, ingenuity and mischievous imitation are Trickster's arts. Importantly, Wilson Harris, a highly influential 'postcolonial' thinker, places tricksters at the centre of his work, both fictional and critical, which at its core is about the unfinished genesis of the imagination. The fact that tricksters are often associated with originary myth, as for example in etiological tales, makes them interesting for postcolonial writers concerned with the 'genetics' of the imagination. It is the work and potential social or political function of the imagination that is at issue here.

As described earlier, mythological trickster figures embody imagination and creativity; trickster myths tell of the creation of cultural goods and cultural practices. As eternal boundary breakers and crossers of frontiers, trickster figures symbolise what Wilson Harris has described as the 'unfinished genesis of the imagination'. For Harris, the 'element of tricksterdom' is at the heart of the rise of the 'imaginative arts' in formerly colonised cultures, and the artist must, in fact, become a trickster in order to negotiate the demands of the new and old world order:

It is this element of tricksterdom that creates an individual and personal risk absolutely foreign to the conventional sanction of an Old Tribal World: a risk which identifies him (the artist) with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples but requires of him, in the same token, alchemic resources to conceal, as well as elaborate, a far-reaching order of the imagination which, being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. (199b 166)

The imaginative and creative resources in culture are vital to negotiate the spaces of past, present, and future in postcolonial societies. Bhabha describes a project similar in function to Harris's 'unfinished genesis of the imagination':

Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent 'neo-colonial' relations within the 'new' world order and the multi-national division of labour. Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance. (1994b 6)

The interplay between colonised past and exploitative present still creates the material realities for many societies. Like Harris, Bhabha asks how 'strategies of representation or empowerment' come into being (1994b 2). Bhabha finds them formulated in the 'in-between spaces', the 'interstices'. The in-between spaces are where culture is located and where 'newness enters the world' (1994c 227). Trickster — shapeshifter and boundary-crosser — inhabits the in-between, and trickster imagination becomes a space for the evolution of strategies and agencies of empowerment, or for what Frantz Fanon has famously described as 'negating activity' (qtd. in Bhabha 1994b 9). The imaginative elements surviving — and

re-created — in trickster stories, Wilson Harris shows, form a ‘trickster gateway’ (1999b 166) into an art that can take on this function for society — new original creative art that can imagine the future in the face of contemporary crisis and ‘see through or break through a hang-over of the past’ (1999c).

The import of the work of the imagination as a cultural and political fact has also been outlined by the Indo-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his *Modernity at Large* (especially 5–11). In showing how the construction of imagined worlds and imagined selves become objective social realities, Appadurai emphasises the role of the imagination in the struggle for cultural identity. The imagination’s political aspects clearly speak of its ambivalent character. Imagination is used or abused for ideological purposes, and also produces ideologies. At the same time, however, it can just as well provide new resources for identity and mobilise energies for creating alternatives to assumptions of monoculturalism, essentialism, or the unified nation, which have been shown to be dangerous or invalid. Trickster imagination comes in handy for writers addressing the many problems of a postcolonial world. Robert Pelton, who is primarily working in the West African context, defines Trickster as the image of the human mind and imagination; an image of the human power to create images (131–32). Lewis Hyde expresses a similar idea: ‘several places in the trickster mythology itself seem to me to suggest a creation story for the imagination’ (58). The momentousness of laughter becomes evident in that it is either the cause, driving force, or result of creation. It is not only the art of something, like cooking or hunting, but also art itself that is brought into existence by tricksters.

What, then, characterises the art trickster laughter brings into being? The performances of tricksters have been vividly and aptly described by Hyde (252–80), who examines the acts of disturbance tricksters perform. Trickster goes for the vulnerable points, attacks the Achilles’ heel. In a tale among the Ossetes in southern Russia reported by Hyde, the handsome hero Soslan is invulnerable except for a secret weak spot in his knees, a weakness which the trickster Syrdon, who is disguised as a woman, manages to discover. The other Ossetic heroes are much amused by Soslan’s invulnerability and roll a saw-toothed wheel down a hill just for the fun of seeing it bounce away from Soslan’s body. But Syrdon inspires them to aim the wheel at Soslan’s knees, and so the hero is cut down. From this story Hyde concludes that even the eternal are vulnerable at their joints. The word that provides Hyde with the unifying image to describe the cultural work that tricksters do is the Latin *articulus*. Hyde elaborates on its etymology and associations. *Articulus* can mean both a joint in the body and a turning point in the solar year, and for Hyde both represent moments of crisis. The solstice marks the crisis or turning point in the life of the sun when it seems to stop growing and begins to die. The scope of the word becomes clear when looking at its root and many related terms: all terms coming from the old Indo-European root *ar*, meaning ‘to join’, ‘to fit’, and to ‘make’, have to do with some sense of joining.

The two Latin nouns *ars* and *artus* echo this. *Ars* refers to skill, artifice, to craft and crafty action, while *artus* means a joint in the body. From this etymology in combination with the trickster stories, Hyde suggests thinking of trickster artists as artus-workers, or joint-workers. Tricksters are fond of the flexible or movable joint; they are joint-disturbers. Another disturbance they are fond of is re-articulation. Much of trickster's play is the reshaping of the world around him by disjoining and rejoining its elements: 'trickster's art involves playing with what I'm calling the second-order articulation; trickster shifts patterns in relation to one another, and by that redefines the patterns themselves' (Hyde 257).

This idea of trickster performance as a work of *artus* is a concept of obvious relevance for the question of the interrelationship between trickster discourse and issues of postcolonialism. It has been argued that Trickster, after all, merely reaffirms the belief system he is initially working against, that he is mocking but not actually changing the order of things. In this sense, he would serve merely as a kind of safety valve in a kind of carnival that allows for the expression of opposition without serious consequences, with trickster myths operating as ritual vents for social frustrations (see for example Hynes and Doty 206–208; Hyde 187). Although this is certainly part of trickster discourse, it does not stop there. Tricksters play with second-order articulation, as Hyde calls it, and the discourse that emerges with recourse to trickster imagination plays in turn with signification, which accounts for its deconstructive power. 'To kill a god or an ideal, go for the joints', Hyde reasons (253) and it is this work at the joints that offers an extremely valuable tool for the problem creative artists find themselves confronted with. At times or points of crisis, Trickster and his laughter can help to discover the weak spots that need to be attacked so as to get rid of old or superimposed concepts that must be changed in order to enable re-articulation (on how laughter and its expression in literary form discovers the 'Achilles' heel' see also Bakhtin 87). As Hyde notes, attacking the joints in order to actually destroy something, or attacking the joints to change the shape of things, are two senses in which 'tricksters are *artus*-workers and their creations works of *artus*' (258). This idea opens up many areas of application for postcolonial studies. The implications of trickster's pleasure in disjoining and rejoining in relation to the problem of cultural difference is one example; the entanglement of trickster play and the work of the imagination is another.

Imagination lets us conceive of new significations. Trickster imagination incorporates cheating and lying, both of which have to do with signification and language; duplicity is the precondition of signification (Hyde 75). Umberto Eco, in *A Theory of Semiotics*, has this to say about what makes something a sign:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else ... thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything *which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all. (qtd in Hyde 60)

This is the level of signification on which trickster imagination operates. As a form of creative lying, it can be used simultaneously to tell a truth, opening up new space for significations by giving the old ones the lie. The play of signs in trickster stories, Anne Doueihi argues, opens up for us the way ‘our minds function to construct an apparently solid but ultimately illusory reality’ (198). This playfulness of language reveals a different order of reality, a reality in which several meanings on several levels are possible because a space opens up between the different signifiers (199) as well as between signifier and signified; it dissolves the order of things and opens up other realities. In this way, laughter, which is at the heart of trickster imagination, can become a hermeneutic activity, an activity that makes us aware of the way we perceive things and construct realities. This activity includes an emphasis on the source and character of creativity, discovering how creativity can produce the possibility of social change. Trickster imagination and its laughter open up the doors of perception and bring to light the social consequences of this activity.⁵ Consequently, trickster imagination draws us into the hermeneutic activity of interpreting, and of subsequently critiquing our own interpretations and significations.

‘IF WE LAUGH AT HIM, HE GRINS AT US’ — POSTCOLONIAL LAUGHING

The quote in the section title is from Paul Radin’s study of the trickster in North American Indian mythology (169). Ever since Radin and others introduced this figure into Western anthropology, and eventually into Western consciousness, as more exotic than, say, the Hermes figure from Greek mythology, the trickster has become an object of fascination. Anthropology, psychology, or art are just a few examples of fields that draw on trickster imagination as a source of creative and scientific inspiration.⁶ Another group of people that has found trickster imagination a rich and relevant arsenal of material for its own project of cultural transformation and critique is writers from formerly colonised countries.

One such author writing from the background of former colonies is Pauline Melville. Her Guyana-based novel, *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, explores the incest and eclipse myth of Amerindian culture in order to address the problem of societal restructuring in the wake of European colonisation. Melville plays with many pre-texts, such as Wilson Harris’s *The Infinite Rehearsal* and Mario Andrade’s *Macunaíma*. Most notably, however, she draws upon and writes back to Lévi-Strauss’s accounts of Amerindian myths in his *Mythologies*. Melville thoroughly deconstructs Lévi-Strauss’s underlying presupposition of knowing an ‘other’ people or culture. The narrative device of choice is a traditional trickster figure as narrator. *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is framed by Macunaíma, the popular mythical being who has experienced many rewritings, and unfolds its own version of this figure’s laughter and imaginative play. In Melville’s story Macunaíma returns from the skies, where the Brazilian novelist Andrade, he complains, had tried to consign him. Macunaíma’s laughter and the laughter in the novel are characterised primarily by mimicry and mocking. Melville mimics Lévi-Strauss, but also

subverts and mocks his *Mythologies*; and Macunaíma, who prides himself on the art of disguise (Melville 7), imitates and mocks everything and everyone. That everyday life was ‘just an illusion behind which could be divined another reality’ (37) and ‘an illusion behind which lay the unchanging reality of dream and myth’ (99) is the central vision of the novel.

At the centre of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*’s comic vision is another story that links the creation of laughter with the creation of the world. Macunaíma, who can imitate everything from ‘the flickering hiss of the labaria snake’ to the ‘Lilliburlero signature tune of the BBC’s World Service’, reproduces a BBC radio programme on the Big Bang and on Einstein and Hawking for his grandmother:

‘Which came first,’ I wondered out loud, ‘the equation or the story?’

‘The story, of course,’ she snapped, as she listened carefully to my perfect mimicking of those faint hissing sounds of the universe from the beginning of time, recorded by radio telescopes.

‘What people are hearing,’ she said, ‘is the final wheeze of an enormous laugh.’ (8)

The laughter in Melville’s novel remains in the spirit of this creation myth. It is the enormous laugh of creation that indulges in the vitality and sheer fun of the mythical stories. In a little vignette about her incestuous pair, Danny and Beatrice, Melville rewrites almost word for word one of the myths reported in Lévi-Strauss and quoted here about the trickster Epi:

Beatrice laughed at the way his penis wiggle-woggled as he ran. Catching her mood, he began to strut and show off in front of his sister, thrusting his little pelvis forward. Beatrice laughed with all the more excitement because she realised that his penis danced like one of the fish cavorting in the pan. (92)

Or, to give just one more example of the positive associations of laughter, Melville also reinvokes the little red toad, which doesn’t function here as a civilizing hero bringing the gift of language, but rather makes Beatrice, who has been placed in a convent school, feel ‘that it had come to cheer her up’ (143).

But the laughter in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is not only associated with positive aspects and creative energy. Laughter is also attributed with destruction.⁷ The primary connection made throughout the novel is between laughter and blindness (see particularly 88). Laughter and questions of perception are closely linked. Beatrice’s sister Wifreda, who has witnessed the incest, goes blind, with the laughter of Beatrice ringing in her ears. The main issues at stake in the context of disaster in Melville’s novel are perception and communication, or rather the failure of communication. Lévi-Strauss has described mocking and teasing, those staples of trickster activity, as ‘abusive forms of communication’, and Trickster, as a traditional messenger figure, plays an important role in this. In an ironic and tragic accident Bla-Bla (note the name), the son of one of the main characters in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* dies in an explosion, running towards the danger spot Americans wanted to warn him about by shouting ‘Chofoye. Chofoye’, thinking it was an Amerindian word for explosion (343). But Chofoye is actually the name

of Bla-Bla's father. The Americans, not realising that Bla-Bla can speak English, also fail to realise that their informant has been mocking them.

Trickster not only embodies the playful but also the disruptive side of the human imagination. The negative sides of trickster, though, are not usually given enough attention in the critical literature. Mean laughter and nasty disruptiveness are just as important a part of the trickster imagination. In many myths, Trickster is associated with bringing into being people or things that establish ultimate boundaries; this acknowledges the negative aspects of trickster imagination. One such boundary created by trickster is, for example, death.⁸ Trickster imagination can thus account for and respond to the negative aspects of life, aspects that help make this figure fruitful for formerly colonised peoples, for whom the material conditions and consequences of colonialism and imperialism are still a harsh reality.

Trickster imagination — characterised by both its negative and positive aspects, and by the incessant changing of roles and identities — has the potential to dissolve often unchallenged ideologies and ideas about the world. The duality of Trickster's destructive and creative sides can be accounted for through the many functions of his laughter. Laughter has many manifestations and effects, and theories of laughter abound. No theory, however, can account for the richness and ambivalence of what is laughter; laughter can only be tackled in its specific instances.⁹ As discussed earlier, trickster discourse — and the laughter effects produced by it — has been questioned as to whether it has a critical and subversive function and a potential for political and social transformation. In the context of postcolonial fiction, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein have asked whether laughter gestures 'towards a new world order' or, rather, merely upholds 'the order of the day' (10). Many laughter or humour theorists have focused on the function of laughter as a social corrective or a mere social vent (and hence reconfirming the order of the day), particularly Henri Bergson in his famous *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.

Mikhail Bakhtin, however, in his similarly influential book on Rabelais and the Renaissance philosophy of laughter, has elaborately demonstrated how later theories and philosophies of laughter — including Bergson's — have focused on laughter's negative functions rather than on its creative power. Bakhtin shows how laughter 'degenerated' by shifts in culture that increasingly ignored conceptions of the creative power of laughter as it is expressed in ancient myths and antique laughter theories (such as Hippocrates, Aristotle, or Lucian). In these conceptions laughter is 'a universal philosophical principle that heals and regenerates' and 'is essentially linked to the ultimate philosophical questions concerning the 'regulation of life'' (70). Laughter in this tradition becomes a philosophy. This 'supreme form of laughter', as Bakhtin calls it, found its highest expression in Rabelais. During the Renaissance the 'culture of laughter begins to break through the narrow walls of festivities and to enter into all spheres of ideological life' and 'became the form of a new free and critical historical consciousness' (97).

Trickster laughter and imagination also draws on older conceptions of laughter and mythical sources that resonate with the creative power of laughter. Trickster discourse rediscovers the critical, productive, and regenerative power of laughter that has been lost in Western discourse since the Renaissance. Readings of Bakhtin's *Rabelais* have emphasised the critical and subversive function of laughter and its positive aspects, not least because of the 'historical orientation of this laughter' (98) and hence its political and utopian potential. Unsurprisingly, this opening for subversion of official ideologies has been attractive to postcolonial discourse. What has been less discussed in these readings focusing on the political and historical function of laughter, however, is just how much this laughter is about the image of the 'historic world of becoming and renewal' (Bakhtin 435), and just how much this image is an ambivalent image. Images in the cultural forms that are imbued with and brought about by laughter are all ambivalent images, or, to use Bakhtin's famous formula, grotesque images. They deal with the 'grotesque world of becoming', a world full of transgressions and transformations, where destruction and death are an integral part of becoming (308). The grotesque image is an ambivalent image, one that can combine 'in one image both the positive and negative poles' (308) — birth and death, the upper and lower level of the body, or play and seriousness.

Trickster is such an ambivalent, grotesque image in the Bakhtinian sense. In its ambivalence lies the power of this figure. Trickster's laughter, like Rabelais's or Bakhtin's laughter, is ambivalent: gay and triumphant, mocking and deriding. Both aspects have an utopian nature. Ambivalent laughter is related to the world, to freedom, and to 'the people's unofficial truth' (Bakhtin 90). The 'laughing aspect of the world', writes Bakhtin, has an 'unfinished and open character' (83) and laughter opens people's 'eyes on that which is new, on the future' (94). Laughter and the grotesque, ambivalent images of a world in the constant process of becoming and transgression of the 'old' is inextricably interwoven with 'the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture' (Bakhtin 325). Trickster's laughter in postcolonial writing, similarly, is interwoven with the unfinished genesis of the imagination that tells of an unfinished world and its times of crisis and renewal.

To summarise, trickster imagination as it has developed through the re-enactment, re-creation, and re-appropriation of trickster mythology in postcolonial fiction is characterised by both the negative and positive aspects of its laughter. The laughing trickster is an ambivalent image. The interplay between creation and destruction creates its richness and function. Through this play trickster discourse opens spaces to destroy — or at least challenge — 'the closed circle of interpretation' of the West's epistemologic creation of the Other (Bhabha 1993 31). As Bhabha has shown, in this closed circle, '[t]he other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse'. Trickster's work of artifice — of disjoining and

rejoining — produces spaces for ‘the active agent of articulation’ — the status the West denies its Other through its ‘narrative and *cultural* politics of difference’ (Bhabha 1993 31).

Unsurprisingly, then, postcolonial discourse — historically concerned with dichotomies between us and them, with notions of identity, self and the other, and with many more concepts and ideas that have been used as tools for domination and colonisation — makes full and productive use of trickster imagination. Pauline Melville’s trickster-narrator dismantles the fixity of such notions. Disguise is the only ‘true’ tool, paying homage to the fact that everything is disguise, construct, illusion. ‘Ah, secrecy, camouflage and treachery. What blessings to us all,’ he exclaims. ‘Where I come from, disguise is the only truth and desire the only true measure of time’ (7). Such sentiments confront us with an art of narration and imagination completely different from our Western one. Sexual desire, lying, fantasy, playfulness and laughter prevail over the linearity of time, realism, seriousness and science. In this spirit, Macunaíma in the novel is rather destructive, digging a grave for most of our precious — and sacred — grands récits. Time, truth, history, psychology, the primacy of literacy or Darwinism: all of these, for him, are not much more than amusing antics.¹⁰ Mocking Darwin and his science — measuring and collecting for instance — Macunaíma’s laughter draws attention to questions of perception. He laughs at Darwin’s ‘blindness’, making up his own cheeky myth about Darwin sitting down on the ancestral stones of Macunaíma’s myth cycle and writing down the first line of *The Origin of Species*, which, as is well known, declares that we are descended from monkeys. ‘If his eyes had been in his arse he would have known better’, Macunaíma mischievously observes (Melville 3). The creation of the world and its narration, in Macunaíma’s vision, are accompanied not by awe and respect, but by laughter. Where the gods create, or the trickster laughs and farts.

NOTES

- ¹ The Native North American art scene, for instance, even saw the rise of *The Magazine to Re-Establish the Trickster* (see for example in Ryan 1999). The trickster figure has also gained a cultural role more generally in various cultural fields. On this, and especially on the trickster’s literary role and in literary criticism see, for example, Morra and Reder, or Pulitano. On the trickster in film see Bassil-Morozow. On the role of the trickster in blues, and popular music more generally, see Smith.
- ² Note Ania Loomba’s observation that such terms as ‘the postcolonial condition’ or the ‘postcolonial subject’ can at best be no more than a handy shorthand, ‘because they do not allow for differences between distinct kinds of colonial situations, or the workings of class, gender, location, race, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructured by colonial rule’ (Loomba 15).
- ³ Compare Lewis Hyde, who also draws on the concept in evolutionary theory that the tension between predator and prey is one of the great engines that has driven the creation of intelligence itself, each side successively and ceaselessly responding to the other (1998).

- ⁴ For a discussion of the evolutionary hypothesis of co-evolution as cause of diversity, see for example Stephen Gould's *Dinosaur in a Haystack*.
- ⁵ On the connection between laughter and opening within mythology, see for example Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (120–32).
- ⁶ Hynes and Doty offer a useful bibliography tracing such influences. They supplement their extensive entries with [TC] for collections of trickster tales, or [TM] for works that have significance in engaging the methodology of 'trickster studies' (233–58).
- ⁷ For an interesting evaluation of this contradiction, see Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (132).
- ⁸ For one such story, see Hyde. He relates one origin myth of death, showing how Coyote's foolish behaviour is the reason for the present situation of mortality (84–86).
- ⁹ For a brief but very good introduction to humour theory and the meaning of humour see Critchley; for a useful overview of literature on humour theory in a postcolonial context see Reichl and Stein.
- ¹⁰ For an excellent essay on Melville's take on Darwinian evolution as a colonial mistranslation see DeLaughrey.

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