

# From Borders to Bridges: Trickster Aesthetics in the Novels of Michelle Cliff

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In recent years scholarly discussion of literary trickster characters has become particularly intense in the field of postcolonial studies. Especially Native American, African American, and Caribbean American authors have been shown to use tricksters as symbols of vitality and survival of their native cultures. These mythical figures dwell at the borders of different worldviews, they are metaphors of cultural transformations, and mark the cross-roads of various epistemological boundaries. Folkloric tricksters have been analyzed by countless literary critics in novels considered as indigenous or postcolonial, and, for example, Toni Morrison's use of tricksters has been a widely discussed topic.<sup>1</sup>

Michelle Cliff (b. 1946) is a Jamaican American migrant author, who while rewriting the Caribbean past and the history of resistance of the colonized people, uses the trickster figures as symbols of transitivity between oppositional dualities and as signifiers of the collision of culturally constructed binaries. My aim in this paper is to analyze Cliff's use of the trickster figure as a bridge between different kinds of borders constructed by colonial discourse. My argument is that Cliff's tricksters

1. Also for example novels like Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*; Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*; Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*; Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, or in the writings of Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Wilson Harris, the use of trickster characters has aroused a lot of scholarly discussion.

mark a space where different kinds of boundaries – linguistic, cultural, racial, gender, or sexual – collide. As a black lesbian author, she also “queers” many of her trickster characters. In other words, Cliff is not only rewriting the oppressed history of the Caribbean but also creating new spaces for non-normative sexualities in this history.<sup>2</sup>

In the following I wish to examine what kinds of trickster practices Michelle Cliff uses in her novels and how these practices serve as strategic means to disrupt normative structures of power, including the oppressive and dominative discourses of colonialism, “race,” gender, and (hetero)sexuality. I propose that in Cliff’s novels the functions of the trickster characters and trickster-rhetoric are associated with a critique and problematization of normative systems of signification. By using tricksters Cliff is able to undermine the stability of stereotypes related to a colonized Caribbean culture. First, I will briefly introduce the trickster as a folkloric figure. In particular, I will concentrate on the ambiguous Caribbean Anansi trickster. Secondly, I shall examine how women authors of color use a trickster aesthetic as revisionist mythmaking in their literature. Trickster aesthetic employs the characteristics of trickster figures textually to question and to challenge socially oppressive practices, such as patriarchal traditions and colonialism. Cliff blurs the colonial hierarchies by utilizing different kinds of trickster practices, on the level of language and discourse, as well as on the level of characterization. Trickster practices in Cliff’s novels include mixing and combining dualities of Western thinking, thus creating new sites of resistance or deviating syntheses. The “otherness” produced by colonizing power structures is revealed to be non-essential construction of racist/patriarchal ideology.

2. While the postcolonial field of study has been criticized for not considering and problematizing the questions of sexuality, and particularly the heteronormative bias of postcoloniality, there have also been demands for queer to consider its “color-blindness” – the Western and white biases of academic queer theory. It has been said that during the first five years of the new century, the queer has reached the phase of so-called “second generation queer theory” because of the criticism queer has faced. About “second generation” queer theory, see for example, Dennis Altman, “Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities,” in John C. Hawley, ed., *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 19-41; and Joseph A. Boone, “Go West. An Introduction,” in Joseph A. Boone, Martin Dupuis, Martin Meeker, Karin Quimpy, Cindy Sarver, Debra Silverman, Rosemary Weatherston, eds., *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) 3-20.

Thirdly, I will examine how Cliff's tricksters are "drilling holes" in the normative systems of signification. One of the most significant functions trickster has in Cliff's novels is blurring the definitions of sexuality and gender, which are traditionally expressed in biological, and therefore "natural" terms. I will analyze how the trickster assumes queer characteristics in her novels as the strict marginal/normative opposition between homo- and heterosexualities is set aside. Cliff queers the trickster and thus creates positions for non-normative sexualities in the largely homophobic Jamaican culture. Finally, I will examine the trickster aesthetic as a counter-practice in Cliff's novels. Trickster appears as the symbol of resistance or the metaphor of the counter-discourse, when colonizing power structures are encountered. Cliff represents ways of crossing the borders which define "acceptable" social and cultural practices.

Michelle Cliff has written several books including poetry, essays, novels, and short stories. Her first volume of poetry, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, was published in 1980. Her second book was the novel *Abeng*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1984. *Abeng* tells a story of twelve-year-old girl, Clare Savage, growing up in Jamaica in the 1950s, and it includes many autobiographical elements referring to Cliff's personal history. The novel is set in Jamaica – combining elements of Caribbean mythology and history in its narration. Cliff's second novel, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987),<sup>4</sup> a sequel to *Abeng*, continues with Clare's struggles to create wholeness out of her fragmented sense of identity. In the novel Clare's best friend is transsexual Harry/Harriet who helps Clare with his/her insightfulness, warmth, and wisdom – in the end of the novel they are ready to join a guerilla-group together fighting against neo-colonial forces in Jamaica. Cliff's third and most recent novel, *Free Enterprise* (1993),<sup>5</sup> continues with the themes of feminism, resistance, and correcting the official version of history. The story is set in the U.S after the Civil War and it describes female abolitionist resistance. In all of her novels Cliff creates strong female figures not allowing the history of resistance and colonized stories to sink into oblivion. This can also be

3. Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (1984; New York: Plume, 1995).

4. Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987; New York: Plume, 1996).

5. Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (1993; New York: Plume, 1994).



seen in her well-known essay, "A Journey Into Speech," published in her collection of prose and poetry, *Land of Look Behind* (1985):

To write as a complete Caribbean woman, or man for that matter, demands us retracing the African past of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the cane fields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. Or a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the artforms of those of our ancestors and speaking the patois forbidden us. It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting. It means also, I think, mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose.<sup>6</sup>

### Ambiguous Anansi

Tricksters are half-divine cultural heroes appearing in oral folklore in many cultures. They are commonly discussed in the fields of religious, folkloristic, or cultural anthropological studies. According to William J. Hynes, tricksters are "notorious border breakers" and "fundamentally ambiguous" figures, which are in "continual transit through all realms marginal and liminal."<sup>7</sup> Tricksters can make fun of, question, or desecralize the most essential beliefs, rituals, or social structures of the community in question. Tricksters are extremely controversial characters, heroes, or rogues, which combine the sacral and the profane. Hynes describes the trickster as a "cast out" character, whose "activities are often outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order. No borders are sacrosanct, be they religious, cultural, linguistic, epistemological, or metaphysical."<sup>8</sup>

Tricksters are empowered by the breaking of fundamental taboos or by calling into question the conventional practices of its society. According to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the trickster is "the embodiment of all complementary opposites, but in particular of that between imme-

6. Michelle Cliff, *Land of Look Behind* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1985) 14.

7. William J. Hynes, "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide," in William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, eds., *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1993) 33-35.

8. Hynes 34.

diate sexual gratification and the demands of civilization."<sup>9</sup> The trickster combines different kinds of oppositional binaries and thus expresses their mutual inter-dependence. Tricksters are balancing between the construction and the deconstruction of communal norms. After tricksters have questioned or criticized the communal traditions these traditions can be re-constructed and defined anew. William G. Doty and Hynes conclude with the words of Brian Street:

To question everything in society would lead to anarchy; to preserve everything would lead to stagnation; the conflict is presented, and the balance achieved, in the trickster tales, which so many societies possess. And in all of them a universal feature of the trickster is his role as both revolutionary and savior.<sup>10</sup>

In the Caribbean area, the most common trickster figure is Anansi the spider, which Cliff has said she uses consciously as a device for rewriting the multi-voiced and syncretic Jamaican culture.<sup>11</sup> In the oral tradition tricksters are generally animal figures, whose characteristics literary tricksters assume. The monkey is the common trickster-figure in African based cultures, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has demonstrated in his well-known study *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988).<sup>12</sup> Rabbit, fox and coyote are the most common trickster figures in Native American tradition. It is also the case in the Finnish tradition of animal stories, where the Fox and the Bear are the eternal fellow contestants. The Fox gains many trickster-like characteristics playing tricks on the Bear, who for one represents many features commonly thought as "Finnish": hard work, honesty, stamina, and persistence. The Fox contests the national ideals when it treacherously but cleverly succeeds to collect the prize earned by the Bear's hard work.<sup>13</sup>

9. Quoted in Doty and Hynes, "Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues: The Problem of the Trickster," in Hynes and Doty, eds., *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* 20.

10. Quoted in Doty & Hynes 19.

11. See Judith Raiskin, "The Art of History: An Interview with Michelle Cliff." *Kenyon Review* 15.1 (1993): 58.

12. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

13. Leea Virtanen writes about animal tales in Finnish folklore. According to Virtanen's study the morals of animal tales are often far from uplifting: "the kind or good-willed suffer loss while the weak, cunning and arrogant wins the day. The grotesque is a frequent element. ... Shrewdness, cunning, wisdom, and adaptability to new situations are depicted as ideals of behavior." Leea Virtanen and Thomas DuBois, *Finnish Folklore* (Helsinki & Seattle: Finnish Literature Society in association with the University of Washington Press, 2000) 217.

The spider trickster Anansi (Ananse, Anancy, Nansi) is common in the folklore in West Africa, especially among the Akan people in the area of Ghana. West African trickster tales and folklore spread to the Americas during slavery through the Middle Passage in the Caribbean. According to Christopher Vecsey, Hare, Tortoise, and Spider are the chief actors of West African folklore, varying from one location to another. The Tortoise is the most common among the Yoruba people, the Hare appears in the grassland areas, and the Spider in the forest areas.<sup>14</sup> Gates, for one, speaks about Esu-Elegbara as the most common trickster figure among the Yoruba, Dahomey, and Fon cultures in West Africa. Esu, whom Gates considers as an ancestor of the Monkey trickster in America, adopted many new forms in the new world upon the merging of many diasporic African traditions.<sup>15</sup> Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown mentions 25 different documented variants of the Anansi character in the English and French West Indies.<sup>16</sup>

Anansi is a controversial culture hero. He cheats, makes tricks, is extremely greedy, violates the most profound aspects of societal order, and is exceedingly antisocial. In many stories Anansi challenges the hegemony of the Nyame, the Supreme Being of the Akan Pantheon of Gods. According to Vecsey, Anansi for the most part "brings the people destructive and dangerous innovations," and "when he does help mankind he is usually acting with the hope of receiving a reward or payment."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in Anansi stories, the lack of balance brought by this trickster is always restored by the other characters of these tales. Also on many occasions, when Anansi fails with his tricks, the listeners draw ethical conclusions. Vecsey argues that Anansi calls the most sacrosanct of Akan institutions into question. Anansi "gives Akan society the opportunity to mock Nyame's authority; he gives the individual the opportunity to mock society's authority."<sup>18</sup> But in the end Anansi-stories serve to

14. Christopher Vecsey, "The Exception Who Proves the Rules: Ananse the Akan Trickster," in Hynes and Doty, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* 107.

15. See Gates, *Signifyin(g)* 16-20.

16. Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999) 68.

17. Vecsey 117, 116.

18. Vecsey 118.



resolve the doubts raised by Anansi and return the balance shaken by this insolent spider.

David Leeming and Jake Page emphasize the divine side of Anansi the Spider, comparing him with such culture heroes as Jesus and Osiris. Although they see Anansi as a rogue, they emphasize that Anansi is traditionally seen as a mediator between the people and the god Nyame. They also describe Anansi as a “master of the mysteries of language,” whose story-telling ability is “part of the trickster-shaman’s power.”<sup>19</sup> Mastery with the language is often associated with tricksters. Esu-Elegbara, the Dahomean trickster analyzed by Gates in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*, is characterized as a mediator and a messenger between Gods and Humans, the divine linguist. Esu interprets the alphabets of God and thus functions as a metaphor of in-betweenness and translation, as well as the symbol of signification. The parallel figure in Western tradition is Hermes, who also is the messenger of Gods, but who interestingly enough lends his name to the study of methodological principles of interpretation of a text, *hermeneutics*.<sup>20</sup>

The widely known story about Anansi’s greed, which for example Toni Morrison draws on in her novel *Tar Baby* (1981), is about his “encounter” with the sticky doll, the tar baby. Anansi’s wife and son had been working hard on the farm. The farm produces a large crop of maize, yams and beans, and, of course, the family is well satisfied. Selfish Anansi, however, wants the whole crop to himself and uses trickery to get his family to leave the farm. While they are away, Anansi feasts for two weeks on the produce. When the family comes back, they are utterly amazed to find that their fields already harvested. Anansi’s son asks their neighbors for help, and together they build a large sticky rubber-man and place it on the farm. When night comes Anansi sneaks out to raid the farm. He sees the figure and tries to talk to it. When the man does not answer, Anansi gets mad and sends a blow to the figure of the cheek,

19. David Leeming and Jake Page, *God: Myths of Male Divine* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 37.

20. See Gates, *Signifyin(g)* 6-11. In addition to Hermes, the Western literary canon has many other trickster figures. The variety of fools, jokers or king’s jesters, which commonly appear in drama might be considered as tricksters. The “Grave digger-section” might for example be interpreted as an appearance of the trickster, or the trickster discourse, in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Yorrick’s skull inserts comic dialogue into its tragic context, and thus this scene functions as *comic relief* in the play. Here Yorrick as trickster “operates” between two worlds “returning” from death to disturb the tragedy of the play.

whereupon Anansi's hand is caught in the sticky rubber. As he struggles with the rubber doll the sticky rubber binds him more and more tightly, until he cannot move. The son and the neighbors rush to the field and are surprised to find that the thief is Anansi himself. Ashamed, Anansi takes his spider form, spins his thread, and escapes.<sup>21</sup>

### Trickster and Revisionist Mythmaking in Feminist Literature

Jean Rosier Smith is interested in the process of rewriting old myths, which women writers of color frequently engage in when seeking to create a sense of both individual and communal identity. Smith uses the term "*revisionist mythmaking*," originally introduced by Alicia Ostriker, to describe women authors' "aim to redefine themselves and to deal with a shared crisis in self-definition by revising and recalling traditional stories."<sup>22</sup> Smith, who analyzes the fiction of Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Louise Erdrich, claims that "their revisions of myth, history, and narrative form simultaneously draw on and challenge their cultural heritages."<sup>23</sup> The trickster discourse is one part of this revisionist mythmaking, which they use to multiply perspectives in order to deconstruct the unified history or identity.<sup>24</sup> Smith emphasizes that in these feminist narratives of color the trickster is not merely a character but a rhetorical principle with breaks, disruptions, openness, loose ends, and multiple voices or perspectives.<sup>25</sup> In postcolonial literature the introduction of tricksters is frequently part of a narrative strategy to foreground

21. The tar baby story is the widest known Anansi-tale. (See the tale for example in Vecsey 119; and a longer version in Jacqueline de Weever, *Mythmaking and Metaphor on Black Women's Fiction* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991] 35-36.)

22. Jeanne Rosier Smith, *The Trickster Aesthetic. Narrative Strategy and Cultural Identity in the Works of Three Contemporary United States Women Writers: Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich and Toni Morrison*. *Dissertation Abstract* (Tufts University, 1994) 7.

23. Smith 8.

24. See Smith 8-11. The term "Trickster Discourse" originates from writings of the Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor. Smith explains that he "translates all of the trickster's characteristics into features of language which make up what he calls 'trickster discourse'" (17).

25. Smith 11.



survival, the potential of renewal, or the ambivalence of cultural borders and boundaries.

In Cliff's writings, the trickster discourse serves a similar narrative purpose. The paradoxes, ambiguity, tolerance and multi-voicedness embodied in the trickster render possible the transformation of colonial or other socially oppressive practices – or at least a discussion and criticism considering these practices. Smith uses the concept of "*trickster aesthetic*" to describe this method of using trickster figures as a means of challenging the ethno- and phallogocentric tradition. The trickster is able to parody different kinds of power structures, introducing multivocality and a multiplicity of perspectives and worldviews.<sup>26</sup> According to Smith, tricksters are "a mode of communal sign", and as "liminal, carnivalesque beings, [they] have the power to transform their society."<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, tricksters can be considered as a *rhetorical principle*. Then the trickster is not an actual character in the story, but a "polyvalence of language"; the trickster rhetoric includes multi-voiced narration, varying perspectives, strange words, repetitions, as well as the use of dialect, symbolism, and verbal language games. In his study *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* Henry Louis Gates Jr. analyzes tricksters primarily as discursive and rhetoric/stylistic features in literature, and explains that "the Signifyin(g) Monkey is often called the Signifier, he who wreaks the havoc upon the Signified."<sup>28</sup> He transfers the features of trickster characters into language, and defines the Monkey "not only a master of technique; he *is* technique, or style, or the literariness of the literary language; he is the great Signifier."<sup>29</sup>

Patricia Murray has provided a particularly Caribbean perspective on the use of trickster figures. Murray claims that Caribbean tricksters might be considered as symbols of the hybridity and syncretic nature of Caribbean culture. Murray analyzes trickster as metaphor, and argues that it embraces "the multiplicity and diversity of cross-cultural heritages, and ever increasing cross-cultural futures, whilst continuing to challenge the

26. Smith 12 and 14-15.

27. Smith 21, 25.

28. Gates, *Signifyin(g)* 52.

29. Gates, *Signifyin(g)* 54; italics in the original.

rapacious system of colonial desire that produced such hybridity in the first place.”<sup>30</sup> While symbolizing all the postcolonial and cross-cultural dialogues in the Caribbean, the trickster might serve as a form of resistance to the Eurocentric cultural hegemony because of its roots in an African-based tradition. Similarly Michelle Cliff in her novels draws from the African folk-tradition when she uses the trickster to dispel Western categorizations. Trickster represents the vitality and survival of the Caribbean culture.<sup>31</sup>

### Queer Tricksters Drilling Holes in the Normative System of Signification

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., associates the trickster with the problematics of signification, particularly when an individual has to operate on lingual borders. A lingual border, according to Gates, is for example the spoken vernacular discourse of the black communities. He claims in his earlier writings that these lingual borders are the sites of Monkey.<sup>32</sup> Gates also emphasizes that the space between literary traditions is the space of the Monkey. Gates refers to African-American literary texts as “mulattoes” with two-toned heritage, and suggests that they combine European literary structures with an “accent that Signifies (upon) the various black vernacular traditions.”<sup>33</sup>

30. Patricia Murray, “The Trickster at the Border: Cross-Cultural Dialogues in the Caribbean,” in Berry Ashok and Patricia Murray, eds., *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000) 178. See also 177-79.

31. As a signifier of cultural survival, trickster also represents survival in very concrete ways. Valerie Lee connects the trickster to stories which describe the material survival of particular communities. These African stories depict tricksters as providers of food or associate them with food and nourishment. Lee also combines “the tricksterness” with the healing traditions, healers, spiritual providers, granny midwives and “nourishing” mother-figures in African-American culture. In such a perspective the trickster aesthetic assumes a strongly feminist emphasis. Lee’s example of her idea of the mother-healer-nourisher-trickster is Sethe’s character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Marie-Thérèse in *Tar Baby*. Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives & Black Women Writers* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 77.

32. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey,” in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *Black Literature & Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1984) 293.

33. Gates, *Signifyin(g)* xxiii.

Gates' idea of "mulattoe" literature may also be applied to Cliff's novels. In her narration Cliff makes constant shifts between King's English and vernacular Caribbean spoken patois. These lingual shifts are used to highlight the character's connectedness to his/her Caribbeanness or to emphasize the class status of the speaker. Even the narrator may change into patois, particularly when engaging with myths or folkloric tales, which shows the interconnectedness of language and experience. Cliff resists the formality of the European tradition of the novel by mixing up the form of this genre. Her novels often interrupt linear narration with myths, folklore, or historical sections, which deviates from the uniformity characteristic of traditional Western narration. Indeed, it is by using the trickster's tools that Cliff creates counter-narratives to Eurocentric literary traditions. In the following section from *Free Enterprise* Cliff's trickster-like use of language becomes visible. She interrupts the narration to tell about the myth of John Crow and African slaves flying back to home. When telling the mythical story the language transforms into patois at the point when focalization also changes:

Some people believed that slaves punished to death came back as John Crow. This could not have been true, for the skies of the island would have been black, not blue. But some people persisted, explaining the Crow-them eat the slave-them, and then the slave-them become the Crow-them and fly all the way back to Africa; is true-true. And then what? Nyam dead hyena for time ever-lasting?

Nuh, man, nuh tu'n back into warrior-them?

And then the sweet sound of air hitting teeth. Disbelief. But the longing for a return, to Africa, life, home. (119)

In addition to multi-vocal narrative strategies and black discourse, Gates' analysis of the trickster-thematic includes two other characteristics worthy of notice with reference to Michelle Cliff's novels. These are the deconstruction of the gender binary and symbolism of resistance. In Fon culture Esu is the seventh son of the God Mawu-Lisa. Both Esu and Mawu-Lisa are genderless or bi-gendered characters, which do not represent the physical difference between men and women. In the novel *No Telephone to Heaven* Mawu-Lisa is juxtaposed with the transsexual character Harry/Harriet. Mawu-Lisa is both the sun and the moon, or power and wisdom combined to represent a synthesis of many dualities common to Western culture. Thus Mawu-Lisa also resists the essential nature



of biologically defined gender.<sup>34</sup> To quote the novel, “one old woman, one who kenneed Harriet’s history, called her Mawu-Lisa, moon and sun, female-male deity of some of their ancestors” (171). Harry/Harriet is also connected to the African–American Monkey-trickster when a white soldier calls Harry/Harriet a “sweet lickle Monkey” (129).

Cliff turns to the African heritage, like the trickster-stories, when seeking to rethink the categories of gender. Nada Elia has claimed that Cliff’s transsexual trickster in *No Telephone to Heaven* is a radical means of re-interpreting the dominant ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality. Elia writes: “This is a truly subversive act, as it allows her/him [Harry/Harriet] to deconstruct dominant ideas of race, sex, and class without substituting new ones that would merely have the effect of creating additional divisive boundaries.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, Cliff’s black creole character is *the queer-trickster* renewing the “Fanonian” discourse of black masculinity, which has been showed to be extremely oppressive to homosexuals.<sup>36</sup> The following commentary by the black gay critic Marlon Riggs underscores the subversiveness of Cliff’s vision of black masculinity:

Before the white man came, African men were strong, noble, protectors, providers, and warriors for their families and tribes. In pre-colonial Africa, men were truly men. And women – were women. Nobody was lesbian. Nobody was feminist. Nobody was gay ... But the embrace of the African warrior ideal – strong, protective, impassive, patriarchal – has cost us. It has set us down a perilous road of cultural and spiritual redemption, and distorted or altogether disappeared from historical record the multiplicity of identities around color, gender, sexuality, and class, which inform the African and African American experience.<sup>37</sup>

34. See more about the dual-sexed trickster, Gates, *The Signify(g)* 23, 30 and Kathleen J. Renk, *Caribbean Shadows & Victorian Ghosts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) 133-39. Renk refers to all tricksters problematizing the gender binaries as “tricksters of Sun and Moon.” This kind of tricksters can be found, according to Renk, for example in the writings of Michelle Cliff and Paule Marshall (133).

35. Nada Elia, *Trances, Dances, and Vociferations: Agency and Resistance in Africana Women’s Narratives* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001) 62.

36. Cliff rejects the claims which for example Franz Fanon has made that homosexuality is something strange and alien to African-based cultures. Fanon connects homosexuality to colonialism and is persistent with the idea that there is no indigenous homosexuality among African nations. Fanon is projecting a strong, black masculinity, which does not allow itself to be symbolically “castrated” through any association with homosexuality. See more about black masculinity and homosexuality, Gaurav Desai, “Out in Africa,” in John C. Hawley, ed., *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 146-47; and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks (Peau Noire, Masque Blancs, 1952)*. Transl. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986 [1967]) 150-181.

37. Quoted in Elia 64-5.

Moreover, Harry/Harriet is also a trickster symbolizing political resistance in *No Telephone to Heaven*. S/he is the power which leads Clare to the guerilla-group formed by young Jamaicans and thus to resistance. Judith Raiskin considers Harry/Harriet as Anansi-trickster, who crosses and blurs many boundaries regarded as "natural": "Harry/Harriet is both the traditional Anansi trickster character and the revolutionary guerilla fighting neocolonialist exploitation."<sup>38</sup> As a queer-trickster, healer, and fighter, Harry/Harriet is the predecessor of the black, lesbian obeah-healer character Mma Alli in *Abeng* who "had never lain with a man."<sup>39</sup> She taught many of the woman on the plantation "to keep their bodies their own, even while they were made subject to whimsical violence" (35). Through the creation of these characters, Cliff connects the themes of gender and sexuality to the Afro-Caribbean traditions of healing, resistance, and trickster stories.

While the tales about the Monkey may be read as "rituals of insult and naming" or "allegories of the black's political oppression," Gates interestingly analyzes them as "chiasitic fantasies of reversal of power relationships."<sup>40</sup> A similar reversal of power relationships is typical for trickster characters in Cliff's novels. Tricksters appear on the borders of conventional, convenient, oppressive, or accustomed structures. Robert McRuer combines the repetitions and the changed meanings of trickster discourse defined by Gates with the subversive performative repetitions defined by Judith Butler. McRuer pays particular attention to trickster figures as invertors or interrupters of the norms limiting sexuality – the heterosexual matrix.<sup>41</sup> The character of Harry/Harriet may be seen as a

38. Judith Raiskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 191. If Harry/Harriet is considered as a trickster figure, attention should be paid to his/her healing abilities. In the end of *No Telephone to Heaven* Harry/Harriet educates him/herself as healer in both the Western and Afro-Caribbean senses of the word and becomes both nurse and the obeah-healer. Valerie Lec connects such healers and midwives who operated in black communities outside the institutional field of Western medicine to the trickster. They knew a whole variety of herbs and roots, means of spiritual healing, stories, conjuring, and many other traditional "strategies of survival." According to Lec, these skilled grannies were trickster-like shape-shifters, priests, ritual healers, midwives, or story-tellers. An interesting detail in this context is the midwifery bag – a bag of tricks – full of secrets: assorted herbs, potions, magical amulets, and many other items of mystery. In Lee's study this bag is repeatedly referred to as a "Trickster's bag" or "Trickster's bag of subversive practices" (see Lee passim, but particularly 17, 43-44, 68, 77, and 111).

39. A 35.

40. Gates, *Signifyin(g)* 54, 55, 59.

41. See Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance* (New York: New York UP, 1997) 85-90.



queer-trickster as defined by McRuer. As a queer-trickster, Harry/Harriet not only undermines the binary thinking of gender categories and stereotypical representations of black macho masculinity, but the limits of hetero-normative sexuality. S/he represents the performative nature of gender as defined by Butler – gender as acts of doing rather than as a way of being.<sup>42</sup>

Neither Harry/Harriet's gender nor sexual identity is defined essentially through biological categorization. At the end of *No Telephone to Heaven* s/he gives up his/her prior dream of undergoing a sex-change operation. Consequently, she is capable of refusing the Harry part of herself, and chooses to be Harriet, in Harry's body. When Clare sees her friend after a long time Harriet explains to wondering Clare:

"Harry?"

"Harriet, now, girlfriend ... finally."

"Then you have done it?"

"No, man. Cyaan afford it. Maybe when de revolution come ... but the choice is mine, man, is made. Harriet live and Harry be no more." [...] "But, you know, darling, castration ain't de main t'ing ... not a-tall, a-tall."<sup>43</sup>

The novel juxtaposes Harriet's decision and Clare's difficulties with accepting her light creole skin. Clare has struggled with a fragmented sense of identity. With Harriet's help she is able to achieve wholeness by finding her Caribbeanness; she is neither white nor black, yet both. As Judith Raiskin reminds us, it is "significant that neither Clare nor Harriet makes a physical change at the end: Clare is still light skinned, and Harriet has not had the sex-change operation. By their own choices each has

42. Judith Butler analyzes the categories of gender and sexuality as genealogically constructed. She sees that gender, sex, and sexuality are performative repetitions, acts of doing rather than being. According to Butler there is no deed behind the doer; gender is not reason to certain gendered acts, vice versa gender is something what is constructed after the performative repetition of "regulatory practices of gender coherence." Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*: "In this sense, *gender* is not noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to reexist the deed. ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York: Routledge, 1990] 24-25.)

43. NTH 168.



challenged the boundaries of racial and sexual classifications and stepped beyond the biological determinism of these positions."<sup>44</sup> Cliff abandons the biologically or genetically defined categories, which are traditionally conceived as absolute and normal. She shows the fluctuation of these categories and exposes their performative constructedness.

As a trickster Harry/Harriet helps his/her friends to cross destructive or limiting boundaries. S/he for example confesses to Clare how he was raped as a young boy by the white soldier and how he recovered by listening the Anansi-stories told by his nanny.<sup>45</sup> By telling about his rape Harry/Harriet problematizes the connection between power and masculinity and criticizes the misuse of phallic violence. In sum, Harry/Harriet represents the dialogical trickster full of shifts and contradictions.

### Trickster's Counter-Discourse and Resistance

In *Signifyin(g) Monkey* Henry Louis Gates, Jr., emphasizes the aspects of parody, intertextuality, and the dialogue between black texts as essential parts of the trickster rhetoric. According to Gates, the black African-American literary tradition creates new narrative spaces for the particularly black experience through the "inner dialogization" with other black texts.<sup>46</sup> In her novels Michelle Cliff creates a braid of intertextual voices underneath her narration; she expands the semantic space of the Caribbean novel by the "inner dialogization" with other texts.<sup>47</sup> Antonia MacDonald-Smythe connects Cliff's intertextuality to traditional story telling:

44. Raiskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields* 191.

45. NTH 129. Wilson Harris has also paid attention to the ritual healing function of Anansi. Harris connects Anansi the Spider to the limbo-dance which originates from the slave ships of the Middle Passage. According to Harris the slaves changed themselves into human-spiders, which symbolizes the slaves' union with the power of Anansi and the connection to the African Gods. See Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays on Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, Andrew Bundy, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999) 159.

46. See Gates, *Signifyin(g)* 110-3.

47. For further discussion on the role of intertextuality in the works of Cliff, see for example Simon Gikandi, *Writing in a Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 234-39. Although Gikandi only analyzes Cliff's first novel, *Abeng*, intertextuality operates also in her other novels.

Michelle Cliff takes generous advantage of the traditions of borrowing and intertextual weaving that is so much a part of that storytelling tradition. She draws the reader's attention to the form of the story – the technical virtuosity undergirding it. The story's intricate composition is constantly foregrounded. Cliff's emphasis is on the power of the story – of words that beguile and enchant.<sup>48</sup>

Cliff's writing draws broadly from the tradition of Anansi-stories, to a point where she might be said to write *as a trickster* – crossing the borders of both black and white literary and cultural legacies in the process. When writing about tricksters in Cliff's novels, the intertextual connections with Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) are the most important. In *Tar Baby* Morrison consciously utilizes the Anansi traditions transforming "historical folk materials" in a process that Trudier Harris refers to as "literary folklore."<sup>49</sup> Like Morrison, Cliff carries on the African-American and Caribbean Anansi-tradition as "literary folklore." In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* Lorde, meanwhile, juxtaposes the trickster character Afrekete with strength, intelligence, sexuality, and the community of black women; they are the tools with which the oppressive forces can be faced. In *No Telephone to Heaven* the figure of Afrekete is associated with Clare.<sup>50</sup> Together with Harry/Harriet they are Afrekete and Anansi, the symbols of resistance, survival and sexuality.<sup>51</sup>

*No Telephone to Heaven* contains a scene, where Harry/Harriet and

48. Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001) 175.

49. See Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University Tennessee Press, 1991) 5.

50. NTH 125.

51. Lorde ends her novel with the words: "Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance: Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; Mawu-Lisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, *whom we must all become*." Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 2001 [1982]) 255. According to my analysis, towards the end of her "bildung"-process in *No Telephone to Heaven* Clare becomes Afrekete, the strong woman warrior and guerilla-fighter. One might view this as Cliff's answer to the challenge to black women posed by Lorde. In Lorde's novel the trickster Afrekete also associates to the sexuality between women, to lesbian identity, and to the abandoning of gender roles defined by biology. With the intertextual reference to Lorde Cliff makes room for the tradition of black lesbian literature – and thus expands the semantic field of Caribbean feminist writing. For a more detailed analysis of Lorde's use of trickster discourse, see Kara Provost, "Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde," *Melus* 20.4 (1995): 45-60.

Clare trick an American tourist, claiming to be Prince Badnigga and Princess Cunnilinga of Benin participating the International Festival of Practitioners of Obeah. Here the fixed stereotypes of the tourist are subverted into mockery by using trickster strategy.<sup>52</sup> The scene not only signifies the subversion of the hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized, but also highlights the queerness of Cliff's trickster. In the scene Cliff describes the colorful eye-shadows of Harry/Harriet. Harry/Harriet is an African warrior of resistance, although his war paintings are turned into makeup foregrounding transsexuality, and thus undermining biological gender binaries. Cliff uses the trickster rhetoric to change and subvert the fixed prejudices concerning Africa. As the tourist is ready to believe anything that sounds African, these stereotypes are deconstructed and ridiculed:

The man stared, color high. Harry/Harriet picked up a joke. "Yes;" extending his hand, rising slightly from his seat, only as far as he imagined a prince of Africa would rise to greet a stranger, "I am Prince Badnigga, and this is my consort Princess Cunnilinga; we are here for the International Festival of Practitioners of Obeah, my dear chap."

The man took Harry/Harriet's hand and bowed slightly. "Obeah?"

"Voo-doo," Clare interjected, pronouncing each syllable as distinctly as possible. "Zombies and like." "Oh." The man seemed eager to depart, but Harry/Harriet held on. "I see you have noticed my eyelids ... these are the colors of our national flag ... At the first sign of manhood each young warrior on our country must do the same. [...] Poor man, did he not see their eyes jump with the joke? *Afrekete and Anansi*. But no, the poor fool, now released, took the whole story back to his table. (125; emphasis added)

Cliff utilizes trickster discourse to underline and to deconstruct the stereotypes and common beliefs, but changes the African tradition into the King's English. Cliff thus works at the crossroads of two languages and two cultures, mixing them up, but at the same time she brings up the syncretic nature of the Jamaican Creole culture. Cliff has commented on the scene in her interview with Judith Raiskin: "They're playing [Harry and Clare] with him like Anansi would. So they're using an essentially African type of discourse, but they're conducting it in the King's English."<sup>53</sup>

52. For example Kathleen J. Renk interprets the scene making the point that it is the very trickster character Harry/Harriet who makes the trickster discourse also available to Clare. This "availability" of trickster strategy helps her to understand her own possibilities in terms of subverting or negotiating oppressive power structures. See Renk 137-38.

53. Raiskin, "The Art of History" 58.



Several characters function as highlighters of overlapping perspectives – the multi-layeredness of the viewpoints – in Cliff’s novels. Many of her minor characters gain trickster-like characteristics, a strategy seeking to parody conventional thinking or to build up a network of multiple voices in the novels. They are reminders of controversial, subversive, or alternative ways of encountering the colonized culture. In shaking the authority of the colonizing hegemony, these characters call to mind hybrid agencies as defined by Homi K. Bhabha. Such agencies in Cliff’s novels are for example Nanny the Maroon Warrior – a symbol of feminist counter-history that can be found throughout her writing. Such characters as Mesopotamia, Scheheredzade, and Shakespeare II may also be considered as hybrid agents in *Free Enterprise*. Scheheredzade, for instance, is a mystical woman, an ex-slave living in the streets of Washington. Her character parodies the slave-mistress of the King of Samarkand in *Thousand and One Nights* – she has to be witty and cunning enough to please her white father to be able to save her slave mother.<sup>54</sup> Shakespeare II on the other hand takes advantage of the works of his more famous namesake to teach and present the Caribbean history of resistance to his people.

The character of Mesopotamia in *Free Enterprise* is a parallel figure to the Nanny of the Maroons. To the reader she is told to be the leader of the group of imprisoned female slaves embodying the strength and resistance of Caribbean women. However, Mesopotamia’s mysterious figure stays unseen in the novel – she is the hidden metaphor of the feminist abolitionist counter-history. The figure of Mesopotamia refers to the Rainbow Serpent God, Da of Dahomean, the snake-woman trickster, who according to Kathleen J. Renk is depicted in Afro-Caribbean literature as able to “reverse the demonization of the ‘exotic,’ evil female in the garden myth while expressing alternative modes of being that make possible a reseeing and reshaping of the Caribbean and, beyond that, the world.”<sup>55</sup> As trickster characters, both Mesopotamia and Nanny symbolize new and alternative representations at Caribbean women. They turn, change, and re-form stereotypes which traditionally have been the basis for constructing images of colonized femininity.

54. FE 93.

55. Renk 124-25.

Cliff demonstrates in various ways how solidly tricksters are attached to the Caribbean culture. Trickster stories reshape the interpretations of other, more contemporary pieces of popular culture, for example Hollywood movies, by bringing forth or producing mixed, creolized forms of popular culture. The trickster highlights the hybridity of Caribbean culture. Trickster's space is the "third space of enunciation," as Bhabha calls the site "which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code."<sup>56</sup> Bhabha's ideas concerning "the third space" as a site of dialogue and abrasion which has the potential to renew or transform both counter-parts involved, are useful when thinking about creolized Caribbean experience. Cliff's narrator shows that the Caribbean syncretic culture represents such a "third space." Pertinently, this dialogical site of signification is the place where trickster appears. Cliff is depicting multiple elements of the Jamaican imagination:

Jamaicans came in droves to see the pictures, to glimpse the world beyond the island, lose themselves, whether in theaters or in country gathering places – the picturegoers carried the images away with them, transforming them, eager always for more. In the streets and in the yards, Brer Anansi, about whom their grandparents taught them, Rhyging, about whom their mothers warned them, Sasabonsam, whose familiar image terrorized them, mixed in their games with Wyatt Earp, Legs Diamond, Tarzan the Apeman, and King Kong.<sup>57</sup>

According to Jean Rosier Smith, those often female authors who write within the dominating culture and the indigenous literary tradition, can *place themselves in a position of a trickster* when functioning on the borders of many lingual and cultural structures. They are able to develop heterogenic voices which reject the normativity of one legitimate discourse and thus creating "an altered sense of the real which challenges perceived, Western ways of knowing."<sup>58</sup> Smith illustrates her idea with the words of Mae Henderson, who claims that "minority women writers work as a combination of disruption and revision, a weaving of competing and complementary discourses, that seek both to adjudicate com-

56. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 37.

57. NTH 93.

58. Smith 27. See also 28-32.

peting claims and witness common concerns.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, this kind of a “trickster-position” is connected to the themes of counter-history, memory, border identities, and ideas of subversion discussed in contemporary postcolonial studies.

The trickster-position (re)constructs new ways of remembering by creating an alternative sense of community. Through trickster-positionality the author is able to repudiate the stereotypes undergirding (neo)colonial power structures. According to Smith, trickster aesthetics makes possible the active dialogue between readers and the multiple perspectives of the novel, “engendering a broader sense of the ‘real’ and suggesting a mode for survival in our increasingly diverse, multicultural world.”<sup>60</sup> I would like to conclude by saying that the trickster becomes a symbol of the survival and vitality of indigenous cultures. Cliff’s novels show that trickster aesthetics can be used as a critical device when deconstructing the defining, compelling, and naturalized borders constructed by dominating discourse. The trickster turns these borders into bridges by highlighting the alternative (third) spaces in-between. The trickster figure represents a multiplicity of voices and serves to reveal the normalizing nature of myths by creating counter-discourses which traverse naturalized borders. In Michelle Cliff’s novels the trickster queers and twists the norms of colonized, patriarchal, and (hetero)sexist systems, thus showing their performative nature.

59. Smith 31-2.

60. Smith 50-1.