© This transcript has been prepared by Andrew Perry for presentation at the *International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference* (IGNCC) 2020.

Encrumbed by the Signifying Monkey [1]:

The Exigencies of Desire in the Comics of Robert Crumb

For the full-length version of this article, please consult *The International Journal of Comic Art (IJOCA)*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2019 [2]

This presentation is divided into three sections. (*5,800 words total*)

**PART 1**: Perversion, Assault & the Trickster (*6 pages*)

It is understandable why so many see Robert Crumb’s work as representing nothing more than the racist, sexist and misogynistic expressions of a privileged, adolescent imagination. Many cartoonists of Crumb’s era, and more still today, have expressed their disgust not just with his art, but with the rash of less artistically talented, misogynistic imitators in his wake. Fellow cartoonist Trina Robbins [3] is especially outspoken on the profound problems she has with Crumb’s comics. In an online interview, originally conducted and published in 1991, Gary Groth cites Robbins’s central criticism of Crumb’s work. She states (*quote*):

I guess the worst of it to me is that Crumb became such a culture hero that his comix told everyone else that it was OK to draw this heavily misogynistic stuff. The phenomenon of the underground comix of the ’70s, so full of hatred towards women; rape, degradation, murder and torture, I really believe can be attributed to Crumb having made this kind of work stylish. (*end* *quote*) (Groth, 1991)

In the same interview, Crumb reflects on the question of his culpability for what he helped to unleash, explaining (*quote*):

I remember once Trina was giving me, Wilson, and Spain a big dressing-down about our work, and I said that you only had to be true to your subconscious, or something like that. And she said, ‘Well, it wouldn’t hurt if you’d show a little self-restraint.’ I’ve never quite resolved that, self-restraint. (*end* *quote*) (Groth, 1991)

Much of younger Crumb’s earlier, edgier, boundary-pushing work can in many ways be seen as a purposeful response to Robbins and what she represents to him. So what happens when you leave behind what Crumb calls the “self-restraint . . . [of the] socialized part of your mind?” Is this willful rejection of our received understandings of gender and sexuality an act of perversion or something else?

From a postmodern perspective, Crumb’s troubling cartoon representations of racism, misogyny and “deviant” sexuality can be viewed as a desire to deliberately deconstruct the socially-constructed power dynamics of gender and race. His work starkly questions the ways that we have chosen to culturally understand and represent outwardly unacceptable drives. On the surface, his gleeful, sophomoric crudity often seems to be done for an obscene racist or sexist laugh, as in this disturbing image [4]. Or this panel from his infamous incest strip “Joe Blow.” Many sensible critics have argued that this deliberate, sexist indecency was the unfortunate, highly privileged, phallocentric formula for the entire Underground Comix movement. But if we deliberately attempt to interrupt our immediate reactions to images such as these, is it possible to perceive something else at work?

The ancient trickster figure [5] provides an unusual way of reassessing notions of “perverse” sexual behaviors and encoded assumptions about gender. According to Andrew Wiget there is an essential ambiguity and absurdity at the core of trickster that (*quote*) “highlights cultural categories we all use for ordering experience but which we have so successfully internalized that we never perceive them as social phenomena; they seem merely the way things are. Trickster’s foolishness unhinges such assumptions, displacing the ordinary from the realm of commonality and making it available for contemplation” (*end* *quote*) (Wiget, 1990: 91-92). Similarly, in his challenging and criminally overlooked trickster novel, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* [6], Gerald Vizenor explores a subversive concept that he calls a “terminal creed,” a belief or utterance whose meaning is fixed or without creative play. The term, which he identifies as the inverse of trickster’s “comic discourse,” is deeply embedded in the tribal identity from which it derives. In essence, terminal creeds are inflexible, absolutist beliefs that privilege individual over communal identity and impose static meanings upon the world, denying the possibilities for vital change, evolution, adaptation or re-creation. Their intent is to focus attention on privileged values and beliefs while casting divested values into shame and silence. To most white Americans, the word “Indian” and all the predetermined cultural baggage that this term is forced to carry is the foremost terminal creed in Vizenor’s novel. Trickster consciousness calls these rigidly defined cultural categories into question, challenging the well-worn semiotic path between signifier and signified, the word and the thing. Trickster is driven by this essential ambiguity. He is at times the lowdown fool, deceitful, vain and selfish, at others a culture-hero sometimes “endowed,” according to Hyde, “with a high sense of mission and tremendous powers in order to accomplish tasks beneficial to humankind” (Hyde, 2010: 87). To incite newfound awareness, trickster shocks, confronts, confounds and provokes conventional modes of understanding, working the articulations – the seams – between the high and the low, leveraging the unsettling moments when certainties break down. Or as Vizenor simply puts it, “Some upsetting is necessary.”

As the Native American scholars Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz explain in their “Introduction” to *American Indian Trickster Tales*, trickster is the target for both his community’s veneration and ire, naming him (*quote*) “a celebrator of life, a celebration of life, because by rallying against him a community discovers its own resilience and protective skills” (*end* *quote*) (Erdoes, 1998: xxi).

This “rallying point” is what I keep in mind when I encounter disturbing images in Crumb such as these [7]. This is Crumb at his most deliberately provocative. Absent the trickster, it is tempting to dismiss these images as clear examples of straightforward misogyny and racism, worthy of our rage and condemnation. And let’s be clear here – they certainly *are* worthy of this reaction. Both of these images, in fact, are focused on in an article representative of many critics’ attitudes towards Crumb’s art, by the feminist blogger Kim O, entitled “r. crumb is a sexual predator” on *the shallow brigade* blogsite. Exasperated by an older generation of fans and critics whom she views as Crumb’s apologists (O identifies as Millennial), she points to the cover of *ID* No. 1, where Crumb depicts himself (*quote*) “standing atop a (presumably dead) naked woman's buttocks, chortling, ‘Fuck 'em and cut their heads off!’” [8] This is of course the sort of edgelord garbage for which Crumb is celebrated” (*end* *quote*) (O, 2019). O labels Crumb a “serial abuser” enabled by an Underground Comix movement determined to paint Crumb’s critics as “ignorant rightwing prude[s].” Even more bluntly, she notes (*quote*):

The mythology of art comics relies heavily on these counterculture heroes who unwittingly perpetuate the status quo and celebrate themselves for it. Surely it's possible to acknowledge their failures without denying their contributions. Surely that would be the “honest” and “brave” thing to do, to use a few terms those people profess to understand. (*end* *quote*) (O, 2019)

The tension that O recognizes in Crumb’s art between the intentional rejection and heedless acceptance of the status quo concisely conveys the ambiguous essence of the trickster. If we reframe rage and condemnation as starting points rather than the destination for our reactions to images like these, how might these initial, legitimate responses lead us somewhere more productive? How do we confront and answer them?

History is littered with examples of humans – often though not always males – warped by unacceptable sexual desires, a common trope in literature. In Charles McGrath’s interview in *The New York Times Book Review* with the late American novelist emeritus, Philip Roth, [9] a man who spent a significant part of his career publically wrestling with the troubling aspects of male desire, Roth describes this sometimes overwhelming compulsion in terms that could equally apply to Crumb’s work, saying (*quote*):

Men enveloped by sexual temptation is one of the aspects of men’s lives that I’ve written about in some of my books. Men responsive to the insistent call of sexual pleasure, beset by *shameful* desires and the undauntedness of obsessive lusts, over the decades, I have imagined a small coterie of unsettled men possessed by just such inflammatory forces they must negotiate and contend with. I’ve tried to be uncompromising in depicting these men each as he is, each as he behaves, aroused, stimulated, hungry in the grip of carnal fervor and facing the array of psychological and ethical quandaries ***the exigencies of desire*** present. I haven’t shunned the hard facts in these fictions of why and how and when tumescent men do what they do, even when these have not been in harmony with the portrayal that a masculine public-relations campaign – if there were such a thing – might prefer, I’ve stepped not just inside the male head but into the reality of those urges whose obstinate pressure by its persistence can menace one’s rationality, urges sometimes so intense they may even be experienced as a form of lunacy. (*end* *quote*) (McGrath, 2018: 16-17)

The human sex drive is a formidable, bewildering force that many never learn to fully reckon with. While joyous, it also carries a heavy responsibility, and for some a curse. But, as Wiget argues, (*quote*) “By manipulating us into laughing at a figure with whom we have just identified, the [trickster] forces us to reaffirm the beliefs we have been momentarily permitted to question” (*end* *quote*) (Wiget, 1990: 94). Laughter creates an alternative space to confront this consuming struggle, so often cloaked in shame, secrecy and silence. Put off by the seriousness and pretension of comics with literary aspirations, Crumb is drawn instead to the rough, working-class nature of comics with their roots in the “low” popular culture of the early 20th century. “My comics,” he explains in *The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book*, “appealed to the hard-drinking, hard-fucking end of the hippie spectrum as opposed to the spiritual, eastern-religious, lighter-than-air type of hippie” (Crumb, 1997: 95). His work is deeply influenced by the little-known sexualized and racialized cartoon characters and obscure “race” music of the 1920s and ‘30s. [10] As he explains to Peter Poplaski, (*quote*) “People have no idea of the sources for my work. I didn’t invent anything; it’s all there in the culture; it’s not a big mystery. I just combine my personal experience with classic cartoon stereotypes” (*end* *quote*) [11] (Crumb, 1997: 260). Crumb’s comics represent an uneasy dialogue between these appropriated images and our modern sensibilities. He explores the darkly humorous, high-test mixture of creativity, repression and frustration engendered by these conflicting themes, inspiring a host of original characters who struggle to resist the consuming pressure to conform and comply, no matter the cost. Fertile ground for the trickster.

**PART 2**: The Exigencies of Desire: Trickster & Sexuality [12] (*8 pages*)

It is not trickster’s function as elevated culture-hero, but his disturbing sexual offenses in his role as “dirt worker” that viscerally repel so many. In many cultures, but western cultures in particular, the body is a primary site of inscribing shame and therefore silence, often engendering the uncontainable response of bodily and sexual display. “What one covers on the body,” Lewis Hyde explains in *Trickster Makes This World*, “one also consigns to silence” (Hyde, 2010: 169). This site of conflict often plays out with one faction presuming to speak for established, collective values that (*quote*) “preserve the coverings and silences that give social space its order” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 168). On the other side are the agents of change, who see the mutability and uncertainty of the current order and call it into question. For them, meaning is contingent and identity fluid, “even the meaning and identity of one’s own body” (Hyde, 2010: 172). For those in the first camp, uncovering the body becomes a shameless, even obscene act of speech, a wallow in the dirt, if “dirt” is defined as ideas, behaviors or materials that have been consigned to the margins of society. This view creates a false dichotomy between the pure and the impure, the clean and the dirty in an effort to draw a clear line between them. For trickster, who embodies the ambiguous simultaneity of both, this binary laughably attempts to introduce perfection into an imperfect world, its aim an unachievable, sterile purity. But rather than outright banishment, dirt becomes one of trickster’s primary tools to remake the world.

Similar to our modern secular Halloween and bachelorette parties, Hyde discusses the Catholic Church’s method of acknowledging deviance through what he calls “ritual contact with dirt” (Hyde, 2010: 186). Though the Church has historically not been above resorting to violence to eliminate the anomalous, it also annually provides what Hyde calls (*quote*) “sanctioned, structured, and contained involvement with things that are normally out of bounds” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 186). This is the function of Carnival and Mardi Gras – or the earlier Feast of Fools [13] – followed by Lent, the lengthy period of atonement. Though unsettling to the established order, these short-lived celebrations act as safety valves for the harmless release of transgressive behaviors, temporarily acknowledging and expressing them without serious consequences. Through what Hyde calls the “fences of ritual” (Hyde, 2010: 188), celebrants are inoculated against the ongoing need to partake in the forbidden, protecting them against what is normally excluded from the orderly world. And while these structured containments of disorder have an important role to play, trickster’s more egregious bodily transgressions periodically spill over the ritual fences, allowing seismic shocks into the stable garden of the social order. Though certainly no culture-hero, the trickster-like sexual abuses of disgraced Hollywood mogul and convicted rapist, Harvey Weinstein, have realigned the tectonic plates of sexist behavior in American and international culture. Weinstein’s arrogant mistake – one of many – was that he physically enacted rather than narratively observed trickster’s transgressions.

An analogous re-articulation can similarly shift Crumb’s comics to the role of narrative dirt-ritual. In a 1974 interview, Susan Goodrick discloses to Crumb that, as a female, some of his stories make her angry (*quote*): “You don’t show women that are warm, compassionate, intelligent, or independent. Your women are always either domineering and offensive or abused and humiliated” (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 89). This shrewd description deftly captures the bewildering intersection of unsavory qualities of the central female character in my close reading of several of Crumb’s strips.

Cheryl Borck makes her debut appearance to the accompaniment of discordant music in the Mr. Natural strip “Here He Comes Again!” (1986). [14] A professional dancer, she goes by the moniker “Devil Girl,” first emerging from the shadows of a modest compact car. An imposing physical presence with untamed hair, diabolic leer, and prodigious tongue, she is a flamboyantly dressed agent of chaos released like a professional wrestler into Flakey Foont’s bourgeois life. She is introduced to the whiney, self-pitying Flakey by Mr. Natural, a quasi-charlatan, over-sexed stoner guru and itinerant ‘60s holdover. This triad of characters represents the entwinement of the essential trickster qualities of manipulation, comedy and hypersexuality, all three represented most acutely in the compelling form of Devil Girl.

The LSD-inspired Mr. Natural is one of Crumb’s earliest and most popular recurring characters [15] who made his first appearance in *Yarrowstalks* #1 (1967). He is a difficult character to define, even for Crumb, who admits (*quote*): “I don’t know what he’s about, really. He’s not really a charlatan. He doesn’t rip people off. He didn’t cheat people…Sometimes he did things to people that might appear to be putting them on or ‘using’ them in some way, but this usually involved some sort of ‘Zen’ lesson. I guess. I dunno. I can’t explain his behavior (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 120). At best, Mr. Natural’s insights are half-formed, tantalizing. He frequently arrives at the edge of large truths only to leave them unspoken. This rhetorical device is called “aposiopesis,” [16] in which a speaker abruptly leaves off completing a thought, allowing listeners to determine their own meaning. This move is fully lost on Flakey who resolutely continues to badger Mr. Natural for his suspected spiritual insights. Flakey Foont is a man tortured by neurotic uncertainty, attempting to shed the drug-addled spiritual debris of the ‘60s in his dubious bid for middle-class respectability. [17] Flakey never fathoms that for Mr. Natural the simple truth is that humans are incapable of perceiving truth, its search leading to nothing more than frustration. His is the contradictory philosophy of no philosophy, the truth of no-truth. Flakey’s dilemma ironically recasts the idealism and hokum spirituality of the 1960s. He plays the long-established comics trope of the frustrated, also-ran sidekick, the Robin to Mr. Natural’s Batman. But Flakey’s sexual repression subverts this trope, contributing to his enormous lack of self-confidence, the potent quality Crumb perceives as most valued in a sexual partner by cisgender women. Speaking with Jean-Pierre Mercier in 1999, Crumb reveals (*quote*):

[The] characters like Mr. Natural, Flakey Foont . . . it’s about myself. They are just archetypes of different parts of your own psyche. I’m never really conscious of what I’m doing. It’s much later that I realize what it is really about. But the thing is, once you see what they are about, you become self-conscious, and in order not to fall into doing a caricature of your own work, you have to keep pushing away from what is known territory into the unknown. (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 198-199)

Devil Girl is his fiendish conveyance into this territory of the unknown. “Here He Comes Again!” begins with Mr. Natural’s unannounced visit to Flakey’s leafy, suburban home. [18] Conspicuous in his tattered hobo-sack – a visual echo of the threadbare gown of Outcault’s Yellow Kid – he interrupts Flakey peacefully reading the Business section. For two full pages, Flakey berates Mr. Natural who stands rigid on the stoop, a blank expression pasted on his face. He does not speak or even react until shoved to the sidewalk, blood gushing from the crown of his bald scalp. Rendered suddenly docile, Foont offers profuse apologies and a towel which he wraps turban-style over his head. Stating his original intentions, Mr. Natural invites Flakey to a meeting for an unspecified group comprised of one girl recruited that afternoon. On cue, Devil Girl emerges from her car bedecked like The Fabulous Moolah [19]. By way of introduction she snaps her slithery tongue on Flakey’s jaw then licks the corner of her eye, intimating the warm, worming pleasures of Oculolinctus, or eyeball licking. Aghast, Flakey looks on, quivering with erotic awe. When she begins speaking in gibberish Mr. Natural forces her tongue back into her gaping mouth, stating, “*OH she’s bad, Foont! She needs taming, this one!*” Dropping to her hands and knees on the public sidewalk, she roars like a lioness. Mr. Natural admonishes, “*Now behave yourself! This is a very conservative neighborhood!!*” Reeling with sweaty tumescence, Foont immediately offers to join the group. Instinctively recognizing Flakey’s spineless pliancy, she questions his politics, his resolve, and his manhood while Mr. Natural pounds on her unyielding buttocks like a snare drum. She praises Mr. Natural as her “*man*,” stating, “*Here’s a guy who goes his own way, no matter what! He’s so cute!*” Noting her resemblance to a “*big nasty snake*,” Natch produces a swami’s flute and begins to play a tune that mollifies Devil Girl into a hypnotic dance. [20] Setting aside his worry about the neighbors, Foont is also spellbound by the music and drifts into a trance. With a heavy sigh, he reflects: “*This music is strange and poignant…Takes me back…Reminds me of those psychedelic experiences of twenty years ago…It’s like an acid flashback! How different I was then.*”

Abruptly wrenched from the plaintive vision, he is delivered back to dreary routine by his wife and two children returning from a trip to the grocery store. Ruth, his practical wife, wonders why he is sitting asleep on the front lawn. His son laughs and asks if he is “*meditating*.” In the kitchen, Ruth sets down her grocery bag containing a sensible box of whole grain and complains about the trials of her day with the kids. His back turned, Flakey wonders if the entire experience was a hallucination. Above his head, a hovering thought bubble contains Devil Girl’s face cackling with infernal glee, her brows downturned in two sharp points of malice. In the final panel, Flakey grimaces violently, his fists clenched to either side of his head as explosive lines of distress pulsate around him. He curses, shouting, “*That little bastard is gonna drive me nuts!!*” In tiny print crowded along the right panel border, the strip ends as Ruth Foont extensively lists the ways her husband might learn to make some meaningful sacrifices for his long-suffering wife.

A product of Crumb’s middle career (mid-80s to early-90s), Cheryl Borck has clear antecedents in a number of his early-career, recurring female characters. Crumb describes the polarizing Angelfood McSpade as “a goddess, a vision of perfect, primitive sexuality.” Similarly, Crumb calls the female Sasquatch in “Whiteman Meets Bigfoot,” [21] (*quote*) “The lusty Amazon sex goddess who lives naked in the jungle” (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 121). Both of these female characters descend from his early masturbatory fantasies of the beguiling comic book heroine *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* and star of the stirring 1950s TV show adored by teenage boys. Each of these characters materially represents Crumb’s idealized female form. The reiterative pattern of their story lines often plays out the sexual dynamic established in Crumb’s childhood and copiously documented in many of his self-revealing, self-loathing strips. He especially marvels at female hips and behinds that are “large, well-formed, [and] muscular,” saying that they give him a “sense of security.” He feels drawn to them – compelled to draw them: (*quote*) “I want to get in there. It’s dynamic and exciting…It pulsates, throbs with vitality and life” (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 127).

The fecundity and crude earthiness of these characters recalls the spirit of the blues, a sensual musical form that occupies a crucial place in his artistic imagination. He likens the coarse bawdiness of his characters to “old-time burlesque theater” [22] (*Conversations*, 2004: 130) with its deliberate lack of refinement. In a telling 1980 interview with B. N. Duncan about his controversial depictions of blackness, Crumb reveals (*quote*):

[M]y “negro” characters represent something more than black people as such. They’re also the embodiment of white people’s stereo types [sic] of blacks, what they hate and fear, as well as envy, about what they *think* black people are. These “negro” characters are only very loosely related to *real* black people” (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 123).

The very same can be said for the recurring women whose imposing dimensions represent for Crumb an exaggerated physical expression of ideal womanhood as defined through the eyes of a male – unattainable to him in his pre-fame years. Particularly in the Devil Girl strips, he explores in almost excruciating detail the theme of male/female antagonism, evident in her sincere disdain and loathing for the lust-struck Flakey Foont. [23]

Sharing a direct bloodline with previously recurring Crumb females, the physically superior Cheryl Borck is larger than the two diminutive men who seek to tame or “conquer” her unbridled female energy. Crumb frequently depicts women as frightening, aggressive and obnoxious, the comic set-up for their comeuppance. (*quote*) “I love to be ‘in the driver’s seat’ with big, strong women,” he explains. “I can’t help it…That’s the way I am, so it always shows up in my cartoons” (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 118). Female rejection and social ostracism are two powerful and malignant presences in the Devil Girl strips. Some of this, he explains, stems from his early Catholic school education where (*quote*) “the nuns were these big giant scary women who liked to pick on little boys” (*end* *quote*) (*Conversations*, 2004: 118). In the alarming strip, “The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself” [24] – not intended for the faint-of-heart – Crumb’s eponymous stand-in finds himself sexually excited after beheading a nun as retribution for her attempted penis amputation via a meat cleaver. Wow.

It is Crumb’s outsider status – ironically embodied by the consummate middle-class insider, Flakey Foont – that informs the trickster consciousness underlying much of his work. Devil Girl is the uncontained female spirit absent from Flakey Foont’s repressed sexual desires which demand the narrative dirt-ritual of trickster consciousness. Leading a life that makes no room for these unruly drives, Flakey finds himself helplessly drawn to her furious sexual allure. She represents what the traditional rules of bourgeois society have marked for banishment, shame and silence. In the words of Susan Goodrick, Devil Girl/Cheryl Borck enigmatically encompasses a female presence both “domineering and offensive” as well as “abused and humiliated.” To access this dual consciousness, Flakey must accept the tricky role of dirt-worker embraced by her and Mr. Natural, a radical subversion he is comically unwilling to make because it would fundamentally overturn everything he has worked to attain. This is why he so often cannot hear the enigmatic wisdom offered by Mr. Natural that instead strikes Flakey as shamelessly dissolute.

**PART 3**: Encrumbed by the Signifying Monkey [25] (5 pages)

You can be fairly certain that trickster has stepped into your presence when you experience powerful feelings of disgust, discomfort, or shame. My own memorable encounter with trickster came years ago at a funeral. After a number of heartfelt remembrances for the mother of an old friend, the minister informed the mourners that he intended to perform an “interpretive pantomime” meant to physically express the spirit of the deceased woman’s life. Donning paper slippers, he leapt suddenly into a melodramatic crouch, fanning his arms like the wings of a flailing bird. As the scene unfolded before the crowded congregation, I sat in mortification while a middle-aged clergyman pranced madly about the sanctuary floor, furiously wind-milling his arms while loudly calling the woman’s name in a slow, warbling falsetto. There were not large enough rocks in the world for me to crawl under. This man had swerved so widely out of his lane that he caused me actual, physical distress. And yet my shame is telling. When we suddenly, often unexpectedly step outside of, or more commonly are pushed out of the rigid constructs that our culture has dictated for us – prescribed identities deeply and unconsciously ingrained in our thoughts and behaviors – it is easy to feel shaken by the experience. After much laughter and multiple retellings, I now see that not only was this minister terribly brave, but his outright rejection of “acceptable” behavior within the consecrated space of a funeral forced me to reconsider how I define my own identity as someone occupying a cultural lane intersectionally similar in many ways to his own.

This *necessity of discomposure* recalls an old saying from World War II. [26] As the Allies massed for the invasion of the Continent, England was flooded with roistering GIs. In response to the boorish behavior of the young soldiers, British citizens bemoaned their presence as “overpaid, overfed, oversexed, and over here.” The discomfort that contemporary viewers feel is evident in images such as the cover for *Gothic Blimp Works* No. 2. [27] The image recalls the famous Coppertone ad, but the dark, assaultive implications in the “Blimp” cover are starkly different. To today’s sensibilities, this is an unambiguous representation of physical assault. By design, Crumb’s images force us to confront the objectionable realities of unfettered male desire. But should we simply turn away from unsavory images like these? Ignore or reject them? Should we get angry and demand accountability? Or, does his art embody the ambiguous hinge between these two responses? For me, Crumb’s images – like the young GIs – are our own *necessary nuisance*.

It is no accident that Crumb is drawn so instinctively to the blues musicians of the 1920s and ‘30s. [28] This fertile musical form, showcasing an unapologetic expression of sexual opportunism, is heavily imbued with trickster consciousness. “Hokum” blues is a musical gumbo of influences, from African music, the call-and-response structure of African village life, spirituals and gospel music, and oral storytelling traditions, seasoned with fiery dashes of African trickster narratives. It is a spicy amalgam of the sacred and the profane, its musical grammar exposed in the naked expression of carnal desire. Leaving behind the restrictive roles and rules of home, both male and female blues artists travelled freely through the Jim Crow South accompanied by a newfound sexual freedom that embodied trickster’s sexual roaming. Recently released from slavery, the blues musicians’ footloose behavior was a direct affront to white culture. As David Williams points out in *The Trickster Brain*, “Blind Lemon Jefferson, one of the first men to record the song, sang “The Black Snake Blues” and “The Black Snake Moan,” in which the snake, like in the Winnebago Trickster story, is the mischievous penis with its own mind” (Williams, 2012: 176). These trickster-infused blues compositions are why Crumb draws such deep wells of inspiration from the music of this time period. His illustrated biography of Charlie Patton, to his many illustrated album covers of blues musicians, to his obsessive collecting of 78 rpm “race records” of the period, as well as the blues-influenced string bands he has performed in all bear the distinctive marks of trickster consciousness.

The ambiguous tension between order and disorder, purity and dirt, is at the center of trickster narratives. Regrettably, our modern culture has few authentic, enacted rituals to respond meaningfully when confronted with the unsettling shock of dirt-work. This is why reactions to Crumb’s art have been so categorical and uncompromising. Lewis Hyde’s apt description of Robert Mapplethorpe’s transgressive art applies just as equally to Crumb: (*quote*) “[A] dirt-worker in the classic trickster lineage, one who usefully disturbs the shape of things by crossing or reworking the line between the elevated and the excremental” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 197). The dirt of the margins is not a place to linger. It is not meant to remain at the center of things. But we must make occasional spaces for trickster’s dirt-attacks upon the old and the established. As such, we must be willing to voice what works to shame us. For trickster to exist, argues Hyde, he requires a supportive *dual affiliation* to (*quote*) “people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd *double attitude* of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 13). For Crumb, it is the insistence of a hyperactive libido coupled with the sting of female rejection and an unreconstructed misogyny – his own toxic form of body shame – that he wrestles with and attempts to resolve through his art. Trickster is not only a boundary-crosser, but a boundary *creator*, “bring[ing] to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight” (Hyde, 2010: 7). Rather than pure certainty, what trickster consciousness provides is “[s]paces of heightened uncertainty, and . . . the intelligence needed to negotiate them” (Hyde, 2010: 6).

This “dual” intelligence – the “double attitude” of trickster consciousness – finds ritualistic modern expression in hip-hop culture with the linguistic game of the “dozens,” [29] an event with deep roots in African oral culture. Hyde describes the game as (*quote*) “a kind of verbal dueling in which antagonists publicly insult one another with elaborate rhyming couplets” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 272). Based on the “Signifying Monkey” [30] of African oral narratives, the goal is to verbally “trope a dope” your adversary, (*quote*) “stupefying with swift circles of signifying. To be dozened is to be dazed into a kind of simplemindedness, a loss of language in which one stops being a signifying creature” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 273). A pivotal scene in the film *8 Mile*, starring the rapper Eminem, features the triumphant dozening of an opponent. The game plays with entrenched cultural values such as the dictate to honor your family, particularly your mother, and often features spectacularly profane variations of throwing shade on “yo’ mama.” If you value your mother, the game implies, then derogatory language about her demands physical reprisal. But the true aim of the game is oral brinksmanship, verbal jousting designed to unseat an adversary from what Hyde calls the “Mind of the Monkey.” The equilibrium of this trickster consciousness – neither/both serious and unserious – is the ambiguous perch where language becomes simultaneously meaningful and meaningless. The Monkey Mind deems language a semiotic sign, a form of camouflage which can be used to both lie and tell the truth. According to Hyde, (*quote*) “The antagonists in a game of the dozens play with the difference between meaning something and just saying it. . . . The loser, the person whose poise fails and who commits himself to the culturally approved side of this string of dualities, slips from the signifying mind . . . and falls into the body” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 273-274).

This serious/not serious “double” attitude of the trickster is a cognitively challenging middle space where the levity of the signifying mind overcomes the gravity of the embodied self. Trickster’s central paradox is that “the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very thing that cultures are based on” (Hyde, 2010: 9). This precarious boundary between “meaning something and just saying it” contains the fundamental contradiction of Robert Crumb’s art. Embracing this incongruity guides us to respond from the tectonic center between adulation and condemnation to images the comics scholar Robert C. Harvey fittingly describes as “outrageous assaults on orthodox sensibilities.” The intentional shock – the “trope a dope” [31] – of Crumb’s work, argues Harvey, (*quote*) “explodes the conventional facades behind which we hide, thereby revealing what we really are” (*end* *quote*) (Harvey, 2010: 209). It was quite literally a shame, when in response to overwhelming criticism, Crumb recently announced that he has forbidden himself to ever draw the female form again. Has he been ironically dozened into “a loss of language in which one stops being a signifying creature?” If so, we are running the regrettable risk of sterilizing his work – and the comics culture at large – into the hingeless fixity of a terminal creed, making the need for trickster even more essential.

Hyde remarks of Pablo Picasso, [32] another disruptive artist whom Crumb admires, that (*quote*) “[Picasso] took this world seriously; then he disrupted it; then he gave it a new form” (*end* *quote*) (Hyde, 2010: 13). Crumb’s art has followed this same trajectory. A serious student of comics history, he has profoundly altered their course, reviving the established form he inherited. Like it or not, cartoonists working in the genres of confessional, graphic memoir are travelling a route originally mapped by Crumb. Strident attacks on his work as objectionable and demands for its removal heedlessly overlook the trickster’s cunning ability to push his life force into his tail, his life principle into a box, his **ouroboros**-like ability to continually return to make us laugh. [33] What today’s young cartoonists, and the cartooning community in general would be wise to realize is that the messenger has meaningfully tipped the balance. We have all been encrumbed by the Signifying Monkey.

[Click slowly through slides 34-end]