

Epic Trickster faces the Desert of the Real: An interview with Gregory Rutledge on African-American epic, Western epic tradition in U.S. and the current political crisis¹

El *Trickster épico* ante el Desierto de lo Real: una entrevista con Gregory Rutledge sobre la épica afroamericana, la tradición épica occidental en Estados Unidos y la crisis política actual.

O Trickster épico diante do Deserto do Real: uma entrevista com Gregory Rutledge sobre a épica afro-americana, a tradição épica ocidental nos Estados Unidos e a atual crise política

Gregory E. Rutledge
University of Nebraska–Lincoln: Lincoln, Nebraska, US
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2955-6080>

Mg. Andrés Eduardo Cabra Sánchez
Investigador Independiente
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0508-7497>

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Resumen

En esta entrevista, el Dr. Gregory E. Rutledge aborda diversas cuestiones orientadas a tender puentes entre los estudios de la épica y la narrativa trickster del África Occidental, el imaginario homérico en la cultura Estadounidense, la literatura y los Estudios Culturales. La teoría del «Trickster épico» del Dr. Rutledge se centra en la continuidad y la discontinuidad transatlánticas de la tradición épica africana en los Estados Unidos, así como en su colisión con la epistemología occidental blanca desde el período colonial hasta el presente. Su metodología —que incluye formas de África occidental, de los pueblos indígenas de América y europeas/estadounidenses, y que abarca la literatura, el cine, la música y el deporte— tiene implicaciones antropológicas, literarias y también en la política cultural. Inspirado en tres epopeyas de África occidental y en la literatura afroestadounidense, el «Trickster épico» despliega la «doble conciencia» de Du Bois, la concepción de la performance de la épica africana de Okpewho, el «Signifyin(g) Monkey» de Gates y el paradigma de «amor y robo» mediante el cual Lott conceptualiza la *minstrelsy* como un espectáculo racializado del siglo XIX estructurado en torno a prácticas de *blackface*. Su enfoque teórico reformula la «doble conciencia» para analizar las dinámicas de apropiación y de borramiento cultural y epistémico encarnadas y perpetradas por la blanquitud hegemónica sobre la cultura negra.

A lo largo de la conversación, el Dr. Rutledge utiliza el concepto de “Epic Trickster” para formular una crítica profunda a la epistemología occidental. Lo hace de manera comparativa, concibiendo el “crisol” literario estadounidense como una performance cultural que incluye, entre otros elementos, formas arquetípicas y míticas como las epopeyas homéricas, así como un sentido épico proveniente de África Occidental, incorporado por las poblaciones esclavizadas y que se integró —de manera forzada pero decisiva— en las interpretaciones de la lucha contra la esclavitud como una épica del pueblo afroestadounidense. Así, el enfoque comparativo del “Epic Trickster” se sitúa en la tradición épica africana, que pese a ser excluida de los currículos occidentales, tanto en Estados Unidos como en América Latina, moldea las estructuras profundas de la narrativa afroestadounidense, desde la ficción hasta el *hip hop*.

De este modo, el concepto “*Epic Trickster*”, al surgir del análisis sobre cómo el imaginario épico, las figuras *trickster* y los discursos de supremacía blanca y excepcionalismo se conjugan en la mitología política estadounidense, permite interpelar las amenazas que representan la retórica actual antiinmigrante y supremacista blanca del gobierno estadounidense. Este diálogo abre un espacio para considerar la dimensión política de la tradición épica occidental en la cultura estadounidense y las conexiones entre las crisis políticas contemporáneas y la interpretación/apropiación del legado homérico por parte de la cultura blanca estadounidense. Este enfoque puede entablar un diálogo fecundo con los estudios decoloniales latinoamericanos debido al racismo estructural que marcó tanto la historia de formación de los Estados latinoamericanos como de los Estados Unidos de América.

Palabras clave: Racismo; Performance épica; Americanismo homérico; excepcionalismo blanco estadounidense; épica afroestadounidense.

Abstract

In this interview, Dr. Gregory E. Rutledge approaches several questions aimed at creating bridges between West African epic and trickster studies, Homeric Americana as a performance, literature and Cultural Studies. Dr. Rutledge’s theory of the “Epic Trickster” focuses on the trans-Atlantic continuity and discontinuity of African epic tradition in the United States and how it collides with White Western epistemology from the colonial period to the present. His methodology—including

West African, First American, and European/American forms; literature, film, music, and sport—has anthropological, literary and policy implications. Inspired by three West African epics and African-American literature, the "Epic Trickster" deploys Du Bois' "double-consciousness," Okpewho's African epic performance, Gates' "Signifyin(g) Monkey" and Lott's "love and theft" minstrelsy paradigms; his theoretical approach reformulates "double-consciousness" to analyze the dynamics of appropriation and cultural, epistemic erasure embodied and perpetrated by White-elite culture upon Black culture.

Throughout the interview, Dr. Rutledge uses the "Epic Trickster" to raise a deep critique of the Western epistemology. He does so, comparatively, by approaching the U.S.'s literary "melting pot" as a cultural performance including, among other things, archetypal/mythical forms like Homer's epics and an embodied West African epic sense dropped, along with the enslaved, like seasoning into the epic of slavery. Thus, Dr. Rutledge's "Epic Trickster" comparative is situated in the African epic tradition, which was excluded from the Western *curricula* in the U.S. and Latin America, and animates the deep structures in African-American storytelling from fiction to hip hop.

Thus, the "Epic Trickster," comprised of epic performances, tricksters, white supremacy and American Exceptionalism as part of the political mythology, equally speaks to threats represented by the current anti-immigrant and white supremacist rhetoric from the U.S. government. This dialogue opens space to consider the political dimension of the Western epic tradition in American Culture, and the connections between the current political crises and the interpretation/appropriation of the Homeric legacy by White American culture. This approach can enter into dialogue with Latin American decolonial studies due to the structural racism that shaped both the history of the formation of Latin American states and the United States of America.

Keywords: Racism, Epic Performance, Homeric Americana, White-American Exceptionalism, African-American epic

Resumo

Nesta entrevista, o Dr. Gregory E. Rutledge aborda diversas questões voltadas a construir pontes entre os estudos da épica e do *trickster* na África Ocidental, o imaginário homérico na cultura norte-americana, a literatura e os Estudos Culturais. A teoria do «Trickster épico» do Dr. Rutledge concentra-se na continuidade e na descontinuidade transatlânticas da tradição épica africana nos Estados Unidos, bem como em sua colisão com a epistemologia ocidental branca desde o período colonial até o presente. Sua metodologia — que inclui formas da África Ocidental, dos povos indígenas das Américas e europeias/estadunidenses, e que abrange a literatura, o cinema, a música e o esporte — apresenta implicações antropológicas, literárias e também para as políticas culturais. Inspirado em três epopeias da África Ocidental e na literatura afro-estadunidense, o «Trickster épico» mobiliza a «dupla consciência» de Du Bois, a concepção de performance da épica africana de Okpewho, o «Signifyin(g) Monkey» de Gates e o paradigma de «amor e roubo» por meio do qual Lott conceitualiza a *minstrelsy* como um espetáculo racializado do século XIX estruturado em torno de práticas de *blackface*. Sua abordagem teórica reformula a «dupla consciência» para analisar as dinâmicas de apropriação e de apagamento cultural e epistêmico encarnadas e perpetradas pela branquitude hegemônica sobre a cultura negra.

Ao longo da conversa, o Dr. Rutledge utiliza o conceito de "Epic Trickster" para formular uma crítica profunda à epistemologia ocidental. Ele o faz de maneira comparativa, concebendo o "caldeirão" literário dos Estados Unidos como uma *performance* cultural que inclui, entre outros elementos, formas arquetípicas e míticas como as epopeias homéricas, bem como um sentido épico oriundo da África Ocidental, incorporado pelas populações escravizadas e integrado — de modo forçado, porém decisivo — às interpretações da luta contra a escravidão como uma épica do povo afro-americano.

Assim, a abordagem comparativa do “Epic Trickster” se inscreve na tradição épica africana, que, apesar de ter sido excluída dos currículos ocidentais tanto nos Estados Unidos quanto na América Latina, molda as estruturas profundas da narrativa afro-americana, da ficção ao *hip hop*.

Desse modo, o conceito de “Epic Trickster”, ao surgir da análise de como o imaginário épico, as figuras *trickster* e os discursos de supremacia branca e excepcionalismo se articulam na mitologia política norte-americana, permite interpelar as ameaças representadas pela atual retórica anti-imigrante e supremacista branca do governo dos Estados Unidos. Esse diálogo abre espaço para considerar a dimensão política da tradição épica ocidental na cultura norte-americana e as conexões entre as crises políticas contemporâneas e a interpretação/apropriação do legado homérico pela cultura branca estadunidense. Essa perspectiva pode estabelecer um diálogo fecundo com os estudos decoloniais latino-americanos, devido ao racismo estrutural que marcou tanto a história de formação dos Estados latino-americanos quanto dos Estados Unidos da América.

Palavras-chave: Racismo; Performance épica; Americanismo homérico; Excepcionalismo branco estadunidense; Épica afro-estadunidense.

Introduction

Ahora embárcate en la lectura y deja que Elegba, el abridor de caminos, te revele tus futuros pasos ya escritos en las Tablas de Ifá, desde antes de nacer. Tarde o temprano tenías que enfrentarte a esta verdad: la historia del hombre negro en América es tan tuya como la del indio o la del blanco que lo acompañarán a la conquista de la libertad de todos.
Manuel Zapata Olivella, Changó, el gran putas

To introduce the present interview I would like to use the verb “to land on”, because the maritime background that I see in the reading-writing process is part of the research journey. I landed on *The Epic Trickster in American Literature: From Sunjata to So(u)l* (2013) by Dr. Gregory E. Rutledge in 2022 during the writing-reading process of my master’s dissertation in Literary Studies at Caro y Cuervo Institute. In a certain way this interview was born from this research journey, for at the time of this discovery I was seeking to connect epic studies with decolonial theory in order to analyze the novel *Changó, el gran putas* (1983) (*Changó, Decolonizing the African Diaspora, trans*). Indeed, I could say that a verse of Zapata Olivella led me to engage with epic trickster theory: “Give me, Father, your word, The word evocative of Soundjata’s sword” (Zapata Olivella 2010 p. 52) says the griot Ngafua, in the exordium of *Changó*. So, naturally I wondered: How is Soundjata (also known and spelled as Sunjata, Sundiata, and Son-Jara), the twelfth-century Malian hero and namesake of this epic, connected to the African diaspora and its impact on Latin-American literature and political history? Dr. Rutledge’s epic trickster theory gave me an answer—or at least, showed me a path to a possible answer. As Dr. Rutledge says, “epic is the very center of how we understand ourselves.” This “ourselves” includes not only the American people, but Latin-Americans too; not because we were main characters of the *epic performance* that tries to drive the world into new wars and global warming, but because we (as a society differentiated in terms of race/gender and class) were molded by this *epic performance* from the colonial period to current times.

The following interview was born principally from the generosity of Dr. Rutledge. I wrote to him in mid-February 2025, with some questions that, even now, I'm reformulating after a year. Dr. Rutledge not only accepted the interview, which required that we communicate several times leading up to an extensive interview, but also dedicated his time to reviewing the original transcription, which included footnotes and a bibliography, and making further footnotes, additions and clarifications.

The questions that I formulated for Dr. Rutledge aimed to explore common points between Homeric Americana, West African epic, and Latin-American epic regarding the role of epic culture in both contexts. Although the questions, that Dr. Rutledge kindly answered, are centered on creating bridges between West African epic and trickster studies, Homeric Americana as a performance, and literature and Cultural Studies, Latin-American readers will find that these questions are connected with their history. This is due to the epic performance that came with modernity/coloniality, which was defined by the slavery of African people and native peoples of this whole America,—re-baptized with the name of the one who “re-discovered”, through the cartography raised from his “epic voyages”. This epic performance had as its chief function the white-supremacist project of erasing, excluding and appropriating all of the cultural differences.

Epic is a central concern of literary studies. Homeric Works, West African epics (which are mostly unknown in Colombia, except for the ones Zapata Olivella and Fernández Ochoa (2017) mention in their novels), Luso and Hispanic new world colonial epics, and Indigenous epics are part of the modern, post-modern and postcolonial literary background. As Dr. Rutledge says in *Epic Trickster*, “Of course, the African and European influences did not enter as coequals: the Homeric performance [after recreated in colonial epic performance in the case of Latin America] arrived under a logic of conquest (...) while MOS-epics arrived in the cramped holds of slave ships that forcibly brought millions of Africans into such spaces as cargo” (Rutledge 2013, p. 13). Thus, what is the political dimension of this epic background? How can we understand the intersection and collision between the diverse epic traditions?

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—which Dr. Rutledge analyzes in his work— and Zapata Ovilla's Changó, spelled Sango in English, show us that the different status of the epic traditions and the way that they are reinterpreted goes beyond literary devices and comes into the political discussion. Thus, from the very literary device to the real effects of epic performance, this interview tries to present several questions that go towards a better understanding: what is the impact of epic rhetoric and actions in current times? What is the threat that it entails? Why do we need the trickster—which is present in African descent oral traditions in the whole Americas—but what happens when the trickster becomes epical and forgets his origin, both in metaphorical and political terms?

Interview Development

Andrés Cabra: Well, Dr. Rutledge, in your book *The Epic Trickster in American Literature: From Sunjata to So(u)l*, you introduce the concept of epic performance. Dr. Rutledge, could you tell us more about this concept?

Gregory Rutledge: Certainly, certainly. I think that there are two ways of thinking about epic performance that are useful in my study. The classical literary formulation does relate to traditional West African epic storytelling.

And people like Isidore Okpewho² or John William Johnson³ or [David]Conrad⁴, there are a number of those figures who are experts in West African epics and their work, their research, is responsible for helping us compare West African epics to more global epic

² Isidore Okpewho (9 November 1941 – 4 September 2016) Works: *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*, Columbia University Press, 1979, *Myth in Africa: A Study of Its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance*. CUP Archive. 1983. *African Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity*, 1998; *Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*, 1992; *Blood on the Tides: The Ozidi Saga and Oral Epic Narratology*, 2014.

³ John William Johnson. Works: “Yes, Virginia, There Is an Epic in Africa,” *Research in African Literatures*, 1980, vol XI, N° 3; *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (text by Fa-Digi Sisòkò, 1992, reedited 2003; 'Heelloy' *Modern Poetry and Songs of the Somalis*, 1998, *Oral Epics from Africa Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent*, 1997.

⁴ David Conrad. Works: *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People*, 2004, *Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era*, 1999. *Somono Bala of the Upper Niger*, 2002, *Sunjata: A New Prose Version*, 2016, *Empires of Medieval West Africa*, 2010.

storytelling traditions and, particular with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as the literary, the written, form of an older epic performance tradition. That is central to what I'm doing. But there is a broader sense of the epic performance that is just as important. And for me, more important when you're dealing with issues of oppression and race, nationality, settler-colonialism, empire and so forth. And that relates to the way that anthropologists will look at the epic storytelling traditions.

They're not interested only in the literary performances: the epic metaphors, the role of the epic hero, which is more or less the classic Western form of celebrating and centering the hero. But they approach it as more of a cultural communal artifact that lets you understand the dynamics of history, mythology, politics, economics, so on and so forth, as it really attaches to the land and shapes the identities and understandings of the people who are hearing those epic stories.

I suppose that the biggest difference for me as I understand it in these two senses, will be that the classical formulation of the epic performance is centered on the epic hero, particularly as an elite exceptional individual, whereas the more anthropologically centered understanding of the epic performance really brings in the community of hearers as a very important and vibrant artifact for understanding what the epic performance really means. So those two are operating together. I tend to skew more toward the latter in my work because I'm very much concerned about racial uplift and understanding how epic and race are at work here in the United States. But for sure, both of them have to be understood as overlapping significantly in my study.

Andrés Cabra: What is the place of the epic performance in American culture?

Gregory Rutledge: Yeah, this is a really, really good and important question. And it does relate to my previous answer about the literary epic, particularly Homer as the model for great writing, but also what American culture is from the arrival of the first Europeans up until this very present moment.

And I suppose the best way of understanding this is to say that epic is the very center of how we understand ourselves, not only in terms of what great writing is. Going back to the beginning of our nation, much of the idea of what a great writer was and what a great civilization is, is the ability to produce an epic. Great writers like Homer, Virgil, whatever, can produce an epic, and great civilizations from whom they arise are epic in their scale, in their creativity. I think American society, because it has inherited that tradition from Western European countries, significantly with Great Britain, the United Kingdom as its model, it has inherited that idea.

And much of our constitutional way of thinking about ourselves as a nation is centered on the idea of greatness. With Rome as a model, with Ancient Greece as a model, with epic societies in general as a model, I think Americans see themselves in that particular genealogy. And our greatness, then, is comparable to, in line with, the British Empire, with the Roman Empire, with Ancient Greece, and is equivalent to whatever ancient societies that were epic in scale in the past. It's very important for us, I think, in how we see ourselves. And the American Dream is deeply related to this idea that our country's beginnings is an epic story. The beginning of the first settlers coming here to establish their own colonies, and then breaking from Great Britain, that would be considered an epic war, the American Revolution, and then the kind of sense that we were a great, exceptional country that was destined for epic greatness. So it is in our DNA, it's in how we've performed our political identities from the very beginning, again up until this very moment.

Andrés Cabra: Well, in your book, you talk about the deformation that the Western-white epistemology has done on the African epic, reducing the African epic as a folklore manifestation, or even denying the place of the African epic in the epic studies. For example, we can think in Ruth Finnegan, *in Oral Literature in Africa*, she said that in Africa there is not epic in the strict sense, and she exposes as her principal argument the issue of the structure, the prosodic structure of the African epics, and for her, these African epics had not the condition, the technical condition, to being an epic.

Do you think that the transgressive power of African epics can challenge Western modernity and provide a new critical perspective?

Gregory Rutledge: Yeah, this is a really, a great question to mull over, and in many ways, it's going to be an ongoing discussion because epic traditions are in many ways overlapping. And what I mean by that is that whenever you have an epic event, thinking again of the Trojan War, it's two epic traditions that are involved in that particular moment, the Greeks—the Achaeans—and the Trojans, and to the extent that they were side-by-side, and then in conflict, the outcome of that was very much in doubt. Troy had never been defeated, and so Troy as a different model of the epic, separate from the Greek model, did present its own iteration, its own form, its own history, of what epic was. Hector had his own transgressive ability as the contest-hero for his society, and of course Achilles and Odysseus, Agamemnon, Ajax, and other heroes for the Greeks represented the same for their respective societies.[...]

But to get to your question, and especially with Ruth Finnegan's remarks that Africa didn't have the right conditions to be able to produce a formal epic tradition, and of course there were those in the West who felt that way generally because white epic figures and white civilization was seen as great on a transcendental cosmic scale, whereas West African societies were not seen to have such capacity. And that's just simply a misunderstanding of the nature of the African societies of the past and really an inability to understand the histories of ancient Africa. And we are talking about very ancient histories. The problem is that because the written records aren't as available or is unavailable for a number of these societies, we just don't have the metric, we don't have the transcript, to let us be able to see, except in the case of something like Egypt. And Egypt I think is a very good way for understanding just how vast a scale of what an epic is, in terms of its accomplishment.

But in terms of the transgressive potential, I think it certainly does because of the nature of African society from the ancient times going back to societies like Egypt or to ancient Meroë or to these other ancient civilizations—Ethiopia—that go back to the earliest periods in the birth of human civilization. When you think about their capacity, the capacity to build

civilizations, the capacity for creating sophisticated language, for building pyramids, for the mathematical designs of the Egyptians, for the exploratory abilities of these societies, and then as that gets passed on to other parts of Africa, to other parts of the Mediterranean, as it disperses, you then realize that some of this knowledge that was birthed in West Africa, that was transgressive in the sense that it's creative and leading to great dynasties or great kingdoms or empires, that's transgressive and epic potential for the record.

And the scale of these and the scale of the ability of some of the more recent African kingdoms that existed in the 16th century to 17th century to 18th century, before slavery and colonization really brought them to a close, shows that there is in this history a remarkable degree of potential for the transgressive. And that's what I found so interesting in my study once I had a chance to look at some of the literary anthropologists and their discussions of these epic figures and their centrality within their cultures and also within the regions in which those storytelling traditions were told. So, that potential means that the human ingenuity is certainly a West African, a Central African, a North African, an East African, a South African, an African one, using that term broadly to cover all those different societies and ethnic groups.

So yes, I do think that there is that potential. Can it be a dangerous one? Most certainly. The kind of violence that's unfolding right now in West Africa, in Nigeria, in Mali, in the Sudan—South Sudan—with the mercenary groups fighting against the government, that kind of tension, even though it's not on the scale of an epic war, shows that you have this kind of capability that is continually a structure of African societies. Unfortunately, it's internal turmoil, but once there is solidity, you could always get a great civilization that rises and then can compete. Some of these have amazing natural resources. If any of these societies, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, if it's able to really consolidate its own natural resources, it could buy the technology, it could build itself rather quickly into an amazing society that is rich, that's well educated, and is in [competition] with other societies in the world. So yes, it's possible.

Andrés Cabra: Well, but if we think about the African-American epic—I'm thinking especially, for example, in artistic movements as Harlem Renaissance, Hip-hop or other Black artistic and political movements—how do you think the African epic power was recreated in these forms of Black culture, and how this artistic process can challenge Western modernity, or better, the racism that supports Western modernity?

Gregory Rutledge: Yeah, this is a really interesting question, one that I like to take up with my students when we are engaged in African-American literary history. And I like to start my classes with reading [Johnson's] *The Epic of Sun-Jara*, and then to cross the Atlantic once I've established that ancient epic tradition, and raise for the students the question of whether the Malian epic storytelling tradition, what would happen to it once you have members who are part of Malian society, and other Senegambian members of the society who heard the telling of the epic of Sunjata? What would happen to those individuals who were transported through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and then deposited into the New World, either through the Caribbean, or directly to the mainland US? It's, I think, appropriate to think of it this way, and this helps us understand your question. If there's an ongoing epic performance tradition in the New World, with Homer as the referent, even if many of the people who are the settlers would not have necessarily read Homer, but they are in a way performing Homer to the extent that it is so central as a literary and aesthetic cultural value for what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a nation, a great society, a great civilization. You take those who are enslaved from West Africa in these epic traditions, and then you drop them into this Homeric diaspora that's part of the melting pot of American culture, and it's like thinking of two epic traditions that are suddenly meeting one another.

We might be inclined to simply think that they're going to act in negation, with the white Homeric New World tradition in direct opposition to the West African Old World epic traditions. And certainly in racial terms, white masters as enslavers and the formerly free West Africans as the enslaved, who are now the new blacks, the “new Negroes,” certainly

there is that kind of opposition. But culture doesn't work only in the way of racial oppositions because the melting pot idea is that multiple cultures are poured in.

So in this sense you're getting two epic traditions that are meeting one another. One of them through the Western European tradition is creating its own New World epic story, but those who are enslaved are bringing their Sunjata or their Ozidi or their Mwindo, and that through the form of this new identity called blackness is being deposited into this melting pot of the New World.

So this is two epics. The enslaved has the interest in performing an epic to escape the servitude, the chattel slavery, that's been placed upon them. So they are en route to becoming Americans to adopt the Homeric American tradition and to graft it into their own native West African storytelling epic traditions. That's an amazing way of thinking about that conflict and complementarity.

From that perspective, then, you're seeing something that is a rather remarkable way of understanding how epics work together to complement even as there is a racial contradiction. The slave autobiographies, or what's called the "slave narratives," were bestsellers because—when 19th-century Americans or even earlier with the first slave narratives being published in the 19th century, excuse me, in the late 18th century—they were very popular with readers on both sides of the Atlantic: with British audiences, who were the first ones to read these, and then later with American audiences. Because they saw the stories of the enslaved people, especially the ones who had escaped like Frederick Douglass⁵ or, in Britain, Olaudah Equiano⁶. These figures were epic figures for them because to escape slavery meant that they had accomplished something great.

And I think that many Americans in the 19th century, whether you're talking about Southerners or Northerners, they would have recognized that slavery was an epic imposition on the identities, on the lives of the people who were enslaved. If you're a Southerner in

⁵ Frederick Douglass (1818 - 1895) Works: *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); "The Heroic Slave". Pp. 174-239 in *Autographs for Freedom*, edited by Julia Griffiths. Boston: Jewett and Company (1853); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881 (revised 1892)).

⁶ Olaudah Equiano (1745 - 1797). Works: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself* (1789).

particular, but even white Northerners because there was slavery in New England, quite a bit in places like Rhode Island and in Massachusetts, New England generally—they had a fairly sizable slave trade—that is an epic story unfolding. And [whether it's] against the Native Americans or against the African Americans, their traditions are going to become part of that new American story. It creates a dynamic of complementarity and contradiction. And at that very site, you get remarkable creativity because the people in that particular overlap of conflict, of complementarity, are under the most intense pressure you could ever imagine. And there is a creative need on their part to overcome their status. So[, for example, there are] things like the music traditions that you reference, beginning with the slave hymns that were told centuries earlier. And then once you had the Civil War, you would have the birth of the blues tradition, which is certainly going to be connected to some of the older forms of spiritual songs, because even as they were singing songs, hymns for God, there is a blues melancholy that would be part of those hymns. Well, those are going to become secular stories separate from traditional hymns. And as a lot of scholars have shown or people like Toni Morrison knows in our own kind of novels, the blues also tells the epic story of figures who were transfigured by this complementarity-conflict dynamic.

Creativity is what you get out of that. Bad man figures are what you get out of that. John Henry's are what you get out of that. And then jazz and eventually rhythm and blues. And then hip-hop, to think in the most blended form of an epic sounding beat that really carries the resonances of war through the percussion, through the chanting, if you will, of those raps that speak to a long tradition that's centuries old. So yes, I think that there is much, that is a result of this, and Americans love epic. So it's no surprise that we globally love hip-hop. We love blues. We love jazz because these represent the kind of transfigurative power of the African-American experience in dealing with conflict and complementarity.

Andrés Cabra: It's beautiful. We love jazz, hip hop, spirituals, and blues because they represent the power to transgress. Perhaps we can speak of an epic community, in the sense that, for example, hip hop emerges from a collective experience—a communal force that gives rise to a new epic, a different kind of epic in contrast to the white epic of violence and

war. And speaking of collective experiences. Is it possible to think about the connections between the African-American *epic trickster* performance and the struggles of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American peoples?

Gregory Rutledge: Yes. I don't know the particular histories, of course, of all the countries, but certainly when you think of places like Haiti, for example, and the Haitian Revolution, or when you consider the role of slavery as it related to Brazil, Brazil holding onto slavery until, I believe, the 1880s, maybe early 1880s. And so you had a much larger percentage of enslaved people imported into Brazil, hence its larger tradition of African culture and people of African descent compared to the United States. Our current population is about 14% of the US population. So even though slavery was extremely important for American identity and the formation of our society from 1619 when you had really the first Africans brought in and then 1640 or so when slavery really became indexed through the African-American experience, we've had a long history, but the numbers of enslaved people who were brought in to the US mainland has been relatively small.

But we can understand through this experience here in some ways what Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American experiences can benefit [us], if we look at all three of those in kind of a triangular way, because Haiti's own story inspired some of our writing, quite a bit of our writing. One of the earliest short stories, for example, was by a figure named Victor Séjour out of New Orleans, called "The Mulatto." And that's the English translation of that story published in 1837, originally in France, because the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the defeat of the French, really signaled the epic capacity that [black] people in the US, because of our smaller numbers, really could take as a model. And a lot of the writers, a lot of the activists, a lot of the enslaved people were very much interested in that, whereas the white enslavers, of course, were terrified by what had happened in Haiti. And of course today Haiti has continued to pay that price, ever since, in terms of the debt imposed on it, in terms of the interventions of the US government to depose popularly elected figures. There is a significant interest in what the epic is, in the "epic trickster" capacity, in understanding these global dynamics, the institutions of the International Monetary Fund or the world or the

WTF, of international banking and finance, and how those are used in relationship with the people who are installed in power in Haiti to perpetuate [the domination]. And, of course, it's going to be the same kind of dynamic in Cuba as well, which is why the hatred of Fidel Castro is so deeply written into American policy to this day.

In the Latin American world, again, you're going to have similar kinds of stories because of the legacy of Spanish colonialism, whiteness as the model through Spain, and the privilege of Spanish and Portuguese, white colonizers, and the land ownership, and the privileging of those histories and aesthetics and literary traditions and languages over the indigenous stories of the indigenous people there, but also those West African people who were then imported in as figures to be enslaved. So there is much that could be used both by the writers, by the artists, by the intellectuals, by the educators in looking at the triangulation of what happened in these three different areas that your question brings up. Because if you can understand how all three works, the commonalities of them, I think that it gives you a platform for really understanding what the epic trickster really means at a community level that we don't see in academia because academia, in literature in particular, tends to be for the middle-class readers even in minority communities. And that's certainly the dynamic here in the United States. So a broader understanding, which we don't tend to do here in the United States unfortunately, [is what we need.] Our African-American tradition is very much based on the mainland U.S., and we don't have much concern with the Caribbean and with Latin America. And that's a very, very tragic thing, but it's probably by design, because divided you're conquered, in unity you find power that can take you back to your roots in West Africa, and your roots in terms of the community having power.

Andrés Cabra: In your conceptualization of the “epic trickster” you used the trickster figure, which in the U.S. is present in the folk literature, as “Uncle Remus” tales. In Latin American and in the Caribbean oral literature there are similar characters named “Uncle Rabbit” and “Uncle Tiger,” and in the Caribbean there is Anansi, the Spider, and another characters with

the same characteristics. Well, this power, this common power of Latin American, Caribbean, and even American folk characters. This power of the trickster, which we can see in, for example, the hip-hop aesthetic, can be used for the marketing, for example, or can be used for the transnational companies, with another aims. These other uses of hip-hop aesthetic, for example, or in general the Caribbean music, maybe empties the memory of the fights for rights, freedom, and dignity that these cultural artifacts preserve. Could be understood this process of emptying as a form of the Western-White epic trickster performance?

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, yes, this is a very good question, and this gets right to my conceptualization of what the “epic trickster” means and why it’s such a potent moment in the epic storytelling cycle. Meaning that from the moment the epic stories begin, usually with the birth of the epic hero, they're pushed into flight away from their homeland at the bottom of the circle, this is when they are in the diaspora somewhere, and they grow up, and then they begin a return process which is usually understood as the adult figure, as a warrior fighting, the way back to home, the beginning point. Well, the beginning of that journey, the first quarter of that circle, is what I think of [as] the “epic trickster” moment, when the person who is born as an epic figure is not yet an epic hero, meaning that you don't know from the logic of the story what's going to happen to them, whether they will live a full life and become this successful victor at the close of the circle, or if they will, like Hector, [not succeed]. In a way he doesn't get to come full circle and become a victor that emerges from the Trojan War. He's killed.

So in that sense his epic potentiality doesn't really reach its full potential as a victor. I like to think of the “epic trickster” as the survival skills of the tricksters that you have referenced earlier combined with the early survival flight of these protagonists in the epic stories. And these aren't just moments where they flee, and they're fleeing for the glory of the epic hero story, I like to think of this as a reflection of reality in that if we face an overwhelming obstacle, no matter who we are, the only way to survive is to flee and to try and learn the lessons of those who came and oppressed us and forced us into flight. Because if we don't

learn those lessons, understand the way that a trickster could learn, and if we don't know how to really read things, and tricksters are skilled at reading—it's hermeneutics, understanding the signs, reading the conditions—[well,] that's how you escape, that's how you survive, that's how you adapt, and you become better. Once those skills are then internalized, then you're really on your route as an “epic trickster” figure who has internalized the skills of survival, the language skills, the exceptional skills the ability to transfigure oneself to appear other. That's kind of an alterity that we associate with the Greek gods, with Zeus in particular, but some of the other Greek gods also have this capacity as well. Or the God of the Bible. [Here,] certainly is a greater figure, for whom we have no image, that is everywhere or that is in heaven, but can also appear as a “burning bush,” right? And so there is this ability to transform oneself as part of this omnipotent power, this omniscient power.

Well I think that epic heroes have this “epic trickster” element to them, and that's what makes them so remarkable. Because if they're mere brutes—meaning that they just grab their sword and they will go and fight a million armed enemies without any regard for whether they're going to die or not—well, who wishes to follow that kind of person into a slaughter, your own slaughter? But these figures are very witty, they have tricksters' wit, and thus they have the ability to then use subterfuge, like Odysseus and the Trojan horse, to achieve their ends and to combine it with military might, the epic hero's arm of magnificent sword ability. That's very important. Once you combine those two together then I think that you really understand that the epic hero in this sense is a real consolidation of the different capacities of a society.

To respond to your question, I think this gets back to how America as an epic-centric society has succeeded because it embodies as a white-based society. And whiteness is continually expanding, right? It's never been a pure British, or a pure German. It's been Spanish, it's been French, it's been British, all of them occupying significant parts of the U.S mainland in these early centuries. And then it's Irish, it is Italians, people who were not considered white, it's Jewish, people who were not considered white until after, say 1915, as we move into the 20th century.

So whiteness itself is a tricky concept, growing, adapting, the mythology, changing to represent the changing dynamic of society. In that way we can best understand how the American performance as an epic trickster has always unfolded from the American Revolution. That is a trickster moment because the ultimate trick is to say “we're not going to be enslaved by you, King George,” and yet at the same time in creating their new society, their new constitution, they were enslaving people of color, whether they're Native Americans or they're African Americans, and identifying themselves as democratic. That's the ultimate trick that is written implicitly into the Constitution itself. It's no surprise then, going forward, from the 18th century—1789, the adoption of that U.S. Constitution—into the 19th century as the U.S. burgeons into its own kind of economic powerhouse, especially once it has defeated Britain for a second time. And then the whole nation opens up as the frontier expands from the east to the west. It's called “manifest destiny,” our own epic story unfolding because, it's our “manifest destiny”.

And then, of course, once we've established ourselves after the two world wars, then, there's really nothing that could stop us from using all those “epic trickster” means that are grafted onto whiteness as a way of promoting American culture, including co-opting hip-hop or co-opting jazz. A lot of jazz performers in the 1920s-1930s were white, and a lot of them who were most successful were white figures with white bands because they couldn't quite—I'm talking about American audiences here—see blacks as being the dominant leading figures of this particular aesthetic, jazz or blues. And so America has this long tradition of co-optation, of expropriation, taking African-American musical performance forms, or even African-American faces in a form of blackface minstrelsy, and making it a white entertainment, a white dominant form of economic exploitation that also reifies what race means here, white hero, black tricksters. But it's always been a white “epic trickster” dynamic.

And so the idea of my book again is that the epic trickster then is something that unifies us as a human species, and these ideas of purity really don't work in the truest sense because human culture is itself a hybrid manifestation. I've mentioned Egypt earlier. Well, it dispersed and informed and deeply influenced ancient Greek society. So ancient Greek

society is also, scholars have suggested, deeply influenced by Egyptian culture. So we have to think of the world this way. It's hard for people to do that because we have this understanding of pure whiteness in our imaginaries, but that is a terrible, terrible thing that leads to misunderstanding. That, itself, can cause a fatal weakness because if you understand yourself as a pure epic figure, and you don't really have sufficient understanding of the "epic trickster" dynamic within society that lets you know the complexity of reality, then your society is in trouble because you're too simplistic, you're too monological.

Andrés Cabra: Well, it means that if we want to use epic trickster as a concept to describe, for example, narrative, we need to clarify whether we are talking about the white epic trickster or the black epic trickster, because there are two ways of being a trickster. The act of taking the culture of the other and recreating it—well, all cultural processes are re-creative processes—but there are two types of tricksters, right? The white trickster takes without permission, uses the culture, and at the same time creates an "Other" [in the sense of otherizing]. In contrast, the black epic trickster co-creates with the community and focuses on peace.⁷

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, you know, I suppose that one way of understanding this, to help us clarify, is that in the European-American tradition of epic aesthetics, epic heroes are not too far removed from being god-like figures. And thus they're put on a pedestal on which we can see, maybe, an Achilles in his wrath, in his abilities, even daring to challenge Zeus or

⁷At the risk of being redundant, perhaps a point of clarification is warranted here. The use of "white epic trickster" and "black epic trickster" does not imply a racial absolute in this conversation. The absolute category is the "epic trickster" as a universal (Human) potentiality: i.e., all Humans have this potential. But like the social constructedness of whiteness *perceived* as a supremacist absolute, which is itself a direct result of centuries of violence, exploitation, and manipulation, a "racial" (ethnic) division distinguishes the "white epic trickster" and "black epic trickster" in this context, even as the two are, ironically, inseparably interlocked. In Western (European and North American) Humanities, the epistemological-aesthetic divide is canonical, with "white" (European) epics being treated literally as literary oppositions to tricksters: "white" literary heroes versus noncanonical oral lore. But insofar as cultures do not exist within the limits of imagined Western canons, and canons exist within shared storytelling spaces that are much larger in terms of participation, "white" and "black epic tricksters"--along with the other racial/ethnic constructs--interact with one another in a conflict-complementarity dynamic.

Apollo because of his abilities. I think for West African and other storytelling traditions, they're not seen as god-like figures but something that is more human, or more mortal, and fallible. Because there's this fear that those who channel epic ability in the West African context, as I've understood it, is that that power can kill, it can deform you, by acquiring this kind of epic power. And so there's a different way of looking at the epic heroes in this regard, with the European tradition seeing these figures as really being transcendental, god-like figures and thus having a certain kind of Platonic purity about them whereas in the West African epic tradition there's a more organic community-aware understanding of the epic figures because of the powers that they channel. I think that this division comes from a failure of the West to understand the Homeric tradition, because it is a dead tradition long removed from us. So we really don't know what Odysseus would have been like and Achilles would have been like for the people who first heard these stories spoken in the original organic cycle. We just don't know. We have Homer's transcripts that come to us in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But the benefit of these West African storytelling traditions is that we can see how the community is very much aware of the danger of figures who are approaching god-like potentiality. So you have to have these heroes limited in a way because if they're too pure, they're too powerful, they're too god-like, and removed from humanity and the community, then they become the most frightening creatures of all. So we can learn a lot of lessons by studying these living epic traditions, whether it's West African or it's in Eastern Europe, because I think that we'll be able to see how the community has to be aware of these for its own safety, even as it celebrates them as historical figures that are landmarks in themselves.

Andrés Cabra: Well, I will move on to another part of this interview, specifically about the methodology you used to create your book. In your book, you point out that there is an epic performance, but your conceptualization goes beyond performance as it has been traditionally understood in the epic sense. I mean, for example, Isidore Okpewho—you mentioned him earlier—talks about performance, but he refers to the world of the griots, the performance of the griots, right? Okpewho talks about epic performance in the sense

of performing an epic. Albert Lord approaches it in the same way. So, how does your work engage with the classical approach to the epic genre? Since your concept of performance differs from Okpewho and Lord's conceptualization—being closer to cultural studies—how does it distance itself from these classical approaches?

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, it's a way of understanding, as I was speaking earlier and in my previous question about the place of the epic hero because for a lot of the epic classical stories the figures that really get the most attention, I supposed necessarily, are Achilles, they are Hellen, they are Agamemnon, they are Odysseus, they are Penelope, Telemachus. Those royal figures receive quite a bit of attention and, of course, especially the epic heroes because we don't really have much else that we can extract from Homers epic stories, because Homer really centers them in tandem with the exploits of the gods who are intersecting with their story, whether it's Athena as the patron goddess for Odysseus, or Zeus and Apollo early in the *Iliad* as they are taking sides with the Trojans or the Greeks. But that *herocentric* story is, I think, for a very individualistic, a very literary form of understanding of the epic, which has this place of course. For literary studies, you have to be able to look at the text that's been given to us, and if it's written with Odysseus as the hero, as in the *Odyssey*, well it makes a lot of sense to pay attention to Odysseus as the *epic hero*. But, when you are thinking in terms of real world politics—and epics are not just literary forms—I believe that they stem from human interactions, human conflicts. And it's not international conflicts only. [In] the epic of Sunjata, that I like to teach in my classes, the fall of the Malian society starts with an internal conflict between—

Andrés Cabra: Soumaoro vs Sunjata.

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, yes, no, no, actually it's from, it's from—

Andrés Cabra: Between the queens, at the beginning, between the queens after the death of the king.

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, [...] because there is some variation on these pre-Sunjata background stories. But oftentimes it is a family conflict between the king, who's on the throne, with his aunt, in the version that I like to read, he has excluded her from a meal which seems to significantly indicate that he has excluded her from the family. That unleashes a conflict in and of itself. So you have an intra-family conflict that starts this. And it's similar with Helen and Agamemnon. Even though some of the versions see Helen as being kidnapped by the Trojans, other versions of it have Helen running off with Hector's younger brother of her own free will, which would suggest that Helen was cheating on her husband because, you know maybe, he's a big old guy with a fat stomach and or something of that nature. So you can see a "house divided," meaning that your domestic "house" can then be "divided." And then your society is thus in a more vulnerable position, because forces within the kingdom, within the empire, whatever, are then at odds with one another. That makes you weak, that creates its own kind of dynamic, lets a Soumaoro—that you just mentioned—come [at] this moment of internal civil war and take over. Well, that's a good way of understanding, how community, how the power of women, how the understanding of political intrigue, how the way that coalitions of interest [interact] within a society are all very relevant for understanding these stories. And so, if we pass on these stories, and we focus only on the exploits of Odysseus as he's traveling in his 20-year circle from leaving Ithaca going to Troy to fight against the Trojans and then spending all those years on his way back to Penelope, well you miss a lot of the very essential parts of what the community would have understood the role of Odysseus to be, and the role of Penelope and Telemachus. Because it might not be only that they are adored; it could be that they also have their own stories and their own problems in Ithaca, but we don't get those stories. I'm interested in those stories, I'm interested in the role of women and their potentiality because, let's face it, women can see themselves as being exceptional, too, and believe that they should be the ones who are controlling a society as well. There are historical figures in world history where great societies are run by female leaders. We don't see it enough because, yes, the might of these warrior men dominates our understanding, but it's not

exclusive. And, also, when we understand women's smartness and the ability to read and be tricksters, then there is the ability, under the right circumstances or with a woman who is great enough, for them to be [epical] figures. I'm interested in those dynamics because it then teaches us something about how people understand life in the midst of an epic story, and how we then can learn, ourselves, what it means to be part of a society in which epic has been unleashed.

Those traditions mean the survival of us as normal people. How do we regard our leaders. Do we just put them up on a pedestal? The epic stories that I've used for my own study have audience members laughing at epic figures. There are storytelling mistakes by the epic bard, in a version of the epic Sunjata that I use. So instead of a perfectly literary delivery of the epic story, you see mistakes, you see misspeaking, you see breaks in the story, which is all, I think, very useful to understanding the limits of humanity, even as these great stories are unfolding, because people have frailties, epic figures have frailties. Achilles, for example, not only had Achille's heel—by which he was killed, but he's someone who was prone to anger. He's the wrath of Achilles, he is someone who's prone to easy anger. That's not a positive thing. That can get you killed, if you are someone who is very sensitive and responds to any kind of slight by killing or pulling out your sword and threatening to kill. That's not the kind of leadership that you want. So that gets obscured, and I think that—there's research out there that shows that Achilles and Odysseus were feared by ancient Greek peoples because of these capacities. And that brings them in line with what we know about the West African epic storytelling traditions.

So the community is very important. Unfortunately the Homeric stories—and assuming that it is Homer, because it may not be; you know, there's scholarly debate about that—but *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* just don't provide us with that kind of very essential context of how the original hearers understood these figures. I suspect, just like there's a reason to fear Zeus, because Zeus was doing all kinds of transgressive and violent things, the Greek gods were doing all kinds of transgressive and violent things to the people, there's reason to be afraid of that kind of power. We see that recognized in the traditional West African epics, so that kind of organicity is very important for understanding the story. I'm very much

interested in that organic storytelling from the perspective of the community, with the roles of women restored because they are essential to the stories from beginning to the end. And if you remove them from it, then you're really not telling epic stories just telling heroic male-dominated slaughters. And that's really not interesting, and it's not useful for understanding humanity whatsoever.

Andrés Cabra: Which edition or oral tradition of Sunjata do you use in your teaching?

Gregory Rutledge: The version that I use to teach is one transcribed—translated and transcribed—by John William Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara*, and it's based on the storytelling of Fa-Digi Sisòko. And I like this one because it actually is based on a call-and-response dynamic in which you have the storyteller, but you also have the musician who is saying “yes” or “indeed”, and we see that on the right side of the page. And so there is a dialectic between the story and the music that's represented there. And so it is a storytelling performance for the audience. We don't get the audience interjecting, but it's understood that there is an audience that was hearing and that was present there for that particular storytelling performance, which is one of the more splendid storytelling performances that refers to people who were sitting in the audience. So John William Johnson helps us understand that there were these dignitaries who were present at the telling of this story. So it becomes a more splendid affair.

I started my own understanding of these West African epic traditions with the one that you just referenced, D.T. Niani's *Sunjata: The Epic of Old Mali*. And my understanding is that D.T. Niani took a composite approach to this figure and for Western audiences, based on Western ideas of the epic hero. He then created a literary representation that would appeal to, and be understood by, Western readers. That was my start. Once I had an opportunity to see that there were other versions, and once I read the Fa-Digi Sisòko version, I then immediately realized I can't go back to D.T. Niane because it's too hero—centered and all of the context, the role of women, simply disappears. And it's less interesting to me. In a way you can say that Niane's version, although it might be an important publication, it is, in a

way, a reflection of a colonized mentality in which you are trying to create a text that meets the expectations—the aesthetics—of your colonizer, whereas your indigenous storytelling gets relegated to the sidelines. That's a very troubling thing for me, and I don't want to involve myself in a neo-colonial literary methodology. And that's why I don't really even use D.T. Niane. It would be easier for my students to read it. I think that they would enjoy it more, but I think that epic shouldn't be something that we necessarily enjoy, because the potential and the danger of epics should be something that we have to grapple with. And Fa-Digi Sisòko's story has post-colonial epics. It speaks against France, it speaks against capitalism, it speaks against modern technology in ways that shows he is very much aware of the presence of France as a national power there in his homeland. It's incredibly important to know that and see how he uses female power and male power in tandem for that particular understanding of what epic is.

Andrés Cabra: Well, this is fascinating. In my research about Manuel Zapata Olivella's works, I realized he refers to Niane's version in *Changó, el gran putas*, published in 1983. It is significant because he described his novel as an epic of African in the Americas. When I read Niane's version, I feel that it was a hypermasculine version, it's a version centered in the man, in the male figure, in the hero.

Well, about the next question, even you have already answered a part of this question. A first reading of Soundjata—Niane's version, as well as Bamba Suso & Innes' version—, might lead us to think that hypermasculinity is at the core of the epic, making it difficult to distinguish between Homeric and Malian epics, if we focus solely on the role of the hero. However, in your book, you highlight the role of female figures, for example, you refer to Sunjata's mother and the symbol of the turtle in her back, and you highlight the role of female figures and the more codified aspects of the Malian epic, and of the MOS-epics in general. In the chapter on Morrison's work—*Beloved*— you take Sixo, the character of Morrison's novel, as an example of an epic trickster figure. I want to quote your book directly:

As this graphic excerpt demonstrates, Sixo exemplifies the epic trickster as one who approaches the classical epic paradigm and yet epitomizes complementarity, contradiction, and ultimately ambivalence. Indeed, his appearance is also doubly epic by standards of color-coded belief among the Ijo and in the Mande: blue and indigo represent “intractable” character in the Ozidi Saga performance, and red denotes female epicity in Sunjata (Clark-Bekederemo, “Introductory” xlv). (Rutledge 2013, 216)

Are these codified aspects the most essential in your theoretical approach for understanding the continuity and discontinuity of MOS-epics in Afro-American literature?

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, this is a very good question and especially the predicate to your question about the role of females as opposed to hypermasculinity. When we first spoke, you asked me about epic performance. “How was mine classical and yet how did I depart from it?” I do recognize the epic hero. It's something that's inescapable. These are hypermasculine figures. And so even though in the Malian tradition of the epic of Sunjata, or in some of the other West African epics, Ozidi, Mwindo, you don't get the kind of killing machines that Achilles represents, for example, in *The Iliad*, or the other Greek and Trojan figures represent in *The Iliad*, because Homer's telling really has some remarkably graphic fighting that unfolds. And so that killing is a foreshadowing for much of the way that you can say modern cinema plays out today, with masculinity unleashing hell upon the bodies and the lives and the civilizations of others. It's our model, and it has a long tradition, quite obviously.

But Helen was a significant figure. She is the one who really helped to get that war started. The recovery of Helen is very significant. Likewise, we understand that Sunjata, for example, his name, from what I understand, is one in which the first part—the “Sun” part—is indexed to his mother. So his identity in this indigenous Malian sense with Islam on the side, or world religion on the side, or understanding of male dominated kingdoms and dynasties and empires on the side—is rooted in female potentiality and the role of the female. You can't remove that from anyone's identity. The birth of any of these heroes, thus, is related to the

mother. In the Greek tradition, Odysseus—and maybe we can understand why he survives and why Achilles doesn't—has Athena as his patron goddess. So you have what Zora Neale Hurston will call “mother's wit,” divine mother's wit, who is there to guide Odysseus continually.

Sunjata is connected to female sorceress mysticism that is the indigenous storytelling spiritual traditions, whereas his father embodies the Islamic tradition more. So he has the complementarity of both of them, but again the mother is very central to who he is. So we have to then push aside, again, the kind of simple male—dominated understanding, even as we recognize that the epic of Sunjata, once you get beyond some of the early moments of the story—it is following him, it's about his story—it continually reminds us that he needs his mother. When he is lost in some far off land. It's his communication with his mother or with his sister that allows him to survive and then to come back, in a very important recognition element in the story.

Well, I like this role of Sixo because I see Sixo as a figure representing a deeper cultural paradigm, unlike the other figures in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the other Sweet Home men, the Paul D, Paul A, Paul F. Paul D is the one who goes on to meet Sethe in the novel. They all look up to Sixo. He is an epical figure in a way, in what he's able to do physically, but he also is attuned with spiritual forces that seem to be codified for a female understanding. And the love story that he has unfolding in Toni Morrison's novel shows that he's someone, despite that masculinity, [who] is not in the white epic hero mode, but is someone who is powered by a female complementarity that allows him to understand Patsy, the lover that he has, and that, even in the moment when he is being killed, he's able to laugh and transcend because he is not just a male figure, he is something that is more. Patsy is part of who he is and Patsy carries their child. He's Sixo, his son is Seven-O.

The other men are more American—based, they've already lost something, some . . . motherly, mystical connection that Sunjata has. So it's an important thing to realize this. I think that his colors—and this is a bit speculative—but I think that his colors are ways of helping us understand that he is connected to an indigenous spirituality in ways that are not associated with the other Sweet Home men. Just as the colors red and blue, hot and cold,

have their dynamics with the Sunjata tradition, Sixo embodies wholeness. Because you have to realize that hot potentiality needs to be paired with a blue cooling, so that you don't have the transgressive ability—which is an essential for the epic exigency—you don't want that to overheat, become only red. So the blue cooling is necessary to keep it within a human register, where the epic figure can then put down the sword and then regain a normal existence. Without that there's great danger for everyone. So Sixo is someone who is really remarkable. One of the greatest moments, one of the greatest figures, I think, in American literature, in African-American literature, for sure, is what he represents.

Andrés Cabra: It's beautiful, thank you. Because the question now, for me, is: we need to use the imagination in the sense that—maybe in Morrison's novel, or in any of the other texts you used in your book, and also in my current work—we need to try to capture these symbols that aren't explicit, these symbols we don't have access to. We don't have a scholarly tradition to analyze these symbols, because they were blacked out and obscured by white epistemology.

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, [it's] one of the great tragedies facing African-American literature, and this is why Morrison represents a very important recovery. That has started before, of course. After slavery, there were people in the 1870s who began understanding, and seeking to understand the African past. But it's always been from this moment of loss, in particular for African-Americans. Because unlike places like Brazil—where you have such a vibrant storytelling heritage in which indigenous West African spirituality is connected with Christianity; and so you have Catholic saints and tricksters that are molded together, and so you have a vitality that lets you make some connections—it's much harder for us here to do that. And especially in the epic performance context, it's so important to look into these dynamics and understand, again, how the colors work, how the metaphors work, what the references are, the foreshadowing, the backstories, so that you can really understand the complexity of what's unfolding and get the best sense of what the essence of the story is.

And, again, because Homer's tradition is dead to us, we've lost that. The West lost that a long time ago, a long time ago. And so we end up in a moment of putting figures like Achilles or Odysseus on the altar. And they're very pure figures, they're very Platonic figures, but they've lost that human organic element that shows their fallibility within the texts of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. And we need a lot more of that for people, then, to know and challenge classical understanding, and to have their own ways of reading those figures, but we simply just don't have that.

So I like epic stories using these living epic traditions. If we could have an Epic Stories Department, I'm in favor of that because it would then let us look over modern Western literature and then look at classical epic stories from this perspective of the symbols, the colors, the figures, the ways of reading that should be attached to epics because of the importance of epics as a potential way of seeing ourselves relative to other people in the world. Epics make us wish to conquer others if we handle them badly, and so we should understand epics in a much, much better way, as children growing up in elementary school, in middle school, in high school and on to college, but unfortunately the very opposite is happening. Epics are not taught very much, even Homer's [*Odyssey*] and *Iliad*. And so we've lost, really, an ability to understand a portion of our own society, because the kids are denied something that they really should be reading and talking about, beginning in middle school at the very latest.

Andrés Cabra: So, we can now move on to the final part of our meeting. We've been talking about the connection between epic stories and the present. And I think that, especially in our current times—with the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric—it's really important to reflect on how epic studies relate to what's happening today.

In Latin America, we're watching—with both fear and astonishment—how anti-immigrant rhetoric is growing stronger within the U.S. government, and among part of the U.S. population as well. At the same time, Trump has been invoking the idea of *manifest destiny* to justify the transgression of political boundaries, and this is truly astonishing, because the

very boundaries he uses to fuel anti-immigrant rhetoric are the same ones he wants to transgress.

In your book, you talk about the relationship between the American Revolution and Hegel's conception of what an epic is — transgressing boundaries. And when you explore that topic, you also refer to Hitler, who—possibly reading Hegel—transgressed boundaries, and that led to the Second World War.

So, in that sense, could we understand Trump's anti-immigrant and expansionist rhetoric as a manifestation of the American exceptionalism that Hegel postulated?

Gregory Rutledge: This is a great, great question, and one that should be, I think, even presented to contemporary modern audiences, in a way that you can introduce Hegel. Or perhaps not by introducing Hegel, but the ideas that Hegel had, and Hegel's concerns about what was missing, as far as he understood, in modern Western democracies at the time because he lamented that those nation—states, as they had then been configured in his day, were bound by constitutions and by procedures and bureaucracies. He . . . lamented this, because he thought that gone were the days of a certain kind of plasticity where nations and great leaders could be epic to break outside the boundaries of the constitution, or of the general assembly, or the courts, and demonstrate the kind of epic poetry, capital P, as in Age of Poetry, that so many people found valuable in the Bronze Age or the age of Homer and earlier. And that's his context for looking at what America represented.

You know, I think . . . exceptionalism is a good word of identification here, because although race is of course very important in how we understand history over the last several centuries and in understanding specific events . . . it's also, I think, important to realize that we should separate racism from exceptionalism, and [understand] that epic really aligns with exceptionalism in a finer way that's harder for us to see. What you have to also do is go into, scope into, whiteness itself and see that whiteness is not a monolith that's pure, but it has its hierarchies, too.

And in America, for example, going all the way back to the beginning, it is certain kinds of nobility indexed to Western Europe, to British nobility, especially in the way that we see ourselves. But this would be the nobility of [the] French as well, the nobility of Spain, too.

The nobility of a particular, small set of people who saw themselves as inherently noble. And so I like to think of that as “honorary white”: It's noble white, it's royal white, it's inherently noble, and so I like to think of that as honorary white. That is different from “common white.” “Common white” serves as a general mechanism that goes about in the public space and will be the foot soldiers for policing race. They're the ones that will be the police officers, they'll be the ones working in the prison—industrial complex, they'll be the ones who are the teachers, who have racialized thinking and will implement the paradigm. But within whiteness itself, you will see that there is hierarchy, and that those elite blue-blooded individuals have, for centuries, seen themselves as epic figures by inherent worth. I think that's very important because the extent to which you believe yourself exceptional by blood means that you'll be willing to use other white members of your whiteness as a buffer to be manipulated to serve your own interest—to keep down the colored people—at the same time that you are using your honorable white privilege to create divisions within whiteness that separate you from common whites. We don't understand this today here in the United States. Even our focus is on anti-racism, so it's this base of white versus black relations. But we really don't talk about the elites and understand how honorary whiteness has played itself out and serves as a very hidden dynamic that connects all the way back to the earliest feudal period and to Europeans thinkings of themselves as descendants of Aeneas of Rome, . . . or Hitler[’s] thought of German [language] as descended from ancient Greek.

. . . So an effort to connect to this kind of nobility, and to understanding those individuals, that elite, the 1% or the 0.1%, would be essential for trying to grapple with the inner dynamics of how this epic trickster element is working.

But we don't study that. In African-American literature, for example, it is just very basic understandings of racial conflict. And that means when those elites,—who are that 1 %, the honorary whites operating with their massive financial endowments behind the scenes—it means that we are not prepared when they then come full force and then manifest their own interests in society. That's what I believe we're witnessing right now.

And so, one of the great tragedies for African-American history, even as we fought and had our successes, [is that] we haven't been able to focus on the role of those elite individuals, to expose them and then to understand the channels by which they have maintained their elite noble selfhoods, and used that to control various institutions here in society. Where there's a lot of talk now about oligarchs here, with Elon Musk, with the members of Trump's cabinet, and of course with Trump as well. It becomes pretty evident that this exceptionalism is now really manifesting itself and becoming a player in the political sphere, and that it has used the common whites, manipulating their racial fears, because these elites have been able to do that, and they've had the mastery of that for centuries. And now is the right time.

So the extent to which we understand this and don't allow ourselves to fall into the very safe civil rights legacy of just grappling with racism in the form of anti-racism, but pushing beyond that to look at . . . honorary whites and their exceptionalism . . . is a way of understanding how people see themselves. Frankly I think a lot of Americans—white Americans, you could say—they would argue: “Well I'm not a racist, I just believe in merit and that white people, are more exceptional based on demonstrated construction of society, than colored people. So I'm not a racist.” And this is what we've heard from Trump because implicitly he can say: “Well, I will hire the most worthy, . . . the most meritorious individuals”.

Well it is missing the fact that even as there are exceptional people—of course, there are exceptional people—people who are exceptionalist love greatness, and that has nothing to do really with a fair measure of merit. It is subjective, and it is wanting to be there in the center. It is not logical, it is not objective, it is not based on merit. It's a very, very dangerous thing because you will then install in place people, who lack merit, who are really not exceptional, but who fit your exceptionalist way of thinking. In a way that then positions you to collapse because you have misunderstood some very essential element of how to govern, and what the difference is between exceptional and exceptionalism, the worship of greatness.

So, it's a great question. I think that we are right back in that moment of the early nineteenth century that Hegel wanted to see happening, and the world is also reflecting this as well:

Germany, France, the right and, of course, Turkey and other places too, including South Korea. [South Korea] is having this difficulty right now. It's a very interesting moment, and the world is going to have to grapple with this. And if we don't do it well, we're headed toward, I think, a world war because I don't see any other way of avoiding this without really coming to understand [this]: you must see the nobility that people believe in, and expose that as much as you possibly can. But it's a hard thing to do, and that's part of the epic struggle of humanity. How well we deal with that is part of who we are, not only as African Americans, but also European Americans, as you know, people in Colombia, Spain working-class people, anywhere, farmers anywhere, people who care about the climate anywhere. Children, I think, have the most at stake because this is a world that, if it is wrecked, they will have to grow up into. They will have to face the raw might of an epic gone very, very bad. Which is the story of *The Matrix* by the way. It's a great film, and I think I will end on that point, with a nod to *The Matrix*.

Andrés Cabra: About *The Matrix*, at the end of your book, you used Slavoj Žižek's conceptualization of the "*desert of the real*" to refer to the current times of capitalism. My fear is that the world is heading toward this desert of the real. For example, in past times, neoliberalism presented itself as an answer to socialism, and the idea that we need a minimal state was presented as necessary to achieve progress and peace—and this rhetoric was successful. But now, with Trump's rhetoric and with other Latin American leaders who are supporting him, I think we are witnessing a new rhetoric about capitalism: a capitalism without states, without boundaries. And at the same time, we are seeing the *desert of the real*—I mean, the real condition of immigrants, the real boundaries, the mental boundaries that don't allow us to change, for example, the immigration policies. Maybe *The Matrix* (1999) was an anticipation of the real consequences of white exceptionalism and capitalism. What do you think about it?

Gregory Rutledge: Certainly there are elements of that movie that fit that particular reading, and it is a very useful way of understanding the utter control of society. Right now you have

thinkers talking about things like “surveillance capitalism”, which is the power of transnational corporations, using the Internet and the power of algorithms, to extract data based on our online habits—from everyone—and then to better formulate a way of presenting reality to coax us into more consumerism and into a frame of reference that sees ourselves primarily as consumers within the boundaries of the nation. Or we have the possibilities of the new cryptocurrency, that has really exploded onto the scene—also driven in some ways by the Internet, which is a major concern of *The Matrix*—as a new form of currency. It's part myth, it's part money, so no one quite knows what cryptocurrency is because almost anyone can jump in and establish their own cryptocurrency right now. And if you are a Donald Trump or if you're a celebrity that has national, international, global reach, you can start your own cryptocurrency. And the talk of some Latin American governments—I know this has already been implemented in the form of adopting cryptocurrency as a method of indexing the nation's economic productivity payment schemes, private payments, public payments, when it is very uncertain—is to believe in AI, which *The Matrix* presented as the cause of this particular dynamic, in a moment in which AI has been foisted upon us without any of the necessary safeguards.

And some of these larger questions being dealt with by governments that should know better, that should be asking the questions that were never asked about the Internet, when it was first created in the mid—1980s and then unleashed upon us, [are:] What will it do to human capacity for connecting to one another? What will it do with interpersonal relations? What will it do with creativity? What will it do with the ability to learn? How will it create new forms of addiction? How will it create new forms of individual dysfunction? How will it support slavery? How will it support pornography? How will it really cause disruptions in what it means to be a human? Those questions weren't asked. If they were asked, they weren't put to any study and then [researched] meticulously over an x period to then determine whether, and to what extent, we could implement the Internet or implement AI. These changes are just brought to us as consumers. We really don't have much of a say. And I think a lot of it goes over our heads, because, of course, we're not that elite 1% that is over and above this system, and is allowed to exist over and above this system. There's a great

novel that I have published on called *Super Sad True Love Story*, and it's . . . [near-future] dystopian science fiction, speculative fiction novel about America in its last days—late—capitalism—when the systems are failing just as the Soviet Union, the Soviet Empire, collapsed. And the author is Gary Shteyngart. He's a Russian Jew, and he witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union. And so, in some ways, he's writing about what could happen to the U.S., what it would look like in this moment. And there is Internet, there is social media, it is complete saturation of human relations, human higher education with these technologies to the extent that Freud disappears, reading as an enterprise disappears, in which sociality through social media, is what defines youth culture. Well that novel, published in 2013, 14 years after *The Matrix* was released, is a slight recalibration, taking consideration what we have given ourselves as technology in progress. [...] [Otherwise, discussion of Shteyngart's novel is too terse.] And that is in a way of thinking about where we are right now, because the human diversity globally has been loaded into this “matrix” of AI, this “matrix” of social media, this surveillance capitalism model, and it's been turned loose on us.

So we really don't know where this is going to go. The “desert of the real”, I think, is a very apt characterization of where we are right now. And the epic trickster does operate in moments like this because that's what you have to have, someone who has that capacity to deal with this complexity and survive it. And maybe in that you can find some solidarity between the working—class whites, once they become aware of the noble elite as the controlling forces. [The] question is how soon will we get to that. As long as we are splintered in terms of race, by nation, then we really have, I think, a little difficulty of having a really kind of global consciousness. And maybe the elites are not aware of the danger that they're in as well. I think, they should be because, once things break out of a kind of sleepwalking that Neo was in at the beginning of *The Matrix*, once people wake up—Morpheus calling on Neo to wake up, Trinity calling on Neo to wake up, sending him down the rabbit hole—it is a powerful, terrible force. And this is what writers have been doing for a long time. Frederick Douglass was doing the same kind of thing in the mid-nineteenth century, talking about

slavery. You have to have that moment for enough people then to really understand what's going on. [...]

Andrés Cabra: To move to the end of our interview, the next question is about how to use African wit to try to face our current threats—I mean, climate change and surveillance capitalism. Your book starts with a tale about the mosquito, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, retold by Verna Aardema. You use this tale to present four points of your approach:

First, all life is interconnected, from the smallest insects to the strongest animals.

Second, transgressing the laws of nature can be legitimate under certain circumstances.

Third, archetypal symbols of heroic exceptionalism and trickiness are themselves engulfed by story—in Aardema's tale, by the threat represented by Mother Owl's refusal to raise the sun because of the mosquito's actions.

And fourth, the cultural performance that informs the archetypes is the most important element in determining the roles they will play.

This allows us to think about the possibility of using wit and wisdom today to face our current threats—I mean, climate change, surveillance capitalism, and also the work of doing academia. Do you think that the academic can not only show knowledge, but also wit and wisdom?

Gregory Rutledge: Yes, well, I think, that they show something that's very important in how we deal with one another. Knowledge is instrumental, facts are instrumental, being able to program is instrumental, but wisdom is the synthesis of different competing knowledges—in understanding different values, and being able to look especially from the lens of someone who has lived [to] a certain extent, or has a certain broad capacity for understanding humanity—to then be able to sort through the enticements of facts, of knowledge, of smartness. One of the things that I was writing about to begin the book that

way, was to point out the dangers of knowledge as a kind of form of idolatry—a way of Western thinking or imperial thinking, whether it is Eastern or is ancient African—as a way of not coming to grips with something that is more organic and really lets us connect humanity to nature, past to the present, from our society to other societies.

Too often in our modern world and especially here in the U.S., we don't really think enough about other societies. So there's a lack of wisdom—as I indicated earlier—in African-American studies, in the sense that we know very well about the African-American experience, but because we don't know the Afro-Caribbean experience, and we don't know the Afro-Latin experience, we really can't have a more broad-based community of understanding of where our stories fit. And I think that a lot of African-Americans, unfortunately, are part of the “American Dream,” and belief in knowledge and American superiority and progress, and so on and so forth. And we've accepted that among ourselves, so we've internalized a form of that exceptionalism, too.

That's based on education, the state apparatus of schools, and not an understanding of older forms of storytelling and knowledge, wit, and wisdom, that these folk stories can tell us. And if you're not reading those because you consider them to be too childish—and many people do today; they have no interest in reading those stories the way that they did in the past because they're considered to be connected to Africa, or they're considered connected to slavery—and so, [we reason,] they can't tell us anything, there's no knowledge there.

But these stories and proverbs are called “common sense”—in terms that I use in my book—they're called “common sense” for a reason, because you have to have common sense, not in, like, a base, basic knowledge. Common sense meaning a broad way of sensing, common *senses*, if you really want to understand what something means. So if we talk about the cryptocurrency, and the AI, is there common sense in how we interface with this? And the problem is that there hasn't been, and we saw it in the most recent elections. And so people are making decisions based on massive amounts of misinformation and disinformation. Facts that turn out to be fiction, fake. Whereas if we were better readers, and not just readers of literature, but also readers of these traditional stories, [we'd] understand the lessons they give us about human behavior, about humans' ability to trick and about the

trickiness of reality, that's a very important wisdom that we need to have, whether we have facts before us or not. Without understanding the tricky face, the mask of rationality and order of our world, then you really become someone who can be easily preyed upon because you take the superficial for the reality. That's the message of the epic trickster. Combine those two together, and it should be a warning to you.

You have to look more beyond the surface. It's not simply epic, it's not simply the trickster, but it is that dynamic that is combined, the complementarity and the contrast. And so, what's the wisdom that comes out of that is what we really have to pursue, and there isn't much of an interest in doing that, I fear.

But there is one good thing about this, I believe. [It] is that, given the scale of threat, presented by global warming, this time we can't just operate at the scale of [the] civil rights movement here within the United States or within Colombia or within Brazil. It has to be a Human rights and an earth rights perspective and a children's rights perspective, that really informs us. And I think that a lot of people now are aware of this in ways that only a small number of people were in the 1960s here in the United States. So the good thing is that faced with this particular crisis, I think it'll be much easier for intellectuals to see the ones who aren't only armed with facts, but are armed with wisdom and wit, and can have a kind of fluidity in their thinking and strategizing, not in a mean way, but in building coalitions that help us understand—including the 1%—that it is in their best interest really to work with us.[...]I think that there are people who see this. It's very, very clear, more than ever. So there is a positive possibility here of recognition, where we don't have to rely on people being deeply read in the Humanities or in history because, you can now rather easily see with the oligarchs and the billionaires, weighing in publicly and dismantling federal systems here in the United States or joining with coalitions and involving themselves in politics in other countries, willy-nilly.

We can now see that, clearer than ever, that it's a clear and present danger, that is there before us. A lot of people will be able to see that, including the people who are not the most learned. So I think it's a good chance for human wisdom and wit to come to a real awakening. [...]

Concluding Remarks

By positing the “epic trickster” as a construct that syncretizes hero and trickster archetypes, this interview of Dr. Gregory E. Rutledge--author of *The Epic Trickster in American Literature: From Sunjata to So(ul)*--offers readers a unified theory and methodology to address hierarchical typologies of race and genre, along with class and gender. Instead of a single text (novel, long poem, short story, etc.) as the unit of analysis, here the epic performance--inclusive of all of this and much more--is the form allowing for cross-cultural comparatives and deep, close readings. Spanning the continuum from short trickster tale to expansive epic, inclusive of but not limited to mythology, fiction, film, popular culture, poetry, lore, music, etc., the “Epic Trickster Faces the Desert of the Real” is a dialogue that examines the performance culture that literally structures our world.

With attention to the epic and trickster tales, philosophies, aesthetics, performances, and technologies--represented by the likes of Homer, W.E.B. Du Bois, Isidore Okpewho, Lord Ragland, Toni Morrison, the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix*--critical questions guide the conversation: even assuming tricksters can outwit the masters, can they outwit fully realized epic figures? Are epic heroes, like Odysseus or Sunjata, already master tricksters, unlike Achilles? Is Zeus not the ultimate “epic trickster” in Greek mythology? Does the modern idea of whiteness span the spectrum of possible actions from epic hero to wiley trickster, and if so what--if anything--can stop it? Should the literary epic (e.g., *Iliad*) not be the central object of study, because of literature’s historically limited demographic of readers, but the totalizing cultural performance inherent in the body-politic? Through the modern West’s Homeric adoptions and adaptations culture, conquest of the Americas, and importation of enslaved, would not an epic “melting pot” be the defining performance form that conditions our reality?

As a construct that is distinct from the long-recognized idea of the trickster as culture-hero ascribed to the Other, the unchecked “epic trickster” is apocalyptic: whether conceptualized as epic heroes who signify with trickster wit, or tricksters who can employ epic physicality, the totalizing implications have never been clearer for our world. As understood by ancient

Greeks, West Africans, and other indigenous epic performance traditions, communities that hero-worship the “epic trickster” invite a threat capable of ushering their worlds into the desert of the real.

Instead of relying on modern Western literary constructs as ethno-aesthetic forms that are both universal and distinct, the “epic trickster” places the storyteller who operates within the *shared storytelling performance space* as the foundational center. Universal literary metrics--set in European values of worth, beauty, and canonicity--create hierarchies and territorial boundaries that limit, marginalize, and oppress in the name of modern civilization’s “high” culture. Against these rankings and processes, which erase the massive, unquantifiable expanse of European/American oral storytelling performance, even “whiteness” itself is partialized, divided, as authorship and readership violently subordinate the “white” body of storytelling via a Cartesian reification of mind over body *within* whiteness.

As a conclusion, this interview has illuminated how *epic trickster performance*, from African and African-American traditions, continues to mold and resist dominant narratives in American/Homeric culture. Through it we have reconsidered the cultural and political roles of the trickster in American history and even Transatlantic history, the gendered dynamics of the epic, how these dynamics change depending on how epic works are studied, and the intersections with racial and political boundaries that were created by the epic performance and which are challenged by the epic trickster storytelling. We see how these epic trickster narratives offer both a critique and a potential pathway toward a more just understanding of our present and the threats, the desert of real threats, that we face.

While this interview has limits, like others by virtue of the form, it is hoped that the introduction of Dr. Rutledge’s “epic trickster” will be beneficial to thinkers and all the storytellers throughout the Americas. The comparative framework of the “epic trickster,” set in a shared storytelling performance that deemphasizes literacy/literary divides, offers the conflict-complement dynamic essential for reordering generic canons and creating intra- and inter-racial solidarities that are needed at a time of great challenge to Humanity. Against the present return of centuries-old imperial and colonial practices, scholars, activists, and

students who seek ways of respectfully and meaningfully engaging lore, literature, culture, identity, and cultural performance in our rapidly changing world may find this interview to be an inspiring resource. Since we witness the resurgence of exclusionary rhetoric and praxis today, the critical analysis of these epic traditions allow us to better understand the power of storytelling both to exclude or justify the destruction of the difference, as we see in the reinterpretation of Homeric poems in American culture, but also to challenge, transform, and reimagine our collective future as Morrison's *Beloved* invites us to do.

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