Creolizing Anancy
Signifyin(g) Processes in New World Spider Tales

A web is a place and space of hybridity that creates, by its very presence in the world (which is often invisible, unseen, a gossamer of the margins) new combinations and juxtapositions.1

The Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed is our trope for chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act.2

FROM NOVA SCOTIA TO BRAZIL, from the Carolinas to the tiniest Caribbean island, Anancy the spider, the quintessential hero of traditional creole folklore, weaves a Calibanesque web and spins a


Signifyin(g) discourse. Taking his cue from West African origins but also from New World influences, Anancy provides “a tolerated margin of mess”\(^3\) stemming from a liminality which manifests itself both as a tale and in a tale. As fluctuant as the spider which occasionally inhabits it, the folktale is a form of expression not only shaped, but deshaped and reshaped by cultural influences whose every occurrence is a new creation. As such, this manifestation of creolization processes at play in the New World provides a fitting place for Anancy to spin his web of trickery.

Anancy the spider emerges as a masterful trickster whose indeterminacy is revealed in the geographical location and functions he occupies within each tale as well as in the appearance and language he adopts to achieve his ends. Dweller at the crossroads, inhabitant of nooks and crannies, Anancy is never in a specific enclosure yet never out. Likewise, he never fulfills a given role. He is never quite a hero, as he often employs the basest means to reach his goals, even on the rare occasion when they are lofty. His trickery makes him akin to a villain who preys upon the innocence of others to satisfy his cravings. This “hero-scamp,” as Roger Abrahams calls him, at times pays a high price for his misdeeds when he is duped by a stronger force or a craftier trickster. Hero, villain, dupe, Anancy defies categories in order to retain his indeterminacy.

Indeterminacy also characterizes Anancy’s physical appearance. Like the spider, Anancy is a creature that defies categorization. He is sometimes portrayed as a human being endowed with a spinning gift, sometimes as a spider with human features, male or female. Lastly, Anancy is aware of the protean nature of language and is forever punning to outwit other characters, whether through downright lies or through more refined ways of using what Henry Louis Gates Jr. has characterized as Signifyin(g) powers.\(^4\) In his search for an intertextual grid to read African-American literature, Gates draws both on the standard definition of signifying – carrying meaning to the surface – and on the African-American usage of the term Signifyin(g) – testing the ability of a word to bear conventional meanings – to posit a discourse of trickery. Signifyin(g) is not a practice limited to African-Americans. As the Jamaican writer Dennis Forsythe explains, the “Anancy art of ‘Mouthing’, of throwing words (or ‘mammy-guy-ing’ in Trinidad), and Anancy body-language techniques,

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\(^4\) In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates chooses to underline the difference between signifying: the standard use of the English word and Signifyin(g): the black use. He places the ‘y’ between parentheses to respect the Afro-American pronunciation of the word. I retain this spelling here for the same reasons.