Encrumbed by the Signifying Monkey: Con Men, Cackling Clowns and the Exigencies of Desire in the Comics of Robert Crumb

"What [do] we learn from reading books with characters and situations that are repugnant[?] We learn how to critique, examine and analyze texts, to see them in their time period with the human limitations of the authors. . . . [They] may make a reader enraged, repulsed and even sickened, but may also present an opportunity to deepen perspectives on one's own worldviews and values, and perhaps to act on them."

– Trudy Smoke (from "Letters" in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 3, 2019)

"Sex, as society defines it, is constructed, just like everything else, and so it can be deconstructed. . . . Our identities play such a big role in how we move through the world and create connections with others, and we fool ourselves when we ignore them. One person's fantasy is another's trigger, and there's room for all of it to exist next to each other."

Arielle Egozi ("How do you define the 'best sex ever'?" in Salon.com, March 21, 2019)

"Drawing is a way for me to articulate things inside myself that I can't otherwise grasp."

– Robert Crumb (from the *R. Crumb Handbook*, 2005: 394)

MUDDIED WATERS

Do you have strong opinions on the topic of public masturbation? Multi-generational incest? The unconsenting degradation of inebriated young women? The depiction of African-Americans as monkey-like "pickaninnies," "coons," and "spades?" Right from the outset it is uncomfortably clear that confronting the provocative, inflammatory role of offensive images at the throbbing core of Robert Crumb's artistic vision is morbidly tricky. Even a cursory browse of his work reveals the ubiquity of distressing sexual and racial depictions, indeed, the outright *anger* in much of his work. Crumb's art is difficult, disconcerting, disturbing, instinctively turning many people away. The critic Frank Cioffi admits that his comics "will probably never receive the critical attention that they deserve, for they brim with racist and misogynist imagery. .

. . One comes away from Crumb's work feeling slightly soiled, *ashamed* of having spent the time reading them" (Cioffi, 2001: 111-112). [Italics mine] When first time readers or even seasoned admirers encounter his work, we are forced to grapple with Crumb's frank confirmation of his own problematic attitudes towards women. In a 1995 interview with Gary Groth, the editor-in-chief of the *Comics Journal* and co-founder of Fantagraphics Books, Crumb states without equivocation, "I am misogynistic. I've got a lot of bitterness toward women. . . . When you're talking about misogyny, you're talking about some kind of generalized feeling toward the sex, which I do have. I have this resentment toward women. I have a hurtful, angry, resentment toward women that's left over from my youth" (Crumb, 1995/2004: 94-95). Further muddying reasonable analysis is Crumb's well-known reluctance to embrace scholarly interpretations of his work. *Keep it simple, stupid* seems to be the workman-like ethos behind not only his own artistic process, but his underlying desire for his readers' responses to his work. As such, I am constructing the accessibility of my critical assessment within these terms.

Additionally, we need to consider our own transformative historical moment, where the intersection of gender and race in the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements is producing an increasingly receptive audience for disenfranchised voices. Culturally powerful and influential men in politics, business, film, comedy and literature are suddenly being held to account for their sexist behavior and the field of comics is no exception. There has been no recent lack of intensely dismissive, condemnatory views on Crumb and the Underground Comix movement he helped found. In "Cancel Culture Comes for Counterculture Comics," from the libertarian website Reason.com, Brian Doherty describes the overt denial of Crumb's work by the contemporary cartoonist, Ben Passmore, who presented the award for Outstanding Artist at the Small Press Expo's Ignatz Awards ceremony in September of 2018. Passmore, who is black, explained to the amenable attendees that "comics is changing…and it's not an accident." Referring to "creeps" and "apologists" in the industry, explains Doherty, Passmore denounced Crumb by name: "Shit's not going to change on its own. You gotta keep on being annoying about it.…A while ago someone like R. Crumb would be 'Outstanding.'. . . [But] I wouldn't be up here, real talk, and yo—fuck that dude" (Doherty, 2019). This social justice re-evaluation, based upon what Doherty calls "our modern culture of outrage archeology," represents a mounting trend of affronted responses to the "sheer maniacal delight in transgression" of underground comix in general, and Crumb specifically. Doherty points to the removal of Crumb's name from

the 2018 exhibit at the Massachusetts Independent Comics Expo (MICE) which took the position that his work is "seriously problematic because of the pain and harm caused by perpetuating images of racial stereotypes and sexual violence." MICE went on to publically state:

> We recognize Crumb's singular importance to the development of independent and alternative comics, the influence that he has had on many of our most respected cartoonists, and the quality and brilliance of much of his work. . . . [But] we also recognize the negative impact carried by some of the imagery and narratives that Crumb has produced, impact felt most acutely by those whose voices have not been historically respected or accommodated (Doherty, 2019).

For Doherty, this is a clear expression of "cancel culture" whose project is to "[protect] the status and feelings of previously excluded or oppressed groups." But its unintended and corrosive consequence is that through blame and shame, freedom of expression, "in all its messiness and ugliness," is silenced. This concentrated form of disapproval creates a purity test that disavows people, ideas and art that do not conform to its "woke" expectations.

Similarly, Nadja Sayej in the Guardian.com interviewed Crumb on the occasion of his recent gallery exhibition, "Print: Mind Fucks, Kultur Klashes, Pulp Fiction & Pulp Fact by the Illustrious R. Crumb" at the David Zwirner gallery in New York. In it, Crumb stunningly reveals that he no longer draws women, admitting, "I try not to even think about women anymore. It helps that I'm now 75 years old and am no longer a slave to a raging libido" (Sayej, 2017). Undoubtedly, by contesting and redrawing the cultural boundaries of sexual and racial politics, the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements – direct challenges to regressive sexual and racial attitudes and behaviors – have had a powerful and silencing effect on Crumb and his work. As a result of this determined criticism, he explains, "I became more self-conscious and inhibited. . . . Finally, it became nearly impossible to draw anything that might be offensive to someone out there, and that's where I'm at today. . . . I don't draw much anymore, [but] it's all right [sic]. A lot of ink has gone under the bridge. It's enough" (Sayej, 2017). One can almost sense the final curtain falling on his long career. Such public denouncements of his polarizing work, with its persistent onslaught of provocative images, seem to leave little room for middle ground responses. Can art this admired and reviled have anything left to say to us from the

center? What can his work, much of which is the product of a previous time, possibly say to our digitally hyper-connected, 21st century lives?

This paper is not another oblivious apologia for the work of an aging misogynist, nor the fulsome effusions of a devoted fanboy. Instead, this an imperfect attempt to consider images and ideas – an artistic body of work – that call for honest and careful attention to the discomfort of ambivalence, to move beyond the binary oppositions of loathing and rage versus unexamined reverence and adulation. Crumb's art can open a prolific middle space for the acknowledgement and consideration of perplexing drives that live within each of us. My goal is to suggest an alternative response to the sexual "perversion" and misogyny that lurk not just beneath the surface, but often march aggressively through the foreground of much of Crumb's cartoon plots, themes and images. Through the distorted and unreliable lens of the trickster, the culture-hero and dirt worker, we can attempt a more generative exploration of the sexual transgressions of Robert Crumb's artistic vision. Through this notorious but transformational figure whose enthusiastic modes of expression embrace vulgarity, licentiousness, absurdity, ugliness, smuttiness, lust and all manner of offenses both large and small, we can open tabooed spaces for productive discourse that so often remain closed and silenced. That is the threshold, the joint, the articulated hinge that I hope to travel.

PERVERSION, ASSAULT & THE TRICKSTER

"Some upsetting is required."

– Gerald Vizenor, (from *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, 1978/1990: 146)

Commonly understood, the concept of perversion is intimately entwined with the pejorative, starkly shaded with an overt sense of distortion, misrepresentation, falsification, misinterpretation, corruption, subversion, debasement. Its dark step-cousin, *sexual* perversion – erotic behavior or desire considered abnormal or unacceptable by mutually agreed-upon cultural conventions – is even more suspect and threatening. It is understandable why so many see 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 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:

> I guess the worst of it to me is that Crumb became such a *culture hero* [italics mine] 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. (Groth, 1991)

In the same interview, Crumb reflects on the question of his culpability for what he helped to unleash:

> 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 . (Groth, 1991)

For Crumb, letting the "subconscious loose in your work" results in something "more interesting," which I take to mean *authentic*. In fact, much of younger Crumb's earlier, edgier, boundary-pushing work can in many ways be seen as a purposeful response to Robbins – his vital counterbalance – and what she represents to him. This warrants quoting Crumb at some length:

> One of the keys to expressing yourself in your art is to try to break through self-restraint, to see if you can get past that socialized part of your mind, the superego or whatever you call it. There's a little Trina in all of our brains that's always judging and saying, "No, no, that's bad, that's wrong," some little nun or school teacher or authority figure that always wants us to be correct and good and polite, and do the things that are most acceptable to everyone — always, at all times. We're constantly trying to do what's socially right. It's hard to break out of that in your actions in the world, let alone in your art. Art, hopefully, is one place where you can get away with that, breaking away from those things and revealing something deeper. I know from my own work I *have* to let that stuff out [italics in original], it can't stay inside of me; all the creepiness, the sexual stuff, the hostility toward women, the anger toward authority. I've actually worked a lot of that out of my

system in my work. In my early period I did a lot more violent, anti-authoritarian stuff than I do now. In this one story I had myself chopping this nun's head off. I had to do that, it had to come out. (Groth, 1991)

This difficult issue is worth some careful consideration. What happens – what can you *see* – when you leave behind what Crumb calls the "self-restraint . . . [of the] socialized part of your mind," reframing reasonable, established cultural norms not as unassailable expectations or a certain fixed point of view, but instead as *constructs*, fluid and variable products of a certain perspective? What reveals itself when we interrogate these instinctually held restrictions that both inform and stubbornly sustain our received understandings of gender and sexuality? Is this willful resistance, even rejection, 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 dispute, to disrupt, to deconstruct the established, socially-constructed conventions and 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:

Figure 1

From "Hey Mom! Let's Have Nigger Hearts for Lunch!" in *Zap* No. 1 (1968)

Or this panel from the infamous "Joe Blow":

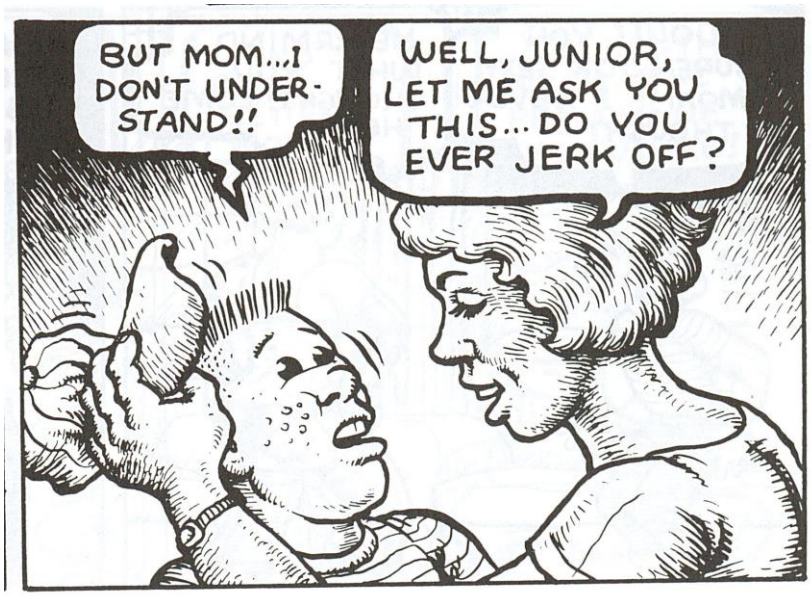

Figure 2

From *Zap No. 4* (1969)

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, to momentarily suspend judgment, is it possible to perceive something else at work? Does Crumb's art create a space – I hesitate to call it a *safe* space – to collectively consider the unacceptable urges represented in these confounding images in a way that allows us to defer our initial reactions to his racial – and more to the point of this study – his sexual images?

Enter trickster, the ancient, liminal, cross-cultural, border-crossing, postmodern clown. The trickster figure provides an unusual way of reassessing notions of "perverse" sexual behaviors and encoded assumptions about gender. Trickster serves as a purposeful force for reconsidering, recontextualizing and perhaps even transforming the dominant discourses surrounding our contemporary understanding of sexuality and gender. In his instructive article "His Life in His Tail," Andrew Wiget, a literary scholar at New Mexico State University, explains that there is an essential ambiguity and absurdity at the core of trickster that "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" (Wiget, 1990: 91-92). Similarly, in his challenging and criminally overlooked trickster novel, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (originally published in 1978 as *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*), Gerald Vizenor, a mixedblood member of the Minnesota Chippewa tribe, explores a subversive concept that he calls a "terminal creed." This is 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. "The opposite of a comic discourse is a monologue," argues Vizenor, "an utterance in isolation, which comes closer to the tragic mode in literature and not a comic tribal world view" (qtd in Velie, 1989: 131). 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. To improvise on Wiget, they are concepts or ideas that are *un*available for contemplation, remaining unquestioned, unspoken. 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. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco argues that words themselves are founded on deceit, that language is its own form of duplicity:

> Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. . . . Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything *which can be used in order to lie*. [Italics in original]. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all. (qtd in Hyde, 2010: 60)

Trickster is driven by this essential ambiguity – sometimes the lowdown fool, deceitful, vain and selfish, or as a culture-hero sometimes "endowed with a high sense of mission and tremendous powers in order to accomplish tasks beneficial to humankind" (Hyde, 2010: 87). This complicated ambiguity, Wiget explains, "at once horrifies and fascinates us" because it reveals the centrality, but more importantly the *necessity* of our own divided, partial, imperfect natures.

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 comprised of contradictory forces: the serious clown, the mute prophet, clever and foolish, a liar who tricks with the truth, both powerful and powerless. "[Trickster is] Coyote, part human and part animal, taking whatever shape he pleases, combin[ing] in his nature the sacredness and sinfulness, grand gestures and pettiness, strength and weakness, joy and misery, heroism and cowardice that together form the human character" (Erdoes, 1998: xiv). And despite (or better, *because*) he is always thinking about and acting upon his sexual drives, trickster is sacred in Native American cultures through his power to aid humans in reconfiguring their relationship to received truths, and specifically for our uses here, about gender and sexuality. Citing the critic Howard Norman, Erdoes and Ortiz frame the trickster as the target for both his community's veneration and ire, naming him "a celebrator of life, a celebration of life, because by rallying against him a community discovers its own resilience and protective skills" (Erdoes, 1998: xxi). This "rallying point" is what I keep in mind when I encounter disturbing images in Crumb such as these:

Figures 3 & 4

Final two panels from "Memories Are Made of This!" in *Weirdo* #22 (Spring 1988)

Splash Panel from "Angelfood McSpade" in *Zap* No. 2 (1968)

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. In it, she expresses her ardent rejection of Crumb's celebrated place in the pantheon of comics history. As with many comics critics (myself included), she finds it difficult to separate the art from the artist in the blatantly sexist, misogynist and racist images like the ones above. Exasperated by an older generation of fans and critics whom she views as Crumb's apologists (she identifies as Millennial), she points to several revealing moments in interviews over the years in which Crumb unwittingly admits to what few would hesitate to call sexual assault. Referring to the same Crumb interview with Gary Groth cited earlier, O argues:

> The worst example I'm aware of dates back to 1991 (republished in 2014). In the introduction, [Groth] describes an image of the artist where Crumb is "tweaking his critics" by depicting himself "standing atop a (presumably dead) naked woman's buttocks, chortling, 'Fuck 'em and cut their heads off!'" [Figure 5] This is of course the sort of edgelord garbage for which Crumb is celebrated, but Groth wants us to know that looks can be deceiving. "No raving pervert, Crumb is soft-spoken, articulate, thoughtful and – above all, honest, both about his work and his own sex life." (O, 2019)

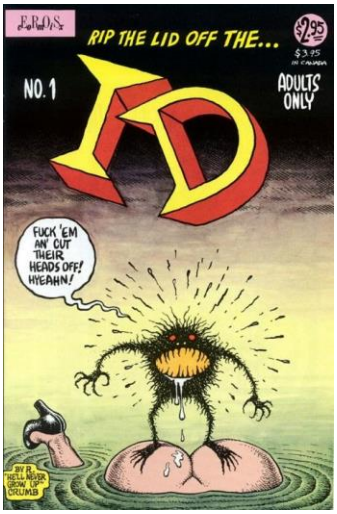

Figure 5

Front cover of *ID* No. 1 (1990)

O also emphasizes the troubling and often overlooked reality of Crumb's treatment of women in his personal life. In the same interview, Crumb discusses an incident from the 1970s when he attempted to jump on an unsuspecting woman's back and ride her around the room. (Crumb readily admits this is one of his recurring fantasies, performed with consenting participants. More on this theme later.) Upon which the woman, according to Crumb, "screamed … and ran from the house." Again, it is difficult to categorize behavior like this as anything other than outright assault. 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:

> 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. (O, 2019)

Similarly, in the online article "No Girls Allowed!: Crumb and the Comix Counterculture," Claire Litton, a staff writer for the popular culture website *pop MATTERS,* argues convincingly that Crumb and his misbegotten imitators deliberately barred female cartoonists from participating in the Underground Comix movement, thereby "poisoning a blossoming genre with vehement misogyny" (Litton, 2007). For Litton, Crumb's work and his outsized influence facilitated a squandered opportunity: "Where there could have been an open forum for feminist art and collaborative, ground-breaking works, there was only hatred and sexism, often inspired by a man who admitted his fear and loathing of women." Mirroring O's concern, Litton also points to the central contradiction she sees hiding in plain sight in Crumb's project:

> In a time that despised instinctual repression, Crumb's work seemed like a representation of everything The Man was against: artistic expression, sex, and sexual artistic expression. In reality, he was so generally embittered towards women and afraid of "selling out" to commercialism that he resorted to shock tactics or material designed to alienate. By buying in to the cultural norms of female repression and gender roles, Crumb ended up supporting the very mainstream values he claimed to abhor. (Litton, 2007)

These are difficult, thorny issues. There seems to be no single solution, or perhaps more accurately, no real solution at all. What I am suggesting is that a problem/solution approach may distort the creative dynamic at work in Crumb's artistic expression. Taking Kim O's proposition as my cue, I am seeking what I fervently hope is O's "honest and brave" approach, what I see as a parallel reading laid alongside our initial, outraged response to Crumb's work, a reading that I hope both complements and complicates it. The tension that O and Litton recognize in Crumb's art between the intentional rejection and heedless acceptance of the status quo concisely conveys the ambiguous essence of the trickster, a figure who defies reliable certainties, who ducks our attempts to pin him down, and dodges our need to secure his final meaning. 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? As a progressive community with shared cultural values and a commitment to basic human dignity and equality, what do we do with these bewildering images and the dark urges that they represent? How do we confront and answer them? By intentionally crossing thresholds, the trickster's aberrant behavior is a call to recognize these drives within each of us, temporarily providing us with the opportunity to see and name our unacceptable compulsions and to recognize that we are not alone in having them. Rather than isolation and stasis, trickster offers inclusion and the possibility of transformation, especially since the space in which it is offered is often deemed damaged, perverted, or shameful.

History is littered with examples of humans – often though not always males – warped by desire, 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, 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: [All italics mine]

> 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. (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, "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" (Wiget, 1990: 94). Laughter creates an alternative space to confront this consuming struggle, so often cloaked in shame, secrecy and silence. In a revealing conversation with Peter Poplaski in *The R. Crumb Handbook*, Crumb comes very close to naming the sexual presence of the trickster in his work:

> As a matter of survival I've created this anti-hero alter-ego, a guy in an ill-fitting suit – part homunculus, and part clown. Yep, that's me alright. . . . I could never relate to heroes. I have no interest in drawing heroic characters. It's not my thing, man. I'm more inclined toward the sordid underbelly of life. I find it more interesting to draw grotesque, lurid, or absurd pictures, and I especially enjoy depicting my fevered sexual obsessions; ugly, weird little guys doing bizarre, twisted things to beautiful buxom women. This part of my work repels a lot of people. (Poplaski, 2005: 393)

Put off by the 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. As he explains to Poplaski, “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” (Crumb, 1997: 260).

Crumb’s comics represent an uneasy dialogue between these appropriated images and a number of recurring themes: the absurd contradictions and ambiguities of existence; the pain of being a social outcast; the human need for truth and certainty and the hucksters who promise this; gender antagonism and his early sexual rejection by women. Many of Crumb’s strips explore 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.

THE STRIPS: CON JOBS, CLOWN JOBS & OTHER JOBS

“You know, I’ve been attacked by women’s liberation. They say I’m a ‘chauvinist pig’ getting rich by degrading women. But I think it’s healthy to get that stuff out in the open where you can laugh at it and understand it rather than keep it hidden and festering.”

– Robert Crumb (from a 1974 interview with Susan Goodrick in *R. Crumb Conversations*, 2004: 89)

“Creative mobility in this world requires, at crucial moments, the strategic erasure of ethical boundaries.”

– Lewis Hyde (from *Trickster Makes This World*, 2010: 168)

THE CON JOBS

Crumb’s comics are rooted in the past, shaping his drawing style which he calls “old fashioned” (*Conversations* 76). The subjects of his drawings and cartoons are often deliberate echoes of images from three distinct historical periods and the popular culture of those times: the 1920s and early ‘30s; his childhood in the 1940s and ‘50s; and the psychedelic ‘60s into the early ‘70s. Each has had a profound visual influence on his work but it is the 1920s that represent for him a more genuine, prelapsarian period unspoiled by the ravages of individualistic, technological, consumer-capitalist culture which began in the second half of the 20th century and continues unabated to today. This was a time before TV and the internet, even before the

widespread popularity of the radio. The shared cultural values of this earlier, more "authentic" time – expressed most clearly for Crumb in its music – thread through much of his artistic expression, taking on some of the inherently ambiguous qualities of the trickster. For Crumb – an ardent socialist – our modern, late-capitalist existence is devoid of any clear meaning beyond its monetary value, conforming our bodies, our lives and our beliefs into mere products for consumption. This quasi-Christian "fall from grace" is evident in his widely admired strip "A Short History of America" (1979), first published in *CoEvolution Quarterly*. In twelve short, evenly-stacked, rectangular panels, "Short History" provides a richly detailed record of a small patch of initially untouched land. [Figure 6] Predating the arrival of humans, the strip transports us across a vastly accelerated timeline delivering us to today's familiar suburban-industrial crudscape. "*What's next?!!*" a small caption box asks in the bottom right corner of the final panel, leaving the reader with the uneasy feeling that the inexorable repurposing of the land into a degraded reflection of its industrious occupants has caused something vital and necessary to be lost, not just in the landscape but in ourselves. The elegiac tone of the strip summons what Crumb refers to as our "bleak corporate monoculture" (*Conversations*, 2004: 225), a sterile, inbred structure designed to sell products, not move people where they live. Like the oblivious marks of a con-artist, "A Short History of America" suggests we have been ripped off if we accept the familiarity of the final panel as the highest expression of American, or even human values. With the knowing wink of the trickster, Crumb invites us to resist and re-contextualize the gleaming capitalist promise contradicted by its empty, utilitarian expression in the environment that we inhabit, a setting that began with such Edenic promise.

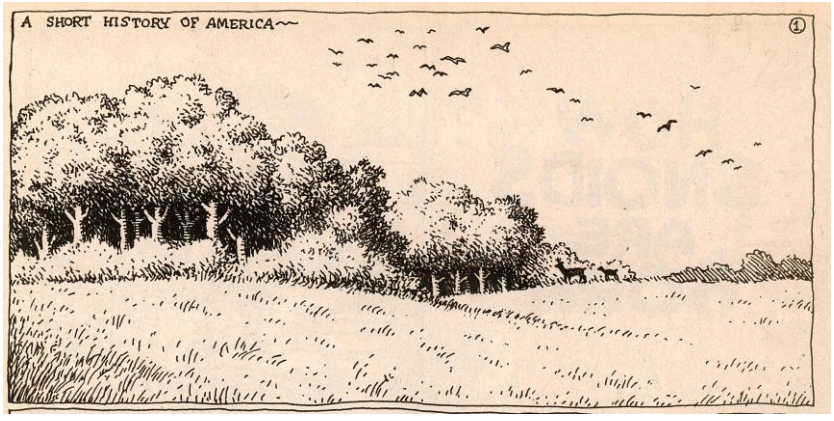

Figure 6

Panel 1 from "A Short History of America" in *CoEvolution Quarterly* (1979)

In an interview with Kristine McKenna, Crumb explains:

> I have a contrary streak that won't allow me to feed people what they want. . . . I never worry about how the work will be received because I'm not interested in a mainstream audience. I don't want to be the guy who caters to people and makes them feel comfortable about their lives – not that I sit down to draw and think "now let's see how uncomfortable I can make people." But I've found that if you do something that's straight from where you live, it's not gonna be mainstream. It just doesn't work that way. My work is full of sweating, nervous uneasiness, which is a big part of me and everybody else. Most people don't want to see that though because it reminds them of inadequate parts of themselves. (*Conversations*, 2004: 163)

True to his contrarian nature, search no further than the gruesome fate of the philandering Fritz the Cat, murdered at the height of his popularity by a jealous lover with an icepick to the back of the skull. [Figure 7] Like trickster, Fritz's actions are often motivated by self-interest, many strips ending with his comedic comeuppance. He is a confirmed flirt, libertine, and an accomplished ladies' man, everything that Crumb was not.

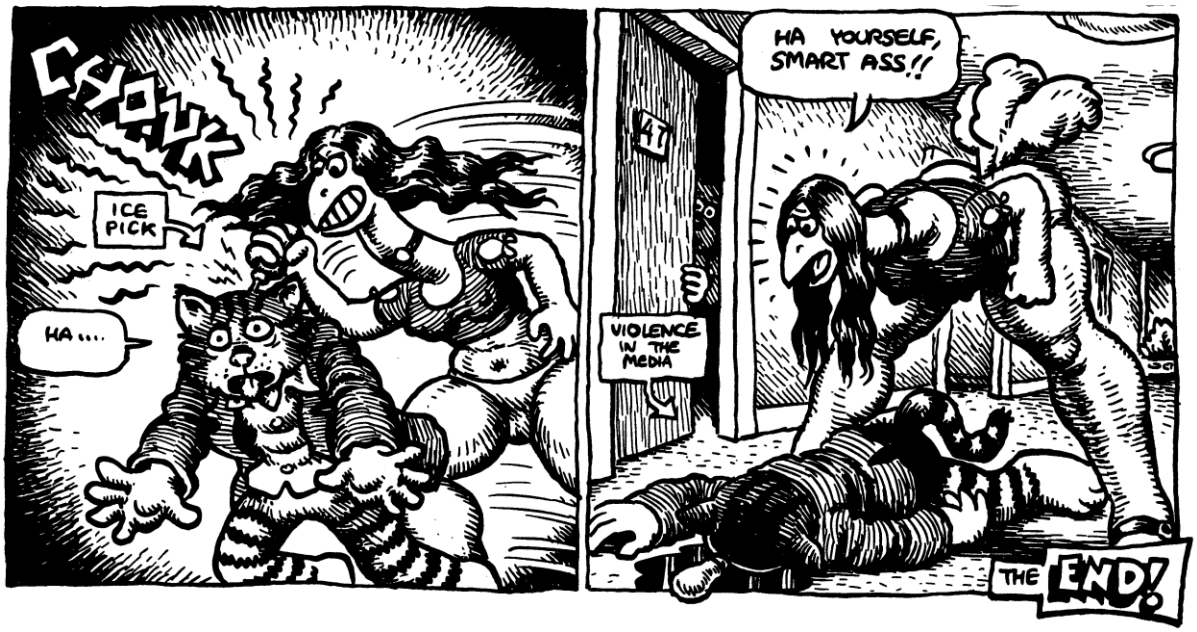

Figure 7

"Fritz the Cat 'Superstar'" from *The People's Comics* (1972)

In a telling interview with Jean-Pierre Mercier, Crumb again remarks on his deeply engrained, trickster-like inability to deliver what the public expects:

> The really sick stuff, the really twisted stuff, I just have to do it! . . . I guess the compulsion only comes in because the sick part is a forbidden thing, socially forbidden. Everybody's id is supposed to be under wraps. So somehow, I had this compulsion in my comics to let the id have its say. I think that if I hadn't gone through that first period of fame and attention then I would never have felt free to do that other stuff, and maybe even compelled to do it, to get [publishers and fans] to back off a little bit or see that I'm not so wonderful. It was just taking the drawings I had been doing secretly and going public with it – going public with the whole dark side of myself. (*Conversations*, 2004: 194-195)

This perverse desire to subvert expectations often surfaces as duplicitous behavior disguised as profoundly held convictions, the modus operandi of the con artist. "Mode O'Day and Her Pals," originally published in *Weirdo* #9 (Winter 1983-1984) epitomizes the idea of art as a compulsive swindle. Mode is a character constantly on the make. The embodiment of 1980s materialism, her values are determined by the latest fad. She is a conspicuous consumer and social exhibitionist. In the splash panel [Figure 8] she strikes a dramatic runway pose, attired in the latest fashion trend. (Thus her name). To the far left, the strip's title is scrawled in what appears to be black spray paint over a traditional painter's palette, implying a sense of the manipulative business of art. Just above her schlubby companions' heads, an unframed block of text announces, "*She's just a small-town girl but what she'd really like to be is a fashion model in New York!*" Towering over them, Mode silently reflects on the fabulous A-List celebrity parties she could be attending instead of hanging around with her "*pals*" whom she considers "*boring nonentities*." She is dismissive and rude to her friend Doggo, a flyblown canine dressed in the trench coat and battered fedora of a 1930s noir detective. Mode visibly reinforces the class distinctions she perceives between herself and Doggo when she asks his opinion of her expensive haircut, pretentiously names its exorbitant price, then berates him when he calls it nice. "*What do you know, you're just some slob off the street*," she replies while turning her back to admire herself in a mirror.

Figure 8

"Mode O'Day and her Pals" from *Weirdo* #9 (Winter 1983-1984)

The strip focuses on a piece of scrap metal Doggo has discovered in a salvage yard that he offers to the duplicitous Mode as a "found object." Rebranding Doggo as *Pucci*, Mode leverages her connections in the art world to engineer a financial windfall for herself. When Pucci's "sculptures" surprisingly become the toast of the art community, he comically realizes that he no longer requires her services. In the final row of panels, Mode rages at the absent Doggo, threatening violence for the "double-crosser" and smoldering over the meteoric rise of his successful new art career. When Doggo turns up to inform her that he has purchased the entire salvage yard and now oversees a team of assistants, he offers Mode a job. In the final panel – the visual punchline to the strip – Doggo is violently brained with the heavy object which ricochets off his skull from the next room with a resounding "*BONG*." In comical defeat, he plunges to the floor, squeans of pain dancing around his cranium. In the bottom right corner of the panel, at the tip of his shoe, a tiny caption box reads, "*END*."

Echoing Crumb's professional experiences with businessmen and Hollywood executives, "Mode O'Day and Her Pals" pits the naïve artist against the opportunistic business practices of unscrupulous capitalists. Early in his artistic career, from his traumatic legal battles over the copyright of his most famous image, "Keep on Truckin'," to his exasperating negotiations for the

animated film version of *Fritz the Cat*, to the innumerable toys, figures, rolling papers, t-shirts, posters and all manner of bootlegged products, Crumb's interactions with hucksters and con men were notoriously exploitative, with him most often coming out on the losing end of these "deals." In an interview with Al Davoren in 1972, he discusses the business negotiations for *Fritz*:

> They took every advantage they could. It's just the way those guys work, those New York guys, that's the way they do it. And it's like nice guys finish last in their book. . . . It's not ethical, you know. Not ethical on human terms. Maybe on business terms they are, but on human terms they're not. Business ethics and human ethics are two different things. (*Conversations*, 2004: 59)

This asymmetrical relationship is illustrated when Mode insists on a 60/40 split with Doggo, counting on his lack of business acumen to allow her to easily manipulate him. The class distinctions in the strip mirror this hierarchy as well. A low-born artist, Doggo sees beauty in the humble piece of scrap which, when elevated by the critics to the level of "found art," is quickly harnessed by the wealthy and connected Mode to leverage its monetary value. By the end of the strip, Mode has made no financial gains (or losses) while Pucci the artist ends up financially ahead – despite his violent but amusing comeuppance.

Viewing this strip as a trickster tale enables us to perceive Art itself as the biggest loser in the ongoing conflict between authenticity and profit. Doggo's convictions may be genuine but even he is not immune to the necessity of making a living, thereby diminishing the true value of artistic expression which exists beyond the realm of quantifiable profit. The paradoxical result is that Art is turned into a meaningful fraud. And yet, the strip is distinctly funny, providing us with the trickster-like ability to answer the paradox with laughter.

THE CLOWN JOBS

In the revelatory *Trickster Makes This World*, the cultural critic Lewis Hyde makes the fascinating argument that deception and trickery arose as one of the oldest survival strategies in nature, particularly in response to the development of the ability to see. "In evolutionary theory," Hyde explains, "the tension between predator and prey is one of the great engines that has driven

the creation of intelligence itself, each side successively and ceaselessly responding to the other" (Hyde, 2010: 20). This relentless pressure on prey to camouflage, to deceive, to mimic, to cheat – and its attendant need for successful predators to see through the subterfuge – has nurtured an incremental rise in states of higher awareness for each. Calling upon the resonant phrase of the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, Angi Buettner describes this symbiotic but ultimately ambiguous dynamic as the "unfinished genesis of the imagination . . . where culture is located and where newness enters the world" (Buettner, 2009: 124). Trickster creatively occupies and crosses the perilous boundaries within this antagonistic game of opposing needs, but his ambiguous laughter offsets the seriousness and violence of this fraught relationship. Steeped in fecundity, Trickster's laughter calls forth the evolving project of the polarized human mind:

> Images in the cultural forms that are imbued with and brought about by laughter are all ambivalent images, or, to use Bakhtin's famous formula, grotesque images. They deal with the "grotesque world of becoming," a world full of transgressions and transformations, where destruction and death are an integral part of becoming. The grotesque image is an ambivalent image, one that can combine "in one image both the positive and negative poles" (qtd in Bakhtin, 308) – birth and death, the upper and lower level of the body, or play and seriousness. (Buettner, 2009: 130)

Crumb's strips teem with less-than-fully-realized characters who are damaged but utterly human grotesques. They seek what they cannot find, squatters in Bakhtin's "grotesque world of becoming." In the serious unseriousness of their cartoon adventures, there is an abiding sense of ambivalent comedy that offers a distorted mirror of mutual recognition. Crumb's grotesques act and trickster laughs. In sharing this laughter we are potentially transformed by the characters' clownish transgressions.

There are clear comedic precedents in the template of many of his strips. As an accomplished student of comics history, Crumb notes:

> The humor was most often very low-brow in those early strips – in the last panel somebody is falling out of the picture after hearing the punch-line. These newspaper comic strips were looked down on by the upscale cartoonists of the weekly magazines coming out of New York – the *New Yorker*, *Life*, *Judge*, etc. Comic strips and comic

> books were for the working classes. Literate people did not read them, and often did not allow their children to read comic books. (*Conversations*, 2004: 229)

As such, the inside front cover of *Big Ass Comics No. 1* (1969) confronts readers with the startlingly oversized posterior of a barefooted, bucktoothed female. [Figure 9] While her Asian features are grossly exaggerated right to the tip of her pointed hat, she seems to proudly defy the typical stereotype of the physically slight, socially demure Asian woman. Standing in the center of an iris lens topped with the unambiguous phrase "*BIG ASS*," she stares directly into our eyes, beckoning with her thumb for us to climb aboard while charitably uttering, "*Git on it!*" Her back pockets suggestively contain a seed catalog and a pamphlet entitled "*thoughts of mao*." The cuffs of her jeans are rolled up, revealing a powerful set of calves. Beneath her bare feet is a block of text, a brash call-to-arms that declares: "*Hey all you castoffs of the degenerate Bourgeoisie! Come on, all you whiney, sniveling brats of the affluent middle class!! Hop right up there!! Let that Holy Mutha Big Ass carry you back Home!!*" Interestingly, she is walking down a post-apocalyptic street lined with the burned-out carcasses and spare parts of an automobile culture framed with the detritus of scorched powerlines and streetlights. In a hopeful note, the sun rises in the distance over the blackened landscape, leading discerning readers (those open to the proposition) to realize that climbing aboard her awe-inspiring behind will somehow transport us to better days.

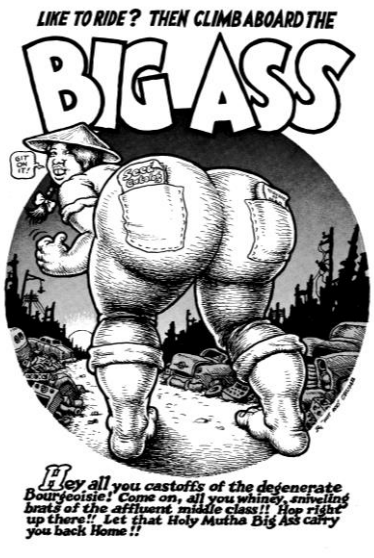

Figure 9

Inside front cover from *Big Ass Comics* No. 1 (1969)

Bookending this opening image [Figure 10], the back cover provides a satirical mission statement for what readers have just experienced: "*Don't be a straggler! Step on the gas!! Lecher self go! Get behind the BIG ASS*" it shouts in an over-inflated balloon font and be-bop rhythm, giving this groovy happening a sense of swinging movement. Marching in a line originating at the vanishing point is a diverse group of well-adjusted Americans made up of what might charitably be called the Charter Members of the "Big Ass Movement," the lucky few who accepted the ride offered in the previous image. They range from small children to hippies, old women to college students, cartoon characters to businessmen. One of the revelers carries a shopping bag that sports the slogan "*Sears & Fastbuck*." A baby smokes a cigar while a young man loudly honks an antique car horn. The Grand Marshal at the head of this oddball parade is an imposing majorette vigorously twirling a baton. Her skin tight uniform accentuates her comically large bust which threatens to swallow her grinning head. Predictably, she wears a tiny skirt that struggles to encase thighs resembling those of a draft horse. Her lower legs are clad in feminine white boots adorned with little red pom poms that bounce gaily as she marches with an air of complete physical confidence. Beneath her thumping feet the text hollers: "*Calling all mutants! Big Ass Comics leads the parade.*" A large black arrow emblazoned with the phrase, "*This guy makes himself sick!*" draws attention to an isolated, green-hued man leering at an oblivious young girl from the corner of a window. Our imagination is encouraged to fill in the details of what he is doing to himself. In language reminiscent of old-fashioned carnival-barkers or vintage ad copy, we are asked to consider the larger implications of what has driven this pitiful man to such a sickly state:

> *And why? Because he was sold a bill of goods somewhere along the line and like a sap he believed them! Is it any wonder he has an unhealthy attitude? Who's to blame for his abnormal behavior? Can he ever hope to become well-adjusted? Or is his hidden anxiety a sign of latent perverse tendencies beyond his power to cope with? The answers to these burning questions are fully explained in easy-to-grasp terms in the pages of Big Ass Comics! Read Big Ass Comics and see for yourself!*

Figure 10

Back cover from *Big Ass Comics* No. 1 (1969)

Read together, these one-page strips encourage the (presumably male, comic book) readers to recognize themselves in the unfortunate, green-eyed wretch with the cartoon nose and wild, unkempt hair who longs for the curvy, young female standing just beyond his reach, separated by a literal wall of bricks. Trapped in his own isolation, this man occupies an underground space beneath the marchers, leading a maladjusted life that denies him meaningful access to shared communal interaction. That he was "sold a bill of goods," yet remains ignorant of the transaction "somewhere along the line" echoes the gullible mark of the capitalist con job. He is the predator's prey, but also the inverse, as he studies the tormenting curvature of the girl's behind, a lecherous predator himself. But what I have blithely referred to as the "Big Ass Movement" offers a comic/serious pathway out of one's sexual misfortunes. *Don't resist these urges* the strips advise the downtrodden (male, cisgender) reader, low-ranking men with limited sexual prospects, demoralized and defeated by the hormonal demands of the biological imperative. *Climb aboard the ass,* coax the jubilant images, *Join the parade of happy riders and see where it takes you. It has to be better than where your life is now*. These are images in which

both participants – the metaphorical rider and the emblematic ridden – are co-equal agents of transportation and transformation, each avoiding the tragic missed opportunity of non-ridership. Crumb's disruptive creativity deliberately pushes at the boundaries of gag cartoons which, from their earliest days, have been played for laughs. But these are not simply cartoons intended for chuckles. This collective laughter is tinged with the bitter undercurrent of sexual rejection and betrayal along with the possibility of a shared transformative resolution. The tension at the core of this dynamic resets the accepted boundaries of the genre in startling ways.

With its brevity, simplicity, spare setting and preposterous sexual premise, "Anal Antics" from *Big Ass Comics* No. 2 [Figure 11] is another Crumb strip that manifests trickster consciousness. The title of the splash panel trembles in a giddy dance of old-fashioned capital letters above a stylized iris lens. (An aperture? An anus? A spotlight?) At the center of the lens the Snoid is engaged in a dramatic stage bow, as he shockingly protrudes from the behind of a generously proportioned young girl endowed with a formidable buttocks and powerful legs shod in knee high boots. In an unmistakable echo of Looney Tunes' Porky Pig, he states: "*Hi folks! I'm Mr. Snoid and I live in an asshole!*" To which she adds, "*Isn't he cute?*" presumably in an effervescent giggle. In the bottom right of the splash panel is a second lens identifying the strip's author as *R. "what-does-it-all-mean?" Crumb*. To the lower left is a 3-dimensional caption box angled to resemble an old vaudeville show poster warning the reader that the strip about to be encountered contains "more sick humor which serves no purpose." In visual montage-style, the remaining nine panels provide a comical overview of a typical day-in-the-life of a lucky Snoid in his dream "apartment." The drawbacks to this living arrangement, we discover, are minimal (vacating for the landlady's morning toilet; the occasional flatulence). Many are the advantages (skinny-dipping thrills; bicycle spank-rides; singing, joking, laughing and general clownery; proximity and availability of easy sexual encounters; warm, cozy sleeping arrangements). The story – if you can call it that – begins and ends nowhere in particular. In the final panel, we see a lonely Snoid wandering the frigid streets with no place to live and no one to love. The strip ends with the plea, *"Why don't you give a Snoid a home in your asshole today!!"*

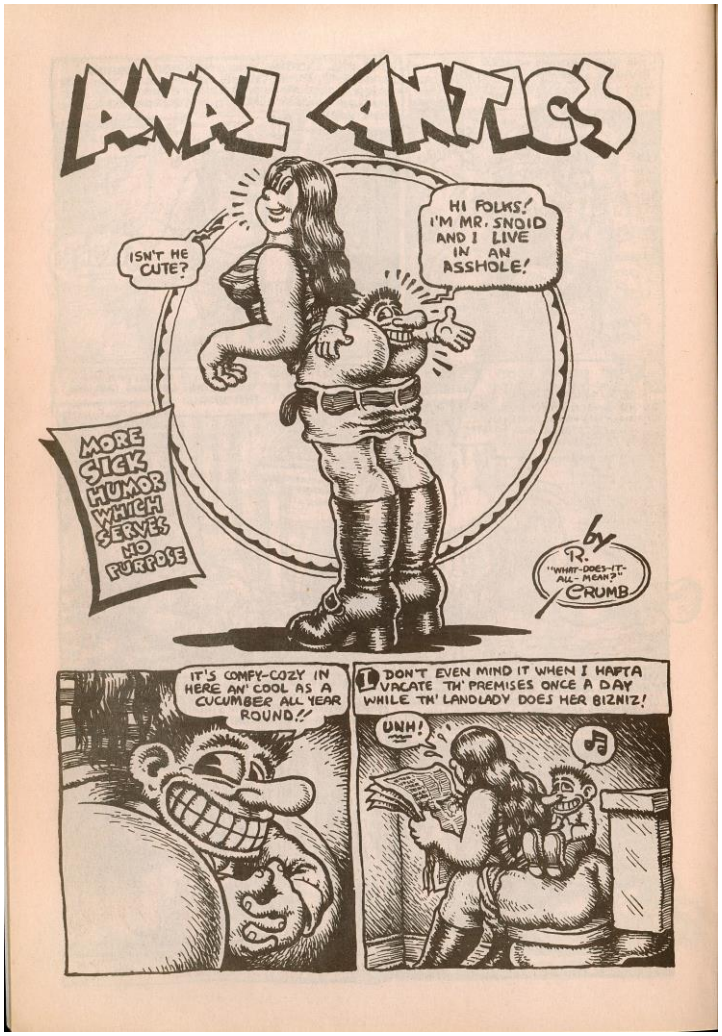

Figure 11

"Anal Antics" from *Big Ass Comics* No. 2 (1971)

Deliberate offenses abound – from a feminist perspective, perhaps too many to enumerate. Most alarmingly, the strip asks the reader to accept the premise of women as vessels for male occupation, passive receptacles for male pleasure and physical objects of male entitlement. The Snoid literally colonizes her body, addressing the audience from inside her rectum. When overcome with the need for sex, he explains, *"I jus' crawl on up right through her intestinal track, through her stomach, and up her throat, then she puckers up an' I fuck her mouth from th' inside! It's great!"* In fact, this is not the only strip to explore the theme of female colonization ("*colon*-ization?"). "R. Crumb versus The Sisterhood" (1973) features the eponymous hero (R. "The Victim" Crumb) who also physically occupies a woman's body. [Figure 12] Briefly, "Sisterhood" is a Heckle and Jeckle-inspired sidewalk brawl between an

imposing female champion and Crumb. The action takes place outside a women's group clubhouse labelled "*No Boys Allowed*." Initiated by a vaudevillean ink-squirting flower, the strip focuses in loving detail on the violent pummeling administered to Crumb by Big Kate, clad in powerful, thigh-hugging boots. The fight quickly devolves into a preposterous sexual interaction that culminates in Crumb climbing into Kate's vagina. In the next-to-last panel, Crumb has sexually conquered Kate whose violated body lies atop the rubble of the clubhouse. Walking away with a self-satisfied look, he mutters, "*So much for women's liberation…*" The narrow, frameless final panel announces, "*Just kidding girls! I'm actually on your side!! Honest!! This was just another infantile fantasy from a sick, immature mind…But remember, it's only a comic book!*" He signs off with "*Love & kisses, R. Crumb*."

Figure 12

From "R. Crumb versus The Sisterhood" in *Black and White Comics* (1973)

In all of these strips, but particularly "Sisterhood," one gets the distinct feeling that Crumb is seeing how far he can bend a comic strip, testing its tensile strength before it actually breaks. The adolescent offensiveness and explicitly rendered sex acts disrupt any lighthearted expectations a reader may have of a traditional cartoon strip. This is especially destabilizing in "Antics" since both characters seem so mutually satisfied with their arrangement. It seems the offense itself is the point. The trickster mythically embodies these lowborn impulses. And while, as an elevated culture-hero he offers transformative gifts to humankind, trickster consciousness can also manifest as cruelty, viciousness and malice:

> Trickster not only embodies the playful but also the disruptive side of the human imagination. The negative sides of trickster, though, are not usually given enough attention in the critical literature. Mean laughter and nasty disruptiveness are just as important a part of the trickster imagination. In many myths, Trickster is associated with bringing into being people or things that establish ultimate boundaries; this acknowledges the negative aspects of trickster imagination. One such boundary created by trickster is, for example, death. (Buettner, 2009: 129)

Birth is another of these "ultimate boundaries" that trickster tests. As a stand-in for Crumb, Crybaby Beanhead reluctantly enters the world facilitated by a "Cozmic Clown." [Figure 13] ("Crybaby" because of the human propensity to wallow in self-pity, "Beanhead" because Crumb has described the perfect female form as a bean with the concave angle of the spine leading to a bulging behind.) The strip's large, visually spare panels contain brief caption boxes that provide a running voice-over, ostensibly sung by the Clown, that speak directly to Crybaby's ongoing travails. Structured to resemble an old blues song, Crybaby struggles and suffers through his fleshly existence in a state of perpetual want. Born into a world he didn't ask for, compelled to do work in which he finds no meaning, longing to return to the womb, he inhabits a baffling universe that consistently reminds him of his many shortcomings. That he is expelled from the paradise of the womb by a cigar-chomping clown seems both comically fitting and desperately unfair. The strip – and this panel in particular – conveys the uneasy sense that we all step to the tune of coarse clowns who pull the strings on our oblivious lives. It is difficult to take oneself seriously when the unshakeable sound of laughter underscores the essential exigencies of life.

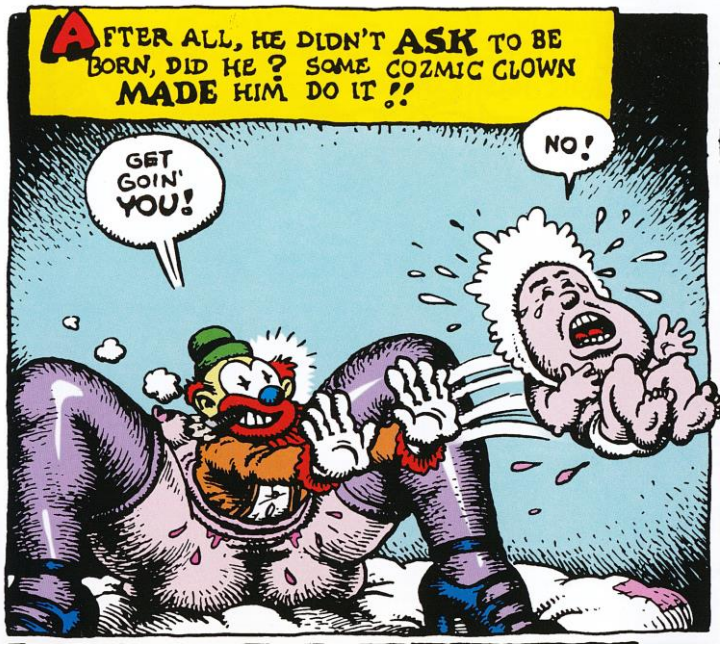

Figure 13

From "Crybaby Beanhead in Crybaby's Blues," *Arcade* No. 5 (1976)

Created 26 years later, "Cradle to Grave" expands the premise suggested in "Beanhead." [Figure 14] Spanning the life cycle of a male child, "Cradle" opens with the rude smack-on-the-behind at the beginning of life. In the second panel, the contented infant innocently nurses at his mother's large breast. Moving against the rightward momentum of the strip, a rowdy gang of clowns arrives unannounced with their arms spread wide, demanding that his mother hand over her "brat." Echoing the accelerated timeline of "A Short History of America," by the third panel the child has rapidly aged several years. To his bafflement, the clowns have hoisted him onto their shoulders, pointing the way towards the upcoming trials of his life. The red tassel on the blackfaced clown's hat encroaches into the gutter, subtly reinforcing his boundary-crossing status as a trickster figure. With shouts of "*YA-HOO*," the clowns convey their boy to the next panel where he has aged perhaps five more years. Attired in a blood-red cowboy hat, he points his toy pistol at another boy perched atop his own coterie of clowns. One clown notes that "*boys will be boys*," while another observes, "*He's an obnoxious one! He'll go far!*" This sentiment reaffirms Crumb's oft-stated belief that only loutish alpha-males get their way in this world. The clowns' comments intrude into the gutter with the next panel, where we find the gawky teenaged boy hesitating to accost a girl who sits, unapproachable, atop her own conveyance of clowns while dreaming of an attractive, presumably popular male.

In the next panel the boy, now a man, having successfully navigated the labyrinth of courtship rituals, mounts the woman as their squads of clowns struggle to support them. Underneath the couple's cries of passion, several of the clowns comment on the action, sarcastically proclaiming, "*Greatest love that ever was in the world!*" This garners a snicker from one, to which another answers, "*Oh you cynics!*" In the ensuing panel their young daughter is carried away from her confused and heartbroken parents by her own pack of clowns. Now grown to his full physical stature the middle-aged man, dressed in an oxford shirt and business tie, stoops over a calculator. His life is occupied by adult responsibilities as he aspires to the money that will afford him and his family a respectable middle class existence. At this point in his life, his sweating clowns groan with exertion. Their dialogue balloons infringe again into the gutter as they notice that their "man of means" has gained some heft. Swiftly transporting the now old, grey man to the last stages of his life, he sits hunched atop his crew of clowns dressed in retirement clothing in the identical position as the previous panel. He reflects on his former responsibilities, once so urgent and all-consuming, and wonders, "*Gosh, what's it all been for, anyway??*" With a chuckle, the clowns notice his existential doubt and suggest that they "*git th' stretcher ready!*"

In the final row of panels, the frail, elderly man approaches his end, mumbling inarticulate regrets and calling for his nurse. "*Oh boy*," one his clowns sardonically comments, "*his mind is going*." "*Oh well*," answers another, "*it won't be long now*." In comic briffits of dust, the expired man is unceremoniously dumped into an open grave with an "*atta boy*" and a "*toodle-oo*." In the final panel, a threatening sky lowers onto a single rose drooping over a fresh mound of dirt in front of a headstone that reads "*Joe Shmuck R.I.P.*" Exiting stage left is the leg of a single clown who proclaims from off-panel, "*Well, that's that…*" In the bottom right hand corner, a small, unassuming banner reads "*END*."

This brutal but simultaneously funny Everyman strip reads like a medieval Morality play. It is the stages of life as lived by an individual who has assiduously followed the rules dictated for him by the cultural expectations of his time and place, but who, upon reaching the end of the drama, finds that he is left unlamented and unfulfilled. It is the clowns who observe, support and enable every step of this grim, seemingly inevitable process. Once they consign the old man to the ground the clowns cease running. In every panel but the second-to-last – Joe's burial – they

exhibit a manic urgency, always rushing to the next scene, persistently pushing the rapid passage of time in their hurry to fulfill their cosmic duties to their human charges. And while they seem complicit in urging this man to enact his inexorable role, they are emblematic of the need to resist playing by rigidly constructed rules that result in an unyielding self-seriousness which ignores the unpredictable comic joy of life. In a 2002 interview with D.K. Holm, Crumb admits:

> I often fell into the trap of taking myself too seriously and trying to live up to the "genius" image I had of myself – a fatal, egoistic error that many artists, writers, even comedians make. You think you have to make some big, important statement to the world every time you pick up your pen, or brush, or whatever your tool may be. That's a hard thing to overcome, I work on it every day. (*Conversations*, 2004: 224)

In its embrace of trickster consciousness, "Cradle to Grave" lays out a latent blueprint for avoiding the same hollow fate as Joe Shmuck. According to Buettner, "Trickster imagination – characterized by both its negative and positive aspects, and by the incessant changing of roles and identities – has the potential to dissolve often unchallenged ideologies and ideas about the world" (Buettner, 2009: 129). Trickster's enthusiastic embrace of the unpredictable, readymade contingencies of existence provides the means for reimagining the structured cultural expectations of what comprises a life well-lived. "At times or points of crisis," argues Buettner, "Trickster and his laughter can help to discover the weak spots that need to be attacked so as to get rid of old or superimposed concepts that must be changed in order to enable re-articulation" (Buettner, 2009: 126). Mr. Shmuck is a Crumb character who has been sold yet another "bill of goods" that he never paused to consider. In a path measured by the prudent milestones of advantage, gain and profit, it is the spaces between these markers that unwittingly escaped his attention. It is trickster's clowning that draws awareness to the concealed power of these neglected interstices. As Buettner asserts, "Sexual desire, lying, fantasy, playfulness and laughter prevail over the linearity of time, realism, seriousness and science" (Buettner, 2009: 131).

These "exigencies of desire" are the most difficult, notorious and misunderstood aspect of trickster's nature. It is to the sexual *dirt work* of these "other jobs" that we finally turn.

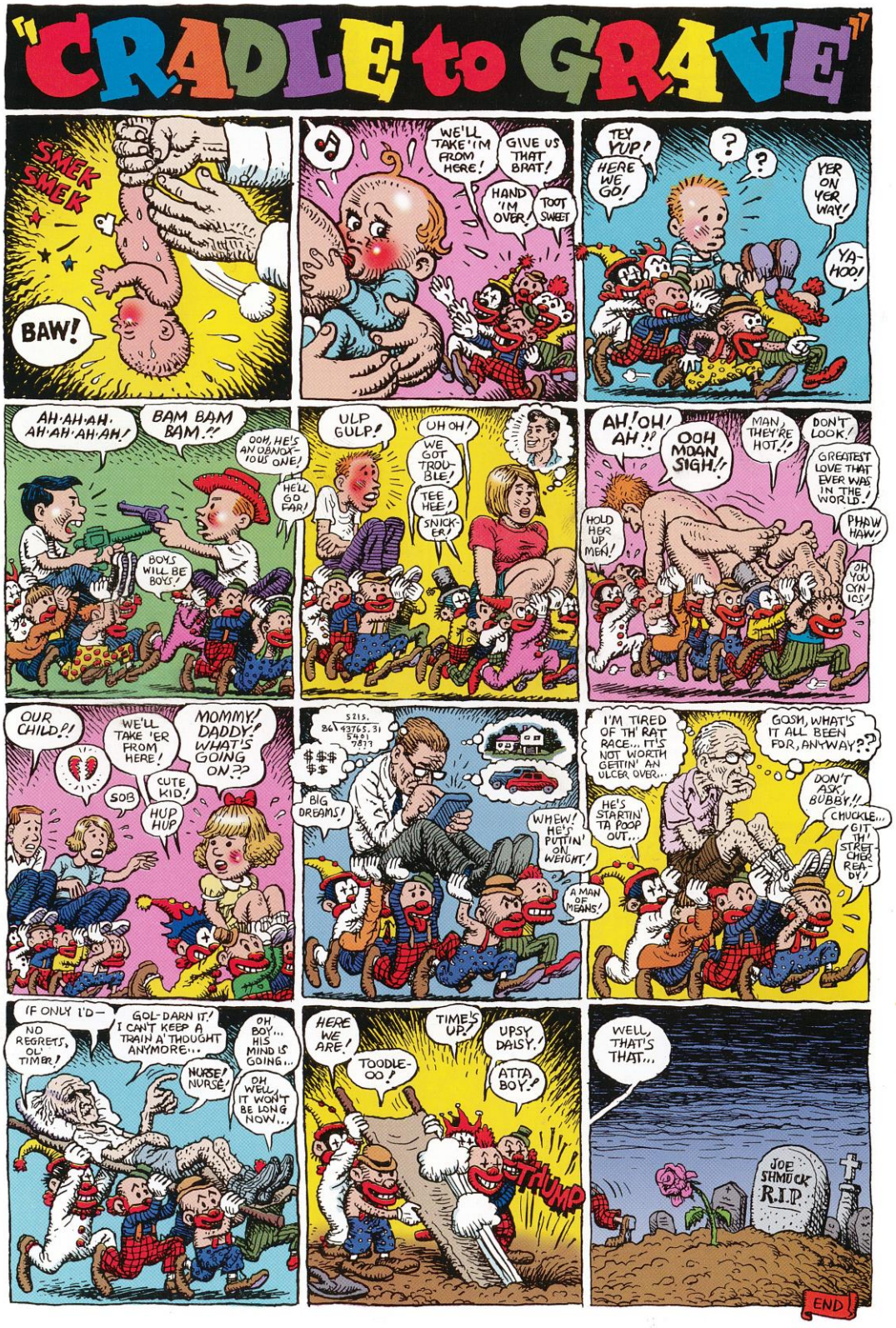

Figure 14

"Cradle to Grave," from back cover of *Mystic Funnies No. 3* (2002)

THE "OTHER" JOBS

Returning to *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde links the concepts of shame and silence and their dual expression in "shame culture." This arises in face-to-face communities where members externally observe and police one another's behavior, rigidly enforcing community standards of decorum. Shame culture, Hyde explains, "preserves its structure by swamping those who step out of line with deadly, smothering waves of shame" (Hyde, 2010: 155) designed to control and silence those who do not comply. High school is classic shame culture. Hyde distinguishes shame culture from "guilt culture" where moral sanctions are generally internalized. Its members "carry the internal eye of [their] conscience with [them] wherever [they] go" (Hyde, 2010: 155). In both cultures, select actions and utterances are forbidden except at certain occasions, seasons, or stages of life in highly prescribed settings (think of modern Halloween or bachelorette parties). Many Native American tribes relegate the telling of trickster's ritual-dirt tales to dark winter nights. "If rules of silence help 'maintain the real,' as [Maxine Hong] Kingston puts it, then one takes considerable risk breaking them" (qtd in Hyde, 2010: 157). This cultural silence-breaking often (but not always) occurs in sacred spaces like churches, funerals or cemeteries and contains a sense of regard for the feelings of others. Families are non-sacred spaces where the dirty laundry is intended to stay within the confines of the home. Those who ignore the observation of this respectful, even reverent silence by violating accepted social norms risk rejection by the dominant group. These "whistle-blowing" affronts are often punished through censure or even violence. Politics, social media and slut-shaming come to mind, as does the LGBTQ+ community's non-compliance with sex and gender norms. As we saw earlier, even the comics community enforces communal shame standards.

This is where the pivotal role of the trickster becomes murky because the unsilenced, shameless (or more accurately, *shame-different*) person is both a risk to herself and the highly-structured cultural arrangement of the world around her. This is why, Hyde believes, that some mistake trickster for a psychopath:

> Psychopaths lie, cheat, and steal. They are given to obscenity and, as one psychologist put it, exhibit "a confusion of amorous and excretory functions." They're not just antisocial, they're foolishly so (they "will commit thefts, forgery, adultery, fraud, and other deeds for astonishingly small stakes and under much greater risks of being

> discovered than will the ordinary scoundrel"). . . . They are masters of the empty gesture, and have a glib facility with language, stripping words of the glue that normally connects them to feeling and morality. Finally, they lack both remorse and shame for the harm and hurt that trail behind them. One way or another, almost everything that can be said about psychopaths can also be said about tricksters. (Hyde, 2010: 158)

Hyde points to the inverse of this dynamic as a way to understand the dilemma: *Everything said of tricksters cannot be said of psychopaths*. Tricksters function in the mythical realm, not in the real world. But more importantly, "Trickster's mythic functions are wider than any psychopath's, and harder to classify. . . . Trickster stories . . . have typically been told in ways that marked them as 'special speech,' so that, no matter how profane their content, they belonged to an anomalous category, a sort of sacred lack of the sacred" (Hyde, 2010: 158). Half of trickster, remember, is a ritualized culture-hero, an ambiguous mediator/thief between humankind and the gods, "connected to a class of actions no psychopath ever performed" (Hyde, 2010: 158). Hyde wonders if associating the trickster with the psychopath is more a mental defense against the anxiety that trickster's dubious methods can produce:

> There is, of course, good reason to be cautious when glib and cunning human beings appear on the scene. But it must also be the case that a society, to preserve the status quo, will slide an image of the psychopath over the face of the trickster to prevent real contact. Like one of those Styrofoam owls they put on buildings to scare off timid pigeons, the image of the psychopath is a minatory illusion, a threatening mask to keep the conventional from approaching trickster's sacred/not-sacred functions. Trickster is among other things the gatekeeper who opens the door into the next world; those who mistake him for a psychopath never even know such a door exists. (Hyde, 2010: 159)

Significantly, individuals who choose to embrace qualities that have been shamed into silence do not simply turn away from shame and deny its existence. Rather, they engage and wrestle with it, redrawing where the lines of speech and silence belong, remaking the territory of shame's thresholds. "They try to change its face," Hyde argues, "kill[ing] it in one form so as to resurrect it in another" (Hyde, 2010: 165). This noncompliance, however, is difficult and hard-won: "They promulgate an altered sense of dignity to replace the constraining dignity that the village urged

on them. . . . This kind of art settles on the line between sacred and profane, opens a commerce between the two, and by that commerce shifts their content, or shifts the line" (Hyde, 2010: 167).

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 consuming response of bodily and sexual display. "What one covers on the body," Hyde explains, "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 "preserve the coverings and silences that give social space its order" (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, the admirable and the deplorable 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 incipient aim an unachievable, sterile purity. Rather than outright banishment, dirt becomes one of trickster's primary tools to remake the world:

> Dirt is always a by-product of creating order. Where there is dirt, there is always a system of some kind, and rules about dirt are meant to preserve it. . . . If you care about your community, you will respect the dirt commandments that give it structure. As with keeping shame's appropriate silences, honoring the distinction between the clean and the dirty helps make the world an orderly place, while dishonoring that distinction . . . threatens the design. (Hyde, 2010: 176)

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 "sanctioned, structured, and contained involvement with things that are normally out of bounds" (Hyde, 2010: 186). This is the function

of Carnival and Mardi Gras – or the earlier Feast of Fools – 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, 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. As Crumb explains to Susan Goodrick in a 1974 interview, "When people are forced to deny their natural urges they get weird, twisted and mean" (*Conversations*, 2002: 88). Goodrick discloses to Crumb that, as a female, some of his stories make her angry: "You don't show women that are warm, compassionate, intelligent, or independent. Your women are always either domineering and offensive or abused and humiliated" (*Conversations*, 2004: 89). This shrewd description deftly captures the bewildering intersection of unsavory qualities of the central female character in the final collection of strips.

Cheryl Borck makes her debut appearance to the accompaniment of discordant music in the Mr. Natural strip "Here He Comes Again!" (1986). 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 who made his first appearance in *Yarrowstalks* #1 (1967). He is a difficult character to define, even for Crumb, who admits: "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 (*Conversations,* 2004: 120). Frank Cioffi argues that Mr. Natural "speaks the language of consumer come-on rather than any wisdom" (Cioffi, 2001: 113). 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," 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. 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:

> [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. (*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. 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, he 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. 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. (Look it up.) 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. [Figure 15] 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.

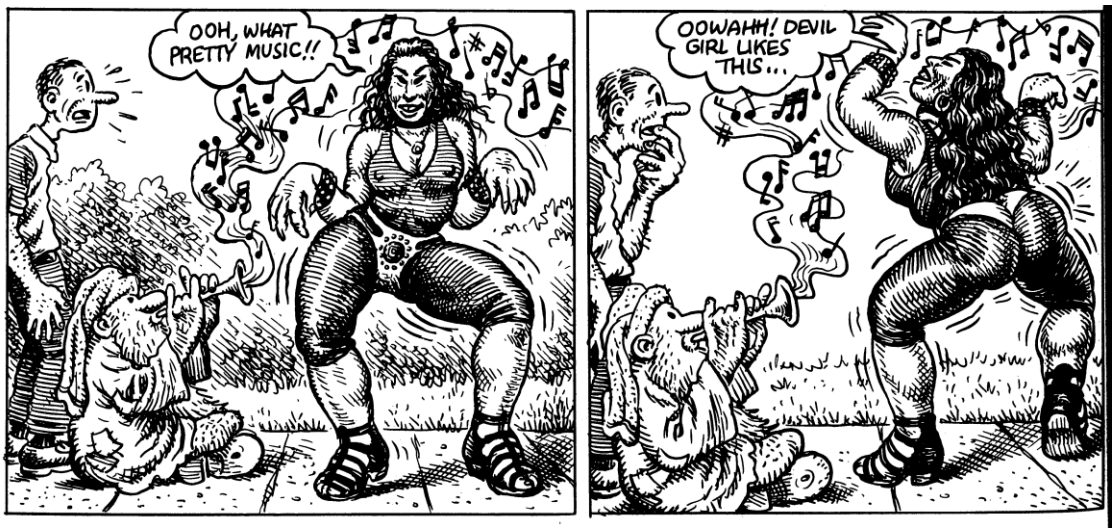

Figure 15

"Here He Comes Again!" from *HUP* No. 1 (1986)

A product of Crumb's middle career (late-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 [Figure 4] as "a goddess, a vision of perfect, primitive sexuality." Similarly, Crumb calls the female Sasquatch in "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot," "The lusty Amazon sex goddess who lives naked in the jungle" (*Conversations*, 2004: 121). Both of these female characters descend from his early masturbatory fantasies of the beguiling *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle,* the stirring 1950s TV show beloved 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: "I want to get in there. It's dynamic and exciting…It pulsates, throbs with vitality and life" (*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. (*I return to this idea in more depth in the conclusion.*) He likens the coarse bawdiness of his characters to "old-time burlesque theater" (*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:

> [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" (*Conversations*, 2004: 123). [Italics in original].

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.

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. "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" (*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 the nuns were these big giant scary women who liked to pick on little boys" (*Conversations*, 2004: 118). In the alarming strip, "The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself" – 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 insider, Flakey Foont – that informs the trickster consciousness underlying much of his work. In a November 1961 personal correspondence with Marty Pahls, fellow comics collector, confidante, and eventual roommate, Crumb admits:

> By the time a poor soul reaches college they've been trying to be something they're not for so long that it becomes a part of them and they start adding new layers of falsehood on top of their smothered self… To think, I'd be the same way if I had been accepted by society. Since I am not accepted, I go against the modes of society which rejected me. These college kids are nothing but impressions on other people, on each other. Their real selves got lost somewhere around the age of eleven, twelve, thirteen. It's all sad. (*Vigor for Life*, 1998/2012: 177)

The impressions of these "smothered" selves demand the narrative dirt-ritual of trickster consciousness. Devil Girl is the uncontained female spirit absent from Flakey Foont's repressed sexual desires. Leading a life that makes no room for these unruly drives, he 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 tendered by Mr. Natural that instead strikes Flakey as shamelessly dissolute. "Trickster is *a*moral, not *im*moral," explains Lewis Hyde. "He embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined. He represents the paradoxical category of sacred amorality" (Hyde, 2010: 10). These are words that Robert Crumb needed to hear as a younger man, who once admitted:

> How I hate the courting ritual! I was always repelled by my own sex drive, which in my youth, never left me alone. I was constantly driven by frustrated desires to do bizarre and unacceptable things with and to women. My soul was in constant conflict about it. I was never able to resolve it. Old age is the only relief. (*R. Crumb Handbook*, 2005: 387)

Sharing a pedigree with Joe Shmuck, Flakey is on his own clown-enabled, pseudo-erotic parade to the grave. Our peers, parents, politicians, and priests repeatedly reassure us that prudently following cultural policies will pay off in the end. We need only stay in our lane while others do the same. Trickster – and Robert Crumb – are here to disabuse us of this.

ENCRUMBED BY THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY

"We should debate whether we can admire or appreciate the writings of anti-Semites, racists, homophobes and sexists, or if doing so makes us complicit, but first we must experience the words. Sadly, we are now in an age of righteous, zero-tolerance rage."

– Joseph T. Moldovan (from "Letters" in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 3, 2019)

"There's not a corner or cranny of my life and psyche that hasn't been publicly explored, put on display, held up for ridicule, for laughs, to ogle at, as an example, as a freak show, or just out of my own narcissistic compulsion to exhibit myself. . . . I wanted to be loved so badly that I was compelled to show them the worst, most despicable part of myself, to test their love."

– Robert Crumb (from *R. Crumb Conversations*, 2004: 223-224)

"[W]e need art to explore the darkest recesses of our lives and minds. But we also need art to tell us why this world is worth loving, and therefore saving."

– Christian Wiman (from "The Poet of Light," in *The New York Times Book Review*, January 12, 2018)

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 transfixed with 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 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. As the Allies massed for the invasion of the Continent, England was flooded with roistering GIs. In response to the boorish behavior of the high-spirited young soldiers, British citizens bemoaned their presence as "overfed, oversexed, and over here." In my imagination I see Crumb's powerfully-limbed, expansive-breasted women who populate his anonymous cityscapes as feeling the same. While these substantial women gambol through his strips, a nearby male often lurks, leers and lusts for these objects of his male gaze. The discomfort that contemporary viewers feel is evident in images such as the cover for *Gothic Blimp Works* No. 2 [Figure 17] in which a grizzled, possibly homeless man, liquor bottle spilling from the hip pocket of his coat, accosts a fresh-faced young redhead. With both hands he wrenches down her skirt revealing the slope of her behind, the tint of her flaming red hair mirrored in the "*BLIMP*" of the title as well as her descending skirt and the small iris lens containing the price of the publication. Anxious plewds of comic sweat spew from the girl's forehead signaling her distress while the man's lower lip streams with drool. The image recalls the famous Coppertone ad [Figure 16] in which a frisky puppy pulls down a pig-tailed little girl's bathing suit to reveal the tan lines on her tiny behind. But the dark, assaultive implications in the "Blimp" cover are starkly different. To today's sensibilities, this is an unambiguous representation of physical assault.

Figures 16 & 17

Coppertone Ad (1959) and cover of *Gothic Blimp Works* No.2 (1969)

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. This fertile musical form, showcasing an unapologetic expression of sexual opportunism, is heavily imbued with trickster consciousness. The blues is a musical gumbo of influences, from African music, the call-and-response structure of African village life, Negro spirituals, 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 unclothed in the 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 – an extreme shaming of both the body and the mind – 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: "[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" (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. Refusing to periodically apply the lubricant of the trickster imagination to the rusty hinges of our highly regulated cultural arrangements risks a barrenness that denies the promise of renewal. 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 "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" (Hyde, 2010: 13). [Italics mine] For Crumb, it is the insistence of a hyperactive libido coupled with female rejection and an unreconstructed misogyny – his own toxic form of body shame – that he wrestles with and attempts to resolve through his art. While he walks a perilous line, his disruptive, disturbing images urge us to expose our concealed sources of shame. This does not mean that Crumb advocates the behaviors or beliefs in his images. Trickster is not the con man. Whether he enacts or is enacted upon by the con, his manipulative, humorous, hypersexualized actions draw our attention to the scam, ridding it of its power to silence us. 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). This raises some interrelated questions: Do the ongoing condemnations of Crumb's work mistake the messenger for the message? Is it a case of arresting the actor who murders someone in a film, or prosecuting the songwriter who performs a song about suicide or rape? Rejecting *Huckleberry Finn* because of Twain's casual use of the n-word? 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," an event with deep roots in African oral culture. Hyde describes the game as "a kind of verbal dueling in which antagonists publicly insult one another with elaborate rhyming couplets" (Hyde, 2010: 272). Based on the "Signifying Monkey" of African oral narratives, the goal is to verbally "trope a dope" your adversary, "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" (Hyde, 2010: 273). A pivotal scene in the film *8 Mile*, starring the

rapper Eminem, features the triumphant dozening of an opponent. Hyde's description of the game's dynamic is revealing:

> The winner is the player who improvises quickly, who most deftly turns the other's rhymes around, who always responds to wit with greater wit, and who in all this outlasts the other and most delights the gathered audience. . . . The loser is the player who breaks the form and starts a physical fight. The point of the game is to play with language, not to take it seriously, or better, to stay in *balance* on the line between the playful and the serious while trying to tip one's opponent *off* that balance, dizzied with a whirl of words. (Hyde, 2010: 272-273) [Italics in original]

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. Recalling Eco, the Monkey Mind also deems language a semiotic sign, a form of camouflage which can be used to both lie and tell the truth:

> To climb into the Monkey's tree is to detach from the bedrock categories of one's own culture and "signify" with them, and that means to recognize that [participants in the dozens] are serious (there's no insult if this isn't serious) but that their seriousness can be infused with humor (the game demands wit and more wit). . . . 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. (Hyde, 2010: 273-274)

This serious/not serious speech, the "double" attitude of the trickster, is not our mundane, day-to-day consciousness, but a cognitively challenging middle space where the levity of the signifying mind overcomes the gravity of the embodied self. The door into trickster intelligence is a makeshift, liminal threshold set aside in ritually fenced spaces, events or times – like the dozens

– intended for reconsidering the quotidian reality of cultural limits. 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). Ultimately, what the signifying mind perceives is that disorder and disruption are not situated in the trickster, but instead are located in the compulsory order and rules of the cultures he has bred.

The precarious boundary between "meaning something and just saying it" contains the fundamental contradiction of Robert Crumb's art. Does the trickster say what he means or mean what he says? Embracing this incongruity guides us to respond from the tectonic center between adulation and condemnation to images Robert C. Harvey fittingly describes as "outrageous assaults on orthodox sensibilities." The intentional shock – the "trope a dope" – of Crumb's work, argues Harvey, "explodes the conventional facades behind which we hide, thereby revealing what we really are" (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, another disruptive artist whom Crumb admires, that "[Picasso] took this world seriously; then he disrupted it; then he gave it a new form" (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 perpetual ability to return. 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.

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