

• *Articles* •

**Absurdist Narratives in the Sunshine State:
Comic, Criminal, Folkloric, and Fantastic Escapades in the
Swamps and Suburbs of Florida**

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Abstract: *Recent Florida fiction, such as Swamplandia! by Karen Russell, Sick Puppy by Carl Hiassen, and Triggerfish Twist by Tim Dorsey, emphasize the absurdity, liminality, and criminality of the state. By utilizing folkloric motifs, genres, and rhetoric—and employing simulations of traditional narratives—these popular novels explore and exploit the national perception of Florida’s status as the “weirdest state.” Harnessing the mode of the comically fantastic, each narrative reconfigures Floridian marginality by presenting the borders of criminal identity and the manifestations of social deviance as essential features at the center of this chaotic peninsula’s culture. Disorder narrative realism, these texts reveal psychological insights and highlight the uses of nonsense for storytelling.*

Fertile and Fractured Identity: Florida Folklore on the Margins

Storytelling in an oral context is understood by folklorists to be a manifestation of both individual and communal identity. The assertion of identity is also part of literary compositions, and the inclusion of folklore is sometimes part of literary depictions of the development of characters’ identity: “writers frequently and more or less self-consciously have adapted and incorporated the forms and content of folklore in creating literary works [...]” (de Caro and Jordan 2004, 5). Fiction can also include simulated folkloric content to provide the impression of a depth of tradition in which characters are immersed: a contrived matrix of communal meaning in which characters struggle to negotiate their individuality in

relation to a group identity. The role of place in helping to situate identity is a fundamental means by which literary and folkloric works contextualize meaning, and the function of how regional folkloric material helps to construct identity applies to simulated productions of folklore as well. From the margins of the page, folklore connects with an implicit nexus of storytelling connections, “real” and imagined.

Some of Florida literature in the last two decades exemplifies how simulated folklore contributes to the struggle to define an individual identity in relation to a communal identity tied to a sense of place. The role of folklore—no matter how seemingly marginal—whether traditionally preceded or innovatively simulated, involving Florida’s environment operates as a substrate that offers aesthetic coherence to an otherwise chaotic jumble of competing narrative elements of volatile nonsense, outrageous absurdity, criminal farce, and the ambiguous fantastic in the Sunshine State. Ultimately, what emerges is not only the identity of the characters, who struggle within the realm of the fictional and improbable peninsula, but also the identity of the state itself, defined and disrupted by infinite paradox and perpetual conflict, spinning like a hurricane—merging center and margins in a tempest of intertextual and folkloric implications.

Florida, the Bizarre: Distinctly Liminal and Positively Criminal

Florida has become known in the national popular imagination as a haven of weirdness. It is no surprise that when the writers of *Weird U.S.* decided to a “weird” book for each state that Florida “rose to the top of the list” (Scurman and Moran

2005, 6). Perhaps the most influential factor in popular perceptions of Florida as a place where the world is turned upside down is Florida's role in the 2000 Presidential election: "the country had a new president, and the image of Florida as a chaotic banana republic, already one of the stronger alternate views of the state, had become firmly established in the national consciousness" (Glassman 2009, 252). In the same year, the *Orlando Sentinel* observed that "newcomers" from the other states have become responsible for up to eighty or even ninety percent of the state's population and have "made Florida the U.S. southern frontier much the same way that California was America's new beginning in the West a century earlier" (Padilla 2000). In the previous century, Florida was still virtually a frontier in the old sense of the word, where civilization met the wilderness; near "the end of World War II, Florida was the least densely settled state east of the Mississippi [...] when the U.S. Bureau of Census declared the Western frontier 'closed' in 1890, renegades and dreamers continued to slip down into Florida [...]" (Belleville 2011, 8).¹ And now as the "southern frontier" for population expansion, Florida embodies marginality with its demographic tensions and its geographic peculiarities, appearing to many Americans as a strange appendage dangling from the country.

Since 2000, media coverage has helped to present Florida as a place of chaos and paradox where perverted crimes proliferate, political corruption and confusion dominate, and a host of competing demographics clash in a land marked by its liminality via not only the gulf coast and ocean shores surrounding the peninsula but the frontier-like mentality that characterizes so much of Florida history. In the

presence of the liminal, “we are on the edge of something new, a transitional place and time” and Florida with its cycles of colonization and immigration, periodic reshaping of the coastline by hurricanes, sea-level rise, and the competing forces of real estate development is the epitome of liminality in the United States (Sims and Stephens 2011, 109). Florida is a state where it is said that to go south you have to go north, meaning, for example, that in Jacksonville you will find more traditional and Confederate-flag waving Southerners than in the Miami region where Yankees from New England (as well as Cubans and Puerto-Ricans) are more common than Florida crackers.² The truth is always of course more complicated than what the census numbers reveal.³ Racial, ethnic, and regional identity transcends conventional assumptions; for example, Glorious Johnson, an African-American Republican Councilwoman and an admirer of President Lincoln, chose to attend the Confederate Memorial in Jacksonville because she proclaimed “This flag is not a flag of hate, but a flag about heritage and history” (Shan 2008).

History and geography both are subject to multiple interpretations in Florida, and the very landscape seems fraught with ambiguity. The Everglades themselves and Florida swamps (the Everglades is not technically a swamp but a “river of grass” across “one hundred miles from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico,” but it certainly makes that swampy impression to most) are liminal forms: neither land nor water but a perilous and intriguing mixture of both (Douglas 1947, 5). In such a region characterized by its transformative potential, it is not surprising that both folklore and popular literature about Florida have concentrated on the contrary

elements in Florida. And it is particularly the bizarre and absurd aspects of conflict that emerge from the swamps of Florida, a general weirdness, which is the hallmark of liminality: “free [...] combination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality [...]” (Turner 1982, 28). Welcome to Florida: weirdness in “every possible pattern” awaits you.

Reading the news in Florida resembles scanning through a police blotter of deviancy or a list of the more unbelievable urban legends at snopes.com. As Keith Olbermann declared on his cable news show in 2005: “Day in and day out, no state delivers more crazy news items than Florida. It has become its own category of weirdness.” Just in 2011 alone, the Dougherty Gang of siblings killed a police officer who tried to arrest them for speeding;⁴ the Fort Lauderdale mayor was arrested for politically favoring a developer; giant African snails began to destroy homes in Miami;⁵ a woman in Northern Florida bit pieces of a man’s face off, claiming she was part vampire and part werewolf;⁶ and, a Melbourne Republican proposed ending the ban on dwarf-tossing (Walker 2011).⁷

It’s not simply the frequency of violence and the bizarre, but the consistency and intensity of the bizarre violence that runs through Florida. Florida is quantifiably the weirdest, at least since 2009: “Tableseed.com [...] has analyzed nearly 2,000 Associated Press (AP) “strange news” stories that were released in the past year. After segmenting all of the news stories by location, the state of Florida was the runaway winner [...]” And the weirdest of Florida cities? Tampa—which is where Tim Dorsey’s novel, *TriggerFish Twist*, takes place.

The Argument: How Florida's Criminal Chaos and Simulated Folklore Perpetuates Interpretative Uncertainty in Popular Literary Fiction

The focus on criminal activity perpetrated by characters living marginal lives in the writings of Tim Dorsey (*Triggerfish Twist*), Carl Hiaasen (*Sick Puppy*), and Karen Russell (*Swamplandia!*) relies upon Florida stereotypes of a state of sociopaths who thrive in a habitat of deregulation, corporate corruption, and predatory sexual perversion.⁸ Such texts, rather than being absolutely fresh arresting distortions, resemble fun-house reflections provided by the news media. As author Carl Hiaasen admits, "Crime in Miami is so bizarre that no novelist's inventions could surpass true life."⁹ All three authors offer texts that combine expectations of deviance in Florida along with literary and folkloric improvisations—allusions, typologically folkloric characters (devious tricksters and avenging heroes), frame-stories, tall tale telling, embedding of motifs, and simulations of the dynamics of legends— to offer visions of Florida where violence is an assertion of identity. Each text's use of literary and folkloric generic expectations from farce, myth, tall tale, and legend perpetuates the interpretative uncertainty of the fantastic that propels each story between modes of realism and absurdity, order and disorder, sense and nonsense.

Through the bizarre characters and preposterous circumstances that these narratives stage, intriguing psychological portraits and pointed social critiques nevertheless emerge from the context of confusingly nonsensical contexts. As Stephen Mulhall observes of Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of sense and nonsense,

meaning is contextual, and the use of the improbable and the seemingly incoherent may gain significance regardless of any specific content or lack of content: “not all nonsense is devoid of sense, or meaning, or point; each variant of the species may in fact manifest significance in its own distinctive way” (Mulhall 2007, 122). Nonsense works in a narrative context as both an aesthetic and ideological strategy to reorder conventional expectations. Thus, almost paradoxically, the use of nonsense in fiction is recognized by critics as productive of meaning, not destructive of significance: “nonsense language in literary writing is constructed to produce sense; nonsense is its tool” (Rieke 1992, 7). The mode of nonsense resembles the literary fantastic: “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 1973, 25). Like the fantastic, which at least temporarily disrupts normalcy by the hesitation the reader experiences when confronted with the impression of the supernatural, from the earliest verbal incarnations of the nonsensical, the nonsense-mode employs inversion for commentary.

For example, the first surviving medieval nonsense poem (composed near the turn of the thirteenth century C.E. by a German named *Minnesänger*) ends with a “series of bizarre reversals of the natural order” and then concludes with the statement: “This is what one sees in the world turned upside-down” (Malcolm 1997, 53). The roots of this genre, “‘impossibilia’ in Latin and ‘adynata’ in Greek” lie in both the ancient classical tradition of poetry and in “some of the best known prophetic verses [...] ‘the lion shall eat straw like the ox’” (78-79). The long-standing

method of turning “the world upside-down” is both a provocative performance and a dynamic tool of narrative, whether in a joke, play, or novel. In these novels’ depictions of Florida, the state itself figures as a zone where the world already is upside down. The unexpected not only happens; it happens regularly.

Tall Tales in Tampa*

* - For the sake of clarity, all parenthetical citations and references in the color **RED** point to corresponding pages in the primary text, Tim Dorsey’s *TriggerFish Twist* (2002).

In Tim Dorsey’s *TriggerFish Twist*, Serge Storms, a psychopath with an obsession for Florida history and culture, moves next door to the mundane Davenport family; the mild-mannered father, Jim Davenport, soon discovers life in Tampa is not for the weak-hearted. When a member of the McGraw gang of murderers and car thieves steals his vehicle, Jim Davenport reacts defensively: cleverly killing the man who threatened his sedate suburban existence, but Jim’s problems are just starting. In between his violent capers with his drug-addicted girlfriend, Sharon, and similarly drug-crazed stooge, Coleman, the charismatic and energetic psycho-conman, Serge Storms, tries to befriend Jim, inveigling Jim in a series of deviant escapades through Tampa.

Dorsey’s *Triggerfish Twist* uses a folkloric frame-story device to call attention to the nonsensical narrative not only as fiction but as an absurdly unlikely tall tale. Often considered America’s most historically prominent genre for both narrative folklore and literary comedy, the tall tale “is a humorous folk narrative that uses outrageous exaggeration within the frame of a realistic story—in certain situations, in order to perpetuate a hoax” (Mullen 1998, 643). In the case of *TriggerFish Twist*,

the entirety of the novel is subverted as a possible hoax on the reader because the framed story appears to be a tall tale told by an old woman, Edith Grabowski, who appears later in the narrative as an avaricious husband-hunter who ends up marrying a man whose delusion is that he is a multi-millionaire, a preposterous fiction that he imposes through a variety of public appearances, fooling not only the media but the criminal underworld as well. The gullible Edith, sets up the entire book as a multi-layered joke, a tall tale performed to a television audience, and the tale's improbabilities present a farcical simulacrum of Florida told by a stereotypical dupe who even as the framing agent never fully realizes how she has been duped: "Well, story time again. Probably the best place to start is Jim Davenport, seeing as he was in the middle of almost everything that went wrong. [...] we should start with the one question everyone's asking these days" (4).

That question referred to by Edith is why has Florida become "romantically lawless or dangerously stupid," but Edith does not ask this question because the framing does not stop with her. Although she is a first-person narrator she calls attention to another narrator, asserting "I'll shut up now and let the narrator take over" (4). Edith's revelation that there is a "narrator" highlights that she knows she is a character and gets the metanarrative joke. By extension the writer is in on the joke, and now, we the reading public share in this metanarrative joke. Prepared for the absurdities that follow, we distance ourselves accordingly, realizing that the hallmark of absurdity is that the incongruous operates "in tension with the congruous" (Cornwell 2006, 24). Therefore, any attempt to categorize the narrative

frame as wholly realistic or unrealistic is not compatible with the prevailing absurd aesthetic of the overall narrative where the oral tall tale telling enthusiasm of the storyteller, Edith, chafes against any model of realism contained by the literary narrator.

The third-person narrator advances further into the realm of “story time” invoked by Edith and is the one to ask the question of Florida’s chaotic identity. Thus, several steps from any pretense of mimesis of the everyday world, we enter a realm of playful metafiction. The plot that follows with its sequence of coincidences, violence, erotic escapades, and pairing of the history-obsessed psychopath, Serge Storms, with his managerial neighbor Jim Davenport belies any serious attempt to criticize the image of Florida as a criminal circus.

The notion of Florida as lawless and bizarre has become a meme of popular culture. For example, the popular radio show *Loveline* included a game (invented in 2003) that asked callers to identify whether peculiar crimes took place in either Germany or Florida, the regions which the show’s comedian, Adam Carolla, identified as most likely to make the news for criminally deviant behavior.¹⁰ Weirdness used to be the hallmark of California, according to majority perceptions, but “Florida historian Gary Mormino agrees that the Sunshine State overtook California as ‘the new capital of weirdness’ in the 1990s or 2000s” (Muessig 2011). Speculation on how Florida has arrived at this dubious distinction abounds: too much heat, humidity, and mosquitoes; prevalent drug use (especially as practiced by criminals attracted to the excessive deregulation); and population demographics

that are often stereotyped and assumed to foster conflict—retired and perhaps senile senior citizens, bellicose rednecks averse to strangers, winter-weary Northeasterners, non-English-speaking immigrants, and religious extremists.¹¹ Here is God's plenty in the Sunshine State.

Although the cover of *Triggerfish Twist* refers to Serge as a "Sunshine-State folklorist," the term is a misnomer. "Where is the folklore?" I wondered as I read through Tim Dorsey's novel. He does not gather or tell folktales. Instead, the folkloric elements are embedded through the acts that Serge performs and the narrative dynamics. Besides the tall tale aspect of the oral frame story, the novel has elements of fabliau or schwank, the folkloric genre that involves "uncommon occurrences in commonplace situations" and resembles farce, which often "mocks the social order" (Dorson 1972, 69; Lindahl 1987, 125). Like the trickster who barter items of no value to gain something of value, one night when Coleman, the blasé oafish drug addict, steals a pepper mill, he walks the streets engaging in a silly sequence of trades with other criminals until he ends up with something he values: a bike to get around.¹² Here, we see the absurdity of the free market system, where the underground black market of criminals is a microcosm of the larger greed-driven mechanisms of market forces, except these criminals achieve a fairer system than the win-or-lose capitalist model: each "trader" gets what he or she wants.

Despite the series of coincidental incidents that comprise so much of the plot of *Triggerfish Twist*, the use of such exaggerated improbability that pushes the bounds of plausibility far from the realm of any literal reality suggests a satirical

stance of the novel, making fun of the idea of Florida as a farcical freak show. Farce as a genre is invoked by Serge himself as he delivers a speech to college graduates:

We can learn everything we need to know about the incredibly rude, selfish, infantile country we've become by observing the human spokes revolving around the Tonya Harding sociocultural axis. The Greeks reveled in Homeric tragicomedies; the English lived out Shakespearean dramas. But we, America, are the cast of the Kerrigan farce. (315)

For those who have mercifully forgotten whom Tonya Harding is, she is the ice skater who hired thugs to bash the knee of Olympic competitor Nancy Kerrigan. With the various chance meetings upon which the plot depends, the atmosphere of unruly but entertaining slapstick violence, including a deviant spirit of Eros, the book qualifies as farce with little departure from caricature or improbability. Yet the narrative is so wrapped up in farce that it cannot critically detach itself from the representation of an endless Florida carnival. The most direct debate about whether Florida is unfairly demonized in popular conception as an anomaly is conducted during a violent and strange scene. Sly McGraw, the so-called "gentleman bandit" aims his gun at Sergio Storms, who claims, "We have a special confluence of economic and social factors that are killing the roots of the communities" (349). Sly responds, "Florida has no monopoly on bizarre and freakish crimes. That's anecdotal not empirical" (350). Since this debate is integrated into the climatic sequence of the narrative, involving naked *Twister* at gunpoint and a double

homicide with the aid of a buffalo costume, it is the bizarre which explicitly and empirically triumphs, although ultimately the entire text remains a single anecdote of the aged Edith. Thus, throughout the metanarrative of *Triggerfish Twist*, the Florida question of the “lawless” and “stupid” is enacted and reenacted as an ongoing farcical performance.

Simultaneously, the marginality of lurid criminals like Sly McGraw and Serge Storms is shifted towards the center of normalcy because not only is the final confrontation in Jim Davenport’s house, but the perpetrator of the final two murders is the banal everyman, Jim Davenport himself, pushed to extremity to protect his family. Jim kills his first McGraw brother much earlier in the novel when Skag McGraw gets into his car, mistaking it for the getaway vehicle. When Skag threatens Jim’s daughter, Jim kills Skag with the help of his malfunctioning car that deploys the front airbag when he turns on the radio; the airbag breaks Skag’s neck while he is plunging his head into the glove compartment where Jim has claimed there is cocaine hidden in the back. Cocaine is the currency that unites the underworld of the Tampa region, from the McGraws to Serge Storms’s tricks-turning girlfriend, Sharon, who assaults anyone accusing her of being a prostitute. Serge becomes intrigued by Jim’s life, and from giving sex tips to Jim for achieving greater bliss with his wife Martha to destroying Jim’s bullying neighbor, Serge’s criminality is almost sentimentalized as the excessive behavior of a man with earnest intentions while his character also serves as the creative proxy of Tim Dorsey. Serge admits that he “always wanted to be a writer,” and this preoccupation with writing seeps through

Dorsey's novel with even minor characters, such as a waiter, whom the narrator tells us was "collecting the menus but thinking about the screenplay he was writing that would show everyone" (209; 164-165). The multiple indications of metanarrative and the realized potential for "everyman" Jim Davenport to equal or exceed the body count of the convivial psychopath, Serge Storms, tightens the bonds between deviancy and normalcy and perpetuates the perception that Florida is a place where chaotic intersections abound and eruptions of violence are the inevitable results of clashes of identity propelled by addictive desires, whether for sex, cocaine, or money.

Florida Ecology and Insanity: Urban Legends and Myths of Vengeance in Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy**

* - For the sake of clarity, all parenthetical citations and references in the color **BLUE** point to corresponding pages in the primary text, Carl Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy* (1999).

In Carl Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy*, the disruptive effects of antisocial desires for sex, cocaine, and money also take center stage in Florida, and again an arbitrarily unhinged character is the expedient for producing a plot of unlikely coincidences and intersections of criminality on multiple levels. However, thematic focus and metaphorical structure of Hiaasen's novel is more unified than Dorsey's; the psychological exploration of Hiaasen's radical activist Twilly adheres to the narrative's symbolic environmental politics while Dorsey's quixotic psychopath, Serge, serves the needs of farcical expectations. Twilly's acts of violence follow a code of conduct: "Vengeance, he believed, ought never to be ambiguous" (142). Twilly is an eco-terrorist with anger-management issues but less extreme than

Serge Storms on the continuum of criminals. Serge was diagnosed as a psychopath and “had no idea why” he has his uncontrollable tendency towards violence (91). Twilly is fully conscious of the first time he committed an act of antisocial violence when at age fourteen he discovers that Marco island’s waterfront has been defiled by condos. When a tourist on the beach rebukes him for his heartfelt tantrum, he bites off her toenail and mounts it “in his seashell display” instead of the shells he had hoped to find on the Marco beach (30). Twilly persecutes litterbugs and becomes obsessed in the chastisement of a lobbyist, Palmer Stoats, who continues his littering habit oblivious as to why Twilly punishes him. With a nod to the urban legend of the concrete Cadillac, Twilly arranges to have a garbage truck unload its full load of trash on Palmer’s car. In Twilly’s odyssey to chastise and educate Palmer, Twilly becomes inveigled with the highest level of Floridian corruption: politics, real estate, and the criminal underworld.

One of the running themes in the novel is that real estate development in Florida is devastating the purity of the state. This emphasis on real estate development as a perversion of nature is heightened by the deviant proclivity of Robert Clapley a drug-dealer turned real estate developer, who has spent enormous sums of money to change two prostitutes through plastic surgery into approximations of Barbie dolls.¹³ Clapley carries Barbie dolls in his pockets daily as a further manifestation of his fixation; however, the two women eventually rebel in their fashion choices as they get involved in gothic porn films. To reclaim the attention of his two Barbie Frankenstein monsters, Clapley promises them more

powdered rhino horn, which due to earlier experimentation they crave more than money or cocaine. As Clapley explains, these two women's belief in the rhino horn is tied to their dream of Florida: "They [...] end up in beautiful sunny South Florida, a.k.a. paradise. Everything's supposed to be new and exciting here" (221). Clapley manipulates the women with their own delusions. Like the lobbyist, Stoats, Clapley then plays the role of the "great white hunter" and in a parody of Ernest Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," both men in an attempt to reclaim their illusion of masculinity and control in their lives are killed by an ailing ancient rhino, provided for their entertainment at a pay-to-hunt Floridian game preserve. Their deaths are a karmic punishment that fits their respective violations of nature: both men were part of a conspiracy to destroy the flora and fauna of Toad Island.

Paralleling real estate developers, politicians, and drug dealers, the novel presents a continuum of activism when it comes to taking a stand for the preservation of the environment. Twilly is actually not the most extreme example of pro-environment vigilantism. One of Florida's fictional former governors, Clinton Tyree, known as Skink after he retreated in self-imposed exile to the Everglades because of frustration with the political process considers Twilly to have "shown uncommon restraint" in his dealings with the litterbug lobbyist, Palmer Stoats (417). Skink asserts that at times angry violence is "the only sane and logical and moral reaction. Jesus, you don't take a class to make it go away! You take a drink or a goddamn bullet. Or you stand and fight the bastards" (398). Hiaasen's criticism of

the morally bankrupt superficial consumerism and unrestrained sensualism of Florida culture and politics is limited by his narrative's reliance on titillation in the form of the hedonism of the novel with its focus on sexual deviance, the lifestyles of the rich and corrupt, and a plot whose pacing heavily depends on violence. Like Dorsey's *Triggerfish Twist*, stereotypes abound of Floridian iniquity; Hiaasen's corrupt political and business world of Florida is replete with cocaine dealers, hitmen, crass tourists, and old adulterers. Ultimately, the novel ends with wish fulfillment since Skink and Twilly triumph in their struggle against the cabal of corruption.

The improbability of the plot partly succeeds because of the underlying mythic currents of the story, where the role of Skink in the narrative resembles the function of a folk hero called back from his isolation or sleep to restore a sickened land (the motif of the dormant heroes to one day be woken is D1960.1 *The Seven Sleepers*). Finn Macool and his Fianna of Ireland and King Arthur and his knights are two well-known examples of legends concerning the supposed return of noble figures to defend their native land one day when they are roused from sleep from their hidden caves: "some say the day will come when the Dord Fiann will be sounded three times, and that at the sound of it the Fianna will rise up as strong and as well as ever they were. And there are some say Finn, son of Cumhal, has been on the earth now and again since the old times, in the shape of one of the heroes of Ireland" (Gregory 1905, 436). What would be nonsense in a more realistic novel is accepted here as an expectation of the underlying conventions suggested by the

narrative elements of myth and legend. Twilly, for example, is unable to dream until his romantic union with the wife of Palmer Stoats, Dessie, who joins him in his ecological crusade. Validating his obsession, she serves as his anima, and the foil to his eccentricity. Similarly, the current governor, Dick Artemus, has an intelligent secretary Lisa June, who validates the virtue of Skink when after traveling to investigate him listens to his “true stories of old Florida,” and “she’d kissed him back” (299). This group of four shares a commitment to defending Florida.

Lisa June’s verification that this legendary self-exiled governor has an empirical reality and potency expands the borders of the novel’s narrative towards a simulation of legend and evokes regional Florida saviors. Unlike Odysseus or other heroes identified in Lord Raglan’s hero pattern as being “driven from the throne and city,” Governor Tyree gives up his status voluntarily because of his disgust at the Florida government’s corruption (Raglan 1956, 175). At first, Lisa June reveals to the current governor that she has “never heard of him [Skink],” and the governor explains Skink is “Ancient history” (164). This shroud of mystery is maintained when ordering the state trooper, lieutenant Jim Tile, to deliver a message to Skink, Governor Artemus refers to him as “your legendary friend” (171). Clinton Tyree has not only a reptilian nickname (skink) and resides in the Everglades but the sense that he is coming out of the wilderness partly in a spirit of vengeance is significant: “a man coming wounded and bitter out of deep swamp” (235). Skink is also a Vietnam-veteran, typologically a folk hero by definition: at once victim of the horrors of war and a survivor. A marginal being, he returns to defend the wilds of

Florida from the predatory real estate developers, but he is blocked by political forces:

It was one thing to recite the standard gospel of environmentalism—for heaven’s sake, even the Republicans had learned to rhapsodize about the Everglades!—but to rail so vituperatively against growth in a state owned and operated by banks, builders and real-estate developers... (234)

As an environmental crusader, Skink is a virtual genius-loci of the Florida wilderness; in fact, he resembles the alligator conjure man, Brother Monday, who helps both humans and animals, of whom it is said by raconteur Judy Gail, “Well, the story goes that ev’ry time there are people who need help, Brother Monday comes back from the alligators and helps them” (Bruce and Brooks 2001, 109). Skink, however, does not seek exile again. At the end of the novel, Skink and Twilly are eco-terrorist buddies, determined to punish the ignorant litterbugs in Florida, and they’re not about to quit anytime soon.

The Underworld of the Everglades: Negotiations with Tradition and Identity in *Swamplandia!**

* - For the sake of clarity, all parenthetical citations and references in the color **GREEN** point to corresponding pages in the primary text, Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!* (2011).

Of the three texts I have selected for analysis, the Pulitzer prize finalist *Swamplandia!*, most thoroughly captures the liminality of life in Florida.¹⁴ Ava, the book’s protagonist, struggles to define her identity in relation to her family and the threats that face her, simulating one of the chief functions of folklore: to provide a

meaningful worldview that offers emotional and practical support. Just as the main conflict in *Sick Puppy* is between ecological purists against the powers of corporate hegemony, so in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* the protagonists strive against the threat of corporate competition, the World of Darkness theme park on the mainland, which threatens to marginalize and destroy the family business of alligator wrestlers in their island community. Rather than a karmic power of nature driven with the relentlessness of mythic inevitability that aims to restore the balance of the soul of Florida, *Swamplandia!* is a more localized narrative with a smaller scope that explores the perils of supernatural belief as a dangerous delusion while family folklore figures as a restorative to a violated identity. Russell depicts how an adolescent girl's search for closure over the death of her mother exposes her to deceptive manipulation of her magical beliefs, resulting in her being raped in the Everglades because of her longing for a spiritual connection with the maternal to be materialized in the flesh.

The Bigtree family of *Swamplandia!* live together on a small island where they run an alligator theme park, though it is a tiny operation, not some extravagant commercial venture:

The title of the novel includes the emphatic exclamation point, Russell says, because it fits the high spirits of the novel. The Bigtree family members have created their own fantastical history springing from their alligator-wrestling tradition, but in reality, they're just the lowly operators of a shabby tourist attraction in a swamp. Including the

exclamation point hints at the manufactured enthusiasm to be found in such a place.¹⁵

They are not native Floridians, but transplants from Ohio: grandma and grandpa Schedrach came down to Florida years ago, changing their name to Bigtree and setting up the homestead that Ava, her older sister Ossie, and her older brother, Kiwi, call home. After the death of Hilola Bigtree, the star alligator-wrestler of Swamplandia, the fortunes of the family operation take a serious downturn. While Kiwi leaves his family temporarily to go make a living from their arch-enemy, the World of Darkness, Ava and her sister Ossie mourn the death of their mother through unconscious and non-traditional means. Ossie, named after the Seminole leader Osceola, who was captured by American forces through trickery, becomes obsessed with Spiritist practices and believes she has a ghost lover, Louis, who allegedly resides on an old rusty ship that the girls discover one day. Ava reluctantly indulges in her sister's obsession with the ghost of Louis and when Ossie goes missing one day, she sets out to find her sister before Ossie gets lost forever in the depths of the Everglades.

The obsession Ossie develops for the alleged spirit lover of Louis is reminiscent of cases of "erotomania" and "sleep paralysis" collected by folklorist David J. Hufford (1989, 149, 161). Ossie has been isolated in her life on the island: she would like to have a boyfriend but is unable to meet boys due to the marginal life of the Bigtree family. The tension she experiences approximates the psychological dynamics tied to the experiential-perspectives of the spirit-assault

cases. In 1965, psychiatrist Stephen B. Payn presented the case of a woman, whose SP [sleep paralysis] he considered to be “an extreme form of inhibition, representing a compromise between fulfillment of her sexual and hostile impulses and a defense against them” (Hufford 1989, 160).

The most obvious form of repression that Ossie faces is the sheer absence of suitors in her lonely location. The mystical belief in a ghostly lover that has wooed Ossie away even convinces Ava once her sister has disappeared on an old barge, heading apparently somewhere deep in the Everglades with her phantom. The isolation of the Bigtree family fosters Ava’s belief in ghosts: “it was easier for me to imagine a secret wind unbending the pins of an engine than any tanned and red-blooded helper, some local boy or fisherman fixing up the dredge and piloting her away” (149). When she disappears on a trip, Ava determines to find her, pursuing her along with an itinerant Bird Man who shows up as a seemingly providential figure at *Swamplandia!* when her father and brother are away trying to make money for the failing theme park. Bird Man agrees to escort Ava to the “underworld,” which Ava believes her sister is heading towards in order to consummate her relationship with the ghostly Louis.

Just as Dorsey plays with the narrative frame of *Triggerfish Twist* and distances the reader with his use of farce, Russell similarly employs rhetorical gestures to chip away at normative expectations of realism in *Swamplandia!*. In *Swamplandia!*, the gaps in the discourse between Bird Man and Ava comprise a form of nonsense, which according to Susan Stewart “results from a radical shift towards

the metaphoric pole accompanied by a decontextualization of the utterance” (1980, 35), and she notes the “way to ‘kill’ a metaphor is to interpret it literally” (34). Ossie and Ava both interpret the underworld literally as a supernatural space while Bird Man uses his comprehension of Ava’s literalization of the underworld as a way to deceive and seduce her. Much like Clapley’s manipulation of his two would-be barbies who seek paradise in Florida, Bird Man, a diabolical trickster rather than an angelic helper, exploits Ava’s desire for reunion with her sister and mother by leading her deep into the Everglades where he rapes her.¹⁶

Ava’s eventual rape by Bird Man is an unraveling of a precarious game of interplay between metaphorical and concrete rhetoric, and this unraveling produces fantastic results in terms of a 180 degree shift of her relationship with Bird Man, not her guide, protector, and friend but her kidnapper, predator, and rapist.¹⁷ Thus rather than a statement of shared belief, Bird Man’s comments about the underworld progress from a superficial sarcasm to an aggressive and more deceptive irony:

The Bird Man got a funny smile on his face. “Right. The underworld.”

“Stop that,” I said angrily, surprising myself again. “What I’m telling you is real.”

[...] he ground a pale fleck of butter into a piece of burned toast and smiled sadly at me. Belief didn’t come up.

“Oh, I know it is, Ava. I know it’s real. It’s just that your sister is pretty young to make that trip.”

Then the Bird Man sipped cold coffee and told me that there was a real underworld.

“This whole swamp is haunted, kid.” (150)

Ava’s rhetorical conflict with Bird Man is reminiscent of traditional Scottish wit-word battles, which were struggles for linguistic supremacy. The Reverend Alexander Stewart describes wit-word battles in his early-nineteenth-century folklore collection, *Twixt Ben Nevis and Glencoe: The Natural History, Legends, and Folk-Lore of the West Highlands*: “wit-word” combats [were] a sort of epigrammatical *duello*, in which the people at large took a lively interest, the charge and countercharge, the attack and repartee [...]” (A. Stewart 2006 [1833], 215). Ava does not perceive the metaphorical level of the conversation, so she is an unarmed combatant in her wit-battle with Bird Man; she is literal-minded in her credulity while he reframes her naive questions within metaphorical paradigms of verbal irony, poses rhetorical questions, or engages in outright deceit:

“You promise it’s a real place, Bird Man?”

“What a question. Do I promise that hell is a real place?” He chuckled at me, as if to reassure me, but his eyes were bright and cold as snow banked in the valley under his hat. “Hell’s real, all right. We can be there tomorrow, or Wednesday, at the latest. So long as you want to go.” (159)

Ava believes and accepts Bird Man’s offer to literally guide her to hell.

Little does Ava know that the hell will be of Bird Man's own fashioning, not a concrete passage to an otherworld that lurks in the swamps. There is a sinkhole in North Central Florida referred to in some local legends as the "Devil's Milhopper" and "a gateway to hell" (Carlson 2005, 12-13). There are also number of limestone caves in Florida—and even a legend of a Spaniard emerging from a cave "like Rip Van Winkle, claiming that he had been asleep in the cave for many years"—but there is little traditional basis for Ava's belief in the Florida underworld or an Everglades entrance beyond Ossie's memorate: the "Dredgeman's Revelation" of his death (Cox 2007, 41). When Ossie insists that the Underworld is a real place accessed through "the Eye of the Needle passageway [...] a gray channel cut between two twenty-acre islands made entirely of shells" she asserts the primacy of her Spiritist interactions with the Ouija board above regional and family traditions:

"The Chief doesn't know a thing about this passage to the underworld," said Ossie. "Nobody living does, except for me, and I only know because Louis told me on the Ouija board." (119)

Ossie's memorate ("defined as a personal story about a supranormal experience told by either the individual or a third person quoting him or her") about Louis and the underworld is also a personal experience narrative because the narrative expresses her emerging identity (see Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1988, 19). As Ossie shares this revelation with Ava about the location of the underworld, asserts her status as a vessel of esoteric knowledge. She wants her sister, Ava, to validate her experience as someone who has authority and perspective, which is part of the "function of the

personal narrative [...] to allow for the discovery of the teller's identity (especially in terms of values and character traits) and to maintain the stability of that identity for both the teller and listener" (Dolby 2008, 27). Ava reluctantly participates in this shared belief, but Ossie recluses herself further and further in her performative involvement with her Spiritist obsession. "Go already, please? Ava, he's waiting on me" (128), which is antithetical to the standard dynamics of sharing personal experience narratives which through "the interplay of this shared culture and the unique event that allows intimacy to grow" (Dolby 2008, 50).

Ava is eventually shut out from the sharing of Ossie's experiences involving Louis. Although Ossie's stated belief to Ava concerning the authenticity of Louis is indeed a personal experience narrative, the narrative and preoccupation with Louis that begins to define Ossie is an isolating vision rather than a narrative performance that connects Ossie with communal traditions. Folklorist Simon Bronner asserts that the "central problem of tradition is explaining the ways that people rely on one another, with reference to precedent, for their wisdom, their expression, their identity" (1998, 9), but Ossie's belief is without precedent in her community, so she is divorced from traditional support.

A further challenge to either Ava or Ossie identifying with their family traditions for support is the ersatz aspect of those traditions, which are closer to fakelore than folklore. Their assumed Native American personae for promoting their family theme park has no connection to their family's genetic lineage:

My family, the Bigtree tribe of the Ten Thousand Islands, once lived on a hundred-acre island off the coast of southwest Florida, on the gulf side of the Great Swamp. [...] Although there was not a drop of Seminole or Miccosukee blood in us, the Chief always costumed us in tribal apparel for the photographs he took. He said we were ‘our own Indians.’” (5)

And yet the family does have its traditions, its legendary homesteading by the grandparents from Ohio (“According to Bigtree legend, it was that same day that Grandma Risa got her first-ever glimpse of a Florida alligator [...] she later swore that as soon as they locked eyes, they *recognized* each other” (24), and its heroic alligator wrestlers, but these traditions are subordinated to commercialism: “‘Tradition is as important, kids,’ Chief Bigtree liked to say, ‘as promotional materials are expensive’” (5). Furthermore, the Bigtree education that Ava receives is incomplete; more emphasis is put on her participation in promotion than survival—she lacks the practical survival knowledge about living out in the wild, as she realizes when she is alone in the Everglades, pursued by her kidnapper: “You might be surprised to learn that I didn’t know how to use a flare or start a fire. I’d lived in the swamp my whole life and I had no idea about the Essential Next Steps [...] Grandma Risa, my mother, Grandpa, Sawtooth, the Chief, any one of them would be halfway home by now” (267). Despite her father’s contrived and mercantile approach to traditions, Ava’s consciousness indicates the intensity of pride and cohesion of this small world of Bigtrees; she often refers to “we Bigtrees” and

proclaims herself a “Bigtree wrestler” in the opening sentence of her application letter to the Kentucky derby, an alligator-wrestling national championship (45, 49). Ava reveres her dead mother, and—implicitly in her mind— the prodigious skill of her mother, Hilola Bigtree, served to validate the Bigtrees pretensions to count themselves among Native American tribes: “to beat the Seminole wrestlers, to show the Miccosukee alligator handlers what were Bigtrees were made of” (42).

Despite the promotional nature of their traditions, the Bigtrees comprise a folk group. The shared identity of the family equates to a “*consciousness of kind*” which is fundamental to the identity of a folk group (Oring 1986, 25). Charles Frederick observes that families contain “a vast repository of knowledge” and that the majority of that material is “unrecorded and passed on informally” and includes “various items that serve to provide the family with a singular sense of identity” (1990, 171). In the case of the Bigtrees, Chief Bigtree has a literal receptacle of family lore; he has even constructed a “Bigtree Family Museum” to display what Ava irreverently refers to as “all kinds of crap from our house that the Chief had relabeled as BIGTREE ARTIFACTS” (23). Despite such an ostentatious “repository of knowledge” the lack of respect from Ava for this museum indicates that the Bigtrees are a folk group fraught with ambivalence and a sense of fragility, for their greatest claim to tradition—the legendary exploits of Hilola Bigtree—are vanishing into memory, and the tourists are disappearing accordingly. Hilola’s famed performances were the great “promotional materials” of the Bigtrees.

Unable to duplicate her mother's successes and mutually grieved by her death, it is no wonder that Ava and her less athletic older sister, Ossie, turn to a more private world to invent their own bonding traditions. Discovering in the Library Boat an old book, *The Spiritist's Telegraph*, the two sisters learn about alleged apparitions and purported methods to contact the spirits of the deceased. Turning to alternative spiritual material, which includes supernatural material, is sometimes associated with a self-perception of marginality: "persons who see themselves as alienated" as well as a "symbolic means by which young people [...] can cope with feelings of their own powerlessness within the society and beyond" (Clark 2003, 222-33).

The socially marginalized and emotionally bereaved Bigtree sisters design their own Ouija board and participate more directly in the world of the spirits, but soon Ossie alters the nature of these practices, and Ava "is not allowed to play anymore" (33). What had at first been a sisterly pattern of arguable folklore-in-the-making had become a private ritual for Ossie alone. Ava is left with dread about the *Spiritist's Telegraph* and her resulting "superstitions" are also her private affair: "If accidentally I glimpsed one of the ink drawings of the Victorian Spiritists [...] I had to knock twice on something real to ease a bad feeling inside of me. [...] wood, food, the wavy black soap dish with melted pink soap flakes, even Toaky, our house gecko" (350). The ongoing mental and emotional negotiation between private anxieties and beliefs constitutes much of the novel's exploration of how conscious and unconscious perspectives about what defines reality ultimately defines identity.

Alienated in her own beliefs, Ossie's decision to take the barge deep into the swamp to go with her ghostly boyfriend to the underworld is "acting out" in more ways than one: she is not only enmeshed in "erotomania" but is a troubled adolescent grieving unconsciously for her dead mother, and she is physically trying to validate her belief in her own memorate about the ghostly Louis. In other words, Ossie is performing *ostension*, which is defined by Bill Ellis as "the literal acting out of a legend" (2001, 162). Bird Man's duplicitous charade of promising to take Ava to the underworld is a literary approximation of *pseudo-ostension*: "a hoax in which the participant produces evidence that the legend has been enacted" (Ellis 2001, 162). After Ava's disillusionment with Bird Man, she realizes that "the underworld had been a big hoax" (271). Russell's literary simulation of varieties of ostension helps to emphasize the tensions of belief that comprise identity and are especially significant in this novel of maturation, which highlights the ways in which adolescents must define themselves in relation to their community and their past.

Ava's unresolved grief for her dead mother and anxiety for her missing sister makes her consistently vulnerable to the magical thinking that Ossie's spiritism promised—of a transcendent life of souls that can commune with earthly beings—and Bird Man's recognition of her susceptibility to magical beliefs dooms her to victimization via manipulation. Part of the challenge that Ava faces is that the deceitful guide Bird Man embodies the archetypal trickster-figure more than a longed-for fairy tale helper, and his appearance resonates with the bizarre quality a trickster often has in narrative and performative traditions: "The mental aberration

attributed to both the fool and the trickster is often mirrored in his appearance, his bizarre attire of grotesque deformity immediately setting him apart from his fellow man” (Towsen 1976, 5). The strange “collar of feathers” that Bird Man wears as a jacket at first suggests an almost animal kinship to his character, which makes him fantastical (192).

The suggestion of Bird Man’s animal aspect further implies his typological identity is that of a trickster: “In many cultures the trickster spirit is incarnated in an animal—such as the sly fox of European folk tales or the cunning coyote-clown of the California Indians” (Towsen 1976, 5). But if he is a trickster, he is a demonic one in his predation upon Ava’s beliefs and body. His choice to return to so-called hell, “‘I didn’t plan to make this trip again, you know,’ he said softly at one point, and not really to me” (160) seems to be his failure to resist recidivism, victimizing—probably not for the first time—a young confused girl, and when Ava perceives his deception her judgment pierces the veil of his costume and his word-weaving about hell:

The coat was just a rag, I realized. My heart froze. A crazy person’s disguise.

“You were lying to me,” I said dully. “There isn’t such thing as the underworld, is there? This is just the ordinary swamp.” (246)

Before Ava’s realization of Bird Man’s duplicity, she follows along in his charade, assuming the position of a folk tale heroine guided by some mysterious helper, and she views him in with the hope that he is a friendly guide; she holds his hand and

fantasizes about him, not as a lover, but as a parent surrogate: “I had childish fantasies about this man: I wanted to hold his hand in the woods again. I wanted to put my ear on his chest, something I used to do with Mom” (134). Yet, both the character of Bird Man and the narrative’s components periodically critique Ava’s assumptions about the adventure she believes she’s embarked upon, traveling to a magical place where the dead may commune with the living.

Even the chant the Bird Man does when pretending he actually has powers to influence the birds plays with expectations of magic that he assumes Ava has about his abilities as a charmer of animals through music. However, the narrative itself subverts those expectations and teases the reader with the quintessential conjunction of episodic tales—“and”—that constitutes the only word Bird Man sings to supposedly control the birds: “And and and and...” The Bird Man told me that he was singing a transition song” (161). Instead of some marvelous magical secret call it turns out the “transition song” is mundane, though Ava herself is still charmed by it: “After a while the song wasn’t a language anymore but a note like a skipped stone—a melodic conjunction” (161). Is this a metafictional gesture purposely calling attention to the fundamental building block of a coordinate conjunction? The use of this word “and” emphasizes the linguistic dimensions of the fantastic that permeate the novel and reminds the reader not to commit to a stable worldview but to puzzle on with uncertainty about what happens next in the narrative.

The darkest deception by Bird Man is how Ava's gestures towards friendship with him and her fantasies of him as both a parental surrogate and romanticized lover are steps enabling him in his own pedophilic pilgrimage:

On the walk back I took this Bird Man's hand in my own without looking up at his face and was shocked and pleased when he didn't release me. *Now we are friends*, I thought hopefully as we slid sideways over the mucksoils. (130)

Rather than finding some otherworldly transcendence or a vicarious parental figure, what Ava finds is bitter disillusionment after the uncertainty of her beliefs about the underworld. The Bird Man encourages Ava's credulity to exploit her belief in himself as a mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead. In fact, he is a marginal figure of a different sort: a sexual predator who lives off the grid.

Just as in *Sick Puppy* and *Triggerfish Twist*, there is a continuum exploring the range of subjective responses to the challenges of life that might categorize us as sane or insane, similarly the continuum of belief in *Swamplandia!* interrogates whether madness is incremental or total and is it merely a matter of accepting fantasy, and whether conventional fantasies, such as mainstream religion are sane, and unconventional beliefs are insane. To build support for Osceola's character we get Ava's insistence that Ossie is far from flighty:

Even in her trances, even while possessed, my sister was very shrewd about her prospects. A fantasy would collapse like a wave against the rocks of her intelligence. Madness, as I understood it from books,

meant a person who was open to the high white whine of *everything*.

(157)

Yet, despite Ossie's apparent shrewdness in some respects, when Ava and Ossie's brother, Kiwi, finally rescues Ossie, he learns that she was going to marry Louis, the ghost, by hanging herself. We learn further that after her restoration to the real world away from the heart of the Everglades, Ossie's "'powers' did not interest her anymore, because she was drugged" (315).

Recovering Identity: Folkloric Improvisation as a Remedy for Violation

Turning to folklore after her rape and flight through the swamps, Ava exemplifies one of the functions of traditional material to supply models of behavior that can offer support in times of extremity. Ava succeeds in her escape partly because she clings to a heroic version of the feminine (embodied in the legendary exploits of her mother) that she can emulate despite being in the fallen condition of a young girl kidnapped and raped by a stranger. The dynamic of Ava's reliance on traditional precedents is analogous to what Cristina Bacchilega (1995) explains about how folklore operates to complicate a young woman's identity in Dacia Maraini's novel *La lunga vita di Marianna*. Like Ava, Mariana is raped; in fact, she is silenced by her abuse: "Marianna became deaf and mute as a result of her uncle raping her when she was five" (Bacchilega 1995, 90). Through hearing a range of folklore over her life she approaches an identity that inspires her with the courage to psychologically resist her oppression, although many of the elements in the folklore she encounters are misogynistic: "When her husband-uncle Pietor first

exercises his marital 'rights' by raping her one morning in her sleep, the thirteen-year-old girl returns to her family home where mother and aunts assault her in turn with the many proverbs they write to her [...] 'Marry for love and end up in pain' [...]”(Bacchilega 1995, 92). Mariana does not achieve full liberation, but the hybridity of self that recognizes the possibility of subverting masculine; for example, Mariana hears competing versions of her husband's legendary family histories: these variants serve to diminish the status of her husband's authority (1995, 95). A striking assertion of autonomous imagination is when Marianna imagines “small wings growing on the side of her ankles”—suggesting that the imagery of chimerical monstrosity that used to be solely a negative concept (in “her mother's cautionary tales [...] chimera-like dogs [...] would chase [her]”) has shifted through her transformative vision towards an empowering image of freedom (97). Bacchilega concludes that “Dacia Marianna's deliberate narrative strategies engage her readers in the contradictory and multiple play of 'voice,' staged both as 'writing' and as challenge to the forked tongue of the patriarchal speaker” (98).

Ava learns to retell the story of her life and her family in ways that sustain and transform her identity. In contrast to the patriarchal oppression of Mariana through much of her family and husband's folklore, Ava's family folklore is chiefly matriarchal, and her veneration of her dead mother's legendary exploits as an alligator-wrestler serve a more practical turn than Mariana's acculturation: Ava learns how to evade her rapist by her employment of traditional alligator wrestling

techniques against an actual alligator: thus, she triumphs over the attacks on her body.

In her most desperate hours in the wilderness, despite the questionable traditions of her family, Ava is finally able to turn to her family folklore for support, and it is during these moments of crisis that the personal experience narrative that Ossie had told her about Louis becomes a tool for sustaining her will that she employs through self-narration: “I was just myself telling myself a story. But I wouldn’t have made it very far without the Dredgeman’s Revelation, which distracted me from the pain of sunburn and thirst” (293). Significantly, Ava produces a variant about the trials Louis faced as a human, a resiliently masculine and young figure, who survives rather than perishes: “I must have recited the Dredgeman’s Revelation at least a hundred times forward and backward. I added a new ending: in my version, the Dredgeman escaped, and lived” (293). Integrating these masculine and feminine models of survival—Louis the Dredgeman and Hilola Bigtree the National Alligator-Wrestling Champion—is essentially Ava achieving individuation, synthesizing her animus and anima into a unified whole, at least for this moment of truth.

Inscribing her own optimistic ending on the tale of Louis reveals the power of Ava’s resilient personality. She will pass the test of the lethal liminality of the swamp, propelled by her own wings of will (rather than ankle-wings like Marianna) in her hybrid stories. She completes her escape from Bird Man, who has tracked her down, by diving into an alligator hole where he would not dare to follow. When she

is caught by a live alligator, she evades its clenched jaws around her lower leg by using the alligator-wrestling training taught by her mother: “There is a way to still your body and then slingshot forward in a surprise frog-legged stroke, a Bigtree escape maneuver” (305). Soon after this defeat of a watery and scaly death, Ava is then discovered by rangers. Ava’s use of family folklore as a psychological resource in her successful escape demonstrates how tradition-bearing people can draw upon stories and beliefs to simultaneously solve real-life problems and strengthen the bonds connecting their individual identity with communal identity (See Georges and Jones 1995, 269).

Sunk in the Swamp: Fractured Fairy Tale Patterns

Not only does Russell violently disillusion her protagonist, Ava, but she also subverts the readers’ expectations for a fantasy novel that she had suggested through the epigraph to the novel from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) as well as the repeated indications that the Spiritism of Ossie might indeed be real. Just as I read through *Triggerfish Twist*, speculating when Serge would reveal himself to be a folklorist, I wondered if finally Ava would enter her otherworld in the literal sense she longed for. Unlike Carroll’s work, Russell does not offer a “wonderland” or a land beyond the looking glass, nor does she provide the reader in Ava the center of sense that Carroll did with Alice who manifested “a sense of the reliability of good sense [...] in a world that seemed [...] at times to be grotesquely deranged and untrustworthy, indeed insane” (Holbrook 2001, 136). The result of Russell’s hints through epigraphs and adventurous episodes that Ava is on

a fantastic adventure is a suggestive fairy tale frame that is an inversion of conventional Märchen expectations.

Ultimately a guide to her own personal hell, rather than a chaperone across the underworld to her departed mother and wayward sister, the Bird Man's rape of Ava brings her to the point of zero, resetting her perceptive base to where nonsense and sense are equally empty of significance to her, but her sense of identity, built upon Socratic and Cartesian affirmation, begins anew with the feeling of pain and the memory of her recent rape:

I knew now that I didn't know anything. Those nights with the ghosts belonged to my sister so completely that I couldn't guess at them, I realized, the way that this thing was going to be mine. (263)

Rather than the supernatural wisdom that the loosely mythic motifs of the narrative suggested Ava would achieve, her revelation through violence dissolves her worldview and isolates her.

Despite this disillusioning enlightenment, and the apparent dismantling of the fairy tale structure of helpers and archetypal principles, Ava maintains at least one fantastical fairy tale helper: the red-colored young alligator that she has kept secret and nourished on her own, even during this trip in the Everglades with the deceitful Bird Man. In a combination of the internalized voice of her mother, which manifests the dawning awareness of danger of this man that had been growing in her during their trip and her own physical reflexes, Ava rebels:

The Bird Man has no idea where he's taking you, and if he does, well that's much worse, and you won't find your sister anywhere near here, Ava, and I would run, honey, personally...

What I did next was all instinct, as if my muscles were staging a coup: I felt a movement in my breast pocket, the red Seth clawing against the cotton ticking; I pulled her out and untapped her small jaws and flung her at him in one fluid motion. (265)

After her earlier physical compliance with the rape, this sudden eruption of action from Ava's simultaneous gnosis of intuition and kinesis startles the Bird Man and gives Ava the time to flee.

Although Ava relies on family traditions, her path to maturity is not consistent with the folkloric and mythic patterns of successful quests. The birth-image of the alligator hole and the internalized voice of the mother may herald Ava as a heroine on her way to maturity, but the experience repudiates the supernatural in favor of the psychological. Her development as a heroine is distinctly decoupled from the expected structure of traditional fairy tales and isolated from the embedded legendary elements that repeatedly surface in the progress of the text.

A quick review of Danish folklorist Bengt Holbek's synthesis (using Vladimir Propp's structural terms) of fairy tale patterns emphasizes what a striking inversion Ava experiences in her adventure narrative of maturation, for she achieves neither a marriage, nor wealth, nor meaningful independence: "In the initial situation (Pf1), which he [Propp] has given the signum a, the hero(ine) is dependent, often abused

or ridiculed, poor, unrecognized, deprived of friendship and love; in the final situation, the wedding (Pf 31), which we may correspondingly give the signum w, the hero(ine) is independent of parental authority, fully recognized, rich and powerful and has found a spouse” (Holbek 1987, 410).

Like the shock of the dissolution of Swamplandia, the uncanny sudden encounter with Mama Weeds—a large self-reliant woman known to be a witch living out in the Everglades—is a fragmentation of Ava’s identity. Finding herself at the doorstep of this supposed witch or ogre is an experience that explodes Ava’s disillusioned skepticism about Everglades folklore, unleashes the repressed denial about her dead mother and lost sister, and confounds her judgment. When Ava discovers a clothes line by a ramshackle house in the swamp, Ava moves from disbelief in the legend to certainty that the swamp bogeyman has stolen not only her sister’s skirt but the jacket of the ghostly Louis and the dress of her departed mother. It is as though the competing aspects of her current identity—*anxiety about her sister’s whereabouts, uncertainty about the existence of the spirit world, and unresolved denial about her mother’s death*—are manifested by her attachment to these articles of clothing:

There is a legend in our swamp about a lady, a laundress—or a ghost, or a female monster—named Mama Weeds. She was like an island bogeyman. Her story predated us. [...] Personally, I had always considered the story of Ma Weeds a little silly. [...]

I nearly jumped out of my skin; I saw a jacket that I recognized. [...] the last time I saw this garment, Osceola had been wearing it in our kitchen. [...] and I saw that Ossie's favorite skirt was hanging one line over. [...]

I was pulling Ossie's skirt from the line when a woman appeared around the side of the house. [...]

She was huge—not fat so much as absolutely solid. [...] She was wearing a dress that looked ready to burst off her [...]. My mother used to wear a dress like that, with a very similar look. No, I thought with a slow and brain-penetrating chill, she used to wear this dress. I was certain now that I was staring at Mama Weeds. (289)

According to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic models of fairy tales' structural patterns, Bird Man should have been her helper rather than her antagonist, perhaps even her "prince," and the figure of Mama Weeds as her wise mentor, but this hag figure is relegated to the brief encounter in the Everglades rather than having any substantial role to play either as a proxy mother-figure or an ogrish doppelegänger for the shadow memory of the maternal. Alone and still lost, Ava was in need of a protective figure to guide her, but instead she finds herself at odds with this enormous female hermit. Like Skink's striking appearance in Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy*, the sheer sight of Mama Weeds carries an aura of uncanny significance. Mama Weeds vaguely evokes legends of the Scottish Washer at the Ford (who washes the

shirts of the dead) because of this large woman's uncannily situated dwelling with the washing-line of clothes that may be those of the dead.

More regionally, the Florida swamp as a preternatural zone of non-human entities contains giants, including female giants.¹⁸ Furthermore, Mama Weeds physically resembles Florida historical legends of actual people considered giants—or at least relatively large—especially the four big women born in the McLain family, whose exploits are told in the “Four Female Giants” chapter of Annette J. Bruce's *Tellable Cracker Tales* (1996). Two of these sizable sisters take up residence in the Everglades and the description of the Ox Woman's dwelling is a notable antecedent to Mama Weeds's hut:

We don't know the exact route the Ox Woman took, but with only her hounds and oxen, she crossed the Everglades. [...] The Ox Woman found her sister Hannah, or Big Six. She was earning a living cutting buttonwood for the making of charcoal. She could cut more wood than any man. Ox woman [...] near a canoe landing used by pre-Columbian Indians, the big woman built herself a palmetto shack. (Bruce 1996, 62-63)

The circulation of tales about these big women in the Everglades provides a traditional depth to the figure of Mama Weeds because the larger matrix of storytelling in Florida serves to frame the literary works that follow.

Ava struggles to take not only “Osceola and Louis's clothing” but tries to “wrench the dress off her” and demands her to “give me back my mother” (290).

Forced to flee, the hermit calls after her “You need help! Girl, get back here!” (291). However, there is no help here for Ava, and she will not recognize the possibility that this woman is a helper and not a monster.

Ava does not inhabit the positively serendipitous world of the wonder tale or Märchen where “the hero practically always ends up making the right choice” which “certainly serves to reinforce and to reassert the optimistic outlook of the genre” (Neeman 1999, 47). Instead she remains lost until an implausibility of another kind delivers her and her family: the proverbial cavalry. Instead of a prince—Ava has no romantic match—her brother arrives in a plane, spotting their sister Ossie waving from her own isolation in the swamp, and then together they encounter the search party of rangers who have located Ava. Kiwi has learned to fly in his quest to rescue the family from economic ruin. Neither brother nor sister is successful in that aspect of their journeys; they become reunited, but their island home is doomed to fail: another casualty to more powerful corporate forces that rule the peninsula.

If there is any consolation in *Swamplandia!*, it is Ava’s connection to her family and especially her realization that the perspective of her mother lives on in her own consciousness, not by any supernaturalism, but through the natural processes of psychological internalization and creative memory. Despite the combined efforts of their family, *Swamplandia!*, we learn from Ava as she reflects from a more advanced position in life, is no more except in the shared identities of the family: “the show really must go on. Our Seths [the Bigtree term for alligators] are still thrashing inside us in an endless loop” (315).

The Show Goes Endlessly On: Florida's Perpetual Carnival of the Absurd

Ava's rhetoric is clearly metaphorical now, perhaps having been wounded for her earlier insistence on the literal, she progresses redemptively through her transcendent rhetoric. To imagine her ideas as literal is clearly absurd, an impossible challenge to reason as defined within a context of normalcy. The idea of the interior perpetual loop serves to describe the representations of Florida by Dorsey's *Triggerfish Twist*, Hiaasen's *Sick Puppy*, and Russell's *Swamplandia!*. Each writer includes fantastic, farcical, folkloric, and absurd elements that emphasize some features of Floridian culture while minimizing or distorting others, but the funhouse reflections infinitely regress into endless carnivalesque performances absent of any stable reference point. Each narrative relies upon a stereotyped Florida that functions as a joke about theme parks, criminals, druggies, developers, obscure wildlife, senior citizens, and crazies that characterize so much of Florida's public perception. One must learn to expect the perpetual nonsense and excess that characterizes the discourse of Florida's conflicted culture. It's a place that creatively reinvents the margins of normalcy to contain and privilege deviancy—absurd but vital.

Like the centrifugal force of a washing machine, these novels with their Floridian powers of chaotic attraction and disintegration serve to disassemble and reassemble generic elements of narrative folklore, from legend to tall tales, but in a state of simulacra where simulated folklore, fakelore, and folklore swirl together in a froth of ambiguous suggestibility. In *Triggerfish Twist*, Tim Dorsey offers a violent

parody of Tampa, which lacks differentiation from the popular conception of Tampa as the weirdest city in Florida, the state defined by the bizarre. Carl Hiassen's *Sick Puppy*, while portraying heroic perspectives on radical environmentalists who seek to punish corrupt real-estate developers, falls into stereotypes that may alienate as many open readers as convert would-be fellow travelers. Perhaps only Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* dramatizes a meaningful assertion of identity where improvisations of family folklore help to sustain a young woman through a brutal crisis, but once again, the narrative partly relies upon a theme-parked façade of Florida, and the contrived heritage of the Bigtrees entails that Ava has a fractured identity that does not hold up to close scrutiny.

Episodically, all three of the novels rely upon the arbitrarily deviant psychologies of criminal and adolescent characters whose caprice serves as an expedient for each author to stage a plot of cumulative nonsensical and farcical absurdity. Logical plausibility is sacrificed to fantastic subjectivity to present a cast of Floridians who refigure what is a state of normalcy. Each narrative erodes the boundaries between criminal deviant and ordinary Floridian. Center and margins blur in a configuration of reordered disorder in the psyche of the reader who via the farcically comical revelations of character in the absurd predicaments in each plot must finally acknowledge, "the weird Florida? It's us." And there is no escape out in the margins, whether swamps or suburbs, and even if you break the mirror—distorting the truth in a thousand fractures—the funhouse reflection remains. Florida, the trickster state, keeps on grinning.

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Notes

¹ More strictly defined, Florida's frontier period ended around 1860: "Florida has experienced five frontiers since 1492. [...] The last, the American Frontier that opened in 1821 when the United States annexed the area of the present state of Florida, closed in 1860 when the federal range and township surveys reached the edges of the Everglades. [...] frontier conditions continued to exist after 1860 in isolated areas [...]." See Hoffmann (2002, 1).

² Florida crackers were pioneers who came to the southern frontier in the 18-19th centuries, generally assumed to be of Celtic heritage who became known for their self-reliant skills of living off the land and especially their cattle herding proficiency. Although the name is often diluted and reduced as an epithet to refer to a either a poor white person or native white inhabitant of a Southern state, the word "cracker" itself has a rich and debated etymology; "cracker" is thought to be both a synonym for "braggart" and also tied to the "crack" of the cattle-whip. Florida crackers' outdoor survival skills became the stuff of legend, and their contribution to Florida traditions remains an essential part of understanding the state. See St. Claire (1997, 2006), as well as the websites: <http://www.crackercountry.org/> and http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~fcc/main/what's_a_cracker.htm.

³ See U. S. Census Bureau (2011a, b).

⁴ "Police Capture 'Dougherty Gang' in Colorado." *BBC News US & Canada* (October 11, 2011). <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-14481198>. Accessed 31 October 2011.

⁵ "Fla. Officials Going on a Giant African Snail Hunt." *CBS Miami* (September 30, 2011). <http://miami.cbslocal.com/2011/09/30/fla-officials-going-on-a-giant-african-snail-hunt/>. Accessed 31 October 2011.

⁶ Casey Glynn, "Fla. Murder Suspect Claims She's Part Vampire, Part Werewolf." *CBS News* (September 28, 2011). http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20112703-504083.html. Accessed 31 October 2011.

⁷ By February 2012, Florida was already shaping up to be at least as peculiar and violent as recent years: Florida residents in Brevard county were sharing pictures of a sizable Burmese python slithering along the road; a burglar clad only in his underwear was making the rounds (Edwards 2012); an elderly couple drowned mysteriously together in a hot tub; a Palm Beach robber wore a Barack Obama mask as he held up a McDonalds (Rolden 2012a); a teenager stabbed his grandmother one-hundred times and—for good measure—hit her with a wrench and shot her with a crossbow (Bizarre Florida 2012); a naked man walked out of a Jacksonville hotel and told police he was "taking a bath,"; a woman threw her girlfriend's hamster to its death three-floors below (Rolden 2012b); a nicotine addict called 911 to complain about being out of cigarettes ("Woman arrested..." 2012); and "the person accused of helping inject concoctions of 'Fix-a-Flat' and Super Glue into women's derrieres was attacked during a taping of a talk show by an audience member" (Moscovitz 2012).

⁸ The national perspective on Florida as a crime-ridden fallen paradise is perhaps the inevitable result of the idealization of Florida by writers from Emerson to Hemingway that dominated the nineteenth and early-twentieth century and which Anne E. Rowe describes, "for the American imagination [Florida was] not merely a geographical region but an image, a garden, Eden-like [...]" (Rowe 1986, 4). In fact, E. E. Calloway, a resident of Bristol Florida, insisted that the Biblical Garden of Eden was situated on "Florida's Apalachicola River. For Callaway, this theory was not just a flight of fancy. The Apalachicola is fed by four primary tributaries or 'heads,' exactly like the river described in the Book of Genesis" (Cox 1987, 26).

⁹ Quoted from "Hiaasen, Carl 1953-" (1995, 199).

¹⁰ See <http://wiki.lovelinefan.com/index.php?n=Main.GermanyOrFlorida>. Accessed 22 February 2012.

¹¹ Allison Ford (2012) offers four theories about the major influences that explain why Florida is so weird: the impact of the climate and landscape, the social demographics, the media's treatment of the region, and the deregulation.

¹² One tale type that tends to feature clever barterers is Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale-type 1535, *The Rich and the Poor Peasant*, where the poor peasant prevails by obtaining items of value by claiming the worthless ones he has attained are either magical or coveted for sale in another town or locale. A couple related motifs are K119, "Sale of other pseudomagic objects," and K148, "Cheaters sell each other valueless article."

¹³ Julie Sloan Brannon observes of Hiaasen that like Charles Willeford, he uses “the grotesque as a commentary on amorality” and that both “paint South Florida as a bizarre place that operates under rules different from ‘normal society’” (Brannon 1997, 48, 63).

¹⁴ Karen Russell’s novel *Swamplandia!* did not escape the bizarre web of Floridian absurdity despite its entry into the Pulitzer Prize contest, where it managed to enter the top tier of three: “For the first time in 35 years, the Pulitzer committee did not name a winner in the fiction category.” See http://blogs.miaminewtimes.com/cultist/2012/04/swamplandia_author_karen_russe.php. Accessed 30 April 2012.

¹⁵ See <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/09/133590900/wrestling-gators-and-language-in-swamplandia>. Accessed 15 February 2012.

¹⁶ This deceptive act of sexual aggression is in fact compatible with the traditional trickster motifs. Esther Clinton observes in her discussion of the trickster that the canonical *Motif Index* often “inadequately described” the sexual explicitness of the trickster’s actions, such as Motif T292.4.3, “In darkness of night, Trickster, instead of her chosen, lover elopes with girl.” Garry and El-Shamy clarify that “the term *elope* minimizes the deception and arrogance the Trickster uses to essentially kidnap the girl” (Clinton 2006, 474).

¹⁷ Rabkin (1976) clarifies the fantastic as “when the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make a 180° reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted. This is true, even if the effect lasts only a moment” (12).

¹⁸ See Reaver (1987, 27).

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