“Where the Trails All Cross”: Chronotopes, Cyclic Time and Recycled Mythology in Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*

Mikael Lopez
Bachelor’s Degree Project
Literature
Fall 2013
Supervisor: Bo G. Ekelund
Abstract

Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is an intricately layered novel in which the myths and folktales of the Amerindians of Guyana, as they are represented in Melville’s novel, are engaged in a dialogue with their reality. This narrative/mythical dialogue results in *enactments* and *re-enactments* of the myths and folktales, not only retelling them, but also *recycling* them, resulting in the Amerindians interpreting their myths and folktales nonmetaphorically. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of settings as *chronotopes*, “timespaces” in which time and space are inseparable from each other and from the theme, is used to define the distinct thematic qualities of the three narrative layers in the novel. I label these three chronotopes *unfixed space*, *the juncture*, and *the interior*. The interior is established as the chronotope in which the enactments and reenactments of myths and folktales primarily take place, re/enactments which add yet another layer to the novel. I argue that the reason the chronotope of the interior is the nexus of these myths and folktales is largely because the Amerindians adhere to a concept of time which is *cyclical* rather than *linear*. The enactments and reenactments are then unfolded as intentionally complex and contradictory *threads*, which are then untangled to show how the myths and folktales are recycled in the novel. This untangling reveals how the threads interconnect, and how they can all be traced back to the narrator, the trickster deity Macunaima, suggesting he is as unbound by temporal and spatial limitations as the narrative layer of myths and folktales from which he has emerged.

**Keywords:** Amerindians; myth; chronotope; cyclic time
Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is exactly what its title suggests it is, an intricately layered yarn into which we are ushered by a charismatic narrator, the unreliable trickster deity Macunaima, who “appear[s] to vanish” (9) after the prologue. Instead he assumes the role of ventriloquist in order to tell a colorful yet what initially seems to be a “realist” tale about the Amerindians of Guyana,¹ but the Amerindians’ myths and folktales quickly seep into the narrative, entangling it in mythological *threads*. These threads also hold together the three narrative layers which are contained within the novel, layers which I will later identify as three distinct *chronotopes*, the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of settings as “timespaces” in which time and space are inseparable from each other and the theme.

Bakhtin also stresses that it is important to “never confuse . . . the represented world with the world outside the text” (253), something most readers of well-crafted fiction are doubtlessly tempted to do at times, but it is an admonition which I want to emphasize in this essay. While the subject of this essay might appear to be the Amerindians of Guyana, it is not; rather, it is their fictional counterparts as they are represented by Melville in her novel, or to be even more precise, as they are diegetically represented by an unreliable narrator. It might seem as though I am overstating this detail, but it is important to proceed with caution when writing about peoples who have been, and still are, victims of misrepresentation, “[a] blind spot of the Caribbean . . . and of Caribbean literature more specifically” (Misrahi-Barak 310).

¹ In this essay, “the Amerindians of Guyana” denotes peoples who inhabit the Amazonian region with little regard for national boundaries, which include the *Wapisiana*, the *Macusi* and the *Wai Wai* who are depicted in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*. 
The Ventriloquist’s Tale makes visible these invisible peoples, and is structured like a set of Chinese boxes, or like a matryoshka doll, the Russian wooden dolls-within-dolls, containing a story within a story within a story. In the three narrative layers—one nested within another nested within the frame narrative—the narrator and the characters also tell stories, stories which are essentially myths and folktales, adding another narrative layer to the novel. These myths and folktales are central in Melville’s novel, and she seems to intentionally present us with differing, conflicting versions of them. Myths are also manifested through the characters themselves, in the novel’s supposedly realist narrative, as the characters consciously or unconsciously enact and re-enact their myths and folktales, thereby creating yet another version of the myths. These narrative layers complicate the kind of structural, reductionist study of myth that the novel’s fictionalized version of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michael Wormoal, attempts within the novel itself. This resistance is reified when Wormoal tries to hold a lecture on the “Rational Analysis of Myth,” and the irrational weather gods flood the university, effectively canceling Wormoal’s lecture (308).

To borrow Melville’s own words about Wilson Harris, the nestor of Caribbean literature, The Ventriloquist’s Tale is a particularly “dense nexus of dream, myth [and] archetype” (qtd in Misrahi-Barak 311), a “nexus” in which the lines between perceived dualistic concepts such as reality/dream, history/myth and endogamy/exogamy are unclear or dissolve completely. This is a strategy which is used quite consciously by Melville, who claims that her own appearance can often “cause confusion” because it is “white” although she is of mixed English and Guyanese/Amerindian ancestry. She is clearly less interested in defining her (racial) identity than she is in “breaking down preconceptions, stirring up doubt, rattling judgements, shifting boundaries and unfixing fixities” (“Beyond the Pale” 740). And this is precisely what Melville does in The Ventriloquist’s Tale: she (re)presents the boundary between the reality of the Amerindians and their myths and folktales as illusory, letting the enactments and reenactments initiate a dialogue between the

---

2 Wormoal’s paper is called “The Structural Elements of Myth”, while Lévi-Strauss’ essay is called “The Structural Study of Myth”.
3 Unlike the weather gods, I do find much of Lévi-Strauss’ study of myth useful, and while I do not use it as a definitive guide, I consult it throughout the essay.
4 The question of whether The Ventriloquist’s Tale advocates either endogamy or exogamy—the practice of either marrying within or outside one’s own, in this case, ethnic or social group—has been a topic in several essays and articles (e.g. Braz, Burnett, Deloughrey, Misrahi-Barak, Shemak), but will not be directly addressed in this essay.
narrative layers and the mythical layer. It is through this narrative/mythical dialogue that Melville not only retells Amerindian mythology, but *recycles* it, and it is the scheme and significance of this recycling that I will examine in this essay. I will begin by defining the meaning of *myth* and *folktale* in this essay, after which I will identify the three distinct *chronotopes* in the novel. This is followed by a linkage between the concept of *cyclic time* and the Amerindians’ nonmetaphorical interpretation of their myths and folktales, finally leading to an exploration of how some of these myths and folktales are recycled within the novel.

**Myth**

In the novel’s prologue, Macunaima tells us that his grandmother—the Amerindians by extension—believe that “history [is] only to be trusted when it coincides with myth” (9), and later it is related that they also believe that life is “an illusion behind which lay the unchanging reality of dream and myth” (99, 37). The belief that life is an illusion is a pervasive one in spiritual and religious thought, even becoming a trope of popular culture, and both of these Amerindian beliefs correlate with the notion that what prevents myth from becoming irrelevant is that its structure is *timeless*, that “it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (Lévi-Strauss 209). It would be convenient to say that there was a consensus on how to define myth—what it actually is, what specific purpose it serves—but as Lévi-Strauss notes, there is not:

> Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual, . . . Whatever the hypothesis, the choice amounts to reducing mythology either to idle play or to a crude kind of philosophic speculation. (207)

None of these definitions seem to quite capture the role which myth plays for the Amerindians in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, because they are the definitions of a scholar, an anthropologist, and because none of these definitions allow myths to be much more than fictional, albeit sacred stories, as opposed to comparatively “true”, secular *histories*. The narrator addresses this division between fiction and fact, and extends it to the opposition between oral storytelling and writing, first by letting us know that his grandmother believes “all writing is fiction,” “[e]ven writing that purports to be factual, puts down the date of a man’s birth and the date of his death” (2), and then by addressing it on the final page of the prologue, with feigned pathos:
Sad though it is, in order to tell these tales of love and disaster, I must put away everything fantastical that my nature and the South American continent prescribe . . . [H]ard-nosed, tough-minded realism is what is required these days. Facts are King. . . . Now, alas, fiction has to disguise itself as fact and I must bow to the trend and become a realist. (9)

This “realism” is then continuously undermined by the fact that the novel does incorporate the fantastical and the mythical, bordering on or, arguably, fully embracing magic realism. This is exemplified by a scene from the novel in which a missionary priest, Father Napier, plays the violin for an Amerindian audience who “watc[h] with a sort of horror as, before their eyes, the priest turn[s] into a giant, buzzing, savannah grasshopper” (119), without any textual indication that this Kafkaesque transformation is only figurative.

In the context of this essay, I will narrow down the definition of myths and folktales to stories with the explicit or implicit purpose of explaining nature or the nature of human beings, or a story which retells an event which is considered sacred within a particular culture. Myths treat unchanging “events alleged to have taken place long ago” (Lévi-Strauss 209), often explaining the creation and beginnings of the world, generating an indirect connection to the auditor’s life due to the distance between them and the events. Folktales, on the other hand, are malleable and set in both (the near) past and present, often explaining the ordinary in extraordinary ways, generating a direct connection to the auditor’s life due to the perceived proximity between them and the events.

Myths and folktales are then interpreted metaphorically or nonmetaphorically as true, historical accounts, a division which does not exclude that the interpreter practices both forms of interpretation separately, or even simultaneously. Metaphorical interpretation often appears to be the territory of the scholar and of cultures external to the myths and folktales, while (relatively) nonmetaphorical interpretation is generally the exclusive territory of the particular cultures from which the myths and folktales spring. Although a distinction between the two has just been made, myths and folktales can be said to exist along a continuum of mutability, and myth will often be used interchangeably with folktale in this essay for brevity’s sake. I argue that it is primarily because of the novel’s setting, particularly in the innermost embedded narrative, that the Amerindians interpret their myths and folktales nonmetaphorically, and in this setting not only their folktales, but also their myths, connect directly to their lives. From this analysis I will proceed to examine the
significance of the relation between the Amerindians and their myths within Melville’s novel.

The Chronotopes

Bakhtin proposed that “temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another” (243) in literature and art, and used the term chronotope, literally “timespace” (setting), to refer to this fact. The chronotope is setting construed as the way in which the author’s choice of place in time relates to the choice of place in space (and vice versa). This choice also accentuates the novel’s theme by embodying the abstract elements and “permitting the imaging power of art to do its work” (250). I suggest we continue viewing the three narrative layers in the novel as dolls-within-dolls as I establish them as distinct chronotopes. The frame narrative consists of a prologue and an epilogue which are set in an undefined time, and thus form two halves of the “grandmother” doll; the first embedded narrative consists of two parts which are set in the present, thus two halves of the “mother” doll; the central part, the innermost embedded narrative which is set in the past, is the “daughter” doll; the myths and folktales are the collective shadow which is cast by the dolls, creating a fluid narrative layer which runs like a thread through the other narrative layers.

The frame narrative is not only set in an undefined time, but also set in an undefined space from which Macunaima “lay[s] claim to the position of narrator in [the] novel” (1). It is almost a kind of metaspace from which Melville herself might be ventriloquizing through Macunaima, bookending the novel with veiled commentary on her own work. When a setting’s temporal and spatial location is undefined, it can essentially be described as timeless, which is also a way of describing the “zone of myth” (Burnett 35; Lévi-Strauss 209), the natural setting of an Amerindian primal deity such as Macunaima, but it would be inaccurate to equate this chronotope with myth. It is clear that Macunaima has temporarily descended from myth and the stars into this chronotope to engage in a narrative/mythical dialogue, and although he does tell us that he has “travelled through Europe in search of the parrot who [is] supposed to be [his] heart” (354) —after which he returns to South America —the precise temporal and spatial location of this chronotope remains undefined.5

5 Macunaima tells us that he has been exposed and “succumbed” to endogamous separatist movements during his travels, when “[t]he Serbs . . . the Basques . . . the Chechens – everybody was at it” (Melville 255). This does seem to place the chronotope somewhere around 1997, when The Ventriloquist’s Tale was first published, but this temporal location is only implicitly defined.
Because of this temporal and spatial uncertainty, I will refer to this chronotope as
unfixed space.

The first embedded narrative is set in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, with
its internal bookends set out in the native Rupununi region of the Amerindian
characters in the novel. The relation between the city and the Amerindians, embodied
by the character Chofy McKinnon, is ambivalent. At first he is lost in it, and it “fill[s] him with dread . . . laugh[s] at him, even play[s] with him” (24), but it also presents
him with the opportunity for an extramarital affair with an English literary scholar,
Rosa Mendelsohn, and with it comes the possible prospect of leaving Guyana for
England. This chronotope implicitly equates the present with the city, with modernity
and civilization, and thematically with change and exogamy, even though the
exogamous option is ultimately unfulfilled. It could also be categorized as what
Bakhtin calls a threshold, the chronotope of “the decision that changes a life” (248),
but Chofy does not choose change, not out of indecisiveness or fear, but because the
death of his son changes him. This change results in him returning to his native
Rupununi region, appearing to signify regression, but in this case the change has
taken place within him. I will refer to this ambivalent chronotope as that of the
juncture.

The innermost embedded narrative, which takes place in the beginning of the
20th century, is set almost completely in the Rupununi region of interior Guyana, with
short episodes set in Georgetown and in Montreal, Canada. This chronotope links the
past to the rural village, to tradition and nature, and it also seems to partially
correspond to Bakhtin’s provincial town:

[Provincial] towns are the locus for cyclical everyday time. Here there
are no events, only ‘doings’ that constantly repeat themselves. Time
here has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow
circles of the day, of the week, of the month, of a person’s entire life. A
day is just a day, a year is just a year—a life is just a life. . . . Time . . .
almost seems to stand still. (Bakhtin 247-248)

However, according to Bakhtin the provincial town “cannot serve as the primary time
of the novel” (247), but can only function as a backdrop for its primary chronotope.
This is not the case with the innermost embedded narrative because, at least in terms
of quantity, it does serve as the primary chronotope of The Ventriloquist’s Tale. The
notion that time does not advance historically is also reminiscent of Baidik
Bhattacharya’s chronotope of belated space, located in a postcolonial Caribbean that
“lags behind” the rest of the world where “real” history takes place, “always
somewhere else” (248). But the Amerindians seem less belated than simply indifferent to modernity: their attitude towards progress is presented as conservative, some Amerindians even considering “novelty or innovation . . . a sign of death” (Melville 9), as “dangerous” (99). Each time Alexander McKinnon, a Scottish freethinker—and thus an outsider—who has married into the Amerindian culture, attempts anything new, he is met with laughter, contempt and suspicion, because “[novelty] mean[s] that something [i]s wrong with the order of things” (99). And although McKinnon’s presence among the Amerindians in this chronotope links it thematically to exogamy, it is overshadowed by (excessive) endogamy, symbolized and literalized as the incest between two of McKinnon’s children, Beatrice and Danny.

So while we can say that this chronotope is related to the provincial town and the belated space, it is neither one, because it is too distinct, and occupies its own place among chronotopes. As a chronotope which is textually located within the innermost embedded narrative, and as a chronotope which is geographically located in the interior of its regional setting, and as a chronotope which is thematically concerned with sexual relations within the boundaries of the family, I will refer to it as the interior. It is within this chronotope that the enactments and reenactments of myth primarily take place, largely because it adheres to cyclic time.

Cyclic Time

The Guyanese7 Amerindians’ distrust of history, unless it is mythically rooted, echoes the pre-Columbian Maya civilization’s belief that “history repeats itself whenever the divine influences are in the same balance” (J. E. S. Thompson qtd in Burnett 28). This echo implicitly alludes to the concept of cyclic time, a concept which is crucial in understanding the reason for the Amerindians’ nonmetaphorical interpretation of their myths. In the chronotope of the interior, there are three forms of cyclic time in motion. There is the cyclical everyday time that Bakhtin attributes to the provincial town, time in which it seems that time does not advance, in which time “seems to stand still,” a space which is timeless in its most broad and superficial sense. Then there is cyclic time as a term to describe how the Amerindians, as a predominantly

---

6 Even though he is accepted by the Amerindians, and is the father of the McKinnon lineage, he never truly accepts or adapts to them, remaining an eternal outsider who eventually returns to his fatherland, Scotland.

7 I am only using the prefix Guyanese here to differentiate between the Amerindians and the post-Columbian Maya people, Amerindians who live in Mexico and Central America.
agrarian society, follow the *cycles of nature*. Shibi-din, Danny’s uncle, points this out to his nephew: “That’s the Master of Fish. That constellation signals the rains and tells you when it’s fish-breeding time. The little group of stars at the top we call the Tapir—the tapir is also connected to the rainy season” (Melville 123).

The Amerindians are, of course, aware that time is viewed as *linear* in other parts of the region, as in Georgetown, but they seem to be unconcerned with it in this chronotope. These two concepts of time have a minor clash when McKinnon receives an out-of-date newspaper which reports that an eclipse will occur. He decides he wants to photograph the eclipse but then realizes “he ha[s] no idea what the date [i]s” (180), making it impossible for him to plan ahead. McKinnon’s Amerindian father-in-law, who we could imagine might say that it would be impossible not to notice when the eclipse occurs, believes that “[McKinnon’s] plans . . . help him to avoid seeing what life is really like” (100). Even after decades together with the Amerindians, McKinnon remains a linear man at heart, exemplified by his concern with modernity—objectified as newspapers and photography—rather than Amerindian culture. But it might be more accurate to characterize McKinnon as a divided man, a man for whom the juncture is initially too rigid and regulated, and for whom the absence of regulations in the interior eventually becomes too belated and primitive. This leads to McKinnon constantly traveling between village and city, and finally to him leaving the belated space to catch up with “real” history in Europe.

Finally, and most importantly in the context of this essay, cyclic time is the underlying concept which supports the mythological cosmology of the Amerindians, a cosmology in which not only the seasons repeat themselves, but also the universe itself. This concept presupposes that the universe continually reaches a point, not an end, in which it “restarts,” after which, as the Mayans would put it, history literally repeats itself. This concept of cyclic time also includes smaller cycles within “the great cycle,” all the way down to the cycles we refer to as years, months and days, but most of these smaller cycles are too brief to offer any great insights or knowledge about life.

**A Circular Argument: Recycled Myths**

The concept of cyclic time is the key to explaining the cryptic assertion that I have attributed to the Amerindians within the novel, that “history [is] only to be trusted
when it coincides with myth” (Melville 9). If “history”—days, months and years—is only a set of smaller cycles that repeats “the great cycle,” then knowledge which concerns the great cycle, in this case stories in the form of myth, is knowledge which “explains the present and the past as well as the future” (Lévi-Strauss 209), and will naturally be a kind of knowledge that is highly valued. And if myths are knowledge which is not bound to history, if it is knowledge that supersedes history and time in the conventional sense, we can reach the same conclusion as Lévi-Strauss did and say that this knowledge, the structure of mythical patterns, is timeless (209). The patterns of smaller cycles are insignificant compared to the mythical patterns, and are only meaningful when they “coincide” with the mythical patterns, in other words, they only acquire their significance from this coincidence.

Cyclic time also unveils the “illusion behind which lay the unchanging reality of dream and myth” (Melville 99, 37): the “illusion” is the belief that time is linear, the belief that time has a beginning and an end, and that any course of events is unprecedented and will only happen once in history, which is not the case if time is cyclical. Even if events “have taken place long ago” (Lévi-Strauss 209), as those recounted by the myths are said to have done, they are not “past” events in the sense of linear time—in a cyclic concept of time they are past and future events simultaneously, and will, theoretically, repeat themselves an infinite amount of times. The “unchanging” nature of myth (M) positions it on the opposite side of history (H) on a continuum of temporal perceptions of reality. The chronotopes which I have identified in The Ventriloquist’s Tale—unfixed space (us), the juncture (j) and the interior (i)—occupy discrete points between these two positions, a continuum which could be roughly illustrated as

\[ |M–us––i––––j/us–H| \]

The distance between myth and unfixed space is short, since unfixed space is the chronotope into which Macunaima descends from myth, something of a narrative/mythical terminal. But unfixed space concurrently shares a position with the juncture next to history, since Macunaima explicitly engages with history. I have already demonstrated how the interior, the chronotope of tradition and preservation, adheres to cyclic time, which positions it in the borderland between myth and history. The chronotope of the juncture, of modernity and change, is naturally located close to the domain of history.
The Amerindians in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* interpret their myths and folktales nonmetaphorically, and the myths they tell are directly connected to the auditor’s life, because while the events in the myths may have taken place in the distant past, this past is also the future in cyclic time. This is the point Macunaima is making when he tells us that “[his grandmother] can’t tell the past from the future—they’re both woven together on her wonky loom” (357), implying that she weaves the fabric of life, not unlike the Fates of Greek mythology. These mythical patterns are recycled in the smaller cycles that a human being is able to experience and comprehend, and are manifested through the characters in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, who consciously or unconsciously enact and reenact their myths, making them characters in (the retelling of) a myth. The characters are both enacting the sacred stories of their culture, and reenacting (meta)physical events that (will) take place in an undefined time.

The most conspicuous recycling of myth is the recycling of the pan-Amazonian eclipse myth, “which represents brother-and-sister incest in the form of a copulating sun and moon” (Melville 82), a myth which is enacted and reenacted in the relationship between Danny and Beatrice McKinnon. But there is not only one version of this myth in the novel, and the different versions diverge and even contradict each other. This makes it difficult to simply reduce their complexity using algebra as Wormoal attempts to do within the novel, not unlike what April Shemak terms “First World readers’ desire . . . of ‘fixing’ indigenous identity” (358). Instead of viewing the myths in the novel, and the novel itself, as a “mathematical language . . . to be decoded” (Melville 81), it is more fruitful to view them as the convent nuns view young Wifreda McKinnon, “as closed as the Japanese art of paper-folding” (138), as origami. This piece of origami can then be unfolded, rather than reduced, to explore how Amerindian myths and folktales are recycled in the novel, and how Melville layers her text with textual threads. By untangling some of these textual threads I will show how they interconnect, and how they all seem to lead back to the narrator. The narrator never vanishes at all, he only embeds himself into the embedded narratives from which he performs his ventriloquist act which, I will show, is as self-centered as it is centered on the Amerindians.
The Rising Sun

The first thread I will explore is the one created by the result of the illicit relationship between Beatrice and Danny, a boy who is never given a name and who is simply referred to as “Sonny.” He embodies the “nexus” from which all of Melville’s threads diverge: a boy who is “absolute in his quietness and self-containment” (282), “a walking event-horizon” (283). The comparison between Sonny and an event horizon, the boundary of a black hole in which time seems to stop, seems to suggest that Sonny exists between two worlds. In this case, it also suggests that he exists between two chronotopes—between unfixed space, as a terminal to myth, and the chronotope of the interior—or, perhaps more accurately, it links and equates him with the interior. Sonny is essentially defined by his (almost redundantly) explicit connection to the eclipse myth: he is “conceived around the time of an eclipse” (283) by Beatrice and Danny, the eclipse myth’s sun and moon respectively, and “walk[s] around in his own moonlight” (282), “permanently in some inner state of lunar excess” (285), “always . . . entranced by the moon” (288). There is no doubt about Sonny’s connection to the eclipse myth, but Sonny, like the walking myth he is, remains an enigmatic character to whom it seems “[a]ny characteristic can be attributed . . . every conceivable relation can be found” (Lévi-Strauss 208). This enigma is epitomized on the final pages of the interior, when Sonny disappears without a trace, which also serves as a point of departure from which to explore where some of the textual threads lead:

Because of the rumours that his mother was a kanaima, nobody searched too hard for him. Some people said he had gone into the mountains to train as a kanaima himself . . . Sonny’s apotheosis came after several people swore they had seen him near Bottle Mountain, standing at the place where a number of trails all cross, the rising sun between two mountain peaks catching him in a prism of light so that he seemed to dazzle where he stood. (Melville 290-291)

As Shemak points out, Sonny’s name clearly “invok[es] the mythic symbol of the sun” (361) that is so pervasive in The Ventriloquist’s Tale. The “rising sun” in the passage above evokes birth, and reinforces the apotheosis8 of Sonny, his transformation into a deity. But Melville does not allow any simple interpretations of what deity this is, saturating the passage with threads leading in opposite directions. Sonny’s “dazzle” is a reference to an earlier mention of a “dazzling figure” who is

---

8 An interesting choice of word, since apotheosis is so closely linked to European (the former colonizer’s) theological concepts.
seen near Bottle Mountain when Father Napier attempts to climb it. When a Christian missionary such as Father Napier climbs a mountain, he is not just climbing a mountain—he is consciously enacting and reenacting several Christian myths which involve mountain climbing. He is assuming the role of Moses at Mount Sinai, faced with God manifested as a burning bush, the mountain at which Moses later received the Ten Commandments, and he is also assuming the role of Jesus at his Transfiguration up on a mountain, during which, incidentally, “his face did shine as the sun” (*American Standard Version Bible*, Matthew 17:2) and “his raiment became white and dazzling” (Luke 9:29). But Father Napier never reaches the mountaintop—he is blown down from the mountain by the wind, which is implicitly controlled by the dazzling man who, a witness assures, is Amerindian. This would seem natural since there is an inherent antagonism between an Amerindian deity and a European missionary, verbalized by the local shaman, the *piaiwoman* Koko Lupi: “[Father Napier] tries to strike the sun out of the sky. Him with his dead god on a stick. He thinks he can stand between the sun and the moon” (240).9 The reference to Father Napier standing between the sun and the moon is, of course, a reference to him being the one who finds Beatrice and Danny when they elope, the one who brings them back home and, in doing this, separates the lovers forever.

The dazzling man’s Amerindian ethnicity is supported by the fact that Bottle Mountain happens to be “where one of [the Macusi’s] legendary heroes was supposed to have imprisoned his son in a rock” (154). This myth is also recycled and rephrased as “two mountain peaks catching [Sonny] in a prism of light” (291), prism meaning crystal, of which the largest concentration is found in bedrock. This connection between Sonny and the son of the legendary hero seems paradoxical, since Sonny has not yet been born when Father Napier attempts to climb the mountain. Others, successfully converted Amerindians, make the connection between the son of a legendary hero and the Son of God, and “say . . . that perhaps it was Christ who was imprisoned in the rock” (154), leading us back to Jesus. Many scholars have, in turn, made the connection between Jesus and solar deities such as Horus and Mithra, all of whom, in these theories, are regarded as symbols of the fall and rise, the death and rebirth, of the sun.10 This connection that scholars make between solar deities offers

---

9 Neil L. Whitehead writes that “the [piai] (curing shaman) was seen as the key figure standing in the way of rapid and complete missionary conversion” (181).
10 George A. Wells’ “Stages of New Testament Criticism” (1969) offers a good introduction to these theories.
an example of what could theoretically be an extra-textual recycling of myth, since these particular deities also happen to originate from geographical locations—Palestine, Egypt and Iran—in or around the Levant. But more significantly, this theory of solar deities as symbols of resurrection might offer one explanation to the paradoxical connection between Sonny and the son who is imprisoned in a rock; it could suggest that Sonny is the reincarnation of the son who is imprisoned in a rock, the manifested recycling of a mythical figure. On the other hand, this is precisely the kind of repetition and contradiction that the recycling of myth entails, a “mytho-logic” as opposed to the rational logic which I have briefly attempted to impose on the character of Sonny.

Where the Trails All Cross

The fact that Sonny is said to have been seen “standing at the place where a number of trails all cross” (291), that he is seen standing at a crossroad, is an unambiguous allusion to deities of crossroads. It is an appropriate space for Sonny, the walking event horizon, to occupy, since he is also the embodiment of the chronotope of the interior, a chronotope which inhabits the borderland between myth and history. Melville has expressly stated that she “take[s] as [her] tutelary spirits Legba, Exu and Hermes, the gods of boundaries, borders and crossroads” (“Beyond the Pale” 743), of which Exu and Hermes are also known as trickster deities—a relation they share with the novel’s narrator, Macunaima. 11 Macunaima is introduced into the narrative of the interior by Danny’s grandmother who depicts him as the son of the sun and a “reddish, rock-coloured woman”(105). 12 Danny’s grandmother compares Danny’s “reddish brown” skin color to the woman’s, implying the woman is Amerindian—which would make Macunaima a demigod—and also establishing a direct connection between divinity and Danny/the Amerindians, between the interior and myth, a dialogue between narrative layer and mythical layer.

This dialogue is perhaps made most explicit in the relation between Sonny and Macunaima. When Sonny disappears, “nobody searche[s] too hard for him” (290), except for a hunter who traces the footprints of the dazzling man—who could be Sonny—into the mountains and to a waterfall. He does not find the man, only a

11 Papa Legba and Exu (as the diasporic Eleguá) are also very much present in the Caribbean, in Haitian Vodou and Cuban Santería respectively.
12 Towards the end of the novel, the description of Chofy’s wife Marietta as “a figure moulded entirely from red Rupununi clay” (342) subtly reminds the reader of the Amerindians’ divine heritage.
cacophony of sounds from different animals, which he attributes to “either a parrot or [a] ventriloquist” (292), both of which explicitly identify the dazzling man as Macunaima. If Macunaima is the dazzling man, then it also suggests that Sonny must be an incarnation or reincarnation of Macunaima, and that Macunaima, in turn, might be the son who is imprisoned in a rock. As the threads surrounding Sonny are untangled, they all seem to lead back to Macunaima, and the presence of the “invisible” narrator becomes visible. When Macunaima introduces himself he explains that “[his] name translated means ‘one who works in the dark’” (1), not only emphasizing his role as the novel’s invisible narrator, but also suggesting a connection between his name and the novel’s pivotal eclipse. He is foreshadowing an event “[which] brings chaos” (180) according to the Amerindians, and chaos being one of the primary responsibilities of a trickster, perhaps it is also insinuated that he is the one who causes the eclipse—and the relation between Beatrice and Danny—to occur. But there is another, less visible thread which connects Macunaima to another figure who works in the dark—the kanaimà.

Kanaimà and Piai

Merely “rumours that [Beatrice] is a kanaima” (290) are enough to force Sonny’s mother into exile, and to dissuade people from searching for Sonny when he disappears, “to train as a kanaima himself” (290) some believe. The role of the shaman in Amerindian culture, the spiritual expert who can see through the illusion of reality, is divided between the piai and the kanaimà, between shaman and “dark shaman,” between figures who are either revered or feared. This division also mirrors Macunaima’s assertion that “[a]ll stories are told for revenge or tribute” (9), which verbalizes the unreliability of the narrator, any narrator in fact, and in which the act of storytelling is conflated with shamanic practices, specifically those of the kanaimà. Anthropologist Neil L. Whitehead describes kanaimà as “a form of mystical assault that ritually requires the extensive physical maiming of its victims” (171), while Melville describes it as “the spirit of revenge” (266) manifested in person, animal or

---

13 The hunter also finds clothes scattered in front of the waterfall, of which a “cream suit” and a pair of “dark glasses” are exactly what Macunaima says he would “look wonderful in” (1) in the prologue.

14 I will use Whitehead’s “kanaimà”, as opposed to Melville’s “kanaima”, throughout the essay. Most Amerindian languages are still primarily oral, i.e. they have not been written down extensively, so there is little consensus on spelling (hence the appearance of the alternative spelling of Macunaima as “Makunaima” in the essay). Melville herself has written an interesting article on this topic called “The Wapichan Dictionary” (2009).
object. In The Ventriloquist’s Tale, this “vindictive force” is triggered by the ubiquitous sun and possesses Beatrice when she decides to kill Father Napier for separating her from Danny, or as the piai Koko Lupi words it, for “stand[ing] between the sun and the moon” (240). Whitehead explains that

. . . kanaimà is seen as emanating from the first time—a primordial force that has structured the universe and formed the world as we know it. . . . As a result kanaimà itself almost becomes outside history . . . kanaimà as a way of being in the world is beyond time. The temporal and spatial dislocation of kanaimà is therefore an integral part of its ritual and symbolic force, [and because of it] practitioners are . . . able to travel vast distances in a short space of time . . . (179-180)

The “temporal and spatial dislocation” could just as well be phrased as “undefined time and space,” as Macunaima’s unfixed space has been described in this essay, and the novel also establishes Macunaima and his brother as primordial deities/forces who shape, perhaps not the entire universe, but the world (114, 153, 184). This relation between kanaimà and Macunaima is not made explicit in the novel, but in some Amerindian traditions “kanaimà are seen as the descendants of . . . Makunaima” (Strathern & Stewart 21), while the piai are seen as descendants of Macunaima’s younger brother Piai’ima, the brothers acting as mythical figures who “shar[e] responsibility for the cosmic order” (Whitehead & Wright 6). If the kanaimà are descendants of Macunaima, then the spirit which possesses Beatrice must be his spirit, and Sonny, if not the Amazonian trickster himself, seems to at least be training to wield the power of Macunaima.

The shared cosmic responsibility is enacted and reenacted by the two shamanic figures, which are sometimes united in one person, and despite only ever being identified as a “piaiwoman,” Koko Lupi incarnates this coalescence of shamanic ambivalence. While she is clearly a “curing shaman,” often called upon by two generations of McKinnons—although never by McKinnon himself—to cure illness, she is violently antagonistic towards Father Napier’s missionary activities, openly hostile towards outsiders working in the region, threatening to use “poisons to make them impotent” (160). This antagonism and hostility seem to be in opposition with the expected role of a healer, and the threat of causing impotence is an unambiguous stance against exogamy, a threat which seems to be more in agreement

15 Macunaima’s brother is sometimes called Chico (by the Macusi), Duid (by the Wapisiana) or Piai’ima/P’aima (by the Patamuna), although they could, theoretically, be different brothers, since the sun is said to have had many children who, curiously, are all called “the Macunaima” (Melville 105).
with the expected role of the kanaimà. Koko Lupi is a character “in which the boundaries between perceived dualistic concepts ... are unclear or dissolve completely,” to quote the introduction to this essay, precisely what Whitehead refers to as “[the] often-noted dual capacity of the shaman to heal and to cause harm” (quoted in Whitehead & Wright 10). Koko Lupi is also the one who gives Beatrice—after her transformation into a kanaimà—the poison to kill Father Napier, almost as if Koko Lupi, as an (unofficial) adept of Macunaima, is ventriloquizing the act of kanaimà through Beatrice. The dualities which the character of Koko Lupi personifies—cosmic, shamanic, moral—also aligns her with the character of Sonny, who I’ve suggested exists between two chronotopes, and both Koko Lupi and Sonny embody the illusoriness of the boundary between Amerindian myth and reality. This illusory boundary also mirrors the one between the frame narrative and the embedded narratives, between which Macunaima—who could arguably be described as a mythological thread himself, even the primary thread running through the narrative layers—crosses invisibly, although, as I have shown, not without leaving a conspicuous trail.

Following this trail and untangling the textual threads in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* could go on endlessly, but the threads which have been examined in this essay have sufficed to illustrate the purposes of this essay. Through these threads I have examined how the Amerindians of Guyana, as they are represented by Melville and her unreliable narrator, interpret their myths and folktales nonmetaphorically. Using Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, I have defined the distinct thematic qualities of the three narrative layers, layers which I have labeled unfixed space, the juncture, and the interior. I have also used the concept of cyclic time to explain why it is primarily within the chronotope of the interior that the myths and folktales are enacted and reenacted, recycled, as it were. The recycling of the novel’s central eclipse myth and its result, Sonny, has served as a point of departure to explore how some of the threads interconnect, and how they lead back to the narrator who spins the yarn, Macunaima.

16 If Koko Lupi embodies the inherent duality of the Amerindian shaman, Beatrice and Wifreda seem to embody the division of shamanic roles; Beatrice is explicitly identified as a kanaimà, while the description of (old) Wifreda’s garden as full of plants which can be used as herbal medicines (16), her stay in the part of Georgetown which is called “the City of Crones” (69), and Marietta “recount[ing] her dreams” to Wifreda (352), suggests she might have taken the place of Koko Lupi as the local piai.

17 This suggestion might seem speculative, but in the Areruya culture, one of the skills the piai are expected to master is to “learn [how] to speak in the voices of animals” (Staats 126), a form of ventriloquism, which suggests that there might also be a bond between the piai and Macunaima.
Although Macunaima might at first seem to be confined to the unfixed space of the frame narrative, I have shown that he is never absent from the embedded narratives: he either disguises himself as Sonny or he is represented by the figure of kanaimà, directly by Sonny’s mother Beatrice, and indirectly by the shaman Koko Lupi. Like the fluid narrative layer of myths and folktales from which he has emerged, Macunaima is *transchronotopical*, in other words, *beyond* the temporal and spatial limitations which the chronotopes impose on the rest of the characters in the novel. The significance of this transchronotopicity is beyond the scope of this essay, but suggests one possible direction for future research. The novel also serves as a reminder that not only must we “never confuse . . . the represented world with the world outside the text” (Bakhtin 253), we must also remember that, while the narrator might “appear to vanish” (Melville 9), all voices in the narrative always belong to the ventriloquist. And the ventriloquist, ultimately, is not Macunaima, but the author herself, Melville. She uses Macunaima and the transchronotopical narrative layer of myths and folktales like a needle—not unlike the temporal weaving of Macunaima’s grandmother—to thread through the frame narrative and its embedded narratives, stitching them together to create *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*. 
Works Cited


