

## Invoking the Ancestors: Edward Sapir, Bugs Bunny, and the *Popol Vuh*

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*By focusing on Bugs Bunny and selected Looney Tunes, I support the hypothesis that in the current broader culture of the United States, many toons serve the functions of ancestors. Sapir (1915[1991]), describing Nootka and several other cultures, detailed sound changes that occur in specific social contexts, including ritual storytelling; I show how speech features of specific toons follow the same and similar patterns. Secondly, by presenting some salient parallels between the Popol Vuh and Space Jam, a 1996 film starring Bugs Bunny and Michael Jordan, I discuss characteristics that Looney Tunes share with ancestors of the Quiche Maya.*

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will present evidence to support the hypothesis that certain Looney Tunes characters, particularly Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Sylvester the Cat, and Tweety Bird, serve the functions of ancestors in Broader United States (BUS) culture in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. I will use selected features of ancestor-invoking tales from selected cultures and show similarities to features of Looney Tunes tales. In doing so, I am not claiming that the creators of Looney Tunes consciously and/or deliberately modeled their creations after other cultures' tales (although they may have), nor

am I claiming that the particular ways any one culture distinguishes its heroes could be universally applied to other cultures. I am merely claiming that Looney Tunes employ devices that are known and documented in the more organically-developed tales of one or more traditional cultures, despite Looney Tunes' being artificial constructs which were manufactured relatively abruptly by a very small and unlicensed subset of the members of BUS culture (for profit, no less).

First, I will discuss some of the speech features that Looney Tunes share with ancestors of other cultures, principally Nootka, and I will discuss some of the extra-human physical abilities that Looney Tunes share with ancestors of the Quiche Maya, as portrayed in the *Popol Vuh*. Finally, I will provide evidence that Looney Tunes do, indeed, fulfill the functions of ancestors listed below for members of BUS culture.

### 2. Ancestors and Storytelling

Invoking and honoring ancestors<sup>1</sup> is a universal human activity, performed in every known human culture. The activity serves several vital functions, among which are:

- to teach children about their heritage, their lineage, and the practices of their culture
- to initiate children into their culture
- to provide members of the culture, throughout their lifetimes, a shared knowledge base upon which can be developed proverbs, parables, and other metaphors of guidance for navigating earthly life
- to help maintain cultural cohesion and continuity
- to help reinforce cultural identity
- to help create a sense of community (see Anderson, 1991) by giving every member of the culture one or more “mutual acquaintances,” personalities that everyone knows and to which everyone has reasonably equal access
- to provide a source of extra strength, encouragement, and inspiration for getting through hard times

I would assert that the very universality of invoking and honoring ancestors demonstrates that a culture could not survive very long as a

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the terms “ancestor” and “hero” will be used interchangeably.

viable entity without a way of performing that activity. Since BUS culture could be argued to be viable, and since we really have no fully common ancestors because of our diverse provenances, we must be employing other beings to fill the role.

In various traditional cultures, storytelling is a primary medium for invoking and honoring ancestors. The storytelling can be done informally, in ritual fashion, or in manners between those two register poles. A frequent, if not universal, feature of ancestor stories is that the heroic characters—regardless of whether they were ever human in any historical past—are imbued with both human and extra-human attributes. They may appear as animals, but will have the ability to use speech. They may appear human, but will have the powers of specific animals and/or the ability to perform acts that defy the laws of the physical world. It is important that our heroes, our ancestors, be distinguished in some ways from us and our ordinary lives, and each culture has its unique combination of ways to index that difference. Among the devices used for making this distinction are: zoomorphizing originally human characters to give them powers or abilities of particular animals; giving human characters extra-human powers or abilities; anthropomorphizing originally non-human characters to give them powers or abilities of humans (e.g. speech); suspending physical laws, and any combination of these.

The Looney Tunes Bugs Bunny, Sylvester the Cat, Daffy Duck, and Tweety Bird could be taken as anthropomorphized animals or zoomorphized humans; they have the faces and bodies of their presenting species but walk on two feet and have the manual dexterity of creatures with opposable thumbs. Certainly they are able to suspend ordinary physical laws and use human language. Further, their stories fulfill many of the functions listed above, especially those of initiating children into their culture, providing a shared knowledge base, and giving members of the culture “mutual acquaintances.”

### 3. Sapir and the Phonological Evidence

“ . . . in (indigenous) American mythology certain beings are apt to be definitely characterized by speech peculiarities.”

—Edward Sapir 1915:9

Edward Sapir (1915) describes a pattern of sound alterations in Nootka used for particular affective purposes; he referred to this pat-

tern as “consonant play.” The alterations are used for talking to or about people with particular physical irregularities or, in myth telling or storytelling, when speaking in the voice of particular animals or humanoid heroes. The physical irregularities include extreme shortness, extreme fatness, left-handedness, or being hunchbacked. Also included are children and people who are described as ‘sore-eyed’, which could mean cross-eyed or having “some other defect of the eye.” The application of these alterations must be done with care when directly addressing such a person, as it is possible to give offense. Sapir discusses that the terms are used to indicate both affection and derision, and he notes that the line between those two attitudes is often very fuzzy.

The particular sound changes are of three varieties: epenthesis of a segment or syllable into a particular slot in a word, changing the place or manner of articulation of particular segments of words, or both. The epenthesis could be of a morpheme such as the diminutive, or it could be just a non-morphemic segment or syllable; for example, when speaking in the voice of the cultural hero *Kwátiyat*, a voiceless velar fricative ([x]) is inserted after the first vowel of each word (366).

However, it is the segment-changing variety that I focus on here. Sapir also mentions similar patterns in Kwakiutl, another Northwest coast language, and Khoisan<sup>2</sup>, an African language family. Table 1 shows selected elements of the pattern. For each animal speaker in the first column, the specific sound change is shown in the final column. In the middle columns the language is given, followed by the mythological trait, if any, associated with that animal. The next column notes the physical irregularity, if any, also associated with that particular sound change. Two of the animals—the Kwakiutl mink and the Khoisan mantis—assume the role of trickster in the stories of their respective cultures; Bugs Bunny may be considered to perform that same role in BUS culture.

Also included in Table 1 are the sound changes employed by Daffy Duck and Sylvester the Cat; their alterations follow a pattern of

<sup>2</sup> Sapir was not specific about exactly which African group he was describing. The cultures and languages he refers to as “Bushman” are now known as Khoisan, which name I will use in this paper.

enhanced frication very similar to that displayed by the Nootka deer and mink. In Sylvester’s trademark line, “Sufferin succotash!,” for example, the initial /s/ of each word is pronounced as a voiceless lateral fricative. Daffy’s sibilants are similarly changed, plus his /p/ becomes a homorganic fricative, and his /f/ is often hyper-fricated. In Tweety’s speech, as, for example, his trademark line, “I tawt I taw a puddy tat,” the voiced interdental fricative /ʔ/, voiceless alveolar fricative /s/, and voiceless velar stop /k/ are all phonetically realized as [t] or [D]. The intervocalic flapping in ‘puddy’ is interesting in that it suggests rule ordering in Tweety’s pattern; that is, the fricative /s/ in ‘pussy’ first becomes a homorganic stop, and the stop then becomes flapped as would any intervocalic /t/ in US English. Tweety also frequently realizes<sup>3</sup> /l/ and /r/ as [w], a pattern which is fairly common in young children acquiring English as a first language. Sapir does note that “. . . the influence of the speech of children [is] a contributing factor in the creation of myth-character forms” (1915[1991]:372).

(1) Affective sound changes (modified from Sapir 1915)

<u>SPEAKER</u>	<u>Language</u>	<u>Mythological trait</u>	<u>Human trait</u>	<u>Sound change</u>
Small birds	Nootka		very small	s, s <sup>h</sup> _ ç
Deer, mink	Nootka		sore-eyed	s, s <sup>h</sup> _ °; c, c <sup>h</sup> _ L (nasalized vowels)
Elk Nootka				°, L _ s, c
Mink	Kwakiutl	Trickster		(cerebral clicks _lateral clicks)
Mantis	Khoisan	Trickster		(ordinary clicks _ compound)
Baboon	Khoisan			
Sylvester	English			s _ °
Daffy Duck	English			s _ ° p _ f
Tweety	English			?, s, k _ t l, r _ w

Other examples of consonant play for affective purposes have been described in linguistic literature. One notable example is from

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Tweety’s pattern of consonant play is somewhat inconsistent and tends to appear in the shorter speeches and more salient words. Since toon speech is a dramatic performance, this inconsistency should be neither surprising nor damaging to my analysis.

Takelma, an indigenous language spoken in Oregon. Dell Hymes (1979) described that in Takelma stories, the speech of bears is distinguished by the prefixing of the voiceless lateral fricative /ʃ/ on certain words, while coyote speech is prefixed by /s/. Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) describe the consonant play that is part of the *hlonipha* system in Zulu, Xhosa, and other southern African languages. In *hlonipha*, speakers must avoid uttering the names of respected persons and/or certain relatives, as well as ordinary words which sound like the names of those persons. One of the most common ways to accomplish that avoidance is by changing the place or manner of articulation in one or more of the consonants in the name or word.

I wish to point out two things in discussing the similarity between the Looney Tunes’ pattern and the patterns described by Sapir. First, the Looney Tunes’ speech employs a well-attested mechanism for distinguishing itself from everyday discourse. Secondly, it is worthwhile to note the wisdom of Sapir’s observation about the blurred boundary between derision and affection. Ordinary members of BUS culture with the same speech irregularities as those used by Daffy Duck, Sylvester, Elmer Fudd, or other Looney Tunes are often teased, sometimes with affection and often not.

#### 4. Thematic Parallels in *Space Jam* and the *Popol Vuh*

In this section, I will examine some thematic parallels between the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan creation account, and *Space Jam*, a 1996 Warner Brothers feature-length film starring Michel Jordan and Bugs Bunny, playing themselves. Also appearing in the film are all of the classic Looney Tunes toons-including Elmer Fudd, Foghorn Leghorn, Taz, Yosemite Sam, and more-and NBA basketball figures, including players Charles Barkley, Patrick Ewing, NBA Commissioner David Stern, and others, also playing themselves. Once again, I am not claiming here that the writers of *Space Jam* consciously or unconsciously drew on the story of the *Popol Vuh*; they may, in fact, have never heard of the *Popol Vuh*.<sup>4</sup> I am arguing, however, that the themes and characters of *Space Jam* are developed in a way that befits ances-

<sup>4</sup> It would likely be possible to interview the four writers credited in the film (Leo Benvenuti, Steve Rudnick, Timothy Harris, and Herschel Weingrod) to ascertain whether they were familiar with the *Popol Vuh*, but since that information is tangential to my argument, I did not pursue the possibility.

tor tales and serves the functions of invoking and honoring ancestors as described above.

According to archeological estimates, the *Popol Vuh*, the creation account of the Quiché Maya of southern Guatemala, dates back to the late Preclassic period- approximately 2000 years ago. The account was transmitted orally for generations; it was written in glyphs, and its stories were depicted in paintings on ceramics. Early in the Spanish occupation, the *Popol Vuh* was written in Quiché using a Romanized alphabet. That version was translated into Spanish and ultimately other European languages, and it is that version that is accessible today to non-Mayans. The *Popol Vuh* is richly textured, poetic, and highly symbolic; it employs the parallelism and repetition of lines and phrases that are characteristic of the Maya literary aesthetic. In addition to describing the creation of heavenly and earthly life forms, including humans, it also relates the history of the Quiché people and its lineages.

A prominent episode describes the time when the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque,<sup>5</sup> were summoned to the underworld to play ball with the lords of the underworld-powerful and terrifying villains with names like Blood Gatherer, Pus Maker, and Bloody Wing. The story, although fairly short, is complex and layered; I present here a brief summary of some salient features.

The stakes of the ball game are very high-the Hero Twins are playing for their lives and for the head of their father, who years earlier had been defeated in the underworld when he and his own twin brother had been summoned by the lords to play ball. Not surprisingly, the lords of the underworld play dirty and try to trick and bully the Hero Twins. They lock the Twins in a room full of jaguars. They also lock the Twins in a room full of bats that cut off Hunahpu's head, which the lords then use as a ball. The Hero Twins, however, prevail in the end. In addition to their sharp wits and good standing with all the animals of the world, whose help they seek and receive, they are able to commit feats such as reattaching Hunahpu's head. Once they have dispatched the terrible

<sup>5</sup> Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the names used by Tedlock (1985), are often rendered into English as One Hunter and Jaguar Deer; other interpretations and variations exist, as well.

lords, they ascend together from the underworld in a glowing orb to become the sun and the moon. The symbolism of the sphere as an object of play and of power is prominent.

The Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque appear human, but they are not human, because humans had not been created yet. They walk on two legs, have opposable thumbs, and use language. In addition, they are also able to perform acts that defy the laws of the physical world as we know it, and they are able to recover almost instantly from injuries that would be more than fatal to ordinary humans.

We turn now to another pair of Hero Twins, Bugs Bunny and Michael Jordan in *Space Jam*. The film describes the time when the Looney Tunes must beat a team of aliens in a game of basketball. The aliens are little and scrawny until they steal the talents of five NBA stars, placing their ethereal loot in a luminescent basketball for transport. The NBA players' talents make the aliens monstrously huge and powerful, and they assume the team name Monstars. The Looney Tunes become alarmed and summon Michael Jordan to help them win the game. Well-known as a golf enthusiast, Michael is on the golf course with friends, and when he reaches into a cup to retrieve his ball he is grabbed by the hand and pulled down through a tunnel to the Looney Tunes' home in the underworld.

The stakes of the ball game are very high-the Looney Tunes and Michael Jordan are playing for their lives, their liberty, and the stolen talents of the NBA players. Not surprisingly, the Monstars play dirty and try to trick and bully the Tune Squad players. Bugs is smashed completely flat when a Monstar leaps on him, an explosion blows Wile E. Coyote to bits, and Monstars roll Michael Jordan up and use him for a ball. The Looney Tunes, however, prevail in the end; Bugs and Daffy remind Michael that in the underworld land of the toons, bodies are capable of doing things that can't be done on Earth's surface. In the final second of the game, Michael Jordan, tackled at half-court by Monstars, stretches his arm all the way to the basket and dunks the ball to give the Tune Squad a one-point victory. In the end, Jordan ascends from the underworld carrying the NBA players' talents in a glowing basketball.

The Looney Tunes have many human traits, but they're not human. They walk on two legs, have opposable thumbs, and use lan-

guage. In addition, they are also able to perform acts that defy the laws of the physical world as we know it, and they are able to recover almost instantly from injuries that would be more than fatal to ordinary humans.

Certainly the two stories are substantially different, yet there are striking parallels. In both the *Popol Vuh* and *Space Jam* we find:

- Hero Twins
- underworld ball game imbued with symbolism involving spheres and their power
- stakes of: life, head (honor, essence) of their father (*Popol Vuh*); life, liberty, talent (honor, essence) of the five NBA players (*Space Jam*)
- villains using Hunahpu's head as a ball; villains using Michael Jordan as a ball
- extra-human prowess to defeat dirty-playing villains
- recovery from injuries that would be fatal to humans
- ascent from the underworld in/with a glowing orb

### 5. *Space Jam* as Ancestor Tale

Both the *Popol Vuh* and Looney Tunes stories, of course, provide the satisfaction of virtue triumphing over malice. *Space Jam* fulfills the functions of invoking and honoring ancestors, as described above, especially in imparting the cultural values of teamwork and good sportship. In fact, the film is somewhat heavy-handed in delivering the message that we can achieve our dreams through faith and persistent effort. At halftime, with the Tune Squad trailing by 50-some points, Michael's locker room pep talk is ineffective, but Bugs fills a bottle with water, labels it "Michael's Secret Stuff," and passes it around. The Tune Squad returns to the floor with vigor and determination and brings the score closer. During a time out, they ask Michael for more of his secret stuff and ask why he had not given it to them in the first place. Michael responds that there is no such thing as secret stuff, that what they had drunk was just water, and that the strength they had was in them all along. The film's theme song, "I Believe I Can Fly," by R. Kelly, is sweet and inspirational; it certainly can provide a source of extra strength and encouragement.

Bugs Bunny and the other prominent Looney Tunes are some of the most familiar "mutual acquaintances" that members of BUS cul-

ture have, even to the extent of being featured on U.S. postage stamps (an honor formerly enjoyed mainly by dead presidents). Tapping my own memory, I can recall often hearing discouraged or exhausted friends or relatives make statements like "I feel like a two-ton weight (or piano, or anvil) just fell on me," and I'm sure I've said that myself at times. I'm completely confident that none of us either knows how that might actually feel, or has ever actually witnessed such an event in person, but we are all familiar with the image, since we've seen dozens of such catastrophes befall Wile E. Coyote, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and their pals. I'm equally confident that we all know exactly what to do in such a circumstance: pick ourselves up and keep going, just as the Looney Tunes have taught us to do. They give us, as any good ancestors would, a source of strength in hard times.

### 6. Conclusion

I've shown micro-level phonological evidence and macro-level thematic evidence to support the argument that some toons-in this case specific Looney Tunes-serve as ancestors/heroes for people of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century BUS, performing all of the functions stated above. The Looney Tunes, like all ancestor/heroes, are distinguished from ordinary humans in specific ways. Each of the featured Looney Tunes-Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Sylvester the Cat, and Tweety, among others-has the strengths and powers of the presenting species and also possesses the human characteristics of bipedalism, manual grasp, and use of language. Their language use, further, is also frequently distinguished from that of ordinary humans through consonant play, or phonological patterns of sound changes. The same or similar patterns are employed in the storytelling customs of some traditional cultures in North America and Africa.

In addition, the Looney Tunes are not bound by the physical laws of the known world and are capable of recovering almost instantly from injuries that would more than kill any one of us. Those characteristics are shared as well by the Hero Twins of the *Popol Vuh*. Like the Tune Squad, their adventure in defeating the lords of the underworld is filled with treachery, faith, and the symbolic power of the sphere. Thus, we've seen that a venerated and classic story with grand-scale cultural importance has significant thematic parallels with a trifling and inconsequential Hollywood bauble intended principally for viewing by children. But children, after all, are an important audience

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for the transmission of history and values of any culture, as has been observed by many, including our ancestor, Edward Sapir.

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