Deceit, Defiance, and Delight: Ossie Davis, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Janelle Monae as

Modem Black Tricksters

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Introduction

If one asked the average person in the United States to name a trickster, a few common answers might be Bugs Bunny (a familiar cartoon rabbit), Loki (a Norse god and the subject of a popular series streaming on Disney+), or The Joker (a villain from the *Batman* comics). Most people can identify a trickster without knowing an exact definition. A student of literature, mythology, or folklore might also name Puck (from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Coyote (from Native American folklore), or Anansi (from the folklore of the African diaspora). What do these characters have in common? They are cunning instigators of havoc, underdogs in their world, unwilling to accept their positions in the face of authority. They use their wits to achieve goals of power, success, survival, or sometimes just amusement.

Their stories compose a critical category in the oral traditions of our ancestors. A trickster might be a minor or major character in a story. When the trickster is a significant character or the story's protagonist, we are talking about a Trickster Tale. The Trickster Tale is a well-noted motif in cultural anthropology. Such tales are familiar in folklore, literature, and other art forms in American culture, which is not unique in this way. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote, "The phantom of the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages" (207). Tricksters are not exclusive to either American or Western culture. The Trickster archetype has existed in mythology and folktales throughout the centuries and across the globe. From our most ancient mythologies, we have Eshu, of the Yoruba people

of Nigeria (who used deceit to steal yams from the High God Ifa), Hermes, a Greek god (who stole his brother Apollo's cattle), and Kali, the dual-natured Hindu goddess who represents both death and rebirth. We also have modern tricksters found in American daily life, like the Trix cereal's rabbit.

Jung and other analyzers of trickster tales, including anthropologists like Zora Neale Hurston and Paul Radin, note that, despite their universality, tricksters are unique to their specific culture. This thesis examines Black American tricksters and trickster tales, exploring how one may find tricksters embedded in Black art and Black lives. Black folklore and literature are full of trickster characters unique to the African diaspora's cultures. Much scholarly exploration of Black, African, or African American tricksters focuses on traditional legends and folktales, but there is no dearth of modern Black trickster tales in various artistic formats.

This thesis proposes that tricksters in Black culture do not simply exist on a page. Beyond the idea of a trickster tale as an art form, some Black people exemplify the trickster traits in their lives. Some of these are cultural icons and models of success in Black culture, including Black artists.

Art is often said to imitate life. A closer look at a few Black artists will demonstrate how trickery may infuse Black cultural icons' art and lives. As members of a marginalized minority in the United States, Black artists have more obstacles to overcome to reach fame and success. By embracing the ways of the tricksters, these Black artists demonstrate that the deceit, defiance, and delight

surrounding the Trickster are forceful tools for Black people to survive in today's world and thrive.

It is necessary to identify the attributes of tricksters and trickster tales to understand the use of trickery. These attributes are evident in mythological and modern-day stories, though not all tricksters display every possible trait. However, some traits are universal. Identifying these traits is necessary for any discussion of tricksters. Chapter One: The Antihero Hero explores the characteristics of tricksters and trickster tales as described by psychologists, anthropologists, and folklorists. This thesis will provide examples of fictional characters demonstrating these traits.

Next, the thesis explores whether all characters who use tricks fit the definition of a trickster. In order to distinguish the true tricksters, we need to understand more about trickster tales. For this thesis, trickster tales are stories featuring the trickster, not just as a plot device to test or thwart a heroic protagonist but also as stories where the tricksters are the protagonists. Finally, Chapter One: The Antihero Hero, narrows the list of possible trickster traits to focus on a few that are particularly culturally relevant in our continued exploration of Black tricksters.

Chapter Two: Healing and Resistance discusses why these traits are particularly relevant to Black culture in the United States. Black trickster tales have existed throughout the history of Black people in the Americas, including the exploits of Brer Rabbit, Anansi the Spider, High John de Conqueror, the

"enslaved person," John of the John and the Old Master folktales, and Staggerlee. Though many think of Black tricksters as belonging to another century, they still exist in modern Black culture. Literary tricksters appear in works of modern fiction, such as the works of Toni Morrison, Walter Mosley, and Octavia Butler. Black tricksters exist in film, including those of the Blaxploitation genre, and in music, like gangsta rap. From their birth in the oral tradition to written form and into today's digital age, we find characters who inherited the legacy of the Black Trickster, defying the racial constraints of the white supremacy culture that is the dominant ethos of the United States.

Much research and critique of traditional African diaspora's mythological or folkloric tricksters exist, like the spider Anansi and Brer Rabbit. However, there is also a growing body of writing about modern tricksters in Black art. More examination of trickster motifs in other art forms is needed. For example, film is an art form where Black tricksters thrive. Look no further than Eddie Griffith's Undercover Brother, Pam Grier's Jackie Brown, and even Candyman for fictional modern-day Black tricksters in film. Looking closely, one can see that no lack of Black tricksters create havoc against the status quo. Chapter Two identifies Black tricksters in multiple art forms while illustrating that trickster tales operate within the culture of oppressed people distinctly: as entertainment, but also as a bringer of hope and lessons on survival and thriving.

Most research on Black tricksters looks to the world of fiction. However, some Black artists personify the Trickster not just in their art but in their very

lives. Expanding our thinking about tricksters beyond mythological and fictional characters into the real lives of Black cultural icons further illustrates that not only are tricksters still needed in the Black culture, but they are still present, serving an essential purpose in Black liberation. These Black icons embrace trickster characteristics to survive and thrive in a world where the dominance of a white supremacy culture has the odds stacked against them.

Three artists who may not commonly come to mind when thinking about tricksters are the actor/playwright/activist Ossie Davis and singers/actors/authors Sammy Davis, Jr., and Janelle Monáe. These three artists are the specific examples probed in this thesis. Artists are good examples not because they are the only Black icons whose lives model trickery but because these artists exhibit the traits of the trickster in their lives and art.

Chapter Three focuses on Ossie Davis, best known to the larger world as an actor on stage and screen. Throughout his long career, he accepted the roles of distinguished and honorable men, refusing to play more stereotypically Black roles. He is known for acting alongside his wife, Ruby Dee. It may be less common knowledge that Davis was also a director and playwright, bringing forth Black characters in these arenas that display their full humanity – characters who, though respectable, often used the tools of a trickster to survive and thrive. This mild-mannered actor was also a forceful civil rights activist in real life. Behind his soft smile lay an iron will and a sharp intellect: tools used to plot how he could use his craft to show Black Americans' beauty, pride, and dignity with

humor and pathos and demand that their humanity be recognized. His life is the first, but not the only, example in this thesis of managing the tricky landscape of being a black artist with a social conscience.

Sammy Davis, Jr. and Janelle Monáe are more controversial artists who inhabit the role of the trickster. Sammy Davis, Jr. is the subject of Chapter Four. Despite his acting, singing, and dancing skills, Sammy frequently appeared as The Fool or the dupe – a familiar archetype often associated with The Trickster. This aspect of the characters he inhabited contributed to many in the Black community labeling him as an Uncle Tom or an assimilationist "wanna-be." The critiques of his personal life, especially his role in the Rat Pack, his marriage to white Swedish actress May Britt, and his closeness to Richard Nixon overshadowed his artistic accomplishments. Sammy's body of work, discarded by many for decades, has more recently been studied in a new light and acknowledged for forging a path for Black artists coming after him. His dramatic acting roles and biographies present us with a multi-faceted artist using his blessed gifts to try to bless the world while normalizing the existence of Black entertainers in a time when the boundaries of acceptability were strict and appeared impossible to break.

Janelle Monáe, the artist discussed in Chapter Five, broke into the music scene in 2007. In the 17 years since, they have captured attention with their music, videos, movies, and bold fashion. Janelle stands out due to her outspokenly queer identity, boundary-pushing fashion, and other-worldly

elements of their videos and onstage performances. A gender-bending artist with a flair for dystopian storytelling who makes music spanning multiple genres, Janelle is never the same twice. Even before acting in film, Janelle created alter egos to accompany the musical journeys they invite us on, always leading us to ask questions about identity, oppression, and the struggle for freedom. Their onscreen characters are a mix of tricksters inhabiting worlds from the past, present, and future. As a vocal, non-binary, pansexual person, Janelle challenges a polarized world, moving beyond double consciousness to their self-proclaimed "I am everything," inspiring today's young people of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities by creating universes of possibilities that defy all-too-easy dichotomy.

The Conclusion summarizes the examination of the art and lives of these three artists—using art analysis, interviews, biographies, and autobiographies, as well as public commentary on the impact of their art and their significance to the Black community—and how they demonstrate artists embodying characteristics of Black tricksters.

Chapter 1: The Antihero Hero

Every story is a little bit of a trick.

-Joseph R. Lee, *This Jungian Life*, "Trickster"

Trickster tales hold a formidable place in the pantheon of folklore due to their ubiquitous presence in pre-literate cultures across the globe. Almost any collection of folktales will include stories featuring tricksters. These stories were an essential part of the oral traditions of these early cultures. Anthropologists and storytellers have documented this folklore extensively. We tell, read, and watch the tales of our ancestor's tricksters: thanks to Joel Chandler Harris, children's picture books, and Disney, Brer Rabbit and Jack in the Beanstalk are still familiar to children and adults today.

Stories that feature tricksters as the protagonists or main characters are Trickster tales. In a typical Trickster tale, the protagonist has a need or desire but is disadvantaged and unable to meet it because an obstacle prevents them from achieving their goal. The obstacle is formidable: it may take physical form as a character with more societal power and physical might, or it may be that rules, laws, or social mores make achieving the trickster's goal seem impossible. Tricksters must use their wits to win what they desire. Sometimes they win, and sometimes they lose. Furthermore, though the trickster's desires may be questionable – indecorous, even illicit – we cheer on their attempt, maybe

secretly, despite our more public self decrying their antics and expecting them to fail.

The most important part of a Trickster tale is the trickster itself. How can we recognize a trickster? Psychologists such as X write about the "trickster archetype." Folklorists such as Richard M. Dorson, author of *American Negro Folktales*, might speak of the "trickster hero," and anthropologists discuss the "trickster motif." The term "trickster" was first popularized in the academic world in connection with the study of Native American mythology in Paul Radin's book *The Trickster* in 1955 (Hynes and Doty 2). However, since then, the telltale signs of the Trickster have been connected to mythical and historical characters dating back to antiquity.

Dr. Emily Z. Marshall writes in "Harlem Tricksters: Cheating the Cycle of Trauma in the Fiction of Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, and Nella Larsen" that tricksters are "symbols of chaos and freedom... expressions of the innate human desire to thwart societal rules and overturn oppressive regimes" (*Harlem Tricksters 21*). Dr. Esther Clinton, a scholar of popular culture, wrote, "The term trickster…refers to more than simply a deceptive character. The trickster is destroyer or creator, hero or villain." Clinton also emphasizes the "duality of character" of the trickster (472). A definition that delves deeper into the psychology of the Trickster appears in *Encyclopedia Britannica's* entry on the Trickster tale: "…a protagonist (often an anthropomorphized animal) who has magical powers and is characterized as a compendium of opposites.

Simultaneously an omniscient creator and an innocent fool, a malicious destroyer and a childlike prankster, the trickster-hero serves as a sort of folkloric scapegoat onto which are projected the fears, failures, and unattained ideals of the source culture." With the near universality of this character, it should come as no surprise that a myriad of traits are associated with it. Nor should it be a wonder that there is no universal agreement on the traits of tricksters. William Hynes, in his essay in the book *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, writes of six ubiquitous traits. He writes that a trickster is a "fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality; deceiver/trick player; shapeshifter; situation invertor; messenger/imitator of the gods; and, sacred/lewd bricoleur" (Hynes and Doty 34).

Other authors identify fewer traits than Hynes, and many folklorists and anthropologists who write about tricksters identify more. The traits frequently associated with the Trickster include (but are not limited to) a dual nature of creator/destroyer, slyness, deceptiveness, prankishness, defiance of social conventions, foolishness, shapeshifting, hedonistic goals, a love of chaos and disorder, creativity, and revolutionary inspiration. One can easily identify tricksters from our shared cultural experience that exemplify these traits. Think of Coyote of Native American folklore (creator/destroyer), Brer Rabbit (slyness), The Cat in the Hat (deceptiveness), Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (prankishness), *The Odyssey's* Circe (defiance of social conventions), Wile E. Coyote (foolishness), *Alice in Wonderland's* Cheshire Cat (shapeshifting), Loki

of Norse mythology (a lover of chaos/disorder), Scheherazade (creativity), and Prometheus (revolutionary inspiration).

With such an abundance of traits, it can prove challenging to state definitively whether a character is a trickster. Some characters in a story might play a trick to obtain a goal but otherwise display few trickster traits. Characters frequently display trickery in stories as surprises, and unforeseen turns of events are helpful to drive any plot, including such typical "twists" as the resolution of an Agatha Christie mystery or Gretel pushing the witch into the oven in the Grimms' fairy tale. Turning conventions on their heads or topsy-turviness is commonly used in satire (think of the musicals of Gilbert and Sullivan), and humor comes from characters enmeshed in a disorderly world (think of the antics of Pseudolus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*). These plot devices may or may not result from a trickster's action. Most people would not declare Gretel a trickster, but Pseudolus fits the bill nicely. Screenwriter Maureen Sullivan, in her blog, *Maurvelous Life*, suggests that Lucy Ricardo, the wacky wife in *I Love Lucy*, is a trickster in that she pushes the boundaries of expectations of a 1950s housewife. Is the comedy of Lucille Ball showing her audience that constraints on the women of her day reflect a common devaluing of women? This devaluing undercuts the protective glorification of the "woman-on-the-pedestal" society likes to create. Is Lucy Ricardo's ambition not simply humorous but an act of resistance? The very fact

that it is so difficult to find total agreement on the traits of a trickster is in itself reflective of the trickster's “shapeshifting” nature.

Some anthropologists suggest creating a matrix to score various tricksters (Hynes 34). This lack of clear and universally accepted traits underscores the multifaceted complexity of the Trickster. However, such "either/or thinking" is not always beneficial. When looking at tricksters, it might be best to take a "both/and" approach. Ultimately, whether a particular character is fully Trickster or only one-quarter a Trickster may not matter. As Maureen Sullivan might argue, the function that a trickster serves is ultimately more important. Though the Trickster seems like an unlikely protagonist to teach us about life, they often function as a moral instructor. This thesis will focus on only a few tricksters – not endeavoring to illustrate every trait mentioned earlier but focusing more on illustrating how tricksters function in the Black culture.

The Trickster might seem despicable as a protagonist; consequently, it may not initially seem like an inspirational or aspirational figure. Society disproves most traits associated with the Trickster. However, that does not mean one cannot identify with the Trickster in some way. Though the Trickster seems like an unlikely protagonist to teach us about life, it has meant a great deal to its audiences. Psychologist Carl Jung, writing “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,” in response to Paul Radin’s *The Trickster*, labeled it a generally well-loved archetype because it represents the "shadow" side of a dual human nature. In Jungian psychology, the "shadow" represents the suppressed part of

human nature, where forbidden desires and impulses reside. It is also the home to the part of us that resists playing by society's rules. Many long to challenge, question, or break free from society's moral and ethical dictates. Cheering on the Trickster gives one a safe, vicarious thrill. However, these tales can also be instructive. This is essential to remember as one considers how Trickster tales function in a culture.

Trickster tales are often humorous, but they have serious sides. While regaling us with these colorful characters' antics, Trickster tales also teach us about the larger culture. By witnessing the unacceptable, the audience understands what is acceptable and learns to bend the world to meet its needs despite the odds. Trickster tales lay clear the boundaries in our society: boundaries around what we should and should not desire, boundaries around how we should and should not behave, and boundaries around relationships. In any society, there are consequences to breaking these boundaries, and trickster tales illustrate these consequences. What we choose to do with that information is up to us.

Writing about the Trickster tales of Native Americans and their endurance over the centuries, Jung said, "Now if the [trickster] myth were nothing but an historical remnant, one would have to ask why it has not long since vanished into the great rubbish heap of the past, and why it continues to make its influence felt on the highest levels of civilization…" (Jung 201). Tricker tales persist

because they are instructive tools for thriving in a world not conducive to survival.

Storytelling has never been simply an enjoyable pastime. The stories told by the ancient cave paintings of early humans in Sulawesi, Indonesia, and other sites indicate that storytelling may be the oldest form of human communication (Tjandra par. 1). Storytelling has always been (and continues to be) an essential tool for instruction, including ethical and moral instruction. We absorb and remember the stories we hear the most. Think of toddlers pretending to read a book while reciting elements of their favorite bedtime story. Stories are more than pure entertainment. They are, in fact, a crucial part of the blueprint used to build our lives. Our brains house stories in the hippocampus, the same section of the brain that holds memories (Fell par.. 11). The hippocampus is crucial in human decision-making (Attaallah et al.). If memories stored in the hippocampus help us make decisions, then stories housed there may also do so.

Trickster tales offer instruction on society's mores, values, and dictates by their very flaunting of them. A protagonist who not only refuses to follow the instructions but actively seeks the means to thwart them can inspire the listener, hoping to escape society’s systems of oppression and powerlessness. Take Jack and the Beanstalk as an example. As a fairy tale, it may be entertaining. However, most fairy tales contain a lesson. One could suggest this analysis of Jack and the Beanstalk: Jack and his mother are economically disadvantaged. Jack encounters The Giant. The Giant is an evil creature that eats people. He is

also rich; instead of using his wealth, he hoards it. Jack uses his ingenuity to do something society frowns upon: Jack steals from The Giant to provide for his family. The fairy tale makes the antagonist unlikeable, making the theft more readily accepted. If we use this analysis, Jack and the Beanstalk denounces the class system, where some have more resources than they could ever possibly use while others starve. The story supports the idea that Jack deserves the stolen riches not only because his family is poor but because he is smart and sly enough to obtain them.

If stories contribute to the blueprint of our lives, Trickster tales provide important instruction for marginalized people on how to thrive in a society not built for their survival. Perhaps this is one reason that Trickster tales are particularly prevalent in the cultures of the African diaspora, Native Americans, and Asia – cultures of peoples who have experienced Empire and oppression by the Western, Euro-centric world.

One can find many expository papers on fictional tricksters. Much less research exists on the advantages that trickster-like traits might convey in the real world. Nevertheless, as psychologists like to suggest, archetypes are a way to explain human behavior. If one takes the line of reasoning one step further than accepting Trickster tales as simple blueprints, there must be people who have embraced the ways of the Trickster in real life to survive and thrive. Furthermore, artists who use trickster motifs in their art might be particularly inclined to incorporate the traits of the Trickster in how they relate to the world.

Moreover, if that world is predominantly a hostile place, the ways of the Trickster might be precious tools for living, encouraging human flourishing.

Tricksters use many tools. Given the limited scope of this thesis, focusing on a small number of traits will be helpful. There are examples of Black Tricksters that exhibit all the previously named traits. However, in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, four traits, in particular, are explored: defiance of social conventions, assumed and unconscious foolishness, deceit or concealment of the truth, and literal or metaphorical shapeshifting and the ways these traits show up in fictional and real-life Black Americans. Defying or simply ignoring social conventions might be the most apparent Trickster trait marginalized people embrace. One can anticipate that many of the cultural norms of marginalized people differ from those of the dominant society. In some ways, then, the very existence of a Black culture defies social conventions. What distinguishes the Black Trickster is embracing this trait and using it for their own gain. s they are deliberately foolish, and other times just are, for example.

Looking at the earliest Black Tricksters, such as Anansi and the enslaved man John, foolishness, both assumed and unconscious, abounds. That these tricksters desire and strive for a lifestyle that is virtually impossible for them to achieve would lead to most people labelling them fools. Many trickster tales achieve much of their humor through the foolish antics of a trickster who we know will be thwarted in the end. This does not stop us from admiring their perseverance and ability to hope for a different outcome. Perseverance and hope

are necessary when one is trying to change the world. The fight for equity often starts with a dream of equality, which seems simple foolishness at the moment but can seem prescient and inspiring later.

Deceit can take multiple forms, from outright lying to a simple exaggeration. It is the shell game on the street corner where the dexterity of the con man befuddles our senses and confuses reality. Concealing or distorting information and physically hiding something or someone is a form of deceit. The Trickster knows how to manipulate their world, as well as themselves.

Social and literal shapeshifting is a highly prized talent possessed by some tricksters as it is rare yet useful for many situations. It can help tricksters appear more powerful than they are, as someone less threatening, or hide them in plain sight. Shapeshifting tricksters with supernatural powers may change their appearance significantly, including gender or age. More commonly found in Trickster tales are Blacks Tricksters who use disguise as a tool for deception. Disguise is another way to shapeshift temporarily. It can raise or lower one's social status. Shapeshifting can be encouraged, prized, and rewarded when used for entertainment. Audiences love a bit of magic.

Though the following chapters will focus on these three traits, some tricksters might specialize in one, while others might utilize all three. Also, tricksters may exhibit one primary trait while possessing other traits. Even looking at a subset of tricksters – like Black Tricksters – not only will the traits of

tricksters vary, but how they use them will also. There is no one way to be a Trickster.

CHAPTER TWO: Healing and Resistance

> The radio was shut off, and all we could hear was the melodic sound of a storyteller's voice. I was especially delighted when the story was a slickster trickster tale about some wily character who used his wits to outsmart his opponents. I like to think of each of these slicksters as a cross between a Mississippi bluesman and Brer Rabbit, though there were a few women as well. And whether it was someone fast – or slow – talking, a well-dressed city slicker or an innocent-looking country bumpkin, all were gifted with a silver tongue tarnished by an oily reputation. No matter how bad these characters seemed, however, they managed to charm their victims and disarm their critics with just enough humor to take the edge off their unscrupulousness. (McKissack xi)

From the ineffectual Wile E. Coyote to *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch* to "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," Tricksters abound in American culture. Artists use stories about them to amuse us, but the same stories can also teach us. Indigenous author Paula Gunn Allen writes about the instructive function of stories in *The Sacred Hoop*:

> My mother told me stories all the time... And in all of those stories, she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be,

> whom I came from, and who would follow me... That's what she said and what she showed me in the things she did and the way she lives. (Gunn 46)

Indigenous, Black, and People of Color (BIPOC) people in the United States live in a world where the dominant culture often does not reflect their values, history, and lived experiences. They can feel as if the world is against them and that their survival is at constant risk in a system not created for them. Tricksters excel at creating conditions to enhance their own chance of survival in a world not suited to them, a trait that might explain BIPOC's fondness for the tales and their preponderance in BIPOC cultures.

Black trickster tales hold all the qualities of a traditional trickster tale: the disadvantaged main character has a conflict with an advantaged antagonist; the trickster cannot survive the conflict through conventional means, so they devise a cunning plan; the plan usually involves deceit, possibly through disguise, often playing upon the greed of the antagonist or their need to keep the trickster disadvantaged; the plan frequently defies dominant cultural expectations; the plan may or may not be successful. Within these tales, one can find Black tricksters with many traits mentioned in Chapter One. In this case, what makes the tricksters and their tales special is their role in the culture of an oppressed people.

Emily Zobel Marshall, a postcolonial literature scholar who writes about Black tricksters in the Americas, writes:

> Moving beyond the work of Western theorists…. I argue that trickster narratives can offer a release from both personal and historical traumas, as a liminal figure who can cross social and cultural boundaries, the trickster is a medium for transcending the trauma of racism and prejudice. …the trickster offers sufferers of colonial and postcolonial traumas a way to cheat or trick the cyclical, recurring nature of trauma and become a vehicle for healing and resistance. (Marshall 13)

Black trickster tales are often messages of inspiration and blueprints for resistance, cunningly enveloped within entertainment. Trickster tales function in this way not just in Black culture but in the cultures of BIPOC people in the United States because the triumph of the underdog is a particularly personal message for all marginalized people.

One hundred and sixty-one years after Emancipation, constitutional freedom did not bring freedom and justice for all. For many Black Americans, The American Dream is just that-- a dream. In a multitude of indicators of well-being and success, there exists a significant gap between the average achievements of Black Americans and those of non-Black Americans. A quick look at a few statistics illustrates that Black Americans still struggle to enjoy the fruits of the wealthiest nation on earth. According to the Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finances (2023), the median household wealth of a black family in

2022 was $45,000, while the median wealth of a white household was $285,000.[1] Black household wealth is lower than any other racial or ethnic group. Earning a college degree increases the chances of earning higher wages. However, in 2019, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) found that black students entering a four-year college have a 40% graduation rate compared to 74% for Asian students, 64% for white students, and 54% for Hispanic students. Black Americans, as a group, struggle to achieve success in American institutions. One institution where Black Americans are overrepresented is the criminal justice system. The imprisonment of Black people is five times greater than that of white people, and one in five black men born in 2001 will experience imprisonment in their lifetime (Ghandnoosh para.1).

Data like this illustrates that for millions of Black Americans, achieving their dreams is a struggle, whether their dream is a college education, owning their own business, fame, and fortune, or just rising above the poverty level. Yet, Black Americans persist. Their persistence can use all the support they can get. Living in a society where one's success and means to fulfill the most basic needs feel unsure calls for inspiration. Marginalized people need to have real or fictional stories that demonstrate that it is possible to break through obstacles, face down enemies, and win the day. Inspiring stories can give one strength for arduous

[1] For the purposes of this survey, "Wealth" is defined as the value of assets owned by a family or an individual (such as a home or savings and retirement accounts) minus outstanding debt (such as a mortgage or student loan).

journeys. If those stories also sometimes provide instructions on overcoming life's difficulties, so much the better.

The original mass influx of Black people to the United States came through the slave trade. The National Park Service estimates that approximately 388,000 Africans were enslaved and brought to North America from the 1500s to 1800s (The Root, para. 4). [2] Legally considered as 3/5ths of a person by the U.S. Constitution and treated frequently as less than human, an enslaved African could see their situation as hopeless. They did not speak the language of their enslavers. Since captured Africans came from among many tribes, they did not necessarily share a language with the other enslaved Africans they lived amongst. They brought different cultures, including mythologies and folklore, each with trickster gods and animals. There was Eshu of the Yoruba people, a god of change, disorder, and language, a messenger from the other gods to humans. The Igbo god Ekwensu had similar traits. There were Hare, Tortoise, and Spider, creatures inhabiting the mythologies of West African people. Their stories sailed on the boats of the Middle Passage, too.

One might not want to tangle with another person's god but telling a story about the wily ways of Hare, Tortoise, or Spider was safer. Humans like to tell stories, so stories from Africa were shared. However, the stories evolved to be

[2] See also https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/how-many-slaves-landed-in-the-us/ and https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196042/slaves-brought-africa-to-us-1628-1860/

more relevant to their new circumstances over time. Enter the Black trickster tale. Its tradition is as old as when the first Africans landed on America's shores and has continued into the present.

In the American South, there were no native tortoises or hares, but there were rabbits, so Brer (or Bruh) Rabbit was born among the enslaved Black people of the American South. There is scholarly debate about the origin of Brer Rabbit, including theories that he is unrelated to the Hare of African folklore and that he originated with the Cherokee or the English colonists (Marshall 34). For this thesis, the actual origin of Brer Rabbit is less important than the fact that his tales are undeniably part of Black folklore. Folklores from other lands may feature tricky rabbits, but *Brer Rabbit* is a bonified Southern Black folk hero. Zora Neale Hurston, a Black anthropologist, folklorist, and author working in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote:

> In folklore, as in everything else that people create, the world is a great, big, old serving platter, and all the local places are like eating-plates. Whatever is on the plate must come out of the platter, but each plate has a flavor of its own because the people take the universal stuff and season it to suit themselves on the plate. And this local flavor is what is known as originality. So when we speak of Florida folklore, we are talking about that Florida flavor that the story and song-makers have given to the great mass of

> material that has accumulated in this sort of culture delta. (Wall 875)

Folklorists, anthropologists, and literary figures like Zora Neale Hurston, Alan Dundes, Joel Chandler Harris, and others have documented Brer Rabbit's trickster exploits in stories all over the South. Whatever their origins, enslaved Black people shaped the adventures of Brer Rabbit, yet the tales also have a timelessness that helped them survive to this day.

The most famous story is Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby. Interestingly, versions of stories about tricksters getting stuck to sticky substances exist in folklore worldwide, but their true origins are unknown. The various versions of the story are the focus of *The Tar Baby, A Global History* (2017), by Bryan Wagner. Its enduring popularity is not confusing as the story is a classic Trickster tale: In the Brer Rabbit version, Brer Fox, frustrated by constantly being outwitted by Brer Rabbit, constructs a sticky figure of tar and leaves it in the road for Brer Rabbit to discover. Upon encountering the tar baby, Brer Rabbit greets it. The tar baby, of course, does not reply. Brer Rabbit is offended by the tar baby's refusal to acknowledge his greeting. After several attempts to engage the tar baby, Brer Rabbit strikes the figure and immediately gets stuck in the tar. Repeated blows to the tar baby result in all of Brer Rabbit's limbs sticking to the tar baby. When he becomes incapacitated, Brer Fox – who was watching all of this from behind the bushes – jumps out, delighted that he has finally caught the tricky rabbit. He gleefully muses aloud of ways to kill and cook his foe. Brer

Rabbit pleads with Brer Fox to kill him in any manner he pleases-- just as long as he does not throw him in the awful briar patch of bushes. Brer Fox, thinking Brer Rabbit fears this most of all, throws the rabbit in the briar patch. But instead of being greeted with groans of pain, Brer Fox hears Brer Rabbit call out joyfully, "I was born and bred in a briar patch!" before the rabbit safely hops away once again.

Brer Rabbit is a classic Trickster. He is quite the rascal: he does not want to work to earn his living; he steals, lies, and cheats. His only thought is for his own well-being. He teases Brer Fox and Brer Bear and seems to delight in their misfortune and pain. Yet, he is definitely the protagonist of this story. In his book, Bryan Wagner shares a more extended version of this story that starts with the lazy rabbit tricking his fellow animals out of food, which we hear about in many Brer Rabbit stories. In an interview with NPR, Wagner says:

> There is no question that we are meant to identify with the rabbit. This is something that is confirmed again and again by the people who are telling and hearing the story. It's therefore puzzling that the opening scene of the story is structured in a way that makes it impossible to identify with the rabbit. The rabbit makes an agreement with others to share a resource in common, and then he breaks the agreement, taking everything for himself, leaving his honest neighbors with nothing. In other cases, the rabbit refuses to

> work, and then steals from his hardworking neighbors, leaving them to go hungry. One might assume that slaves telling the story, for example, would have strong reasons to identify with the fox, who works hard and has the fruit of his labors stolen from him. Yet over the course of the story, the line of identification with the rabbit becomes increasingly clear, as we cheer his escape at the story's conclusion. (Martyris par. 18)

Brer Rabbit's actions may seem immoral or, at least, morally ambiguous. Not all Tricksters are as immoral as Brer Rabbit, but moral ambiguity is a trait often found in Tricksters. An immoral protagonist might not seem so strange to people who are well familiar with the immorality of slavery. Faced with the evils of slavery and racism, a little immorality to even the playing field might be seen as acceptable. Enslaved people, fighting for their very survival, might not see Brer Rabbit's actions as immoral. Lawrence W. Levine, author of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977), in the section "The Slave as Trickster," writes, "But for the most part tales were the vehicle through which slaves rehearsed their tactics, laughed at the foibles of their masters (and themselves), and taught their young the means they would have to adopt to survive (Levine 125)." Emily Zobel Marshall, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and other scholars explore how Brer Rabbit pays into the psyche of enslaved Black people.

The international slave trade was outlawed in the United States in 1808 (though illegal trading still occurred). It was no longer needed as generations of enslaved Black people reproduced enough slave labor to number in the millions. Black people born into slavery constructed a new culture, influenced by their African roots but native to their current soil. Alongside stories of Brer Rabbit grew other folktales. One of the most popular folk heroes was John (or "Jack") of what is commonly called the John and the Old Master (or Massa or Marster) tales. In this thesis, for brevity, the stories are called "John Tales." Several folklorists and scholars have documented these stories, perhaps most famously Hurston in *Mules and Men* (1935), Richard Dorson in *American Negro Folktales* (1967), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the *Annotated African American Folktales* (2018).

These tales are born of the plantations in the American South. John is an enslaved black man on Old Master's plantation. John's goals in the stories range from the mundane to the deadly serious. In many stories, John's goal (like Brer Rabbit's) is to obtain food. He may take a pig or a turkey, trying to elude the prying eyes of Old Master. He may disguise himself or his actions. When confronted, he lies or dissembles. Sometimes, he gets away with it, and sometimes, he is discovered and beaten. However, he generally gets at least some of the tasty meat before being punished for his crime. Other stories feature the Old Master testing John's faithfulness or truthfulness. These tests mostly fail, for John is faithful only to his own survival, and what is true for the White man is

not always true for John. Other tales involve John's attempts to gain his freedom and escape punishment or death. John exhibits the characteristics associated with tricksters. He devises a strategy to gain something he lacks: food, money, high esteem, or freedom. His plan may be clever, but, at times, it backfires, and instead of duping, John gets duped. He uses his brain and not his brawn to achieve his goal. John might disguise himself or "change shape" to pursue his intrigue. He often plays upon the greed of others to embroil them in his plot, where he will surely take advantage of them. Like Brer Rabbit, John is a flawed folk hero-- perhaps an antihero by the dominant culture's standards.

Hurston collected stories in the Black community after Emancipation, though many stories people shared with her originated during slavery. Another trickster character Hurston documented is High John the Conqueror. Though High John shares a name with John from the John and Old Master tales, his characterization is quite different. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. summarizes an essay Hurston wrote in 1943 about this folk hero, allegedly born an African prince, enslaved, but who, with tenacity, daring, and cunningness, inspired courage amongst other enslaved Blacks and carried them away from the plantation on a big black crow. This journey started their many adventures, including visiting Hell, where High John tricked the ultimate Trickster, the Devil, married the Devil's daughter, and got elected High Chief Devil. Paradoxically, High John returns the enslaved people to the plantation. Their bodies are still enslaved there, but the adventures with High John freed their minds and helped them

realize "the power of love and laughter to win by their subtle power" (Gates 530). That this story includes fantastical elements-- like riding on the back of a crow-- yet ends with the enslaved people returning to the place of their enslavement is indicative of how they are grounded in reality, unlike the stories of the African gods and Brer Rabbit. Change is a constant in our Universe. Like all else, our stories evolve to meet our needs. Even our gods and folk heroes evolve. Perhaps the enslaved Black people needed to know that humans, and not just tricky rabbits, could overcome the most overwhelming obstacles, survive, and thrive. The Black tricksters emerged during slavery and afterward started to take human and not animal form. They become endowed with more human flaws as the folk heroes evolve over time. Their stories become more realistic, similar to the lives experienced by the enslaved Black people, and less mythical.

Brer Rabbit, John and the Old Master, and High John the Conqueror are characters passed on through the oral tradition. We have their stories today in written form because someone wrote them down. Some collected the stories in the interest of studying and/or preserving Black folklore. Some wrote them down to sell for profit. Some possibly published folktales for nostalgia or to glorify a past quickly disappearing. Just as in the collection of Brer Rabbit stories, there are questions surrounding sharing the John stories. Many early collectors were White, making it questionable that the Black storytellers shared the stories completely. Even if the collectors were Black, differences in class and a sense of belonging could result in the storytellers' distrust and modification of the stories.

Indeed, Black storytellers have often been conscious of sharing too much, not wanting to be caught at a disadvantage. Sometimes, the folktales themselves are a warning not to share everything one knows with everybody.

One of them – John and the Blacksnake – is included in Harold Courlander's anthology, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* (2002). In this version, John encounters a Black snake that tries to create a bond between them, as they are both black. John refuses any connection over their Blackness and runs back to the plantation, where he tells Old Master about the talking snake. Old Master does not believe John. He and John head back to the swamp. John commands the snake to speak, but the snake is silent. Old Master berates John for wasting his time and leaves. When John asks the snake why he refused to talk, the snake replies, "John, you sure let me down, too. I spoke with you and nobody else. And the first thing you do is go off and tell everything you know to a white man" (441-442). In a similar version, John encounters a place where slaveholders dumped the bodies of murdered enslaved people. There, John converses with a talking skull. In this version, Old Master kills John when the skull does not speak to him, and John joins with the other bones, having belatedly learned the danger of telling the White man too much. One wonders if White collectors were conscious of how often the Trickster tale provides lessons for the real life of an oppressed people.

Versions of folktales in the collections available to us likely underwent editing by both their storytellers and their collectors. In truth, storytellers

constantly modify stories to suit their desire and style and appeal to their audience. Nevertheless, there is enough documentation to illustrate the prevalence of Trickster tales in early Black folklore. Gates dedicated several chapters in his anthology to tricksters, and Hurston wrote about them extensively. Moreover, virtually any collection of Black folktales will include a section on tricksters. Though the earliest examples exist in the oral tradition, over time, Black people began to write down their own stories, and they brought the tricksters along with them.

In 1899, the Black author, political activist, and lawyer Charles W. Chestnutt published his first novel, *The Conjure Woman*. The novel consists of short tales about Uncle Julius, a Black man in post-Civil War North Carolina who becomes the servant to a white Northern couple who moves to the South to start a vineyard. The novel functions as a double Trickster tale: the first trick is the conjuring in the story itself; the second is that Uncle Julius uses the story to obtain some advantage for himself or his community. For example, in one story, "Po' Sandy," the white couple plans to tear down a shack on the property to build a new kitchen – until Uncle Julius spins a story of the shack's haunting. The frightened White wife convinces her husband not to tear down the shack, which Uncle Julius later asks to use as a church for him and other Black residents of the town, declaring that ghosts cannot disturb religious services. The husband from the North is only dimly aware that the harmless-looking old Black man tricks them with his storytelling. Uncle Julius, living on the land before the couple buy

it and hire him, uses the art of storytelling to ensure his survival despite the turn of events that resulted in his home being bought out from under him.

Literary scholarship on Black tricksters note additional works in the nineteenth century and more modern works, such as Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the works of Toni Morrison (*Tar Baby*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*) and Ralph Ellison (his character Easy Rawlins). Black tricksters exist in the work of White authors like Mark Twain and Herman Melville. Two examples of more recent literary tricksters are from the pens of Percival Everett and Patricia McKissack.

Everett wrote *Erasure* (2001), winner of the first Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and the basis for the Academy Award-winning film *American Fiction* (2023). *Erasure* tells the story of Thelonious ("Monk") Ellison, a Black author trying to achieve literary success. Monk belongs to a tricky profession: he is a fiction writer and a storyteller who writes untruths or deceptions for a living. When his books don't sell, and his writing is labeled as not black enough," Monk decides to write a parody of books about ghetto life. The book, titled *Fuck*, is about the life of Van Go Jenkins. Monk writes the book in Ebonics under the pen name of Stagg R. Leigh. Jenkins's world is a hopeless, violent, and misogynistic place where everyone curses, lies, and steals and where collecting baby mamas and the number of men one beats or kills defines masculinity. The publishing world misses the joke, heralds it as brutally honest, and it becomes a bestseller. Van Go is "badman," a form of Trickster that runs

through Black folklore, embodying the trickster traits of disregard for societal conventions, hedonism, violence, selfishness, and often hypersexuality.

Though the writing started as a parody, now that the world takes it seriously, to continue it becomes a trick. To keep selling the book (or performing the trick), Monk needs to create another character – Stagg R. Leigh – who could believably have experiences similar to Van Go. Once started, the deceitful trick demands more and more from him. Live interviews and meetings with publishers and film producers find Monk deciding how much of a disguise he will assume. Leigh has a prison record. In contrast, Monk does not. Monk has advanced degrees. Leigh has street smarts. Having shifted into the shape of Stagg R. Leigh, Monk becomes caught and finds himself buried deeper and deeper in deceptions until the toll becomes too much. His trickery has successfully gained him money, fame, and critical acclaim but at a high personal cost that equates to failure. This is a novel of double trickery – Monk is a trickster writing about a "badman" trickster.

The Badman Trickster as a folk hero is a trope within Black Trickster tales. Monk's pen name references one such Black folk hero, Staggerlee, which many Black readers will note. That, and the mocking character's name-- Van Go Jenkins, a nod to a tendency for Black parents to give their children colorful, non-traditional names-- should cause readers to suspect that the work is not serious. Monk's editor knows it to be a parody. However, others, especially white publishers and film producers, are all too eager to believe in the stereotyped

reality the book paints, finding it easily digestible and a reinforcement of a belief about Black life that justifies the status quo.

Indeed, Tricksters tales are so fundamental to Black folklore that they are part of a shared lexicon of Black children's literature. An example of a modern collection of Trickster tales is Newberry Award honoree Patricia McKissack's book *Porch Lies: Tales of Slicksters, Tricksters, and Other Wily Characters* (2006). Relishing her childhood immersed in the oral tradition, McKissack shares several porch lies about tricksters, who, unlike the Badman, are harmless and often valued community members. One character, Mingo, is such a skilled trickster "…he'll be at the Pearly Gates selling sunglasses to shade yo' eyes from the glow of the heavenly throne." (12) Mingo, in defense of his actions, declares, "Sure, I've had to make it best I could in this ol' world….but I never took nothing from nobody who didn't deserve it" (9). In "Aunt Gran and the Outlaws," an elderly Black woman tricks the infamous James Brothers into saving her farm and the entire town, as she believes the Lord has sent them in answer to her prayers (37-58). It is worth noting that McKissack is writing for children. There are a number of popular and award-winning collections of Black and African folktales for children by Black authors, including *Julius Lester's Black Folktales* (1969), Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* (1985), *Herstories* (1995), and *A Ring of Tricksters* (1997), and *Ashley Bryan's African Tales uh-huh* (1998). They all include some stories about tricksters. Storytellers frequently include stories from

anthologies like these in their repertoire, as both teller and young listener alike enjoy a good, funny Trickster tale.

So far, the examples of Black tricksters are from the oral tradition or literature. However, the oral tradition is reinvented not just in print but also in other art forms. Black tricksters exist in music, theatre, and film—anywhere storytelling happens. A look at several examples will illustrate the archetype's ubiquity.

Tricksters are part of the continuous line of the oral tradition in music. Interestingly, many of the tricksters popularized in song belong to the Badman category. There is Staggerlee, a legend based upon the true story of “Stack” Lee Shelton and his murder of Billy Lyons. However, the true story has grown into a legend that fits into a category of Black tricksters commonly called the Black Badman. The Black Badman is a specific Black trickster character trying to get ahead in life but constantly encountering situations not of his making that he meets with trickery that usually includes violence and that is harmful even to the innocent in their path. In the case of the Badman, the story may result in his imprisonment or death. He is an outlaw. Within the Trickster tale, he could be a hero or a villain. "He" could also be a "she," as the Black Badwoman exists in folklore, too.

Staggerlee lacks any admirable traits; he is not an asset to the community; he is not funny or silver-tongued. Nevertheless, he became a folk hero who tried to live a life of dignity, playing by his own rules instead of those

dictated by society. He loses every time. Anyone who feels the deck stacked against them can identify with Staggerlee. Though there are written accounts of the true story, the documentation is sketchy, which leaves plenty of room for creative storytellers to embellish. The Staggerlee of legend probably started with Shelton's story shared orally, but soon the embellished story was memorialized in poetry (including "Staggerlee Wonders" by James Baldwin), song (Lloyd Price recorded a version in 1959 that became the first recording to reach #1 after being censored and some version of this legend has been recorded more than a hundred times by blues, rock, pop, and even punk rock entertainers, black and white), stage musicals and plays (there are several, including a musical created by Allen Toussaint and Vernel Bagneris in 1987) and books, like *Pimp Slays Bully* (2003), by Cecil Brown, which traces the history of Staggerlee – the man and the myth.

Tricksters are widely present in Black theatre. Sometimes, they are not the main characters, especially in works of the early twentieth century, when Black tricksters might have seemed particularly threatening to white audiences used to a different type of stereotypical Black characters. In early Black theatre, we often see tricksters like Lila from the musical *St. Louis Woman (1946)* by Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen. Lila is a hard-drinking, bad-talking, Badwoman who, failing to win back the favors of her lover, kills him, and allows another man to take the blame. Ultimately, she repents, confesses, and seeks forgiveness from God. An acceptable morality and respectability win the day.

Modern Black drama rejects the constraints of respectability. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins is a Black, gay, millennial playwright who penned the Tony-nominated play *Appropriate* (2013), which explores a white family's response to discovering a legacy of racism. What is the trick? An identity of Blackness basically trumps every other identity in America, whether one wants it to or not. Black writers who do not write about "the Black experience" can anticipate criticism. Like the character Monk from *Erasure*, there is the expectation that a Black artist will limit themselves to Black art. The irony is that the dominant culture defines Black art, not Black culture, which acknowledges that the Black experience is sometimes just the human experience. If Black artists are only praised and successful in their careers when demonstrating the "Black experience," the full humanity of Black people is erased. The history of America is full of examples of how denial of Black people's humanity contributes to prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and even violence against Blacks. Jacobs-Jenkins is very aware of this, and-- in a trickster-like move that defies the expectations of society-- he chooses not to accept or ignore this expectation but to turn it on its head by writing a play about race and Blackness populated with only White characters. A *New York*er article tells us the playwright was "…inspired… to write a play that would make Blackness invisible but spectrally present." The article describes the playwright himself as "impish" and "puckish," noting his sense of humor and playfulness (Lucas 2024). However, his plays use that humor to deal with somber topics like race, alcoholism, pandemics, and

mass shootings. *Appropriate* shows us a White family as inextricably trapped in American racism as any Black family.

Black tricksters have also found a comfortable abode in film and television. Though these stories exist first as screenplays or scripts, they ultimately become a visual art form that reaches more people in today's society than literature. The television show *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) featured George Jefferson, a self-made wealthy businessman constantly striving to be accepted by society as a great man. In many of the episodes, especially the early ones, the already successful George devises a plot to get wealthier or famous, which backfires. Like "the Fool" trickster persona, George's schemes seldom succeed in gaining him more wealth or fame, but the harmless George, secured by the love of his family and community, ends up fine.

The movie *Blazing Saddles*, directed by Mel Brooks, who is White, includes White and Black writers, (Brooks and Black comedian Richard Pryor amongst them) who created the screenplay. The film is full of deceit, defying social norms, and delight. It is the story of Bart, a Black man appointed as sheriff of an all-White frontier town as a trick by authorities. Bart, however, proves trickier than the authorities: his antics, sometimes accompanied by the Looney Tunes theme music, lead to his success not only in being accepted by the locals but also in saving the town from the corrupt White authorities. Bart, played by the incomparable Cleavon Little, is a classic Black trickster: smarter than his adversaries, smooth-talking, sexy, shapeshifting, and insisting upon being

accepted on his own terms instead of giving into the expectations of the dominant culture. The writers drop this urbane Black trickster into the setting of the Wild West (one where Black history, though important, is often invisible). His Black credentials are hard to miss: dressed to the nines, he rides toward town accompanied by the Count Basie orchestra, and Basie himself slaps his hands with Bart in a gesture of "give me five." However, he is not above playing the Fool when it helps him get ahead. In one scene, he plays a stereotype of a scared Black man as well as playing someone threatening to shoot the Black man while holding his own gun to his head. He uses disguises, such as when he pretends to be a candy-gram deliverer and dons a Klu Klux Klan hood and robe to get closer to the villain and discover his plot against Rock Ridge.

Tricksters abound in the films that comprise the Blaxploitation period. A common trope of movies from this period is the Black man or woman who has turned to a life of crime to survive or get rich. The films may seem to glorify badmen: pimps, murderers, gangs, and drug pushers. On the other hand, these films have the air of reality: these characters reflect the lives of many Black people living in impoverished neighborhoods. Their actions may be evil by the dominant culture's standards, but they live in a world that does not offer many options for being good and getting ahead. One aspect that made these films different from popular movies about Black life before them (such as *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Porgy and Bess (1959)*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961)) is that they featured a Black protagonist who overcomes obstacles, playing by their own

rules and achieving success. These tricksters do battle with American white supremacy culture (in the form of "The Man") and win.

The films are Trickster tales, full of humor (delight), raw sexuality (defying social norms), and complicated schemes (deceit). There is also violence, which, though not as featured in earlier Black trickster tales, is also not absent from them. "Blaxploitation" is frequently used to describe movies made specifically for black audiences during the 70's. Though some of these films were made by studios owned by White people and written and directed by White artists, this period also witnessed the rise of Black filmmakers. Writers, directors, and producers like Melvin Van Peebles, Ivan Dixon, and Gorden Parks Sr and Jr. represented Black life on film. They crafted Black heroes for entertainment and inspiration. Also noteworthy was the rise of the tough, streetwise Black women as protagonists, most famously in the characters of Coffee (played by Pam Grier) and Cleopatra Jones (played by Tamara Dobson). [3]

One of the biggest box office successes was *Superfly* (1972). The protagonist, Priest, is a drug dealer who wants to stop dealing drugs that are hurting his own community and "go straight." He encounters multiple obstacles: for example, betrayal by a Black friend and rival dealers attempting to kill him numerous times. The biggest hindrance comes from the White gangster, the one really in control of the illegal drug business. Ultimately, Priest devises a plan that

[3] For an excellent discussion of the importance of the Blaxploitation period to Black culture, watch the short documentary, *The Best of Blaxploitation* (2022), directed By David Bryne and featuring Black filmmakers Malcolm Mays, Michael Jai White, and Scott Sanders.

turns the White man's own scheme against him. Priest walks away to live his life in peace.

Rudy Ray Moore was truly an entrepreneurial filmmaker from the Blaxploitation period. Moore started making films after gaining success in the Black community with his raunchy comedy act and albums. He produced, wrote, and starred in small-budget films about ghetto life. Moore created the iconic trickster characters Petey Wheatstraw and Dolemite. Wheatstraw is a comedian murdered by rivals who makes a deal with the Devil to return to life in exchange for marrying the Devil's daughter. He devises various deceits to get revenge and escape the clutches of the unattractive Devil's daughter. Dolemite is a nightclub owner and pimp released from prison by the governor and tasked with stopping the drug trade in his neighborhood. He takes on rivals, drug lords, and corrupt cops with the aid of other pimps and prostitutes who can seduce his enemies before tackling them with karate moves. The films contain plenty of action and comedy. Moore's early films were self-financed. The 2019 film *Dolemite is My Name*, starring Eddie Murphy, details how Moore used all the tricks in the book to make his films and, more importantly, distribute them at a time when producers and movie theatre owners thought Black movies could not sell. His fictional characters are tricksters, and Moore uses trickery to survive as a filmmaker. Moore is an example of a different kind of double trickery, which this thesis will continue to explore.

Moore's path to filmmaking was a struggle, especially because Black filmmaking was so new. Moving forward to contemporary times, there are more Black filmmakers, though not many Black directors are making big-budget films. Those who can find backing for major motion pictures sometimes still enjoy a Trickster tale. Jordan Peele is one of the most successful Black film directors, writers, and producers today. Peele's film *Us* (2019) pits Black tricksters against other Black tricksters. The film creates a shadow world populated with doppelganger-like creatures. We learn that one of these creatures tricks the protagonist, Adelaide, and has switched places with her in childhood. The "real" Adelaide now wants her place in this world restored. During the ensuing battle between characters of both worlds, we, the viewer, cannot always be sure which character is from our world and which is from the shadow world. The film is a thrilling play with shapeshifting and a socio-political treatise on class. Like Rudy Ray Moore, the writer and director is an example of a real-life trickster and artist—an example of double-trickery. Jordan Peele first reached fame as a highly successful comedian and is now a successful horror film director and producer. His art is created not just with other Black people but also to be consumed by Black people: his first feature film, *Get Out* (2017), was a fever dream of black fears, playing with tropes long existing in black culture. Both his films and comedy sketches entertain audiences and score box office gold with non-Black audiences and Black ones, but with references to Black culture that trickily enrich the experience for the Black audience. His dual nature is one common trait for

Black tricksters, perhaps linked to what W.E.B. DuBois called the "double consciousness" of Black Americans.

Funny and scary, embedded deeply in Black culture and also of universal appeal, Peele makes it work with great success. Peele is a trickster artist, entertaining us while also modeling how a Black entertainer can survive and support other Black artists' survival. By using BIPOC artists both in front of and behind the camera, Peele spreads his success to them. Peele took his filmmaking one step further by establishing a production company, MonkeyPaw Productions, that produces films, television, and books created mostly by BIPOC filmmakers. Its website states,

> Our company is committed to groundbreaking storytelling, visionary world-building and the unpacking of contemporary social issues. Monkeypaw Productions champions highly specific perspectives and artistic collaborations with unique and traditionally underrepresented voices. Our work challenges the conventional architecture of genre storytelling from horror to science fiction to social satire, while balancing avant garde visual language with undeniably contagious fun. (https://www.monkeypawproductions.com/about)

(The production company's name comes from a famous horror story by W.W. Jacobs, The Monkey's Paw (1902), that involves a deceitful, wish-fulfilling monkey's paw used to tragic consequences.) Like Uncle Julius, Peele tricks for

the benefit of himself and his community. Peele excelled as a comic (being the Fool), switched to creating horror and suspense (shapeshifting), and now spends his time behind the camera as a director, producer, and founder of his own production company, a feat few Black artists have accomplished (defying social conventions).

Looking back further in Black history, Zora Neale Hurston, who collected many of the tales mentioned in this chapter, exhibited strong trickster characteristics to achieve recognition as an anthropologist and writer. Here, then, is another example of double trickery: Hurston's artistic work is full of trickster tales, and her real life was also that of a trickster. The PBS American Experience documentary *Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space* explores many details of Hurston's life. When her father stopped paying tuition for her education, Hurston, longing for more education, lied about her age to attend high school (Strain 2023). She encountered many additional obstacles to earning advanced degrees from Howard University and Barnard College. Yet she persevered. From dissembling to her White patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, who funded her field studies, to convincing her mentor, Franz Boas-- who was highly critical of her anthropological methods-- to write the foreword for *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston created her own rules to achieve the success that society's rules did not allow. In her first significant anthropological work, *Mules and Men*, Hurston used a trick not previously utilized in the field of study: she inserted herself into the work of gathering folktales. Hurston moved back to her childhood home of

Eatonville, Florida, where she had first encountered the kind of folktales she wanted to study. She knew she needed to be accepted as an insider to help ensure she would have access to authentic stories. So she lied, claiming to be an outlaw, a bootlegger on the run, to appear less threatening and curry favor among the people of Eatonville. Hurston hunted with them, sat on porches, and spent many nights at the local bars and nightclubs to hear the stories told there.

Mules and Men is as much a story of Hurston's adventures as a collection of folktales and voodoo rituals. Other anthropologists and academics criticized Hurston for her methods and used them to prove her unprofessionalism. Refusing to abide by the rules and standards set by a society not meant to include her as a Black woman, she created a new method for future anthropologists. She traveled to Jamaica and the American South, studying the cultures of the African diaspora by immersing herself in them. By including her own experiences in her reporting, she tackles the myth of objectivity in scientific research.

Unlike most anthropologists, she published in both academic journals and popular magazines, wanting to share her findings with the average person and not just the academic community. She incorporated much of what she learned in her anthropological studies as she shapeshifted into a documentarian filmmaker and a fiction writer, penning four novels, including her seminal work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Film documentarian. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, in

the Introduction of her book of collected essays, *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction* (2001), writes:

> As both anthropologist and artist, outsider and insider, alien and friend, she herself becomes a border of Eatonville that transforms what it touches, a brilliant medium for invention but also an invention itself…Like Eshu, Legba, and other trickster gods of African origin, Hurston is the medium of language between a heaven and earth of her own devising. As such, she is the very model of the American literary artist as trickster. (Reesman xi)

When it comes to defying social conventions, it can seem as if the very existence of Black America defies American society. No wonder Black artists have had to embrace trickster characteristics to succeed. Indeed, Black Americans' fight for equity has involved actions pushing the boundaries of acceptable American standards. From sit-ins in North Carolina to refusing to move to the back of the bus in Alabama to lawsuits like Brown *vs*. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, to publications of hidden history like the *1619 Project* (2019), Black Americans have earned their present place in America society by not accepting the status quo. Though the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was primarily peaceful, propelled by Black leaders like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, the author of *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), a treatise challenging the conventional wisdom to be patient and wait for rights to be given to Blacks by Whites. Black children growing up learn about King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm

X, Eldridge Cleaver, Shirley Chisholm, and other Black icons who defied respectability politics and pushed the boundaries of expectations for Black leaders. Black culture continues to question and challenge standard American culture, as evidenced by the outcry over the casting of a Black actor to portray a mythical Little Mermaid and the surprise elicited when pop diva Beyonce recorded a country music album. It is not hard to find Black tricksters creating fictional Black characters and living trickster lives. In the following chapters are three tricksters who have left an indelible mark on Black and American culture.

Chapter Three

Ossie Davis

> For the first time since I started working in the theatre, *my boss is the Negro people*! And I chose to believe that this fact has implications for the Negro artist, musician, performer—in his struggle to express himself and survive at the same time – that are revolutionary. For if we can, in fact, create for our own people, work for our own people, belong to our own people, we will no longer be forced into artistic prostitution and self-betrayal in the mad scramble, imposed upon us far too long, to belong to some other people. We can indeed, as long as we truly deserve the support of our own, embrace our blackness, and find the stuff of our manhood. (Davis, Life Lit 92)

The play *Purlie Victorious* features a Black trickster character on a plantation in the Deep South during Jim Crow. Penned by and starring Ossie Davis, it opened on Broadway on September 8, 1961, at the Cort Theatre (renamed as the James Earl Jones Theatre) in New York. The production achieved critical acclaim, although it struggled at the box office. By 1961, Ossie had made a name for himself in the theatre, and many luminaries attended the production, including Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote about the experience in her newspaper column, saying,

> Mixed with the humor there is intelligent, incisive commentary on segregation, discrimination, and the slow pace of integration… I think it is well for you as an American citizen to see it and ponder our racial problem… as a question affecting our standing and our real sincerity among the peoples of the world. (Dziemianowicz, para. 14-15)

Malcolm X also attended a performance. He met Ossie for the first time backstage and, according to Ossie, said that Black folks laughing at White folks was revolutionary — the highest kind of struggle he could imagine (The Malcolm X Project). Though the play performed to a mixed audience, Ossie credits Black audiences' embrace of the production with enabling it to make it through the eight months it managed to run. Despite its limited run, it was the most successful production of the writings of Ossie Davis—a trickster artist who used words and storytelling to promote the civil rights of Black people. Ossie Davis lived a remarkable life as a seemingly mild-mannered and respectable teller of stories, but he was also bold and revolutionary in the style and content of his stories. He displayed an ambiguous, dual nature—one of the characteristics of Black tricksters—in both his acting, writing, and, indeed, in his personal and professional life.

Ossie Davis was born in 1917 in the small rural town of Cogdell, Georgia. In the joint autobiography *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*, he tells a story about his coming into the world:

> I was named after my father's father, Rayford Chapman Davis. In the South, we tend to use initials. So when the clerk at the Clinch County courthouse asked Mama who I was, she said, "R.C. Davis." He thought she said "Ossie Davis" and wrote it down that way. Mama would not have argued with him. The man was white. Mama and I were black and down in deepest Georgia. So the matter of identification was settled. Ossie it was and Ossie it is till this very day. (Davis and Dee 7)

Thus, Ossie's life—indeed, a crucial part of his very identity—was shaped from the very beginning by a White man and the institutions of White America. Our name is a word that identifies us to the community and world around us. It is little wonder that Ossie, whose life was shaped at the very beginning by a misunderstanding of words, became a lover of words and the power they hold to create our destiny, and a man determined to possess and control words to promote Black liberation and civil rights.

Ossie's lifelong dream was to be a writer. His obituary in the *New York Times* indicates that he achieved this goal: the newspaper declared Ossie an "Actor, Writer, and Eloquent Champion of Racial Justice" (Severo and Martin). However, Ossie's route as a writer was not straightforward. Growing up surrounded by preachers and storytellers, Ossie grew to love words and public speaking. He did not let poverty stop him from his dream of attending college. With money earned from many jobs and a scholarship, he entered the esteemed

Howard University. His love of Shakespeare inspired him to be a playwright. Encouraged to learn more about theatre by professors at Howard—most notably Dr. Alain Locke and Dr. Sterling Brown—Ossie impetuously left Howard after his junior year to move to New York City, where he joined a small theatre company and mingled with other Black artists in Harlem. His career was put on hold while serving in World War II, but he returned to New York and the theatre world, acting and writing in his spare time. Ossie met Ruby Dee, his acting partner and wife of 57 years when cast in a play together. Ruby was a New York sophisticate whose first impression of Ossie was that he was a country bumpkin, but tricky Ossie managed to win her heart despite her objections. Separately and together, they played significant roles on stage and screen until Ossie's death in 2005.

Ossie was also an "actor-activist" (Williams 302) who marched with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King but also eulogized Malcolm X. Ossie understood how both men worked towards the same goal of Black empowerment, despite their differing approaches. He and his life partner, Ruby Dee, helped organize and served as grand marshals of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, the largest civil rights protest of its time, attended by 250,000 people and where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King gave his famous, "I Have a Dream" speech.

Ossie let few obstacles stand in the way of achieving his dreams. As a boy growing up in the Jim Crow South, he witnessed his father stand up to white businessmen and refuse to back down when threatened, more than once, by the Klu Klux Klan. Ossie himself learned the trick of bending the world to meet his

needs. In his biography, he wrote of achieving success at Howard by turning the very aspects of his being that made him an underdog into tools that won over any objection:

> I couldn't wait for classes to begin because there I was in my element. I knew exactly how to call attention to myself and to my brilliance, with just enough eccentricity to be charming. In fact, my being poor and different and from the Deep South gave me an edge. I had seen my daddy use his poverty to make fools of men who are much higher up the social ladder than he. The problems that I faced, large and small, were challenges I was glad to meet.
>
> And meet them I did, mostly out of pure mother wit and simple common-sense invention. (Davis and Dee 73)

This storyteller fills his autobiography with specific examples of negotiations and tricks that helped him achieve his desires. Homesick and unable to finish the first play he is working on, Ossie went to the Army draft board and made a deal that if he could spend Christmas with his family, he would enlist while he is in Georgia instead of being drafted then and there. Ossie's charm sold the deal. One of his memories from his military service involves an unsuccessful trick:

> Before I left on my furlough, I was given an evaluation by an Army psychologist. I told him that I was drinking a fifth of whiskey a day, about my vivid nightmares, my feeling of being lost and at wit's

> end. The drift of his questions, his attitude, seemed very sympathetic. I fully expected to be discharged, that the war for me was over. (Davis and Dee 134)

This time, Ossie's charm was not enough. Despite his efforts, he did not receive the discharge. Like most tricksters, some of Ossie's tricks fail. Later in the autobiography, Ossie and Ruby share a memory of hiding backstage at a theatre in large baskets to evade being served with subpoenas to appear before Joseph McCarthy during the Communist witch-hunt that ensnared so many artists in the 1950s. This trick was successful, and they never had to testify.

Ossie explains his own character in ways familiar to a Trickster: "I did a lot of dreaming, and scheming, and planning, and plotting, and writing." (Davis and Dee 106) and

> To this day, I hate necessity as I hate a tyrant. I am too lazy and indifferent to separate fact from fiction, and will never willingly undertake it, except under duress. I am therefor a most unreliable witness to things that happen in time and space. Most of my adventures wind up as perjured testimony. I cannot practice recall without lying a little: improving the story, throwing out the unpleasantness, reducing it first to antidote then finally to a gag - for which I supply the punchline. (Davis and Dee 23)

In this quote, Ossie confesses to laziness, lying, and, like Uncle Julius, creating stories to distract and entertain. Ossie's autobiography includes many reminisces that involve some level of deceit, though they are mostly innocent and unharmful.

Ossie credits examples of his father's wiliness as inspiration, but certainly these real-life stories existed alongside the tales he heard growing up. He was clearly familiar with the trickster tales told by storytellers in the Georgia of his childhood. He said, "In the south, people tell stories at the drop of a hat. Everybody knew the stories about Brer Rabbit, slavery time, and ghosts. Those tales were part of a floating sufficiency that constantly fit the community" (Davis and Dee 41). Ossie knew these stories were entertaining and an inspirational lifeline for the community, but he began to understand such stories in a different light while studying at Howard University, under the tutelage of folklorist, poet, and professor Dr. Sterling Brown. Ossie remembers that "Sterling knew all about John Henry, Brer Rabbit and High John the Conqueror…It was Sterling who taught me that the blues were poetry, and that the stories I knew so well from my own childhood were first class literature" (Davis and Dee 81-82). With this knowledge, Ossie viewed his own writing as more than an interesting pastime. His stories could also be literature, and he could use that literature for a purpose. He could inspire people to make the world a better place. Art may imitate life; however, life could possibly also imitate art.

Ossie's stories are not random: they invoke themes that he held dear. Writer Rohinton Mistry said, "So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different" (228). It is a familiar idea: the artist returns to the same subject time and time again, with variations to make it interesting. If trickery itself is art, might one look at the work of a Trickster to distinguish recurring themes? Brer Rabbit tricks Brer Fox and Brer Bear to eat and not get eaten. John tricks the Old Master for food and to avoid work. Uncle Julius tricks the Northern couple to keep his homestead and help provide for his community. All of these tricks involve a character with less social capital trying to achieve a level of freedom to make life easier and secure their future.

Ossie's tricks have a common theme, too. They revolve around what he calls "The Negro Question," which he says boils down to "When the hell are we gonna be free" (Davis, Life Lit 87)?! and frequently hone down more finely to the matter of Black Manhood. Ossie Davis creates characters who use trickery to obtain or fully live into Black Manhood, mirroring the way Ossie himself used Trickster moves to survive and thrive as a Black man in a world not created to ensure his success or even his survival.

One could define another of Ossie's recurring themes as one of Black Liberation. The question "How can a Black person be a true Man in a white supremacist society?" shows up frequently in Ossie's stories, speeches, and acting roles. He wrote, "Art among us Blacks has always been a statement about our condition and therefore it has always been political" (Davis and Dee 86).

Ossie is a storyteller Trickster, much in the same vein as Uncle Julius from The *Conjure Woman*. The fabrications he invented serve not only his own livelihood but also the Black community as a whole. Ossie declares this political aspect a crucial aspect of all Black Art. The themes of Black manhood's struggle in a White supremacist society, Black liberation, and the right of Black people to communal and political success are central to Ossie's art and are evident in such works as the play *Purlie Victorious* (1961), the movie *Get on the Bus* (1996), and many of Ossie's speeches and writings, such as those collected in his book, *Life Lit By Some Large Vision* (2010). In the article "The Real History Behind Purlie Victorious on Broadway," theatre journalist Joe Dziemianowicz writes, "Sometimes the dividing line between a character and a playwright is a blurry one" (Dziemianowicz, para.1). It is not unusual for both actors and playwrights to infuse their art with their life experiences. Ossie's experiences as a Black man fighting to have his humanity recognized are central to his art. An experience from his early childhood cemented this theme in Ossie's life.

In his autobiography, Ossie recounts an incident from when he was six or seven years old, walking home from school. A police car pulled over, and the officers ordered him to get in the car. Being a young child, Ossie did not fear or ask questions. He lived in a world where a Black boy did not question White men. He obeyed the officers, who took him to the precinct. There, they joked around with the young boy, who thought this was just fun and games. At one point, an officer laughingly poured a jar of cane syrup over Ossie's head. Ossie

laughed, too. Then the officers gave him a piece of peanut brittle, patted him on the head, and sent him on his way. Ossie never told his family the story of his humiliation at the hands of the authorities or his own participation in it. He refers to the tale as "the Waycross, Georgia incident" and writes about it in several places, obviously haunted by what he labels as an act of "niggertazation."

We know a great deal about Ossie's life from his own words. A look at his art provides examples of the same themes reflected in his essays and autobiography. The most obvious example is the Trickster Ossie created in the play, *Purlie Victorious*. Ossie wrote an essay about the play's process, which took five years. In the essay "Purlie Told Me" Ossie wrote:

> In pursuit of Purlie I found more than I had bargained for: the act of writing became my long moment of truth; and it took me five years to adjust my eyesight, to be able to look squarely at the world, and at myself, through Negro-colored glasses. And to decide, on the basis of what I found: it is not enough to be only a Negro in this world…one must, and more importantly, also be a man.
>
> Purlie, in order to get himself put down on paper at all, had to force me to examine myself; to dig deeper and deeper into my own soul, conscious and subconscious, to peel off and rip away layer after layer of sham, hypocrisy, evasion, lies—to rip up by the root the many walls I had erected around the pretense that I was

> indeed a man—when I knew all along—but had never been before forced to admit even to myself—that in the context of American Society today, *the term negro and the term man must mutually exclude each other!* (Davis, Life Lit 87-88)

This essay bears Ossie's desire to use *Purlie Victorious* as a rallying cry for Black liberation and manhood. Ossie writes that, as Purlie developed as a character, the play moved from anger to satire, using laughter to illustrate the "ridiculous" of segregation. Moreover, though he hoped that all audiences would enjoy the play, he was clear that *Purlie Victorious* was a Black play. He writes:

> Normally, a black performer on Broadway will have his wages paid in white money. But for Purlie, the situation was reversed. For the first time since I started working in the theatre, *my boss is the negro people.*
>
> And I chose to believe that this fact has implications for the Negro artist, musician, performer—in his struggles to express himself and survive at the same time—that are revolutionary. (Davis, Life Lit 92)

The plot of *Purlie Victorious* centers around Purlie Victorious Judson, who returns to his Georgia home and family of sharecroppers, who work to support the livelihood of Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee. Purlie intends to dupe Ol' Cap'n into paying him $500, legally owed to Purlie's family, but which Ol' Cap'n has refused to

release. Purlie plans to use the money to purchase Big Bethel, a barn previously used as a church by the Black sharecroppers on the plantation. With repossession of the church, Purlie hopes to build up the community of Black sharecroppers by instilling racial pride and progress. Purlie's original plan fails, but through various lies, deceptions, and tricks, Purlie defies the will of Ol'Cap'n and gains possession of the church, baptizing it as The Church of the New Freedom.

Purlie is a classic Black trickster in a traditional Trickster tale. As a traditional Trickster, he is an underdog in a system where he cannot legally achieve what he needs and deserves. Literally, Purlie desires his family's money--$500-- that is in the possession of Ol' Cap'n. However, the $500 signifies more than just money. To Purlie, it is Justice. To Purlie, beating Ol' Cap'n equates with regaining his manhood. We learn early in the play that Purlie left the plantation years earlier after being whipped by Ol' Cap'n. The whip itself is virtually a character in the play, brandished by Ol' Cap'n in several scenes. It is a reminder of Purlie's humiliation, emasculation, and "niggertazation." Ossie had cane syrup poured on his head. Purlie had a cane whip taken to his back. Both submit to the humiliation but it continues to haunt them.

One may look at the Trickster traits Purlie exhibits and how this story is a traditional Trickster tale. Purlie is cunning. Like John or Brer Rabbit, he is always plotting and scheming to improve his situation and those of the community. "Purlie always did irritate the white folks," says Missy, Purlie's sister-

in-law (Davis, *Purlie Victorious* 446). He is smart, using his brains, not his brawn. He has a smooth tongue: he inspires his sister-in-law by declaring, "Freedom, Missy, not fritters. The crying need of the Negro today is not grits, but greatness; not cornbread but courage; not fatback, but fight-back" (476). The play ends with his inspiring speech to Black people everywhere:

> Tonight, my friends—I find, in being black, a thing of beauty; a joy; a strength; a secret cup of gladness; a native land in neither time nor place—a native land in every Negro face! Be loyal to yourselves; your skin; your hair; your lips, your southern speech, your laughing kindness—are Negro kingdoms, vast as any other!...Farewell, my deep and Africanic brothers, be brave, keep freedom in the family, do what you can for the white folks, and write me in care of the post office. Now, may the Constitution of the United States go with you; the Declaration of Independence stand by you; the Bill of Rights protect you; and the State Commission Against Discrimination keep the eyes of the law upon you, henceforth, now and forever. Amen. (497)

Even this bit of inspiration includes delightful humor: his remark about helping White people is an example. His asking the audience to write to him "care of the post office" reminds the listener that Trickster Purlie is always on the move and not to be confined in any one place.

Purlie also uses his silvery tongue to deceive Ol' Cap'n. He lies about Cousin Bee and tells a tall, untrue tale of confronting Ol' Cap'n. He steals the whip and assists in stealing the money rightly owed him. Purlie is a shapeshifter: Missy, surprised to find that Purlie is a preacher, says, "But last time you was a professor of Negro Philosophy" (Davis, *Purlie Victorious* 444). We do not know if Purlie has credentials to certify that he is a learned professor or a minister. Purlie appears simply to declare that he is a thing and acts as though it is true. Not only does Purlie change his own shape, but the plot to gain his family's money involves the disguise of Lutiebelle—an impressionable young woman he just recently met—disguising herself as Purlie's dead relative, Cousin Bee, the direct inheritor of the $500.

Purlie Victorious includes echoes of traditional Trickster tales that harken back to earlier Black tricksters. Purlie devises a clever plan, but it backfires when Ol' Cap'n outsmarts Purlie to reveal that Lutibelle is a fake and orders both arrested. This turning of the tables is characteristic of many trickster tales, especially the stories of John and the Old Master.

Ol' Cap'n has a bullwhip, just like one Old Master brandishes in many of those folktales (Davis, *Purlie Victorious* 455). *Purlie Victorious* includes a reference that harkens back to stories told by enslaved people, cautioning against talking to White people, when Idella urges Charlie to monitor his speech by quoting, "He that keepeth his mouth shut keepeth his life." The more unique elements reflect the time of its writing and its purpose. The attempt to win Big

Bethel – the purpose of the trickery – is ultimately successful not merely through Purlie's guile but through the help of other Black sharecroppers and even Ol' Cap'n's son, Charlie. This is a twist: a White character helps the Black trickster. There is plenty of dialogue about how Black people will achieve their civil rights and true freedom. Ossie wrote the play during the height of the Civil Rights era. His tale imagines blacks and whites working together, with the understanding that, in the words of Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, "Until we are all free, none of us are free." In the essay "The Indictment of the Law and Notions of Masculinity in Ossie Davis' Purlie Victorious, " Paxton Williams writes, "In *Purlie Victorious*, Davis provides a humorous tale that shows how change will come to America…Purlie Victorious presents a prime example of how the arts can educate, enlighten, entertain, and yes, fight tyranny" (Williams 320). Including a white co-conspirator reflects the reality of the times during which Ossie lived. Black civil rights activists looked to White allies to help the cause. Purlie's securing of Big Bethel is a communal effort that will benefit the entire community. In the final scene, Charlie becomes the first White member of Big Bethel's congregation, signifying that the community Big Bethel serves could include Black and White people.

Purlie the Trickster also has a love interest. Adding romance to the plot not only fleshes out the play but also fleshes out Purlie. He is not just a trickster. He is a human with all the needs and desires of any other human. If John, in his short stories, is reduced to a caricature driven by basic needs, Purlie is allowed

to be three-dimensional and more fully human. Fighting for full citizenship after the Civil War, Black people would cry, “Ain’t I a man?” or “Ain’t I a woman?" to insist that the White establishment view them as fully human. Creating a fully human character in Purlie answers that question.

The enslaved trickster John received his freedom with the Emancipation Act. However, Black people could still not enjoy all the rights of a free people. Like a freedom song, *Purlie Victorious* calls African Americans to hold onto hope for a better future. It wraps that hope in a comical story that includes elements of Black pride, Black love and solidarity, and collaboration with a younger, enlightened White populace to ensure a better future for the Black community. Finally, it features a traditional Black trickster in a less-than-traditional world waiting for transformation.

Ossie shapeshifted from playwright to actor to civil rights activist and also to director. His most famously directed film is *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), a Black action comedy based on a novel by Chester Himes. The original screenwriter was white. The producers hired Ossie as an additional writer to make the movie "more black." After Ossie revised the script, the producers asked him to direct the film. Though it was a popular film that made millions—ranked as the 25th biggest box-office success of 1970 and a mainstay still of the Black movie lexicon-- some criticized the script as "whitewashing" the world Himes created to make it more palatable for White audiences. This criticism might have stung Ossie, whose future directorial excursions were pithier and more radical,

including *Countdown at Kusini* (1976), a movie that the marketing poster declared was, "a dynamite story of African revolution." The film was financed by the black sorority Delta Sigma Theta and filmed in Nigeria, with a cast and crew of American and Nigerian artists. The themes of Black liberation and improvement of the Black community are more obvious in the films Davis directed after *Cotton Comes to Harlem.*

Ossie continued acting even after his forays into playwriting, activism, and directing. Notably, he appears in several films directed by Spike Lee, introducing him to a new generation of moviegoers. 1996's *Get on the Bus* features Ossie in his biggest role in Lee's films. The plot of this finely crafted film is simple: a busload of Black men head to Washington, D.C. to attend the Million Man March, a historical event in the Black community. The genius in the film is in the interaction between the characters: Black men from different walks of life with diverse perspectives on Black manhood.

The film explores themes familiar to Ossie, including Black manhood and Black liberation. It could not be more fitting that Ossie – an artist and thinker focused on Black liberation, Black community, and Black manhood—is the character who is the linchpin in this drama. From the quotes above from Ossie's essay, "Purlie Told Me," to his portrayal of dignified Black men to his lifelong refusal to fight "niggerization," one could argue that he was born to play Jeremiah in *Get on the Bus*, the Trickster builder of community and disruptor of easy answers. That *Get on the Bus* is about Black liberation is clearly illustrated

from the first frame to the last. The images of manacles make this point and are as much a character in this film as the whip is in *Purlie Victorious*. The opening credits roll over images of black limbs in shackles. One of the featured characters, Evan, Sr., takes the trip handcuffed to his teenage son, Evan, Jr., who, convicted of a crime, was allowed to attend the March only if tethered to his father at all times. Throughout the film, this situation is a topic of much conversation and consternation, as many of the passengers are uncomfortable with the handcuffs, which make a significant appearance at the film's closing.

Ossie's character, Jeremiah Washington, is introduced to the viewers very early on when we see him removing and hiding a hospital wristband (Lee). Then comes his first trick: when asked by the driver, George, how he feels, Jeremiah replies, "Never better!" He starts the trip with a lie, a deception.

The dual nature of a Trickster is evident in how Jeremiah acts as both a reconciler and a disruptor in the film. When boarding the bus, he declares, "Black power!" Another passenger sneers that Jeremiah "sounds like he is stuck in the 60s." Jeremiah, the oldest passenger on the bus by far, calls himself "Pops," and others refer to him that way, as well as "Uncle Remus." However, Jeremiah is not just a doddering old man. He says he wants to be "first in line for the revolution." This character dispenses history lessons, such as how Black cowboy Bill Pickett invented steer wrestling and how light-skinned enslaved Blacks received treatment equal to that of darker-skinned Blacks, but his sparkling eyes and lively engagement with the other passengers illustrate that Jeremiah is just

as alive in the present and looking forward to making a difference in the future as anyone else on the bus.

Further examples of Trickster behavior include Jeremiah sitting in the back of the bus—a place traditionally occupied by those intending to make mischief far from the eyes of authority figures in the front—to his secretly downing a medical prescription of pills when alone in a bathroom (Lee). Like most tricksters, he is a smooth talker, a man of words, who offers a prayer at the start of the trip and composes another to thank God once they have arrived safely in D.C. He participates in communal singing, adding a humorous verse to a Shabooya roll call (an old, Black traditional call-and-response chant) and lyrics to a blues song the group creates on the fly when the bus breaks down. Jeremiah exhibits a trickster's dual nature. He plays the part of a peacemaker, speaking out to stop passenger Flip, who likes to challenge the other passengers, from harassing a biracial passenger. When the group encounters Wendell, a Black car salesman who does not have a ticket but wants to join the bus ride, Jeremiah, the peacemaker, convinces the group to let him join, saying, "I say let him come. We're talking about a brother here" (Lee). Nevertheless, when Wendell constantly derides Black people, Jeremiah—displaying his dual nature--challenges him and does not object when Wendell is ejected unceremoniously out the bus's front door.

Jeremiah helps create a community on the bus and helps repair it when it might tear. He is a symbol of the past as it rolls into the future. The passengers

come together in community around music a few times in the film: from James Brown's "Papa Don't Take No Mess" to the roll call and blues music played on the guitar. When someone bemoans the loss of their boom box, Jeremiah takes out his djembe drum and plays a "coming home song." The drum is part of their shared African history. Later, he teaches the 19-year-old Xavier, the youngest man on the trip, how to play it, thereby passing the gifts of the past into the hands of the future.

Percussion instruments, like drums, replicate the human heartbeat, and Jeremiah's possession of the drum symbolizes that he is the heart of the journey. It is, therefore, ironic that Jeremiah has heart problems. The Million Man March was an attempt to get to the heart of the Black male community and address problems plaguing the community. However, in Lee's film, when the bus reaches D.C. and the March is within their reach, Xavier discovers Jeremiah collapsed in the back of the bus. Here, one sees the flip side of this Trickster character: the peacemaker becomes the disruptor. Instead of continuing to the March, the bus heads to the hospital. A doctor informs the group that Jeremiah is in severe cardiac distress. The group must decide to continue on to the March or stay at the hospital. The relationship between the father, Evan, and son, Evan, Jr., transforms on the trip, as does Evan, Jr.'s feeling about making the trip. The boy who did nothing but scowl his objection to this "stupid" trip, raises his voice and votes to stay at the hospital with Jeremiah, saying, "We can't just leave him!", indicating that he has not only found his place in this community of black men,

but he also claims responsibility and leadership within it. The group splits, with several passengers deciding to stay at the hospital while others continue on to the March. Even from his hospital bed, though, Jeremiah brings the community together: the ones who decide to continue on the March change their mind and circle back to the hospital, where they discover that Jeremiah has died. The community's mood is now heavy and sad. One passenger sobs, "We came 3000 miles just to bury another black man (Lee)" The community is one in their sorrow, but George, their leader, knows that sorrow is not enough and that Jeremiah would not want the community of Black men to give in to defeat. George delivers an impassioned call to action to accept more responsibility for the Black community (similar to Purlie's closing speech), after which he finds Jeremiah's drum and arrival prayer. George starts to recite the prayer, but soon the voice is that of Jeremiah, in a voiceover. The film ends with Jeremiah's words accompanied by Xavier playing Jeremiah's djembe and a shot of Evan, Jr.'s discarded and empty handcuffs (in contrast to the opening shot of the shackled Black limbs) at the feet of Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial.

Ossie never forgot that his fame as an artist gave him the opportunity to focus on civil rights and the uplifting of the Black community. He continued to work his entire life, dying while filming on location, on February 4, 2005, at the age of 87. The next night, Broadway theatres dimmed their lights in his honor.

After closing on Broadway in 1962, *Purlie* toured Chicago and became a film entitled *Gone Are the Days*, in which Ossie and Ruby Dee reprised their roles as

Purlie and Luttibelle. In 1970, the story became a musical, *Purlie!*, nominated for five Tony Awards, including Best Musical, but which garnered none. The play *Purlie Victorious* came again to Broadway in 2023 with Kenny Leon, a Black, Tony-award-winning director, at the helm and Leslie Odom, Jr., a Black, Tony-award-winning actor in the lead role. The production earned six Tony nominations, including a win for Best Actress for Kara Young, and was both a critical and box office success. Odom, Jr. was the driving force behind the revival, saying, "I think Ossie Davis is still saying something powerful to this generation about the unfiltered, unedited Black voice, Black imagination, Black humor, Black genius" (Lee para.33). At the close of every performance, the actors on stage turn to face a screen, featuring a projection of a devilishly smiling Ossie Davis: the man whose writing continues to inspire Black men, performing one more trick from beyond the grave.

Chapter Four

Sammy Davis Jr.

> One must have chaos within to enable one to give birth to a dancing star.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 11

Sammy Davis, Jr. was a contemporary of Ossie Davis. Their lives have some parallels: they were both Black artists who acted on stage and screen and were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. As Black Americans, both men encountered racism as an obstacle to their career goals. Yet, there were considerable differences in their lives, especially in their early upbringing and their goals in life. Ossie wanted to be a writer—to use the power of words to transform the world-- particularly the world of Black men-- into a better place. Sammy also had a goal: to live and be respected and loved as a star, for he believed that stars are loved by everyone—simply because they are stars. Achieving stardom, he thought he would, therefore, achieve respect and love.

Sammy believed that stars could buy anything they wanted, go anywhere they pleased, and do anything they wanted to do. Simply surviving was not enough for Sammy. He wanted to thrive, and his notion of thriving was the ability not just to buy anything, go anywhere, and do anything: Sammy wanted the ability to *be* anyone. Ossie's trajectory as a trickster is more straightforward than Sammy's. Sammy was a complicated man. Nevertheless, one can identify

trickster traits in Sammy's behavior. Sometimes, Sammy plays "The Fool," using buffoonery to "get something over on" the establishment with a wink and nod. Sometimes he defies societal conventions, in both his art and his life. However, the Trickster traits most clearly embraced by Sammy are mimicry and shapeshifting, a form of deceit. An examination of Sammy's life will further illuminate his mimicry and shapeshifting skills, defiance of social conventions, and playing the Fool.

Looking back at Chapter One's description of a Trickster tale:

> In a typical Trickster tale, the protagonist has a need or desire but is disadvantaged and unable to meet it. An obstacle prevents them from achieving their goal. The obstacle is formidable: it may take physical form as a character with more societal power and physical might, or it may just be that rules, laws, or social mores make achieving the trickster's goal seem impossible. The trickster must use their wits to win what they desire. Sometimes they win and sometimes they lose.

It is easy to understand Sammy's life and career as one, long trickster tale. He desired to be the biggest star possible. As a Black man with little money or education, born in the early part of the twentieth century, he faced multiple obstacles of rules, laws, social mores, and expectations that existed to prevent Black people from achieving power. Sammy had to use his wits to achieve his

goal. He tackled his goal of stardom step by step, using his wits and talent to create a star. Mostly, Sammy wins. However, sometimes, Sammy loses.

Sammy knew it wasn't going to be easy for him to be a star. He was short for a man at 5'4". He did not feel handsome enough for the White American star system. Rather, Sammy felt he was too dark-skinned, his nose was misshapen after more than one break in Army fights, and he had a glass eye. Sammy knew his looks would not buy fame. He was not well educated and had never attended school. He was not born to money. Sammy was born into a country filled with racial hatred and segregation. What Sammy did have was talent, a likable personality, a willingness to work hard, and a fantastic drive to be the best. In his autobiography, *Sammy*, (co-written with Burt and Jane Boyer), he says of his ambition:

> I knew that above all things in the world I had to become so big, so strong, so important, that those people and their hatred could never touch me. My talent was the only thing that made me a little different from everybody else, and it was all that I could hope would shield me *because* I was different.
>
> I'd weighed it all: What have I got? No looks, no money, no education. Just talent. What do I want? To be treated well. I want people to like me, and be decent to me. How do I get there? Only one way with what I have to work with. I've got to be a star! I

> have to be a star like another man has to breathe. (Davis, Jr. and Boyar 63)

Sammy spoke often of his desire to be a star. Only occasionally, like in the quote above, did he mention the ultimate goal: to be respected, liked, or loved. However, as also witnessed in his words, the two goals were one and the same in his mind. According to Sammy, he could only attain acceptance and love by becoming a star. The PBS documentary, *American Masters: Sammy Davis, Jr: I've Gotta Be Me*, quotes Sammy: "These people are going to love me as an entertainer no matter how much they may hate me as a Black" (Pollard). There were few Black stars in the entertainment industry at the time. Sammy's logic was understandable.

Artists with marginalized identities have additional obstacles to success in this country. A strategy that artists might make is to strive hard to be better than the best in their field. There is a belief in the Black community that a Black person has to be ten times better at their job than a White person just to survive, much less to get ahead. Whether that is true or not, a strong drive to be the best has often been useful for Black artists. It is also helpful to excel in more than one art form, increasing the number of possible avenues for career success. Ossie Davis was an actor, director, and writer but mostly worked in stage and screen works. Sammy excelled not only in more than one art form but in different mediums altogether. Often called a "triple threat" as a dancer, singer, and actor, Sammy also excelled as an impressionist, nightclub entertainer, and a

decent musician and photographer. In his ability to move between so many art forms, Sammy is a shapeshifting artist whose real tricks are his talent, resiliency, and willingness to take risks.

Sammy Davis, Jr. was born in Harlem in 1925 to Elvera Sanchez and Sammy Davis, Sr. His mother was Cuban American, though for most of his life Sammy claimed she was Puerto Rican because he feared anti-Cuban prejudice (Haygood 34). Sammy was not above a little Trickster deceit. His father was Black. Both parents were in show business. They met as members of a vaudeville troupe headed by Will Mastin. Mastin, whom Sammy would refer to as "Uncle Will," produced vaudeville spectacles of dancing, singing, comedic skits, and novelty acts that toured portions of the "Chitlin Circuit," a series of nightclubs and theatres where Black acts could perform for Black audiences. After giving birth to Sammy, Elvera longed to return to performing. She left Sammy with his paternal grandmother in Harlem, whom Sammy called "Mama." After having another child—a daughter—Elvera and Sammy Davis, Sr. divorced, and Elvera left the Mastin troupe for another vaudeville act. Afraid she might try to retrieve Sammy from Mama, Davis Sr. decided to take Sammy, at age three, on the road with the Mastin troupe. What followed was a chaotic childhood of near-constant travel and financial instability. Between gigs, Sammy had short intervals of a stable home life in New York with Mama. However, Davis Sr. would inevitably turn up and toss Sammy and his bags in a car to take off for the next nightclub engagement. Young Sammy developed the playful habit of asking, "Where we

going, Daddy?" to which Davis, Sr. would reply, "We're going into show business, Sammy" (Davis, Jr. and Boyar 14).

Sammy watched performances from the wings. During one performance, the toddler Sammy wandered onto the stage and mimicked what he had observed from the performers. Soon, it was part of the show: pretending that Little Sammy "accidentally" interrupted an act, coming out dancing. What was an authentic action on little Sammy's part became a trick in the act. Later, Mastin dressed Sammy in a suit, put him in blackface, gave him a big cigar, and billed him as a Silent Sam, the Dancing Midget. The disguise, another trick, assisted Davis, Sr. in avoiding child labor and neglect laws. Sammy never attended school, and Davis, Sr. did everything he could to avoid attendance officers. Though not of his own making, Sammy performed tricks before he was in long pants.

It became clear that Sammy had a talent for mimicry. This talent proved crucial to Sammy's career. Time and time again, Sammy placed himself in situations where he could observe talented artists and mimic them. Mimicry is a form of trickery in which someone pretends to be someone or something else. Sammy desired freedom to be who he wanted to be. Throughout his life, he experimented and explored different presentations of Sammy Davis, Jr. As someone raised in show business, where acting and performing different personas happened nightly, this form of shapeshifting would seem natural to Sammy.

Tricksters often excel at shapeshifting. Sometimes, the shapeshifting manifests itself as a character changing their physical form – as mythological gods and goddesses sometimes do to trick humans. Sometimes, this means disguising oneself – in the way that Ossie's Purlie presented himself as a professor during one visit home and then presented himself as a minister at the next. Shapeshifting can manifest itself as building a persona. Carl Jung wrote, "The persona is a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung, *Collected Works*, para.305). Sammy Davis, Jr. created a persona to presents to the world to gain its love. In Sammy, building the persona or the shapeshifting was cumulative, almost more like shape-building. Sammy seldom discarded any new form of expression that he encountered. He was an artist at making and remaking himself, adding art form upon art form, building the public persona of SAMMY DAVIS, JR., towards his ultimate trick: finally making everyone love him. *Vanity Fair* magazine described Sammy as a "chameleon" (458). Chameleons are famous for mimicking their environment. They were not the only ones to refer to Sammy in this way. However, Sammy did more than just mimic what he saw. He improved upon the art forms he took on, creating his own style and performing them bigger and better than anyone around him.

Soon, little Sammy was the hit of Mastin's shows and Sammy got special billing: 'Will Mastin's Gang Featuring Little Sammy (Jamie, "1925-50 Early Life on the Road", para 2). He was performing the tap routines of Mastin and Davis, Sr., but better than them. Mastin witnessed how quickly Sammy learned; soon, the child was involved in all aspects of the performances. When he was seven, Mastin started taking Sammy with him to the booking agents' office, teaching Sammy the business end of "show business." Around that same time, Sammy appeared in his first film, *Rufus Jones for President* (1933), a short featuring Ethel Waters. The thin plot-- Sammy dreams that he becomes a child president—is an excuse for Waters' singing, Sammy's dancing and singing, low stereotypical humor, and pretty showgirls. Sammy's dancing is undeniably excellent for someone so young. *The Jazz Singer*, the first film with incorporated sound, was released in 1927, so in 1933, talkies were still relatively new. Getting Sammy cast in the short film was smart because vaudeville was dying. Mastin could no longer book his full show and knew changes were needed. He let go of most of the troupe, keeping Davis, Sr., and Sammy to dance alongside him and billing the new act as The Will Mastin Trio. As a trio, the act began opening for other entertainers. The two older men would come out tapping furiously and then call Sammy on stage. The act lasted eight minutes.

In 1934, Mastin introduced Sammy to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the most successful Black tap dancer of his time. Robinson had a different way of tapping: instead of the fast-paced, energetic tapping that involved the entire body that

Sammy learned, Robinson was a smoother dancer, mostly moving only his legs and feet. Sammy admired Robinson's style and mimicked it partly during the Trio's performance. He practiced at all hours to combine this smoother style with Mastin's. Though Mastin was not happy about Sammy's change in style, he could not deny that audiences loved it. Junior quickly became the hit of the show, as his dancing talent outshone the two older men. This was the first time Sammy had used hard work and talent to rise above mimicry and create his own style.

At 18, the Army drafted Sammy. There, he encountered racial hatred in a way he had never known. Sammy had led a cloistered life in the entertainment and the Black communities. The reality of being Black in America hit him in the Army quite literally. On the first day, when Sammy refused to clean the boots of White soldiers, he got into his first fight and took his first beating. It would not be his last. White soldiers broke his nose three times. He suffered a concussion after at least one fight. White soldiers poured urine into his beer and even peed on him. Though not experienced in fighting, he learned to physically defend himself time and time again. However, the situation changed once Sammy had the opportunity to perform in variety shows put on by the unit. He not only danced, but he added singing and impersonations. His performances garnered respect amongst many White troops and even protection from some: "My talent was the weapon … the way for me to fight" (Jamie, "1925-50 Early Life on the Road", para 6). Sammy realized that he could win acceptance from White people by entertaining them. Appreciation of his talent made life in the Army easier, but

it did not protect him from all acts of racial hatred. Sammy would summarize his Army experience thusly: "Prejudice had been crammed down my throat. I'd gone into the Army like a kid going to a birthday party, and they'd taught me well all that my father and Will, with the help of show business, had so lovingly kept from me" (Davis, Jr. and Boyar 63). If he had not known before the obstacles he would face because of racism, he certainly understood them now.

Sammy left the Army in 1945, determined not to let his race define his career and life. "I've got to get bigger. I've got to get so big, so powerful, so famous, that the day will come when they'll look at me and see a man—and then somewhere along the way they'll notice he's a Negro" (Davis and Boyar 197). He returned to the Will Mastin Trio. The Trio's reputation grew, primarily due to Sammy's performances and his way of making friends with influential show business people like Eddie Cantor and Humphrey Bogart. Soon, the trio was not limited to Black venues but were opening in big nightclubs for famous entertainers, White and Black. Sammy was now up close and personal with stars. In the Army, he started doing impersonations and now, as he met actual music and movie stars, he worked on perfecting his imitations. Against the wishes of Mastin, he worked his impersonations into the Trio's act, mimicking Black entertainers like Louis Armstrong and Billy Eckstine but predominately impersonating White ones like Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Stewart, and Edgar G. Robinson. For a Black man to impersonate a White entertainer on stage was unheard of – but that did not deter Sammy from taking the risk. He was

determined to entertain in his way, bringing all his talent to the stage. Adding impersonations to the act exemplified mimicry, risk-taking, and defying social conventions. The risk proved worthwhile: Sammy's impersonations were a big hit and became a permanent part of Sammy's act.

Sammy first met Frank Sinatra when the vaudeville star was 15. Sammy was impressed with Sinatra's success and lifestyle. Sammy added a bit of singing to the Trio's act, mimicking the style of Sinatra, the most popular singer of the day. Sammy reconnected with Sinatra when Sinatra demanded that the Will Mastin Trio open for his act. After hearing Sammy sing a bit during the Trio's act, Sinatra encouraged him to sing more, and Sammy, the chameleon, did: first by singing a smooth, Sinatra-like way, but, over time, developing his style. He worked more singing into the Trio's act and hustled for a recording contract with Decca Records in 1949. In 1954, his first hit single was "Hey There." Months later, his first album, *Starring Sammy Davis, Jr*, was released. It hit #1 on the Billboard chart and stayed on the chart for 23 weeks. Currently, Sammy's discography includes over 40 records (Jamie, "Discography", para. 2).

With the hit recording and the success of the Will Mastin Trio Starring Sammy Davis, Jr., Sammy felt that stardom was within reach. He started living the lifestyle of a star as he desired, even though he could not afford it. New suits and jewelry were his favorite purchases. Will and Sammy Sr. understood how important it was for Sammy to live big. It was also good for the act to appear so successful. Will and Davis, Sr. bought a new Cadillac for Sammy. Within months,

Sammy totaled the car in an accident that cost him his left eye. Even this was not going to deter him. He put on an eye patch, practiced doggedly to regain the balance so crucial to a dancer, and returned to the stage with the Trio only two months later, to a standing ovation at Ciro's nightclub in Los Angeles. *Variety* said it was "one of the greatest ovations ever handed a performer, any place" (Haygood 194). Later, after receiving his glass eye, he stopped a performance to take off the eye patch slowly. The ovation and cheers following this tricky move proved to Sammy that he had the audience's love.

Due to Sammy's multiple performance skills, the Trio was in demand. When hired to open for Lionel Hampton, Sammy pleaded with Hampton to teach him to play the drums and vibraphone. Hampton gave in. He said, "He was a fast learner. Whatever he attempted to do, he was good at." Hampton also observed, "Sammy wanted to be a star, and that's what he was working toward…Sammy was climbing all the time. All the time he was climbing" (Haygood 111). After watching Hampton and learning from him—forever the mimic—Sammy incorporated playing musical instruments into his persona and the Trio's act, which now averaged at least 30 minutes.

After leaving the Army, Sammy learned a new skill: photography. Photography is also similar to mimicry: it allows the photographer to reproduce the original. Unlike his other artistic endeavors, photography was not part of public performances or his public persona: it was personal.. Sammy just enjoyed taking photos. He started with street scenes in Harlem. The camera eventually

became his constant companion, and, as Sammy started meeting famous people, he started documenting these gatherings with photographs. Sammy particularly liked to photograph women he found attractive. The photographs provided proof that Sammy was amongst the stars. By choosing the setting, lighting, and even the posing, Sammy could subtly control his star-filled world. A book of his black and white photos, *Photo by Sammy Davis, Jr.,* was published posthumously by his biographer, Burt Boyar.

Having conquered the live stage with his dancing, impersonations, and singing, Sammy aimed for more: he wanted to be a movie star. Dancers, singers, and comedians were fine. That work was paying the bills. However, audiences for nightclubs were limited; movies were the hot thing. Sammy desired a wider audience. Everybody would love him if Sammy were a movie star (like the people he impersonated and partied with).

Nevertheless, movies seemed out of reach, as the studios refused to cast him. Instead, Sammy found other outlets for acting. One of his forays into acting as an adult was with a television pilot, *Three's Company* (1953), about a family of nightclub performers. Sammy insisted on a truly interracial cast (a rarity that was another defiance of the conventions of the day and a risk) and roles for his father and Mastin. The pilot was never picked up, as television stations feared it would not play in the South. The pilot was one of the few risky, tricky moves that failed. Sammy's next acting gig was a lukewarm Broadway show, *Mr. Wonderful* (1956-57). The show featured Sammy's dancing and singing talents.

However, it originally included a plot focused on a talented artist who experienced racism in the U.S. and moved to Europe to succeed. Again, the producer's fears about how the racial plot might hurt the sales resulted in a weakening of the plot that the critics panned. He had much better success with his future musical performances, *Golden Boy* (1964-66, 1968) and *Stop the World- I Want to Get Off* (1978).

Finally, in 1958, Sammy had his chance for his first leading film role since *Rufus Jones for President* in *Anna Lucasta*, which also starred Eartha Kitt. (Coincidentally, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee performed the same roles on stage in 1946.) But his real break came the following year when Sammy appeared as the character Sportin Life in the film adaptation of *Porgy and Bess* (1959).There was a great deal of buzz around the production. Sammy lobbied for the role for months and was excited to appear in a big-budget film with Sidney Poiter, Dorothy Dandridge, and Pearl Bailey. His performance met with much critical acclaim. A weekly newspaper, The New York Mirror, said, "HE'S GREAT." *Cue Magazine said,* "Sammy Davis, Jr. – serpentine, acrobatic, evil incarnate – is the finest Sportin' Life yet." *The New York Times* review read:

> In previous stage productions of this folk opera Sportin Life has come through as a sort of droll and impious rascal with the bright, lively quality of a minstrel man…But there's nothing charming or sympathetic about the fellow Mr. Davis

> plays. He's a comprehension of evil on an almost repulsive scale. (Haygood 291)

Sammy had conquered film. More roles followed, including *Ocean's Eleven* in 1960, with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, and Peter Lawford—known as "The Rat Pack." Some of his subsequent films included various combinations of The Rat Pack. Sammy appeared in Westerns (which he loved, and he even became an expert at gunplay), comedies (like *Cannonball Run* (1981) and *Cannonball Run 2* (1984)), and dramas, including *A Man Called Adam* (1965), which Sammy co-produced and which also starred Ossie Davis. He made 26 films; his last one, *Tap* (1989), co-starring Gregory Hines, was released a little more than a year before his death.

Sammy felt he needed film roles to be a true star, but kept returning to live performances. Reading an audience and making them love him was one of his greatest talents, his ultimate trick, and what fed him more than anything else. It was more important to him than family or his health. He continued to perform even as his second wife, May Britt, divorced him and moved away with their two children. He went back to the nightclubs after suffering a heart attack and hip replacement surgery. First, Davis, Sr., and then Will Mastin retired from the Trio, but Sammy kept performing his nightclub act alone. By then, *he* was the headliner. He continued to tour worldwide, played for queens and kings, and received a Kennedy Center honor, an NAACP Image award, and a posthumous

Lifetime Achievement Award from the Grammys. People who saw his nightclub act said it was unsurpassed. He was a consummate entertainer.

In 1960, while filming *Ocean 11* in Las Vegas during the day, the aforementioned Rat Pack took to the stage of The Sands casino nightclub in the evenings to perform what they called "The Summit." Famous and influential people from all walks of life—movie stars, sports figures, politicians—filled the seats of the nightly shows. Sammy, Sinatra, and Martin went on to perform in other Vegas clubs, in Atlantic City, and Miami, becoming the core of the Rat Pack, which Sinatra led. The act included singing by all Pack members, while Sammy also danced, did impersonations, and sometimes played the drums or other instruments. However, the main feature was the comedy: between and, just as often, during the songs, Sammy and others would make joking remarks—mostly making fun of each other. They performed throughout the 60s. In 1988, Sammy, Sinatra, and Martin launched a "Together Again" tour that played to some of the largest arenas in the country. Martin left the tour after only a few shows, and Liza Minelli joined Davis and Sinatra. The tour played in the U.S. and worldwide before ending in 1989. The three appeared together for the last time at *Sammy Davis, Jr's 60th Anniversary Celebration* (1990), a TV extravaganza featuring numerous stars from the entertainment world including Gregory Hines, Eddie Murphy, Whitney Houston, and Michael Jackson. It won an Emmy, but Sammy died of throat cancer before receiving the honor.

This is a short biography of the work of a man who scaled the heights of fame as an all-around entertainer. He had many artistic talents. One of these was playing "The Fool." When referring to tricksters, the Fool is a character that appears to be stupid or extremely silly. Often, this is an act—a persona—that hides the character's true intelligence and slyness. From the seven-year-old Rufus Jones singing, "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You," while holding a greasy pork chop to his Rat Pack stage buffoonery, Sammy was not above using the kind of tactics Black entertainers brought to vaudeville in his performances, even though those tactics had fallen out of favor in the Black community. Matt Birkbeck, in his book *Deconstructing Sammy: Music, Money, Madness, and the Mob* (2008), writes, "Sammy gave in to ridiculous parodies that set African Americans apart" (43). One of the places where Sammy often displays foolish behavior is in the Rat Pack stage shows. The parody is evident in his use of Southern Black Ebonics in them. All of the performers occasionally use this speech, too, but Sammy uses it more. Dave Calvert, in an essay from *Popular Music*, "Similar hats on similar heads: uniformity and alienation at the Rat Pack's Summit Conference of Cool," writes about the minstrel format of the Rat Pack shows: "The Summit performances make no overt reference to blacking up as a motif. Nonetheless, the influence of minstrelsy infiltrates the performance structure in other ways. The organisation of the troupe in particular echoes the characters, relationships and roles that were developed in the blackface tradition" (para. 31). Calvert's essay continues, explaining how the

minstrel roles of the ‘interlocutor' and the ‘endmen’ are evident in the structure of the Summit’s routines.

The Rat Pack performances are the prime examples of Sammy acting The Fool. The best recordings are of the performances of Davis, Sinatra, and Martin from the early ‘60s. Though all three were known for singing, comedy takes center stage here. All three performers take ribbing. Though it goes in every direction—Sammy ribs Martin and Sinatra, Martin and Sinatra rib Sammy, Martin ribs Sinatra, who ribs Martin, and so forth-- Sammy is the brunt of more jokes than the others. And though some of the jokes make fun of the Italian heritage of Martin and Sinatra, jokes aimed at them are predominantly about Martin's drinking and Sinatra's leadership of the group. The jokes are about their actions. Most of Sammy's jokes are racial. A joke repeated often, with variation, involved throwing a white tablecloth over Sammy and Frank saying something like, “Alright folks, put on your sheets and we’ll start the meeting” (*The Rat Pack Live at the Sands, 1962*), referring to a Klu Klux Klan meeting. While Sammy is singing, Frank or Dean might also yell out, "Be yourself and eat some ribs" (*Live at the Sands*). The jokes are about his identity. One can change one's actions, but one cannot change one's race. Some jokes are about his short stature. (One oft-repeated bit involves Martin carrying Sammy in his arm while saying, "I want to thank the NAACP for this award…" a joke revolving around Sammy's race and height.) There are also frequent jokes about Sammy being Jewish (Sammy

converted to Judaism as an adult). Again, jokes centered around his identity, even if this particular identity is one Sammy chose instead of being fixed at birth.

Being the brunt of jokes does not necessarily make Sammy "The Fool." It is the way he reacts to the jokes that smacks of buffoonery. While Martin and Sinatra react to the ribbing with coolness, nonchalance, or even ignoring remarks, Sammy laughs at every joke thrown his way. He laughs and laughs big: stomping the floor, turning around, doubling over, gesticulating wildly. If he is in the midst of singing, he stops his song to perform his exaggerated reaction. The assumed humor is not just in the joke, but just as much in his response, which encourages the audience actually to laugh at Sammy twice. His nightclub performances with Sinatra and Martin and his mimicry and adoration of Sinatra (embodied on stage when they perform "Me and My Shadow") are sometimes cringeworthy. Sammy is treated as less than equal, often treated like a child. Sinatra makes fun of Sammy's suit in one long joke, saying it is not worth wearing in their classy act. He points out that he and Dean are in tuxedoes. At first, Sammy is defiant, saying his suit is fine. Frank bans him from the stage and orders him back to the dressing room. Sammy hangs back, still defiant. Frank orders him more firmly. The punchline is Sammy ultimately giving in, like a recalcitrant adolescent, going to the dressing room. Later, he reappears in a tuxedo.

However, Sinatra was very supportive of Sammy: giving the young Sammy singing advice, inviting the Trio to open for him, insisting Sammy be part

of *Ocean 11* and that he receive third billing in the Rat Pack movies, and even threatening to end their friendship if Sammy did not stop taking narcotics. It is evident that the three men genuinely cared for each other. During the act, all three remind the audience, "Just trying to have a little fun, folks." However, the reality is that Sammy is a member of an oppressed minority that, during the '60s, when the three men started performing, was fighting to be recognized as human beings worthy of the same respect and dignity as White America. Sammy's buffoonery lands differently from the silliness of Sinatra and Martin. Laughing at a member of an oppressed people can feel mean and like additional oppression to those in a similar struggle.

The Rat Pack stage act is not the only example of Sammy playing The Fool. In the early 70s, Sammy was a frequent guest on *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in* (1968-1973). One memorable character he performed as a Judge, who entered in a robe three sizes too big and a long, white, curled wig like the ones worn by British judges, prancing and singing, "Here Comes the Judge," an Ebonics-filled tune. As always, Sammy used whatever tool he had to achieve his goal of fame. Sammy did not always play The Fool: when one considers his many performances, the foolish ones are a relatively small portion. It was simply a tool Sammy brought with him from vaudeville. It elicited laughs from the audience. However, the vaudeville audiences were Black. Similar to the laughs elicited by the Rat Pack, they feel differently coming from a White or mixed audience. James Baldwin, in "Stranger in the Village," from *Notes of a Native Son*

(1955), wrote that it was a great part of the American Negro's education "that he must make people 'like' him" (213). Playing The Fool encouraged White audiences to like Sammy: it proved him harmless, not a "threatening Black man." However, The Fool act hurt Sammy's image in the Black community, and, as Birkbeck's remark indicates, it formed a narrative about Sammy that has lingered for years. It was a trick that both helped and hurt him and his legacy.

During the early years of his career, Black people did not have the power to make Sammy a star. Sammy needed success in the White community to become a star. With that as his sole purpose, he immersed himself in the White community. Though the indicators were there as soon as Sammy became successful, it was not until later in life that Sammy was bothered enough by the sting of disdain from the Black community to try to counter-narratives that he was anti-Black. Articles with headlines like, "Is Sammy Ashamed He's a Negro?" appeared in local Black publications like *Jet* magazine and local Black newspapers, as Sammy climbed to stardom. Sammy found them frustrating--"I've worked all my life toward the day when no white man could tell me how to live—now the colored people are trying to do it" (Davis, Jr. and Boyar 191).

Sammy wanted to be loved by everyone and never felt he was not part of the Black community. While climbing the ladder of fame, he insisted on including his father, Uncle Will, and other Black entertainers in his performances. Sammy stopped playing at hotel clubs that would not house him and his entourage. When he attained power, Sammy refused to play at clubs that would not allow

Black people, and this helped integrate nightclubs in Vegas, Los Angeles, and Miami. These tricks of defying social conventions were successful. They helped create opportunities for artists coming after Sammy. However, this was also not obvious to the Black community at the time. These actions were not enough to counter the overall negative narrative in the community.

Sammy worked on presidential campaigns for John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Richard Nixon. He believed the three men were earnest in their desire to promote civil rights for Black people. We also enjoyed having access to the halls of political power. Though he performed at fundraisers for John Kennedy, Kennedy denied Sammy the opportunity to appear at a ball thrown by Sinatra to honor Kennedy's election. Sammy fared better with Nixon, who invited him to the White House and appointed Sammy on commissions. However, the infamous photo of Sammy hugging Nixon further damaged Sammy's reputation in the Black community, which mostly did not support Nixon. Nixon was a Republican. Most Bleck people were voting Democrat. Sammy's support and fondness of Nixon was further proof that he was out of touch with Black America and proof to some that Sammy thought he was White (or wanted to be White).

Sammy tried to repair his reputation. He marched in Selma and D.C. alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. He met with Black troops in Vietnam to hear their concerns. Sammy helped broker peace and cooperation between Black gangs and civil rights organizations. On the night of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, Sammy went on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* to plead

with the nation not to riot (Vereen). He contributed financially to Black organizations and performed at their fundraisers. Famously, in 1972, during an appearance on the TV show *All in the Family*, he meets the racist head of the family, Archie Bunker, and surprises Archie by kissing him on the cheek while being photographed. The kiss—quite a trick on Archie—was, according To Norman Lear, Sammy's idea (VanHooker para. 39). Over time, it becomes widely acknowledged that Sammy's accomplishments paved the way for other Black artists. Whether Sammy had pushed for social change primarily to satisfy his desires or improve Black Americans' lives, the effect was the same: Sammy Davis, Jr. demonstrated that Black entertainers could bring in the bucks. Future triple-threat artists paid homage to Sammy. Gregory Hines kissed his feet and said, "Sammy Davis is one of the greatest entertainers who ever lived. In my lifetime, I've never seen anyone to compare with him" (Haygood 472). Ben Vereen, who understudied Sammy in *Golden Boy* and appeared with him in *Sweet Charity*, mimicked Sammy in Vereen's performance in *All That Jazz* (1979).

Sammy's biggest defiance of social conventions might have been his public love of White women. During a time of the lynching of Black men for even looking at a White woman, Sammy did not try to hide his attraction. In 1958, he started a relationship with Kim Novak. Resorting to trickery to keep the relationship secret, Sammy would have his driver drop him off blocks away from Novak's house so he could skirt through the neighbor's yards and avoid possible

paparazzi. The relationship was discovered, and it infuriated the studio boss. Friends warned Sammy that there was a price on his head. He quickly married a Black dancer, Loray White, and stopped the relationship with Novak. The marriage did not last long—just long enough to get the studio boss off Sammy's case. However, she was not the last White woman Sammy would romance, and, in 1960, after several other affairs, he married the tall, blonde, Swedish actress May Britt. They were married for six years and had three children before Britt tired of Sammy's fast lifestyle and divorced him. As much as Sammy loved blondes, Britt's love could not compete with the love Sammy experienced from constantly performing. Sometimes, one identifies so strongly with a persona that it becomes hard to take it off.

Years earlier, Sammy tried to impress a White female WAC captain in the Army so she would allow him to perform in the unit's upcoming entertainment. Several White troops, thinking Sammy was romancing the captain, abused Sammy. They locked him in the latrine and used white paint to write "coon" and "I'm a nigger" on his face and body. This was understandably a traumatic incident for Sammy. Did the Army incident influence him to desire White women more? Perhaps. A Trickster with a streak of defiance might react in such a way.

However, this is another (presumably negative in both the White and Black communities of the day) narrative about Sammy that is only partially true. Sammy was attracted to White women and had affairs with several that made the gossip columns. But Sammy loved women and also had affairs with Black

women. They were simply less publicized, particularly by the White press. Sammy romanced Eartha Kitt during their work on *Anna Lucasta*, had an affair with Lola Falana, and frequently entertained an interracial bevy of young women in his hotel suite. Two of his three wives were Black: after his divorce from Britt, he married Altovise Davis. They were married for 20 years. However, it is true that Sammy's relationships with White women, whether they were romantic or just rumored to be, defied a social convention and hurt his career. It led to protests at his appearances and death threats. It further damaged his reputation in the Black community. The relationships were risky, tricky moves that failed to help Sammy achieve his goal, though they may have been satisfying and worth the risk for him personally.

Sammy achieved his stardom. He lived his stardom as he thought a star should live, even if he had to use trickery to do it. Sammy bought a luxurious 22-room house for his third wife, Altovise, and filled it with fancy cars, furs, priceless art, and anything money could buy. He threw lavish parties, including one in 1980 dubbed “The Party of the Century” that cost $100,000 (Birkbeck 2). Sammy bought expensive gifts for friends, recent acquaintances, and even whole casts of productions. He was constantly in front of debt collectors, often convincing nightclub owners to give him advances to pay his many bills. He died deeply in debt to the I.R.S. for millions, but he had lived like a star!

He escaped the I.R.S., but his tricks did not always help him escape "the briar patch." Anthony Newly wanted him to record the song, "The Candy Man."

Sammy hated the song and felt the syrupy image was all wrong for him. However, when looking to switch recording studios from Motown to MGM, the MGM studio heads insisted he record the song. There was no escaping it: he recorded the song, and it made #1 on the Billboard charts. Audiences loved it and expected Sammy to sing it at every show. "If I have to sing, 'The Candy Man' two shows a night – and, God save us, I can't avoid it – if I don't find new ways to do it, I'll go out of my mind" (Davis, Jr. and Boyar xv). So he changed the placement of the song within his act and worked with different arrangements. His co-biographer, Burt Boyer, wrote: "I watched every show I could, never tiring of them, because they were never the same. He was the only nightclub entertainer I have ever seen who did not have a set act. Before each performance he would tell his conductor, George Rhodes, 'I'll open with …. And …' and then it was up for grabs. By the time he had finished those few musical numbers he knew what the audience wanted – jokes, dancing, more songs, impressions, you could watch him perform for a week and never see the same show twice. He was always spontaneous, always inventing things…(xv)

Sammy perfected his act to get the maximum amount of acceptance and love from each audience. If the audience loved the impersonations, he would do more. If playing the drums impressed them, Sammy would play more instruments. He was able to shapeshift multiple times within a one-hour set like no other entertainer, before or after.

Another song he avoided for years was “Mr. Bojangles." Though named for Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the life of the man described in the song bears no resemblance to Robinson's. The song is depressing, describing a washed-out dancer, and Sammy felt that singing it could be a type of curse. Giving in to studio pressure again, he ultimately did record it. The tune fit his vocal range and enabled him to add the kind of dance moves he could handle later in his life. It was also a hit, and Sammy made it part of his regular repertoire that audiences expected to experience.

Sammy went through a period in the ‘70s of hosting parties full of cocaine, alcohol, and other drugs, with a revolving door of young women. He admired the hippies and hung out with a crowd of younger entertainers. Sammy began to dress and talk like them. The press and the public ridiculed him. Finally, at 51, Sammy gave up drugs, quit drinking, and settled into a more thoughtful middle-age. He could laugh at himself: if Sammy was playing The Fool, the audience knew it, but he knew it, too. Sammy spoofs his embrace of the hippie culture in a magnificent performance of Big Daddy in the movie *Sweet Charity*. In his nightclub act of the ‘80s, Sammy included a tricky wink and a nod by going out on stage without his signature gold chains and rings. At the end of the act, he would sing a song eternally linked to him, “I’ve Got To Be Me”

Whether I'm right or whether I'm wrong

Whether I find a place in this world or never belong

I gotta be me, I've gotta be me

What else can I be but what I am

I want to live, not merely survive

And I won't give up this dream of life that keeps me alive

I gotta be me, I gotta be me

The dream that I see makes me what I am

That far-away prize, a world of success

Is waiting for me if I heed the call

I won't settle down, won't settle for less

As long as there's a chance that I can have it all

I'll go it alone, that's how it must be

I can't be right for somebody else

If I'm not right for me

I gotta be free, I've gotta be free

Daring to try, to do it or die

I've gotta be me

Marks, Walter, *Golden Boy*, 1967

Afterward, he would come downstage, find and put on his jewelry, and say, "Do you recognize me, now" (Davis, Jr. and Boyar 509)? Having achieved his goals and with no more obstacles before him, Sammy could stop shapeshifting and live with the fact that he is both SAMMY DAVIS, JR., the persona he created, and also Sammy, the man who is full of surprises and wants to win everyone's heart.

He was called "Mr. Entertainment," "Mr. Wonderful," and "The Greatest Entertainer of All Time." Sammy crafted the persona of Sammy Davis, Jr. by matching mimicry, hard work, talent, a striving for stardom, and a determination to do things "his way." He first modeled his dancing based on the styles of Mastin, Davis, Sr., and Bill Robinson, then made his style. He modeled his early singing after Frank Sinatra, before developing his style. He impersonated movie stars in his stage act before becoming a stage and screen star, in roles he picked, roles explicitly written for him, or films where he could pal around with his buddies. He wanted to be a star, and he lived like one: filling his closet with suits he would only wear once, buying expensive gifts for family and friends, throwing lavish parties for hundreds of people, and covering himself in his signature jewelry, all the while owing millions to the I.R.S. and dying in deep debt. More than anything he desired love; after achieving that love from White audiences, he joined the Civil Rights Movement, found a place in the Black community, and is acknowledged, praised, and emulated today by Black entertainers like Michael Jackson, Whoopi Goldberg, and Arsenio Hall, who recognized Sammy's groundbreaking status as a dancer, singer, and comedian,

saying, “Before there was Michael, before there was Prince, before there was Eddie, there was Sammy” (Boyar para 27).

He became more than a triple threat—dancer, singer, actor, and photographer—achieving a status gained by few Black entertainers in his time, and he did it in his own way. He even died on his terms: when diagnosed with throat cancer in 1989, instead of having surgery that held the best chance to save his life but would take away his voice, he chose chemotherapy, despite this treatment having a significantly lower success rate and greatly increasing his chance of dying. He died on May 16, 1990.

If Ossie Davis resembled the storytelling trickster, Uncle Julius, Sammy's desire for freedom and love of song and laughter aligns well with High John de Conquer. In her essay, “

High John de Conquer”, Zora Neale Hurston describes this folkloric character

> High John de Conquer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that. But he was not a natural man in the beginning, First off, he was a whisper, a will of hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper put on flesh, His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a singing-drum.

> The sign of this man was a laugh, and his singing-symbol was a drumbeat…High John could beat the unbeatable. He was top-superior to the whole mess of sorrow. He could beat all, and what made it cool, finish it off with a laugh…
>
> Old Massa met our hope-bringer all right, but when Old Massa met him, he was not going by his right name. He was traveling, and touristing around the plantations as the laugh-provoking Brer Rabbit. So Old Massa and Old Miss and their young ones laughed with and at Brer Rabbit and wished him well. And all the time, there was High John de Conquer laying his tricks of making a way out of no-way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jackpot with no other stake but a laugh. Fighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force and winning his war from within. Really winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of a black man whole and free. (Hurston 450-452)

High John is known for his fantastic adventures, risk-taking, and shapeshifting. He is an energetic, larger-than-life character who lives life without limits. As the quote shows, he is also associated with Brer Rabbit. Like Sammy, both characters sometimes play The Fool. Sammy, though unique, played a classic trickster game.

If, again, one returns to the definitions in Chapter One, one is reminded that Scholar Dr. Emily Z. Marshall, author of *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit*, said that tricksters are "symbols of chaos and freedom... expressions of the innate human desire to thwart societal rules and overturn oppressive regimes" (*Harlem Tricksters 21*). Sammy's lifelong struggle for freedom was filled with chaos. Yet, out of the chaos, he created a lasting legacy that has been a beacon for Black entertainers to follow.

Chapter Five

Janelle Monáe

My characters hope for better lives.

- Octavia E. Butler, X

Ossie Davis and Sammy Davis, Jr.'s careers spanned most of the twentieth century. But they were not the only Black artists creating Trickster art and living Trickster lives. Josephine Baker was a famous and controversial dancer who left the United States to perform and live in France. Known for famously appearing wearing a banana skirt and a beaded necklace, her personal life was as interesting as her stage performances. She adopted twelve children, worked for the French Resistance in World War II, and, like Sammy Davis, Jr., helped integrate nightclubs by refusing to play to segregated audiences in the South. Decades later, Jean-Michel Basquiat, a Black visual artist renowned for his layered and complex street art depicting Black culture, criticized the art world at the same time he participated in it. One of his works, *Untitled* (1982), sold at auction for $110.40, the highest price of any work by a Black artist. In the world of music, there is also Tina Turner. Her vibrant and upbeat stage performances of the '60s and '70s masked a life filled with pain and fear of domestic abuse. She escaped that life, redefined her musical style, and forever cemented her place in the annals of music history.

As Black people gained more rights and as Black artists were recognized and allowed to work in more places and ways, the Black arts flourished and became more prevalent in American culture. Today, Black artists dominate certain niches of American culture. This is true of hip-hop culture. Black musicians are also more involved in other music genres. One modern Black musician who mixes genres and brings true innovation to the music world is Janelle Monáe. Since they broke onto the national music scene in 2007, they have pushed the boundaries and defied many expectations of young Black artists. Janelle's music and the accompanying videos present to audiences a world that could still be…if we, as committed audience members, are willing to make it so. Their choice of film roles reflects the same desire to promote a society without prejudice, oppressive hierarchies, or inequality. Though Janelle's art speaks to the liberation of all people, they are particularly interested in supporting young, queer, Black people. They have said, "I always think about the next generation and creating a different blueprint for them. That's my goal: to let them know there's another way" (Sinn para. 13). That is Janelle's goal: to demonstrate to the world that there is a better way to live. A way that is less constrictive, more colorful, and more sensual, and that centers love and acceptance with emphasis on forgiveness as a tool that can produce a more understanding world, an idea that feels countercultural in an era of polarization, scapegoating, and all-out hate. Janelle creates art that hopes for everyone to have better lives.

Janelle Monáe Robinson was born to a working-class family in 1985 in Kansas City, Kansas (McAvoy para.2) Their mother was a janitor, and their father a garbage collector who struggled with drug addiction and was in and out of jail for much of Janelle's life. Their parents divorced when they were young, and their mother remarried. Their large, extended family is heavily involved in the Baptist church, as was Janelle in their youth. They wrote plays, acted in school musical productions, and left home to attend the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City, where they were the only Black woman in their class. Feeling stifled, Janelle left the Academy to join a friend in Atlanta, and that is where their music career took off. Discovered by Big Boi of Outcast, they were hired to add vocals to several of the group's songs. Big Boi brought Janelle's music to Sean Combs, who, after witnessing one of their performances, signed them to Bad Boy Records. Janelle established their own label, Wondaland Arts Society, an outgrowth of the music production and artists collective they formed in Atlanta with friends Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder. Under this label, Janelle recorded a suite of EP's *Metropolis* (2007), and four albums: *The ArchAndroid* (2010), *The Electric Lady* (2013), *Dirty Computer* (2018), and *The Age of Pleasure* (2023). Every one of the albums has received multiple Grammy nominations.

Janelle may not think of themselves as a Trickster personally. However, they embrace certain Trickster qualities in their art and life. Unlike Ossie and Sammy, there is no autobiography yet that gives an insightful look into how they

view themselves. However, Janelle has done a few interviews that contain clues as to how they think about their work. In a 2016 interview for Billboard, they declared, "Donald Trump is trying to build a wall. I'm trying to burn walls down and build more bridges" (Ogunnaike para.8). Their political activity is one of resistance to the status quo, a Trickster trait. Like Ossie and Sammy, Janelle is active in the Black liberation movement of their time. For the two men, it was the Civil Rights Movement; for Janelle, it is the Black Lives Matter Movement. Their social justice interest is not just in Black liberation: Janelle started Fem the Future in 2020, an organization to support women in the music business, and brought their voice to *We the People* (2021), a Netflix animated series teaching young people about democracy and citizenship.

Janelle participates in social justice events for LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter, Black women's rights, and gender equality. However, they do not merely protest with their bodies: politics and protest are frequent themes in their music. The lyrics for the song "Turntables" (2020) repeat the refrain, "America. / You a lie. / But the whole world about to testify." The music video for the song not only clarifies its meaning but is also an example of what Janelle means when they say, "I spend a lot of time in the future. But to help the future, sometimes you got to go back to the past, and sometimes you got to stay in the present." The video starts with the words of James Baldwin, calling forth the past struggles for Black and Gay Liberation: "I can't be a pessimist because I am alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter.

So, I am forced to be an optimist. I am forced to believe that we can survive, whatever we must survive." The visual images include Janelle in a WWII WAC uniform in front of a huge American flag and a child from the future looking through VR glasses, moving as though they are imagining themselves within the images they are viewing, which include footage from the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter protest, and shots of progressive civil rights activists like Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Tommie Smith (the gold medalist in the 1968 Olympics who raised a Black Power fist), Maxine Waters, and Stacey Abrams. There is a nod to the Drs. Mamie and Kenneth Clark's Doll Test[4] – but in Janelle's version, the Black girl happily chooses the Black doll.

In the debut cover story of the first issue of *them.* Magazine, Whembley Sewell writes of Janelle:

> "The constant… is her work, which remains centered in advocacy, agency, and empowerment, regardless of what form it takes. With reverence for the responsibility of an artist and activist, Monáe uses every platform she builds to amplify intersectional discourse about race, gender, and sexuality in new ways. She takes action in a way

[4] Black psychologists Mamie and Kenneth Clark created a test to demonstrate the effects of segregation on self-esteem in children. Black children between the ages of three to seven were presented with Black and White dolls. They were asked to tell the psychologist the doll's race, which doll they preferred, and some characteristics of the doll. A majority of the Black children preferred the White doll, assigning it positive attributes like "nice," and "good," while frequently assigning negative attributes to the Black doll, like "bad." Their findings were presented in the Brown V. Board of Education case as examples of how segregation hurt the self-esteem of black children (Legal Defense Fund).

> that makes everyone take notice…Monáe's voice and vision for humanity help to define what it means to advance emancipation for all. (Sewell para 2)

Another constant in their work is the hope that art and love can transform hearts and the world. Janelle's characters are mostly peaceful warriors, reflecting their own hopefulness and preference for love over hate.

Another protest anthem Janelle recorded that went viral is the 2015 "Hell You Talmbout (Say Her Name)," in which various Black women like Alicia Keyes, Zoe Kravitz, Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, Brittany Packnett Cunningham, Beyoncé, and Brittany Howard say the names of Black women who died from police violence for over 17 minutes. It is a powerful statement.

In real life, Janelle defies social conventions with her social justice stance, like Ossie and Sammy. A look at the two songs mentioned uncovers their social justice themes. Other themes are also at play in Janelle's music. Like their mentor, Prince (a Trickster in his own right), Janelle is not merely a musician: they are a songwriter. Their hit song, "Turntables," is a play on words: the title is about "turning the table" on America, but there is an obvious allusion to the "turntables" that play vinyl records—a way to play music in the past that has come back in style. Again, Janelle brings elements of the past into the present. Janelle loves wordplay, a writer's trick. In the song "Crazy, Classic, Life" (2016), she sings, "We don't need another ruler / All of my friends are kings / I am not America's nightmare / I am the American dream." In the video, Janelle and their

Black women friends thrust their fists in the air in the Black Power symbol on the word "kings," which connects the word to not just King George (rejected by America) but also Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, signifying that these women carry on King's legacy. The gesture also alludes to the current idea within the Black community that Black liberation does not need another individual to carry the cause forward, but, instead, needs everyone to rally to the cause.

Janelle is known as much for their music videos as their music itself. Their music videos are a smorgasbord for the eye, with either rich colors or their signature contrast of black and white. Whatever the color scheme, each frame is carefully bathed in sensuality, whether it is Janelle's artfully lit bare, brown body in a white bathtub placed in a small blue lake and surrounded by pink flamingos, a pink hovercar (that still manages to look old fashioned somehow) gliding along a desert road, or a fully fanned out peacock. The viewer never knows what might pop up next: the Black Girls Magic dancers in leather-studded jackets and Kente fezs, a HBCU marching band, or vagina pants. Moreover, it is not just the videos: Janelle is known for their elaborate and playful Met Gala and Halloween outfits. Their body is like a canvas. Janelle has a flair for the dramatic and the playful in both their music and dress. Often, in their music videos, there is a playfulness juxtaposed with serious lyrics that can leave one wondering if the audience should laugh or rage. Janelle's outfits, costumes, songs, and videos also frequently explore sexuality, which they connect to freedom, especially their own freedom to break out of gender and sexual binaries.

Chaos, table-turning, defying the standard order of the day, and topsy-turviness are Trickster traits. American culture seems to be just recently learning to not only accept a world without binaries but to celebrate it. Janelle is unabashedly and unapologetically way out ahead of the curve. They challenge a binary classification of gender and sexual preference. They identify as queer and as female, using both "they/them" and "she/her" pronouns, not feeling a need to accept other people's definitions of these words. They say, "Don't allow people to put labels on you" (Monáe, Dirty Computer YouTube Space Q&A) "I defy every label" (Associated Press 2020) Janelle shares publicly that they are pansexual. To many Americans, these are new identities. To some Americans, these are frightening identities: in a country that currently tries to erase such identities—with laws, book banning, and even violence—Janelle's forthrightness is risky and brave, as is their story of how they have grappled with labels and identity:

> Monáe's ascent as an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community has tracked alongside her own journey towards personal enlightenment and fulfillment of purpose. It has come with an understanding of the paradox of visibility, and a reckoning with the fears and challenges that queer people, specifically queer people of color, face when living authentically. In taking center stage to speak out and perform against aggressive oppression, Monáe's voice and vision for humanity help to define what it means to advance emancipation for all. (Sewell para 2, 3)

Themes of freedom are common to all three Trickster artists in this thesis.

Though their identity is not tricky, the manifestation of it within their art has a delightful playfulness to it that reminds one of The Trickster. They glide across the stage in their black and white tailored tuxedo, showing off dance moves made famous by male entertainers. In the video for "Pynk," Tessa Thompson's head pops out between Janelle's pink vagina-pants-wearing legs. In the video for “Django Jane”, Janelle, wearing a blood-red suit pantsuit with a tie, raps, “Remember when they said I look to mannish/ Black girl magic/ Y'all can't stand it/Y'all can't ban it,/Made out like a bandit/They been tryin' hard just to make us all vanish” (Monáe 2018). Janelle is being themself, but they are well aware that there are forces at work that would prefer to silence them.

The connection between the songs on an album makes Janelle’s music unique and tricky. They take shapeshifting to another level. Their albums are narratives that take the listener on a journey into the future. Their "emotion pictures" do the same. These are lengthy, narrative-driven short films that accompany Janelle's albums. The protagonists in these futuristic journeys are multiple alter-egos of Janelle themself. In their earlier musical stories (*Metropolis* in 2007 and *The ArchAndroid* in 2010), Janelle is an android named Cindi Mayweather from the year 2719 who exists in a dystopian society that suppresses freedom and love. These themes appear in all the songs.

In *Dirty Computer*, Janelle’s alter-ego is Jane 57821. Jane is a dirty computer. Dirty computers, Janelle says, in a YouTube Space Q&A, are “us:

black women, disabled, LGBTQ. Dirty computers are outsiders, marginalized, powerless" (Janelle Monáe YouTube Channel). The album *Dirty Computer* has fourteen songs that align with a narrative theme around dirty computers. In the 48-minute emotion picture accompanying the album, the outsiders are a diverse group that includes Jane 57821 and their friends and lovers Zen and Che, played by Tessa Thompson and Jayson Aaron, respectively. The film opens with a voiceover: "You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition. At all. And if you were dirty… it was only a matter of time" (Donoho and Lightning). The film's narrative—the "dirty computers" are rounded up by the State to be "cleansed" of all their memories, their individuality, and their desire for freedom—is interspersed with videos from several of the albums' songs. First, the police take Zen, then abduct Jane and Che. A cleansed Zen, now renamed MaryApple 53, is trying to cleanse Jane. At the end of the film, it appears that they have succeeded as Jane introduces themself to a restrained Che as MaryApple54, informing him that they will help cleanse him. Credits roll. But—surprise!—after the credits, Zen returns, and Zen, Che, and Jane escape their confinement by turning the tables on their imprisoners. A viewer who does not stay through the credits would miss this trick—and the trickster persona--at the end.

Acclaimed Black horror writer Tananarive Due, in an interview for *The Guardian*, said, "Somehow, I realized I could write books about black characters

who reflected my own experiences, or otherworldly experiences – not just stories of history, poverty, and oppression. I believe black characters in fiction are still revolutionary, given our long history of erasure" (Lewis-Giggetts, para 17). Given their identity, working in the genre of science fiction is revolutionary. The interplay of a narrative built interspersed with music videos is revolutionary. The amount of Blackness and non-binary actors in Monae's work is revolutionary. They push back against erasure by casting their videos and short films not only with a majority cast of Black women, but also with other BIPOC and queer actors.

Like a true Trickster, Janelle was not satisfied with only a vocalist career. This shapeshifter is a songwriter, singer, guitar player, music producer, actor, CoverGirl model, and author. They may not claim an identity as a dancer, but their dancing is a significant feature of their videos and live performances. Dance moves like sliding effortlessly across the stage, moonwalking, pushing the microphone stand to the floor, and grabbing their crotch are obvious mimics of Michael Jackson, Prince, and James Brown. Unlike Sammy's mimicking, Janelle's feels like paying homage to those who came before them, all Black entertainers known for adding significantly to music history. This is especially true of Prince, who was Janelle's mentor. Janelle said, "My musical heroes did not make the sacrifices they did for me to live in fear" (Spanos para 36).

With sights on the past, present and future, Janelle acknowledges those musical heroes who paved the way for a queer, Black, tuxedo-wearing pansexual

Afrofuturist[5] like Janelle to perform in arenas, at the Grammys and the Academy Awards, and before President Obama. (Of their frequently worn tuxedo, they say, "I call it my uniform," she explained. "My mother was a janitor, and my father collected trash, so I wear a uniform too" (McAvoy para 2).) Even a few of their film roles are historical, such as the character Mary Jackson in *Hidden Figures* (2016) and Marie Buchanon in *Harriet* (2019).

Janelle also appears in *Moonlight* (2016), *Antebellum* (2020), *Welcome to Marwen* (2018), and *Knives Out: The Glass Onion* (2022). Interestingly, in *Knives Out: The Glass Onion,* Janelle plays a character playing a trick: their character, Helen, pretends to be their dead twin sister, Andi, to obtain revenge on their sister's murderer. Like other movies in the *Knives Out* franchise, *The Glass Onion* is a mystery full of twists and turns.

Janelle does not easily resemble any of the earlier folkloric Black Tricksters discussed in Chapter Two. The closest nonblack Trickster that Janelle resembles might be Scheherazade, a Trickster from The 101 Arabian Nights tale. Like Scheherazade, Janelle is educated and well-read. They are a storyteller who knows how to enthrall an audience. And like Scheherazade's trick played upon King Shahryar, Janelle has made millions fall in love with them. Her storytelling saved Scheherazade's life. Janelle's messages of liberation and resistance to

[5] Ytasha Womack, author of Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture, describes Afrofuturism as "an intersection of black cultures as well as imagination, technology, mysticism, and liberation" (Monday para.7).

authoritarianism and hate might save lives by supporting young people struggling with identity questions and softening a nation's heart.

Perhaps there is no equivalent Trickster to Janelle in Black folklore because Black people could not imagine a Trickster like them earlier or could not afford one so forthright and bold. Perhaps Black Americans needed to reach this developmental point in our nation to nurture, make space for, and embrace a Janelle Monáe. There are quite a number of scholarly writings attempting to define Janelle Monáe. Musicologist Matthew Valnes calls their music, "Afro-Sonic Feminist Funk", writing that it uses "the sonic and performative tenets of funk to complicate the gendered politics and discourses surrounding funk music" (Valnes 1). English Professor Zoe Rodine believes that Janelle's art embodies posthumanism, arguing that they are "demonstrating how we might walk the tightrope between the machinic and the organic as we articulate new selves in the deepening Anthropocene" (Rodine 170). As a Trickster, many labels might apply. Yet, Janelle asks that we stop labeling people. Perhaps Janelle is not meant to be defined as much as to be listened to and enjoyed.

Conclusion

Within these pages burned the concept that Tricksters and Trickster tales serve unique functions in marginalized communities. They entertain, yes; however, they also instruct and can provide a roadmap for living. Black artists might find trickery particularly useful as they must overcome racial barriers and the struggles inherent in becoming successful in art. Therefore, successful and renowned Black artists might particularly take on Trickster traits. Some Black artists display Trickster traits in their art and their personal lives as they strive for success in a society not invented for their success.

This thesis has examined parts of the roadmaps of Tricksters Ossie Davis, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Janelle Monáe. Often, their trickery contained echoes of Black Tricksters from the past: Uncle Julius, John de High Conquer, and Scheherazade, walking the road before them. Each Trickster learned from those who came before them. Ossie, at Howard University, learned the value and power of words to the Black Community. Sammy learned to dance and make music from Will Mastin, Bill Robinson, Lionel Hampton, and Frank Sinatra. Janelle had a mentor in Prince and used inspiration from James Brown. And, in their turn, they inspire future generations.

Though unique, they all used tricks of deceit, defiance, and delight. They created tricky characters in their art, like Purlie, The Judge, and Jane 57821. They employed tricks and took risks in their real lives, from assuming new personas in their Las Vegas act to directing movies of Black empowerment

during Blaxploitation to gathering Black women to record a homage to Black women who died from police violence.

All of their tricks could be instructive. Their successes paved the way for those coming after them, like their Black ancestors, who used every trick they could conceive of surviving, thriving, and leaving the world a better place for future generations. All three defied the social conventions of their day, marching for civil rights, marrying someone of a different race, conquering a fear and letting the world know one is pansexual. All three delighted audiences: with their satire, their amazing dancing, and their emotion pictures.

There is so much more that one could explore about these three Tricksters, let alone *all* the Black artist Tricksters one could identify. There could be the exploration of common themes: How does the concept of freedom connect Black Tricksters? How do post-slavery Black Tricksters process the evils of the past? How are they creating a future of liberation? How can one reconcile the personal price Black Tricksters pay for tricking for liberation? The questions asked shape the stories told, and all storytelling is a trick. The stories we tell about ourselves define who we are. This is true of the individual. This is true of people. The stories of our heroes, growing larger than life, may become our future folktales.

Ultimately, art is a trick. Art itself shapeshifts. That's the nature of art. It changes its shape from viewer to viewer, audience to audience. It changes over time as the context changes. Without the audience's perspective, art is

meaningless. Art becomes meaning as one consumes it. Janelle Monáe put it like this:

> Once you put something out and you sit with it, you find out new things that you weren't even paying attention to. People will come up to you and say, "This is what this means to me." And you're like, "Wow, I had no clue that that's what I was saying, and that you would feel that way after you heard it." The beauty of art is that it reveals itself over time, even to the artists who create it. (Sewell, para 39)

When the storytellers told the stories of Brer Rabbit, John de Conquer, John and Old Master, could they have imagined how the characters they created would become iconic? Did they know they would inspire generations? Perhaps, more importantly, did they hope they would?

> …as Black people in the future, knowing we can be as magical as we want to be, as badass as we want to be, as kingly and queenly as we want to be. We get to redefine what it means to be black….when we see it, we can be it…It's important that I free myself up to be anything I want to be…regardless of the color of my skin…because I don't believe that we need to take the same coordinates to reach the same destination. (Janelle Monáe YouTube Channel)

Their roadmaps contained different coordinates. Yet, they all took the road to success, a success only they could imagine. Maybe the truest trick is simply imagination: for a small-town Georgia boy who had cane syrup poured over his head by police to imagine he could challenge racism with laughter; for an uneducated youth who literally dances for his supper to imagine himself a superstar; for someone who has struggled with their identity to imagine a world where love and acceptance wins.

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