
TEACHER AS PROPHETIC TRICKSTER

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ABSTRACT. There are a multitude of powerful cultural archetypes and images of the school teacher. These include nurturing caregiver, guardian of morality, champion of the global economy, self-sacrificing do-gooder, cultural worker, intellectual, tyrant, and many more metaphors. Jim Garrison's essay introduces another figure, a mythological persona, to the pantheon of images depicting the school teacher — the Trickster. Tricksters are masters of multiple interpretation that cross, bend, break, and redefine borders. Garrison concentrates on prophetic tricksters that create openings in closed structures to reveal hidden possibilities. In practice, many teachers are tricksters. They know how to maneuver in, around, and through rigid bureaucratic structures and standards to connect with their students and make a difference while exercising creative autonomy in the classroom. Garrison's essay provides examples of trickster teachers drawn from literature depicting classroom practice.

There are a multitude of powerful cultural archetypes and images of the school teacher. These include champion of the global economy, nurturing caregiver, critical intellectual, agent of social justice, and many more metaphors, synecdoches, similes, and such. Perhaps teaching is so complex we can only fully comprehend it poetically. My essay introduces another figure, a mythological persona, to the pantheon of images depicting the school teacher. It is one whose very nature is poly-tropic, allusive, and elusive — the Trickster.

Real, living teachers are never perfect instances of any cultural archetype, but they may always participate in the patterns of action authorized by them. They may assume the persona of guardian of morality, cultural worker, and even tyrant many times during the course of a single day. In this essay, I examine some of the actions authorized by the mythical persona of trickster, many of which are not laudatory.

Tricksters are devious shape shifters that carry out some of the profoundest cultural work possible. They break, bend, and remold the structures and identities (including personal identities) that hold a society together. They wander endlessly. We often find tricksters at crossroads making deals and at borders not only eluding guards, but also redrawing boundaries. Tricksters break rules, violate laws, and rewrite regulations. Elusive, they specialize in slipping traps while taking the bait. Their logic is that of paradox. They even defy the logic of noncontradiction. Tricksters celebrate contingency, chance, and accident while using them to their advantage. They are creators, and re-creators, of interdependent, imperfect, unfinished, and ever-evolving worlds. For them, the age of revelation never passes.

Tricksters have no essence or innate knowledge. They must learn how to make their way in the world. Tricksters derive intelligence from appetite. Because they often mindlessly follow their desires, they must learn from their mistakes. Theirs is the education of eros. The trickster is a proxy for our species, which relies

far more on learning than does any other. We are not born with the innate instincts and abilities necessary to survive. Literacy, the remarkable ability not only to read natural signs, but also to create and use artificial ones, is what most sets *Homo sapiens* apart. Our species has the longest period of maturation. Actualizing our potential for literacy is an extended, educationally developmental process. While tricksters perform many cultural functions, I am interested in how tricksters reweave the ligatures of literacy and what teachers may learn from such archetypes.

According to Lewis Hyde, trickster is one of the most pancultural of all mythical figures.¹ Often he is associated with the creation of language or its interpretation. He is Krishna among the Hindu, Monkey among many Chinese, and Myrddin among the Celts. In all incarnations, trickster's ploys are linguistic, tropic, and treacherous. Among the Greeks and within the tradition of Western thought, he is the god Hermes, from which we derive the word hermeneutics, the art of interpretation. Hermes is the messenger of the Greek gods mediating between heaven and earth, the guide of mortals to the underworld after death, and the patron of thieves. The divine trickster figure among the Yoruba of West Africa is Esu, who also mediates between the divine and mundane worlds. According to Henry Lewis Gates, Jr., "Esu is the sole messenger of the gods...he who interprets the will of the gods to man.... Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and stylus."² Gates claims Esu is closely related to his "functional equivalent in Afro-American mythic discourse, that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey," whom we encounter in contemporary hip-hop (*SM*, 11). We will concentrate on the cultural mythology surrounding Esu, Krishna, and, to a lesser extent, Hermes to help us better understand how teachers may use the arts of meaning making, interpretation, and reinterpretation to retie the threads of learning prescribed by conventional curriculum and teaching practice.

Gates declares that "Esu's most direct western kinsman is Hermes" (*SM*, 8). There are important differences between Esu and Hermes, but my essay accentuates their similarities. Gates observes that Yoruba sculptures of Esu almost always include a calabash wherein,

he keeps ase, the very *ase* which Olodumare, the supreme deity of the Yoruba, created the universe. We can translate *ase* in many ways, but the *ase* used to create the universe I translate as "logos" as the word as understanding, the word as the audible, and later the visible, sign of reason. (*SM*, 7)

John 1:1 of the Christian Bible reads: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In the original Greek, the word for "Word"

1. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). This work will be cited in the text as *TMW* for all subsequent references.

2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6. This work will be cited in the text as *SM* for all subsequent references.

was “*logos*.” The classical Greek word meant many things, including “discourse,” language, logic (that is, ordered discourse), and “to give an account.” It also implied ratio and proportion morally as well as mathematically, and a gathering that reveals truth. Both *ase* and *logos* imply not only power, but also the supreme power of world-making creativity. Today, “*logos*” usually refers to a logically organized system of fixed categories, concepts, standards, laws, and identities. Without *logos*, all is chaos, although *logos* may also lead to folly.

Hyde remarks that the calabash “symbolizes contained creation” (*TMW*, 292). Esu is “known for breaking calabashes,” which is “a sign of catabolic energy,” and “not of contained power,...but of potentiality let loose” (*TMW*, 292). The release of catabolic energy, the release of human potential, is the prime motive of the prophetic trickster teacher. The critical recognition is that we need both catabolic energy and we need the limits of the living *logos*, but that when the *logos* oppresses, then it is time for trickster, and when trickster threatens to collapse all into chaos, we need the *logos*. This dialectic has neither beginning nor ending.

In the Yoruba Theogeny, “Ifa is the next of divine will, Esu is the text’s interpreter” (*SM*, 9). Committed to law, system, and rigid structure, Ifa always speaks the literal truth while Esu interprets his meaning to humankind in ways that may undo the incautious; Esu is no literalist. The relation between Ifa and Esu is much more complicated than that between Zeus and Hermes. For one thing, Ifa does not rule Esu. Instead, they are the best of friends and delight in their differences. This makes sense; the trickster cannot trope without literal meaning and those who possess literal meaning cannot grow without tropes. They need each other, so it is well that they love each other. This relation is important to remember. Later in this essay, I am very critical of existing educational bureaucracy, but I do not mean to imply that law and order is always bad, only that when it becomes oppressive, teachers may have to resort to trickery.

Esu is the path to Ifa, it is he that invents the system of Ifa interpretation and who teaches Ifa that the latter may make the voice of his will known to human beings. Gates indicates, “The voice of Ifa, the text, writes itself as a cryptogram. Esu then assumes his role of interpreter and implicitly governs the process of translation of these written signs into the oral verse” (*SM*, 13). Esu discloses without final closure. We cannot capture him in the net of any logical system, although he constantly creates and reshapes these systems. We can only interpret this work as a system of differences and traces.³ He is polytropic and as semantically “promiscuous as divinely possible” (*SM*, 42). He evolves into Signifying Monkey in the Americas, where he becomes more oral than scribal, and evolves into the central trope of Afro-American literature (*SM*, 40).

Gates remarks, “If Esu is a repeated topos [topic or place], for my purposes he is also a trope” (*SM*, 11). It is well to remember in the remainder of this essay that Esu, Krishna, and tricksters in general are both topic and trope. Literacy, the ability

3. Not surprisingly, Jacques Derrida endorses Gates’s book, even as Gates confounds Derrida’s notion of phonocentrism.

to read and write signs (including mathematical symbols and the meaning of bodily gestures), the capacity to code, decode, and recode anew, is the trickster's most common trait and a primary trick of the trickster's trade. It is often the trick of the teacher's trade as well.

Empirical studies have shown that teachers enter teaching to obtain "creative autonomy" and the "psychic rewards" of teaching, and the best teachers leave if they cannot secure these desired goods.⁴ The meaning of the phrase "the psychic rewards" is something like connecting to students and helping them grow. If the teacher's institutions cannot contribute to creative autonomy, then they will have to look elsewhere to obtain the psychic rewards of teaching. The loss of creative expression and the opportunity to care and connect are the flint and steel of teacher burnout.

Teachers often turn to the trickster archetype to help them deal with rigid, hyperrationalized bureaucratic structures and mindless technocratic management in order to preserve creative autonomy and secure psychic rewards. Sometimes the law of Ifa proves too rigid. One reason for my writing this essay is to make clearer what it means when we resort to trickery. The trickster archetype is entirely ambivalent. Therefore, such action is as dangerous as it is sometimes necessary.

As an archetype, tricksters are unconscious and indifferent to the consequences of their actions, while actual teachers who depend on this archetype should be fully conscious of and concerned about such consequences. We do not want pedophiles, child abusers, or even negligent teachers, so, as we should, we make rules, instantiate surveillance systems, and pass judgments. Nonetheless, we also construct surveillance systems and pass judgments that suppress teachers' creative autonomy, sometimes to the point of endangering the democratic values of a free and open society.

Ifa and Esu are friends, but their friendship depends on a crucial tension that needs constant maintenance. The promise of certainty and rest tempts us beyond the legitimate role of literalness toward Ifa's rigidity. Meanwhile, the tantalizing image of the archetypal trickster eventually confronts us with the specter of chaos, nihilism, and "anything goes" relativism. The archetype of trickster can live beyond good and evil, but we cannot, although we can, and often should, live beyond conventional good and evil. The wise will let Ifa and Esu enjoy their friendship by cultivating not only critical thinking, but creative thinking as well.

Hyde reminds his readers that "trickster is a mythological character; there are no human tricksters. Human beings participate in this mythology, but they simultaneously participate in others, and in history" (*TMW*, 244). This is a critical distinction. We should not confuse mythical personas with flesh-and-blood human beings. Real, living teachers are never perfect instances of any cultural archetype, but they may always participate in the patterns of cultural action authorized by them. Sometimes they may borrow from several simultaneously in order to enact their own original performances.

4. See Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

Just as participating in the agent of social justice archetype might guard against the excess of the champion of the global economy archetype (our students do need jobs after all), so too can critical intellectual, or even guardian of morality, defend against the excesses of the trickster. The role of guardian of reflective morality, perhaps with an emphasis on the archetype of intellectual in the form of critical theorist, is especially useful for checking the excesses of trickster, while trickster, perhaps in the form of the postmodernist, may be useful for checking the excesses of the overly strident educational critic. Meanwhile, the common sense of practitioners that must cobble things together to fit specific contexts of practical action might check the excesses of critical theorists, postmodernists, or, my favorite, Deweyan pragmatists.

In this essay, my sympathy lies with the classroom teachers and student teachers I encounter in my general social foundations class and when I am out in the schools. Increasingly, these teachers talk to me about the inflexible structures of No Child Left Behind and the like. They speak of burning out or rusting in place. These teachers feel the need to evade rigid bureaucratic structure in order to preserve their creativity and love of teaching. Often it is the best teachers that are most tempted to avail themselves of the trickster archetype with its difficulties and dangers.

With these teachers in mind, I will introduce a particular kind of trickster that I will call, following Hyde, "the prophetic trickster." This trickster restores the plenitude of existence excluded by the closure characteristic of bureaucratic discourse by moving beyond good and evil as that discourse defines it. I believe prophetic trickster is a version of trickster that will satisfy the demands of teachers who, while they find it necessary to embrace the trickster archetype, nonetheless want also to retain aspects of the personas of nurturing caregiver, agent of social justice, and reflective intellectual without yielding to the excesses of any of these archetypes (such as destroying themselves through self-sacrifice, succumbing to the tyranny of partisan politics, or resigning themselves to rigid intellectual categories).

Tricksters often derive intelligence by acting on their desires and learning from the consequence. Therefore, I will have something to say about trickster teaching and the education of eros. I will then argue that perfect and closed cultural systems such as govern school culture in the United States and elsewhere generate a great deal of unnecessary waste. We will look at how trickster teachers work with those students the system tends to trash. Because tricksters work beyond conventional good and evil, they are profoundly ambivalent. Consequently, I provide a cautionary conclusion about how to distinguish true from false prophets.

Remember, trickster tropes all structure moral, aesthetic, or cognitive truths whether good, bad, or indifferent. We cannot evade him. He is a reminder that we may never be certain of our motives or their consequences. We cannot confine or tame trickster, but we may sometimes use catabolic energy well by channeling it wisely through the *logos*. Nonetheless, there is nothing — not moral rightness, aesthetic sensibility, or reflective intelligence — that can fully protect us from his ways. I believe in what I say in the remainder of this essay, but I also believe that

playing with trickster is always dangerous and that sometimes our tricksters may readily reverse our best intentions. In an unfinished and unfinishable universe, no one's discourse (yours or mine) is beyond critical reflection or trope.⁵

BUREAUCRACY, STANDARDS, AND THE EXERCISE OF POWER IN CONTEMPORARY SCHOOLING

In *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche, concentrating on the will to power as knowledge, writes: "It is the powerful who made the names of things into law, and among the powerful it is the greatest artists in abstraction who created the categories."⁶ The strongest artists create the rules, laws, and standards defining good and evil within a culture's unreflective, customary morality. By definition, the good are those who conform and the evil those who disobey the will of the creators. It is well to remember, however, that tricksters are morally ambivalent, and, hence, the powerful can be tricksters too.

Teachers in the role of critical intellectuals, agents of social justice, or even guardians of reflective morality sometimes find the norms of good and evil to be other than what the powerful proclaim. Whether right or wrong, those that arrive at such conclusions and seek to alter the standards will conflict with the administrative, legal, and policing functions that express the power of the creators to hold the norms of conventional morality in place. Tricksters may break rules while avoiding capture. Therein lies the temptation to trickery for teachers that seek creative autonomy or social justice. Here, I concentrate on the excessively rigid bureaucratic rules, norms, averages, tests, standards, and such that establish the mindlessly unreflective morality of so much contemporary educational discourse.

Susan Ohanian calls those who are excessively committed to rigid law and order in the field of education "standardistos" while speaking of "standardisto tyranny."⁷ The standardistos determine the culturally dominant *logos* of the

5. Tricksters are indeed both topos and trope. The figure is endlessly elusive. In a draft of this essay, I devoted several pages to the following claim by Hyde: "All the standard tricksters are male" (*TMW*, 335). Hyde makes two main observations. First, tricksters generally arise in patriarchal cultures. Second, those who hold primary cultural power, often men, construct categories, rules, and norms. Nonetheless, they require some form of release from their own constraints along with a way of acknowledging what their culture requires but cannot formally sanction. Because this essay concentrates on K-12 classroom teaching and females execute most of the tricks of teaching discussed, I dispute Hyde's claim. It is perhaps true that the "standard tricksters" found in the high myths of most cultures are indeed male. However, there are females in abundance at the fringes of high literature or at the center of low myths such as fairy tales. Some relevant collections that identify female tricksters include J. Cheryl Exum and Johanna W.H. Bos, eds., *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power* (Atlanta, Georgia: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1988); Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); and Ethel Johnston Phelps, *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from Around the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 1981). There are also female tricksters in the Christian Bible. See, for instance, Tamar in Genesis 38. However, nothing can contain the trickster, including gender identity. Gates mentions that "Esu is also genderless, or of dual gender...despite his remarkable penis feats" (*SM*, 29). In the Winnebago myths, Wakdjunkaga also performs remarkable penis feats, becomes pregnant, and gives birth (see Paul Radin, *The Trickster* [New York: Schocken, 1972]). I hope to pursue these issues in a later essay. Suffice it to say for now that once we decide to dance with trickster, we can pretty much expect to appear foolish.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1901; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 277.

7. Susan Ohanian, *Caught in the Middle: Nonstandard Kids and a Killing Curriculum* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2001), x. The very title of this book allows us to catch a glimpse of the teacher as trickster in a liminal space. This work will be cited as *CM* in the text for all subsequent references.

contemporary educational discourse, the discursive system of categories and identities. The emphasis is on one-size-fits-all standards that serve as the curricular objectives of instruction where supposedly "objective" tests measure the student's success in meeting the standards. This *logos* reduces the identity of students to test scores. The self becomes merely a cipher.

TRICKSTER TEACHERS AS PROPHETS: RESTORING THE SPIRITUAL PLENTITUDE OF
EXISTENCE BEYOND CONVENTIONAL GOOD AND EVIL⁸

Lewis Hyde remarks: "all structure — no matter how 'good' — exists by excluding something" (*TMW*, 286). Any finite structure (for example, school rules, norms, and standards) must exclude the infinite plenitude of existence. Every bureaucracy must deny, denigrate, or discriminate against what it does not permit as part of "normal" existence or conduct. Trickster prophecy finds openings, or what the classical Greeks called *poros* (that is, portals), that look out on the infinite possibilities excluded by fixed and final commandments decreeing the difference between good and evil. It is well to remember, however, that trickster requires rules to operate. Trickster transforms rules, but cannot create them; another power (such as Olodumare, Zeus, or the school board) does that. I want to consider the trickster teacher as a prophet of literacy.

Hyde argues that tricksters' antics often bring insight for others, if not for the tricksters themselves. They offer "lies that tell a higher truth," they reveal "prophetic contingency," and sometimes they show us the heart of things (*TMW*, 282–284). Hyde concedes that if "we associate prophecy with righteousness, morality, and unmediated knowing, then it is rather odd to speak of an amoral, lying, thieving, mediating prophet" (*TMW*, 284). There is the kind of prophet that supposedly provides direct, unmediated, revealed truth from the highest. Arguably, Moses is the only example in the Hebrew Bible. As Hyde indicates, "all non-Mosaic prophecy is 'imagined,' and prophets who speak in this way can be either true or false" (*TMW*, 297). Unlike Apollo or Moses, Esu and Hermes do not provide the exact meaning of events or the truth of some proposition. Instead, they take us to the limits of language and gesture toward infinite possibilities beyond the boundaries of any actual discourse.⁹ Let us examine non-Mosaic trickster prophecy.¹⁰

If those in power create codes of good and evil that suppress imagination and creative desire, then a trickster just might be the prophet of ameliorative possibility. If there are laws beyond conventional morality, sometimes only an outlaw can

8. In my research thus far, I have only come across one book that makes direct connections between trickster and classroom teaching. James C. Conroy's *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education, and Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) contains a delightful chapter titled "The Teacher as Trickster."

9. Tim McDonough astutely remarks: "What the fool teaches is...not transcendental truths, but the embeddedness of truths and their emergence only in the actions and interactions between meaning making, symbolically capable actors." Timothy McDonough, "The Fool's Pedagogy: Jest for Liminal Learning," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 111.

10. Prophecy has a distinct relation to time, but it is not telling the future. As Hyde puts it, "the prophet speaks of things that will be true in the future because they are true in all time" (*TMW*, 284).

be their prophet. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a trick that involved breaking the law (that is, organized civil disobedience) to fight tyranny and demand civil rights. King did not embrace trickster unalloyed, but he certainly borrowed from Esu's calabash to release catabolic energy. Similarly, good teachers often resort to trickery in defending their rights and those of their students. Many believe the greatest achievement of teaching is to free young minds to dream their own dreams and to vicariously experience in imagination the consequences of acts both wise and foolish. King's greatest speech was about a dream he had. We often crucify prophets. Trickster teachers, like trickster prophets, prefer to live for their cause.

The prophetic teacher accomplishes at least four tasks. The trickster teacher can only carry out the first three. The trickster must first release passionate desire from the objects and ends depicted by the reigning conversation. This step involves stimulating the dangerous desire to learn, which technocratically managed schooling often fears and strives to suppress. Second, the trickster finds gaps, openings, windows, and doors into other worlds closed off by the categories of "correct" thinking, the moral structures of "right" action, and aesthetic constructions of "good" taste. Third, the prophetic trickster points toward the spiritual world and to the plentitude and complexity of the divine that the openings reveal. Louise Rosenblatt's observation that different readers are able to create their own unique poem from the "same" text is the kind of "truth" revealed by trickster prophets.¹¹ The final, truly prophetic task is to separate the good of immediate, unreflective, mindless desire from what we would determine as truly good upon reflection. None would choose unprotected sex if they could vividly envision acquiring a sexually transmitted disease or the responsibilities of juvenile parenthood. Critical reflection is not trickster's forte, however. Instead, it befalls intelligent inquiry to distinguish between the apparent and truly good. Let us consider each of the first three tasks in order.

Trickster releases human potential by liberating eros and creating openings that disclose infinite possibility. According to Hyde, the first part of trickster prophecy involves "appetite seeking the pores of artifice — and it brings directly...the revelation of plentitude" (*TMW*, 292). The trickster prophet assists spiritual enlightenment by first releasing desire from the constraints of conventional constructions (for example, MTV, standardized curriculum, and so on), and then creating or finding new outlets for our energies that lead to the plentitude of existence. Once detached from its familiar objects, eros may reawaken creative imagination. The release of eros precedes the revelation of the infinite possibilities that may pour through the openings constituting the paths to plentitude. Trickster is an indeterminate educator of eros.

One of Hyde's examples of a mythological trickster prophet that reveals immeasurable meaning by first releasing desire from the confines of convention is the Hindu trickster figure Krishna. He observes that for Krishna, "the first part of

11. Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978; repr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

action is not revelation, it's desire" (*TMW*, 290). One of Krishna's tricks is to lure women into the moonlight to dance with him, then to multiply himself in order to appear fully to each and thus gratify their unique desires, and finally to disappear at dawn. The cultural structure that Krishna evades is the Hindu custom of arranged marriage. The release of passions whether in overt actions or in imagination may open up new worlds of possibility. Here we have an instance of stolen love. The connection to teachers as tricksters is that we must often steal the love of learning away from the cultural arrangements of standards, tests, and those whose will to power oppresses imagination.

Krishna teaches something, but the lesson is far from didactic:

Krishna's actions point toward the spiritual world, to the plentitude and complexity of the divine... If he steals away without saying what it all meant, perhaps it would be better to say that Krishna disrupts the mundane and the conventional to reveal no higher law, no hidden truth, but rather the plentitude and complexity of this world. (*TMW*, 289)

Good teachers often steal away without telling students what the lesson meant thereby releasing them to pursue their own needs, desires, and interests while exercising their own imagination. According to Hyde, Krishna "operates not as a point of entry into meaning but paradoxically as a breeder of multiple meanings" (*TMW*, 287). Rosenblatt insists we should often read merely for pleasure. She denies the right of "authorial intent" to entirely determine the meaning of a text and then leaves it to each student to decide what it means.¹² She, like Krishna, is semantically promiscuous.

Chapter 5 of Ohanian's *Caught in the Middle* is titled "Writing Because We Want To." The chapter depicts a reading and writing workshop Ohanian volunteered to create on her own time. She begins by creating a space outside the bureaucratic control of the teachers' union and school administration where any student that shows up may write without predetermined purpose. Students volunteer to come and must obtain passes from their teacher. Here, there is "no pressure of questions or accountability — no standards, if you will" (*CM*, 87). While a few "hoodlums" show up, they soon become bored. Jolene comes to do her science homework and just watch, and Rick shows up to pester the girls. After a while, Rick starts to write a bit, but mostly, he continues to be annoying. Never mind, the space releases the human eros in multiple ways. It is also an opening into another world. The hoodlums would rather release their eros elsewhere. Jolene does not go through the portal, but enjoys the respite, while Rick allows his limited literate longings to occasionally lure him in. (His other teachers, however, say that workshop attendance worked a "miraculous transformation," although Ohanian sees little of it.) Others more abundantly celebrate the delights of literacy.

All human beings are "motivated" by virtue of being alive. The trick to motivation is to release the human eros and orient it in such a way as to allow it to live a life of expanding meaning and value. Describing her workshop activities, Ohanian remarks, "Is this writing process? No. Neither is it writing by prescription.

12. *Ibid.*

Not being one doesn't mean it has to be the other. Echoing Melville, I maintain that, like all true places, our writers workshop is not down on anybody's map" (*CM*, 99). Like Krishna, the trickster teacher's final trick is often self-erasure. One way tricksters play inside and outside of structure is that while they operate between the technocratic lines of longitude and latitude, they are often off the map.

The prophetic trickster teacher not only releases youthful desire from repressive educational constructions, such as E.D. Hirsch's fragmented laundry lists of what everyone must know,¹³ but from other cultural conventions, such as the corporate control of MTV or its supposedly more "wholesome" counterpart the Walt Disney Company, both of which are equally determined to sell students the "goods" advertised.¹⁴ When we refuse to educate the eros of young adults to desire the good, we leave it to popular culture to educate their eros to desire the commoditized goods of corporate culture.

Having redirected desire away from the cultural traps set to capture human passion, the next two tasks of teachers as trickster prophets involve locating or creating openings that reveal the infinite plentitude beyond the outer crust of convention. Standardized curriculum and tests create a false, one-right-answer-only world. Such a one-size-fits-all world suppresses imagination, emotion, and self-expression. Teachers as trickster prophets awaken the infinite spirit of creativity. Gloria Pipkin complains about the constraints of legislated learning: "The idea that learning — which by its very nature yearns to be free — can be shackled by state-forged manacles and test-obsessed officials is as outrageous as handcuffing learners themselves until they agree to 'perform.'"¹⁵ Pipkin's "state-forged manacles" resonates with William Blake's "mind-forg'ed manacles" and the infinite possibilities that appeared to him when "the doors of perception were cleansed."¹⁶ What closes the doors and manacles the minds of students and teachers are fixed and inflexible bureaucratic standards, norms, and averages. Trickster teachers unlock these doors and stand in the liminal space to keep them open.

In *Educating Esmé*, Esmé Raji Codell admits that sometimes she is "carried away with the idea of infinite possibility" in teaching fifth grade.¹⁷ She begins the second section of her book with the following epigraph from Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*:

13. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

14. Hyde remarks: "Literalized desire is therefore a kind of trap of appetite.... Just as the Signifying Monkey gets trapped if he takes the game too seriously, the consummation of desire circumscribes one's freedom to move and change" (*TMW*, 304).

15. Gloria Pipkin and ReLeah Cossett Lent, *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2002), 216. Both Lent and Pipkin won separate cases against the same school district for the violation of their and their student's First Amendment rights.

16. See William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed., ed. David V. Erdman (1793; repr. New York: Anchor Books, 1988).

17. Esmé Raji Codell, *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1999), 11.

There is no life I know
 To compare with Pure Imagination.
 Living there, you'll be free,
 If you truly wish to be. (EE, 73)

In this section, she describes a nifty trick wherein she breaks down one of the thickest of school constructions — the wall separating the role of teacher from that of student. Fed up with Billy's ongoing behavior problems, Codell, who insists on her students calling her "Madame Esmé" to her principal's chagrin, makes a deal. Billy must agree to teach the next day or suffer suspension from school. If you have ever engaged in role-play with your students, you will not be surprised to learn that it worked. With some clumsy moments and some help from the class, Billy and she get through it. The final work period of the day involves writing a composition: "The Day Billy Williams Was Our Teacher." Codell writes one on "The Day Madame Esmé Was Billy Williams" (EE, 95). By peering through the opening provided by the role-play, the students and teachers gained some sympathetic knowledge about each other's daily lives in school.

In the middle of Billy's science lesson (how to construct paper airplanes), the principal Mr. Turner enters and "Madame Esmé" yells, "I didn't do it!" (EE, 95). The children laugh while Mr. Turner, befuddled, turns to leave. Later in the day, Ms. Coil in the office tells Codell that Turner said, "Something's going on in Codell's room, but I'm not sure I want to know what it is" (EE, 73). One of trickster's talents is leaving the chump flummoxed, while furtiveness is another.

Using an old refrigerator box covered with aluminum foil, with a flashing police car light on top, and with various knobs and keyboards screwed and glue-gunned on, Madame Esmé made a time machine with a bookshelf inside. The idea: "Time travel through books" (EE, 75). It really worked. William Blake, Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, or any trickster teacher knows why. By exposing the plenitude of existence, Madame Esmé is more moral than conventional unreflective morality. It is a spiritual achievement. Describing her first day in her first class, she admits, "The moment felt holy" (EE, 26). Breathe deep; exhale slowly. In the theater of your memory, look at the class the first day you taught. If you can see them then and imagine them now as adults, you know how Madame Esmé's time machine works and why teacher tricksters can be prophets. There is something mystical, something numinous, something reverent about standing before the mystery of youth and recognizing their and your infinite potential in the time machine of imagination.

Like any trickster prophet, Ohanian resists sealing off creative possibilities:

Teachers who endure and even triumph need to be smart. They also need a sense of humor, a tolerance of ambiguity, a capacity to love and be loved, a willingness never to reach, please pardon the term, *closure*. God, what a term. The grave, a neat and tidy place, is where we will find closure. (CM, 62)

Standardist ideals of absolute perfection are not part of a living world. They kill the soul of learning. Trickster teachers like Ohanian and Madame Esmé despise closure, while seeking the world of endless flux and possibility.

Once trickster locates it, the portal may reveal endless possibility. Reflecting on some California standards, Ohanian observes,

The verbs used in the Kindergarten standards are significant: *identify* (6 times), *know*, *follow*, *explain*, *recognize* (3), *distinguish* (4), *track* (3), *blend*, *produce*, *count*, *match*, *read*, *understand*, *describe*, *locate*, *use* (2), *connect*, *retell*, *ask*, *answer*, *listen* (2), *write*. This sounds like a whole lot of workbook pages to me. Where are words like *enjoy*, *savor*, *laugh*, *contribute*, *help*, *try out*, *experiment*, *discover*?¹⁸

Ohanian knows they lie through the doors of perception, so she exercises her tricks to point out those doors. Tests are supposed to define what it is to know, but, according to Ohanian,

the best moments in our classrooms come from impulse, not from carefully constructed plans. This is why I am so skeptical about national teaching standards. How do you test for a sense of humor? A good heart? A generous spirit? A tolerance for ambiguity.... Where's the test for love? (*OSF*, 56)

The answer is that it lies in life itself as it is lived every day in intimate and caring, if not always cordial, relationships among students, teachers, parents, staff, and principals.

Most often, it is not about infinite possibility, but simply finding some ameliorative possibility. Ohanian opens one of her chapters with the statement: "Arnold is certifiably crazy" (*OSF*, 101). It is not a malicious statement; she is merely marking a fact. Ohanian's battle with the school psychologist is not over labels, but what they signify. She thinks it is her job to teach Arnold however much she can, while her principal confesses: "We use psychological services to get what we want," which means getting rid of troublemakers by placing them in special education classes. In her school, unlike the ones I am familiar with, special education means babysitting until the student can drop out (*OSF*, 119).¹⁹ Ohanian the trickster negotiates a better deal:

I drag a refrigerator carton into the room. When Arnold feels the need — or I indicate that it is time — he goes into the carton.... If a teacher learns early on that there's no justice in the world, she also learns how to pace herself so she can try to perform the greatest good.... So Arnold retreats to his "office," as we come to call the cardboard box, and I get on with teaching forty-four other students. (*OSF*, 120)

Her deal with Arnold leads to a bit of illegal learning stolen from the sorting machine technocrats. It does not mean Arnold will graduate from high school; he does not. Good teachers know that you should ameliorate the world when you cannot save it. Tricksters not only think outside the box, but, like Ohanian or Madame Esmé, they can create magical worlds inside the (refrigerator) box as well. They teach beyond customary notions of good and evil. Many teachers who want the best possible for all their students do the same.

CULTURAL PERFECTION, GARBAGE DISPOSAL, AND TRICKSTER LOGIC

Ohanian sees it as her "moral duty to offer a counterargument to people who would try to streamline, sanitize, and standardize education" (*OSF*, ix). The

18. Susan Ohanian, *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1999), 76. This work will be cited as *OSF* in the text for all subsequent references.

19. What we have here is psychological services as garbage truck.

concern for sanitation often leads to insanity. The problem with pure, perfect, and sanitized structures is this: once you have created them, how do you rid yourself of the leavings of creation? Garbage disposal has led to some of history's greatest horrors. Ohanian recalls a student, Tommy, to whom social services assigned an escort. When Ohanian tries to enlist the escort to aid in teaching Tommy, she refuses and comments: "He's just a piece of garbage, anyway" (CM, 62). This escort understands the "logic" of Hitler's "final solution" and contemporary "ethnic cleansing." Such logic makes schools sorting machines that winnow the wheat from the chaff instead of educating all to their unique potential.

All structure excludes something. The structure of schooling is no exception. I read Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* as primarily a depiction of how our nation and its schools trash the poor, minorities, and selected ethnic groups. While garbage pickup in East St. Louis ended in October of 1987, the schools continue to trash 55 percent of students before high school graduation.²⁰ At the end of one class, a student comes up to Kozol and tells him that as far as he and the other kids in East St. Louis are concerned, Martin Luther King's dream means nothing to them. Then the student challenges Kozol: "Go and look into a toilet here if you would like to know what life is like for students in this city."²¹ These schools, however, do get the tenured teachers "dumped" from elsewhere.²² Trickster teachers work to renew individual and cultural vitality by restoring some of what society discards.

Hyde says of trickster: "When purity approaches sterility, he will tear a hole in the sacred enclosure" (TMW, 179). Tricksters create portals that allow the ostracized to come streaming back, thereby reinvigorating the social order. Trickster as playful and poetic prophet identifies the needful absent, exposes surds, and transforms structures. Tricksters restore deteriorating persons and cultures by identifying and reinstating banished ideas, ideals, purposes, passions, and values. Without such prophets, no culture is born again. Trickster prophets expose the infinite possibilities of existence concealed by finite laws, logics, and beliefs. Hyde concludes, "Their prophecy reveals the hidden joints holding an old world together, the hidden pores leading out" (TMW, 292). Tricksters creatively locate ugly imperfections in supposedly perfect structures, thereby letting in beauty and light.

Hyde writes that "what tricksters in general like to do, is erase or violate that line between the dirty and the clean" (TMW, 177). Trickster teachers have the same tastes. They too work within and without supposedly sterile compositions. Ohanian affirms, "Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't write fiction. It isn't grand enough for you." She then adds, "What a great description of teaching. Teaching is about everything human, and those who insist on looking only at

20. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 8 and 26.

21. *Ibid.*, 36. In *Caught in the Middle*, Ohanian similarly remarks that many standardistos see kids as "sewage pipes" (13).

22. Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 46.

intellectual abstractions, scorning getting themselves dusty...should not try it" (*OSF*, 29). Trickster teachers know how to take their students' crap and use it to fertilize lucid thought, appropriate passion, and improved classroom action.

In the myth of Krishna, his playmates come running to tell his mother that he is eating dirt. When his mother demands that he open his mouth, she falls into a swoon, for when she looks inside, she witnesses the entire universe. Here is how Hyde interprets this myth:

The child eating dirt has not yet suffered the fall into structure...he has not yet refined the likes and dislikes that will set the ego's boundaries. His mouthful of dirt is therefore anagogic [mystical elevation] to any eye that loves him, though what the eye will see is not heavenly purity but the fullness of this world before order demanded dirt's exclusion. (*TMW*, 293)

Trickster teachers see their students' immense potential as well as their material, bodily, and emotional needs, not just their learning deficits or dirty habits.

Ohanian writes about how, early in her teaching career, she made an alliance with an outlaw student, "Sylvia the Zulu Chief," who taught her how to better organize and run her remedial reading class. Eventually, the system trashes Sylvia by shipping her off "to an institution for wayward youth" (*CM*, 23). Ohanian admits, "I both enjoy and need her assistance" and lets "Sylvia take charge" (*CM*, 12). Sylvia is a trickster, although not always a benevolent one. Ohanian comments on her "strength and her leadership capabilities and her sly cunning" (*CM*, 11). Sylvia teaches Ohanian that everyone is entitled to the "power of good words," and eventually Ohanian learns to "never again rely on a basal [reader] or a canned program" (*CM*, 17 and 19). As a reader, Ohanian declares, she had always "valued my emotional response to books more than a school-imposed intellectual response" (*CM*, 20). Sylvia helped her see that it was the same for remedial readers. Ohanian admits, "I never figure out why Sylvia takes on the job as my aide and even my savior. Probably my books win her over. Sylvia loves books" (*CM*, 14). This is eros and education.

Of course, approved reading often excludes the books that stir the passions. Exciting reading is contraband that Ohanian must smuggle into the class. Her alliance with trashy people like Sylvia leads to the reading of soiled books like Ethel Waters's *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*. While Ohanian finds the book unexceptional, "Sylvia and her reading group are enthralled by Ethel Waters's account of her rise from poverty and abuse to stardom" (*CM*, 14). The students know nothing of stardom while poverty and abuse are well within their purview. A few days after the children start reading the book, the "director of the City Schools program" summons Ohanian to his office and tells her he has "received a complaint that I let my students read dirty books — books with swear words, illicit sex" (*CM*, 14). The teacher complaining wants that book out of the school. While they do not end up trashing Ohanian's books as they do Sylvia, it is a struggle. It is early in Ohanian's career and she is fortunate to have a principal that takes the book home over the weekend, reads it, likes it, and suggests she "should look for more books kids will actually want to read" (*CM*, 16). He grants her permission to ignore the syllabus and the complaint. Sylvia and the principal initiate Ohanian into the tricks of teaching illicit literacy to the illiterate.

By letting trashy students and dirty books into her class, Ohanian breaks the calabash of literacy and releases catabolic energy. By restoring the enthusiasm and passion for learning that a dull curriculum, literacy standards, and standardized tests had forbidden, she rejuvenates the juveniles she is working with. She remarks, "Kids are sneaking into my room for extra reading time, and the librarian reports that when they hang out in the library they actually browse in magazines and books, which is a new behavior" (CM, 15). These kids have learned to steal literacy for themselves.

When Ohanian tries to tell the story of "Sylvia the Zulu Chief," the editors at *Education Week* change "Sylvia" to a "no-nonsense African American colleague." Their concern is that "Zulu Chief" sounds racist. Of course! Part of Ohanian's point was that she worked in a school where teachers and administrators talked about children that way. The editors do not explain why they turn a student into a colleague. Her assumption is that they can "neither fathom nor tolerate a teacher's letting a kid take over, a teacher's admitting she learned a lot about style and pedagogy from a twelve-year-old kid" (CM, 13). Learning from our students is a trick of good teaching. Ohanian indicates, "This could serve as the mission statement for the river school where I begin a long career: 'Sewers must be cleared, the kids must be taught'" (CM, 6). Ohanian learned early how much a trickster teacher could accomplish by reversing the flow of the effluent, although the affluent do not believe the story.

Some of the trickiest teachers work with students that have not yet fallen into the structure of literacy. Instead of seeing them as dirt they must sweep away with standards of achievement, such teachers realize that, like Krishna, these students have potential to learn in large part because of the structure they lack. The pathological deficit approach to schooling ignores the greatest motivations for seeking literacy: need and lack.

Gates describes a bit of educational trickery in the tradition of Esu. Here again, the pattern is one of including what official structure — in this case a high-stakes test — excludes. Gates refers to a *New York Times* article entitled, "Test on Street Language Says It's Not Grant in That Tomb" (SM, 65).²³ Unable to relate to a standardized test, these black students created an alternative test to measure vocabulary mastery in black vernacular that tropes on so-called "standard" English (SM, 66). They title their test, "The In Your Face Test of No Certain Skills." Predictably, the eight employees at McGraw-Hill willing to take the test scored C's and D's. Gates remarks that the answer to the question, who is buried in Grant's tomb is a play on a "centuries-old black joke." Even the name of the test is a bit of "standard Signifyin(g)" where "that by which you intended to confine (or define) me I shall return to you squarely in your face." It is also a parody of "The Iowa Test of Basic Skills." It is part of "an extended Signifyin(g) sign of repetition and reversal, a chiasmic slaying at the crossroads where two discursive units meet" (SM, 66).

23. Some of the younger friends of Esu tell me that this trope is now stale.

Discursive systems cannot carry out their patterns of deduction without rigid identity. Many students have no such identity. A very large percentage of students defy the logic of noncontradiction. Gregory Michie describes following the advice of a friend who suggested spending a few weeks with his students investigating “what it means to be Mexican-American? A lot of these kids don’t even know who they are.”²⁴ He began by educating himself by reading myths and legends. He does not come to any definitive conclusions, although the quest did provide a dramatic learning experience.

It takes the inclusive logic of a trickster to even begin to comprehend the meaning of hyphenated identities (such as Mexican-American) that defy the law of noncontradiction (*A and not A* is always false). Conventional logic does not work without fixed identities. In addition, the hyphen is a link between two or more worlds and a *poros* through which possibility pours. The *Logos* of exclusion must often build walls and post guards around pure and perfect worlds to keep out immigrants of body, mind, and spirit.

Eventually, Michie realizes that many of his students are in “limbo.” They are not “Mexican, but not truly American, either.” One of his students, Jose, directly defies the logic of either/or when he writes, “I consider myself *both* Mexican *and* American.”²⁵ Such identities do not fit readily into perfectly tidy little worlds. Michie admits, “The kids educated and enlightened me”; further, it was “a reawakening for me, really, but it was only a beginning. I knew I had a lot yet to learn about the kids who called me teacher.”²⁶ Like Ohanian, Madame Esmé, and other teacher tricksters, Michie is not afraid to play with identity (including his as a teacher), to reverse roles, to learn from his students, to realize that he does not need to constantly control them, and that he can co-create worlds of endless possibility with them.

A CAUTIONARY CONCLUSION: DISTINGUISHING TRUE FROM FALSE PROPHETS

Every day, teachers play many of the roles scripted by characters found in the pantheon of cultural archetypes. My goal in this essay has been to identify one of them that many might rather ignore. To acknowledge trickster, we have had to go beyond conventional good and evil. Prophetic tricksters reveal infinite worlds of possibility, but how are we to know what will prosper students and what will impair them?

Following Lewis Hyde, I have blended the cultural image of the trickster with that of the prophet to create the figure of a non-Mosaic trickster prophet. This figure presents a serious problem, however: How do we distinguish true from false prophets? Christian wisdom warns: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you

24. Gregory Michie, *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 75.

25. *Ibid.*, 75 and 77 (emphasis added). Either/or is assumed by the logical principle known as the law of excluded middle (*A or not A*), which is simply the logical negation of *A* and not *A*. Both must assume perfect, unambiguous, fixed, and final identities for the argument’s places “*A*.”

26. *Ibid.*, 85.

in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7: 15–16). We may only gather fruit in its season, so we must allow actions to work themselves out over a span of time before we may inspect their consequences. Critical morality arises by intelligently reflecting on the consequences of moral action. This fact does not trap us in the present. We may explore consequences by imagining the future, gathering up the lessons of history, and calling on critical-creative reflection. A reliable sign of truth-telling prophets is that they extend their promise in self-eclipsing love, compassion, and forgiveness. They do not spew forth hatred.

Teaching is a dangerous, tricky, and delightful profession. I do not have the space here to further explore how an agile intelligence should evaluate trickster's antics, but I would remind the reader that the trickster is only one in a pantheon of personalities. A good teacher must encompass many personas in a manner that guards against the excesses of any one of them. The persona and personality of intelligently reflective practitioner can help evade the excesses of treacherous trickster.