

Tricksters, outcasts, in-betweenness, and boundary-crossing. A cultural semiotic reading of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*

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Abstract

The notion of the boundary was a key aspect in Lotman's model of semiosphere and a heuristic concept to make sense of dynamicity and change in socio-cultural systems, working as bilingual filters of translation. This paper seeks to shed light on the idea of crossing cultural boundaries by drawing a parallel between the mythological figure of the trickster and that of the alien or the outcast (*izgoj*), as discussed by Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij. The present study proposes a reading of F. Douglass' *Narrative* from the standpoint of the semiotics of culture, by an interpretation of Douglass as a boundary figure and as a cultural translator between two worlds.

Keywords: *Lotman, boundary, semiosphere, trickster, in-betweenness, semiotics of culture*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2022.2.2.10>

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Preliminary remarks

According to Lotman, every culture creates its own boundaries. The presence of cultural boundaries is a primary, basic, and essential characteristic of cultures. The existence of boundaries is both an essential and functional feature of cultures as well as the precondition for the survival of a given culture. Furthermore, boundaries represent, at one and the same time, a doorway for innovation, change, and dynamism within semiotic systems.

As the founding father of the ‘Tartu-Moscow’ or ‘Moscow-Tartu School’ of semiotics (Shukman, 1988) and the initiator of the semiotics of culture pointed out, “the actual division is one of the human cultural universals” (Lotman, 2001, p. 131). Among the many functions they perform, boundaries are a means of categorization, a process that yields to distinctions and differentiations. Boundaries are a way of making order out of chaos and to generate chaos out of order. As Lotman argues:

Since a boundary is a necessary part of a semiosphere, a semiosphere needs “non-organized,” external surroundings; and if the latter are absent, it constructs them itself. Culture creates not only its own internal organization but also its own type of external disorganization. Antiquity constructed its “barbarians,” and “consciousness” constructed the “subconscious” (Lotman, 1989, p. 48).¹

Given that cultures need an element of boundedness provided by the necessary existence of boundaries, that structure, define, and delimit an internal semiotic space from its outer space, likewise, many cultures create

their own trickster-like characters, those mythological figures that are able to cross and transpass such boundaries. By definition, the trickster is a dweller of the boundaries. It lies *in between*. It blends and blurs the borders and, for this reason, tends to destabilize the status quo.

It is worth pointing out that for Lotman, too, certain figures are an embodiment of the idea of liminality and of the ambivalence and the twofold nature of the boundary. Lotman termed such particular people, *izgoj* (Lotman & Uspenskij, 1982). It is my contention that these figures show a strong connection with the mythical figure of the *trickster*, in as much as they are both, in a certain sense, boundary crossing characters. As we shall see in what follows, *izgoj* is a trickster-like category insofar as it is characterized by a high degree of ambiguity and possess as well an element of unpredictability. Likewise, the trickster is, like the *izgoj*, a creature of the margin, a dweller of the edges and lies at the periphery of a semiosphere.

The present work is an exploration of Fredrick Douglass’ *Narrative*, by unpacking a plethora of sources from semiotics, including Lotman’s model of the semiosphere. In this study, I will be using the concept of the “boundary” as theorized in Lotman’s semiotic thought. The strength of such perspective lies in its emphasis on the boundary as a frictional point, as it were, and in its multifaceted dimension. By borrowing Lotman’s own words, the boundary is, indeed, thought of as a region wherein “accelerated semiotic processes take place” (Lotman, 1989, p. 47).

¹ As far as I am concerned, to date, there are three English translations of Lotman’s seminal article “On the semiosphere”, respectively published in 1989, 1990, and 2005. In what follows, all quotations from the article “On the semiosphere” are taken from the 1989’s version published in *Soviet Psychology*.

An excerpt of it also appears with the title “The notion of boundary” (Lotman, 2011). For a bibliography of the works of Juri M. Lotman published in English, see Kull (2011), Kull & Gramigna (2014), and Gramigna (2022). For a bibliography on the Tartu-Moscow School, see Eimermacher & Shishkoff (1977).

Lotman's model of the semiosphere

An unbounded world is unthinkable. Boundaries delimit, demarcate, contain, and mediate. In so far as markers of semiotic differentiation, boundaries are at the heart of each culture as well as of each existence. At the macro-level of culture, boundaries distinguish the internal semiotic space from the “extra-semiotic” or “non-semiotic” space.² Borders and boundaries are markers of difference. Every culture creates its own boundaries in order to differentiate identity and alterity, the inner from the outer space, life from death, the sacred from the profane, black from white, purity from dirt, text from extra-text, culture from non-culture.

At the micro-level of the individual, the limits of the self are defined by the absolute presence of the other. An existence without the co-existence of the ‘other’ is inconceivable. As the philosopher Martin Buber would say, I exist because you exist. Meaning and semiosis are both given by differences. As Mihhail Lotman pointed out, “[...] for its *own* existence every semiotic entity (sign, text, mind, or culture as a whole) needs *the other* (Lotman, 2002, p. 35, italics in original).

Further on, at the level of biosemiosis, the element that operates as a borderline between the body and the outer surroundings, the self from the *umwelt*, is chiefly represented by the human skin.³ As J. Hoffmeyer very poignantly wrote, “On the one hand, the skin thus serves as a kind of topological boundary; while, on the other hand, its semi-

otic capacity opens up the world to us (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 25). For Hoffmeyer, thus, the skin embodies a twofold nature as it works as a boundary and as a filter at one and the same time.

Indeed, like a bodily skin, a boundary both opens and closes. It contains and discloses. It preserves and reveals. It is worth noting that Hoffmeyer mentions the case of a Norwegian doctor who suffered from the Guillan-Barrés syndrome, which is a serious autoimmune disorder that affects the nervous system. Describing the traumatic experience of his illness, the doctor referred to it as a loss of boundaries’ perception. Interestingly, in his account the physician wrote this description “In a way, the borders of myself disappeared” (Hoffmeyer 2008, p. 18).

The *topos* of being unbounded resurfaces in literature and popular media. The state of being without boundaries, as it were, is represented, for instance, in Philip Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* (1978) and in Richard Linklater’s filmic adaptation of Dick’s novel. In this narrative, the protagonist wears a “scramble suit” that constantly reflects different physiognomic appearance which renders his features a vague, diaphanous, and indefinite blur⁴. This character is undefinable as he is constantly changing his features through the scramble suit. He is one and manifold at the same time as there is no distinction between the features of the multiple identities displayed by the suit but only fuzzy borders: the explosion of oneself in a myriad of others. Within the theoretical framework of the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics, the question of positioning of the researcher or, in other

² I will come back to this point, as the notion of “extra-semiotic” or “non-semiotic” are somewhat difficult and obscure and, thus, deserves further elaboration.

³ The literature on the boundary of the self and the human body is legion. For a first, introductory background on this subject, see Montagu, 1971.

⁴ *A Scanner Darkly*, directed by Richard Linklater (USA, 2006).

words, the problem of observership and that of the point of view it is very important (Grishakova, 2002; Cobby, 2018; Piatigorsky, 1977). This point – the question of the point of view – is interlocked with a semiotic understanding of the concept of the boundary as it was laid out by Jury Lotman (1989). Indeed, the boundary and its function depend on the view point of the observer. Indeed, depending on the point of view of the observer, a boundary can be seen either as a division, demarcation, and a separation or as an element of mediation or a uniting element, that is, something that stands in between two domains, an operator of translation between two worlds or as a transgressible and transitable membrane that link two sides together. Needless to say, one viewpoint does not exclude the other. These vantagepoints are in fact rather compatible, interdependent, and complementary.

Many scholars pointed out the importance of cultural boundaries. This is a vast and interesting subject in and of itself. In cultural anthropology, for instance, May Douglas in her seminal work *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, 2000) has paid special attention to boundaries, margins, and the category of dirt from a structural anthropological perspective. Likewise, Victor Turner has discussed the concept of *liminality* in the frame of rites of passage (Turner, 1967)⁵. More recently, the psychologist Jordan Peterson (Peterson, 1999, 2021) has worked a great deal on the dynamics between chaos and order and the interrelation between these two realms and many other scholars have touched upon this subject.

⁵ For a general overview about the concept of boundary and the categories center/periphery in human and social sciences see Yamaguchi, 1992.

⁶ For a parallel and a dialogue between Lotman's semiological understanding of boundary and psychoanalysis, see De Luca Picione, 2022.

⁷ The literature about Lotman's model of the "semiosphere" is legion. For a background on this concept

Undoubtedly, the boundary is a pivotal concept also in Lotman's semiotic theory of culture.⁶ Above all, in this paper I shall recall and draw on Lotman's approach and his model of the semiosphere⁷. The reason behind such a choice lies in that a semiospheric approach gives us a *model for* analysing cultural boundaries in a processual and dynamical way. For it takes into account the 'porosity' and permeability of the borders in a given semiosphere it proves to be a powerful heuristic device for understanding border crossing in specific cultural settings. As Duranti pointed out, "one of the advantages of 'model for', like all metaphors, is that they have a life of their own which frees them from our original assumptions" (Duranti, 2005, p. 421).

Therefore, the range of applicability of the semiosphere as a 'model for' is wide. The term 'semiosphere' can be utilized either in a "global" sense (the whole space where semiotic processes occur) or in a "local" sense, where the focus shifts on a particular and specific semiotic space, entity or text. Lotman's model of the semiosphere provides a solid framework in supporting my argument in so far as it highlights the double movement from the outside to the inside, from the non-semiotic to the core semiotic space and vice versa as a process of translation. In Ann Shukman's understanding of Lotman's theoretical development, which she divided into three main chunks—the early stage, the incorporation of diachrony, and the phase of the semio-

from a semiological perspective, see Alexandrov (2000), Clark (2010), Kotov (2002), Lotman (2001, 2002), Mandelker (1995), Markoš (2014), Merrell (2008), Monticelli (2019), Nöth (2015), Patoine & Hope (2015), Salvestroni (1985, pp. 7-46), Semenenko (2016), Steiner (2011), Sturrock (1991), Torop (2005, 2022), Portis-Winner (1998), Lorusso (2015, pp. 88-100), Pezzini & Sedda (2004).

sphere—the stage of the semiosphere represents the third stage and the pinnacle of Lotman’s semiotic thinking (Shukman, 1988, p. 73).

The essay on the semiosphere (Lotman, 1989), represents a new milestone in Lotmanian thought and belongs to the years of his scientific maturity. It represents a new hallmark where insights and hypotheses over a long period of years find concrete and fruitful development (Salvestroni, 1985). Lotman’s starting point is a critique of the “atomistic” conception of semiotics that leads him towards a new “holistic” approach (Lotman, 2002). From sign and communication considered in isolation, he shifts to a conception in which there are no isolated parts, but elements immersed in a *semiotic continuum* that has a certain internal structure and organization. With this proposal, Lotman reverses the starting point, abandoning the atomistic perspective in favor of a holistic approach instead. From this point of view, systems operate in a condition of non-isolation insofar as the prerequisite for their functioning is not to be separate from the rest, but to be part of a “semiotic continuum” that Lotman (1989) calls the “semiosphere”, in analogy with the concept of the “biosphere” coined by Vernadsky (1998). From this vantage point, culture is seen as a network of interrelated semiotic systems. For Shukman (1988, p. 73), the analogy between the semiosphere and the biosphere is only partial, because “the semiosphere does not have material, spatial existence; rather it exists in abstract space—that is, when perceived as a whole, it demonstrates certain properties which are ascribable to an enclosed and demarcated space”. Let us briefly recall what are the main attributes of the semiosphere.

First, the semiosphere is “bounded”. It is a circumscribed space in relation to the outer space that surrounds it and it includes a nuclear part (the center) and a peripheral area. Thus, the character of delimitation or enclosure is the first underpinning of the semiosphere and it posits that “the semiosphere is demarcated from nonsemiotic or allo-semiotic space around it” (Lotman, 1989, p. 44). Coupled with the bounded nature of the semiosphere, another key attribute is the boundary (*granica*). Just as the semiosphere is an abstract concept, so too is the concept of boundary, which is not a concrete point, but is defined as “the sum of bilingual translator ‘filters’” (Lotman, 1989, p. 44).⁸ The boundary plays an important role in translation processes. Indeed, by passing through the “filters” that surround the semiotic space, a text is translated into another language that lies outside a semiosphere: “passage through these ‘filters’ translate a text into different language (or languages) *outside* that particular semiosphere” (Lotman, 1989, p. 44, italics in original).

Within semiotic systems, thus, the boundaries of the semiosphere function as filters. Broadly speaking, only a specific type of message, regarded by the culture itself (from its own inner point of view) as a “culture text” is able to filter through the boundaries, reach the nucleus of the semiotic space and gain the status of text, whilst to all the rest of messages is assigned the status of “nontext” or “allo-texts”. Despite the somewhat “cryptic terminology” (Portis-Winner & Winner, 1976, p. 104), Lotman is clear on this point: “the ‘bounded’ nature of the semiosphere is manifested in the fact that it cannot possess contiguity with all-semiotic texts or nontexts. For

⁸ On this point see, Randviir (2005, 2007), and De Luca Picione (2022).

such texts to acquire a reality for it, the semiosphere must translate them into one of the languages of its own internal space, or “semiotize” nonsemiotic facts” (Lotman, 1989, p. 44).

Within a given semiotic space, thus, there is a certain fan of texts that constitute the texts of that culture, while non-texts lay outside the boundaries of the semiosphere. Non-texts remain at the fringes of culture and are located in the extra-semiotic space, being something that has not yet passed through the filters and boundaries of the semiosphere. Therefore, a nontext has not yet obtained the status of a text of culture, although it could become one: “all expressions to which the culture in question does not attribute value and meaning (for example, it does not preserve them), from its point of view are not texts” (Ivanov et al. 1979, p. 204).

The notion of boundary from the standpoint of the semiotics of culture

As can be gleaned from what we have said so far, the boundary plays an important role in the management of what lies outside a semiosphere. Lotman specifies one of the functions of the boundary as follows: “the boundary of a semiotic space is not an artificial concept, but an extremely important functional and structural position defining the essence of its semiotic mechanism. A boundary is a bilingual mechanism that translates external messages into the internal language of the semiosphere, and vice versa. Thus, it is through this function of the boundary that the semiosphere interacts with allo-semiotic space” (Lotman, 1989, p. 46). I will come back to this point in the next section.

Probably influenced by the metalanguage of cybernetics (Salupere, 2015), Lotman characterizes the boundary of the semiosphere as a “mechanism”, or rather, a “device”, which has a double language (bilingual) and makes it possible to translate what is in the extra-systemic space into the inner language of the semiosphere. This is a bi-directional process in that communications within the semiosphere are also translated outwards through the work of boundary translation.

It is, then, apparent that the boundary naturally performs also the function of a limit. We saw this earlier with reference to idea of delimitation which is a key feature of the notion of the boundary. The function of the boundary of the semiosphere, writes Lotman, is to limit penetration and to filter and transform what is outside into inside (Lotman, 1989). As Shukman pointed out, that of the boundary is a very complex concept:

The boundary is not simply a line between the areas of semiosis and non-semiosis; rather, it is the sum of the bilingual translation-filters, or the mechanism for the semiotization of non-semiotic data. The boundary should then be conceived as a set of points. These points, Lotman suggests, may be likened to our sensory receptors, which translate external stimuli into the language of our nervous system (Shukman, 1988, p. 74).

In Lotman’s model, the boundary is the dividing line between the system and its external extra-systemic space. Semiosphere is a circumscribed space in respect to its outer surroundings. This claim does not confine the semiosphere into a closed or bounded space, like a monad cut off from what surrounds it. Indeed, the semiospheric boundary is a porous limit, never ultimate, and permeable. It is the *locus* of continuous processes of translation. As Lotman pointed out:

The boundary of a semiotic space is not an artificial concept, but an extremely important functional and structural position defining the essence of its semiotic mechanism. A boundary is a bilingual mechanism that translates external messages into the internal language of the semiosphere, and vice versa. Thus, the semiosphere can establish contacts with a nonsemiotic and allo-semiotic space only by means of it (Lotman 1989, p. 46).

The boundary has a twofold nature. Its doubleness is revealed by its functions: the “[...] limitation of penetration, filtering and the transformative processing of the external to the internal” (Lotman 1989, p. 46).). Borders are bilingual. To put it with Peeter Torop, “Borders separate and thus create identities, but borders also connect and construe these identities by juxtaposing the own and the alien” (Torop, 2005, p. 164). As it was well laid out by Benedykt Zientara (1979, p. 406) the frontier is always characterized by a conjoining and a dividing element.

The description of borders as “the sum of bilingual translator ‘filters’ ” (Lotman, 1989, p. 44) provides us with the idea of a sort of tension for it takes into account the dynamic movement across the semi-permeable borders of the semiosphere. This move from the outer to the inner space, from the periphery to the centre and vice versa is seen as a process of translation. Thus, the main function of semiotic boundaries is to be the doors of translatability. To use a metaphor that gives us this idea of permeability across borderlines, we could imagine a boundary as a wide-mesh net in which there is the possibility to get through the gap or discontinuity that inevitable will be created.

Lotman argues that boundaries have also another function in the semiosphere, which we may term as the catalyzing function.

This additional function performed by the the boundary makes it the most dynamic zone of the semiosphere: “it is a region of accelerated semiotic processes that always take place more actively at the periphery, from whence they gravitate to the nuclear structures they ultimately supplant” (Lotman, 1989, pp. 47-48). Compared to the center of the semiosphere, the edge and periphery are the most semiotically active zones, most innovative and most dynamic spaces, pushing towards the center. Periphery is, therefore, the place of catalysis and change. Continuous irruptions constantly undermine the inner equilibrium of the semiosphere. The generation of new meanings and new information take place through “semiotic ‘intrusions’ of one structure into an ‘alien’ ‘territory’” from the outer extra-semiotic space (Lotman, 1989, p. 50).

What is the ‘extra-semiotic reality’, really?

Undoubtedly, the problem of change and dynamism was pivotal for Lotman. It is well-known that one of the lynchpins of the semiotics of culture was the concern to explain how change occurs in cultural systems. Indeed, Lotman devoted a great deal of time and energy in studying the dynamic processes in culture, namely, those processes that whilst foster chance and novelty, allow for the maintenance of certain structural features within the system.

If one reads carefully the book *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman, 2009), it is apparent that chapter 1 and 2 are somewhat set aside from the rest of the book. In chapter one, entitled “Statement of the problem”, Lotman states from the outset that a key question is the relation between statics and dynamics. One of the keywords of this chapter is the so-called

“extra semiotic reality”, which is sometimes also called the “external reality” (Lotman, 2009, p. 1).

But what is, really, the ‘extra-semiotic reality’? This terminology may seem at first glance quite vague and obscure, at best. However, the relation between semiotic systems with the extra-semiotic reality, as well as the relation between static and dynamic are key issues in this *Culture and Explosion* as well as in Lotmanian semiotics generally speaking. We should take notice that these problems are laid out at the beginning of the book and set the stage of *Culture and Explosion*. What is, then, the “extra-semiotic”, the “extra-systemic” and the “external reality”? These terms remain quite unclear.

One way to dispel this unclarity is to frame this issue in terms of the relation between language and extra-linguistic reality. This seems to be the route Lotman follows as he brings forth the *caveat* of language as a modelling system. Thus, Lotman frames the relation between semiotic and extra-semiotic in terms of the relation between language and extra-linguistic reality. This way language is taken as a mean to model to world, a way to semiotize the extra-linguistic reality which, in turn, becomes a repertoire of content for linguistic expressions.

To be more accurate, the space outside language is transformed in content that, in turn, can be expressed by means of language. This point may seem trivial but is important. It is important because it lays out the foundation for a semiotical understanding of dialogue. Given that there exists a linguistic reality and an extra linguistic reality, taken as primitives in Lotman’s thought, it follows that no single language is able to grasp the entirety of the external reality. On the contrary, it is only the sum of these languages, that taken all

together as a whole, can fathom the external world. From this stance it follows the necessity of having more than one language (at least two) in order to encapsulate and reflect this reality, which is the principle of polyglotism and dialogue. This said, there is one point that is immediately relevant for this work

Not only Lotman, at the end of chapter 1 of *Culture and Explosion*, argues that the minimal unit of generating meaning is not one single language, but at least two, but it seems to given to the extra-linguistic reality a certain value which should not be overlooked. Indeed, Lotman defines the extra-linguistic reality, as a potential possibility to appear as content of a heterogeneous set of expressions” (Lotman, 2009, p. 6).

Hence, the extra-semiotic reality is reservoir of possibilities and is also what is not yet expressed through language. The need for any semiotic systems to have its extra-semiotic reality, is predicated upon that fact that without it, there would be no dynamicity within the system. However, a point of criticism remains that what is extra-semiotic reality is a quite fuzzy concept.

I will now move to chapter 2 of *Culture and Explosion*, entitled “A monolingual system” (Lotman, 2009). If this is not enough to contend with, even when from the semiotic systems Lotman shifts his attention to the communication model, his focus remain of what is left out from the common zone, so to speak, on the glitches of the system and in the mismatch of communication. In this chapter he criticizes and reformulates Jakobson’s model of communication (Jakobson, 1971), shifting the focus from the identity of the speakers to the difference between them. Whilst Jakobson cared about the area of intersection between speaker A and speaker B, Lotman flips around the model and argues

that, on the contrary, it is the aspects of communication that are left out of the common zone, that is, the area of non-intersection between speaker A and speaker B, that should be considered and makes the communication meaningful. Whilst the communication that occurs in the area of intersection between speaker A and B is trivial, predictable, and tasteless, the communication outside the intersection is unpredictable and rich of novelty. If we really pay attention, as in chapter 1 where the extra-semiotic plays a role in bringing in new content for linguistic expressions, also in chapter 2 what lies outside the boundaries of the area of intersection has great potentiality and is valuable for communication. Although it may seem paradoxical, it is the incomprehension between the speakers, the incommunicability and the untranslatability between languages that should be regarded as valuable as the understanding and the comprehension between speakers. Here, Lotman does not bring in the concept of void or emptiness *per se*. It is apparent, however, that in these two chapters of *Culture and Explosion*, the whole idea of true meaning making is realized through the “intrusion” of what lies outside language, what is dormant, what is potential and awaits to be part of language as content of expression. It seems to me that Lotman’s later thought is permeated with this idea. I would even go so far to argue that he gives more attention to these yet to be realized possibilities of meanings than to what is already established as meaningful in a culture.

Crossing cultural boundaries across the semiosphere

This process is perhaps clearer if one takes a look at the concept of the semiosphere.

Being the semiosphere a semiotic model based on space it gives very well the idea of the contrast between the circumscribed space and what lies outside the boundaries of the semiosphere. Despite the very high heuristic value of the concept of the boundary of the semiosphere, no one really knows who draws such boundaries. This is, however, another problem which cannot be disposed of in a few words.

At this juncture, what matters is to underscore that also in this case Lotman assigns great value to what lies outside the boundaries, so much so that he writes, that the boundaries and, thus, the edges of the semiosphere are the hot spots of the system, so to speak. We saw this earlier: the boundaries are considered as the space of the semiosphere where many key, new, and “accelerated” semiotic processes occur (Lotman, 1989, p. 47). Once again, it seems that it is what lies outside the semiosphere that, through the mechanism of bilingual translation performed by the boundaries, makes the system dynamic and allows the system to develop and change. Even if one takes on the concept of text, another pillar of Lotmanian semiotics, it is always counterpointed with the idea of a “non-text”. A “non-text” is not only something to which the culture has not assigned the value and the function of text within its system. Indeed, a non-text at a certain stage of the historical development can be semiotized and be recognized as a cultural text.

The in-betweenness

As I mentioned above, not only the creation of boundaries is a constant feature of cultures but also the violation of a boundary is important. In the article *The semiosphere*, Lotman refers to certain people that are very

peculiar in that they dwell on two realms. These people belong to two different cultural domains and lie on the edge of these two worlds: *in between* one world and the other.

To be sure, Lotman provides different examples of this particular state of “in-betweenness”: the sorcerer, the blacksmith, the miller, the butcher/ executioner (Lotman, 1989, p. 47).⁹ As Lotman writes:

When the semiosphere is equated with an assimilated “cultural” space, and the world external to it is equated with the realm of chaotic, unorganized, natural elements, the spatial arrangement of semiotic structures sometimes assumes the following form: people who by virtue of a special talent (sorcerers) or a type of occupation (smithy, miller, butcher) belong to two worlds and are, so to speak, translators, are placed at the territorial periphery, at the boundary between a cultural and a mythological space, whereas the sanctuary of “cultural” divinities organizing the world is situated at the centre (Lotman, 1989, p. 47).

Whilst in the above-mentioned article, Lotman briefly mentions, in passing, these figures that, indeed, operate as translators between two spaces, this issue is taken up and deepened in an article published in 1982 together with Boris A. Uspenskij. In this paper, the authors refer to such outcast figures as *izgoj* (Lotman & Uspenskij, 1982, 1985).

Izgoj is a term that refers to a very specific social and juridical concept in the Russian Middle Age period. *Izgoj* is the individual who has moved out of the social status to which he or she belonged and lives at the margins of the community (Lotman & Uspenskij, 1985, p. 165). As the authors explain, the term has later on reached a different meaning, more

broad and less precise, which denotes a position in society that is, at one and the same time, internal and external in respect to the structure of a given society, and this particular position is tied with a given socio-psychological type (Lotman & Uspenskij, 1985, p. 165).

Lotman and Uspenskij provide both a social and mythological reading of this phenomenon. The starting point for the definition of *izgoj* is the high degree of ambiguity that characterizes the concept of “alien” (“*čužoj*”), to which term *izgoj* is interlocked. The alien or foreigner comes from a different culture and dwells in a society and a culture that are foreign to her/him. For this reason, the alien shows a certain ambiguity and has a twofold connotation for she or he belongs to two domains, the outside and the inside, the ‘own’ and the ‘other’. Undoubtedly, the alien can be seen either as enemy, towards whom the ‘own’ community shows feelings of hostility and defence, or as the holder of a particular knowledge (as in the case of shamans and sorcerers), that is, someone to be feared and respected with reverence (Lotman & Uspenskij, 1985, p. 165). As Boris Noordenbos pointed out:

Located on the border between the “own” cultural domain and a space “outside”, the *izgoj* can be seen as a (potentially dangerous) translator or mediator between foreign texts and the internal structure of the semiosphere (Noordenbos, 2008, p. 99).

It is in plain sight that people regarded as outcast have been historically relegated to the fringes and the periphery of a given group. This is the case for small groups, like families, as well as larger groups like societies. This has to do with the religious interpretation of the

⁹ Lotman does not use this term. It is my own terminology. The term “between-ness” is also used in other contexts. See Rose (1985).

frontier, as well underscored by Zientara (1979, p. 407):

Each community understands the frontier as a boundary between the sphere of its everyday life and that which is foreign to it; the foreign element was felt in ancient times, and is often still felt today, as a hostile element. In this way the frontier was also considered in ancient religious systems: on the inside reigned the protector deities of the group, on the outside stretched the region of the sacred without organization (...) or a sphere subject to the gods of other communities. When a people wanted to rid itself of an evil that had arisen within its bosom, it expelled it from its borders: thus, the Jews hunted the scapegoat, thus the Hindus drove the symbolic epidemic chariot out of the community's territory.¹⁰

The ambiguous nature of the *izgoj* consists of either being the holder of a particular dexterity, a sort of creativity, or being the stigmatized possessor of evilness and danger.¹¹

The figure of the *izgoj* described by Lotman and Uspenskij presents certain similarity with the archetypal figure of the trickster. Both are amphibian figures for both have an ambivalent position in the system of culture. Both dwell in the space of in-betweenness. However, there are also some important differences as the *izgoj*, as pointed out above, is a socio-psychological type, while the trickster is a mythical figure. Notwithstanding such difference, both concepts describe liminal figures who belong to two realms and are defined by a high degree of ambivalence. They are eclectic and multifaceted. Let us now recall two definitions of the trickster that may shed light on the parallel between Lotman's *izgoj* and the concept of the trickster. As C.W. Spinks pointed out:

The Trickster is the undifferentiated hero who, in ludic form, is used to satirize the conventions of cultures whose narratives tell about him [...]. Not only is Trickster closely identified with the cultural hero [...] but in the shamanistic tradition the proto-priestly shaman is also often a Trickster figure: one who speaks the old animal languages, one who can change bodily form, or one who always walks the edges of the Sacred and Profane to practice behaviours which to most 'normal' folk are insane, sacred or blasphemous (Spinks, 1991, p. 179).

According to the classic definition proposed by Paul Radin, the trickster is described as follows:

[...] at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both (Radin, 1972, p. XXIII).

Astuteness, creative falsehood, opportunistic dexterity, camouflage, ambivalence, capacity to change skin according to the circumstances: these are all typical features of the trickster's spirit. Famous for his deceptive ability, the trickster is a multiform being. A shapeless shape. *Polytropos*. Namely, the one of many shifts. The trickster is the one who holds that particular flexible intelligence called *mêtis* in Ancient Greece. *Mêtis* is:

[...] a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine fair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years (Detienne & Vernant, 1978, p. 46).

¹⁰ My translation from Italian.

¹¹ In this regard, it is revealing the parallel between the solitary, the melancholic, and the genius as those who have passed the beyond the boundaries and social

norms and regarded as stigmatized by a community. In this connection, see, the discussion about solitude and taciturnity written by Courtine and Haroche (1997, pp. 138-155).

Detienne and Vernant argue that *mêtis* is a particular form of intelligence, flexible and sharp, that is complementary to the logical rationality. *Mêtis* is strictly linked with praxis. It is characterized by its plasticity and obliqueness.

Frederick Douglass as a boundary figure

In the light of what has been said so far, we clearly notice an affinity between the archetypal figure of the *trickster* and Lotman and Uspenskij's concept of *izgoj*. As I have shown above, the similarity is predicated upon the nexus that both figures have with the notion of the boundary. This shed lights on the idea that liminal figures, dwellers of the edge, play the cathartic role of innovators.

It is my contention to demonstrate how Frederick Douglass, an *American Slave*, performed his life as a boundary figure, undermining the basis of the culture he was confined to: the slave plantation. Douglass was born in a world where two distinctive and diametrically opposed systems coexisted: black and white, animal and human, slave and master, owned and owner, exploited and exploiter, non-culture and culture, non-language and language. These classes of asymmetrical opposition are presented in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* - published firstly in 1845 (Douglass, 1994) - his autobiographical account of the redemption from slavery.

I shall look at the *Narrative*, our unit of analysis, as semiosphere, and investigates how internal boundaries are contested and reshaped by Frederick Douglass. Therefore, in the context of this paper, the model of the semiosphere is applied in a narrow sense to a specific literary text. As we shall see in what

follows, Douglass is a trickster-like figure insofar he is in between two opposite worlds, the slaves and the slave holders, and he plays at the edge of the system in order to subvert established rules of the plantation culture.

The *Narrative* itself as cultural text is a trickery act: a black text written with the white ink of the alien language of the master. Douglass' point of view is the insider point of view, the one who narrates the story in first person. He is the sender and receiver of is act of *autocommunication* (Lotman, 1990, p. 20). In his autobiographical account, Fredrick Douglass portrays his experience as a slave from an insider perspective. Needless to say, my own point of view as cultural researcher and analysts is the one potential "model reader" (see Eco, 1979) of his autobiographical novel.

Alessandro Portelli pointed out that the frequency of animal tropes in Douglass' *Narrative* is an index of the border-crossing from the human sphere to the realm of animals (Portelli, 2004, p. 118). In the system of plantation, slaves were animals. This point is reflected in Douglass' descriptions: "By far the larger part of the slaves know a little of their ages as horses know of theirs" (Douglass, 1994, p. 15). Another excerpt is quite enlightening in respect to the human/animal relationship:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder (Douglass, 1994, p. 46).

According to Portelli, Douglass' *Narrative* can be read as the slave's gradual acquisition of a neglected humanity. Indeed, slaves were born in a condition far from being human.

As Lotman pointed out "the mirror-like relationship between 'our' world and 'their' [...] is rendered by a system of rules: "what is not allowed with us is allowed with them" (Lotman, 2000, p. 132). Slaveholders permit themselves what is not permitted to slaves. Despite slavery rules, Douglass firmly decides to learn how to read and write. His first teacher was the "kind and tender-hearted" wife of his master, Mr. Auld (Douglass, 1994, p. 40).

Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger [...] how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value for his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a greater deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy" (Douglass, 1994, p. 37).

Douglass' consciousness of himself as human being goes through the appropriation of the language. Here the opposition between the two worlds become apparent. "It was a new and special revelation [...]. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Douglass, 1994, pp. 37-38). The *tactic* of the slave counterpoints the *strategy* of the master.

What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil,

to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought (Douglass, 1994, p. 38).

Two conflicting semiospheres and values are in contrast. Douglass does not mediate between two poles as conciliator. Instead, he penetrates the cultural code, e.g. language of the master in order to subvert the slavery system. As Portelli wrote, a common language is, at one and the same time, the space of communication and the place for clash (Portelli, 2004, p. 135). Thus, Douglass is not a neutral agent whose mediation preserves cultural differences. He is nothing but a *translator/traitor*, a semiotic generator who "allows a culture to articulate and renew its relationship with its own values and delineations of behaviour" (Harris, 1997, p. 75). Douglass exhibits the transitivity and translatability of a boundary otherwise impracticable and untranslatable. He holds the possibility of a dual contemporary point of view which signifies a twofold semiotic space and a double impossible identity: the one who belongs to A and non-A. The ontological and existential status of Frederick Douglass is in between. In no man's lands.

Conclusive remarks

This paper has attempted to join together Lotman's boundary theory and Douglass' slavery narrative with the purpose of showing the writer's boundary-crossing attitude inside the semiotic space of the plantation. Slavery has been handled as dual system of opposition that are mediated by Frederick Douglass as cultural *trickster*. By a closer look at the *American slave's* autobiographical *Narrative*, I have shown how Douglass' acquisition of the alien's language, the white language of the master, played a subversive role in the cultural system of the plantation.

Douglass has been described as *trickster*. Slaves used all means in order to gain opportunities for escaping his condition.

Opportunity. There is an ancient bond between this term and the passage that whatsoever obstacle prevents. In *The Origins of European Thought* (1951), Richard Onians explains that ‘opportunity’ derives from the Latin *porta*, which indicates the ‘entrance’ or the ‘passageway’. *Poros* in Greek language indicates what offers an aperture, an opening. *Poroi* are all passages that allow fluids to flow over the body (Hyde, 1998, p. 57). Trickster-Douglass walks through the *poroi* of his culture, crossing the borders of his own semiosphere.

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