

LA ARAÑA QUE RENUOVA SIGNIFICADOS

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RÉSUMÉ

De la Nouvelle-Ecosse au Brésil, Anancy l'Araignée tisse une toile calibanesque et file un récit chargé de sens. Ses dons naissent d'une limite qui se manifeste à la fois par l'extradiégétique et l'intradiégétique —niveaux narratifs du récit populaire, une forme d'expression aussi fluctuante que l'araignée qui, éventuellement, l'habite. Occupant des carrefours, des recoins, des fissures, Anancy ne se situe ni à l'intérieur ni à l'extérieur d'un lieu. De même qu'elle ne remplit jamais un rôle, héro, vilain ou dupe, elle défie toute catégorie. L'indétermination marque aussi l'aspect physique d'Anancy: parfois décrite comme un être humain sachant filer, parfois comme une araignée aux traits masculins ou féminins. Mon propos est de démêler, dans leur continuité, les éléments africains les plus marquants des contes Anancy du Nouveau Monde, avant de souligner la nature fluctuante des contes populaires comme une forme d'art et de démontrer que l'indétermination de ses caractéristiques font d'Anancy une "Araignée lestée de sens".

SAMENVATTING

Van Nova Scotia tot Brazil, de spin Anancy produceert een complexe discours maar vol betekenissen. Anancy is een meesterlijke trickster, zoals hij zich uitdrukt in de plaats, functies, verschijningen en taal die hij hanteert om zijn doeleinden te bereiken. Anancy ontsnapt aan iedere model. Hij kan een held zijn, maar ook een schurk of een slachtoffer. Hij wordt voorgesteld als een mens met dierlijke kenmerken maar ook als een spin met menselijke kenmerken. Hij kan een man zijn maar ook een vrouw. Anancy gebruikt altijd zijn betekenisgevende machten om de ander te benadelen. Het artikel beoogt de meest duidelijke Afrikaanse elementen in de Anancy verhalen, die in het Amerikaans continent zijn overgeleverd, naar voren te halen en om Anancy als betekenisgevende spin te presenteren.

THE SIGNIFYING SPIDER

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A web is a place and space of hybridity that creates, by its very presence in the world (which is often invisible, unseen, a gossamer of the margins) new combinations and juxtapositions. (Houston A. Baker, Jr., foreword to *Anancy in the Great House*, vii.)

The Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed is our trope for chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act. (Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 52.)

ABSTRACT

From Nova Scotia to Brazil, Anancy the spider, weaves a calibanesque web and spins a Signifyin(g) discourse. His abilities stem from a liminality which manifests itself both on the extra and intradiegetic levels of folk tale, a form as fluctuant as the spider which occasionally inhabits it. Within it, Anancy the spider emerges as a masterful trickster whose indeterminancy manifests itself in the geographical location and functions he occupies as well as in the appearance and language he adopts to achieve his ends. Dweller of the crossroad, inhabitant of nooks and crannies, Anancy is never in a specific enclosure and yet never out. Likewise, he never fulfills a given role but as hero, villain or dupe, he defies categories. Indeterminancy also characterizes Anancy's physical appearance. He is sometimes portrayed as a human being endowed with a spinning grift, sometimes as a spider with human features, male or female. Lastly, Anancy is aware of the fluctuant nature of language and is forever punning to trick other characters, whether through downright lies or more refined ways of using what Gates Jr. has characterized as Signifyin(g) powers. My purpose here

will be to unravel the most salient African continuities which can be traced in the Anancy New World tales before underlining the fluctuancy of the folk tale as an art form and demonstrating the indeterminate characteristics which enable Anancy to become a Signifyin(g) spider.

RESUMEN

Desde Nueva Escocia hasta Brasil, la araña Anancy teje una telaraña compleja y canibalesca e inicia un discurso que renueva significados. Sus habilidades provienen de la liminalidad y se manifiestan en los niveles intra y extradieгéticos de los cuentos de tradición oral, una forma narrativa tan fluctuante como la propia araña que la habita ocasionalmente. Dentro de la tradición oral, la araña Anancy emerge como una malabarista habilidosa cuya inconstancia se hace evidente en su ubicación geográfica y en las funciones que desempeña, así como en su apariencia y en el lenguaje que finalmente adopta para lograr sus fines. Acompañante de las encrucijadas, moradora de escondrijos, Anancy nunca se encierra en un espacio, pero tampoco nunca queda fuera. No desempeña un papel fijo: sea heroína, villana o víctima, siempre desafía las categorías. La apariencia física de Anancy resulta igualmente imprecisa. Con frecuencia se le presenta como un ser humano superdotado, en otras ocasiones se le ve como una araña con rasgos humanos, ya sea femeninos o masculinos.

La araña Anancy está consciente de la naturaleza cambiante del lenguaje y constantemente emplea juegos de palabras para entrapar a otros actores, a través de soterradas mentiras o refinados senderos de lo que Gates Jr. llama los poderes de significar. Mi propósito aquí es desenredar lo más sobresaliente de las continuidades africanas que pueden apreciarse en las leyendas de Anancy en el Nuevo Mundo, antes que subrayar la versatilidad de la tradición oral como forma artística y demostrar los rasgos indeterminados que permiten que Anancy sea una araña que renueva significados.

From Nova Scotia to Brazil, from the Carolinas to the tiniest Caribbean island, Anancy the spider, the quintessential hero of traditional folklore, weaves a calibanesque web and spins a Signifyin(g) discourse. Anancy's ability to provide "a tolerated margin of mess" (Babcock, 1975, 147) stems from a liminality which manifests itself both on the extra and intradiegetic level of each folk tale where he plays a role. As fluctuant as the spider which occasionally inhabits it, the folktale is a form of expression not only shaped, but deshaped and reshaped by cultural influences, whose every occurrence is a new creation. As such, it seems a befitting place for Anancy to spin his web of trickery.

Anancy the spider emerges as a masterful trickster whose indeterminacy manifests itself in the geographical location and functions he occupies within each tale as well as in the appearance and language he adopts to achieve his ends. Dweller of the crossroads, inhabitant of nooks and crannies, Anancy is never within a specific enclosure and yet never without. Likewise, he never fulfills a given role. He is never quite a hero as he often employs the basest means to reach his goals, even on the rare occasion when they are lofty. His trickery makes him akin to a villain who preys upon the innocence of others to satisfy his cravings. This *hero-scamp*, as Roger Abrahams calls him, occasionally pays a high price for his misdeeds when he is duped by a stronger force or a craftier trickster. Hero, villain, dupe, Anancy defies categories to retain his indeterminacy.

Indeterminacy also characterizes Anancy's physical appearance. Like the spider, Anancy is a creature who defies categorization. He is sometimes portrayed as a human being endowed with a spinning gift, sometimes as a spider with human features, male or female. Lastly, Anancy is aware of the fluctuant nature of language and is forever punning to trick other characters, whether through downright lies or more refined ways of using what Gates Jr. has characterized as Signifyin(g)¹ powers. In his search for an intertextual grid to read African-American literature, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) draws both on the standard definition of signifying—carrying meaning to the surface—and on the African-American usage of the term Signifyin(g)—testing the ability of a word to bear the conventional meanings—to posit a discourse of trickery. Signifyin(g) is not a practice limited to African-Americans. As the Jamaican writer Dennis Forsythe explains, the “Anancy art of ‘Mouthing’, of throwing words (or ‘mammy-guy-ing’ in Trinidad), and Anancy body-language techniques, hissing or sucking the teeth and of making ‘monkey faces’” (1983, 225) were all part of his Caribbean childhood.

My purpose here will be to unravel the African continuities which can be traced in the Anancy New World tales, underline the fluctuancy of the folktale as an art form and demonstrate the indeterminate characteristics which enable Anancy to become a Signifyin(g) spider.

¹ In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates Jr. (1988) chooses to underline the difference between signifying: the standard use of the English word (45) and Signifyin(g): the black usage. He places the ‘g’ between parentheses to respect the Afro-American pronunciation of the word. I retain this spelling here for the same reasons.

AFRICAN CONTINUITIES

In a study of West Indian folktales entitled *Man-of-Words*, Abrahams argues for African continuities as opposed to African retentions. He characterizes the efforts made at establishing with certainty a putative direct and specific link between black cultural expressions on either side of the Atlantic as a search for retentions (Abrahams, 1983, 54), which he sees as a fruitless endeavor. He argues instead in favor of tracing continuities which bring to the fore a more diffuse African heritage while underlining the creolizing processes at play in the New World. The routes followed by Anancy in his passage from Africa to the Americas provide such examples of continuities. Anancy tales are found mostly in the countries of West Africa such as Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togoland, Dahomy. Many slaves who either came from West Africa or awaited there a ship for their middle passage were sent to plantation colonies where Anancy strategies for survival would prove an enduring legacy. Anancy stories have surfaced in former (or current) British plantocratic colonies such as the Southern part of the United States and the English-speaking Caribbean islands as well as former Dutch or Portuguese possessions such as Surinam and Brazil. Anancy tales collected in non-plantation colonies such as Pennsylvania, Nova Scotia or Honduras can be traced back to Caribbean informers who had migrated to new locales. Anancy's multiple journeys have spurred numerous variations in his tales, all of which, however, bear traces of African continuities.

For centuries, West Africans lived in rigid hierarchical societies which faced chronic food shortages and had to develop coping strategies to deal with such conditions of life. African slaves encountered similar situations in the New World as they were incorporated into a system which imposed a strict ethno-social structure upon them and prevented them from obtaining the nourishment needed to sustain a healthy life. These characteristics serve to explain why so many African and African-American Anancy tales deal with a dearth of food (and occasionally other commodities such as women) which the trickster is trying to alleviate and why the latter is usually portrayed as a glutton who can never eat enough to satisfy his own hunger, never seduce enough women to quench his sexual appetite... and never be satisfied with his own underdog status.

In *African Myths and Tales*, Feldmann argues that the African trickster's amorality is not

that of the anomic, presocialized individual, who has not yet matured to a sense of responsibility. Suave, urbane and calculating, [he] acts with premeditation, always in control of the situation; though self-seeking, his social sense is sufficiently developed to enable him to manipulate others to his advantage [Feldmann, 1963, 15].

Her characterization equally applies to the Afro-American trickster. In most tales, Anancy compensates for his physical weaknesses or lower social status with well-crafted, premeditated acts of trickery. Whether setting up a hoax, rigging up a trap, adopting various disguises or Signifyin(g) to reach his goal, Anancy always displays a keen awareness of his victims' expectations which enables him to manipulate them at will.

If most tales show him as being in control of the situation, in occasional cases, he is, however, caught red-handed. Dundes shows that African trickster tales usually revolve around the breaking of an interdiction for which punishment is determined and assessed by the offender's group (Dundes, 1971, 181). Such is the case in the New World tales where Anancy does not escape unscathed. Anancy is then cast out by the group, flogged or beaten by his former victims in an attempt to preserve property and social cohesion.

Anancy's very nature serves to explain why his strategies involve "a maximization of short-term (economic) gain at the expense of long-term social cohesion" (Edwards, 1984, 92). If he were tending towards social harmony, the trickster would lose his status as an indeterminate figure, no longer occupy the geographical and social margins, no longer be all at once hero, villain and dupe, no longer Signify, in other words, no longer be a trickster. Unlike European tales,² African and Afro-American tales thus end in disharmony, in a world torn apart by the trickster's misdeeds, a world where crops have been stolen, animals slaughtered, spouses cheated and where friends have become enemies (Dundes, 1971,

² Not only do most European tales end well but those which have a tendency not to are adapted to fit the norm. Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are never eaten or emerge unscathed from the wolf's belly, Little Pigs one and two are no longer eaten and the Little Mermaid gets her prince. More generally, the acceptability of a trickster hero is clearly a problem in Europe. Edwards underlines "the consistent, nearly paroxysmal care taken by those who have edited the literary version of the trickster cycle of Reynard the Fox, to divorce themselves from assigning anything but disapprobation to his apparently amoral and unpredictable performances" (Edwards, 1978, 3).

175). Disharmony, disorder are the trademarks of the African and Afro-American tricksters.³

CREOLES AS SIGNIFYIN(G) LANGUAGES

When they came to the New World, African slaves were submitted to an acculturating process which was aimed at erasing the African languages and cultures to replace them with the language and culture of the plantation. As Gates Jr. (1988) argues, it is in the language itself as it is practised by the African diaspora that one must look for the origins of Signifyin(g). African slaves may have lost their ability to use their native languages but they have not forgotten how to Signify. Indeed, Signifyin(g) is an enduring legacy, an African continuity which enabled deported Africans to survive slavery by creating a new language that was only partially understandable to the slaveholder and overseer. Changes in the meanings of words — changes that sometimes amounted to complete transvaluation — were encouraged by the slaves's social situation on the limen of a society which denied them humanhood. In other words, slaves used their deftness at Signifyin(g) to spin a new language out of systematic derision.

The creole languages spoken in the regions of the New World which received slaves are all Signifyin(g) discourses aimed at "decomposing and deporting" (Shelton, 1992, 171) the language of the other through double-entendres, puns, verbal tricks and plurality of meanings. It is relevant to note that while creoles derive most of their lexicon from the master's tongue, be it French, English, Spanish or Dutch, lexemes were not only deshaped but reshaped and their meaning often skewed as they were made to fit within an African-based grammatical grid and a creole

³ In Greek mythology, the image of the spider evokes the story of Arachne (from whose name the French language draws its word for spider: *araignée*) who challenged Athena to a weaving contest. In her tapestry, Athena, portrays the Gods as powerful figures imbued with majesty whereas Arachne reveals her trickster bent when she depicts the Gods giving in to their sexual lust and making love with mortals. For spinning this Signifyin(g) discourse, the latter incurs the wrath of Athena and hangs herself rather than face the goddess' fury. She however escapes death as Athena changes her into a spider. Arachne's fate illustrates both the Signifyin(g) and the regenerating powers of the web. Arachne has used her ability to spin to reveal the "other" side of divine life, to Signify the Gods, and yet owes her salvation to the woven thread as she continues Signifyin(g) under the guise of a spider.

setting. This very approach to language Signifies the logocentric *status quo* that is often taken for granted. To quote Carol Tennesen:⁴

French, like most modern Western discourse, is logocentric, that is, it assumes that the word can yield immediate access to "true" meanings. Creole, on the other hand, makes no such claim, in fact prefers to take detours instead of the straightforward path [1985, 89].

AFRICAN DISCONTINUITIES

In African tales, Anancy is always portrayed as a male character, an impertinent seducer who will use trickery and treachery to lure young women into his lair. When married, he repeatedly abuses his wife's trust, preventing her from her right share of food as in "The Bone Sweet" (Jamaica), or lying to her to hide his laziness as in "The Master Trickster" (Nigeria). In the New World, however, Anancy's sexual identity is more ambiguous. In St. Martin, he is an old lady, in the Carolinas a young woman, in the Bahamas a young boy. Anancy thus does not appeal only to men or women, to the old or the young but stands as the epitome of survival for all.

In *Anancy in the Great House*, Jonas (1990) notes that:

throughout Africa and the African diaspora in the New World, folktales are told of the trickster Anancy — half-spider, half-man —, who, though perennially in tight situations, is singularly adept at turning the tables on his oppressor and emerging more or less unscathed. His ability to extricate himself lies in his gift with words, his talent for spinning yarns [Jonas, 1990, 2].

Dundes, Roberts and Colardelle, however, disagree with such a position and show that the African trickster is often punished for his deeds whereas in the Afro-American tales, he rarely is. Colardelle (1975) even

⁴ In *The-Man-Of-Words in the West Indies*, Abrahams (1970) applies the experience he gained studying Signifyin(g) processes among African-Americans (see *Deep Down in the Jungle*) to study language and social performance in various West Indian islands. The studies he conducted in Nevis lead him to distinguish between household rites and road festivities, the former calling for decorum and the proper use of language (here, English), while the latter focusses on wrong-doings, motley and animalistic costuming and puns, double-entendres and nonsense in creole (Abrahams, 1970, 154-155). In bridging the gap between language and social performance, Abrahams points to one of the possible applications of the theory of the Signifyin(g) Spider.

concludes that Anancy tales in Africa are mostly used to convey a moral message. Titles such as "Anancy is put in his place"(Ghana), "Spider meets his match"(Ghana), "Spider learns to listen"(Ghana), "Monster flogs Spider" (Togo)⁵ do point to the ethical closure of several African Anancy tales. Afro-American tales, on the other hand, most often foreground a spider which escapes punishment. The conditions of life under slavery explain such a shift. Slaves needed a folk hero whom they could praise for his ability to defy more powerful forces rather than a figure punished for defying the given order. Anancy's perennial rebellion against social norms and his use of comic trickery made him an attractive figure of resistance for this downtrodden people. His survival in folktales in the Americas attests to his capacity to weave new opportunities out of disruption, discontinuity and defeat. In several tales, however, Anancy fails to reach his goal and is duped by another character. His failing underlines the dangers inherent in letting one's guard down but serves to emphasize that Anancy remains unchastened and continues to spin his web of trickery, a powerful message for any listener faced with daunting obstacles.

INDETERMINANCY OF THE MEDIUM

The folktale owes its fluctuancy first and foremost to its oral nature.⁶ Its orality enables it to fit the circumstances which surround its unraveling, integrating such elements as geographical features as the storyteller uses topological or vegetal props to help him spin his tale, meteorological

⁵ Several other tales function according to these lines, though their titles may not bear any indication of the spider's eventual punishment. See for example "The Noble Adowa"(Ghana), "Spider and Rat"(Togo), "Spider propels animals into a tree"(Togo).

⁶ This sense of orality, and mutability, is lost on the "reader" who discovers tales on a printed page. Not only does the versatile spoken word become an immutable printed word but various components of the tale which point to its orality often go unrecorded. Edwards distinguishes five structural components in Afro-American tales: 1) formulaic opening; 2) atemporal introduction; 3) narrative body; 4) concluding element 5) formulaic closing. Of these, the first and second often go unrecorded, the third is given the most emphasis (in many cases, it is indeed the sole element recorded while the fourth and fifth lose some of their relevance. Yet, the concluding element is often composed of an etiological conclusion (e.g. and this why spider has eight legs, hides in the dry leaves) while the formulaic closing underlines the position adopted by the storyteller regarding his art (see for example the explanations given by Louise Bennett (1973) regarding "Jack madora, me no choose none", a traditional Jamaican closure for Spider stories).

features as he accounts for times of drought or rains, temporal features as he will adapt his tale to the times of day. As Dramé notes, "the folktale emerge as versatile artistic creations that are not only recyclable but highly transformational" (Dramé, 1996, 237). It is interesting to note that whereas most European tales take place in times gone by, African and Afro-American folktales provide the sense of an ongoing present which reinforces the multiplicity of the tale by foregrounding it in each occurrence. African and Afro-American tales did not take place "once upon a time" but rather unravel here and now with an opening call for response such as "Krik!" or "La cour dort?" to ensure full audience participation. As Abrahams concludes, "Oral performance tends to focus on the concrete qualities of the here and now, and on the practicalities and problems faced daily in the village or small-community context" (Abrahams, 1983, XIX). This may explain the importance of the art of Signifyin(g) not only but most importantly, in folktales. To talk directly would have been impossible in such small, tight-knit communities without risking breaking the community apart. On the other hand, indirect arguments that "go round for long", to use a phrase Abrahams borrows from African-American street talk, would have been the most artful and effective form of speech. In most cases, the audience is very familiar with the storyline of the tale, down to its conclusion. This familiarity does not however suggest immutability but rather fluctuancy as the storyteller and the audience are both freed from the dictates of imparting information to avail themselves of the opportunity to celebrate the Signifyin(g) powers of language.

Abrahams further notes that storytelling owes its vitality to two characteristic elements:

first, the seizure of the role of narrator and the maintaining of it in the face of ongoing critical commentary; second, the constant interaction between storyteller and audience, maintained both through audience commentary and the periodic interruption of call-and-response songs [1983, 14].

The delivery of the tale thus reflects on the extradiegetic level the trickery of the trickster as the storyteller must call upon his mastery of language to ensure that the community listens to the whole tale and resist the critical commentary of the audience through Signifyin(g). As he is forever punning, forever troping, he reveals speech as an agency of both order and disorder.

The Signifyin(g) potential of the story is, however, lost on any listener who is not part of the community, all the more so on the researcher who relies on a written transcription of the tale. In an article entitled "Tricksters and Triptychs", Dramé draws a comparison between triptychs and tricker tales. He argues that "While the outside of the panels is usually offered to everybody's gaze, it is only during church rituals that the inside pictures spring to life when they are opened for the initiates" (Dramé, 1996, 252-253). Likewise, trickster tales are superficially open to everybody's gaze but their true meaning remains hidden, to be revealed only during the performance of the tale to those who are aware of the inside panels, of the Signifyin(g) processes at play. Dramé traces the efforts made by a team of French researchers in the 1970s to create "a *simple, rational, and practical system* whereby a *complete index* of African tales could be drawn" (1996, 234-235; my emphasis) based upon a limited set of Dogon tales. The complexity and the monumentality of the task speak for themselves as to the eurocentric perception that Africa can be reduced to a neat set of determinate signifiers, preferably a "simple" one. The team experienced the full brunt of the difficulties inherent in creating a system for a fluctuant medium, but never felt the tremendous impact of the indeterminacy of language, of its Signifyin(g) nature as they relied on written accounts, often once removed from the language used, as tales were translated from a local language to French, sometimes twice removed, from a local language into English and then subsequently into French. It is revealing that even under such circumstances, the African tales would not lend themselves to a "practical" index.

In an article where he explores "the message in the medium", Dabuku (1990) attempts to take into account the versatility of the folktale by adopting an approach which is truer to the medium explored. He works with three versions of a tale (thereby tacitly acknowledging the existence of variants), one recorded on tape in Dagaare, one written in Waale and one in Asante and English. By grounding his research on oral documents or ones written in native languages, Dabuku is able to bring to the fore the importance of culture in the weaving of different versions of the same plot and unearth the palimpsestic meanings hidden within the language used in each tale. He thus reveals the folktale to be not just semantic but polysememic.

ANANCY IS KING OF STORIES

Anancy's role as a trickster is paradoxically, yet intimately, linked with his role as a creator figure. As Pelton underlines, the spider is "a symbol of the liminal state itself and of its permanent accessibility as a source of recreative power" (1980, 35). His liminality as well as several of his characteristics such as his ability to spin a web out of his own substance and his tendency to live in holes, help explain why several peoples credit him with divine powers of creation. The Kakas in Cameroon believe that his home and life underground allow him access to ancestors and spirits, hence his use in divination. The Ashanti believe that their people were created by a large spider, while among the Bambaras, the spider represents the highest level of initiation. In the New World, the Jamaican storyteller Louise Bennett aptly summarizes the creative role ascribed to Anancy. According to her, "Everything that happened in the world was started by Anancy" (Bennett, 1966, ix).

Several African tales also underline Anancy's ability to weave his way between Gods and mortals. In a Limba (Sierra Leone) story, Kota and Yemi wished to seek wives in the land of the sky and Anancy took them there. In another tale, he reaches into the Kingdom of Death to secure food or revive dead relatives. In "Spider and Death" (Togo), he goes to ask Death for food and avoids paying this favor with his life through deluding other animals into taking his place, while in a Jamaican tale, he retrieves his children from Death's hands and brings them back to life.

Anancy, however, is not a benevolent god but a secular creature who "operates in a real world where the hero cannot count on supernatural powers and clever cheating replaces magic" (Feldmann, 1963, 17). Knowing neither good nor evil, Anancy enables all values to come into being. In "Spider and the Calabash of Knowledge" (Ghana), he brings knowledge to the people but in "How diseases came to the Ashanti" (Ghana), he is responsible for the spread of various diseases. His attempt at securing more power in various tales is often foiled as people fear that increasing his powers might lead to his causing more havoc. In a Hausa tale from Nigeria, he thus asks a woman whether she would grant him more cunning. She agrees to do so if he brings the tears of a lion, an elephant tusk and the skin of a dingo. Once he has tricked all these animals into relinquishing the requested items, he is however refused

his prize because the woman fears that if he were taught more cunning, he would destroy everybody.⁷

His divine powers of creation as well as his ability to move freely between the divine and the secular worlds, lead Anancy to pursue enduring fame. He secures the latter in several African tales by asking God to have all the stories previously told about God or ascribed to Him, deal with Anancy and be called Anancy Stories. According to the tale entitled "Why we tell stories about spider" (Ghana), Anancy obtained the divine privilege of having stories told about him after meeting God's request for a swarm of bees, a python and a leopard which he coaxed or lured into various traps. In another version of the tale, Anancy goes to the chief of the gods Nyankupon to ask that all tales told by men might be known as Anancy stories instead of Nyankupon stories. This particular tale helps account for Anancy's popularity, even in stories where he does not appear.

Anancy did not lose any of his craving for fame on crossing the Atlantic. According to a Jamaican folktale, Brer Tiger was king of the forest and had many things named after him such as Tiger lilies, Tiger moths and Tiger stories. Brer Anancy asked for the stories to bear his name and was granted his request upon fulfilling Tiger's demand of a snake caught alive. In her doctoral dissertation entitled *Classification of West Indian Folktales by Types and Motifs*, Flowers notes that "The term Anansem (spider stories) is used to refer to all stories" (1980, 5) in the Caribbean. Some scholars such as Jekyll (1966) in *Jamaican Song and Story* and Verna Pollard, the editor of *Anansem*, a series of Caribbean texts for young readers, thus use the term to refer to various stories, whether or not they feature Anancy.

Among folktales, none seem more indeterminate from an intradiegetic perspective than the trickster tales. Edwards argues that: "Since each plot is ultimately unique, the only thing that unites them is the ludic unpredictability of the trickster character himself" (Edwards, 1978, 84). The adaptability of the oral tale told in a language born of Signifyin(g)

⁷ Similar stories are attested with Hare as a main character. In "Lapin allé mandé Papa bon Dieu un pé l'Espwit" (Trinidad), "Rabbit asks God to give him sense" (Grenada), "Lapin Mandé bob Dieu un pé l'Espwit" (Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, the Saintes and Marie-Galante), Hare performs the tasks requested by God but is refused his share of cunning. Anancy tales prevail in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean territories while Hare stories appear mostly in the Spanish and French-speaking territories as well as the English-speaking countries where a French-based creole can be found, such as Saint-Lucia, Dominica, Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago.

processes combined with the indeterminacy of the trickster figure made trickster stories a perfect trope for the African diaspora. Anancy presents itself as a particularly salient example of indeterminacy, whether one considers his geographical location, his deftness at disguise, his multiple roles or his uncanny mastery of Signifyin(g).

A CREATURE OF THE LIMEN

Suspended by a thread of its own creation, anchored onto elusive points, the spider creates the illusion that it can both walk upon the earth like other pedestrian animals and fly like birds. Based upon this ability, several African and Afro-American tales explain how Anancy became a creature of the limen. In "Anansi's hat-shaking dance" (Ghana), he gets bald as a result of vanity and hides his shame in the tall grass (a liminal area outside and yet close to the village enclosure). In several variants of the tale "Inside the Cow's belly" (West Africa and the New World), he is pursued for a crime and runs away, far enough to hide but close enough to continue his misdeeds. Several West Indian tales explain how Anancy came to live in a liminal space such as the rafters of a house, an out-building or a fence, the most common location being the cassy-tree. In "Anancy and Brother Tiger" (Jamaica) Anancy lets monkeys bear the blame for his stealing the tiger's fat and hides on top of houses to avoid their wrath. In "Man Bwail" (a tale told by a Jamaican immigrant in Honduras), Anancy tricks monkeys into jumping into a pot of water and boils them up. He is tricked in return and hides in the dry leaves to escape. In "The end of nansi" (Jamaica), Anancy is a lazy overseer and a thief who has to hide in old sheds. In "Terycooma and Brer Nancy" (Montserrat), Anancy hides in nooks and crannies for fear of Teecooma while in "In the rafters" (St. Croix) and "Hurricane coming" (St. Thomas), he escapes from Lion and hides under the roof. In "Fire test" (Jamaica) he steals apples and runs away into the cassy tree, while in "Bone for a stump" (Jamaica) he ends up there as Goat kicks him in retaliation for his trickery. This geographical indeterminacy surfaces in contemporary stories featuring Anancy. In "Anancy beat pan" (Trinidad), a contemporary story by Paul Keens-Douglas,⁸ Anancy sits on a window sill to watch his

⁸ Keens-Douglas is Grenadian by birth. However, having lived most of his life in Trinidad where his parents migrated, he is usually associated with the latter country.

neighbor's TV and eventually seeks refuge up a tree on a remote beach after having tricked various animals into participating in a steel pan competition for no pay. Anancy's liminal position enables him to be aware of social norms and avoid submitting to them. He uses the information gathered from his vantage point to his own advantage, breaks the rules and infringes upon taboos so as to reach his objectives. Anancy who is socially peripheral or marginal becomes symbolically central and predominant as he forever reconfigures social norms. It may even be argued that without him there would be no social order as "without deviance and marginality there could be no order, classification or change" (Konrad, 1994, 143).

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN APPEARANCES

Indeterminate appearance is another of Anancy's salient features. Unlike the image of the Monkey, that of a spider does not immediately call forth the Signifyin(g) dimension of discourse. As Gates Jr. argues, Monkey's simian looks and talent for mimicry make him a perfect trope for Signifyin(g). The spider's physical appearance may make him an unlikely trope for the reversing processes involved in Signifyin(g). Yet, Anancy "comes across as a strange, disgraceful, unpleasant creature, *half human and animal*" (Colardelle, 1975, 150, my emphasis). Anancy is often described as a human being endowed with ill-formed arms, shoulders, knees and legs. He is either human, or spider, or both. In one Uncle Remus' story, Anancy is a half-woman, half-spider creature called Aunt Nancy. In the Bahamas, Bânansi is a trickster and hero, either boy, man or monkey. According to Louise Bennett, the Jamaican storyteller,

the way I learnt about Anancy, I knew Anancy as a child, and it was a *joy-y-y-y!* We *loved* to listen to the stories, we loved to hear about this little trickify man, you know, and one thing we knew, that this man was magic, and we could never be like him. You know — he is a magic man. He could spin a web and become a *spider* whenever he wanted to [laughter] [Interview with Louise Bennett, Gordon Town, Jamaica, September 15, 1978. Quoted in Dance, *Folklore by Contemporary Jamaicans*, 12].

Anancy does not content himself with a hybrid identity but dons various temporary disguises to further confuse other characters and/or

reach his objectives. In "Ananse is put in his place" (Ghana), he coaxes various animals into adopting disguises as he does in order to hide their physical faults and seduce young women. In "Pig an long-mout" (Jamaica), he dresses up as a poor ragged old man, a blind man, a poor tear-up old lady, a sore-footed boy and a little half-starving child, all in order to get food from a rich gentleman. In "Anancy an crab" (Jamaica), he dresses up as a girl to gain employment from an older woman. In "Dis Yah one ya Bal" (Jamaica), he turns upside down to get into a party for free by tricking the blind man who is checking entries. In "How Anancy went to fish country" (Jamaica), he dresses as a doctor to cure the blindness of Queen fish. The same disguise serves a more lowly pursuit in "Nancy gives a bath" (Nevis) when he induces sick monkeys to jump into his pot or in "The Bone Sweet" (Jamaica), when he convinces his wife that she must let her sick husband eat a whole hog (or a goat) by himself. In "Bird Cherry Island" (Southern United States, West Indies, Cape Verde islands), he uses feathers to fly like a bird and reach the island where he will gorge on cherries while in "Bone for a Stump" (Antigua), he turns into an ant to escape punishment for stealing food. In "Anancy and the king's daughter" (St. Vincent), he wins the king's daughter by turning himself into a cloud of smoke.

In other tales, Anancy uses disguises to ridicule or incriminate other characters. In "Anancy and Monkey Business" (Trinidad), Anancy decides to trick Monkey who is always strutting around flaunting his best clothes.⁹ Anancy gives Monkey a lovely jacket lined with stinging ants and asks him to perform a wide array of tasks such as jumping, rolling around, moaning etc... The other animals can't believe their eyes when they see Monkey obey. In "Le mariage de Coq" (French West Indies), he lends Coq his best clothes for his marriage but demands them back during the party, thereby exposing Coq's lack of proper clothing. In "Anancy and Monkey" (Jamaica), he is hired to watch over the white man's sheep (a position which implies both geographical and social inbetweenness as he hovers around the sheep and occupies a half-way position between the white man and the black population), takes advantage of his position to steal some sheep and then lures Monkey into wearing a sheep jacket which will incriminate him as the thief. In "Tiger's sheep skin suit" (Jamaica), he similarly escapes being convicted.

⁹ Like Anancy, Monkey can thus fill several roles: hero, villain or dupe as in this latter tale.

When disguises will not suffice, Anancy may pretend to be dead in order to reach his goals. In "Spider's funeral" (Sierra Leone) and "The return of Anancy" (Ghana), he feigns death respectively to obtain riches and keep a whole bean crop to himself while in "Mock funeral" (Bahamas: Andros Island), he does so to catch and kill thieves.

A poem by the Jamaican writer Andrew Salkey best illustrates Anancy's hybridity and propensity to wear disguises.

*Anancy is a spider;
Anancy is a man;
Anancy's West Indian
And West African.
Sometimes, he wears a waistcoat;
Sometimes, he carries a cane;
Sometimes, he sports a top hat;
Sometimes, he's just a plain,
Ordinary, black, hairy spider.*

*Anancy is vastly cunning,
Tremendously greedy,
Excessively charming,
Hopelessly dishonest,
Warmly loving,
Firmly confident,
Fiercely wild,
A fabulous character,
Completely out of our mind
And out of his, too.
Anancy is a master planner,
A great user
Of other people's plans;
He pockets everyone's food,
Shelter, land, money and more;
He achieves mountains of things,
Like stolen flour dumplings;
He deceives millions of people,
Even the man in the moon;
And he solves all the mysteries
On earth, in air, under sea.*

*And always,
 Anancy changes
 From a spider into a man
 And from a man into a spider
 And back again
 At the drop of a sleepy eyelid
 (Salkey, in Grays, 14).*

As Anancy spins tales of trickery out of his mind, he stands as the epitome of resistance to the given order, a creature out of "our" minds. Coming from the forested countries of West Africa, Anancy becomes a marooning trope who escapes plantation life for the wooded hinterland of folktales. Unlike the maroon who often achieves a heroic status through martyrdom, Anancy however escapes unscathed most attempts to stop his Signifyin(g) and spins "the thread of his personality into the warp and woof of the national life" (Cronise and Ward, 1969, 15) not only in the Caribbean but in the African diaspora.

HERO, VILLAIN AND DUPE

Indeterminacy manifests itself also in the various roles Anancy assumes in African and Afro-American folktales. Unlike in European tales where characters are ascribed a particular role and fulfill a set function, Anancy in the African and Afro-American folktales will be hero, villain and/or dupe, occasionally within the same story.¹⁰ When he assumes the role of hero, his heroic deeds are always performed through trickery and thievery. In "How Spider read the sky god's thoughts" (Ghana), Anancy spies upon the king to help his youngest son win a contest which will enable him to reign. In "Tiger in well" (San Andrés Island, Colombia), he saves Monkey from Tiger's grip by convincing Tiger that he must pray before eating. He will often escape punishment by tricking another character to bear the blame. In "Pots and Kins" (St. Kitts), Anancy steals a pot which produces food and lets Tookerman bear the blame. In "Anancy and Tiger" (Jamaica), he steals the tiger's fat and eats it before

¹⁰ If in "Anancy and Monkey Business" (Trinidad), Monkey is Anancy's dupe, in the African-American tale Gates Jr. uses as a base for his theory of the Signifyin(g) Monkey, Monkey prevails against Tiger and turns him into a fool while in "Anancy and Monkey" (Jamaica), he tricks Anancy and henceforth laughs at him.

having the monkeys incriminate themselves. In two Surinamese tales, Anancy burns a church or steals a watch and incriminates another animal.¹¹

Not only is his role as a hero questionable on account of the deviousness of his means, but when he does bring good to people, he often does so inadvertently or, even worse, by failing to reach his original selfish goal. Paulme concludes that one of the differences between the two great African tricksters Anancy and Hare is that the former is presented as the awkward neophyte whose tricks occasionally fail while Hare is the initiated or at least the good pupil who will succeed at first trial. In "Spider and the Calabash of Knowledge" (Ghana) and "Anancy and Common Sense" (Jamaica), Anancy's attempt to keep knowledge to himself by preserving it in a calabash is foiled when he breaks it and knowledge spreads through the world. In two other West African tales, his disobeying of a witch's magic fills the world with animals and his ignorance brings the hoe to men. In "Spider brings sorrel to people" (West Indies), Anancy finds the sorrel bush but is unaware of its potential use. The sorrel petals accidentally fall into boiling water, turning it into a delicious drink which Anancy sells at the market, not knowing yet whether or not the drink may be poisonous.

Anancy's original intent is never to benefit society as a whole. As Wadlington argues, the trickster embodies two antithetical experiences of man with the natural world, his society, and his own psyche: on the one hand, a force of treacherous disorder that outrages and disrupts, and on the other hand, an unanticipated, usually unintentional benevolence in which trickery is at the expense of inimical forces and for the benefit of mankind. Paulme thus concludes of her study of Ture, the Zande spider trickster (Central Africa), that the latter is

the benefactor to whom mankind is indebted for agriculture, for water for the plants, and for fire with which to cook them. A rebel but also a civilizing hero, Ture doubtlessly follows his natural penchant for disorder and opposition by stealing these essential gifts which the spirits would try to hold on to; he does not think of rendering services to men; *the whole point for him is in the trick thus played* [Paulme, Friendship, 71, my emphasis].

¹¹ For more information on the presence of Anancy in the Dutch West Indies and Surinam, see Art G. Broek, "Cuento popular: Over de Antiliaanse spinverhalen in Volkscultuur" *Tijdschrift voor Tradities en Tijdsverschijnselen*, jrg. 5, núm. 3, October 1988.

Were Anancy a 'true' hero displaying such qualities as honesty or courage, he would forfeit his indeterminacy to fit one role and thereby lose the very foundation of his identity. By doing good inadvertently or against his best wishes, he remains a creature of the limen.

Other tales such as the popular "Inside Cow's Belly"¹² illustrate Anancy's switch from the role of *hero-scam* to that of villain. In the tale, two animals go into the cow to eat fat or meat but must not touch the heart or another internal organ such as the liver. Once the taboo has been violated, the animal dies and either the animal who entered second or both trespassers are punished. What is striking in the variants of this tale is that Spider, or another trickster, can either be the one entering first, issuing the taboo and occasionally escaping unscathed (the hero) or the one entering second, breaking the taboo and being punished (the villain).

Perceived as a villain by those whose taboo he has broken, whose property he has infringed upon, Anancy remains a hero for the down-trodden, those who need to develop strategies of coping. As Barrett argues, "Regardless of his treachery and cunning, Anancy has those components which make him a folk-hero par excellence, for elusive and nimble of spirit and witty of tongue, he is representative of techniques of survival at their best" (1976, 35).¹³ Anancy's appeal among slaves, among black Americans who have suffered systematic discrimination, among the precarious micro-states whose economies are vulnerable to the vagaries of international capitalism, lies in his being the epitome

¹² Five African versions of the tale (two from Sierra Leone, one from Liberia, Ivory Coast and Ghana) and eight Caribbean ones (two from Puerto Rico; one from Jamaica; St. Thomas; Saint Eustatius; Nevis and Antigua, and Saint Martin) feature Anancy.

¹³ Several Jamaicans however argue to the contrary. According to Dance, "Anancy's rascality and deceit are bad for the national character" (Dance, *Stories in Jamaica*, 12) while a journalist writes in an article published in *The Gleaner*, a foremost Jamaican paper that: "The admiration of unscrupulous cunning is encouraged by Anancy stories and they express an unhealthy trait of character" (Jacobs: 3). In a study of Rastafarian beliefs, Forsythe argues that Anancy "symbolizes the 'devilish' youth power of eros which will do anything to find physical expression and outlet" (1983, 80) and sees "Anancism" as the root of many (if not all) evils in Jamaican society. Anancism explains why governments, especially the PNP party, are corrupt (222-223), explains why people resort to racketeering in times of economic hardship, why blacks don't do well in business as they remain small-scale hustlers, "Anansi capitalists", who can't graduate to bureaucratic or capitalist trickery (227), why Jamaica is living in the age of Babylon, an age out of which Rastafari must graduate to the age of Lionism (The lion replacing the spider as a totemic figure). Such an approach to the legacy of Anancy however fails to take into account that "The characters' traits of the trickster were not meant to become a life style" (Dramé, 1996, 250).

of survival which holds out the hope that anyone can transcend the limitations of his conditions.

In several tales, however, Anancy fails to reach his goal. His failing reminds listeners that he does not enjoy divine powers and immunity but remains a creature with human frailties. J. Roberts argues that this particular aspect of the trickster tales played an essential social role as it served to "remind enslaved Africans not only of the value of behaviors that they associated with the trickster but also of the consequences of acting like the dupe"(38). Anancy's "failure" may be due to his desire to be different from or to emulate another character, to revenge enacted by a former victim or to his inability to trick another trickster. In a West African tale, Anancy asks God for two extra legs to set him aside from the rest of the insect world. When his wish is granted, he is made to feel so ashamed of his new awkward appearance that he chooses to hide away. In "Wanto and the snout of Naabareka" (Gbaya region), Anancy wants a snout like a fish but can't eat, once given one, while in "The spider of Sara" (Chad), Anancy tries to get pregnant, inflates and bursts. Paulme argues that "one does not imitate with impunity, one must bow to the rules, know how to moderate one's desires" (Paulme, 1997, 71), a message of prime importance in a highly structured society. Such tales would carry a similar message in a plantation society where mimicry often led to social improvement at the expense of one's identity.

Anancy may also be the target of revenge on the part of a former victim. In the Ashanti tale "Anansi and his visitor"(Ghana), Anancy prevents Turtle from having her share of the food by asking him to go and wash his hands and eats all the food in Turtle's absence. When invited for dinner at Turtle's table located at the bottom of the river, he is asked to remove his jacket. No longer heavy enough to remain on the bottom of the river, he floats away from the table. In other cases, Anancy meets his match as another trickster turns his tricks against him. In "Nancy and honey-tree" (Antigua), Anancy is tricked by a magic tree which gives honey, but then glues the thief. He manages to set himself free, tricks other animals and eats them before being tricked by Monkey and turned into a spider. In "Anancy and Monkey" (Jamaica), he and his acolyte trick animals into their lair by fastening a rope around them until Monkey comes along and refuses to be pulled up. These tales serve to remind the audience that there are dangers involved in tricking but also paradoxically that Anancy continues Signifyin(g) despite the odds.

Occasionally, Anancy will not be both hero and dupe within the same

story but take on different roles in variants of the same plot. In "Spoils the dog" (Antigua), though both Dog and Anancy steal food, only Anancy gets beaten as he is riding on Dog's back. In "Anancy and the riding horse" (Africa, the Southern US States, Andros Islands, Barbados, the Virgin Islands, Trinidad, Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Antigua and St. Croix), Anancy promises young women that he will trick a fierce animal into letting him ride on his back. He manages to do so and rides triumphantly in front of them.¹⁴ In the St. Croix version, however, Anancy's companion, Tukerman, mounts Anancy and in the Antiguan version, Rabbit does so while in "Anancy is riding-horse" (Jamaica), Anancy is not riding the horse but is the riding-horse — the one being duped.

"Bird Cherry Island" (Southern US States, West Indies, Cape Verde Islands) offers another example of variants with role reversals. In one version of the tale, Anancy borrows feathers from birds to fly to an island where fruit-trees grow and eats all the fruit. Through stripped of his feathers by the angry birds, he manages to cross back to the mainland. In "The Gift of Flight" (variants found in Africa and the New World), Anancy, however, is unable to do so. In yet another version, he and an acolyte named Tacuma go to the island and gorge on fruit. Tacuma then asks Anancy for shelter for the night. He eats all of Anancy's eggs but counts one egg shell to a hundred to make him believe his eggs are still there. Anancy can thus assume a multitude of roles: the hero who successfully reaches the cherries, the villain who tricks the birds from their right share, and the dupe who is tricked by Tacuma. In one variant of a tale, Anancy rises to the heights of greatness, but in the very next he cannot avoid being caught and is punished for the same avarice or foolishness that motivated his previous success.

WHAT IS IN A NAME?

However important they may be, geographical liminality, multiple appearances and role reversals are but superficial manifestations of an indeterminacy which is grounded in language. Whether it be in the

¹⁴ Various versions of this story featuring Anancy as well as other tricksters can be found in Abrahams, *Afro-American Folktales*; Beckwith, *Jamaica Nansi Stories*; Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*; Parsons *Folk-Lore of the Antilles: French and English*; Harris, *Uncle Remus...*; Dorson, *Negro Tales from Pine Bluff*.

various names Anancy bears, the lisp which affects his speech patterns or his constant use of verbal trickery, language manifests itself as the ultimate Signifyin(g) tool with which Anancy subdues stronger forces.

When researching Anancy, one is confronted with the issue of naming the spider trickster. The existence of an array of names for the spider trickster explains why I have chosen to respect the titles given by researchers for the folktales mentioned but opted to refer to him under its most commonly accepted name Anancy for the sake of simplicity. His various names in African tales can be accounted for by the different languages spoken in the countries where he appears. His aliases range from Ture among the Zande, Djakôlê among the Bété, Kendebba among the Agni-Baoulé, Kakou Ananzè among the Agni, Kweku Ananse among the Akan, to Anansi, Ananse or Ananzè among the Ashanti.¹⁵ The multitude of spider tales among the Ashanti as well as the extensive slave trade from Ghana may explain why the names for the spider in Afro-American folktales bears such a striking resemblance to the names recorded among the Ashantis.¹⁶

Even though in most of the New World countries where Anancy may be found, English is spoken by a majority of the population, names still vary greatly. Anancy can be found in Nova Scotia as Nanacy, Nancy, Brer Nancy or Brother Nancy; in the Carolinas as Ann Nancy or Miss Nancy; in Jamaica as Hanansi, Anansi or Nansi; in Curaçao as Nanzi; in St. Martin as Ahnancy; in the Bahamas as Bánansi, Nansi, Boy Nasty or Gulumbanansi while in one Uncle Remus tale, he is a half-woman half-spider creature called Aunt Nancy. In a single story, Anancy may also be called Anansi, Nansi Buh Nansi, and Compé Anansi. He thus draws from the African but also the English or French languages — Anancy, Brother Nancy, Compé Anansi — to adapt to the language poken by storyteller and listeners. The same argument may be made regarding his accomplice who is sometimes portrayed as his companion, his wife or son and bears various names such as Tacoma, Tacomah, Tukoma, Tukuma, Tookerman, Tookerman, Terycooma... Whereas a sin-

¹⁵ The Ashanti in Ghana are credited with a particularly diverse and extensive set of trickster's tales featuring the spider, some of which have been analysed by Pelton.

¹⁶ Even the origin of the term "Brer" which often antecedes the name of the Anancy is open to conjecture. In "The Misinterpretations of Brer Anansi", Roberts argues that the word is not of Afro-American but of English origin as the pronunciation suggested by the spelling "brer" is inconsistent with the phonology of Black or West Indian English (Roberts, 1989, 101).

gle name would have been an indication of a set identity, the multiplicity of names points to the Anancy's (and Tacoma's) ability to don any identity which befits him.

LIES AND SECRET WORDS

In most tales, Anancy manipulates language to his benefit simply by lying to humans or animals. In "Spider the Swindler" (Ghana), he coaxes a crocodile into telling him what his weakest spot is and uses the information to kill him. In "Spider the artist" (Ghana), he offers to paint each animal's tongue and while they get weaker waiting for the design to dry, he eats them up. In various stories, Anancy however displays a reversed ability to [mis]use language as he reveals the secret names Gods and Kings try to keep from humans. In the Ashanti tale "How Spider read the sky god's thoughts" (Ghana), Anancy disguises himself as a bird and then flies within ear shot of the sky god to discover which is the name for the yam the god is thinking of. The issue is not merely to identify the yam, but to accurately name it.¹⁷ Anancy then shares the information with the youngest son of the god who names the yam and succeeds his father. In "Outwitting to learn a name" (Antigua), Brer Nancy will only share his yam with his family if they can name it. In "Yung-kyum-pyung" (Jamaica), Anancy has to find the names for the king's three daughters, a feat which enables him to marry the youngest while in "Anancy and Lizard" (Jamaica), Anancy guesses the secret name of the king's daughter and prevents Lizard from revealing his trick by making him eat hot porridge (which is why Lizard is constantly moving his head up and down in pain).

Such tales remain but a lesser clue to Anancy's Signifyin(g) powers. Mitchell-Kernan argues that labeling a particular utterance Signifyin(g) draws attention to its metaleptic content as it involves "the recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function, which is potentially obscured by the surface content or function" (1973, 314). Aware of the metaleptic nature of language, Anancy is able to turn the apparently least

¹⁷ The issue at stake here, naming the yam, goes well beyond the folktale where it occurs. The analogy between "yam", a staple diet in many African countries and in the West Indies and "I am" has spurred Kimberley W. Benston to write an article entitled "I yam what I am: the topos of (un) naming in Afro-American literature" where she explores the issue of "calling one out of his name".

deceptive words, numbers, into deadly weapons. In "The Most Powerful Name" (Nigeria), Anancy uses the analogy between the words for God and the number six to kill and eat various animals. Tricked into saying "six", each animal immediately dies for having dared utter God's name. In "Anancy and the yam hills" (Jamaica), Anancy makes five yam hills and asks various animals to count them. Each one falls dead as five is the name of the Queen which no one may say without dying. Whole sentences can serve the same purpose as numbers and induce the demise of various characters as in "The Yam Farm and the Problem Tongue" (Ghana) where Anancy kills some farmers to steal their yams, or in "The Stone with Whiskers" (Sierra Leone), "The Noble Adowa" (Ghana), "Spider and Rat" (Togo), where he kills some animals to eat them.

Spinning a Signifyin(g) discourse is however an art to be performed with the utmost care. Anancy must at times fall for his own verbal trap for otherwise, he would become the undisputed God of language and stop being a trickster. Tales abound in which Anancy forgets the magic word or utters the deadly number or sentence himself. In "Spider, the wild boards and the old woman" (Agni region), Anancy steals a magic knife which cuts all his enemies' heads, but does not know how to stop it and is beheaded.¹⁸ In "Spider and Turtledove" (Agni region), Turtledove weaves a flying basket and uses it to collect food. Anancy does the same, but forgets the words to make it stop flying.¹⁹ In "The Enchanted Loom" (Ghana), Anancy is so eager to get cloth that he forgets the words for stopping the magic loom and is spun away to Europe. In "Spider propels animals from a tree" (Togo) or "Spider and Rat" (Togo), Anancy falls for his own trap as he is made to pronounce the number "seven"²⁰ and dies. Likewise, in "Anancy and the yam hills" (Jamaica), Anancy loses his patience with Guinea fowl which will not count to five and

¹⁸ The listener is however aware that death only concludes a particular variant of a tale. Storytellers will "resurrect" Anancy to keep telling his stories.

¹⁹ In "Full pot full" (St. Croix), Anancy's wife inadvertently takes away the magical powers of a pot which provides food when she washes it.

²⁰ Spider's selfishness may also entice others to try and use the same tricks for their own benefit, usually with terrible consequences. In "Spider learns to listen" (Ghana), Anancy keeps a magic food dish to himself and asks it to provide him with large amounts of food while his family starves. His sons steal the dish and use it to obtain food before taking the magic away from it. Anancy then punishes them by asking a magic whip to beat. Unable to stop the whip, the sons are either made to flee or beaten to death. Variants of the same tale may be found in Surinam and Jamaica.

becomes the dupe as he says the dreaded word. In a variant of the same tale called "Why people now eat rabbit" (Jamaica), roles are, however, reversed as Rabbit plays the figure game on animals (ten is the magic number) until Anancy comes along and tricks him. In "Wheeler" (Jamaica), "Anancy and honey tree" (Antigua), "Wheel me back, Mr. Wheeler" (Dominica), "Caught in his own trap" (St. Croix), Anancy finds a stump by the river side and discovers an object inside which, when prompted by the right sentence, will sling you over great distances. He survives the ordeal and tricks other animals before being tricked.²¹ Anancy's use of discourse in the aforementioned tales point to the non-referential nature of language, its metaleptic content which may harm, or even kill, the uninitiated or forgetful. Because they read language at surface level without any consideration for double-entendres, farmers and animals fall prey to Anancy. Because he forgets the palimpsestic layer of meaning, Anancy falls prey to his own discourse.

Two other Anancy tales point to a somewhat different use of Signifyin(g). Taking advantage of his opponent's idiosyncracies, Anancy is able to make him fall into a trap which in effect was just waiting to be set. In Anancy "Anancy and Hate-to-be-contradicted" (Ghana), Anancy manages to have the latter contradict himself, and then punishes him by cutting him up into pieces. In "Akwasi-the-jealous-one" (Ghana), Anancy tricks the latter in letting him sleep with his wife, Aso, by telling him his name is "Rise up and make love to Aso". When called by his supposed name, Anancy is happy to oblige his host.

ANANCY TODAY

Jonas notes that the eagerness of university students to research Anancy tales is at marked variance with the reality that these are slowly disappearing. Gates likewise points out that "few black adults can recite an entire Monkey tale" (1988, 76). Anancy however survives in the Signifyin(g) discourses of the African diaspora through various art forms such as traditional and modern folktales, music or literature. He still inspires

²¹ The same story occurs in Guadeloupe with Hare playing the role of the trickster tricked in "Lapin fait un s'attwape" and "C'est moin, voca, vouqué moin" (Guadeloupe). In the Jamaican variant "Fling-a-mile", Anancy puts his hand into a hole, is flung away, tricks other animals before being tricked by Monkey.

contemporary storytellers such as Bernard Dadié in West Africa and Paul Keens-Douglas in the Caribbean as well as folktale writers such as Andrew Salkey from Jamaica. All spin stories which feature Anancy up to his traditional tricks, living on thresholds, adopting various disguises, Signifyin(g) his way through life. In "Anancy beat pan" (Trinidad), Paul Keens-Douglas demonstrates Anancy's ability to adapt to present cultural conditions in Trinidad as Anancy applies his trickery to acquire a steel-pan for free and enter a steel-pan contest. Andrew Salkey has "made his Anancy into a physical and metaphorical spider man deeply involved in the continuing struggles throughout the Third World" (back page, *Anancy's Score*). In *Anancy's Score*, he continues the tradition of spider tales with contemporary topics in stories such as "Vietnam Anancy and the black tulip" or "Anancy, the atomic horse".

Anancy also spins his way into poetry, pantomime and theater. Edward Brathwaite (Barbados) has incorporated him in several of his poems in *Islands*; Sylvia Wynter (Jamaica) has written a pantomime entitled *Rockstone Anancy* while Stafford Harrison (Jamaica) has completed a play called *Anansi and Unsung Heroes out West* performed in Ward Theater, Kingston in October 1978. Perhaps more importantly, Anancy continues weaving his way into the fabric of Afro-American life through children's books. The poem by Salkey quoted in full appeared in an anthology for primary school children, while Velma Pollard edited a collection of Caribbean folktales, legends and poems for juniors under the title *Anansesem* and P. Duhgam published a West Indian coloring and vocabulary book called *Island Hopping with Anancy*. In *Island Hopping*, Anancy is the main character, a wanderer with no fixed abode pictured on each page as hiding in the bushes, in the trees or behind a stump. He goes island hopping to introduce various animals to be found around the Caribbean under the different names they bear. Anancy's presence in children's publications point to his enduring presence in the Afro-American world and the likelihood that he will endure for generations to come.

A POETICS OF ANANCISM

Signifyin(g) other texts, whether they be the Other's or each other's, Afro-American authors not only spin new narrative strategies but, to use Gates Jr. words, through their punning and troping, embody the ambi-

guities of language. Music and literature offer particularly fertile grounds for the exploration of Signifyin(g) processes. Gates outlined the Signifyin(g) nature of jazz (1988, 69). Likewise, reggae, calypso and zouk all illustrate Signifyin(g) processes at play. Bob Marley, Sparrow and Kassav all use not only words but musical scripts to reread the Other's texts, from religious hymns to traditional songs. Even the creation of an instrument in itself such as the steel pan may be perceived as a Signifyin(g) process. Born of the used American oil drums in Trinidad and Tobago, its origins and current uses as accompaniment for calypsos both point to its creators' and users' ability to turn the Other's propensity to elicit riches from Caribbean soils and the Other's tongue into powerful Signifyin(g) modes of discourse.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates Jr. traced a Signifyin(g) tradition back to Esu-Elegbara, the double-faced Ashanti god of indeterminacy and offered various Signifyin(g) readings of African-American literary texts ranging from slave narratives to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. A similar poetics of Anancism emerges from reading Anancy tales. Borrowing from Bakhtin, one could argue that Anancy stands for "dialogized heteroglossia", a "linguistic homelessness" that results in "a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world" (Bakhtin, 1981, 366). He spins a mythohistorical web of trickery, "a place and space of hybridity that creates, by its very presence in the world (which is often invisible, unseen, a gossamer of the margins) new combinations and juxtapositions" (Baker, vii) to read discourses within Africa and the whole African diaspora.

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