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RESEARCH

The Comic at the Crossroads: The Semiotics of 'Voodoo Storytelling' in *The Hole: Consumer Culture Vol. 1*

Lisa Kottas and Martin Schwarzenbacher

University of Vienna, Department of Religious Studies, AT

Corresponding author: Martin Schwarzenbacher (a0660910@unet.univie.ac.at)

This article focuses on the use of religious semiology in the 2008 Black graphic novel *The Hole: Consumer Culture Vol. 1* by Damian Duffy and John Jennings. Both creators use hidden signs taken from Haitian Vodou and other Afro-American literature tropes in order to give their story multiple meanings. To accomplish this, they utilize the Afro-American rhetorical figure Signifyin' (or Signifyin(g)). This meta-speech plays with signs and their attached meaning in a way that could be summarized as 'saying (or showing) one thing, but meaning something completely different.' With this technique, the authors are able to mislead and exclude readers from the intentional meaning of the graphic novel by emphasizing ambivalent signs. By using cultural signs taken from Vodou, they are able to imply a spiritual reading experience in which the graphic novel becomes a ritual object and vehicle of the Vodou god Legba, lord of the crossroads and of interpretation. Modeled on Legba's qualities, the story becomes an interactive system of reading paths that changes its reception depending on the reader's interpretation of those ambiguous signs. This essay hence discusses the authors' narrative strategy and how it changes the narrative. It thereby builds on the theory of Afro-American Signification presented in the book *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and expands it.

Keywords: afrofuturism; african-american comics; anthropology; black comix; religion; ritual aesthetics

Introduction

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, comics can be described as cultural objects (Kottas 2017: 166–168). As such, they are subject to perceptual patterns acquired socially. According to this approach, human perception is not solely a product of neurological processes but is similarly shaped by cultural experience (Prinz and Goebel 2015: 9–10). So, how a comic book is read is based on social conventions

that must be learned and experienced (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 158). Even though reading comics, or reading in general, is perceived as a secular, rational practice, it can also evoke a spiritual or magical experience (Baier 2011: 243–245). In that case, spirituality and magic are not essential 'substances;' they rather are a matter of signs and communication. Religious, spiritual, or magic experiences can be seen as semiotic constructs in which signs, symbols, and other figures are perceived as hiding a deeper meaning and potency (Willis 2006: 342). As a social practice, spiritual reading must be taught (Baier 2011: 245) in order to understand the hidden potential of narrations and symbols.

This essay aims to illustrate this 'spiritual' approach of reading comics by inquiring the Black graphic novel *The Hole: Consumer Culture Vol. 1* (2008) (*The Hole*, in short) by Damian Duffy (writer) and John Jennings (artist). We focus on the Afro-American rhetorical technique *Signifyin(g)* as a narrative strategy that hides and alters the meaning of a story by using ambiguous linguistic key signs. Those keys refer to cultural experience and history, and can be understood only by those who share this knowledge. This also means that someone who does not notice this narrative strategy is deliberately misled by the authors' usage of ambivalent signs and gets, as a result, excluded from the intended meaning of their story. In *The Hole*, Duffy and Jennings use signs taken from Haitian Vodou religion to evoke a spiritual reading experience in which the graphic novel becomes a living being that *talks* to its audience and fools and misleads everyone who is 'spiritually illiterate.' For this attempt, we lean on an earlier German publication that similarly deals with ethnocentric constructions, and culture-specific identifications, of self-reflexivity in comic books by drawing on *The Hole* as a case example (see Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018). This paper however discusses the same graphic novel by introducing the approach of religious narratology that interprets Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theory of *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) through the lens of Aesthetics of Religion.

Our aim is to develop a toolkit for studying the religious semiotics of comics and to support the research of narrative strategies in Black comics. To make our treatise more accessible, we briefly introduce our methodology in the first section of our

paper. After this, we explain the subject matter, the figure of speech Signifyin(g), and connect it to its roots in West-African cosmology and NeoHooDoo. After those preparations, we discuss *The Hole's* narrative structure. In this process, we teach our readers to gain access to *The Hole's* hidden meaning by making 'culturally invisible' key signs apparent. The last section views the graphic novel as a ritual object and explains the religious meaning of important key figures.

Esu-'tufunaalo: Black Hermeneutics

Duffy and Jennings interweave *The Hole* with, what we call, following Cancik and Mohr 1988, 'Aesthetics of Religion' (*Religionsaesthetik*). It refers to the sensual, and contemporary, construction of religion, spirituality, and religious experiences through percipience (interpretations) and communication via reading, seeing, hearing, and so on (Mohn 2004: 304–305). Hence, religion is a system consisting of 'special' cultural signs, such as religious symbols, myths, and rituals (Heller 2012: 271; Cancik and Mohr 1988: 121–126). We would like to expand this notion to a religious narratology that sees religion as a resource for storytelling by 'converting' it into semiotic codes for a cultural text (Geertz 1973: 452–453). As such, myths, ritual signs, or gods are treated by writers as semiotic figures, inspirations for narrative strategies and structures, or hermeneutical approaches, geared to the cultural meaning in their particular religion(s). In *The Hole*, these religious signs are organized around the Afro-American rhetorical technique Signifyin(g); that itself can be traced back to West-African religious aesthetics.

The African-American use of the term '*Signifying*' is a concept that, according to literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., developed independently from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic concept of the same name (Gates 1983: 685). While Saussure's 'Signifying' means the process of attaching meaning to a particular sign, the African-American 'Signifyin(g)' (or 'Signifyin'") refers to a variety of speech figures like meta-lepsis, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, hyperbole, and litotes. Gates suggests that Signifyin(g) developed about two hundred years ago, when slaves parodied their masters' tropes or turned them into puns (Gates 1983: 685–686). He also argues that

this play with tropes and interpretations stems from oral narrative traditions in West Africa and from characteristics taken from a particular deity, Èshù-Elégbára (Eshu, in short), the god of interpretation. This figure appears under various names in West Africa and the New World, such as Papa Legba in Haiti or Papa La Bas in American Hoodoo traditions (Gates 1988: 5).

Eshu serves as the messaging link between the gods and men. As the guardian of the crossroads, he dwells between the world of the gods and the human world (Gates 1988: 6). He establishes and regulates communication between them during ritual sessions, as he is the only one who is able to open the gates and to translate the various languages (Gates 1988: 6–7). He is a 'principle of language' (Gates 1988: 22), a god of semiotics, who gives a text its interpretation and attaches a particular predicate to a subject. His traditional stories mostly deal with 'the origin, nature, and the function of interpretation and language use "above" that of ordinary language' (Gates 1988: 6).

In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates develops a theory of reading Afro-American literature, basing it on Eshu's features, calling it *Esu-'tufunaalo*. It literally means 'one who unravels the knots of Es[h]u' (Gates 1988: 9) and functions, parallel to Hermes's role in Western literature (hermeneutics), as a methodological principle of interpreting Black texts (Gates 1988: 8–9). This 'Black hermeneutics' derives from the West-African notion that a ritual text 'remains unread and unreadable without the agency of Legba [that is, Eshu]' (Gates 1988: 25). *Esu-'tufunaalo* plays with the uncertainty of understanding a text (Gates 1988: 25); for reading, this means the literal meaning of a Black text cannot be trusted, as it might trick its readers via Signifyin(g). That said, Gates notes that many African-American literary figures, such as Ishmael Reed or Zora Neal Hurston (Gates 1983: 700), and Black music genres, like Blues and Jazz, use this figure of speech in their works (Gates 1983: 685).

The rhetoric of Signifyin(g) is deeply embedded in sociocultural interaction; it does not only rely on verbal speech and on what is said, it is also accompanied by sociolinguistic *key signs* (keys, in short). Keys are actions, such as gestures, facial expressions, or inflexion, that serve as indications of a statement's actual meaning.

In other words, '[h]ow something is said [...] is part of *what* is said' (Wideman 1985: 66). The more familiar a certain key is among a group, the more subtle and smaller it becomes during a conversation (e.g. a mere wink). When a speaker uses Signifyin(g) in his or her speech act, s/he subtly introduces a key, signaling that the literal meaning of the following message is cancelled and should not be taken at face value. The understanding and visibility of this key is based on a resource of cultural signs commonly shared by the referent and the target audience. If the key is recognized among the recipients, it will be used to re-interpret the utterance metaphorically, or will otherwise exclude listeners from the root of the message. African-American novelists utilize Signifyin(g) to add layers to the meaning of their stories. A particular key can then be interpreted differently, even contradictorily, heavily depending on whether the reader is, for example, Black or White (Wideman 1985: 66).

Gates's theory of Afro-American Signification was initially inspired by the works of novelist Ishmael Reed (Gates 1988: 217–218). Like Eshu, Reed considers himself as a trickster linguist who secretly mocks and confuses his readers by using unclear signs in order to signify (that is, to trick) his audience (M'Baye 2016: 108). His writing style takes motifs, strategies, and semantics from West-African and Afro-Diaspora religions, most notably Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Hoodoo, and includes them subtly into his novels. He calls this aesthetics of African ritualism *NeoHooDoo*. By drawing from ritual aesthetics, and especially from the trickster qualities of Eshu, Reed challenges and satirizes rational Western thought and static encodings of Black representation in order to provoke new interpretations of old discourses in history and literature (Juan-Navarro 2010: 90–91).

The Hole heavily borrows from the narrative structure, aesthetics, and strategy of Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. In it, the voodoo detective Papa LaBas investigates the case of the 1920s outbreak of the epidemic Jes Grew 'which causes civilized white people to shake their bodies like primitive Africans' (Nuruddin 2006: 114). Our assumption of the connection between *The Hole* and *Mumbo Jumbo* is supported by its entry in the graphic novel's bibliography that also lists Gates's aforementioned book. This intention of tricking the audience via NeoHooDoo aesthetics can also

be seen in John Jennings's concept for his, and co-exhibitor Stacy Robinson's, 2013 *Black Kirby* comic arts exhibition, when he states:

Lines make societies feel like they know things; like there's an answer to all things. Our ancestors' collective bellies heave in laughter in the dark, beautiful after-space at this notion. Black Kirby hears that laughter, samples it, and turns it into *synaesthetic, nuanced probes that pushes all the wrong buttons at the right times.*

(Jennings 2013: 9; our emphasis)

In summary, we define Esu-‘tufunaalo as a writing style that uses key signs and concepts taken from African or Afro-Diaspora cultures and history in order to communicate a Black reading experience. The author functions, like Eshu in West-African mythology, as a linguistic gatekeeper to the text's interpretation. Through Signifyin(g), the trickster author is able to exclude those parts of his or her recipients from the root of the story's message who do not perceive or understand the cultural keys. Despite the lack of grasping the narrative core, these recipients get access to another interpretation of the story which intentionally tricks them by taking the story *too literally*. However, those recipients who *are* able to read those cultural keys correctly experience, in *The Hole's* case, a semiotic ritual. Those two ways of reading a Black text will be illustrated and amplified below on the basis of *The Hole's* story.

At the Crossroads of Interpretations

The authors Duffy and Jennings organize their story by crossing dichotomies. *The Hole* tells the story of the young African American Curtis Cooper who accidentally gains superpowers granted by the Vodou deity (*loa*) Papa Legba who is in a fight with White Peter, the spirit of capitalism. This evil spirit converts Black culture and spirituality into consumer goods for a White audience in order to gain power and wealth. The story hence revolves around their supernatural conflict. Curtis gets caught up in it, when Papa Legba decides to open a hole with bared teeth in the Black man's stomach that devours his consumerist surroundings. Since the authors structure their story in binaries, the plot plays, on one hand, in two time domains; in the

past of various protagonists and in the present of 2006 that mostly follows Curtis's perspective. On the other hand, they arrange their characters 'racially' in a binary Black and White structure, given that each Black protagonist comes into conflict with a White counterpart, what apparently creates a good and evil scheme (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 162).

This play with racial and time binaries is illustrated by the story's initial dispute between the two *loas* Papa Legba and Legba Ati-Bon. At first, both characters are depicted as being Black. Papa is an old man and Ati-Bon a Rastafarian. The latter steals the old man's bag, which contains the Fate of the World, and turns into a White male with sunglasses and copyright sign on his forehead. Ati-Bon changes his name to 'White Peter,' leaves the panel and *The Hole's* diegesis. The former *loa* is now able to control the comic book by addressing the audience and changing the comic panel's organization. He gained those extradiegetic powers in a long-lasting complot against Papa Legba. In the past, Ati-Bon had appeared to Carla Bonte, a Black New Orleans store owner and Vodou devotee, and brought her the message that her White husband was cheating on her. Both had come to an agreement that had Carla's spouse and his mistress killed. Carla had then founded the Hyper-Voodoo Network, what made her, over the years, to a great person of influence. In the present, Carla's enterprise converts religious elements of Vodou into apps, fashion, television and radio shows, and so on (e. g. Voodoo Doll Fashion, Voodoo Doc Fashion Line, Vootique). Under her influence, Vodou, *the religion*, has turned into Hyper-Voodoo, *the commercial brand*; which is the reason why Papa Legba has lost power to Legba Ati-Bon/White Peter. Papa Legba responds to this coup by appearing to Curtis Cooper, an African-American tattoo artist (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 162f).

Similarly to Papa Legba, Curtis, too, is at odds with several White characters. When we first meet Curtis on his way to work, he is robbed by a White small-time criminal who, unknown to him, has also an affair with Curtis's mixed-race girlfriend Trina. After serving a sentence for drug possession, Curtis runs a tattoo studio in the back of his mother's hairdresser's shop co-owned by his White stepfather Charlie. Curtis is displeased by their interracial relationship and refuses any of Charlie's

advances – much to the latter's disappointment. Being too late to work after the robbery, Curtis enters his studio where Papa Legba is waiting for him. The moment he notices the *loa* Curtis's upper body gets exposed by the spirit, revealing a swastika scar on his belly. A flashback shows his time in prison, getting brutally beaten up by neo-Nazis. To escape this cycle of Nazi violence, Curtis scratches a swastika into his stomach with a razor blade, sneaked in by his mother. Papa Legba uses this scarred wound to create a black hole in Curtis's body. After reopening the wound, the *loa* suddenly disappears (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 163).

At first glance, this clash of dualisms, of Present and Past, Black and White, Good and Evil, may provoke a responsive interpretation such as: White persons evidently embody the Evil against Blacks in American society, because the *White* criminal robs the *Black* Curtis; the *White* husband cheats on his *Black* wife Carla; and *White* Peter, being an allegory for capitalist forces, represents the enrichment of *White* businesspeople by appropriating *Black* culture. In such an obvious interpretation, Whiteness is associated with *Evil* and Blackness with *Good*. Even the protagonist Curtis frankly admits during the above-mentioned robbery: 'I hate white people' (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 3). So, is *The Hole* an instance of 'reversed' racism? (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 163).

To get back to the rhetoric of Esu-'tufunaalo and the qualities of the trickster linguist Eshu, one has to imagine the text's interpretation as standing on a cross-way. In West-African Yoruba mythology, Eshu symbolizes the path to a text's interpretation (Gates 1988: 10) because he assigns the reader to one path or the other. Any interpretation of *The Hole* must be therefore read as a crossroads of meanings. The text must be read in motion, being constantly variable (Gates 1988: 25). Reading two discourses (Past and Present, Black and White, Good and Evil) as binaries creates 'a contradiction resolvable only by the unity of opposites' (Gates 1988: 37). Understanding a Black text as a hermeneutical crossroads therefore means that the reader takes up a meta-level by noticing the text's Signifiyin(g).

Afro-American Signification functions as a meta-tool of communication; it is a 'trope of tropes' (Gates 1983: 686). It is, in some respects, a 'self-aware' rhetoric system (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 164) that takes over other rhetorical

techniques, figures, and signs (Gates 1983: 689), and 'plays' with them. In that sense, *The Hole's* characters must be interpreted as rhetorical figures in Duffy and Jennings's signifyin(g) structure. This interpretation becomes more ostensible, when the authors' intentions are taken into account. In the graphic novel's appendix, the creators state that their protagonists are based on racist stereotypes (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 152): Curtis is modeled after *the Brute*, a brutal, hyper-aggressive Black male stereotype popularized during the American Reconstruction era. Carla, in turn, represents *the Mammy*, a cliché of the over-motherly, over-weight household servant that became a popular figurative mark for numerous household products in the beginning of the 20th century (Strausbaugh 2007: 276–278). Curtis and Carla are therefore *visual keys* presupposing an awareness of the history of American racist imagery of Black people. As such, both characters must be treated as signs that were constructed by Whites based on racist attributions (Strausbaugh 2007: 67–72; 276). They are not essentially Black signs in their creators' signification. As stereotypes, they function as figures of speech employed by the authors to critically parody the notion of race (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 164).

This becomes more apparent, when we take a close look at the nameless White small-time criminal who robs Curtis at the beginning of his arc. This character consumes Gangsta Rap and lives a life of sex, drugs, and crime. He is based on the hip hop stereotype 'Superthug,' or 'Gangsta,' introduced by hip hop legend Tupac Shakur and popularized by rappers such as 50 Cent, DMC, or Ja Rule. The Superthug is a foolish stock character with bad business sense. Due to his lack of intelligence, he is not capable of committing lucrative misdemeanors; he instead earns his living with drug-dealing and low crimes (Whalen 2007: 41–42). Despite his depiction of having a white color tone, the Superthug in *The Hole* simply rejects his Whiteness by insisting to his mistress: 'Bitch, I ain't white, I'm light skinned' (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 22). Hence, the skin color of the graphic novel's characters is no valid reference point for any predication. This means, you do not see what you get in Afro-American Signification – only the knowledge of the African-American experience adds meaning to a statement or sign (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 164f).

Signifyin(g) organizes keys and discourses in accordance with the anticipated expectations of a target audience. *The Hole's* narrative structure and overall presentation work, for example, with tropes and aesthetics of the superhero genre: Flashbacks into a protagonist's past serve as explanations of why Curtis and Carla are the way they are in the present (in terms of cause and effect) by using the popular trope of the 'secret origin' in superhero comics. But, their figurative function as Black stereotypes cancels the superhero story; their 'secret origins' do not *explain* why they are stereotypes, their history of reception does. Signifyin(g) annuls the literal meaning of a statement by introducing keys. Hence, the authors' signification renders the whole plot meaningless – it simply is an accumulation of rhetorical figures that parodies the structure and tropes of superhero stories (e.g. their Good and Evil scheme) (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 165f). If the story is regarded as being a plot with a beginning, middle, and an end, and not as a rhetorical meta-speech, it will simply lead nowhere; what we illustrate in the paragraphs below by discussing the story's ending – or lack thereof.

The Signifyin(g) Comic

Curtis spends, despite his sudden encounter with Papa Legba, an unremarkable workday. After closing time, he pays his girlfriend Trina, who is actually Carla Bonte's alienated, drug-addicted daughter, a visit. During sex, the hole in Curtis's waist suddenly opens up, and a hand drags Trina into his body. Then Papa Legba forcibly ruptures out of Curtis's guts, activates the hole's superpowers, and leaves the scene again. Trina and Curtis merge into a single androgynous being, consisting to one part of Curtis and to the other of Trina. They plan to force Carla to reverse the transformation, in the belief she sent the Vodou spirit, Papa Legba, after them. At this point, the plot ends with the announcement of *The Hole's* second volume (**Figure 1**).

Turning the page, White Peter appears and starts addressing the reader directly. He actively markets the *Hole* franchise to his audience by praising that 'the Hole books are so great... I've already bought up the film rights!' (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 145) Having said that, he immediately admits that he actually detests comics and has only bought the rights, 'so no one else gets them' (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 146). He

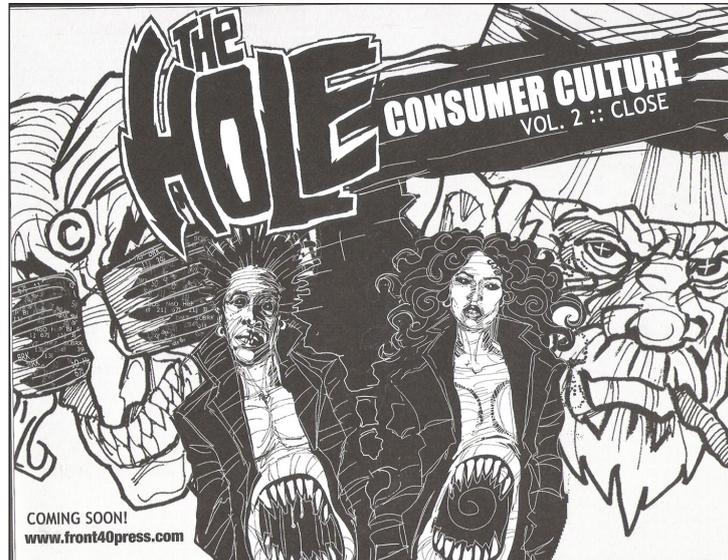


Figure 1: The announcement of *The Hole Vol. 2*; taken from the pages of *The Hole: Consumer Culture Vol. 1* (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 144) © 2008 Front Forty Press.

subsequently describes the film's changes to the graphic novel's plot in vernacular language, mocking the story told. In the movie, 'Curtith', as he "mispronounces" the protagonist's name, 'done robbed [a] voodoo shop' (2008:146), what sets the voodoo goddess of love against him. She replaces his genitals with the hole, possesses his body, and turns him female. In the end, Curtis gets replaced by a Blackface caricature, and the story is renamed '*Tha Hole: Git Yo' Voodoo on!*'

This ending sequence is essential, as it quite frankly parodies the story's plot and mocks its reader. Without any indication, the plot simply ends by Curtis and Trina expressing their intention to confront the villainous Carla Bonté in order to end her Hyper-Voodoo shenanigans. But, instead of a final confrontation between Good and Evil, the real villain, White Peter, enters the stage candidly mocking the story. He rhetorically spoofs its plot points and changes the whole story to his amusement. Thereby, Peter, being an allegory of capitalism itself, expresses his power over the graphic novel's plot: The story's hero is merely a fictional character of a comic book, of a *capitalistic mass product*. We argue that the authors silently reveal in said sequence that Peter is the story's *meta-narrator*. He leaves the diegesis right after his

transformation from Legba Ati-Bon by exiting a panel and begins commenting the plot from a meta-level. This interpretation becomes more obvious with the transitional page between the plot's ending and the announcement of volume 2 (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 167). It reveals that the graphic novel *The Hole* is an object in Peter's hands (**Figure 2**).

The Hole therefore is a story within a story within a story; each entangling itself with the others. To approach this subject more accessibly, we argue that each story is a narrative frame. The separation of those frames is, in accordance with the trickster writing style Esu-ʼtufunaalo, not obviously narrated. We also propose that those frames must be read *from the inside out*; this means, the narrative order is, for analytical purposes, not read according to the pattern of a classical framework story (frame 1 › frame 2 › frame 1) but rather in the following way: frame 3 › frame 2 › frame 1 › frame 2 › frame 3 (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 167).

Frame 1 marks the superhero parody told as the plot described above, while White Peter's sequence acts as *Frame 1*'s meta-level. From his meta-arc, Peter tauntingly reflects on the graphic novel's plot. His polemics therefore serve as *Frame*



Figure 2: *The Hole* depicted as a graphic novel within a graphic novel (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 143) © 2008 Front Forty Press.

2, a hidden critique of the comic reader. This veiled polemical critique follows the structure and lesson of the Afro-American folktale of the *Signifying Monkey* which is a traditional oral poetry that developed in the Black Diaspora during the period of slavery. Gates suggests that it originated from West-African narrations and received its present form in Cuba (Gates 1983: 687–688). Its structure relies on a tripartite relation between the friends Monkey, Lion, and Elephant and operates a power distinction: The Elephant is stronger than the Lion; the Lion is stronger than the Monkey. But the latter outweighs his physical disadvantage through his rhetorical skills and his mastery of Signifyin(g) (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 167f). The tale goes as follows.

One day, the Monkey, while sitting on the tree top, tells the Lion a story about their mutual friend the Elephant speaking badly of the Lion behind his back. Enraged by this account, the Lion confronts the Elephant, vehemently demanding clarification, while the giant animal insists that there must be some sort of misunderstanding. After several attempts and due to his pushiness, the Elephant beats him up, what causes the big cat to realize that he actually is not the most powerful being in the jungle after all. Heavily whipped, he returns to the Monkey with the intention in mind to vent his frustration on the small creature. But, seeing the Monkey laughing at him, it begins to dawn on the Lion that he was conned. The Monkey just told a made-up story and the Lion took it at face value; he believed it to be a *literal* account, whereas the Monkey told it *metaphorically*. This discrepancy between literal and metaphorical meaning is also expressed in the Lion's claim to power in the animal kingdom: The Elephant *literally* is the mightiest animal in the jungle; the Lion in contrast is called the 'king of the jungle' *metaphorically*. Thus, the Lion got signified, and hence the Monkey, calling him names from the top of the tree, is stronger with his signification than the Lion with his raw power (Gates 1988: 55–56).

The tale of the *Signifying Monkey* indicates that *The Hole's* ending sequence (**Figure 3**) is another key signaling that the plot is a parody on the relation between narrator and reader (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 168). The reader, like the Lion above, takes the story *too* seriously, while, in his role as *The Hole 2's* promoter,



Figure 3: White Peter signifies the reader with promotional speech acts (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 145) © 2008 Front Forty Press.

White Peter taunts him or her for this commitment: “The second book will be *worth every penny!* You should *buy two!* *If you don’t, the terrorists* [i.e. the bad guys; our note] *will have already won*” (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 145; our emphasis). From the perspective of a meta-narrator, such as Peter, a story, and everything connected to it, is a system of bare signs, because “[...] these are only tropes, figures of speech, rhetorical constructs [...], and not some preordained reality or thing” (Gates 1983: 723).

Yet, most readers are not used to perceive comic stories as being mere narrative speech acts. White Peter takes advantage of this habit and exposes his readers like the Monkey did in the tale. Just like the Lion’s synonym ‘king of the jungle’ is a mere denotation and not a given fact, the notion of ‘comic book reader’ is, in a consumer society, basically just a synonym for ‘consumer’ or ‘customer.’ White Peter, the spirit of capitalism, indicates this by bluntly promoting *The Hole’s* second volume and the movie to his potential consumers in a rhetorical metalepsis (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 168). Confronted in an interview with the question on the whereabouts of the sequel, artist John Jennings stated that:

We are planning to eventually do the **Hole Vol. 2**. We have been talking about it recently... [...] It's down the road a bit more though. We have a ton of projects that are in front of it... UNLESS some publisher wants to publish it for us...

(Jennings acc. to Anderson-Elysee 2015)

But the catch is neither the movie nor the second volume was meant to be produced in the first place. With White Peter's Signifyin(g) in mind, we want to point out that the 'Vol. 1' in the title of *The Hole: Consumer Culture* is not an attachment, indicating that there will be a sequel; it is but another rhetorical figure, or rather another element of the superhero parody, that mimics the serial nature of superhero comics and hints at their open-endedness. This also means that readers who expect a sequel have been taken in by the comic's rhetoric (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 168). Or, as Gates puts it: 'To read these figures literally [...] is to be duped by figuration, just like the signified Lion' (1983: 723). Similarly, the reader has been tricked by the 'Signifyin(g) Comic,' illustrating that society's 'biggest tricksters [are] capitalism and racism' (M'Baye 2016: 108).

The Talking Comic Book

The third frame transforms the graphic novel into a *Talking Book* by reference to ritual semiotics. For this final part, we would like to remind the reader that in religious narratology the content of religions acts as a resource for semiotic keys in a text. In *The Hole*, for instance, the myth of the *Signifying Monkey* provides inspiration for its meta-plot. In the following, we examine Papa Legba's key role for *Frame 3*, in which the comic book becomes a sentient being from the perspective of Aesthetics of Religion.

To recap, Papa Legba is the Haitian Vodou 'version' of Eshu, the West-African guardian of the crossroads and god of interpretation. He also serves as the manager of the cosmic life-force, *ashé*. Legba determines whether the flow of *ashé* manifests in the real world. No ritual is possible without his permission at its very beginning, and no one is allowed to enter a ritual site without his clearance (Kment 2005: 160). Speaking all languages in existence, Legba is the universal translator as well and

embodies language and communication itself (Gates 1988: 6–9). By using his ritual meaning in *The Hole*, Duffy and Jennings turn the comic book into Legba himself, as we illustrate below.

For a better understanding of the graphic novel's ritual semiotics, we point to our introductory thesis: Comics are *cultural objects*. As such, an item consists of material as well as immaterial elements (Hahn 2014: 9–10). To illustrate this thesis, a *bocio* is a West-African material object that stores the spiritual, immaterial, powers of the gods. This device is not magic *per se*, though; it first needs ritual activation (Hoedl 2009). In order to read *The Hole* as a ritual item, we must understand the comic book's materiality *as part of its story*. It is a cultural *material* text; this means, its physical form as well as its narrative content are both parts of *one single* cultural text. It is important to read both parts together, as they form one single semiotic system. While the graphic novel as a material object consists of binding, paper, and ink, it stores the immaterial powers of Legba as well. To become a ritual vessel of Legba, the comic must first be ritually activated by Signifyin(g) (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 169).

For this purpose, the authors provide the graphic novel's cover sheets with golden *vèvès*. A *vèvè* is a ritual floor drawing in Haitian Vodou (**Figure 4**). Every *loa* has his or her unique *vèvè* with its clearly defined basic motif (Keller 2000: 57). Papa Legba's signature motif is the cross because of his guardianship over the *crossway*. His *vèvè* hence serves as the *first*, the introductory, key in Duffy and Jennings's Signification that determines *The Hole's* meaning as a supernatural item. Those *vèvès* and the foreword, written as an invocation of Eshu and all his embodiments by African and African Diaspora Art historian Dana Rush, signalize that *The Hole* must be read in a spiritual reading experience. Legba, as embodiment of all languages, enlivens and possesses the comic, and determines its spiritual meaning (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 169f).

Another religious signifier is introduced, when Papa Legba and Legba Ati-Bon meet at the beginning of the plot (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 170). Papa calls Ati-Bon a *petwo loa*, when the character is introduced (Duffy and Jennings 2008: 12). In Vodou, the identity of individual *loas* is fluid, resulting in various manifestations

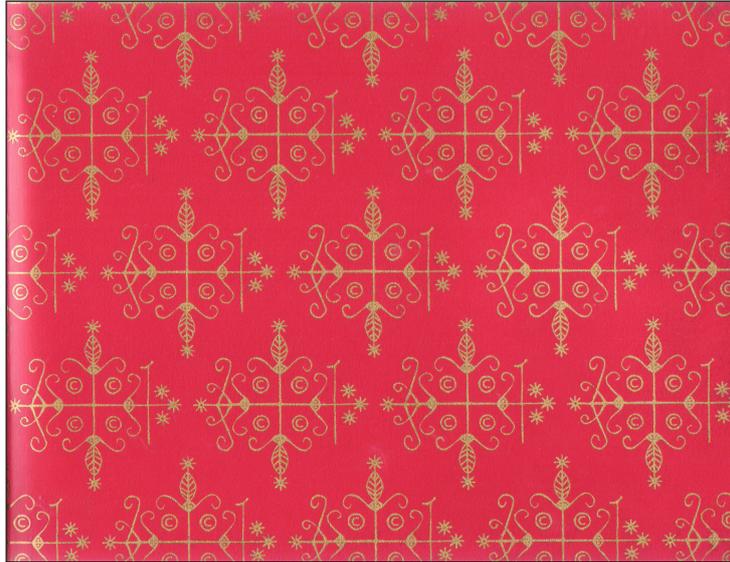


Figure 4: Legba's vèvè decorates the graphic novel's cover sheets. This signals the beginning of a ritual experience (Duffy and Jennings 2008: cover sheets). © 2008 Front Forty Press.

of a single god. The two major groups of manifestations are *rada* and *petwo*. In rituals, occurring *rada-loas* stand for Africa, family, home, peace, and act benevolently, whereas *petwo* spirits represent the gods' aggressive, harmful aspects, which is said to be ensued by the colonial wound (Keller 2000: 55–56). Yet, even if Ati-Bon is a *petwo*, he still remains an aspect of Legba. The same applies to his transformation White Peter; he *still* is Legba (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 170), since the name 'Peter' evidently refers to Saint Peter who is considered to be Legba's Christian persona in Haiti, due to him guarding the Gates to Heaven (Reuter 2003: 35).

The plot's core conflict between the two Legbas does not, as expected, allegorize the eternal dispute between Good and Evil, it rather is a critique of the use of this dichotomous scheme in entertainment media, as writer Duffy stresses in the epilogue: 'There is no Devil figure, no defined demarcation between good and evil in Vodou, only the psychological complexity of humanity itself' (Duffy acc. to Duffy and Jennings 2008: 155). The authors' usage of the two aspects of Legba instead shares similarities with the African-American literature trope *Talking Book* (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 170). This trope captures the ambivalent experience with

the Bible and its abusive role in the mental enslavement of Black people (Callahan 2006: 20; Gates 1983: 700–701). The term 'Talking Book' derives from the memoirs of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, a former slave who thought he had seen his master talking to the Bible, 'as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips' (Gronniosaw acc. to Callahan 2006: 13). In African-American literature, this trope refers to 'making the white written text speak with a black voice' by referencing Black texts and traditions (Gates 1988: 131). This idea of a text's voice likewise derives from the colonial, and anti-colonial, handling of the Bible. In the reading of the slavers, certain verses were used to indoctrinate the enslaved to be submissive by 'poisoning' their mind (hence, the Bible's name 'poison book'). However, when it was appropriated by the Black tradition, the Bible 'voiced' healing messages of rebellion and liberation ('good book') (Callahan 2006: 25–26; 38–39). Afro-Caribbean religions like Vodou similarly provide a framework for therapeutic healing and personal development (Kremser 2005: 13). We therefore argue that Legba is the comic book's Black voice.

Like the Bible, the graphic novel displays the ambivalent experience of living in a consumer society while being Black. Peter, being *petwo*, represents the poisonous side of the comic industry, which results in being tricked by the *Signifyin(g) Comic* as described above, whereas Papa Legba embodies the healing, liberating message (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 171) – the story's allegory. The latter's role can be best understood, when we take a look at Eshu's role in West-African mythology. There he acts as the harbinger of the sacred texts and teaches humans how to read them during divination (Gates 1988: 15). With this in mind, Papa Legba allegorically expresses the book's nature of being a teaching book, as Jennings confirms: 'We wanted this book to be taught and studied. [...] **The Hole** has a teaching guide in the back, a bibliography, and a glossary of terms' (Jennings in Anderson-Elysee 2015).

While being simultaneously the poison (Peter) and its antidote (Papa) (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 171), the trickster linguist acts as the Black voice that comments the graphic novel from a meta-meta-level and teaches how the semiotics of 'buying and selling of race in America' works (Jennings in Anderson-Elysee 2015).

Similar to the myth, Legba explains how mass media must be read so that the readers learn to define themselves beyond the consumerist supply of identities. Involving into a dialogue with the Talking Comic Book, they shall realize that they are self-determined individuals and not empty signs in the consumerist cycle (Kottas and Schwarzenbacher 2018: 171). In our opinion, *The Hole's* core message can best be summed up in the call for decolonization of the Black sign voiced by *Black Power* activists Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton:

When we begin to define our own image the stereotypes [...] that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there.

(Ture and Hamilton 1992: 37)

Conclusion

The Hole's storytelling abstracts ideas from West-African philosophies of religion and mythology. The authors Duffy and Jennings model their writing on the trickster linguist and god of crossroads, Eshu-Elegbara. They use the Afro-American meta-communication Signifyin(g) that derived from Eshu's attributes. This meta-speech identifies plot elements as meaningless story mechanics and semiotic figures. On a meta-level, a story is just nothing but a system of bare signs. As tricksters, the authors play with their readers' expectations by rendering *The Hole* a superhero story. As 'Eshuian' creators on the crossroads of storytelling, they create a path system that 'updates' the story's interpretation interactively (Kottas 2017: 93–96), depending on the reader's sign comprehension. The story is intentionally open-ended in order to challenge their readership. Arriving at the dead end, one path leaves the reader signified by racist and capitalist rhetoric. Another path may lead to the reader's conclusion that *The Hole* promotes Black and White dualism and 'reversed racism.' *The Hole's* Vodou semiotics however hides the opening to a third space beyond singularity and dualism (M'Baye 2016: 121). In that way, the comic book literally teaches its readers the breakdown of the semiology of marketing consumerism by metaphorically talking to them.

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