

**University of Alberta**

**The Trick Question: Finding a Home for Tricksters in Indigenous Literary  
Nationalism**

by

**Kayleigh Cline**

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## Abstract

Published in 2010 in the wake of the Indigenous Literary Nationalism, *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, as compiled by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, represents a shift in critical approaches to studying Indigenous trickster figures. Rather than decontextualizing tricksters by erasing cultural differences and inventing archetypal similarities, the revisited scholarship in *Troubling Tricksters* advocates for recontextualization, which recognizes that a particular trickster figure should be considered most closely related to its culture of origin, rather than to the archetype of The Trickster.

However, while this new trickster criticism represents a more culturally responsible form of scholarship, it risks ignoring or, worse, dismissing literature with multiple cultural birthplaces. This thesis is an engagement with several problematic texts that create ruptures in this new trickster criticism: *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Anthology*, edited by Matt Dembicki, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, and Jason Aaron and R.M. Guéra's ongoing Vertigo comic series *Scalped*.

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## Introduction: A New Species of Trickster Criticism

In her 1991 article “An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh,” Marie Annharte Baker explains that “[b]ecause it is so difficult to define the Trickster [...], we always need to define the moment of the Trickster” (48). Baker was ahead of her time in calling for particularities when examining moments of Indigenous tricksters in literature, for throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s, her advice was—apparently—largely ignored as critics continued to think and write about how best to define The Trickster-as-archetype<sup>1</sup>.

However, recent scholarship has turned its eye towards “the moment” of the trickster, rather than on the trickster him/herself: the futility of attempting to see The Trickster, what Vizenor called an “erotic shimmer, a burn that sunders dioramas and terminal creeds” (x), has finally been recognized and, instead of defining the trickster, there is an attempt to define the trickster by the context in which s/he exists. Like “observing” a black hole by mapping its effects on neighbouring stars, scholars are beginning to study tricksters as intimately linked to their individual cultural contexts, rather than attempting to trace constant characteristics through the figures themselves. This new scholarship calls for a particular trickster to be considered most closely related to other elements of its culture of origin, rather than to other figures from other cultures which also happen to be labeled as The Trickster.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use “The Trickster” to refer to the archetype and “trickster(s)” to refer to those specific cultural figures which have a tendency, at their barest definition, to play tricks. Although tricksters could be liberally identified within countless cultural and popular cultural traditions and mythologies, I use the term in this thesis to refer only to those tricksters within North American Native cultural contexts (unless otherwise specified).

In his contribution to *Reasoning Together* (“A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Criticism Between 1986 and 1997”), Craig S. Womack writes that “the use of the word ‘trickster’ in Native literature has sometimes meant simply resorting to laziness—the substitution of a cliché for substantive analysis with attention to historical and cultural particulars” (70). Womack portrays this tendency to archetype individual mythic figures into the monolith of The Trickster as symptomatic of a tendency of the same process to occur with Native cultures in general, a point echoed by Reder when she points out the parallels between the term “Indian” and “Trickster” in the first paragraph of her preface to *Troubling Tricksters*. Reder writes that “no Indigenous person in North America called themselves ‘Indian’ before the arrival of Columbus, [and] in much the same way no Indigenous community had ‘tricksters’ ” (vii). To generalize a particular culture’s mythic figure by mixing it with numerous others to create The Trickster—a strange recipe that necessarily results in the distortion of the original figure—suggests that the same process can be undertaken on that culture as whole: all the numerous Indigenous nations of North America become, simply, “Indians.”

Such an approach comes in conjunction with the critical movement among Indigenous scholars known as Indigenous Literary Nationalism, which calls for the reassessment of Native literatures within their own specific cultural contexts. Others have already traced the theoretical trajectory of this critical movement, and

I will not repeat that project here<sup>2</sup>, but some important works in the current conceptualizations of this theory that deserve to be highlighted are Womack's *Red on Red*, the collaboratively edited *Reasoning Together*, Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior's *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, and, in a Canadian context, the collaborative article "Canadian Indian Literary Nationalism?". In his contribution to this last work, Niigonwedom James Sinclair writes that

Indigenous Literary Nationalism is one of the most dynamic, controversial, and broadly defined critical approaches emerging today. Simply put, this movement is interested in illuminating the intellectual histories, experiences, and knowledge structures available in Native (tribal/pan-tribal) nations' creative and critical expressions, and embedding these in the history and politics of those nations' community existences. (1)

Indigenous Literary Nationalism, then, emerges from a desire to more completely account for the social and historical contexts surrounding a particular piece of literature: that literature exists in a particular cultural moment that needs to be respected, as well as understood and critically dissected, in order for that literature to be understood. In other words, as Sam McKegney writes in the same article, "true commitment to 'the literature itself' is a commitment to community, nationhood, and sovereignty" (29).

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<sup>2</sup> For accounts of the history of Indigenous Literary Nationalism, refer to the preface to *American Indian Literary Nationalism* and Craig S. Womack's "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Criticism Between 1986 and 1997" in *Reasoning Together*.

Indigenous Literary Nationalism fundamentally changes former approaches to examining tricksters: most significantly, it renders archaic the generalized archetype of “The Trickster.” The mode of criticism in *Troubling Tricksters* is a reaction to previous scholarship that tended to totalize these unique cultural figures—and therefore their unique cultures of origin—into the singular term of The Trickster. Works such as William J. Hynes and William G. Doty’s *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1997), Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes this World* (1998), and Allan J. Ryan’s *The Trickster Shift* (1999) attempted to trap and fix figures from various myths into one easily digestible package of The Trickster, continuing the archetypal work begun in Paul Radin’s *The Trickster* (1956). These works had their particular moment in criticism—they all date from the late 1990s—and they all engaged with varying degrees of unrepentant archotyping. For example, despite acknowledging that “to define (de-finis) is to draw borders around phenomena, and tricksters seem amazingly resistant to such capture; they are notorious border breakers,” Hynes still generates a checklist of six Trickster traits in “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide,” which reads similarly to how one might use a field guide to identify species of birds (33). However, in contrast, Hyde works very hard to be honest about the limitations of his work—recognizing, even more so than Hynes, that tricksters tend to slip from the identification traps set for them—but he does still indulge in drawing parallels across cultures, resulting in an archotyping tendency that looks less for individual cultural contexts and instead strives for generalizations.

In reaction to these works, the approach that *Troubling Tricksters* advocates is the culmination of several relatively recent reexaminations of the archetype of The Trickster, performed in the wake of Indigenous Literary Nationalism. Neal McLeod, in *Cree Narrative Memory*, argues that “trickster” is a “conceptual straitjacket” of a term, which “suggests to some that this sacred being is little more than a buffoon” (97). He goes on to say that *wîsahkêcâhk*<sup>3</sup>, the so-called trickster of the Cree, needs instead to “be seen as part of the *genre* of sacred stories, *âtayôhkêwina*” (97; orig. emphasis). Similarly, Craig S. Womack writes in “A Single Decade” that “[w]hile many Native American cultures, as well as many European, American, African American, and Asian cultures, have story characters that resemble what we often call tricksters, it is a mistake to assume that tricksters originate in Indian stories” (70). These statements are representative of a reactionary criticism to the archotyping work of the 1990s, which, by defining The Trickster, also defined lines of kinship between these characters rather than traced those lines of kinship back to the cultures from which the characters—not The Trickster—originated.

Following in the wake of these observations, the contributors to *Troubling Tricksters* argue that scholarship is more productive if it recognizes, as Reder writes, that “the Anishnaabeg told stories about Nanabush, the Cree told stories about Wesakecak, the Blackfoot told stories about Naapi, the Stó:lō told stories about Coyote” (vii)—and, furthermore, that to capture any of these figures would

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<sup>3</sup> With regards to the spelling of the names of tricksters, I have prioritized consistency with the spellings in the original sources over internal consistency; therefore, several different spellings of the same name may be used within this thesis and even within the same chapter.

be to remove them from their original context and render them meaningless. The new criticism in *Troubling Tricksters* acknowledges that studying tricksters is both culturally and intellectually lucrative but that if they are caged away from their cultural birthplaces, essential elements of their character are muddied and obscured. Rather than decontextualizing tricksters by erasing cultural differences and inventing archetypal similarities, the revisited scholarship in *Troubling Tricksters* advocates for a practice of recontextualization that recognizes that a particular trickster figure should be considered most closely related to its culture of origin, rather than to other figures designated as The Trickster. As Morra proposes in her preface to *Troubling Tricksters*, “tricksters need to be relocated within specific Indigenous socio-historical contexts, and understood properly within those contexts” (xii).

One way of considering what Indigenous Literary Nationalism does—why it is profound and why it has implications that reach beyond Native Studies and English Literature departments—is in terms of difference markers. Previous cultural studies theories tended to point out the fundamentally erroneous nature of racial/cultural difference markers: how Othering results in distortions of what a particular culture’s worldview actually is. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and its subsequent ripple of scholarship across multiple disciplines, is the most significant example of this approach. Race and ethnicity theories tend to be more nuanced in practice, of course, but, essentially, this idea of difference markers = Othering = erroneous representations is what has become the driving force of cultural studies.

But what Indigenous Literary Nationalism proposes is something entirely different: it promotes difference markers as an important part of recognizing the validity of a particular culture's worldview. Rather than Othering and dehumanizing, difference markers in Indigenous Literary Nationalism instead enable the respect of human subjectivities by signalling "subjectivities" in order to activate the "human." Respect for particular cultural worldviews is generated through diversity and distinction. Womack points out that

on the one hand, difference, particularities, specifics, the local, historical details, and so on, allow one to avoid reductive universalized statements about the world that might be labelled as essentialist. On the other hand, naming differences, such as claims about coherent racial or cultural identities, seems to contradict the way in which theory has emphasized the fluidity between insider and outsider positionalities, the breakdown of oppositional categories, cross-cultural exchanges, hybridities, the interdependency of idea and the people that express them, the global aspects of contemporary life. (38)

And "naming differences" is exactly what Indigenous Literary Nationalism sets out to do. It breaks the down the "It's a small world after all" fallacy of "we are all the same despite our differences," and, instead argues that respecting cultural worldviews cannot happen until each cultural worldview is recognized as providing something distinct, unique, and not possessed by others.

*Troubling Tricksters* and other works involved in this new form of trickster criticism calls for a recognition that The-Trickster-as-archetype assumes commonalities in sacred figures that takes away the uniqueness of each culture's worldview and, therefore, diminishes the authority that should be accorded to a particular culture's perspective. Yet, although Womack may conclude that The Trickster "is a trope rather than a reality within Native cultures" (70), The Trickster (that is, the archetype) is a reality, although not "within Native cultures," or, at least, not in the same way as a particular trickster might be a reality. Reder concedes in her preface that

just as many Indigenous people in North America now refer to themselves as Indians, and many storytellers talk and write about tricksters, drawing not only on traditions in which they may or may not have been raised but also on their imaginations and the work of other Native authors. (vii)

*Troubling Tricksters* contains many important essays that work hard to relocate tricksters in particular works of literature back into their particular cultural homes. But what this new trickster criticism risks, I argue, is leaving behind those incidences of trickster in literature which do not utilize a particular trickster figure from the particular cultural background of its creator. Although there is recognition of the importance of authors such as Tomson Highway, Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, and others, all of whom often self-identify as using prescribed archetypal characteristics of The Trickster, there is as of yet no conclusive solution for how to deal with the disruptions these authors present to this new

trickster criticism. Critics such as Sinclair in “Trickster Reflections I” and Womack in “A Single Decade” acknowledge that these authors fit awkwardly into Indigenous Literary Nationalism-based scholarship, but provide little further guidance. Reder also merely mentions—in a rather seismic footnote—that she “suspect[s] that the next generation of literary critics might very well return to pan-Indian approaches in the discussion of literature, because national or tribal specific approaches are unlikely to satisfy or resonate with a growing urban Indigenous readership” (ix). However, her identification of pan-Indian approaches with “the next generation” signals that the current moment of criticism is calling for increased connections to specific cultures. Therefore, the problem of how to deal with those literatures which do utilize The Trickster, rather than culturally-specific tricksters, remains a disturbance in this new trickster criticism.

One approach could be to consider The Trickster as yet another kind of trickster; that The-Trickster-as-archetype may sprout from its own precise cultural context, albeit not a primarily Native one. The Trickster’s “cultural” origin would be that strange intersection of multiple cultural tricksters with multiple academic disciplines (anthropology, psychoanalysis, literature and art criticism). The Trickster’s “cultural context” would be those examples of late-1990s criticism that I listed earlier, paralleling, for example, McLeod’s placing of *wîsahkêcâhk* into the sacred stories of the Cree, *âtayôhkêwina* (97). As Drew Hayden Taylor writes in “Academia Mania,” “[t]he Trickster of legend was alive and well and

living in the glorious halls of academia,” implying that “the Trickster of legend” is not actually that at all but, rather a Trickster of academia (96).

Arguing that the “cultural” context of *The Trickster* is a particular moment within academic criticism makes academia analogous to an Indigenous culture—a problematic contention, though Taylor does write, “[t]his is a strange *race* of people who spend their entire life fulfilling some need to constantly study and analyse other people’s writings and work (in this case Native works), but seldom attempt the same work themselves” (97; emphasis mine). Leaving aside for a moment the debate of whether or not it is ethical to equate academia to a culture, I wish to point out such an assertion does not provide an easy solution for dealing with those texts that use *The Trickster* anyhow. Indigenous Literary Nationalism argues for the returning of cultural elements—like trickster characters—back to their homes and Native lands, but those difficult works of literature that cannot be entirely accounted for with Indigenous Literary Nationalism ask the question of what happens when there are several cultural homes to which a particular trickster could return. Adding another road—one leading back to academia as culture—does not provide any more direction to which path is the “right” way back; it simply adds another choice.

In summary, this new form of trickster criticism is disrupted by those works of literature that have trickster characters with complicated cultural origins. New trickster criticism argues that there is a fallacy in assuming that if one understands *The Trickster* (or, indeed, any single trickster), one is equipped to understand all other tricksters. Yet recontextualizing a trickster whose cultural

origins are not necessarily a straight path leading directly back to a specific Indigenous culture becomes a difficult task. The real work of this new trickster criticism—and its implications for Indigenous Literary Nationalism—arises with those texts and characters that can claim multiple cultural origins.

Which is to say that my thesis is, at its core, an engagement with those problematic texts that create ruptures in the new trickster criticism that has arisen from the values of Indigenous Literary Nationalism. I will examine works that are collaborative between those inside and outside a particular cultural experience, as well as instances of non-Native authors utilizing Indigenous trickster figures. The complications of such examples of literature to new trickster criticism is amplified by their vast variation of forms, which range far outside what could be considered “traditional” storytelling mediums. Trickster characters have a tendency to shape the form of the works in which they exist to better suit their purposes: they reach out beyond the story itself into the form that story is wearing. This allows a trickster figure to remain culturally specific even if his/her immediate context—the form in which his/her story is presented—utilizes conventions and/or techniques that originate from a different cultural context, because this ability—this trickster touch—allows the medium to change to suit that specific trickster. Therefore, I have made a point of focusing on comics in both of my chapters, while including some literature from other media as well, because the visual representations make for compelling evidence of how tricksters actively shape the form of their literary homes. Graphic storytelling actually allows the reader to see the nexus of cultural influences creating each text

and, furthermore, how these multiple cultural influences complicate Indigenous Literary Nationalism's attempts to return a trickster to his/her culture of origin.

In chapter 1, "Portraits of Trickiness," I examine the comic book anthology *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Anthology*, edited by Matt Dembiki. I dissect the complex interplay between culture and form that produces the individual stories contained within the anthology. *Trickster* is one of those examples of literature that complicate the new Nationalist approach to tricksters; not only are the stories written by Native storytellers and then illustrated by mainly non-Native artists, but they are also presented in a decontextualizing anthology format, which runs counter to *Troubling Trickster's* call for the recontextualization of tricksters. Since, in comics, the images are equal partners with the text in conveying the story, the cultural origins of these tricksters are complicated. For example, the first story from the collection I examine is "Rabbit's Choctaw Tail Tale," written by Tim Tingle and illustrated by Pat Lewis. Although the title clearly situates the story within the Choctaw culture, Lewis illustrates the story in a style reminiscent of Golden Age animation: therefore twinning this Rabbit's trickster heritage into both Choctaw storytelling and Bugs Bunny cartoons. "How Wildcat Caught a Turkey," by Cherokee storyteller Joseph Stands With Many and illustrator John Sperry, and "The Yehasuri: The Little Wild Indians," by Catawba (Iswa) storyteller Beckee Garris and Andrew Cohen, provide comparative examples of how tricksters whose origins are in oral literature can impart oral storytelling techniques into the comics format in order to recontextualize within a new medium. The last story

from the collection I examine, “Raven the Trickster” by John Active and illustrated by Jason Copland, provides recontextualization through representation of place. The stories in *Trickster* do not have easily defined cultural origins because of their multiple cultural origins, and yet many of the principles advocated for with this new trickster criticism can still be found within these texts, even if those philosophies need to be expanded in order to account for media forms such as comics.

In chapter 2, “Hunting the Anti-Trickster: Native Tricksters in the White Man’s Words,” I continue to test the limits of this new trickster criticism by examining Native tricksters in works by non-Native authors. In particular, I will examine in Neil Gaiman’s novel *American Gods* and Jason Aaron and R.M. Guéra’s ongoing Vertigo comic series *Scalped* incidences of what James (Sakej) Youngblood Henderson and Linda M. Morra call the “anti-trickster”. Henderson and Morra both theorize the anti-trickster as a strategy employed by colonialism in order to reinforce its false privileging of the colonizer over the colonized, yet the character of Whiskey Jack in *American Gods* presents the possibility that an anti-trickster can actually be a productive criticism of colonialism, even while seeming to act as its advocate and voice. Although analyzing *Scalped* is complicated by the fact that it is an ongoing serial publication, there is also the potential for the association of the main character, Dashiell Bad Horse, with the Lakota trickster Iktomi to become an instance of a productive anti-trickster as well; however, in *Scalped*, the question of whether or not the anti-trickster can be used to undermine colonialism, even as it appears to support it, is inextricably tied

to whether or not this comic series will undermine the conventions associated with its genre of noir fiction.

In these chapters, rather than simply accepting that these difficult texts are fundamentally incompatible with current theory, I will use these texts to target the limits of Indigenous Literary Nationalism. A trickster's cultural context is important—and certainly underemphasized in the previous archetyping Trickster scholarship—but it should not be lauded to such an extent that a critic can no longer account for the particular literary realities of particular trickster characters. Baker's article called not only for cultural context, but for an account of a trickster's literary context as well. This thesis has been created in the spirit of restoring balance between these two contexts: an approach that recognizes that those moments in literature when the cultural and literary contexts seemingly contradict and counteract each other can be productive moments of scholarship, rather than simply passed over as unknowable and invisible, like black holes in a universe of brighter and clearer stars. But inter-cultural tricksters are not black holes: rather than being defined by absence, these characters are composed of an abundance of presence, of multiple cultural origins rather than one. And, as such, both their inter-cultural contexts and their functions within specific literary forms need to be examined together with an acknowledgment that cultural context is not only created outside a work of literature but from within it as well.

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## Chapter 1

Portraits of Trickiness : Troubling *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*

In 2010, two books were published that attempted to reimagine Native American tricksters. The first, *Troubling Tricksters*, edited by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, is a collection of criticism and creative works that reexamines trickster studies, an approach to Indigenous literatures that “at one point became so popular that in recent years it has become somewhat of a cliché” (preface, Reder viii). The second, *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*, edited by Matt Dembicki, is an anthology of several short stories told in comic book form.

*Troubling Tricksters* represents a reassessment of trickster studies that advocates for the relocation of tricksters as characters back to their cultural origins. In her preface, Morra describes the necessity of this new approach in reaction to older scholarship, which tended to transform individual trickster figures into The-Trickster-as-archetype:

[s]ince the late 1980s, tricksters have been seen as emblematic of a postmodern consciousness rather than as part of specific Indigenous cultures, histories, storytelling; and since tricksters have often been used in the service of a predominantly white and colonial culture that characterized this figure as exotic, tricksters

need to be relocated within specific Indigenous socio-historical contexts, and understood properly within those contexts. (xii)

*Troubling Tricksters*, as a project, argues that previous criticism erased the unique properties of each culture's so-called "trickster" (Raven, Coyote, etc.) in order to create the inaccurate archetype of The Trickster.

Reder and Morra, in each of their prefaces, frame the approach that sought out tricksters in every Aboriginal culture (and then some) as archaic. Yet in 2010 *Trickster* was also published—and this collection seems to perform the exact project of decontextualizing tricksters that Reder and Morra portray as extinct. Winner of the 2011 Aesop Prize<sup>4</sup> and nominated for the 2011 Eisner Award for Best Anthology, *Trickster* is composed of many different stories from many different Native American storytellers that are then illustrated by mostly non-Native artists. The cultural contexts for the stories are limited; with a few exceptions, which are discussed later in this chapter, the reader must search through the author biographies to determine which culture serves as each story's site of progenesis. By anthologizing several stories from distinct cultures, distinct figures become archetyped under one image: the collection, you will note, is called *Trickster* (singular) and not *Tricksters* (plural).

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<sup>4</sup> The Aesop Prize is awarded "by the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society upon English language books for children and young adults, both fiction and nonfiction," that "should reflect the high artistic standards of the best of children's literature and have strong appeal to the child reader" (Aesop n.p.). I would not classify the entirety of the anthology as children's literature. Some stories, such as Joyce Bear and Megan Baehr's "How the Alligator Got His Brown, Scaly Skin" and Beckee Garris and Andrew Cohen's "The Yehasuri: the Little Wild Indians" do seem to have a juvenile audience in mind, but, given that trickster stories are not necessarily intended solely for children in their traditional oral form, it makes very little sense to extend the same exclusivity to the stories in comic form.

When examined together, *Troubling Tricksters* and *Trickster* present two sides of the same problem of how tricksters should be studied: the first is primarily critical, while the second is creative; one is composed only of text, while the other incorporates images; one troubles tricksters through recontextualization, while the other troubles tricksters through decontextualization.

However, merely to dismiss *Trickster* as performing a disservice to Native storytelling would be to ignore the fact that it is an anthology. The singular nature of the title *Trickster* implies that only one character features in these stories, but this trickster speaks with multiple voices—both Native and non-Native, for we must read the illustrations as “voices” as well. The plurality of voices means that this collection is never doing simply one thing at a time. Although there are certainly troubling aspects about how the stories are framed, it would be irresponsible to ignore the possibility that placing such different stories side by side may undermine the singular nature of the title *Trickster* and, rather than ignoring cultural distinctions, serves to spotlight those same distinctions. In bringing the stories into the visual realm, the illustrators often employ non-Native stylistic traditions. While this choice may run the risk of distancing the stories from their Native cultural origins, it also serves to trouble the assumptions made about tricksters in a complicated way that moves the stories beyond the text printed on the page in order to remind the reader that, despite the decontextualizing framework of the anthology format, the individual stories were

generated in their present form through a multicultural interplay of spoken word, written text, and images.

Therefore, I will examine the storytelling technique of *Trickster*—the graphic narrative—through the lens of the renewed trickster criticism represented by *Troubling Tricksters*: in particular, I will examine how, while *Troubling Tricksters* may represent a step forward for Indigenous literature, this criticism is complicated by how the stories in *Trickster* braid together oral, textual, and visual elements from disparate cultural experiences. Although any story in the collection is worthy of study, I will focus my efforts on a handful of stories in particular: animation-style illustrations in “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale”, oral storytelling techniques in “How the Wildcat Caught a Turkey” and “The Yehasuri,” and the establishment of place in “Raven the Trickster.”

#### A Portrait of Criticism: The Task of *Troubling Tricksters*

The mode of criticism in *Troubling Tricksters* is a reaction to previous scholarship that tended to totalize unique cultural figures—and therefore their unique cultures of origin—into the singular term of The Trickster. Works such as Paul Radin’s *The Trickster* (1956), William J. Hynes and William G. Doty’s *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1997), Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes this World* (1998), and Allan J. Ryan’s *The Trickster Shift* (1999) totalized various myths from various cultures into the generalized archetype of The Trickster. Prior to the publication of *Troubling Tricksters* in 2010, other Native scholars began the work of questioning The Trickster model posited by those texts, particularly in the

wake of the critical movement of Indigenous Literary Nationalism. In *Cree Narrative Memory*, published in 2007, Neal McLeod argues that “trickster” is a “conceptual straitjacket” of a term (97). In his contribution to the 2008 collection *Reasoning Together* (“A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997”), Craig S. Womack writes that “the use of the word ‘trickster’ in Native literature has sometimes meant simply resorting to laziness—the substitution of a cliché for substantive analysis with attention to historical and cultural particulars” (70).

In other words, the archotyping project of the former scholarship could be summarized as a recipe for The Trickster:

1. Take one particular cultural figure. Any will do, but examples include Wesakecak, Raven, Nanabush, Coyote, etc.
2. Add another particular cultural figure.
3. Generalize thoroughly until appears consistent. Repeat steps one and two as desired until all individual distinctions are dissolved.
4. Serve to an appropriate scholarly publication.

However, some of those critics involved in the archotyping of The Trickster did recognize the difficulty of their projects and even, at times, its impossibility. For example, Hyde concludes his book with a story about Father Jetté, a missionary who wished to transcribe Ten’a Raven stories, yet the stories could only be told in the dark. “Nobody would repeat the stories in daylight,” writes Hyde, “and at night whenever he struck a match to light a candle, the storyteller fell instantly

silent” (314). Hyde is reflexive about his attempts to capture The Trickster, understanding that such a being could only be approximated, never truly captured. But the work of recent scholars suggests that the frustrating elusiveness of The Trickster for such poaching scholars can be attributed to one thing: they were hunting a figment, for The Trickster, as an archetype, does not exist.

Marie Annharte Baker called for a return to a trickster character’s cultural birthplace in her 1991 article, “An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh” decades before Indigenous Literary Nationalism caused others to question the archetype of The Trickster. She writes that

[w]hen we see a trickster on the stage in an Aboriginal cultural production, we must become aware not only of the special cultural circumstance of that creation, and its circular totality, we must know something of the playwright, actor, director, or the events of the day which give inspiration to a particularly rendition. You are forced to be particular to understand. (48)

Baker’s level of particularity is impossible (How could a scholar ever know all of the pertinent events that occurred to the author when a work was composed?), meaning that the complete context of a story is an act of calculus: the object can only be approached, never reached. Yet this does not mean that striving for the closest approximation of those particulars is worthless scholarship. Baker points that “sometimes we don’t know the presence of the Trickster unless we trip up and over our very limited human undertakings”—that, in fact, the recognition of the limits of contextual knowledge is an essential part of studying tricksters in

literature (48). Or, to phrase it another way, to study tricksters is to enter into scholarship with a willingness to be tricked, to understand that the moment where knowledge fails is a productive one rather than an obstacle to be circumvented via an archotyping process. Therefore, the first step in “being particular” is to recognize how the term “The Trickster” tends to move scholars away from that point of complete particularity and into generalizations.

I write “tends” because, although trickster figures may have culturally-specific birthplaces, creative works do not necessarily confine themselves to a single specific Native culture. Reder points out in a crucial footnote to her preface that she “suspect[s] that the next generation of literary critics might very well return to pan-Indian approaches in the discussion of literature, because national or tribal specific approaches are unlikely to satisfy or resonate with a growing urban Indigenous readership” (ix). Therefore, if the particular circumstances of a literary work are pan-Indian, “being particular” may mean looking at a specific instance of a trickster figure as equally influenced by culturally-specific tricksters of an oral storytelling tradition and by those catalogued archetypal characteristics of “The Trickster.” For example, “being particular” in the case of Thomas King’s *Green Grass Running Water* may mean looking at King’s Coyote as a character that was born out of the archetypal characteristics of The Trickster as much as a Blackfoot understanding of Coyote. Although *Green Grass Running Water* does take place on a Blackfoot reserve in southern Alberta, King’s own heritage is not Blackfoot but Cherokee. And, as Kristina Fagan points out in her introduction to *Troubling Tricksters*, “What’s the

Trouble with the Trickster?,” King claims that “his use of the Coyote figure was heavily influenced by his reading of the transcribed stories of Harry Robinson, an Okanagan storyteller” (12). King has a tendency to concern himself with (inter)national pan-tribal issues affecting all Indigenous peoples in North America and admits to influences from several Native cultures, rather than writing out of only one particular literary tradition from one particular Indigenous culture. These tricksters which do not operate traditionally are very troubling in that they do not adhere easily to the revised scholarship presented in *Troubling Tricksters*, since, like Coyote in *Green Grass Running Water*, they may be The Trickster first, and perhaps more culturally-specific figures second. Although Reder and other scholars (such as Neal McLeod in *Cree Narrative Memory*, Craig S. Womack in “A Single Decade,” and Sam McKegney in his contribution to “Canadian Indian Literary Nationalism?”) recognize the existence of such pan-tribal difficulties, not only for trickster studies but for Native Studies as a whole, there is yet to be any conclusive solution to how to reconcile tricksters with complicated cultural origins with this new version of trickster scholarship.

#### Portrait of an Anthology: The Format of *Trickster*

Approximating the particularities that Baker asks in *Trickster*, however, is even more difficult than determining the cultural origins of pan-tribal tricksters, since it is a collection of several stories from several cultures. Although a reader can peruse the author biographies at the conclusion of the book in order to determine with which culture each storyteller identifies (and, presumably, where

each trickster story has its cultural origins), the anthology is not formatted in such a way that this information is obvious. This decontextualization—the loss of Baker’s “particulars”—is one of the dangers of anthologizing Native stories (or any literature). Margery Fee in “Aboriginal Writing in Canada and the Anthology as Commodity” writes that “anyone teaching from the anthology has to ensure that students understand the cultural variety that underlies it,” pointing out that “Aboriginal writers often want to preserve the distinctive practices of their cultures and to pass them on to the next generation, and thus are concerned that the differences between Cree and Nuu-chah-nulth and Mohawk be preserved” (141, 142). *Trickster* is organized in such a way that no external context is provided by the editor: for example, listing the storyteller’s cultural identification(s) in the table of contents. Therefore, the amount of context provided for each story relies on the choices of the Native writers and mostly non-Native illustrators, rather than on the editing choices of Matt Dembicki. For example, “How Wildcat Caught a Turkey” presents nothing within the title or content of the story that would culturally or temporally situate the circumstances of the story. Only by looking up the biography of the author, Joseph Stands With Many, in the concluding pages of the anthology can the reader discover that the author “is a Cherokee storyteller, educator, writer and poet,” and that, “[f]or the past ten years, he has presented his storytelling programs at schools, colleges, universities, government agencies, and museums” (231). And so the reader can finally begin to glean some of the particular circumstances in which the story may have been/is told.

In an interview on Fulcrum Publishing’s website, Dembicki explains how the original cover art for the collection was a sketch by Peter Kuper who, when “told about the various trickster beings in the book—coyote, rabbit, crayfish, etc.” chose to create an image “that would convey that this is a collection of a range of trickster beings” (n.p.). Kuper’s original cover is composed of several different animals, but, rather than being maintained as separate entities, all are combined into the face of one man (see fig. 1).



**Fig. 3. Original cover art for *Trickster* by Peter Kuper from Matt Dembicki and Jack Lenzo, "Designing Fulcrum's Book Covers: An Inside Look at the 'Trickster' Cover Process." *Fulcrumbookblog*. (Fulcrum, 1 Mar. 2011; web; 10 Jan. 2012).**

Although this original cover by Kuper could not be used because of formatting issues and Dembicki was satisfied with the published cover, he still describes Kuper’s cover art as being able to “capture the essence of the book” (n.p.). The desire to emphasize that there is “a range of trickster beings” may seem to be an

anti-totalizing message: an effort to be particular that aligns with *Troubling Trickster*'s call to return each individual trickster to their culture of origin by recognizing their distinct forms. However, by combining all the individual tricksters into a single face, the original image would have performed the same operation as the simple but significant act of naming the book *Trickster* (singular) rather than *Tricksters* (plural): erasing the particulars of each being's culture in service of creating a comprehensive archetype that could be called The Trickster. As Niigonwedom James Sinclair writes in "Trickster Reflections I" in *Troubling Tricksters* "[t]rickster stories are sometimes only one part of a larger body of interrelated narratives these knowledge keepers hold and tell" (25). What the original cover art illustrates is a problem with the presentation of *Trickster* as a collection because it implies that these different beings are more related to each other (as tricksters) than they are to other stories from their cultural contexts.

One of the issues that complicates *Trickster* is that the complete experience of each story is generated by both a Native writer and a non-Native illustrator<sup>5</sup>. This is due, in part, to the difficulties Dembicki encountered in finding Native illustrators; he says, in a 2008 interview with Blue Corn Comics, "I felt I had to broaden my pool of artists to complete the project. And I'm glad I did that because it turned out to be a wonderful educational and cultural experience for all the participating artists, including myself<sup>6</sup>" (n.p.). Matt

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the illustrators (Roy Boney Jr., Rand Arrington, and Dimi Macheras) do identify as Native. However, they do not collaborate with storytellers from their own cultures. For example, "Horned Toad Lady and Coyote" is retold by Eldrena Douma, from the Pueblo culture, while the story's illustrator, Roy Boney Jr. is from the Cherokee Nation.

<sup>6</sup> Dembicki illustrates James and Joseph Bruchac's Abenaki story "Azban and the Crayfish."

Dembicki assures in the “From the Editor” section, placed at the conclusion of the anthology, that “[t]o ensure a proper fit between the written stories and the illustrations, the storytellers each selected an artist from a pool of contributing talents to render their stories” and that “[a]dditionally, the storytellers approved the storyboards” (225). Dembicki says that “text was changed only when panel space was an issue and only with the approval of the storyteller” (225).

However, in the “From the Editor” section Matt Dembicki also makes a claim to authenticity: “[t]he point wasn’t to Westernize the stories for general consumption,” Dembicki writes, “but rather to provide an opportunity to experience *authentic* Native American stories, even if it sometimes meant clashing with Western vernacular” (225; emphasis mine). This is, presumably, to reassure readers that *Trickster* is not intended to distort the stories; as Ron Hamilton (Ki-ke-in) says “I don’t want to have to launder my thoughts and bleach my words ‘white’ in order to have them published” (91; qtd. in Fee 141). Yet this means that Dembicki does not choose to frame the anthology as a collaborative exercise between cultures, but instead decides to stake a dangerous claim to authenticity. I am not arguing that pairing Native storytellers with non-Native illustrators is not a valuable project. As Kristina Fagan writes, contemporary depictions of traditional trickster figures are a “conscious recreation of a tradition,” and that “does not mean that the contemporary manifestations of the trickster tradition are in any way ‘fake.’ But they are, like all instances of ‘tradition,’ recreated because of specific and current needs” (12). *Trickster* is “authentic” in the spirit of Fagan’s use of “tradition” in that it is a “recreation of a

tradition,” but Dembicki’s claim to complete authenticity minimizes the role of the non-Native illustrators, casting them as obstacles that were overcome for the sake of maintaining Native “authenticity,” rather than recognizing that the contributions of both storyteller and illustrator have created something new that is still respectful of traditional ways.

If, as Fee points out, “[a]nthologies are part of a system – a set of interconnected institutional practices – that construct ethnic and racial identity” (139), then the reimagining of one culture’s story with the cultural tropes of another does not have to be read as appropriation, but could be read as a non-Native illustrator actively listening and interpreting the words of a Native storyteller. Fee criticizes those anthologies whose parameters are ethnically defined when she writes that “Native and non-Native writers live in different worlds, thus supporting the model of us and them, self and other, which racial/ethnic difference is constructed to maintain” (Fee 139). However, *Trickster* does the opposite of those anthologies that Fee critiques by breaking down the “self and other” boundary through its collaboration between storyteller and artist from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. The illustrations in *Trickster* are not stylistically aligned with each story’s culture origin. For example, “How the Alligator Got His Brown, Scaly Skin” by Joyce Bear and Megan Baehr is illustrated with thick-thinned, brightly-coloured images in such a way to suggest a children’s picture book. And “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale,” written by Tim Tingle, is illustrated by Pat Lewis using a style reminiscent of cartoon

animation—therefore making a leap between media (animation to comics) as well as between cultures (American to Native American).

### Portrait of a Bunny: Animating “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale”

Pat Lewis’s illustrations of Tim Tingle’s “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale” are reminiscent of a Golden Age animation style, familiar to most through the *Looney Tunes* cartoons which feature a well-known non-Native trickster figure, Bugs Bunny (see fig. 2).

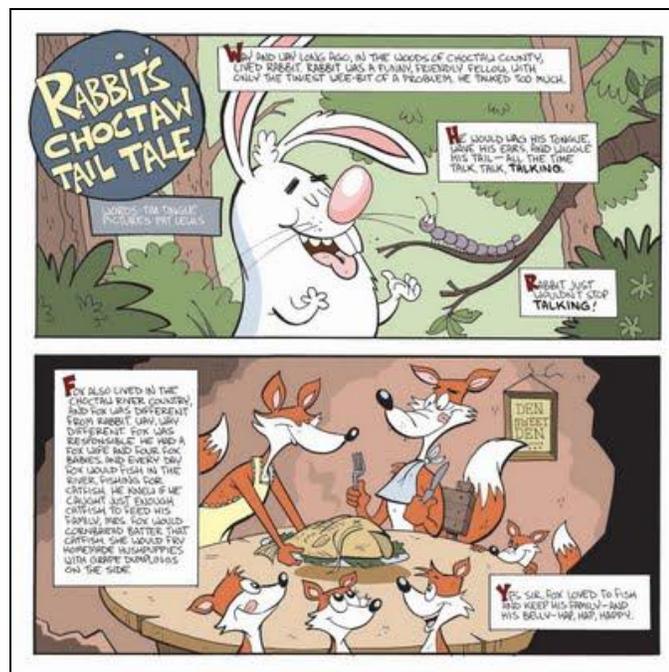


Fig. 4. Rabbit and Fox by Pat Lewis from Tim Tingle, "Rabbit's Choctaw Tail Tale" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 79).

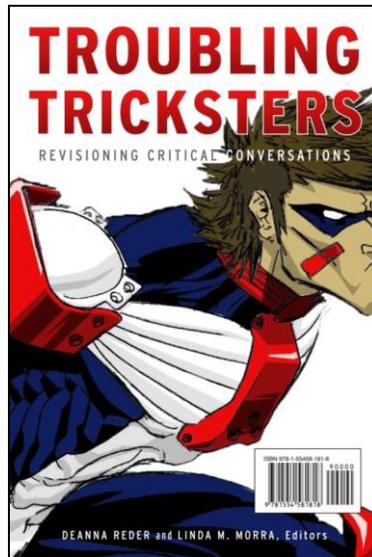
Aesthetically, the association between comics and animation is a close one, for, as

Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* points out, “isn’t animated film just

visual art in sequence?” (7). Yet by utilizing such a stylistic choice, Lewis is taking a risk, for Fee writes that “[w]ithout knowledge of cultural differences, the reader will simply read his or her own cultural traditions over the work, obliterating its difference” (147). Does “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale,” with its animation-style illustrations, obliterate the Native aspects of the story? By drawing visual parallels with Bugs Bunny, will a (non-Native) reader read “Tail Tale” as yet another Bugs Bunny-esque caper, rather than a story with a distinctly Aboriginal context?

“Tail Tale” is not, however, the only example of illustrating a Native story by tapping into images that utilize tropes from outside Native cultures. Steve Sanderson’s comic book *Darkness Calls* also involves an encounter between Native stories and non-Native tropes, because the main character reimagines a traditional Native story through superhero tropes. The protagonist, Kyle, draws Wesakecak as a superhero, battling the evil forces of the Wihtiko. Rather than scolding Kyle for misinterpreting or falsely appropriating these stories, the storytelling Elder tells him that “it’s a really good idea – using your art as a way to keep the stories alive” (22). The image from *Darkness Calls* of Wesakecak as a superhero is, in fact, used on the cover of *Troubling Tricksters* (see fig. 3). And, in her article from *Troubling Tricksters*, “Sacred Stories in Comic Book Form”, Deanna Reder argues that, rather than disrespecting Cree traditions, *Darkness Calls* is “specifically Cree, a contemporary retelling of âtayôhkêwin, a sacred story that usually features the Cree trickster” (180). Steve Sanderson’s superheroization of Wesakecak is, therefore, a similar technique to Lewis and Tingle’s

animating of Rabbit into a Looney Tunes-esque style: the non-Native genre conventions (whether visual or narrative) do not dilute the “Nativeness” of the story but, rather, provide a comparative exercise that causes the reader to reassess their expectations about Native texts and non-Native conventions.



**Fig. 5.** *Wesakecak5* by Steve Keewatin Sanderson and cover design by Martyn Schmoll from Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, editors, *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*. (Waterloo, Ontario, 2010; print; cover).

Unlike the majority of the stories in the collection, “Tail Tale” is one of the few to readily identify the story’s culture of origin by specifying it as “Choctaw”; it is difficult to ignore the cultural difference of the story when that culture is placed in the title. However, simply knowing the culture of origin does not provide complete cultural context. A non-Choctaw reader could assume that Fox is the trickster of the story, since he tricks Rabbit into leaving him alone by telling him that “[i]f you want to catch catfish, you go down to the icy part of the river, cut a hole in the ice, and stick your tail in” (82). However, in an interview

with Marie Penny, Tim Tingle, author of “Tail Tale,” explains that “[t]here are hundreds of Trickster *Rabbit* stories” (n.p.; emphasis mine). Now, astute readers may surmise that by describing Fox as “responsible”—an adjective very rarely seen anywhere near a trickster—Rabbit must be the trickster. A reader familiar with the older brand of scholarship that posits The-Trickster-as-archetype would know that The Trickster “is at once culture hero and fool, clever predator and stupid prey,” tricked as often he performs the trick (Hyde 19). Yet these sources are all external to how the story is presented and framed by the anthology, and a non-Choctaw reader could confuse the characters of Rabbit and Fox without any other Choctaw stories by which to compare, or, at the least, a statement providing some contextualizing information about the culture in which Rabbit and Fox are both operating. Tingle does state that “the Choctaw tribe is very open, you don’t have to be Choctaw to tell the story, but you must respect the tribal origins. Matt Dembicki understood this, as well as the importance of the trickster tale” (n.p.). And, while the tribal origins may be respected, very few clues as to what those tribal origins might be are provided with the story, save the Choctaw name.

Pat Lewis’s illustrations of Tim Tingle’s story are reminiscent of *Looney Tunes*-style cartoons, which are representative of the Golden Age of American Animation. Lewis’s choice has echoes of humour as well, since Bugs Bunny—the epitome of this animation style—is identified in numerous popular sources<sup>7</sup> as

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<sup>7</sup> Bugs Bunny is cemented in the popular cultural imagination as the epitome of The Trickster, with collaboratively-created sites often cite Bugs as a quintessential trickster figure. For example, the “Bugs Bunny” Wikipedia article states that he “is famous for his flippant, insouciant personality and his portrayal as a trickster” (n.p.). Similarly, the “Karmic Trickster” page from TV Tropes chooses an illustration of Bugs to represent the page (n.p.).

a non-Native incarnation of The Trickster. Lewis is reading Tingle's Native story through a non-Native framework. If Lewis drew Rabbit as similar in appearance to the iconic Bugs Bunny, there could be a danger of Lewis performing what Fee warns about when she writes about readers erasing cultural difference through a process of reading their own knowledge base into the story (147). However, Rabbit's appearance is the antithesis of Bugs Bunny's: Bugs is tall and lean, Rabbit is short and fat; Bugs is long-limbed, Rabbit is rather stumpy; and Bugs even has a small nose, while Rabbit has a large one (see fig. 4).



**Fig. 6. Rabbit by Pat Lewis from Tim Tingle, "Rabbit's Choctaw Tail Tale" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 83).**

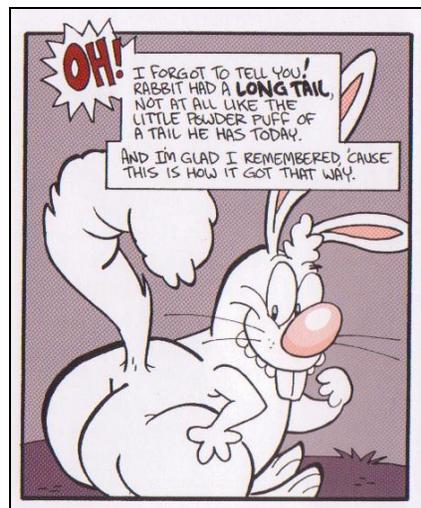
When asked about why he chose Lewis to illustrate his story, Tingle says:

I enjoyed Pat's sense of humor, whimsy, and comedic sensibility.

This is a humorous tale; and though we didn't need dark and

realistic characters, I was at first taken aback by Pat's depiction of Rabbit. He was so funny to look at, so chubby, so over-the-top! Then I realized how perfect *this* Rabbit was for the story. (n.p.; orig. emphasis)

Lewis's illustrations utilizes non-Native imagery in order to invoke a particular mood; any reader beginning "Rabbit's Choctaw Tail Tale" can be assured from both the title and the animation-esque drawings that they are about to read a humorous tale. However, Lewis avoids associating Rabbit with Bugs Bunny through a visual distancing. Rather than being obliterated, cultural difference is highlighted as the reader is visually signalled that this is *not* a Bugs Bunny animation, but a humorous Choctaw story. This differencing goes one step further when the narrator reveals, several pages into the story: "Oh! I forgot to tell you! Rabbit had a *long tail*, not at all like the little powder puff of a tail he has today" (81).

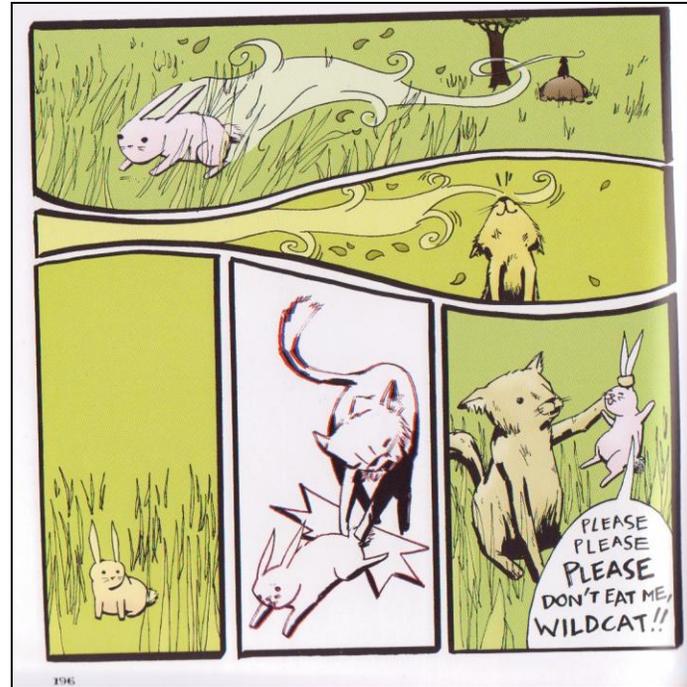


**Fig. 5. Rabbit's Long Tail by Pat Lewis from Tim Tingle, "Rabbit's Choctaw Tail Tale" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 81).**

The panel accompanying this text is a shot from behind of Rabbit's long, luxurious white tail (see fig. 5). However, prior to that point, the panels are framed in such a way so that Rabbit is never seen from the waist-down. Once again, reader expectations are thwarted, both in terms of Tingle's narrative structure and of Lewis's illustrations. In these ways, "Tail Tale" utilizes the illustrator's non-Native style to increase the comedic effect of the story and play with the expectations of the reader: a very tricky thing to do indeed. Therefore, although more culturally contextualizing cues would certainly have benefited the story, the pairing of this Native story with a non-Native visual style does successfully navigate away from equating this "Tail Tale" with a Bugs Bunny animated short.

Portrait of Orality: Framing in "How Wildcat Caught a Turkey" and "The Yehasuri"

"How Wildcat Caught a Turkey" by Cherokee storyteller Joseph Stands With Many and illustrated by John Sperry uses the graphic nature of the story to its fullest extent by being the only story in the collection to have no omniscient narration: the only words in the story are those in dialogue bubbles (see fig. 6).



**Fig. 6. Wildcat and Rabbit by Jon Sperry from Joseph Stands With Many, "How Wildcat Caught a Turkey" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 196).**

This technique takes full advantage of the graphic format in which “Wildcat” is rendered. As Scott McCloud writes, “in comics at its *best*, words and pictures are like *partners* in a *dance* and each one takes turns *leading*. [...] [W]hen these partners each *know* their roles and *support* each other’s *strengths* comics can match *any* of the art forms it draws so much of its strength from” (156; orig. emphasis). Usually in comics, a narrative box describing what is clearly pictured in the panel is considered poor technique, because the text and picture are redundantly doubling a function that could be performed by just one aspect. Therefore, the choice of the storyteller and illustrator to eliminate the narrative text from the story, allowing the pictures to do their work, could be considered simply good technique. However, the circumstances of the stories presented in

*Trickster* complicate this, for many of these stories had their origins in an oral format; therefore, extinguishing the voice of the narrator could risk distancing the story further from its original context.

To continue the emphasis on the graphic nature of the story, Sperry employs common comic symbols: stars and lines to represent frustration, white clouds to represent wafting scents, and pointed shapes to represent points of impact. These aid in the replacement of the narration with signs and symbols: readers do not need to be told that Wildcat is angry when they can see that for themselves. However, as McCloud points out,

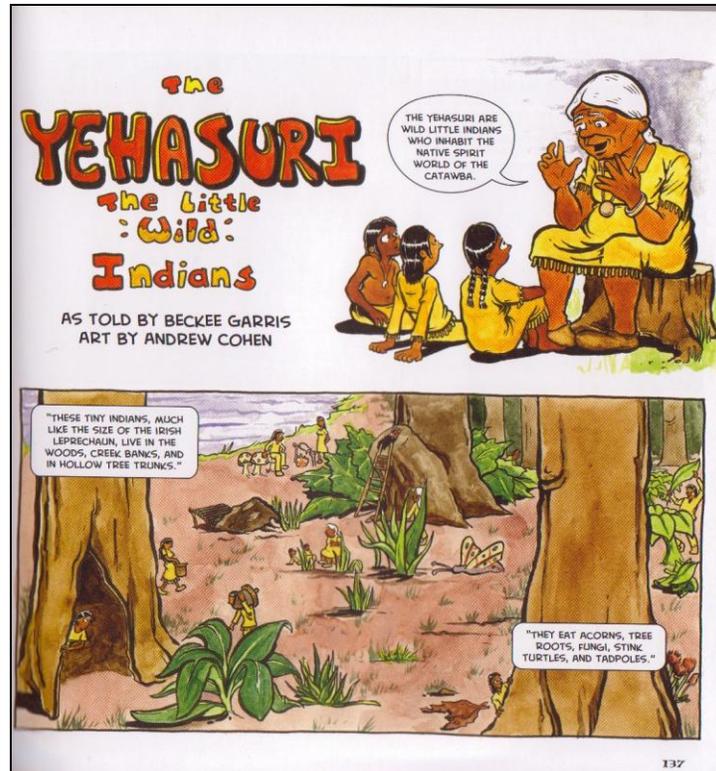
Writing and drawing are seen as *separate disciplines*, writers and artists as *separate breeds*—and ‘good’ comics as those in which the *combination* of these very *different* forms of expression is thought to be *harmonious*. But just how ‘different’ *are* they?

Words, pictures and other icons are the *vocabulary* of the language called *comics*.” (47; orig. emphases)

Therefore, the full reliance of “Wildcat” on visual storytelling may not prove to be that distant from those other stories that do utilize a textual narration—meaning that “Wildcat” is no more distant from the oral tradition than any other story in *Trickster*. In *The Common Pot*, Lisa Brooks explains how “Leslie Marmon Silko, in discussing the Mayan codices on which her novel *Almanac of the Dead* is based, has remarked on their ‘rich visual languages,’ noting that just because European tradition has separated image from word does not mean that this is a universal practice” (xxi). Brooks goes on to explain that in the Abenaki

language, “the root word *awigha-* denotes ‘to draw,’ ‘to write,’ ‘to map.’ The word *awikhigan*, which originally described birchbark messages, maps, and scrolls, came to encompass books and letters” (xxi). Although Brooks is referring specifically to Mayan and Abenaki cultures, the point she raises is that text is a form of image—and not just because European scholars like Saussure have famously theorized so, but also because it is signalled as such in some Native language choices. Although not originally a Native tradition, unlike the maps and messages Brooks examines, this means that the comic book’s tendency to equate words and images aligns it with such traditions: a star representing frustration is just as meaningful as the word “frustration,” as long as a reader is fluent in this kind of comic vocabulary.

In contrast, “The Yehasuri: The Little Wild Indians” by Catawba (Iswa) storyteller Beckee Garris and Andrew Cohen create an explicit framing device in which an Elder tells children about the dangers of the Yehasuri (see fig. 7). Unlike “Wildcat,” where the story’s textual narration is absent, the framing technique of “The Yehasuri” acts as a constant reminder of this story’s oral traditions. Except for the occasional “Augh!” or “Wah!” or “Ouch!” or “Yah!” from either the Yehasuri or one of their victims, the story relies entirely on the narrative text from the Elder telling the story. Comparatively, “Wildcat” relies on dialogue text in speech bubbles, while “The Yehasuri” relies on narrative text in narration boxes.



**Fig. 7.** Opening Narration by Andrew Cohen from Beckee Garris, "The Yehasuri: The Little Wild Indians" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 137).

Rather than enforcing graphic conventions, like Sperry does, Cohen works to subvert them—or, rather, encourages the Yehasuri to subvert them. The Yehasuri are constantly running out of the frames and peeking out from behind panels. They break that comics vocabulary that “Wildcat” maintains. In one particularly memorable panel, the panel is seen from the back, where the Yehasuri are scampering away, with the scene taking place in the panel obscured (139) (see fig. 8).



**Fig. 8. The Yehasuri Escaping the Panels by Andrew Cohen from Beckee Garris, "The Yehasuri: The Little Wild Indians" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 139).**

“Wildcat” chooses to utilize the graphic format of the story to the fullest, while “The Yehasuri” does not allow the reader to forget the story’s oral origins. Is one of these a better, more culturally responsible technique than the other? Fee points out that one of the problems with transcribing the written into the oral, especially in the context of an anthology, is that “songs and speeches are rendered atemporal, implying that the oral tradition must be static,” even though a story told orally changes with each retelling (143). “The Yehasuri” works to resist this implication of fixity when a story is written down by destabilizing the framework in which the story is told: the story takes itself apart, panel by panel. Fee also points out that to record oral tales is also “inevitably to strip them of their performative aspect: gesture, facial expression, audience interaction, and so on”

(147). Rendering stories in graphic form is not entirely the same as writing them down, for the image components can begin to approximate, or recreate, some of the visual performative aspect that is lost with a retelling that relies solely on the written word. A story like “Wildcat” that embraces the new medium wholly regains such performative aspects because the reader cannot rely on reading words but, rather, must read the expressions and motions of characters, such as they might if they were listening to the story rather than reading it. Even the text in the speech bubbles of “Wildcat” is more expressive than that in “The Yehasuri,” with more frequent font changes and bolded words, with a good example being Rabbit’s plea “Please Please Please Don’t eat me Wildcat!!” where each word gets progressively larger and bolder (196) (see fig. 6). This technique renders visually the changes in tone a storyteller might use if speaking the story.

“Wildcat” and “The Yehasuri” are representative of two opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of how narration is considered in these stories: most of the other stories in *Trickster* contain a mixture of both techniques. Both the negation of narration as well as its emphasis can offer different reminders of the oral origins of the stories, meaning that neither is particularly better than the other: they are simply two different approaches to providing some original cultural context for their trickster characters who, otherwise, in the format of the anthology, are decontextualized. What these two stories prove is that a story told in a comics medium can transmit some sense of oral storytelling techniques—and not in spite of their visual format, but because of it.

## Portrait of a Place: Giving “Raven the Trickster” a Home

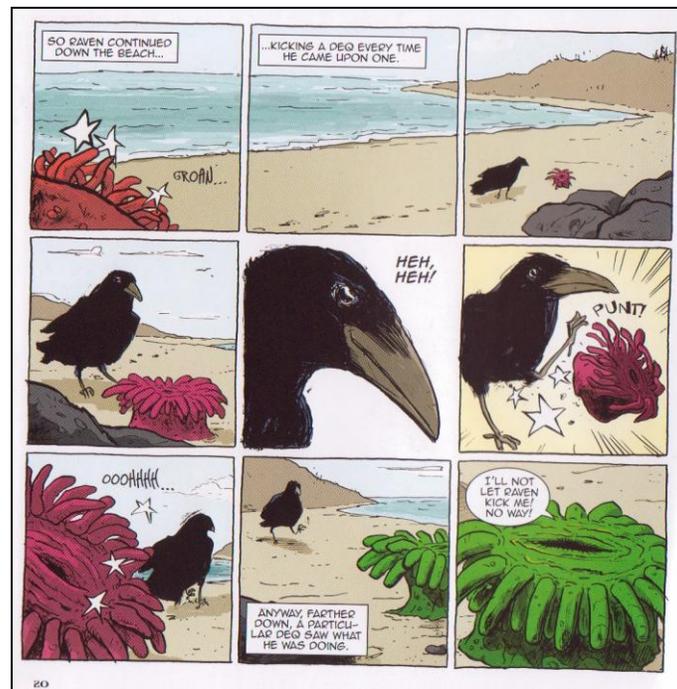
“Raven the Trickster,” by John Active and illustrated by Jason Copland, is more typical than “Wildcat” and “The Yehasuri” in that it contains a balance of text and image. For example, on the opening page, the narration reads that “One day, Raven was walking along the Bering Seashore” and “Whenever he came upon a deq, a sea anemone, he would give it a swift kick” (19) (see fig. 9).



**Fig. 9.** Raven kicking deqs by Jason Copland from John Active, "Raven the Trickster" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 19).

The image is of Raven kicking a sea anemone on a white background, with stars around the sea anemone to demonstrate the point of impact and the onomatopoeia of “PUNT!” (19). The Bering Seashore is not visible, making the boxed narration necessary in order to understand where Raven is, since that information is not provided by the picture. The next page of panels, however, does fill in the

background, with Raven walking along the shore. Copland demonstrates here a balance between utilizing comic conventions to draw attention to the action happening on the first page, but then immediately contextualizes where the action is taking place by providing the background.



**Fig. 10. Raven on the beach by Jason Copland from John Active, "Raven the Trickster" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 20).**

Although, like the other stories in the collection, "Raven the Trickster" is provided with very little cultural context (John Active is Yup'ik), Copland does provide a significant amount of landscape in the background for Raven: few other stories exhibit as strong a sense of place (see fig. 10). In part, this is due to the reliance of the characters on their location: the deqs must be located on a beach, while a beluga whale must, of course, rise out of the ocean. However, the reader

is told this is a specific place: the Bering Seashore. When Brooks explains how “[t]he word *awikhigan*, which originally described birchbark messages, maps, and scrolls, came to encompass books and letters” (xxi), she demonstrates how place is represented visually in Native cultures, equating maps to literature even as she equates text to images. “PUNT!” is just as much a component of the image as it is of the text. And, simultaneously, “Raven” is just as much a map of a very specific place—the Bering seashore—as it is a graphic story. The reader can “see” the Bering Seashore rendered on the page, just as they could on a map.

The other story in the collection which situates itself in a particular place is “Moshup’s Bridge,” by Jonathan Perry, Chris Piers, and Scott White, which explains the origins of a very specific rock formation in Massachusetts. “Moshup’s Bridge” makes the intersection between map and comic explicit by providing a miniature map of the story’s setting (the island of Noepe, or Martha’s Vineyard) next to the title. The physicality of a particular space in which a story exists is yet another aspect of an oral tale that cannot be conveyed with solely the written word, but can be approximated in graphic form. Taken one step further, as it is in “Raven the Trickster,” the portrayal of place can even impart a statement about how a storyteller views the mundane and the mythic. In “Raven” there is no distinction between the two realms, with the reality of the Bering Seashore appearing just as graphically real as the wooden door in the Beluga’s mouth.

Raven escapes the Beluga only after some hunters begin to cut it into pieces. In the panel when Raven is sitting in the darkness of the whale’s stomach,

and a stream of daylight pours in from the outside world, no distinction is made between the physical place of the seashore and the mythic space of the whale's interior: both bleed into each other (see fig. 11). With Raven comfortable to dwell in that moment where the mythical and the physical worlds become one.



**Fig. 11. Raven in the whale by Jason Copland from John Active, "Raven the Trickster" in *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Ed. Matt Dembicki. (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2012; print; 27).**

### One Last Portrait

In *Trickster Makes this World*, Lewis Hyde writes that “[w]herever travelers carry stories from place to place there will be reimaginings, translations, appropriations, and impurities” (69). In “Raven the Trickster,” Raven’s ability to ignore any distinctions between the mythic nature of the whale’s interior and the realism of the hunter’s search for food echoes the ability of all the stories in *Trickster* to exist on the boundaries between worlds. “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail

Tale” straddles a moment where a style from the Golden Age of American Animation becomes the vehicle for a Choctaw tale to travel from orality to the written word. “How Wildcat Caught a Turkey” minimizes narrative text while “The Yehasuri” minimizes dialogue, but both techniques ultimately serve to remind the reader of these two stories’ place as between the two worlds of the oral tale and the comic book.

Sinclair reminds us that trickster stories “are not without homes” (43). *Trickster* may have been arranged in order to better remind readers of these stories original cultural homes by providing clearly stated cultural origins and by leaving behind the singular nature of the title *Trickster* in favour of the more accurate *Tricksters*; Margery Fee’s work on the anthology in Native Studies shows that such decontextualizing is an ongoing struggle of the anthology format. However, Hyde’s quote also reminds us that these stories do travel, roaming from their original cultural homes into places as diverse as a comic book. These stories may make new homes in new places, but that does not mean that they are necessarily exiled from their cultural origins. The choice in “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale” to distance the main character from Bugs Bunny while still indulging in a *Looney Tunes*-style is a trick intended to defamiliarize, reminding a reader of the story’s Choctaw origins. The emphasis on gestures and expressive dialogue in “Wildcat” and the framing narrative and playful panels in “The Yehasuri” provide formal reminders of orality while utilizing comic book conventions. And “Raven the Trickster” visually recalls the physical birthplace of the story on the Bering Seashore, while also blurring the distinctions between the mythical and physical

realms. In this way, these tricksters travelling from the world of the spoken word into the world of visual images—whether those images are drawings or text—can claim both worlds as homes.

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## Chapter 2

## Hunting the Anti-Trickster: Native Tricksters in the White Man's Words

In 2010, Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra compiled the critical works in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* “to reignite interest in trickster criticism, albeit not the discussions of old” (Reder, preface viii). Reder writes that “[t]wenty-first-century trickster criticism is influenced by the recent work of nationalist critics who have called for ethical literary studies that are responsible to Indigenous people and communities” (viii). By deploying *Troubling Tricksters* as a part of the scholarly movement of Indigenous Literary Nationalism, the authors in this collection apply to trickster criticism the principles of cultural specificity, which Craig S. Womack articulates in his contribution to *Reasoning Together* (“A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997”):

[i]nstead of making universal, overarching assumptions about Indians, we want to delve into particulars. We are trying to avoid the kind of literary work that has been so very popular in our field in which people avoid historical research and base their criticism exclusively on tropes and symbols. (7)

What Indigenous Literary Nationalism means for trickster studies, as signalled by the strain of thought represented in *Troubling Tricksters*, is that there is a renewed critical emphasis on the recontextualization of these trickster figures to their cultural origins, rather than attempting to classify similarities and draw

generalizations about the constructed archetype called The Trickster, such as previous scholarly attention to trickster figures tended to do. For, as Reder writes, “the Anishinaabeg told stories about Nanabush, the Cree told stories about Wesakecak, the Blackfoot told stories about Naapi, the Stó:lō told stories about Coyote, and all these stories continue to be told and retold to this day” (vii).

The Indigenous Literary Nationalism approach to tricksters in literature amounts to a theoretical practise which echoes what Marie Annharte Baker advocated for in her 1991 article, “An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh”: “you are forced to be particular to understand” (48). While viewing a particular trickster figure with an awareness of the cultural circumstances of his or her creation is certainly a useful form of scholarship, two particular kinds of literature fall through the cracks with this approach. First, Indigenous authors who utilize what is usually called a “pan-tribal trickster” may elude the grasp of a scholar trying to fix them within one particular culture, since their cultural influences may be many and, perhaps, could include the “tropes and symbols” that Womack discounts. Second, non-Indigenous authors who use Native trickster figures within their work also present a problem—especially if the trickster character they create seems only distantly related to the Native cultural figure whose name the author is using. The second instance is what I wish to examine in this chapter.

In “The Anti-Trickster in the Work of Sheila Watson, Mordecai Richler, and Gail Anderson-Dargatz,” one of her contributing articles to *Troubling Tricksters*, Linda M. Morra critically assesses what it means for a non-Native author to employ a Native trickster character. She uses James (Sakej)

Youngblood Henderson's definition of "the anti-trickster" in order to examine characters in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. Henderson proposes that "[t]he 'anti-trickster' represents a cognitive force of artificial European thought, a differentiated consciousness, ever changing in its creativity to justify the oppression and domination of contemporary Indigenous peoples and their spiritual guardians" (Henderson 58). Morra likens the anti-trickster to an inversion of Homi Bhabha's description of the colonized mimicking their colonizers and making themselves "*almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 86; qtd. in Morra 78; orig. emphasis). In other words, the "anti-trickster" may appear to represent an Indigenous worldview through its mimicry but, upon critical inspection, it is always revealed to be nothing more than a distorted shadow of the Native trickster whose name it utilizes—a shadow which continues to perpetuate the attitudes of colonialist thought.

Morra is critical of those characters she identifies as anti-tricksters in the novels by Watson, Richler, and Anderson-Dagatz; her article seems to serve as a warning for other non-Native authors who may wish to utilize trickster characters, but inevitably will do so without accurately representing Indigenous worldviews and instead replace those worldviews with colonialism. Just because Sheila Watson labels her omniscient character "Coyote" does not mean that he is Coyote. This is related to, though not an exact reiteration of, the appropriation of voice debate in the 1980s, which Margery Fee discusses in her *Troubling Tricksters* contribution "The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the

Liberal Imagination in Canada.” She writes that “[m]ainstream writers who wrote from the position of minority cultural insiders began to be seen as exploitative imposters who were using foreign subject matter without considering the cultural or political impact on the communities from which they took it” (61). Morra’s article lays the groundwork for examining a very particular instance of voice appropriation in which a trickster character speaks with the voice of colonialism: she argues that the dressing of colonial attitudes in the guise of a trickster results in an anti-trickster. The three Canadian novels she chooses to examine all provide fairly straightforward examples of anti-tricksters: for example, as Morra points out with regards to Watson’s use of Coyote, “it is clear that he stands very much within a tradition that has less to do with the Nlaka’pamux tales from which he emerges than with a Judeo-Christian tradition” (81). In this chapter, I will use both Henderson and Morra’s foundational theoretical groundwork on the anti-trickster, but will take these theories to the next level by analyzing examples of anti-tricksters in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* and Jason Aaron and R.M. Guéra’s Vertigo comic *Scalped*, in order to determine whether the anti-trickster must always be a destructive force or, rather, can become a productive instance that can act as a mirror that criticizes colonialism, even while speaking with its voice.

Tracking Whiskey Jack in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

Henderson argues that the anti-trickster is a mechanism of Eurocentric diffusionism, which is based on James M. Blaut's theories in *The Colonizer's Model of the World*. Blaut defines Eurocentric diffusionism as

a theory about the way cultural processes tend to move over the surface of the world as a whole. They tend to flow out of the European sector and toward the non-European sector. This is the natural, normal, logical, and ethical flow of culture, of innovation, of human causality. Europe, eternally, is Inside. Non-Europe is Outside. Europe is the source of most diffusions; non-Europe is the recipient. (*Colonizer's Model 1*)

Blaut's project, which begins in *The Colonizer's Model of the World* and continues in his subsequent work, *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, is to dismantle Eurocentric diffusionism by proving that it is "not well grounded in the facts of history and geography, although firmly grounded in Western culture" (*Colonizer's Model 2*). However, Blaut also realizes the fundamental paradox of this project when he states that "[w]e confront statements of presumed historical and scientific fact, not prejudices and biases, and we try to show, with history and science, that the presumptions are wrong" (*Colonizer's Model 2, 9*).

Blaut's Eurocentric diffusionism—this non-reciprocal relationship between Europe/the Inside/the Old World and non-Europe/the Outside/the New World—is precisely what *American Gods* dissects, but it does so by indulging in this theory to its fullest extent, therefore exposing the limits of Eurocentric

diffusionism and why it ultimately breaks down. Henderson writes that “[t]his flow [of Eurocentric diffusionism] may take the form of ideas or new products through which European values are spread” (61), but in *American Gods*, it takes the form of gods. The premise of the novel is that as immigrants travelled to America, they brought their gods with them: these gods are diffused from the culturally-productive Inside of Europe towards the culturally-stagnant Outside of America. This results in American incarnations of “Old World” gods on American soil. For example, the main character Shadow first encounters in this immortal world when he meets Mr. Wednesday—who is revealed to be the American version of Odin. At the conclusion of the novel, Shadow’s wanderings bring him to Iceland, where he meets the Icelandic incarnation of Odin: “He was me, yes,” this Odin says of Wednesday, “[b]ut I am not him” (587).

Yet by carrying the theory of Eurocentric diffusionism over to the immortal realm, the theory breaks down. The central crisis of the novel is that the American gods are threatened by the fact that no one believes in them anymore—and, worse still for the old gods, America has created new gods it would prefer to worship. At the beginning of his speech to rally the old gods, Wednesday describes himself and his fellows as “[o]ld gods, here in this new land without gods” (137). Here, Wednesday is indulging fully in Eurocentric diffusionism by drawing a binary between old and new, and that traces the flow of culture—in this case, incarnated literally into immortal beings—from the “old” of Europe outwards towards the “new” of America. Yet, Wednesday immediately undermines this implication that America’s gods must come from elsewhere, for

he goes on to point out the old gods' biggest threat: "there are new gods growing in America, clinging to growing knots of belief: gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon. Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance" (Gaiman 137-8). Therefore, the theory of Eurocentric diffusionism begins to buckle under the weight of scrutiny within the novel: this is not an empty, stagnant land that must import its culture from elsewhere, but one that is capable of "growing" its own gods<sup>8</sup>. And this is before even getting to the greater implication of Wednesday's description of America as "this new land without gods": that there is and was never any cultural presence worthy of note in America prior to the arrival of the old gods as representatives of European cultures. This is an oversight made by Wednesday, but not made by the novel as a whole, and the implications of America as a land without gods is explored as the novel progresses through the introduction of the character of Whiskey Jack, an anti-trickster.

Henderson identifies the anti-trickster as an agent of Eurocentric diffusionism, defining the anti-trickster as synonymous to Eurocentrism when he writes that "[a]mong some Indigenous peoples, Eurocentrism is known as the twin of the trickster or imitator, or the 'anti-trickster' " (58). In *Cree Narrative Memory*, Neal McLeod writes that

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<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Europe in *American Gods* must not be without credit cards, freeways, Internet, etc. but, with Wednesday's statement, the novel clearly establishes the new gods as homegrown from American soil. Whether or not Europe also has these new gods (and whether they diffused from America to Europe, as an example of Americentric diffusionism or also sprung up in Europe independently) is simply never addressed within the novel.

[t]he narratives of *wîsahkêcâhk* should be seen as part of the *genre* of sacred stories, *âtayôhkêwina*. The term *âtayôhkêwina* denotes stories of *wîsahkêcâhk* (and, indeed, other beings). When we shift the paradigm to think of *âtayôhkêwina* as “spiritual narratives,” we can see them as core to Cree culture and beliefs. (98)

Whiskey Jack in *American Gods* is not the same figure as the *wîsahkêcâhk* described by McLeod: he is not situated within a specific cultural context such as *âtayôhkêwina*. However, this fact alone does not make him an anti-trickster. Although Gaiman does avoid many of the pitfalls that Morra discusses in her article, Whiskey Jack is an anti-trickster because of his apparent tendency to adhere to a Eurocentric viewpoint by defining himself in colonialist terms rather than within a particular Indigenous worldview. As he is pulled further into the gods’ conflict, Shadow is taken by Wednesday to a cabin on a Lakota reservation and is introduced to Whiskey Jack—“but it wasn’t really *Whiskey Jack* he was saying, Shadow realized. Too many syllables” (351). Whiskey Jack is Gaiman’s anti-trickster: a “middle-aged man with sharp eyes and a mouth like a knife slash” (350). In their first encounter, Whiskey Jack tells Wednesday that he refuses to join his fight because “[t]hey’ll win. [...] They won already. You lost already. Like the white man and my people. Mostly they won. And when they lost, they made treaties. Then they broke the treaties. So they won again. I’m not fighting for another lost cause” (352). By simplifying America’s current state as “they won,” Whiskey Jack performs exactly the “essential element of colonialism [which] relies on the deficient, dehumanized victims and their cultures to explain

and justify the racists' aggression and privileges" (Henderson 70). Therefore, Whiskey Jack takes on the role of the anti-trickster by being a mouthpiece for ideas which reinforce colonialist attitudes.

However, in their second encounter, when Whiskey Jack comes to find post-mortem Shadow in the afterlife, this anti-trickster responds to Shadow's inquiries about his godhood rather modestly, saying: "I'm a culture hero. [...] We do the same shit gods do, we just screw up more and nobody worships us. They tell stories about us, but they tell the ones that make us look bad along with the ones where we came out fairly okay" (512). Whiskey Jack's distinction between the culture hero and the god seems like a distinction gleaned from an anthropology text—yet another example of Whiskey Jack defining himself in non-Native terms for a non-Native. Since Whiskey Jack is an anti-trickster and therefore utilizing colonialist discourse, "culture hero" becomes analogous to the colonized, while "gods" becomes analogous to the colonizer. Whiskey Jack's self-identification as the former, rather than the latter, becomes an example of colonialism justifying itself through the actions of an anti-trickster. However, when reread in light of what Whiskey Jack says later in the conversation, his employment of these colonialist terms is proven to be—in true trickster fashion—deceptive and subversive:

"Look," said Whiskey Jack. "This is not a good country for gods. My people figured that out early on. [...]"

“What I’m trying to say is that America is like that. It’s not good growing country for gods. They don’t grow well here. They’re like avocados trying to grow in wild rice country.” (513)

And the key passage of the novel comes as Whiskey Jack begins to lead Shadow to the door of his cabin—and back into life. “Listen,” he says, “gods die when they are forgotten. People too. But the land’s still here. The good places, and the bad. The land isn’t going anywhere. And neither am I” (514). When read in the light of this final statement, Whiskey Jack’s anti-trickster employment of the colonialist terms “culture hero” as opposed to “gods”—and his subsequent self-identification as a “culture hero” rather than a “god”—becomes a survival strategy: gods in America will eventually all die, but, by not defining himself as one, Whiskey Jack escapes this fate. Henderson writes that “[b]y creating the myth of the ideal, [the dominators] condemned themselves to eternal perfection” (70). Similarly, the gods in *American Gods* are unable to live up to the immortal standards they have designated for themselves for, as Whiskey Jack puts it, “[t]hey don’t grow well here” (513). But Whiskey Jack, as “culture hero” rather than god, is able to avoid such a trap of perfection, for Whiskey Jack defines “culture hero” for Shadow by referencing the kind of stories that are told about them: “they tell the ones that make us look bad along with the ones where we came out fairly okay” (512). Therefore, Whiskey Jack’s distinction between himself and the European-imported gods becomes a source of strength—a means for life—rather than a disadvantage in terms of colonized/colonizer power structures.

Most significantly, because the gods are essentially incarnations of Eurocentric diffusionism, when Whiskey Jack claims that the gods will die, he is also predicting the inevitable demise of Eurocentric diffusionism—that which Blaut calls “a super theory, a general framework for many smaller theories, historical, geographical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical” (*Colonizer’s Model* 11). When Whiskey Jack argues that America is “not a good growing country for gods” and places himself as a “culture hero,” he is asserting the ultimate failure of colonialist attitudes and, furthermore, the survival of Indigenous worldviews in their place.

The anti-trickster, therefore, bends the words of colonial discourse back around until these attitudes collapse in upon themselves: Whiskey Jack is never a trickster in the sense of that he is representing a particular Indigenous worldview but, rather, is a symbol of Indigeneity working to subvert colonialist attitudes from within its own discourses. That Whiskey Jack is symbolic does not adhere to the principles of the new trickster criticism that has emerged in light of Indigenous Literary Nationalism; after all, Womack specifically asks scholars “to avoid the kind of literary work that has been so very popular in our field in which people avoid historical research and base their criticism exclusively on tropes and symbols” (7). Yet by turning the potentially destructive agent of the anti-trickster into a figure who, by utilizing colonial discourse, reveals the failure of that very discourse, *American Gods* provides a criticism of colonial discourse that could perhaps not have been achieved if Whiskey Jack had been a more culturally-

specific trickster rather than an anti-trickster, although I will address issues of Whiskey Jack's complicated cultural specificity later in this chapter.

A comparison, then, between the anti-tricksters in the novels that Morra critically examines and Whiskey Jack in *American Gods* reveals that not all anti-tricksters are alike: Whiskey Jack's subversion of colonialism as an anti-trickster seems to be a rare trick for an anti-trickster to perform. Morra's article pinpoints those moments where Watson, Richler, and Anderson-Dargatz go wrong with their use of Indigenous spiritual elements; she writes that "[w]hen used by non-Native writers, the sacred trickster (in whatever incarnation it appears) becomes far removed from its original function" (79). I wish to look at four particular anti-trickster traps derived from Morra's observations that signal the key differences between an anti-trickster which solely reinforces Eurocentric diffusionism and an anti-trickster, like Whiskey Jack, who uses colonialist discourse in order to undermine it.

First, Morra identifies "Watson's disengagement from the authorial voice [and] her removal of an omniscient narrator" as a technique which renders Watson's Coyote into an anti-trickster state, rather than an accurate portrayal of a voice of a specific culture (81). By taking away the specificity of a character's experiences, Watson is indulging in what Henderson identifies as a characteristic of colonialism where the colonizer's "specificity appears to coincide with the main lines of the universal" (64). The lack of authorial voice lends *The Double Hook* an objectivity that makes Watson's Coyote appear as truth or fact, rather than as a non-Native author's (flawed) interpretation of a Native entity.

In contrast, Gaiman avoids being snared by this trap in *American Gods* because the novel is written from Shadow's third-person limited perspective. The novel does not pretend objectivity, nor that Shadow's specificities are universalisms, because of the constant play with what Shadow does and does not know: his limitations are made apparent by the narrative<sup>9</sup>. For example, "Whiskey Jack" is how the anti-trickster's name is spelled throughout the novel, but it is clear that it is spelled this way only because that is how Shadow is hearing the words: "it wasn't really *Whiskey Jack* he was saying, Shadow realized. Too many syllables" (351). The narrator's lack of omnipresence makes it clear that the majority of the novel<sup>10</sup> is Shadow's interpretation of events and that it is a limited interpretation and, thusly, resists the universalism and feigned objectivity that Watson's lack of voice utilizes. Therefore, the subjective nature of Shadow's narrating voice creates a space from which the anti-trickster can move away from being an objective voice for colonialism-as-fact, like Coyote in Watson's *Double Hook*, and instead engage with the fluidity and uncertainty of a particular perspective in a particular place and time.

The second trap, which occurs in both Watson and Richler's novels according to Morra, is "the deliberate erasure of any identity markers in relation

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<sup>9</sup> Shadow is constantly being deceived by other characters and, in fact, his limited ability to understand is going on becomes key plot points at several points. Shadow does not realize until after his death and rebirth that Wednesday (Odin) and Low-Key Lyesmith (Loki) are war-mongering to get the other gods to sacrifice themselves to them, since humans no longer provide those sacrifices. While, in a secondary plot, Shadow's kindly old neighbour, Hinzelmann, is revealed at the conclusion of the novel to be a kobold that has been stealing and killing children from the town for years—unbeknownst to Shadow.

<sup>10</sup> There are sections that are not from Shadow's perspective, but these are clearly marked with headings or italics, which act as signals to the reader that these sections are from outside Shadow's main narrative.

to ethnicity or Indigenoussness” (81). Whiskey Jack is not the only trickster in *American Gods*: Mr. Nancy (Anansi), Low-Key Lyesmith (Loki) and Wednesday (Odin) all use trickery and all have been classified as facets of the archetype known as The Trickster.<sup>11</sup> Yet they resist the archotyping project within the novel by being distinct individuals with distinct skills: they are all different characters, even if they might use similar techniques in getting individuals to do what they want. This is perhaps why Whiskey Jack signals to Shadow in their second encounter (with a pat on the arm and a “you’re not so dumb”) that he knew what Loki and Odin were planning all along (514): Whiskey Jack is able to read the trickery of his fellow tricksters because of their mutual engagement with archetypal Trickster characteristics within the novel.

There are, however, two contradictory moments with regards to cultural specificity in Shadow’s first encounter with Whiskey Jack: one that uses an identity marker and then another that seems to counteract it. The first moment occurs when Wednesday and Shadow arrive at Whiskey Jack’s cabin on a Lakota reservation, when Wednesday says to Whiskey Jack: “Since when were you Lakota, you old fraud?” (350). These words draw attention to the fact that “Whiskey Jack” is a trickster from Algonquin (which includes Cree, Ojibway, and others) sacred stories, rather than Lakota. By indicating that Whiskey Jack’s cultural origins are not Lakota, Gaiman places an identity marker and avoids pulling Whiskey Jack into generalizations about Native tricksters.

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<sup>11</sup> In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde includes “Manabozho or Wiskajak,” “Ananse in West Africa,” and “the Norse Loki” among his list of “representative cases” of The Trickster (355).

However, when Wednesday and Shadow are given a lift into town by one of the women on the reservation, Shadow mentions Whiskey Jack's name and she responds with "We call him Inktomi here. I think it's the same guy. My grandfather used to tell some pretty good stories about him. Of course, all the best of them were kind of dirty" (357). The supposition that Whiskey Jack and Inktomi are "the same guy" contradicts Wednesday's earlier statement about Whiskey Jack not being Lakota; if he really were Inktomi as well, then he *would* be Lakota. And, if the woman is mistaken, then where is Inktomi? Why is Whiskey Jack the one living on Lakota land?<sup>12</sup> This tangle of questions cannot be conclusively unravelled. Considering Native tricksters from several cultures to be many names for "the same guy" is not necessarily counter to Native spiritual beliefs, nor necessarily a belief produced solely from a colonialist mindset. "[T]his Trickster goes by many names and many guises" writes Tomson Highway in his prefaces to his works *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Yet the contradiction between these two identity markers in *American Gods* is difficult to resolve—although Gaiman does, at least, provide such markers and a recognition that there is not one single "Indian" culture. These multiplicities of identities may also be a clue to the reader that Whiskey Jack is an anti-trickster solely for Shadow because Shadow needs the difficulties of colonialism—as represented by the conflict of the gods—navigated for him by an agent that will speak in colonialist terms, even if it is only

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<sup>12</sup> Whiskey Jack does not remain on the Lakota reservation and, after the young poet, Henry Bluejay, he was mentoring (inspiring?) is killed in a car accident, he moves his cabin elsewhere, to somewhere "in the north" (511, 512).

to ultimately undermine those terms. Whiskey Jack is perhaps something else to, say, the poet Henry Bluejay, and perhaps yet again something else to the woman who gives them a lift; hence, the plurality of names, for Shadow is aware that only he is hearing the name as “Whiskey Jack” and that, to the others, he possesses a different name. Therefore, the contradictory elements of cultural specificity (he is *not* Lakota) versus cultural generality (Whiskey Jack and Inktomi are the same) provide pluralities of identity markers as a means of recognizing that the identity of any one trickster can be a tricky one to determine; in other words, rather than arguing that the singular archetype of The Trickster is what Whiskey Jack is—and only what he is—*American Gods* presents Whiskey Jack with many faces, many names, and many roles.

The third trap is closely related to the presence of these complicated identity markers. Morra explains it, in the context of Watson’s *Double Hook*, as “the cultural distance from [the characters’] own and others’ mythologies” (83). In *The Double Hook*, this cultural distancing is most apparent in how Coyote “has less to do with the Nlaka’pamux tales from which he emerges than with a Judeo-Christian tradition,” an observation which Morra blames equally on the author and the critics reading the work (81). *American Gods* is all about cultural distancing, as each Old World god is “Americanized”: for example, while drinking with Mad Sweeney, a leprechaun, Shadow notes his lack of an Irish accent, which Sweeney explains by saying “I’ve been over here too fucken long” (36). Just as Watson’s Coyote speaks in an Old Testament voice, Mad Sweeney speaks with an American accent.

However, Whiskey Jack is not Americanized in the same way as the other gods because he does not have another Old World incarnation from which his particular form branches off: he cannot be Americanized because he is already American—or, at least, the product of the land now known as America. Whiskey Jack is closely associated with the buffalo man that appears in Shadow's dreams, which turns out to be a manifestation of the spirit of the land. This means that when Whiskey Jack distances himself from godhood by calling himself "a culture hero" (512), he not only ensures his survival by avoiding being a god in a land where gods inevitably die, but also disassociates himself from the cultural distancing that the other gods have undergone. Whiskey Jack tells Shadow:

So, yeah, my people figured that maybe there's something at the back of it all, a creator, a great spirit, and so we say thank you to it, because it's always good to say thank you. But we never built churches. We didn't need to. The land was the church. The land was the religion. The land was older and wiser than the people who walked on it (513).

Whiskey Jack is, once again, utilizing colonialist discourse, for Henderson writes that Eurocentric diffusionism "asserts an emptiness of basic cultural institutions and people in much of the non-European world" (63). Yet Whiskey Jack's close association with the land does enable him to lessen, at least, the cultural distancing undergone by other anti-tricksters: even if Whiskey Jack is not clearly from a specific Native culture, there is a recognition with his plurality of identities

that there is, at its heart, the constant of being eternally connected to the land itself.

The fourth and final trap Morra's identifies is a celebration of cultural hybridity without clearly establishing which cultures are being combined to form that hybridity, a characteristic she identifies particularly in Richler and Anderson-Dargatz's anti-tricksters. She writes that "[t]he problem with this celebration of hybridity is that, if Richler is endeavouring to recover lost narratives, he subsumes Indigenous narratives that have yet to be fully recovered" (85). To draw a musical analogy, this particular usage of hybridity is like composing variations on a theme without playing the theme first: the variations become meaningless without an original reference point to which to compare them. The original trickster being becomes obscured and lost to the ear of the reader. Whiskey Jack in *American Gods* perhaps suffers slightly from this obscuring of cultural origins without it being apparent what is being obscured, such as in the example discussed earlier where it is not clear whether Whiskey Jack is the same being as Inktomi or an Algonquin figure whose interests take him into Lakota territory. One of the tricks Whiskey Jack uses to avoid this trap, though, is by utilizing the oral traditions from which he would have been born. He tells a story about Fox and Wolf, for example, and while the story is not about him, exactly, it does offer a reminder of oral storytelling and give some hints as to what variations Gaiman is playing around the original figure. After all, the anti-trickster, by being "the twin of the trickster or imitator" (Henderson 58), is itself fundamentally a variation on trickster figures in Native realities.

Utilizing Henderson's theory of the anti-trickster and Morra's techniques for applying this definition, Whiskey Jack is clearly an anti-trickster, for he is not concerned with presenting a particular Indigenous culture's worldview, but, rather, is employed to be representative of a colonized perspective. Yet *American Gods* succeeds where those novels analyzed by Morra fails. Whiskey Jack may be an anti-trickster, speaking in the language of Eurocentric diffusionism while wearing the multi-faceted guises of an Indigenous trickster, yet those anti-trickster techniques are precisely what allow Whiskey Jack, as a character, to critique colonial attitudes rather than reinforce them. Gaiman does not avoid issues of colonialism or appropriation of voice, but, instead, uses the anti-trickster as a weapon that can be turned against the principles of Eurocentric diffusionism that originally created it. In this way, Gaiman is using the anti-trickster in a way that is unanticipated by Henderson and Morra: *American Gods* utilizes the attitudes of colonialism with the sole purpose to combat it.

#### Tracking Dashiell Bad Horse in Jason Aaron and R.M. Guéra's *Scalped*

The simple premise of Jason Aaron and R.M. Guéra's *Scalped*, an ongoing<sup>13</sup> comic series published by DC's Vertigo imprint, has sparked a complicated debate: is it ethical to set a crime noir story on a Lakota reservation in South Dakota? The role of the anti-trickster in *Scalped*—and whether or not this anti-trickster is productive, like Gaiman's, or destructive, like those novels

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<sup>13</sup> As of the time of this writing, *Scalped* has been published up to issue #49 in trade paperback format (also known as graphic novel format), while the individually sold issues are at #55. I have limited my discussion to only up to #49, i.e. the most recent published volume, rather than issue.

examined by Morra—is inextricably linked to this debate. In his article “Native Noir: Genre and the Politics of Indigenous Representation in Recent North American Comics,” Derek Parker Royal explains that noir, as a sub-genre of detective fiction, is characterized by a “usually hardboiled” tone, a (usually male) detective character who “demonstrates self-destructive tendencies,” “characters feeling paranoid or trapped in their predicaments,” and plot-driven sexual relationships which “almost always find expression through a femme fatale” (4). *Scalped* utilizes all of these characteristics: aside from taking place on a rural reservation rather than an urban landscape, *Scalped* is typical noir fiction. Royal argues that “*Scalped* bears the characteristic stamp of noir by almost anyone's definition” (15). The main character, Dashiell Bad Horse, returns to his home reservation as an undercover FBI agent working to take down the reservation's resident crime boss, Lincoln Red Crow—and Dash's self-destructive tendencies are exacerbated by Prairie Rose's resident femme fatale<sup>14</sup>, Carol Ellroy (who also happens to be Red Crow's daughter). The conventions of noir fiction are—at least in the earlier issues—played relatively straight, with no subversion of the generic conventions expected from noir fiction.

However, the emphasis on corruption and violence in *Scalped* has caused many critics to accuse Aaron of Native stereotyping. Author Richard Van Camp, in a blog entry, writes:

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<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Carol's designation as femme fatale is troubling from a feminist perspective, but a debate about the treatment of women in noir crime fiction—or even the male-dominated comics industry in general—is outside the purview of this essay, though certainly an important issue in need of address.

I have yet to see a single strong, self empowered Native American woman in *Scalped* and I think this is just so sad because Jason Aaron is a great writer, a fantastic storyteller, but he's made up his mind so far to use his comic book series to be hurtful towards Native American women. (n.p.)

Similarly, Rob Schmidt, of Blue Corn Comics, writes that “[w]hat [readers will] learn is that Indians are criminals, thugs, and lowlifes. In other words, that they’re just as savage and uncivilized as they ever were. What a charming message *that is*” (n.p.; orig. emphasis). In response to Schmidt’s online review, Aaron writes that “I’m not writing *Scalped* with any sort of agenda in mind, and I’m not nearly pretentious enough to think that I’m here to educate the country on the state of Native life. My objective with *Scalped* is to craft interesting characters and to tell a good story” (n.p.). On the other side of the debate, John Lees, in “*Scalped* and the stereotype that wasn’t there,” writes that “[w]hile, yes, there are violent characters in *Scalped* and many laws are broken, this is a crime story, and is therefore by its very definition going to focus on criminals” (n.p.). Just because “a good story” is fiction does not negate all social responsibility, but that does not seem to be the real issue at the heart of the debate regarding stereotypes in *Scalped*; rather, the reality at the core of the debate over *Scalped* is that one critic’s stereotype is another critic’s generic convention.

This convergence of stereotype and generic convention can be readily seen in the character of Carol Ellroy. Van Camp is correct that Carol is “yet another Native American woman sexualized and used without any power at all” (n.p.), but

Royal's assessment of her as Dash's femme fatale, "a narrative doppelganger," who causes both her and Dash to "withdraw into themselves, and into their dysfunctional sexual relationship, as the pressures around them build" is accurate as well (15). The question then becomes not "Is *Scalped* full of stereotypes or being faithful to its genre?" (because the answer is both), but, rather why *Scalped* is utilizing these particular intersections of stereotype and generic convention.

Royal's answer to this question is, really, no answer at all:

Seen in this context [of noir fiction], the reservation becomes a naturalist arena—hardboiled or noir fiction is often linked to pessimistic determinism—with characters trapped by social forces over which they have little control. [...] Aaron taps into many readers' assumptions surrounding reservation life, such as that there are no clean hands in its functioning, and utilizes them for generic purposes. (19)

The logic Royal employs is that readers expect noir fiction to be full of corruption and readers expect reservations to be full of corruption; therefore, a reservation would be the perfect setting for noir fiction. Yet, rather than excuse the stereotypes, such logic only perpetuates them, for Royal's argument that Aaron is only articulating popular beliefs does not seem to be an adequate reason to stop interrogating why "many readers' assumptions surrounding reservation life" are this way.

The feeling of being "trapped by social forces" pervades *Scalped*. In *You Gotta Sin to Get Saved*, the most recently published volume, the character of

Catcher—whose dangerous mystic visions are the driving force of the series—articulates this feeling of oppression when he says “who we are is like a prison. It chains us. Drags us along whether we wanna go or not” (n.p.). By being trapped in their identities, the characters are also trapped in stereotypes and simultaneously the generic conventions of the story: for example, Carol is both a drug- and sex-addict and the femme fatale of her story. As Royal points out, there is a convergence of many readers’ expectations of reservation life and of the noir genre.

However, the most interesting moments in *Scalped* are when, rather than converging, the stereotypes and the generic conventions begin to diverge. Most notably, in *You Gotta Sin to Get Saved*, Carol has finally pulled herself out of her drug-addled despair: she has, in other words, overcome the stereotype she was trapped in up until that point. Yet the loosening of the stereotype’s chains has meant a tightening of those of her generic role: she is still the femme fatale, but, this time, she has unknowingly “pushed” (to use Catcher’s assessment of the situation) the young character of Dino into a darker place, a “new road that’s waiting for him with all its little surprises...” (n.p.). The feeling of being trapped—a noir generic convention—is amplified, rather than decreased, with the reduction of stereotypes.

Which brings us to the anti-trickster of *Scalped* and the question of whether, like Whiskey Jack in *American Gods*, the anti-trickster can be a productive force in this work that reveals the fallacies of colonial logic—or whether it merely becomes another voice for colonialism by “assigning negative

values to Aboriginal differences” and making *Scalped* yet another “self-congratulatory reference point against which Western civilization could measure its own progressive historical evolution” (Henderson 68). Dashiel Bad Horse, the main character, is fashioned into an anti-trickster by his consistent association with Iktomi, the Lakota spider trickster figure and, furthermore, by how that association becomes a voice for colonialist attitudes.

Dash’s association with Iktomi is established at first through Catcher’s visions when, beginning in *Casino Boogie*, Catcher discovers that he can see the totem animals of the main characters. Catcher sees Dash bound up in a mass of spider webs that drag along the pavement behind Dash as he paces back and forth in an alleyway. The spiders’ webs resonant with the web of lies Dash has been weaving: he pretends to work for Red Crow while really working under Agent Nitz at the FBI, yet his loyalty to the FBI seems strained—and could be another deception as well. In *You Gotta Sin to be Saved*, the spider imagery has escalated to a point where its webbing permeates every page, including the cover image a man (presumably Dash) pressing his hands against a spider’s web as if it were bars. And, later, when Catcher’s car runs off the road, the windshield is cracked into two web-like patterns from the impact of Dash and Catcher’s heads hitting the glass (n.p.). The spider and its web resonates with Catcher’s words that “we’re all trapped, see, in one way or another. The trick is just to find the freedom in that” (n.p.). While the other characters are often depicted as inextricably linked to their spirit animals (Lincoln Red Crow’s, for example, is a rotting elk corpse chained to his wrist), it is Dash’s association with Iktomi and

the spiders' webs that most consistently reminds the reader of how trapped within their roles each character is. Carol, for example, cannot escape her role as femme fatale, even once she escapes the stereotypical behavior she is burdened with at the beginning of the series; similarly, Dash cannot escape the web of lies and deceit he has necessarily woven around himself in order to survive his role as detective.

Dash-as-Iktomi as an anti-trickster differs from the other anti-tricksters discussed in this chapter so far in that it is an association made almost solely through the art, not the words, of the comic. Henderson writes that the anti-trickster is "ever changing in its creativity to justify the oppression and domination of contemporary Indigenous peoples and their spiritual guardians" (58). The fact that Henderson specifies that this oppression applies to both "Indigenous peoples *and* their spiritual guardians" (58; emphasis mine) is particularly relevant to *Scalped*: this statement allows a reading that recognizes that the spirit guardians and the characters are both trapped in their binding to each other, representing a simultaneous oppression of both body and spirit. Dash's imprisonment by the spiders' webs is implied to be inevitable; hence a reinforcement of the Eurocentric diffusionism belief that "[o]nly Europeans know true freedom" (Blaut, *Colonizer's Model* 3). In this way, Dash is not a trickster, representing a Lakota version of Iktomi, but, instead, Dash is fashioned into an anti-trickster whose role, as a character, is to emphasize how Indigenous peoples are fundamentally oppressed. Although this association is created only in the

images, not in the narrative text of the comic, the images do speak with the voice of colonialism.

Another difference between Dash's role as anti-trickster and those anti-tricksters examined earlier in this chapter is that Dash is not actually an appearance of a trickster as a spiritual being in the world but, instead, the anti-trickster is associated with a very human character. Unlike Whiskey Jack in *American Gods*, Dash is human. The anti-trickster may be the shadow of the trickster but, in this case, it is also Dash's shadow; the spiders are Dash's imitators as much as they are imitators of Iktomi. This represents a new aspect of the anti-trickster which is not theorized in either Henderson nor Morra's articles: in *Scalped*, the anti-trickster is not only an agent for colonialism but, because the oppressive agenda of colonialism happens to coincide with characters-as-trapped generic convention of noir fiction, the anti-trickster also becomes an agent for noir fiction. In this way, Dash's role as anti-trickster is not immune to the intersection between colonialist stereotypes and noir fiction conventions noted in the ongoing debate about the series.

These multiple layers of shadowing are further complicated by the revelation in the most recent volumes that Catcher—whose visions have been the prime source of the Dash/trickster affiliations—may simply be mad. The arc ends with him thinking to himself: “If there ain't no god, then what's it all for? All the suffering and the struggling? All the dreaming and the fighting? All the killing? Nothing, I hear a voice answer. And then realize it's my own” (n.p.). This undermining of Catcher's visions potentially discounts and dismisses Indigenous

spiritual experiences. However, it is also a reversal of the stereotype which Michael A. Sheyahshe calls the “instant shaman (just add Indian)” in his book *Native Americans in Comic Books*: “the assumption that within every Indigenous person there hides a potential shaman” (55). Like Carol’s recovery from her addictions, Catcher, too, sheds his associated stereotype—that of the shaman—only to discover that he cannot escape his noir narrative role of knowing more than he would like to know, which continues to put him in danger.

More significantly, Catcher’s self-attribution of his vision to madness comes shortly after two of the other characters also become aware of the totem animals Catcher has seen. Red Crow stands in front of a mirror and sees what Catcher has seen: his spirit animal is a dead, rotting corpse shackled to him with chains. After participating in a sweat lodge with Red Crow, Dash stares at a spider in its web for a long moment, before (falsely?) assuring Red Crow that “You’re more a father to me than my own dad ever was. I owe you my life. I know that. So yes. You can trust me. 100%” (*You Gotta* n.p.). This awareness of their totem spirits—obviously with Red Crow, more subtly with Dash—prevents the potential erosion of the characters’ spiritual beliefs that occurs with Catcher’s decision that he must only be mad: the man may be mad, but the visions are still real.

The importance of *Scalped* maintaining the validity of Catcher’s visions of each character’s spirit animal is that it ties in directly to Dash’s role as anti-trickster. If, as the story of *Scalped* continues to progress, it is revealed that Catcher’s visions really were simply the result of insanity, then Dash’s role as

anti-trickster is revealed to have been a narrative deception as well, since he is only associated with Iktomi via these images. If, as Catcher says, “we’re all trapped, see, in one way or another” and “the trick is just to find freedom” (*You Gotta* n.p.), then Dash’s liberation from the role of anti-trickster would signal the possibility of these characters being able to escape their prescribed roles. However, if Catcher’s vision are real, despite his insanity, the anti-trickster instead is played straight and reinforces the idea that the oppression of the colonized is inevitable and eternal, rather than finding a way for the characters to escape this legacy.

In *American Gods*, the anti-trickster becomes productive by using colonialist attitudes to draw attention to the fallacies inherent in those attitudes; in *Scalped*, there is the potential for the anti-trickster to become productive by using both colonialist attitudes and noir genre conventions in order to trap its characters, but, crucially, Dash’s liberation from the role as anti-trickster would signal the possibility of liberation from the legacy of colonialism. In other words, if the anti-trickster, as an agent for colonialism, can be destroyed, then its absence represents a chink in the armor of colonialism. The possibility of the liberation from their prescribed stereotypic roles has occurred with Carol’s character (she is no longer addicted to drugs and sex), yet she has yet to escape from prescribed generic role of the femme fatale. Dash’s recognition of the power that comes with *his* role—such as the moment when he stares at the spider outside the sweat lodge and then proceeds to trick Red Crow—will determine whether *Scalped* is able to use the image of the colonial anti-trickster in a productive way to pinpoint

the flaws in colonial logic, such as Gaiman does in *American Gods*, or whether the anti-trickster is used to “justify the oppression and domination of contemporary Indigenous peoples and their spiritual guardians” (Henderson 58). Therefore, the series is in a catch-22: discounting Catcher’s visions discounts the importance of Native visions, yet also provides a possible escape from colonialism; while confirming the reality of Catcher’s vision would affirm the legitimacy of Native spiritual visions, yet would also affirm the existence of the anti-trickster as representing the inescapability of colonialist destiny.

One of the unique struggles of writing on comics is that they are often published in the issue-based serial format; *Scalped* is no exception. In *The Immediate Experience*, Robert Warshow describes the serial nature of comics, particularly referring to the uncanny ability of many daily comic strips even to live on after the death of their creators, as having “no beginning and no end, only an eternal middle” (53). While the fact that a story is not yet finished should not exempt it from scholarship<sup>15</sup>, Jason Aaron did announce on his blog in July 2011 that *Scalped* would be concluded with issue #60, meaning that there are approximately two more story arcs (volumes/trade paperbacks) left before *Scalped*’s conclusion. What happens with Dash’s role as anti-trickster and whether *Scalped* can use the stereotypes it depicts in earlier arcs for productive, rather than destructive purposes, remains to be seen: there seems to be the potential for it go either way, with troubling implications from either result.

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<sup>15</sup> To excluded ongoing serial publications from critical review would be essentially declare a significant portion of comics and comic strips untouchable, particularly long-running titles that have been going on for decades, such as DC’s Batman and Superman, Marvel’s Spider-man, etc.

Henderson concludes his article with a reminder that Eurocentric diffusionism will “[call] upon the colonized to justify themselves” and that “[t]he psychological consequence of this strategy is currently being unfolded as the “anti-trickster” struggling with *Nanabush*, the Anishinabe trickster” (72; orig. emphasis). New trickster scholarship is cheering for culturally-specific figures, yet another way of winning the fight is to not only promote culturally-specific tricksters, but also to sabotage the anti-trickster. In *American Gods*, Gaiman utilizes an anti-trickster in the form of Whiskey Jack but, by making his role as merely a shadow of Indigenous understanding—and not the real thing—he actually works to support a recognition of Indigenous worldviews by undermining the other side: he rigs the fight. Dash’s role as anti-trickster in *Scalped* is a more ambiguous case, due to its serial publication format. Ultimately, the question of whether *Scalped* uses an anti-trickster for productive purposes or whether Dash’s association with Iktomi becomes an empty signifier that signals back to colonial assumptions is related to the question of whether or not *Scalped* can shrug off the stereotypes it has burdened its characters with by playing against reader assumptions. Anti-tricksters, after all, have learned well to imitate their trickster twins. In *American Gods* and, potentially, in *Scalped*, the anti-tricksters can play the ultimate trick by undermining whims of their creator: colonialism.

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## Conclusion

### Tricksters: There and Here

“I open books and you are there,” writes Niigonwedom James Sinclair in “Trickster Reflections II,” “I speak and you are all I say. I write these words and you come out. Like here. And here” (239). This ubiquitous trait of tricksters is part of what *Troubling Tricksters* is attempting to renegotiate with its Indigenous Literary Nationalism-based approach to studying tricksters: a trickster can be everywhere, like the archetype of The Trickster posits, but tricksters have their somewheres, their cultural birthplaces, their homes. The call put forth by *Troubling Tricksters* and other scholars to reconsider tricksters within cultural contexts enables critics to more fully understand the particulars of a trickster and, therefore, how they function within a particular work of literature.

Yet when Sinclair writes “you are there. [...] And here” (239), he articulates the problem with recontextualization: tricksters are not necessarily very good about staying put when they are told to do so. Stories will travel, roaming between cultures and journeying between media, gathering the dust of various cultural influences on their characters as they do so. To recognize that many of these tricksters can, and should, be returned to their original cultural homes is crucial, yet, what this new form of criticism risks is leaving behind those difficult works of literature which do not adhere readily to only one particular culture of origin. Texts such as *Trickster*, *American Gods*, and *Scalped* are a challenge to this new trickster criticism, for they are composed of a

conglomeration of Native and non-Native culture influences, as demonstrated by the range of genre conventions, visual and narrative techniques, and stylistic choices presented within each. And, yet, this does not mean that such works of literature should be discouraged from being culturally produced or critically engaged.

In my introduction to this thesis, I quoted Sam McKegney's response to the potential critical limitations of Indigenous Literary Nationalism: "true commitment to 'the literature itself' is a commitment to community, nationhood, and sovereignty" (29). I have used this tenet as the engine powering my examinations of *Trickster*, *American Gods*, and *Scalped*.

McKegney's call to examine "the literature itself" (29) is a variation on Baker's call "to be particular" when studying a trickster character (48). Studying the particular historical and cultural moment in which a trickster in literature exists, an approach which is advocated for by Indigenous Literary Nationalism, is important, but what difficult texts like *Trickster*, *American Gods*, and *Scalped* prove is that there is sometimes not just one moment, but a plurality of historical and cultural moments that need to be taken into account and, crucially, that the literature itself must not be left behind in the (inevitably eternal) quest to contextualize that literature. As a final demonstration of why a commitment to the literature is a strategy that Indigenous Literary Nationalism can utilize to examine texts with complicated contexts, I will briefly examine Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, arguably a so-called canonical work of contemporary Native trickster literature.

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* is one of the texts that engages with The Trickster archetype, meaning that this novel's critical merit is threatened by how this new form of trickster criticism attempts to dismantle this archetype. As a preface to the novel, Highway's "A Note on the Trickster"<sup>16</sup> states that "this Trickster goes by many names and many guises" (n.p.). Although Highway lists several examples of specific trickster names from specific Native cultures, this preface is written with the idea that "the Trickster" is a singular being, a belief which coincides with The Trickster archotyping projects of late 1990s criticism rather than with the new trickster criticism calling for recognition that there are many trickster figures (plural), each with more differences than similarities. As Craig S. Womack points out in *Reasoning Together*, "Native cultures, and many cultures around the world, including European ones, have story characters who behave in ways that are very much like the ways of what are often called 'tricksters,' but early critical formulations often existed apart from historical specificity" (19).

When discussing her recording of stories told by Yukon Elders Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, Julie Cruikshank writes

Why do narrators find in these stories such cogent metaphors for explaining their experience? Even when different narrators tell the 'same' story, each gives her own distinctive version. Each teller emphasizes difficult choices faced by a protagonist similar to those she, or someone in her family, has had to make at marriage, after a death, or in a crisis. (314)

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<sup>16</sup> "A Note on the Trickster" also appears as a preface to Highway's plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, which also feature trickster characters.

Although Cruikshank is referring to these women's stories and experiences in particular, this idea that the story is a tool used by the storyteller to reflect upon their individual context can also apply to those Native authors who choose to take up the retelling and reinterpretation of stories that include a trickster figure, like Highway in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*.

Fagan employs this same idea in her article "Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humor, and Trauma in the fiction of Richard Van Camp, Eden Robinson, and Tomson Highway" when she writes that all three writers "use storytelling to explore connections between the traumatic past and troubles in the present and to self-reflexively examine the potential and limits of such indirect and humorous communication" (204-5). In other words, stories are shape-changers, able to become doppelgangers of the teller's life. Cruikshank argues that this ability of a story to adapt to its context is what grants a story its power: "[t]raditional Athapaskan narratives," she writes, "are powerful because they are constructions rooted in general social concerns, even though they are refracted through individual tellers by the time we hear them. Like all good stories, they contain multiple messages: they explore social contradictions women have faced, but they also dramatize a cultural ideal women recognize" (341). Cruikshank is observing the power of stories to take on aspects of their surrounding circumstances. This is what completes the link between how close reading of a piece of literature can simultaneously be a commitment to the context, and, vice versa, how learning about the context of a piece of literature enables a more thorough and accurate close reading.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway's use of the "story within a story" technique adds an additional level of context (the reality of the novel), which provides a demonstration of how the literature and context can feed back into each other. The two main characters, brothers Jeremiah and Gabriel, tell a story about Weesageechak outsmarting the Weetigo to reflect the context around them. When Gabriel arrives in Winnipeg for the first time, Jeremiah takes him to the Polo Park Shopping Mall. As they walk through the mall, they become lost, but Jeremiah hears a "mannequin in white fox fur [whisper] 'ootee-si'— 'this way'" (117). To reassure himself after his encounter with a talking mannequin, Jeremiah asks Gabriel if he can "[r]emember Aunt Black-Eyed Susan's story [...] about the weasels new fur coat?"

"You mean where Weesageechak comes down to Earth disguised as a weasel?" Gabriel alighted on a manly pair of spirit-white Stanfields, and examined the Y-front with such rapacity that the bespectacled curmudgeon of a clerk, smelling sabotage, flared his nostrils. "And the weasel crawls up the Weetigo's bumhole?" Gabriel poked a finger through the opening.

"Yes..." Jeremiah, in spite of himself, exploded with jagged laughter. "In order to kill the horrible monster."

"And comes back out with his white fur coat covered with shit?" laughed Gabriel, dropping the Stanfields on a pile of sky-blue boxers. (118)

Kristina Fagan argues “that Gabriel is using the traditional story to try and understand his own life,” a statement which coincides with Cruikshank’s observations regarding the relevancy of the Yukon Elders’ stories to their own experiences (218). Appropriately, Highway does not present the Weasel story as simply one long monologue told by only Jeremiah; rather, it is a three-way dialogue, a collaborative effort that not only foreshadows the two brothers’ collaborations in their artistic endeavours later in the novel, but that also gives the setting of the shopping mall a voice in creating the story: the description of Gabriel finding a pair of jeans comes between the spoken words of the two brothers . The setting also has a role in generating the story before it begins, for what prompts Jeremiah to recall the story is the encounter with the mannequin because “[a] sudden swerve to Cree mythology might disarm such occult phenomena” (118)—the irony of Jeremiah’s story being, of course, that he speaks of Weesageechak in order to disarm a visitation from Weesageechak as the whispering mannequin. Therefore, Weesageechak, as the mannequin, tricks Jeremiah into telling her<sup>17</sup> story about the encounter with the Weetigo because this story is reflective of what is happening immediately around the brothers.

As the brothers continue to recount Weesageechak’s story, the interspersed descriptions of the mall take on a distinctly Weetigo-esque tone: the comparison evokes both the Weetigo and the shopping mall as sites of mass consumption. The food court is even described as “the belly of the beast” (119),

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<sup>17</sup> In “A Note on the Trickster,” Highway describes the Trickster as “theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously” (n.p.). I have chosen the pronoun “she” because Weesageechak is, in this novel, incarnated primarily in the form of the Fur Queen and therefore appears in pseudo-female form.

meaning that Jeremiah and Gabriel's journey through the mall reflects

Weesageechak's journey through the digestive tract of the Weetigo:

Never before had Gabriel seen so much food. Or so many people shovelling food in and chewing and swallowing and burping and shovelling and chewing and swallowing and burping, as at some apocalyptic communion. The world was one great, gaping mouth, devouring ketchup-dripping hamburgers, french fries glistening with grease [etc.]...The roar of mastication drowned out all other sound, so potent that, before the clock struck two, the brothers were gnawing away with the mob. (119-120)

Yet Weesageechak is with them, guiding them in the form of the mannequin—for having once made this journey herself, she knows the way out: she knows how to eat the Weetigo from the inside out. As Gabriel concludes the Weasel story, the brothers leave while “the mall loomed behind them, the rear end of a beast that, having gorged itself, expels its detritus,” a demonstration that their journey through the mall and, simultaneously, through their story are both complete (121).

Weesageechak in the fur-clad mannequin acts as a guide and example of how to deal with the mass consumption of the mall that is paralleled by the consumptive power of the Weetigo in the brothers' story. This type of analysis does exactly what Womack warns against when he writes that Indigenous Literary Nationalist critics

are trying to avoid the kind of literary work that has been so very popular in our field in which people avoid historical research and

base their criticism exclusively on tropes and symbols. We want to show some kind of commitment to archival sources and other kinds of knowledge rather than atemporal, nonhistorical, clichéd analyses such as, ‘Well...I think the frybread probably symbolizes...’ (7)

But, as Cruikshank’s research with Yukon Elders prove, symbolisms (or, perhaps as a more accurate term, parallelisms) between a story and its context does not mean that the story is merely reduced to the “atemporal, nonhistorical, clichéd” analysis that Womack critiques. Instead, these parallelisms can be keys to unlocking particulars about that context, particulars which can be very temporal, historical, and culturally-specific. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Weesageechak is not merely the archetype of The Trickster who fools Jeremiah into telling one of her stories as a way to help him find his way through the mall; Weesageechak is also Weesageechak, for she continues throughout the novel to intervene in crucial moments in the brothers’ lives. What this example in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* proves, therefore, is that a commitment to the cultural particulars of Indigenous Literary Nationalism should be considered in conjunction with a close examination of the text itself: the cultural context of a story is not only generated from outside the story but is also generated within that story itself.

With this in mind, the stories in the graphic anthology *Trickster* prove that a mixture of Native and non-Native storytelling techniques can produce a result that remains loyal to both cultural origins. Stories such as “Rabbit’s Choctaw Tail Tale,” “How Wildcat Caught a Turkey,” “The Yehasuri,” and “Raven the

Trickster” can therefore thrive in a new medium while still providing cultural clues that indicate that trickster’s particular cultural ancestry. If Indigenous Literary Nationalism is fundamentally based on the concept that difference markers can empower, then these stories that provide difference markers via comparative storytelling techniques within the same short story make powerful packages of how Indigenous Literary Nationalism can function and thrive with issues of cultural hybridity. When Sinclair writes “I open books and you are there,” there is a recognition that the “there” of a trickster figure can change and, inevitably, will change (239). Yet, just because that “there” may be a graphic story collection like *Trickster* does not mean that those stories are no longer reflective of the context of that storyteller, but, rather, that context has shifted.

Likewise, *American Gods* and *Scalped* represent examples of tricksters that are difficult to account for with Indigenous Literary Nationalism’s work to return these tricksters back to their original cultural contexts. While *Trickster* provides examples of trickster figures whose contexts have shifted to include some non-Native cultural influences, *American Gods* and *Scalped* present the complicated example of the anti-trickster, produced out of the attitudes of Eurocentric diffusionism in order to perpetuate the attitudes of colonialism. The anti-trickster still reflects its context, only that context is a very particular narrow worldview which aims to dismiss and disempower the Indigenous tricksters mimicked by the anti-trickster. However, *American Gods* and, potentially, *Scalped* present the possibility that anti-tricksters, when employed in a particular way, can actually disrupt the ongoing legacy of colonialism, rather than

perpetuate it. The difference between these examples of productive anti-tricksters and anti-tricksters which support Eurocentric diffusionism completely is that, in order for an anti-trickster to be equipped to dismantle colonialism, s/he must be self-aware of the colonialist rhetoric which s/he is using—and, in the case of Whiskey Jack in *American Gods*, the elusiveness of his identity remind the reader that there is not simply one “Indian” culture, but a myriad of Indigenous cultures across North America, each possessing a unique worldview.

“[A]nd you are there,” writes Sinclair. “There,” for a trickster, can be anywhere: oral storytelling, comic books, novels. Yet what Indigenous Literary Nationalism advocates for, in reaction to the late-1990s archotyping species of trickster criticism, is to recognize that “anywhere” is always a particular “somewhere,” with its own temporal, historical, and cultural context. The next step for Indigenous Literary Nationalism is to expand what that context can mean and where it can be found: the cultural influences on contemporary trickster characters are multiple. These influences can be traced not only through the stories of a particular Native culture, but also through sources as diverse as comic book conventions and Golden Age American animation. And, furthermore, these sources can sometimes be used subversively, such as using anti-tricksters to undermine the colonialism from which they were born. Examining the literature—the stories themselves—is crucial for understanding how the story is reflected and refracted in the light of its multiple cultural contexts. In this way, new trickster criticism can account for trickster with complicated cultural birthplaces while still recognizing the importance of returning to those

birthplaces: tricksters are there, in their cultural contexts. But they are also here,  
within the literature itself.

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