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Identifying and Mapping the Female Trickster

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Abstract: According to convention, the trickster archetype is predominantly reserved to the male figure. Some literary theorists dispute that the female trickster is a new figure and does not fit with the traditionally male archetype. However, this research asserts that the female trickster is equally as important and active as the male. I assert that the female trickster performs many of the same acts as the male, such as shapeshifting, cunning deception, and boundary-crossing. Like all tricksters she is subversive and furthermore, the female trickster is inherently feminist. Although she might not always carry the name “trickster”, I argue that the female trickster has always been a part of the archetype. She often goes by other names such as spinster, madwoman, conjure woman, etc. This research also recognizes some women as tricksters, by their actions, where they have not traditionally been given the title. This study is unique because it includes both literary, mythical, and historical figures. I outline a timeline of female tricksters across multiple cultures. Anansi the spider, who is often considered the original male trickster, appears in Asante myth as early as 1400 CE, whereas the first female trickster written on my timeline is Lilith, the woman before Eve, in Jewish mythology. The tricksters in Greek mythology, Hermes/ Mercury and Baubo, occur even earlier, in 900 BCE. Lilith appears as early as 200 BCE. Lilith demonstrates aspects which are common among the female tricksters: her liminality, her boundary-crossing, and her connection to the divine or malign feminine, which transcends time and space. This research asserts that the female trickster contains all of the main characteristics of the male trickster. Furthermore, I assert that this is a universal archetype for women and argue for continued broadening of this archetype to female representatives.
The trickster archetype is one of the vital and original archetypal energies recognized by psychologists, spearheaded by Charles Jung. Jung says that the concept of the archetype “is derived from the repeated observation that, for instance, the myths and fairy tales of world literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere...These typical images and associations are what I call archetypal ideas” (Jung 412). In her dissertation, *The Trickster Archetype and Women's Development*, Hancock-Sheridan explains how the trickster is an archetype that assumes great importance in Jung’s analytical psychology. Jung considered the figure of Mercurius, also called Mercury and Hermes, “to be the precursor of the archetypal energy required for the individuation process, in which a person becomes aware of formerly unconscious content of the psyche” (Hancock-Sheridan 06). In his book, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, Paul Radin notes that “Jung defines the trickster as ‘a collective shadow figure, an epitome of all the inferior traits of character in individuals’ ” (Radin 209). The shadow is understood as the inferior part of the personality- a collection of aspects of the psyche which are denied expression because they are not compatible with the chosen conscious attitude.

The first ‘numinous’ figure that Jung posits behind the shadow is the anima. The anima is a personification of the feminine nature of a man’s unconscious, whereas the animus is a personification of the masculine nature of a woman’s unconscious. This gendered representation in the human psyche is vital to our understanding of further incorporating the trickster. Many psychologists believe that women need to strengthen their animus shadow side of their psyche in order to regain their powerful voice. Hancock-Sheridan writes, “If this archetypal energy were made available to woman, would she be helped in integrating her animus, in expressing herself, in regaining a feeling of wholeness? Trickster is, after all, the god of communication; he has a
way with words” (Hancock-Sheridan 08). As one who transcends bounds, the trickster has an active role in communication, especially between the physical world and the holy realm.

The trickster character appears in man’s earliest forms of storytelling. The first documented trickster tale comes from the Asante people of Ghana. Anansi the Spider, the demi-god of all knowledge stories, remains one of the most well-known Tricksters and shapeshifters to date. According to Asante myth “Ananse, in his form as a spider, approached Nyame and asked him to appoint him as the King of All Wisdom Narratives” (Asante). In response the almighty creator god, Nyame, gives Anansi a difficult task, saying, “If you can catch and capture the Jaguar Who Has Dagger-like Teeth, the Hornets Who Sting like Wildfire, the Invisible Fairy of the Forest, you will be King of the Wisdom Narratives” (Asante). Anansi uses his wit to accomplish all these tasks, asking the jaguar to play a game that allows him to be tied with a rope, tricking the hornets that it was raining so they should hide in his calabash, and telling the invisible fairy to fight the tar baby, which effectively traps the invisible fairy. Thus, Anansi becomes the King of All Wisdom Narratives. In the same way that a spider spins a web to catch prey, Anansi spins a complex web of African oral history. He is an elaborate, manipulative, and cunning spider trickster. He can also change forms, sometimes appearing as a man, sometimes as other animals.

The trickster often appears at the start of an origin story. One of the first trickster tales, the tale of the Winnebago trickster, depicts a male trickster as he evolves into his current form. He goes on a warpath, travels the world and causes trouble, discovers his genitals, shapeshifts between the male and female sex, and then settles as a male (Native American Trickster Tales). The Winnebago trickster can shapeshift into a woman, especially during times of transition, but the default form is that of the male. The trickster appears across cultures and occurs at different
times in history. However, the trickster figure is rarely depicted as female. For example, a simple Wikipedia search of the term “trickster” produces a list of literary, cultural, and historical characters, only 13 of which are female compared to 97 male characters (Wikipedia).

In his essay, *Where are the Women Tricksters?*, Lewis Hyde recognizes that all of the standard tricksters are male. He says that

> There are three reasons why this might be. First, these tricksters may belong to patriarchal mythologies, ones in which the prime actors, even oppositional actors, are male. Second, there may be a problem with the standard itself: there may be female tricksters who have simply been ignored. Finally, it may be that the trickster stories articulate some distinction between men and women, so that even in a matriarchal setting this figure would be male (Hyde 185).

There are some exceptions however, since many tricksters including Anansi often shapeshift into women. Furthermore, European fairies, Hawaiian Kupua gods, Japanese Kitsune and Kappa, as well as Korean Kumiho appear as both male and female and are considered tricksters. Hyde recognizes that “It is often said that the well-known tricksters are not male but androgynous or at least of indeterminate sexuality” (Hyde 185). Hermes is an example of a god/trickster who is considered a hermaphrodite. On many mythical occasions, the Norse god, Loki, and the Winnebago trickster, Wakdjunkaga, transform themselves into women. However, Hyde argues that these examples, do not indicate an uncertain sexual status. Rather, “in both cases a male figure becomes briefly female and then reverts to being male. The male is the ground, the point of departure.” (Hyde 185). Since tricksters are fundamentally subversive actors, this calls to question why they wouldn't appear as females, especially in patriarchal settings. Hyde says, “The answer might be a version of Sacvan Bercovitch’s point about how ideologies contain
dissent. A system does well to figure its problems in terms of its own assumptions. If power is masculine, best to have the opposing be masculine as well” (Hyde 189). In my opinion, the reason there are not many recognized female tricksters has more to do with representation of the female voice than Bercovitch’s point.

Trickster figures’ motives behind their actions range from benevolence to malevolence, and often there is no assurance of either because the trickster character inherently defies definition. In her book, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*, Lori Landay writes, “In general, trickster figures are representations of liminality, duality, subversion, and irony” (Landay 02). Two consistent characteristics across trickster figures, male or female, good or evil, creative or destructive, are that they defy definition and they operate through humor. Their changeability and trickery informs their definitive aspect: their world-changing-creating, earth-shattering-shaping humor.

The trickster archetype has been historically reserved to predominantly male figures. Some critics define tricksters by narrow standards. While I outline the common aspects and actions of tricksters, they do not need to be confined by these standards. For example, the male trickster figure usually occurs as two types: the cultural hero or the selfish buffoon. However, in her essay, *Tricksters and Shamans in Jack London’s Short Stories*, Gail Jones asserts that

Defining trickster as a cultural hero is limiting; for what can be gleaned from the hundreds of trickster tales and cycles profiles a shape-shifting character of contradictions: a figure both profane and sacred, foolish and clever, absurd and profound, marginal and, yet, central. In whatever incarnation, trickster shakes up the status quo, rearranging boundaries and reordering our reality with amusement
and laughter. The transforming, transcending trickster operates along boundaries, borders in flux (Jones 110).

The most notable aspects which tricksters are defined by are their use of humor, their ability to shapeshift, their crossing of boundaries, and especially their deception. Some of the characters I mention have all of these trickster aspects, while others have a few. In his argument on essence of archetypes, Jung says,

> It is necessary to point out more that archetypes are not determined as regards to their content, but only as regards their forms and then only to a very limited degree. A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material conscious experience. (Jung 412).

He further adds that the form of an archetype might be perhaps be compared to the axial system of a crystal, which as it were, performs the crystalline structure in the mother liquid, although it has no material existence of its own. This first appears according to the specific way in which the ions and molecules aggregate. The archetype itself is empty and purely formal, nothing but... a possibility of representation which is given *a priori* (Jung 412).

Thus, the female trickster archetype has been less explicitly expressed, and thus less defined as a trickster, though just as there is anima and animus aspects of the male and female psyches, there is the feminine aspect of the trickster archetype. In her book, *Scheherazade’s Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*, Jurich maintains: “While he [the trickster figure] incorporates the divine and secular, the heroic and foolish, Trickster - whether in mythical or folklore frames - is all of us, male and female. Yet, his role as she has
been neglected.” (Jurich 43). The working definition of the trickster needs to be expanded to women as she has always been part of the archetype.

In this research I will define tricksters in two categories: as mythic, literary (fictional) or cultural figures, and as historical or authorial figures. Many of the tricksters cross boundaries into both of these realms. For simplification, I have charted the alternate names and characteristics of the male and female tricksters, in comparison to one another, in order to highlight their similarities. This table informs the teleology of the trickster. The rest of this research is dedicated to mapping the timeline of the female trickster, in seven character studies, with references to the male trickster when necessary.
# Teleology of the Trickster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Trickster</th>
<th>Female Trickster</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Alternate Names:</strong></td>
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<td>Culture Hero</td>
<td>Spinster</td>
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<td>Buffoon</td>
<td>Mad Woman</td>
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<td>Conjurer</td>
<td>Conjure Woman</td>
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<th>Characteristics:</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>wit/humor</strong></td>
<td><strong>wit/humor</strong></td>
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<td><strong>cunning deceiver</strong></td>
<td><strong>cunning deceiver</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ex: Br’er Rabbit</td>
<td>The term “cunning” is related to the female genitals, as the modern slang term makes clear. In terms of etymology, “cunnus” is the Latin word for the vulva. (1)</td>
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<td>Ex: Buggs Bunny (American cartoons)</td>
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<td><strong>shapeshifter</strong></td>
<td><strong>shapeshifter</strong></td>
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<td>Ex: Anansi the Spider (Asante people, Ghana)</td>
<td>Ex: Lilith (Jewish mythology)</td>
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<td><strong>boundary-crosser</strong></td>
<td><strong>boundary-crosser</strong></td>
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<td>Ex: Mercury (Greek God)</td>
<td>Ex: Zora Neale Hurston</td>
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<td><strong>psychopomp</strong></td>
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<td>One who brings into the presence of death or into the presence of the holy. Ex: Mercury</td>
<td>One who brings into the presence of death or into the presence of the holy. Ex: Toni Morrison</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Weaker prey outsmarting the stronger foe”</td>
<td>“Weaker prey outsmarting the stronger foe”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>inherently feminist</td>
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Timeline of the Female Trickster

Lilith (200 BCE)

mythic trickster

In Jewish tradition, Lilith is believed to be the woman before Eve. According to Jewish mythology there were multiple women before Eve, because God had to make a perfect mate for Adam, and the first few women were not perfect enough. It is not surprising to me that in a male-dominated religion, the first male is right, but his mate has to be made or corrected according to his and his God’s desires. In the beginning, God made Lilith from the dust, just as Adam, whereas Eve is made from Adam’s rib. Lilith is a trickster in action and depiction. In her essay, Daring the Free Fall: Sula as Lilith, Debbie Lopez describes Lilith as “Creator and destroyer, seducer of men and murderer of infants, succubus and snakewoman, Lilith is Creation's first female trickster. In pronouncing the ineffable name of God, she is also, arguably, Creation's first female author” (Lopez 121).

Lilith leaves the garden of Eden because she refuses to be subjugated under Adam. Lopez writes, “she refused to lie beneath him in sex, arguing that she was his equal, not his subordinate” (Lopez 122). She not only rebels against God’s will to mate with Adam or her calling to be a “perfect woman” for Adam, but she also leaves Eden to be her own self. This is the aspect of the trickster which highlights self-identity. Lilith discovers individuation, which Jung defines as the process “by which a person becomes a psychological ‘individual’, that is, a separate, indivisible unity or ‘whole’ ” (Jung 415). Lilith’s decision to leave the garden reverses her role of mother/ female/ protector of babies, to a threat to babies. Upon her departure from the garden, God sends three angels to Lilith to tell her to return. Christopher Witcombe writes,
“Despite the threat from the three angels that if she didn't return to Adam one hundred of her sons would die every day, she refused, claiming that she was created expressly to harm newborn infants. However, she did swear that she would not harm any infant wearing an amulet with the images and/or names of the three angels on it” (Eve & Lilith). Of course, these kinds of amulets which protected against Lilith were popular during the medieval period.

In the book of Genesis, the serpent which deceived Eve is depicted as male. However, during the middle ages, there are some depictions of the serpent as a female: who is generally believed to be Lilith. Witcombe writes, “Frequently in art the serpent is represented as female. In a fresco by Michelangelo, for example, the serpent is shown with the upper body of a woman and snake-like lower parts” (Eve & the Serpent). In his depiction, Michelangelo is following the popular convention of the period. There was a common fear of the evil Lilith figure, who consorts with the devil and haunts men at night, so artists depict her as the snake. Lopez explains that “Into the middle ages, the Jews were still employing amulets to ward off the lilim, lascivious succubae who would descend on men in their sleep eliciting nocturnal emissions, which they would then use in creating their own demon brood. For the Greek, the lilim were Empusae, Lamieae, or Daughters of Hecate. Christians called them succubae or harlots of hell” (Lopez 122). In some medieval works “Adam and Eve stand beneath the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, while a serpent-tailed Lilith perches in the branches above. This latter configuration directly conflates Lilith with her Greek counterpart, Lamia” (Lopez 123). According to myth, Lamia was a mistress to Zeus. In jealousy, Hera kills all of Lamia's children and turns Lamia into a monster that devours children. Some say she has a serpent's tale beneath the waist. Witcombe also references “A serpent with a woman's head and blond hair also appears... in a fresco by Masolino of the Temptation on the entrance pilaster in the Brancacci Chapel in S. Maria del
Carmine in Florence” (Eve & the Serpent). The paintings depict the serpent with a female head, or a female with serpent-like limbs. The artists of the 15th century thus depict a woman as not only the source of the fall of man (Eve), but furthermore as the source of evil and deception (the serpent). Witcombe writes “By identifying Eve as a temptress, she was seen as playing the same role as the evil serpent who had tempted her, thus linking the two” (Eve & the Serpent). Since Lilith transforms in art, I consider her a shapeshifter. In The Hebrew Goddess, Raphael Patai writes that “No she-demon has ever achieved as fantastic a career as Lilith, who started out from the lowliest of origins, was a failure as Adam's intended wife, became the paramour of lascivious spirits, rose to be the bride of Samael the Demon King, ruled as Queen of Zemargad and Sheba, and ended up as the consort of God himself... what she meant for the Biblical Hebrews can only be surmised, but by the Talmudic period (second to fifth centuries C.E.) she was a fully developed evil she-demon, and during the Kabbalistic age she rose to the high position of queenly consort at God's side” (Patai 221). Lilith and Lamia enact the negative, amoral side of the trickster, however to a farther degree.

The Lilith figure is depicted as an infanticide- one who eats children. Lopez contends that “the most striking parallel between Sula and both Lilith and Lamia lies in their common roles as child-stealers and/or infanticides. Lilith, in particular is defined by her threat in this regard. The very word lullaby, originates from two Arabic words meaning ‘Beware of Lilith!’ ” (Lopez 126). This depiction of an evil, mythical woman is not a rare occurrence. There are many representations of evil women besides Lilith and Lamia. Witcombe writes: “It needs to be remembered that these demonic ‘women’ are essentially personifications of unseen forces invented to account for otherwise inexplicable events and phenomena which occur in the real world. Lilith, Lasamhtu, Lamia and other female demons like them are all associated with the
death of children and especially with the death of newborn infants” (Eve & Lilith). Most depictions of goddesses contain a negative or positive aspect, often in relation to their beauty. For example, the Hindu goddess, Mohini is portrayed as an beautiful enchantress who maddens lovers, sometimes leading them to their doom. Mohini is the only female avatar of the Hindu god of preservation, Vishnu, so she has a more positive characterization. She has an active history in the destruction of demons throughout Hindu texts. In one tale she tricks the demons into giving the nectar of immortality to her and “gives it to the good instead, depriving the evil from gaining immortality” (Mohiniyattam). I think that is through her relation with the male god, since she is an incarnation of him, that Mohini is seen as good deceiver, whereas the other deceptive women are marked as evil. In evil depiction, there are also the notable Greek Sirens and Slavic Rusalka, along with other water nymphs who charm men with their beauty, and pull them into the water to their death. Another prominent example are witches, all of which are personifications of women to describe evil or occurrences that were once misunderstood.

Uzume (Shinto religion 700 CE)

and Baubo (Greek Mythology (900–800 BCE)

mythic trickster

In her essay, The Trickster Archetype and Women's Development, Hancock-Sheridan asserts that Uzume is a female trickster. The story of Uzume originates in the oldest extant chronicle in Japanese history, the Kojiki, also known as Furukotofumi, which translates to “Records of Ancient Matters” (Encyclopedia Britannica). In the story of the hidden sun, The Japanese sun goddess, Amaterasu, is upset by her uncontrollable brother, Susano-o, the god of storms because he kills her sacred horse. Amaterasu retreats into a dark cave and thus her light is
gone from the earth. She falls into a deep depression, and Uzume is the only kami (Shinto spirit-god) who succeeds in bringing her out of the cave. Uzume utilizes her wit and crude humour to intrigue the sun goddess. The story goes:

All of the gods and goddesses strive to coax Amaterasu out of the cave, but she ignores them all. Finally, the kami of merriment, Ame-no-Uzume, hatches a plan. She places a large bronze mirror on a tree, facing Amaterasu's cave. Then, Uzume clothes herself in flowers and leaves, overturns a washtub and begins to dance upon it, drumming the tub with her feet. Finally, Uzume sheds the leaves and flowers and dances naked. All of the male gods roar with laughter, and Amaterasu becomes curious. When she peeks outside, a ray of light called ‘dawn’ escapes and Amaterasu is dazzled by the beautiful goddess that she sees, this being her own reflection in the mirror. Surrounded by merriment, Amaterasu's depression disappears, and she agrees to return with her light. Uzume is then known as the kami of dawn as well as of mirth (Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto).

Uzume not only uses humor, but she tricks a goddess who appears to be omnipotent. Hancock explains that Uzume is the washerwoman and her action is significant because she is not regarded as the most powerful kami. Hancock writes,

as the lowliest member of the pantheon she has been working, and no one has told her what has happened. When she finds out that she and the others have been condemned to death, she starts singing and dancing in a humorous and ribald fashion. She pretends her breasts are eyes which she sways back and forth and then makes them look cross-eyed. The gods and goddesses are moved to laughter (Hancock 09).
This laughter brings light into the world once again. So Uzume transforms a hopeless situation into one filled with life, by impressing the sun goddess with her crude humor.

There is a Greek parallel to the Japanese Uzume: the Greek crone woman, Baubo. Lewis Hyde writes, “In Greek Eleusinian mystery religion, Baubo was a woman who managed to make Demeter laugh in the midst of her grief and anger over the loss of her daughter Persephone” (Hyde 186). Since Demeter is the goddess of the harvest, in her sadness, fertility left the earth. In the same flashing humor as Uzume, Baubo manages to make the goddess laugh “by lifting her skirts and exposing her pudenda, a shameless and impudent act by definition” (Hyde 186). Hyde recognizes the parallel between Uzume and Baubo, saying that these two examples “add a corollary to the idea that tricksters revive high gods by deriving them. If the high one is a goddess, it may take a female trickster to do that work” (Hyde 192). Baubo is thus a female flasher of antiquity “whose shamelessness is linked with fertility, and the return of the dead, all of which are part of the trickster's mythological territory” (Hyde 186). So while in the introduction section I noted that Hyde contends that there are some aspects of the trickster narrative which may be reserved to male figures, he says, “The Baubo case suggests that perhaps the traditional literature on tricksters hasn't cast a wide enough net, that there are female figures out there, we just need to look more widely to find them” (Hyde 187).

Scheherazad (early 9th century)

literary trickster

The collection of Middle Eastern folk tales in *One Thousand and One Nights* is framed around the story of Scheherazade and the Persian King of Kings, Shahryar. Shahryar sleeps with a different woman each night and has her executed the next morning. On the night that
Scheherazade is to meet the King, she tells him a story and spares the ending. The King is so intrigued by her story that he spares her life to hear the end of it. This recurs for the rest of the nights of the stories, which range from one hundred to one thousand nights, depending on the version. Scherhazade uses her wit to transform a dangerous situation into one which benefits her. As Hancock-Sheridan explains,

> The king, whose wife had betrayed him with a kitchen boy, hates all women. He has made it his practice to take a new wife every night and have her killed in the morning so that he can never be cuckolded again. Scheherazade defies her father who tries to persuade her not to go, and so puts her life in peril. She willingly takes on the job of saving herself, her sister, and all the women of the kingdom (Hancock-Sheridan 43).

She not only saves herself and her family members, since her sister was next to meet with the King, but she also transforms the King into the type of husband she requires. Lori Landay explains, “she transforms her position as rape and murder victim into that of an enchantress who keeps Shahryar interested, indeed fascinated by her stories (and her sexual and procreative skills, bearing him three children over the course of the thousand and one nights)” (Landay 02).

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

author trickster

In Hurston’s book, Tell My Horse, it may appear difficult to find the trickster character because the book is a collection of stories documenting traditions from Jamaica and Haiti. However, it becomes clear that the author herself is the trickster. She assimilates, shapeshifts, and is accepted into these two cultures. Like the traditional trickster, Hurston also undermines
Laettner 17 certain conventions of those cultures, such as overt sexism, in the chapter on the female preparation for wedding. In a conversation with a man, she disagrees with him on a woman's place, but instead of fleeing the argument, she asks to observe his side, thus placing herself in the very situation in which she is ideologically opposed. To better learn of this tradition, the author transforms herself into a viewer, listener, and finally discreetly gives her thoughts as an author. She is an outsider who shifts in.

Hurston is also a specific transgressor of boundaries. She not only crosses these bounds in terms of geography, but she also crosses cultural and traditional as well as religious and spiritual bounds. In her book, *Mules and Men*, she studies voodoo under many doctors. In particular she spent six months studying under the famous New Orleans conjure woman, Marie Leveau’s nephew, Luke Turner. Hurston provides background on Marie Leveau, writing: “Alexander, the great two headed doctor felt the power in her and so he tell her she must come to study with him. Marie, she rather dance and make love, but one day a rattlesnake come to her in her bedroom and spoke to her. So she went to Alexander and studied. But soon she could teach her teacher and the snake stayed with her always” (Hurston 192). While Turner was initially reluctant to teach to her, her persistence convinced him. By the time that she learned all the Leveau routines, Turner had greatly changed his mind about her. She writes,

One day Turner told me that he had taught me all that he could and he was quite satisfied with me. He wanted me to stay and work with his as a partner. He said that soon I would be in possession of the entire business, for the spirit had spoken to him and told him that I was the last doctor that he would make that one year and seventy-nine days from then he would die. He wanted me to stay with him to the end. It has been a great sorrow to me that I could not say yes (Hurston 205).
In each of her practices, there were different initiations and ceremonies. With Turner, she describes her three day search for the spirit “that he might accept me or reject me according to his will” (Hurston 199). Her body lied silent and fasting for three days, while her spirit “went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men” (Hurston 199). During this fasting meditation, she crosses multiple spiritual bounds. She explains that she has “five psychic experiences and awoke at last with no feeling of hunger, only one of exaltation” (Hurston 199). The power of conjure is evident in her depictions of her experience, as through conjure one connects to the past, present, future, dark, light, occult, and holy. Conjure is a significant part of African tradition which I think incorporates many aspects of trickster action.

The conjurer, male or female, act as an intermediary between the material and spiritual worlds. The transformative power of their words combined with symbolic acts is at the heart of the magic of conjure. Conjure has historically been open to both male and female practitioners. In her essay, “Conjure Women”: The Importance of the Humanities to the African American Women's Fight against Racism, Mona Lynette Reeves defines conjure women as “an awesome word combination of great power—the power of conjure magic added to the power of womanness” (Reeves 21). While there are men conjurers, conjure women are more prevalent because it is believed that women hold a special connection to the sacred, to nature, and to the occult. For example, there is a common belief that the menstrual cycle coincides with the phases of the moon. Reeves explains that

Childbirth is a sacred initiation into the sorority of mothers who have come before. The feminine realm is one of relationship and community, where power is created in the sharing, giving, and receiving, not the taking. So a conjure woman
has the power to assess a situation, create a charm or potion, and advise her client on its use in order to bring about change in her life (Reeves 21).

In many ways, the practice of conjure parallels trickster actions. Conjure men and women use insight and create new definitions. They are psychopomps and boundary crossers, moving between the realms of the physical and sacred by intention and power to effect the change they desire. Hurston is furthermore a psychopomp for the reader by bringing the reader into the presence of this sacred practice.

Toni Morrison (1931-present)
author trickster

Many of Toni Morrison’s books contain female trickster characters. Perhaps her most clearly defined trickster is her character, Sula. In her book, *Sula*, the townspeople of the Bottom considered Sula the devil's mistress. Morrison writes: “it was the men who gave her the final label... They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing- the thing for which there was no excuse, no compassion... They said that Sula slept with white men” (Morrison 112). Morrison’s character Sula parallels Lilith. Lopez asserts that “Toni Morrison's Sula assumes what some critics have seen as mythic stature is in large part thanks to the author's employment of Lilith as a source for her protagonist. On the other hand, in Sula, the mythical Lilith inhabits one of her most richly human avatars” (Lopez 121). Morrison not only weaves trickster characters into her stories, but she also utilizes trickster fashion in her writing.

Toni Morrison is the most well-known trickster author. In *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, Elizabeth Beaulieu asserts: “Toni Morrison is highly skilled in the use of trickster figures and a master trickster herself” (Beaulieu 354). Morrison exemplifies passion, dissonance,
and complication in her writing. Her form of narration is not linear. This style creates a web of information and missing information for readers, which can be disconcerting, but that is the effect that Morrison wants. For example, in *Beloved*, there are many flashbacks to Sethe’s past life under slavery. Morrison utilizes specific diction and selective narration, and gradually reveals information to convey how real memory operates. Not all of the story is given at once. Beaulieu contends that “Morrison does not simply blur the common designs of certain story patterns; instead, she continues to confound and confuse- in true trickster fashion” (Beaulieu 355). Henry Louis Gates’ signifying monkey is a trickster who is “our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act” (Gates 52). The novelist can act as a signifier, as one “who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language” (Gates 52). Morrison’s work is rife with nuance and creative language. For example, Morrison’s book, *Jazz*, reflects the style of jazz music. One of the defining characteristics of jazz music is that it is unresolved, and this love story is certainly unresolved at the end. Furthermore, Morrison’s narration reflects a jazz style. In the beginning of *Jazz*, Morrison narrates, “there is nothing to beat what he City can make of a nightsky. It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a citysky presses and retreats, presses and retreats, making me think of the free but illegal love of sweethearts before they are discovered” (Morrison 35). Parts of the narration are disconnected, and it follows the same form as jazz music: long, melodic lines with repetition and resonance.

In many of her books, Morrison’s narration also tends to fall into poetry. For example, *Beloved* narrates without punctuation: “I am in the water and she is coming there is no round
basket no iron circle around her neck she goes up where the diamonds are… I need to find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where she told me I am not dead” (Morrison 251-52). This poetic voice is an omniscient narrator. While Beloved is a specific character in this story, she also represents the collective history of African Americans. She is an all-consuming daughter, an incarnation of Sethe’s guilt, a survivor of the Middle Passage, and a haunting legacy of the past. She embodies a woman who came across during the Middle Passage, as well as a slave woman, as well as a baby killed by her mother to avoid being sold back into slavery. Beloved embodies the history of African American women. Morrison writes:

Beloved

You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine

(Morrison 255).

Morrison is the trickster author because she rebels against writing convention and creates distractions, but like folk tales, she also creates a collective. She wants the reader to feel the complications of race, gender, sex, familial relations, history, violence, etc, which she depicts in her writing. Authors can also shapeshift through narration, as in her writing, she often shifts narrative voices. In Beloved, Morrison narrates in Paul D, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved’s voices. Beloved is also the omniscient and historical collective voice. In Jazz, she narrates in omniscient
voice as well: as Violet, Joe Trace, and Dorcas’ voices. These voices in African American literature point back to the original voices of African storytellers. It is significant that the most well-known trickster, Anansi the Spider, the god of all stories, comes from African descent and that the most well-known trickster author is an African-American woman.

Celie (1982)

literary trickster

In her book, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker creates a trickster woman from scratch. She takes a character who embodies passivity as she suffers from domestic abuse and transforms her into a woman who gains agency and creates her own independent life. At first it does not seem like Celie is a trickster at all because she does what men tell her and never stands up for herself, even when she is hurt. From the beginning Celie says she wants to fight, “But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker 17). Celie was physically abused and raped by the man she believed was her natural father. She does not, in fact, act as a trickster during this time, but she does significantly dissociate from her body. Not only does she leave her body, but she makes herself into something else, something inanimate. In this instance, that disassociation could be considered shapeshifting. When Mr. ____ beats her, Celie shape shifts: “I make myself wood, I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man” (Walker 22).

Celie’s trickster moments appear after she discovers her sexuality and loves her husband’s lover, Shug Avery. Upon meeting Shug Avery she sees what her life as a woman could be like, compared to the near-domestic-servitude life she is living. She realizes that she does not need to remain confined by sexist rules of conduct, and she transgresses those bounds. Celie thinks, “Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind
and the devil take the hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what” (Walker 269). Sofia and Shug influence Celie’s transformation. They are rebellious women who do what they want and speak their mind. Celie rightly says, “What Shug got is womanly seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones that got it” (Walker 269).

Once Celie reclaims her personal agency, she starts putting it into effect. She starts acting and speaking like a true trickster. She creates with her words, changes meaning, and curses those who try to quell her power. She says to her husband, “I curse you... Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble...Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice... anything you do to me, already done to you” (Walker 206). These words and curses also reflect the practice of conjure. The second half of the story is a complete turnaround of the first half, in terms of Celie’s actions. She begins turning everything back, using reversal to protect her. She leaves those bad situations she was in and finds herself. Celie’s transformation involves individuation as well as realization of her homosexuality. As she connects more to her feminine power she produces personal agency.

The three trickster authors that I have focused on are black women. These authors: Morrison, Hurston and Walker all utilize trickster fashion in their writing and create trickster characters. Malcolm X once said, “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman” (Revelist). It is evident to me that women writers of color intentionally use the trickster archetype to strengthen themselves against these systems which deny power. The trickster archetype makes such a reconciliation possible through subversion.
Women writers of color use the trickster’s subversive nature to critique multiple systems of domination which include female systems of domination.

Conclusion: This research provides a timeline of four female trickster characters: Lilith, Uzume, Baubo, and Scheherazade. As well as three authors who act as and write female trickster characters. Morrison, Hurston, and Walker (Celie), are contemporary examples of authors who write the trickster archetype into modern literature. Dr. David Need is a Professor of Religious Studies at Duke University. I talked to him one day about the trickster figure. Need reminded me to ask the vital question: “Who wrote the story?”. It is important to note that most of the male trickster characters and many of these female trickster characters have come from the male perspective. Most mythologies, histories and early writing, come from the male voice. For example, we do not know who exactly is the author of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, but it is generally believed that the collection of stories are written by men. While there are universal qualities of the trickster archetype- humor, deception, shapeshifting, boundary-crossing, etc. - there are also elements of the archetype which form the crystalline structure of the archetype, as Jung’s crystal analogy conveys. Traditionally, readers might have been categorizing the trickster archetype too narrowly by not considering the female manifestations of these traits. Female tricksters from female voices may be inherently distinct from male-voice tricksters. Regardless, these female voices are outstandingly necessary. The expansion of the trickster archetype into the realm of women is not only an expansion of the animus voice, but it is also recognizes that characters of this type are universal to women as well as to men. Further research should look into the relation of the divine feminine to the trickster archetype. The Great Goddess of antiquity is typically described in three aspects: the virgin, the mother, and the crone. These characters should be considered and observed- the main questions being: does the female trickster manifest
in one of these characters? Or is the trickster definitively separate? Are there elements of the
divine within the female trickster or is she confined to being a mediary/ boundary-crosser? This
research proves that the female trickster is not only universal and timeless, but also alive and
well. Presently, we can observe an emergence of female trickster characters in the works of
female authors, especially in the works of African American women. The female trickster is
gaining prominence as the animus is further incorporated into the female repertoire, and thus the
true strength of the female voice further emerges.
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