

***Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art.* Lewis Hyde. New York: North Point Press, 1998.**

Introduction

Story Hyde heard from Navajo while hitchhiking years ago: Coyote taking eyes from head to further sight, and ends up with one eye of a mouse and one of a buffalo (3-4).

"It was not like anything I'd read at college. No one exchanges body parts in the transcendentalist classics..." [4]

Experience on train: "From a moving train I don't see the opaque weave of the real, I see the more expansive view the shuttle gets as again and again the warp threads briefly rise."

Intent of the book: "... a description and invocation of the kind of imagination that stirs to life at the beginning of a journey." [6]

"...all tricksters are 'on the road'. They are the lords of in-between."

"He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither."

'Spirit road' – Trickster as "the messenger of the gods and sometimes the guide of souls, carrying the dead into the underworld or opening the tomb to release them when they must walk among us."

Trickster as thief – "steals from the gods the good things that humans need if they are to survive in this world."

Prometheus' theft of fire has parallels all over the world. [6-7]

"In short, Trickster is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life."

Right/wrong, sacred/profane, male/female, young/old, living/dead.

"Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox."

Sometimes Trickster creates a boundary, or reveals a previously hidden boundary. He is "the god of the threshold in all its forms." [8]

"... in spite of all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture."

"Trickster the culture hero is always present; his seemingly asocial actions continue to keep our world lively and give it the flexibility to endure." [9]

Hyde's basic argument: "the origins, liveliness and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on." [9]

"... social life can depend on treating antisocial characters as part of the sacred."

Trickster “only comes to life in the complex terrain of polytheism.” [9-10]

Monotheism tends toward elimination of ambiguity – but in fact the ambiguity of our actions remains, only the pretense of moral clarity, which “leads to unconscious cruelty marked by inflated righteousness.” [11]

‘Confidence man’ as Trickster, “one of America’s unacknowledged founding fathers.”

Many Native Americans perceived Europeans as trickster-like – rootless, amoral, acting without a regard to community. [12]

Trickster stories have value as entertainment (stirring up fantasy of amusing disorder) and as healing/medicine (knitting things together after disorder has left a wound).

So most modern candidates for status as tricksters “lack an important element of trickster’s world, his sacred context.” [13]

“The god of the roads needs the more settled territories before his traveling means very much.”

Absent polytheism, Trickster “needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed.”

Trickster “belongs to the periphery, not to the center.”

Picasso: ‘art is a lie that tells the truth.’ Picasso “took this world seriously; then he disrupted it; then he gave it a new form.”

Hyde explores “moments when the practice of art and this myth coincide” [14] – “holding the trickster stories up against specific cases of the imagination in action, hoping that each might illuminate the other.”

Trickster “is an ‘eternal state of mind’ that is suspicious of all eternals, dragging them down from their heavenly preserves to see how they fare down here in this time-haunted world.”

PART ONE – TRAP OF NATURE

Chapter ONE: Slipping the Trap of Appetite

The Bait Thief

“The Trickster myth derives creative intelligence from appetite.” [17]

Trickster starts out hungry, but before long he is master of the kind of creative deception that... is a prerequisite of art.”

Aristotle on Homer as framer of lies.

Hermes “invented lying when he was a hungry child with a hankering for meat.”

Trickster myths “preserve a set of images from the days when what mattered above all was hunting.” [18]

Norse: Loki imagines the first fishnet and then gets caught in it.

The ‘oldest trick in the book’ is the fish trap.

Trickster commonly relies on prey to help spring traps.

Salmon, e.g., are driven upstream by sexual appetite, and Trickster takes advantage of this; “the victim’s hunger is the *moving* part.” [19]

Trickster “is a technician of appetite and a technician of instinct.”

But Trickster “can also get snared in his own devices.”

Trickster is “at once culture hero and fool.”

“... the myth contains a story about the incremental creation of an intelligence about hunting.” [20]

“Nothing counters cunning but more cunning. Coyotes’ wits are sharp precisely because he has met other wits.”

Evolutionary theory: incremental increase in brain size among both predator and prey, with predators always remaining slightly brainier, but the relationship never remains stable.

“The hunter is always slightly smarter, but the prey is always wising up.”

The tension between predator and prey is one of the engines driving the creation of intelligence.

Coyotes of the American West seem to have ‘a sense of humor’ – e.g., “the well-known propensity of experienced coyotes to dig up traps, turn them over, and urinate or defecate on them.” [21]

Trickster takes on ‘a third role’ – neither predator nor prey.

Bait-thief stories: Trickster stands outside the conflict between hunter and hunted, becoming “a kind of critic of the usual rules of the eating game and as such subverts them.” [22]

Trickster must feed his belly without being eaten, seeking simultaneously “to satiate hunger and to subvert all hunger not its own.”

“... there are large, devouring forces in this world, and that trickster’s intelligence arose not just to feed himself but to outwit these other eaters.”

Rather than entering the game on the terms set by hunter or hunted, he “plays with its rules” – desiring “to remove himself from the eating game altogether.”

Eating the Organs of Appetite

North Pacific Coast Raven Cycle includes a story purporting to explain the origins of appetite: island animal chief’s beloved son dies – intestines removed from corpse burned – parents wail – shining youth

appears to comfort them – miserable slaves ('Mouth at Each End') bring food into house – shining youth did not eat – slaves tell him hunger comes to them from eating skin scabs – shining youth tastes scab and becomes ravenous, devouring the island's store of food – father gives youth blanket, a round stone, and a bladder filled with berries – youth becomes Raven, who flies east to the mainland, and plants berries and scatters salmon roe. [23-25]

There are three realms in the story – heaven, the world of endless appetite, and an island in-between – and Raven travels between them.

"The story is built around the question whether or not the intestines will own the boy... If he could live, a boy without intestines might be freed from hunger, freed from attachments, freed from sickness and death... the parents' grief and sacrifice summon up a weird 'ideal' being who shines like fire and does not eat, as if he had been gutted."

"Raven is not the father's hoped-for ideal youth who has escaped this world; he is, rather, a restless hungry beast who is in this world precisely because his father's idealism wounded him, and he has tasted the fruit of that wound." [27]

Circularity: eating is self-eating, "all who eat in this world must eventually themselves be eaten."

The law of appetite = 'ecological interdependence'.

By eating the fruit of his wound, Raven sets in motion the world of endless hunger.

Native hunters leaving intestines of killed animal in the wild, for Raven/Coyote to consume: "an image of appetite eating the organs of appetite."

In heaven there are beings who do not eat; in this lower world, mortals eat constantly. Raven is a mixture.

"Trickster makes the world, gives it sunlight, fish, and berries, but he makes it 'as it is,' a world of constant need, work, limitation, death."

Little attention to origin of appetite in most traditions, but "most traditions are filled with examples of trickster's hunger and its consequences." [28]

"The plot is typical: the trickster is given something valuable with a condition set on its use, time passes, and before too long trickster's hunger leads him to violate the condition. As a consequence, the plenitude of things is inexorably diminished. Hunger devours the ideal, and trickster suffers."

Two possible options: limited food or limited appetite.

Unable to choose the latter, Coyote has the former forced upon him.

In a Winnebago story [29-31] Trickster's oversized intestines and penis are cut down to size, and pieces of both transformed into useful/edible plants.

Jung: Trickster as 'forerunner of the savior'. [30]

“... when trickster’s organs of appetite are diminished they are turned into foodstuffs, the objects of human appetite.” [31]

Conversion of crippling desire into appropriate desire.

Homeric Hymn to Hermes – meat thief who does not eat, “hungry for the food of the gods.” [32-34]

‘... denying his salivary glands in favor of the heart’s pride.’ [34]

“Homeric Greeks located intelligence in the chest and the speaking voice, not in the silent brain.”

Homer’s Hermes: “a meat-thief intelligence setting a limit to appetite and by so doing avoiding death, the hook hidden in that meat.”

Meat Sacrifice

Prometheus as trickster: obtains both fire and meat for humans – attempts to deceive Zeus, who responds by sending Pandora. [34-35]

“After Prometheus, humans have fire and meat; they also age quickly and die in pain.” [35]

“... as a result of a foolish trick, human beings get stuck with endless hunger as their portion.” [36]

Question: does Trickster invent sacrifice (ritual apportionment)?

‘...trickster walks the path between high and low.’ [37]

“Behind trickster’s tricks lies the desire to eat and not be eaten, to satisfy appetite without being its object.”

Sacrifice as “an attempt to alter appetite – to eat without the compulsion or its consequences.” [38]

“These stories imagine a final escape for the eating game in which, beyond the edge of predator-prey relationships immortal eaters feast on heavenly foods and never themselves become a meal for worms or for time.”

Hermes forgoes his very desire for meat. He “invents the art of sacrifice and... does so out of a struggle over appetite.”

Trickster “eats the fat and leaves an empty hook behind.”

Chapter TWO: “That’s My Way, Coyote, Not Your Way”

The Bungling Host

Trickster ‘on the road’: “the context of no context” (George W.S. Trow) – between situations, “not... oriented in the ways that situations orient us.” [39]

The aimless wanderer encounters trees and fish who possess “species knowledge,” and thus are “the opposite of the aimless wanderer” – “placed in space” by species’ particular needs – deliberately setting “trickster’s aimless wandering against beings that are anything but aimless.” [41]

In “The Bungling Host,” Kingfisher catches fish for hungry Coyote – next day, Coyote unsuccessfully attempts to imitate Kingfisher and dies – kingfisher catches fish and restores Coyote to life, saying ‘This is my way, not your way... I do not imitate others like you do’ – Coyote then lies and claims to have caught the fish himself. [41-42]

Trickster does not have ‘a way in the world,’ as do others. [42]

Lacking such knowledge, Trickster “ends up hungry, stumbling around covered in his own mess.” [43]

The imitator has no inherent way, but as imitator has “a repertoire of ways,” and “can adapt itself to a changing world.”

“... plasticity of behavior” – “a consummate survivor in a shifting world.”

Young coyotes remain dependent on parents for a long time – needing to learn, relative lack of instinctual fixity.

Even ‘lying animals’ are constrained in their deceit by instinct, making them “vulnerable to any predator that gets wise to the ruse.” [45]

There are ‘traps of instinct,’ as well as ‘traps of appetite.’

Thus while ‘stupider than the animals’ (Jung), Coyote is also more versatile, able to “counter with a series of deceptions and slips from the trap.”

“Creative lying” – “playful construction of fictive worlds.”

Hallmarks of Trickster’s Mind

1. Trickster “can seize an opportunity or block an opportunity” – closing a passage to capture prey, or finding a hold to elude a predator. [46]

Latin root of ‘opportunity’ includes *porta*.

Raven, having flown through a hole in the sky, opportunistically steals daylight from the heavens to return to the darkened earth. [46-47]

Trickster is “a pore-seeker” – not attacking and fighting for daylight, but sneaking in and stealing – keeps “a sharp eye out for naturally occurring opportunities and creates them ad hoc when they do not occur by themselves.” [47]

Blocking: “Coyote lures his enemy into a tunnel, then builds fires at each end –trapping his victim and roasting his dinner at the same time.” [48]

Turning pores into barriers.

Greek *aporia* = impassable place.

Aporia = “a contradiction or irreconcilable paradox” -- “caught in a tunnel with a fire at either end” – “the trap of bafflement, invented by a being whose hunger has made him or her more cunning than those who only think to travel forward through a transparent world.” [49]

2. Trickster's "cunning in regard to doubling back or reversing himself."

When Hermes steals cattle, he has them walk backwards to give the impression they were going in the opposite direction – and creates tricky sandals, making his tracks hard to read.

"... confounded polarity..."

Fox funning a distance and doubling back to confound hounds.

3. Disguising tracks: Confounded polarity "blocks all passage by destroying the orientation that passage requires." [50]

Tracking prey is an act of interpretation: "Stories about tricksters and tracking are therefore stories about reading and writing."

Hermes and Apollo: a skilled encoder vs. a skilled decoder.

Hermes' tracks "have multiple meanings, disguised meanings, contextual meanings, ambiguity..." [51]

4. Trickster can disguise himself, change his skin – encrypting his own image, distorting it, covering it up.

African-sleeping-sickness microbe (*trypanosome brucei*) changes its 'skin' into a thousand shapes to confound antibodies.

"... it is not attached to any particular mark or face or persona, but fluidly alters each as the situation demands."

Theognis (Greek elegist): "It is better to shift one's ground than to stand inflexibly and fight." [52]

Skin-changing "raises serious questions about identity: [53] – Who is the *real* Odysseus?

"It is our habit to imagine a true self behind the shifting images, but it is sometimes difficult to know if that self is really there, or just the product of our imaginings."

Melville's *The Confidence-Man*: Might be the Devil, might be Christ – in fact, "his 'true self' is hopelessly hidden, or doesn't exist."

Pietro Pucci argues that there is no 'real' Odysseus behind his fabulations. [54]

"... it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath. It's possible there are beings with no way of their own, only the many ways of their shifting skins and changing contexts."

Chapter THREE: The First Lie

A Sign of Youthful Theft

Common trickster-tale of a bird seeing reflection of plums in the water and diving to get them, injuring self in the process. [55-56]

In the Winnebago cycle, this is immediately followed by story of Trickster fooling mother raccoons into leaving their children alone, vulnerable to Trickster, by directing them to plums, far away under the red sky (which symbolizes death to the Winnebago). [56]

Trickster offers a figurative hint, but the mother raccoons take him literally.

Trickster -- "simultaneously stupid and clever."

"... a character living on the cusp of reflective consciousness" – "trickster waking to symbolic life or becoming aware of his own imagination and its powers."

"Coyote stories point to coyotes to teach about the mind; the stories themselves look to predator-prey relationships for the birth of cunning." [57]

The brain's cunning is a consequence of appetite; the blood that lights the mind gets its sugars from the gut."

Question: how does the lure tongue give way to the mind that imagines lures?

Hermes hangs some of his stolen meat high in a barn as a *sêma* (sign), creating "an image for his own reflection." [58]

The meat "is a sign of a shift in the order of things, a new wrinkle in the code by which the portions are to be distributed." [59]

It is meat-not-eaten that remains, thus betokening memory of appetite restrained.

Sêma and *nóos* are semantically related: "You don't get a sign without the mental faculty to encode and decode its meanings."

"... this '*sêma* of his youthful theft' marks the move from incarnate life (meat one actually eats) to symbolic or mental life (meat made to stand for something else)."

The awakening of *nóos*, "the mind of a mammal without a 'way' – one that can step back from the objects of its desire and imagine them."

How the encoding mind came into being.

Nóos awakens with restraint of appetite: "We do not get a *sêma* until we have the 'not' of meat-not-eaten." This restraint comes from within Hermes, not from external authority.

Link between mastery of symbols and a prohibitory 'no'.

Meat-not-eaten "appears as the consequence of a series of cunning subterfuges." [60]

The thief's duplicity enables the meat to have multiple meanings.

Umberto Eco: "... semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything *which can be used in order to lie.*"

Fish bait: "Only when there's a possible Lying Worm can we begin to speak of a True Worm, and only then does Worm become a sign."

Apollo's cattle receive their meaning only retroactively, vis-a-vis their status changed by Hermes' theft. [61]

"Hermes-the-thief moves the meat from one situation to another and by such substitutions it comes to have its significance; it became a sign that can 'tell' something."

In Hermes, we have appetite deferred rather than full restraint.

"Odysseus and those who imagine him, on the other hand, have *nóos*, the mind that can form an image or representation of some sort and 'float' it, detached, to be considered and shaped or changed before it is either discarded or acted upon." [62]

Signification evolved to help slip the trap of appetite.

"Now... we have the mind that can hide its assumptions in clouds of rhetoric or spin our opaque mythologies to preserve the barriers of caste and class."

"... ideologies that conceal their own contradictions."

"... trickster's cunning now takes on its mental, social, cultural, and even spiritual forms." [63]

Trickster-mythology is "constantly gustatory, sexual, and scatological" – thus, trickster's mental cunning must be connected to the body's needs.

The invention of lying "arises precisely where artifice and hunger are knit to one another."

"Mere Bullies"

In Hermes' childhood – as in many childhoods – the first lie follows the first theft. [63]

Two worlds: the real one of the theft and the imaginary one of the lie.

"... the first lie is a particularly weighted act of imagination. It is a motivational fiction and a probe into the craft thereof."

An experiment with the solidity of parents' world.

Odysseus must travel inland carrying an oar until someone mistakes it for a winnowing fan. Only a traveler will know that an object/word can have different meanings in different contexts/locations. [64-65]

In Trickster mythology, theft is the beginning of meaning. [65]

"... a prohibition on the theft is an attempt to constrain meaning, to stop its multiplication, to preserve an 'essence,' the 'natural,' the 'real'."

A lie as mental imitation of theft. A child's lie asserts "an independent creator, setting out to make meaning on her own terms."

In Hesiod, the Muses perceive humans to be 'mere bellies,' ridden by appetite, and thus unlikely to tell the truth.

Odysseus claims that his belly makes him forget his story.

Greek culture shows diverse tendencies – pre- and post- 8th century B.C.: [67-68]

- Variant local truths: separation of cities in the earlier period meant that traveling poets/storytellers adjusted their tales in each location to local traditions/deities/meanings.
- Invariant global truths: in pan-Hellenic era (Hesiod), recitation remains unchanged city to city.

Native American trickster stories parallel the earlier Greek tendency. [68]

“Wherever travelers carry stories from place to place there will be reimaginings, translations, appropriations, and impurities.” [69]

Hesiod (and other cultures’ parallels to his universalizing) claim to be free of the belly. From the point of view of ‘local truths,’ this universalist claim to such freedom may just stem from being well fed!

“... it’s easier to control one’s appetite if one controls the food supply” – “aristocrats can appear to govern their neediness because they aren’t in fact needy at all.”

“... the counterclaim to the Muses’ scorn of hungry shepherds would have it that the satiated are the ones who bend the truth to their own ends. The well fed take the artifice of their situation and pass it off as an eternal verity.”

In face of such universalizing tendencies, “some ‘mere’ but hungry belly will see through the artifice and speak, if not the truth, then at least a falsehood sufficiently cunning to change the way the food is distributed. Or he will perpetrate thefts and tell lies that not only feed the belly (that’s the easy part) but upset the boundary markers by which the true and the false are differentiated.” [69-70]

“Beautiful Untrue Things”

Of interest here is not the lie as simple counterfactual statement, but “the mind-boggling falsity that calls the truth itself into question.” [70]

“... to make a ‘lie’ that cancels the opposition and so holds the possibility of new worlds.”

Trickster “feels no anxiety when he deceives... and so can tell his lies with creative abandon, charm, playfulness, and by that affirm the pleasures of fabulation.” [71]

“... the pure and playful delight of floating fiction in the face of stern reality.”

As Apollo laughs in the face of Hermes’ charming lie, so too Krishna’s mother, “charmed by her cunning and shameless child.”

“Our ideas about property and theft depend on a set of assumptions about how the world is divided up. Trickster’s lies and thefts challenge those premises and in so doing reveal their artifice and suggest alternatives.” [72]

West African Trickster, Legbo, as mediator, whose “deception is in fact a revelation.”

Krishna as thief of hearts, disturbs all those who have been foolish enough to think their hearts are their own property, not the property of god.”

- Who gave Apollo those cattle in the first place?

- Who gave all of Pennsylvania to William Penn?

For Trickster to provoke such doubt, “he must draw his adversaries into his own uncanny territory.”

Krishna’s speech is cunning/crooked “because it undercuts the situation from which it takes its meaning.”

Only *nóos* gives the mental poise needed to navigate in deep ambiguity.” [73]

Trickster remakes the truth on his own terms – he becomes ‘Keeper of the Herd.’

“All cultures have particular vocabularies that are deployed in paradigmatic patterns, in locally understood webs of signification.” [74]

“American capitalist democracy has its webs too, of course. Weight loss, natural foods, Valley Forge, atomic power, the family, free trade, white bread: any citizen can spin a narrative of these things that will make sense to any other citizen.”

Such webs of signification are typically built around sets of opposition – tricksters disturb these pairs and thus the web itself.

At the beginning of the Hymn, Hermes is at one pole of such a set of opposites (not-Olympian, not-illegitimate) – he leaves ‘the weary dance of opposition’ (Theodore Roethke) and finds a third thing. [75]

“Once the web has lost its charm, its terms lose theirs,” and seem “open to revision.”

Plato credits Hermes with having invented language (*Cratylus*).

This is a common claim for Tricksters in various cultures. [76]

“... usually language goes dead because cultural practice has hedged it in, and some shameless double-dealer is needed to get outside the rules and set tongues wagging again.”

“... the mythology of trickster figures is... the story of intelligence arising from appetite.”

Nietzsche: “Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions.” [77]

Hunger disturbs unconsciousness/forgetfulness of the illusory character of ‘truths’. [78]

Hunger as agent of *unforgetting*.

“... there is a long tradition that locates art in that trickster shadowland where truth and falsity are not well differentiated.”

Aristotle: art and lying share a common ground.

Attested in Defoe, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Llosa, Woolf, Ellison, Milosz, Picasso, Wilde. [79]

“... we are dropped back into trickster’s limbo, where boundary markers shift at night, shoes have no heel and toe, inky clouds attack transparency, and every resting place suddenly turns into a crossroads. These artists, that is to say, claim a part of trickster’s territory for their own, knowing it to be one of the breeding grounds of art and artifice.” [80]

“... we should be wary of getting too comfortable with any single line of analysis.”

INTERLUDE: THE LAND OF THE DEAD

Coyote's Impulse

Nez Percé story, 'Coyote and the Shadow People': Coyote's wife dies and he grieves – death spirit takes Coyote to the place of the dead – as instructed Coyote did everything his guide directed, even though he could see nothing – guide seats Coyote next to his wife, though Coyote could not see her – as dark fell, Coyote saw the spirits, including his wife – Coyote is overjoyed to see many old friends as well – at dawn, his guide instructs Coyote to remain in the same place until dark falls again – he sat through many hot days, enjoying many nights with the spirits – Coyote is instructed to take his wife home, traveling for five days over five mountains, and he must never touch his wife until after the fifth mountain – they camped each night at the foot of the next mountain – during the day, Coyote was aware of his wife's presence but he could not see her – on the fourth night, Coyote impulsively embraced his wife and she vanished back to the shadowland – the death spirit became angry at Coyote for ruining his plan to establish the practice of returning from death – Coyote returned to the same place his guide had shown him, but nothing appeared. [83-87]

An Old Story

Hyde's younger sister died when he was 6 or 7: "I have sometimes imagined that an early experience of death turns a soul toward art." [88]

Flannery O'Connor's father died when she was young; thus her remarkable fictions of loss and redemption?

Hyde became his mother's consolation, and he wonders if as an adult he "still hoped that the exercise of his talents might somehow lift Edith's soul from the grave." [89]

While writing this book, just such a dream of retrieving a dead child from the underworld. [87]

Tellers of 'Coyote and the Shadow People' "knew we live in Coyote's world, where sexual impulse and mortality are one thing, not two." [89]

Abandoned coal mines in West Virginia burning for decades – the topic of this book has felt like a similar longevity. And Hyde came to realize that he was working on his mother's impossible task. [90]

The realization came that "Hermes begins by setting himself against Apollo, that tricksters in general begin by muddying high gods."

A shift away from idealist Apollonian artistry toward the playfulness of trickster artistry.

Hermes/Krishna "never puts on a mask his elders have designed." [91]

However unfortunate, there is also beauty in Coyote's succumbing to the joyous impulse to embrace his wife.

"... trickster stories are radically anti-idealist; they are made in and for a world of imperfections."

Trickster as shapeshifter: "He makes this world and then plays with its materials."

“... an intelligence able to form the givens into a remarkable number of designs.”

Hyde needed “a shiftier consciousness where old stories fall apart so that new ones may form from the fragments.”

“... durable stories are self-containing, self-defended against change and fragmentation. The high gods set guard dogs around their sacred meadows. If there is to be a change, its agent will have to hypnotize those dogs and slip in from the shadows, like an embarrassing impulse, a cunning pathogen, a love affair, a shameless thief taking a chance.”

PART TWO - TWO-ROAD CHANCE

Chapter FOUR: An Attack of Accidents

The field of inquiry must widen beyond appetite “if we are to get an accurate portrait of the intelligence that allows this wandering, hungry, no-way being to make his home in this world.” [95]

Chance and accident: “Wandering aimlessly, trickster regularly bumps into things he did not expect.”

“... the wit to work with happenstance.” [96]

“... more settled neighbors often tire of trickster’s disruptions and set out to bind or suppress him”, which in turn has unintended consequences.

The Eddas (poetic = 9th century / prose = 13th century) contain two key moments when the trickster Loki threatens Norse gods with old age and death.

1. A giant (in the form of an eagle) captures Loki, and releases him on the condition that he go to goddess Idunn and bring her and her Apples of Immortality into the woods, where the eagle seizes Iddun and takes her to his house. Confronted by the gods, Loki steals Iddun back

Loki, though a god, is son of a giant and has fathered children by a giantess. He is a point of contact where giants touch the gods; he breaches the wall surrounding the gods, and two worlds briefly come together – a threatening contingency. [97]

Aristotelian accidentals are present by chance; they are changeable/shifting, while essentials are stable.

The complexity of interplay between accidents and essences is well illustrated in the arts.

John Cage questioned how we differentiate ‘noise’ and ‘music’ – he “defines modern art as art which cannot be disrupted by non-art” – he “takes coincidence seriously.”

To the classicist, a baby’s cry at a concert, or dust on a painting, are impurities and have no beauty.

But a modernist sensibility “is always willing to take coincidence seriously and weave it into the design of things.” [99]

“Many conservative minds despise coincidence of meaning by treating it as background noise or garbage, but the shape-shifting mind pesters the distinction between accident and essence and remakes the world out of whatever happens.” [100]

“... the intelligence that takes accidents seriously is a constant threat to essences, for in the economy of categories, whenever the value of accident changes, so, too, does the value of essence.”

Loki “creates a threatening contingency when he allows giants to get hold of the Apples of Immortality.”

From inside the wall of the gods’ house, giants appear to be transient accidentals.

But there is resentment among the ‘accidentals.’ Why are they trapped in time, not invited to eat these apples?

Temporal dimension to this: accidents happen in time, essences in eternity.

Loki’s act gives the transients a taste of immortality, while the eternalists get a taste of time.

2. Baldr {The Pure One} begins to be troubled by nightmares, which induce fear in him – everything in heaven and earth is made by his mother Frigg to swear an oath not to harm him – the other gods tease Baldr by harmlessly throwing objects his way – but Loki disguises himself as a woman, questions Frigg, and discovers that she has omitted the mistletoe bush – Loki then makes a dart from mistletoe wood and tricks Hod into shooting the dart at Baldr, which kills him – the gods capture and punish Loki, binding him beneath the earth with the guts of one of his children, and positioning a snake to drip venom on him for all eternity – Loki’s writhing we call earthquakes – subsequently Ragnarök prophesies the doom of the gods – Loki will be released, war will wage, and mortals and immortals will die. But two humans will survive and repopulate the earth, and the gods will reappear. [101-102]

In the 9th century poetic Edda (pre-Christian), mistletoe is associated with the summer solstice, and thus the story pertains to the cycles of nature; Winter impending, but Spring will return.

The later (13th century) prose Edda, compiled by Snorri Sturluson, a devout Christian, regards Loki as ‘the father of lies.’ [104]

For Sturluson, the apocalypse has occurred – apocalyptic rebirth no longer reflects the cycles of nature, but portends the historical coming of Christ.

“Snorri reinscribes a cyclic vegetation myth into linear time, where it is not about the same Baldr reborn each year, having suffered and survived the winter, but about a misguided early avatar of Christ who has died to make way for the real thing.” [104-105]

The 13th century Edda allowed the ‘noise’ of Christianity into the story. [105]

He expands Loki’s role, because Snorri himself is a trickster, himself betraying the Norse gods.

Frigg had set out to suppress every possible contingency – an attempt at control, an imposition of order.

But contingency cannot be reduced to zero. [106]

When Loki is suppressed, the world collapses – when he (and disorder) returns, the world is reborn.

Martha Nussbaum: the good life “requires. . . the most delicate balance between order and disorder, control and vulnerability.”

Mistletoe is an evergreen – “it carries the promise of rebirth even as it kills.”

“Before the eternal can be fertile, they need the mulch of death, disorder, and decay.”

“Just as violent upheavals increase where no political process allows for change, so here the sneakiness and shock of Loki’s deed is proportional to Frigg’s exaggerated attempt at control.” [107]

“... there is only a choice between a way of living that allows constant, if gradual, alterations and a way of living that combines great control with cataclysmic upheavals.”

Chapter FIVE: The God of the Crossroads

The Palm-Nut Oracle

Jung: “when an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears outside as fate.” [108]

Yoruba divination, e.g., is about discernment of the ‘inner situation’. [109]

I Ching is similar. [110]

“... divination works best if you come with a ‘burning question’ – “... for then the oracle’s enigmatic responses will work the way so-called projective therapies work (Rorschach tests, for example), calling hidden structure and knowledge to the surface.”

Yoruba diviners cast palm-nuts – which yield 256 possibilities, matched to folktales, proverbs, poems – all oral.

The trickster Eshu is credited with the origin of this art.

“All purity comes by refinement, and refineries must leave behind them piles of tailings, slag, dross, rubbish, accidents.” [111]

In most mythologies, the gods need some sort of ‘right distance’ from the human world – either too much or too little contact is destructive. The story of Eshu pertains to the establishing of right balance.

Eshu story: gods grow hungry, and wonder how to get (sacrificial) sustenance from humans again – threats having not worked well, Eshu decides to give something good to humans, to regain their good will – Orungan suggests ‘a big thing, made from sixteen palm nuts’ – the monkeys who guard the palm nuts give them to Eshu, and instruct him to travel the world asking about the meaning of the 16 palm nuts in the places of the 16 gods, hearing 16 sayings in each place – Eshu is then to impart this wisdom

to humankind, enabling them to know the will of the gods – when humans understood that they could now escape evil things, they resumed sacrifice, and the gods' hunger was satisfied. [111-112]

At the outset, the gods are in eclipse and trickster must help them out – Eshu's sly intelligence is the hunger artist required to feed the gods. [113]

This is spiritual hunger, so trickster must get humans to see the point of sacrifice: trading carnal satisfaction (meat) for spiritual satisfaction (enlightenment).

“... a trickster who knows that the sacrifice of carnal appetite can lead to the quieting of other hungers, and who can jigger the relationship between mortals and immortals to that end.”

Eshu had gotten the palm nuts ‘by guile,’ and thus is a kind of sneak thief or seducer – there is resistance to delivering the ‘goods’ to humans, because “a change in circumstance is in the offing” – “human beings end up with a power they did not have before, and the gods end up fed but a little less sovereign.”

“This cosmos has come to an impasse it cannot resolve on its own terms. Ambivalence binds it and things get stuck until someone has the wit to call into play a figure who is at home with contradiction and who can do good works by cheating.” [114]

Whenever Yoruba divination is sought, “Eshu is present in many ways. . . his face appears on the divining board; he delivers the sacrifice and takes his cut; he delivers the oracular story and helps the traveler make sense of it; finally, he shows up in the story itself as the instigator of its happy accident.” [116]

Eshu is “connected to the inquiry into destiny” – he always reminds that responses remain obscure even as they enlighten.

Ifa is always more reliable, more clear, while Eshu makes things more uncertain – yet they remain close colleagues.

“In a polytheistic cosmos, such friendship of opposites allows for contradictory belief.”

The beliefs, e.g., that fate is binding, and yet may be altered.

Eshu is the complement to fate, representing the elements of life not accounted for by fate or destiny” (Ayodele Ogundipe). [117]

Parallel to Apollo/Hermes, Ifa/Eshu = “the creative play of necessity and chance, certainty and uncertainty, archetype and ectype, destiny and its exceptions, the way and the no-way, the net of fate and the escape from that net.”

On a journey leaving one's ‘hometown,’ hometown “stands for all the constraints of family, occupation, and temperament that constitute that lot in life.”

Eshu “offers ‘escape from the rigidity of social laws’” (Joan Wescott).

Freed from social constraint, one “enters the realm of ambivalent fortune where things both horrible and wonderful might happen to him.” [118]

If one's disposition is right, chance events could change one's lot in life.

Pure Chance

"Most structures (in nature, society, the human psyche) are resistant to fundamental change, by which I mean change that alters the givens of these structures themselves." [118]

Jacques Monod distinguishes two kinds of chance: [119-120]

1. Operational ('one-road'): event unfolds along a single complicated path; unpredictable because "the chain of events too long, the sequence too fast" – "our information isn't fine enough."

Roulette wheel; dice.

2. Absolute ('two-road'): two causal paths cross, each unfolding by its own inner logic, "wholly unrelated to the other until they meet." [119]

Car accident caused by car swerving to avoid a cat, who is running from a glass of water someone threw at it.

"... nothing connects the one chain of events to the other."

"The cat's running is no accident and my driving no accident, their convergence is."

The words coincidence/contingency contain this image of 'two events converging.'

Aristotle devoted three chapters of the *Physics* to things that happen 'by accident.'

Eshu (Yoruba trickster) "dwells at the crossroads, the classic focal point of true coincidence."

With absolute chance comes the possibility of 'absolute newness' – this is the source of 'all creation in the biosphere.' [120]

"A genetic mutation is a two-road chance event in that there is no link at all between it and the world into which its consequences must fit."

Mutation meeting context = pure coincidence, crossroads event.

Complete independence from each other of (a) the occurrences that can provoke/permit an error in the replication of the genetic message and (b) its functional consequences.

If mutations arose in response to some hidden need or intention, they would not be absolutely new – it would not be a creation, but rather a revelation of something already existing, albeit hidden. [120-121]

The origin of everything in the biosphere lies "at the happy crossroads where a shift in the genetic code met a hospitable environment." [121]

Religious objections to evolutionary chance reflect "the unwearying, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its own contingency."

Preservation of a trickster figure enables a religion "to have a system of belief that recognizes accident as part of creation."

Eshu got one of the creator gods drunk 'at the beginning' – thus, the anomalies in the world.

"Eshu, who delights in mishap as well as good hap, is still slipping palm wine to the high gods."

Gain or loss, what is constant with Eshu or Hermes is the presence of accident.

With a trickster figure, people are "saddled. . . with all sorts of intractable philosophical problems because their cosmology doesn't fit *this* world, the world as it is."

Artists "have long known that happenstance breeds new worlds, that sometimes the creative spirit must abandon its own designs, the kingdom of our intentions being so cramped and predictable." [122]

This has always been true, but in modern art the role of chance has expanded.

Marcel Duchamp (involved in both Dada and surrealism) insisted on "getting away from the hand's acquired and habitual gestures" – "eluding habit in all its forms, and eluding the constant repetition that habit forces on us."

"Forgetting the hand promises freedom from one's own taste both good and bad, an escape from the rules of causality, and a way to avoid perceptual routine."

"... released from the known and meeting the world freshly, the happiness of happenstance." [123]

A Duchamp work, "Large Glass," featured painting of large sheets of glass; in transit in the late 1920s, it was shattered. Duchamp restored it as best he could, and came to love the way the cracks changed the work. [123]

As an artist, Duchamp became the 'crossroads' where 'readymade' objects were brought into 'a kind of rendezvous.'

E.g., a bottle-rack: "It was sitting in the market of useful goods, one universe of value and meaning, when Duchamp set up a rendezvous with another such universe. The art world hasn't been the same since."

Duchamp "courted chance for its amusing openings, and left behind a string of accidents that slipped past the guards and changed all the exhibits."

"You can be on the road at home and in the mind, attentive to the plenitude of coincidence that habit and design sometimes obscure." [124]

'Luck is the residue of design' – "Being 'aware of Eshu' means entering a frame of mind in which the eye notices that residue all around it, the plentiful and readymade world right at hand."

Eshu hangs around doorways – divination making 'heaven' and 'earth' briefly coincident: "It may well be that fate is set in heaven, but it must be played out here on earth." [124-125]

One exception to Eshu's love of chance: humankind *must* sacrifice to the gods, "for sacrifice maintains the commerce between the worlds and gives the mediator his job." [125]

“... sacrifice connected to Eshu focuses on sites of contingency, places where people might bump into something unpredictable.”

Certainly not on an altar in a protected temple – rather a crossroad sacrifice invoking the possibility of fundamental change. [126]

Eshu = “... a mediating uncertainty principle to human-divine relations.”

“an institution of prophetic contingency” – “... an accidental glimpse of the divine, and no sure way to know what it means.”

“There are designs in this world, but there are also chance events, which means design is never finished.”

“... human beings have a way to enter into the play of fate and uncertainty, and from that play this world constantly arises.”

Chapter SIX: The Lucky Find

Paul Valéry: “The bottom of the mind is paved with crossroads.” [128]

A Gift of Hermes

A bird weaving shreds of the author’s computer paper into its nest – happening upon the paper, the bird knew how to weave a habitable home. [128]

Picasso: ‘I do not seek, I find.’ – “... the wandering portion of his artistic practice.”

“... an intelligence. . . not so attached to design or purpose as to blinker out the daily wealth of accidents.”

C.S. Peirce: “Chance itself pours in at every avenue of sense; it is of all things most obtrusive.” (The author ‘happened upon this quote while writing this chapter.’)

Stradivari happening upon broken, waterlogged oars, out of which he made his violins. [128-129]

Mozart hearing a starling singing from a street vendor’s cage, out of which he fashioned the theme of the last movement of the G-major Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. [129]

Picasso seeing an old bicycle seat next to a rusted handlebar, and his mind “instantly linked them together” – the head of a bull (*Tête de Taureau*). [130]

“If only preconception does not block the avenues of sense, accidental finds are all about us.”

Eshu/Hermes are associated with accidental losses and gains – but in ‘uncanny space’ the terms gain/loss collapse – all one knows is that there is ‘a change of circumstance.’

The overriding tone of trickster tales is ‘finding,’ rather than loss (to which “overweening pride or overreaching control” usually contributes).

Hermes ‘finds’ a tortoise at the threshold, and made something of that coincidental encounter.

Victor Turner: the state of being betwixt-and-between is 'generative' and 'speculative' – "the mind that enters it willing will proliferate new structures, new symbols, new metaphors..."

Surprise, quick thinking, sudden gain; humor, not tragedy.

"The agile mind is pleased to find what it is not looking for." [131]

Picasso: "When I paint, my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for."

The gods of fortune "will drop things in your path, but if you search for those things you will not find them."

'Finds' are "potentially unsettling to whatever world it enters."

Anthropologist George Foster studied Mexican peasant communities, and noted resentment toward neighbors who suddenly became richer – given the presumption that this must mean someone else's impoverishment. There is, though, no resentment toward those whose new wealth comes from 'across the border,' or from finding a hidden treasure. [131-132]

"... a lucky find offers a way out of an otherwise restrictive situation." [132]

In Foster's studies, "the lucky find arrives from outside the knotted nets of community reciprocity." [133]

"... an opportunity. . . a pore or penetrable opening in an otherwise closed design."

Kairos = "... the brief instant when the weaver may shoot her shuttle through the rising and falling warp threads. . . a penetrable opening."

"... chance encounters that cannot be derived from the situations that surround us."

To speak of a(n) pore/opening in the order of things "raises the old question of what lies on the other side of that order." [134]

Most ancient peoples believed that accidents reveal the will of the gods.

Christians commonly hold a similar view. [134-135]

Tricksters "are not only agents of luck, they help to draw heaven's hidden meanings out of luck's apparent nonsense. [135]

After Freud, we find a similar conjunction of accident and insight, but now psychologize it.

Picasso "believed in the deep self, a personality of which the artist himself or herself is not necessarily aware." [136]

Desire/impulse leads the artist – 'like a carrier-pigeon.'

Picasso instructed young artists to draw a circle, and to see in any deviations from the ideal their unique style.

“... accidents point to the concealed portion of the man or woman to whom they happened.”

“The carefully interwoven structures of thought and social practice provide stability and structure, but they bring a kind of blindness and stupidity, too. Gifts of Hermes tear little holes in those fabrics to offer in brief intelligence of other realms.” [136-137]

In trickster mythologies, even the gods cannot live without divination; thus “an accidental find must sometimes reveal something other than heavenly will or hidden purpose.” [137]

Cosmos is “a containing fabric, and what lies outside is chaos, confusion, muddle.”

“Perhaps trickster’s accidents reveal not hidden realms of greater order but a world of shifting fragments, noise, and imperfections. . . Accident is the revelation of accident.” [138]

But Hermes stands for ‘smart luck’ rather than ‘dumb luck’ – “after a touch of chaos comes another cosmos.”

‘Smart luck’ adds craft (both technical skill and cunning) to accident. [139]

With the lucky find, the lyre, Hermes seduces Apollo into cancellation of the debt incurred by his theft of the cattle.

The lyre is descriptive, but order returns “because Hermes soon weaves his lucky find into the scene he has disturbed.”

Primarily, a luck find reveals *the mind of the finder*.

“... a chance event is a little bit of the world as it is – a world always larger and more complicated than our cosmologies – and that smart luck is a kind of responsive intelligence invoked by whatever happens.” [139-140]

Louis Pasteur: “Chance favors the prepared mind.” [140]

“... chance events need a context before they can amount to anything.”

“... the prepared mind... has its theories, but it attends as well to the anomaly that does not fit them.”

Paradox: “With smart luck, the mind is prepared for what it isn’t prepared for.”

“... a kind of openness, holding its ideas lightly, and willing to have them exposed to impurity and the unintended.”

James Joyce: ‘... the gift of Hermes... is the invisible influence (prayer, chance, agility, *presence of mind*, power of recuperation) which saves in case of accident... He is an accident of providence.’ [141]

“... some intelligence that responds and shapes, the mind-on-the road, agile, shifty in a shifting world, capable of recuperation, and located especially at the spots where roads, ‘parallel... and contrary,’ converge.”

Telling the old stories and enacting small ritual actions “bring to mind the mind contingency demands.”

A Net to Catch Contingency

D.T. Suzuki noted that the ego is a small part of mind which “can cut itself off from the Big Mind or can open itself up.” [141-142]

John Cage adds that it is by our ‘likes and dislikes’ “that we cut ourselves off from the wider mind (and the wider world).” [142]

“Likes and dislikes are the lapdogs and guard dogs of the ego, busy all the time, panting and barking at the gates of attachment and aversion and thereby narrowing perception and experience.”

A discipline of *non-intention* is needed to be free of the ego.

Cage often quoted Meister Eckhart: ‘we are made perfect by what happens to us rather than by what we do’ – and developed a ‘practice’ not only to ‘allow things to happen,’ but to encourage them to do so.

“The point of Cage’s art... is... to open its maker (and, per haps, its audience) to the world.” [144]

Having left an exhibit of Mark Tobey’s art, Cage noticed his aesthetic enjoyment of the pavement beneath his feet – the art “had opened its viewer’s eyes” – as Cage’s work can open our ears.

In any city, “one constantly hears a complicated sound collage” – this is the world we are given to hear. [144-145]

Briefly dropping unconscious, reflexive filtering. [145]

“We are more likely to appreciate chance if we stop trying to control what happens, and one way to do that is to cultivate non-intention.” [146-147]

Picasso’s attention to accident is a way of *exploring* the self; Cage’s is a way of *leaving* the self.

Cage sought Monod’s ‘absolute newness’ of pure chance.

Convergent evolution, e.g., of two species of fish (one in Africa, one in South America) which must navigate in muddy water. Both evolved an electric method of feeling their surroundings, which requires a stiff body, and thus required a single large fin running the length of the body. Both fish evolved very similar electrical capacities, but the African fish’s fin runs along its back, the South American’s along the belly. [148]

Chance and necessity: “the nature of electricity necessarily stiffens the body, the propelling fin is located by haps.”

“Cage was above all dedicated to creating a kind of awareness, believing that if we rigorously allow chance to indicate what comes next we will be led into a fuller apprehension of what the world happens to be.” [149]

Cage “was not blind to the fact that cultures and selves guard and replicate their ideals, their beauties, their masterpieces, but he did not cast his lot with durable structures, he cast it with perturbation.” [150]

“He made an art that was a net to catch contingency,” and “cocked his ear for noise, not the old harmonies, sensing that noise can lead to something, as remarkable as this world.”

PART THREE: DIRT WORK

Chapter Seven: Speechless Shame and Shameless Speech

The Immigrant Child

Venerable monk, Tripitaku, takes Monkey with him on a journey – the monk is silent in the face of shameful situations and kindly in the face of monsters – Monkey pleads, ‘Master, please put away your compassion just for today.’ [153-154]

Monkey is never blinded by compassion and never struck dumb, and he “keeps the pilgrims moving smartly along.” [154]

Maxing Hong Kingston tells of her mother’s admonition to hold secret the story of an aunt shamed into suicide by an illegitimate pregnancy, told to Kingston at the time of her first menstruation, to shame her into correct behavior. [154-155]

Shame culture fears rupture of the ‘law,’ the ‘path,’ the rules that keep villages intact. [155]

“An orderly world will have areas of speech and areas of silence.” [155-156]

In many traditions, it is an injunction to silence that renders a particular narrative sacred (‘mysteries’). [156]

This produces two kinds of speaking and two kinds of silence: profane/sacred.

Outside the temple/cathedral, one speaks of the sacred and remains silent as to the profane; outside, it is reversed. [156-157]

Rules of silence ‘help maintain the real’ (Kingston); thus, breaking the rules entails considerable risk. [157]

‘Shame that binds the tongue’ is “a gift from the gods to protect reckless mortals from their own foolishness.”

The Greek *aidos* (often translated as ‘shame’) connotes reverence/awe as well as modesty.

Without *aidos*, a person “cannot sense the force fields of the spiritual world, is in danger like an animal stripped of its protective instincts.”

“... the danger isn’t really that shamelessness will destroy the cosmos, it’s that the cosmos will destroy the shameless.”

Trickster has real resemblance to a psychopath, but “trickster’s mythic functions are wider than any psychopath, and harder to classify.” [158]

- Trickster stories are marked as 'special speech' – despite such profane content, they are “a sort of sacred lack of the sacred.”
- Trickster's lying/cheating/stealing “enable tricksters to perform a unique set of necessary tasks” – e.g., enlivening gods deadened by their own purity.

Trickster's intelligence “continues to function when normal guidance systems have failed, as they periodically will.”

- Trickster is a culture hero – inventing fish traps, bringing fire – in a way no psychopath ever is.

Paul Radin: Trickster is “at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator. . . [who] knows neither good nor evil yet. . . is responsible for both.” [158-159]

A society will regard any trickster as a psychopath, in order to protect itself from “real contact” with trickster. [159]

“Trickster is among other things the gatekeeper who opens the door into the next world; those who mistake him for a psychopath never even know such a door exists.” [159]

By writing her memoir, Kingston breaks her mother's rule of silence. She felt compelled to speak, despite feeling both the inhibitory shame and the awe of *aidos*.

Her felt need to speak is connected to “the fact that she is the child of immigrant parents” – living in two cultures at once.

The 'old country' inheres in the parents' speech inflections, cooking spices, the stories they tell, the silences they keep. Yet the 'new country' is all around the children. [159-160]

Living in two worlds, immigrant children get to be shamed *by* their parents and they get to be ashamed *of* their parents. [160]

Richard Rodriguez's memoir is similar to Kingston's, and vividly portrays this dual shame.

The story told to Kingston covers a whole system of gender relationships – and while such stories may serve to protect in a Chinese village, “in Stockton, California, they wound” – and the girl wounded by them “must speak shamelessly if she is to be healed.” [161]

Hyde imagines that such a girl “invents a mediating language” on the road between home and school – she throws things out of her lunch box on the way to school, and throws out notes from teachers on the way home.

“... she assembles from the fragments of her experience the new story that will be hers, the story that combines what is of use from each world into a new world, crossbred from the two.”

Immigrant parents typically regard the child's new identity as shameless speech.

For Kingston, the guardian spirit was the one called 'the King of the Monkeys' in the old Chinese stories.

Slayer of Argus

The list of things that shame locals varies from place to place; 'shame' may be universal, but its content decidedly is not. [162]

"In Japan, if a small boy wets the bed, his mother will hang the yellowed sheets from the window to make him lose face before his friends (while in the United States, we leave the child alone and look for a bed-wetting gene)."

Chinese who dream of emigrating call America 'The Gold Mountain'

Many children 'ashamed' of their families develop an ideal world to which they aspire. [162-163]

Alan Ginsberg's father, e.g., was very passive and his mother clinically paranoid. His father dealt with the upsetting parts of family life "by a hasty retreat to convention and denial." [163]

This was his response to Ginsberg's homosexuality, urging either silence or suicide.

Ginsberg attempted such conventionality, but then, of course, rejected it. [164]

"Ginsberg's early work is full of Eternity and Angels, and in such language we hear the shamed boy's dream of traveling out of present time toward some more perfected land. He would leave the muck of father's village and take himself to the peak of Gold Mountain."

He cut such idealist visions with "great catalogues of actual fact" (e.g., incidents of his mother's psychotic behavior).

His art "oscillates between idealizing the actual and actualizing the ideal."

Artistic work such as Ginsberg's is not an escape from shame, but rather the resolution/fruit of it. [165]

It took enormous 'work' to come to the point in life where Ginsberg could reveal (in *Kaddish*) things that shamed him most in his wounded childhood.

Hermes is 'the Slayer of Argus': not avoiding shame, but facing and fighting it.

In Ovid's telling: Hera catches Zeus with a lover, Io – Zeus hides Io by turning her into a heifer – suspicious Hera asks for the heifer as a gift, and sets hundred-eyed giant Argus as a guard – Zeus longs to see Io and charges Hermes with killing Argus – Hermes, disguised as a goatherd, charms Argus with story and song, and, having lulled him to sleep, slays Argus. [165-166]

Argus's eyes: in a shame society, there are always eyes watching you. [166]

Ginsberg's struggles – sleeplessness, amphetamines – "are Argus Killers." They close the eyes of his father and teachers that had "led him to feel ashamed of his mother and his own hurt." Reading poetry and listening to the blues "put the guards to sleep, so that he might speak what his own otherwise apt inhibitions forbid." [167]

Ginsberg is relatively unique in that he does not seek to distance himself from the things he comes to 'confess,' but to honor them.

"... he not only wrestles with shame, he remakes its territory, sanctifying what others have called profane."

Those who seek to change the face of shame "lift the old shame thresholds and place them in new doorways" – "... an altered sense of dignity."

Things about Ginsberg's mother that had been degrading and unspeakable are spoken (transfigured, redeemed).

Breaking the hold of shame requires lifting boundary markers from their footings, a "strategic erasure of ethical boundaries." [167-168]

An 'attachment to ethics at the expense of the sacred' (Czeslaw Milosz) blocks the "creative mobility" needed, the "messier and more ambivalent spirits" which alone can slay the hundred-eyed guardian of shame. [168]

The debate about support for 'pornographic art' is perennial – (a) "those who presume to speak for the collective trying to preserve the coverings and silences that gives social space its order," vs. (b) "the agents of change, time travelers who take the order itself to be mutable, who hope. . . to preserve the sacred by finding ways to shift the structure of things as contingency demands." [168]

That the latter turn regularly to bodily and sexual display is puzzling, but necessary.

Adam and Eve cover their genitals (and in the old paintings, their faces, too, with their hands).

"The body happens to be a uniquely apt location for the inscription of shame," both (i) because the body seems to be the sense organ of shame," and (ii) because the content of shame, what we feel ashamed of, typically seems indelible and fixed, with us as a sort of natural fact, the way the body is with us as a natural fact." [168-169]

The 'rules about speech and silence' have an ordering function, not just for society, but for body and psyche as well. [169]

The three realms are congruent – the orderliness of one is the orderliness of the others.

By Adam and Eve's act of covering, "they simultaneously begin to structure consciousness and to structure their primordial community."

By learning shame, they divide reality into 'zones,' the speakable and the unspeakable.

Similarly, Kingston's memoir sets menstruation in the context of a shame story, and "links the content of shame to particular teachings about a woman's self-image and her place in society."

The "bodily fact" of Rodriguez's memoir is skin color: "I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body."

"... an unalterable fact about the body is linked to a place in the social order, and in both cases [Kingston and Rodriguez], to accept the link is to be caught in a kind of trap."

Underlying this is an equation between body and world. [170]

Rhetorical metonymy: one's changeable social place is figured in terms of an unchangeable body part/trait, and that bait-and-switch trick "is made to blend invisibly into the landscape."

The enchantment of regularly repeated stories (with rules of silence, and the assertion that they are intuitively true) "secure the borders of the narrative and make it difficult to see the contingency of its figures of thought."

As the verbal tricks are invisible, "the artifice of the social order becomes invisible as well, and begins to seem natural."

Social/psychological orders become "natural facts."

"... to make the trap of shame we inscribe the body as a sign of wider worlds, then erase the artifice of that signification so that the content of shame becomes simply the way things are, as any fool can see."

'Escape' from the trap requires reversal.

Mutilation/suicide = attempted escape, while still taking the figurative elements of the trap at face value.

This is the trickster who has not yet learned to separate the bait from the hook. [171]

Separating bait from hook = knowing that the sign of something is not the thing itself / "... a better escape artist with a much more playful relationship to the local stories."

Refusing the whole set-up, breaking the enchantment of the group story and the rules of silence.

"... by these refusals it detaches the supposedly overlapping levels of inscription from one another so that the body, especially, need no longer stand as the mute, incarnate seal of social and psychological order."

Speaking where shame demands silence "depends largely on a consciousness that doesn't feel much inhibition, and knows how traps are made, and knows how to subvert them."

Rodriguez's memoir describes the growth of such a consciousness: proud of his skin, rather than ashamed.

Boundary-crossers have this insight: "meaning is contingent and identity fluid, even the meaning and identity of one's own body." [172]

All social structures anchor themselves by inscription in the body; only by covering my privates am I allowed to show my face in the world.

“To the degree that other orders are linked to the way the body is inscribed, and to the degree that the link is sealed by rules of silence, the first stuttering questioning of those orders must always begin by breaking the seal and speaking about the body.”

Suppression of such speech is like the gods binding Loki, a suppression which “hobbles the imagination that copes with the shifting and contingent nature of things, and so invited apocalyptic change where something more playful would have sufficed.”

Chapter EIGHT: Matter out of Place

Heaven's Privy

Mawu is the female creator god in West African Fon myth – her son, Legba, a trickster, is her servant – Wawu receives credit for all good things, Legba blame for all bad – Legba steals Mawu's yams, making it look as though she herself was the thief – Legba tires of servant role and conspired with an old woman to throw her dirty dishwater up in the air each evening, which soaked Mawu – Mawu tired of this and departed from the near region above earth to high heaven, leaving Legba on earth. [173-174]

The Mawu-Legba relationship is entirely on her terms – the yam-theft-trick is “a lie that tells the truth,” unveiling the illusion of her pure goodness, his pure evil – She must either further differentiate herself from him or confess their unity – she chooses differentiation, which allows Legba more freedom of action, becoming “the ambivalent author of what humans take to be both ‘good’ and ‘evil’.” [174]

In response to the yam-theft, Mawu had moved only ten feet higher; Legba forces the issue with the dirty dishwater, “forcing his mother to face up to one final ambivalence: is she clean or dirty or some primordial combination of the two? [185]

“... no one washes dishes in heaven. There is no dirt up there...” [175]

Any traveler knows that “the line between the dirty and the clean is not fixed by nature.” [175]

In search of a ‘general rule,’ Mary Douglas: (1) “Dirt is matter out of place.” (2) “dirt is the anomalous. . . has no place at all when we are done making sense of our world.” [175-176]

In Old Testament cosmology, e.g., each sphere (earth/water/sky) has its proper kind of animal life -0- dietary laws decree all anomalous creatures to be ‘dirt’ (unclean). [176]

Dirt is “always a by-product of creating order” – with rules meant to preserve the ordering system.

Dirt and order, accordingly, “are mutually dependent.” [177]

“Dirt is one of the tools available to trickster as he makes this world.”

Tricksters (like Legba) “like to. . . erase or violate that line between the dirty and the clean.”

Trickster appears to debase a god with earthly dirt – with the god's eventual renewed as usual consequence.

Japanese Shinto mythology: Story of Susa-nō-o. [177-180]

"In this world, in trickster's world, life and death are one thing, not two, and therefore no one gets rid of death without getting rid of life as well. You get no seeds at all if the sunlight is too pure even to mingle with the muck of the rice paddies. You get no seeds if shit never enters the New Palace. And because there is always a hunger seeking for those seeds, whenever humans or gods move to purify life by excluding death, or to protect order completely from the dirt that is its byproduct, trickster will upset their plans. When purity approaches sterility, he will tear a hole in the sacred enclosure and drop a dead pony on the virgin weavers, or strew his feces under the Sun Goddess's throne." [179]

Such stories "speak to the sterility that hides in most all human systems and design. The models we devise to account for the world and the shapes we create to make ourselves at home in it are all too often inadequate to the complexity of things, and end up deadened by their own exclusions." [179-180.]

Carl Jung recounts a vision from his childhood (age 12) – Beautiful cathedral in Basel, sun sparkling on its blue-roof tiles, God sitting above on golden throne. . . and then a thought he initially resisted – a turd drops from under the throne onto the cathedral which is broken asunder. [180]

Jung felt relief, as if "grace had come upon me."

"Jung had been born into a church purified to the point of sterility. . . [his] redemptive project required going back into some primal ambiguity – where the dirty and the clean, the high and the low, are not differentiated – and beginning again to sort the *prima materia*, the old stuff." [181]

Jung would later posit the figure of Mercurius (a trickster who "consists of all conceivable opposites") as having "appeared in European thought to compensate for an overpurified Christ."

The "problem of Christian dirt" – "what to do with the byproducts of putting a spiritual house in order." [182]

The medieval alchemists set about retrieving "ambiguous, dark, paradoxical" things that had been eliminated from the Christian model.

Redemption/re-creation through dirt.

Aboriginal peoples lived with ambivalent characters like Mercurius – as did pagans – but nothing like this remained in 19th century Christianity. [183]

Lost has been the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, and thus intelligence is weakened.

The alchemists sought to retrieve "a discarded sense of how the divine operates in darkness and matter."

Hyde judges Jung to have been "a man out to revive Christianity by smuggling pagan gods and dark matter from the unconscious into the sanctuary" – seeking to make a connection where there has been a separation. [184]

“ . . . psychoanalysts are trained to do what Coyote has always done, get a conversation going with excrement.”

Democratic Carnival

There is a dilemma as to how any order (spiritual, secular, psychological) should relate to its own dirt:

- Since purity often ends in sterility, “no order should locate its dung heaps too far from town.”
- Yet since ‘dirt’ is the by[produce of crating order, no order willingly entertains the return of dirt.

Thus, “order often turns violent when threatened by its own exclusions.”

“ . . . violence turned against the anomalous and out of place.”

Ritual contact with dirt provides one alternative to such violence – e.g., the telling of trickster tales. [186]

Examples: Amerindian dirt rituals; medieval Cathoolic ‘Feast of Fools.’

Transgressive celebrations; carnival.

“Mocking but not changing the order to things, ritual dirt-work operates as a kind of safety valve, allowing internal conflicts and nagging anomalies to be expressed without serious consequence.” [187]

“Carnival is thus a sort of psychic and social drainage system in which structure’s garbage gets expressed only to be carted away when the banners come down.”

Such ritual dirt work offers the value of non-violent stability; this is its conservative role. [188]

“ . . . but when the order is in fundamental crisis these rituals can become the focal points for change. . . true structural shifts.”

Carnival’s ritual debasing of the pope, e.g., “played a key role in the Reformation in Germany.”

Carnival’s gender-role reversals also brought into existence images of women (and alternative ways of conceiving family structure) that were hard to control.

Analogous double role for trickster today: [188-189]

- They usually bring harmless release;
- Occasionally they authorize moments of radical change.

Trickster narratives can be “road maps for fundamental change.” [189]

There is tension between (a) the need for order, and (b) the need for dirt’s return – and the question arises as to how to resolve the tension. [190]

Flannery O’Connor said she wrote about backwoods churches rather than her own Catholic Church “because she found the problems of modern faith more starkly revealed by ‘homemade religions.’”

Hyde suspects that our culture has no good way to respond when faced with its own dirt, and that fights about “transgressive art” relate to this. [191]

E.g., Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*.

In Hyde's perception: "With body fluids [urine, blood, milk] as his filters he makes us see the crucifix *through* the body." [192]

"Conjoining an abstracted Christ and the human body, specifically the body we deny and turn away from, the blood and excreta from which we normally avert the eye, Serrano's image seemed to me to ask what the Roman soldiers asked Peter: 'Do you know this man?'"

In this perspective, "Serrano intervenes. . . to save the divine from its own too elevated purity."

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the Renaissance was marked by the "carnivalization of literature" – the style of carnival entered art (especially the novel). [193]

Jesse Helms's response to Serrano parallels this Protestant suppression: ". . . in Serrano we have a lapsed Catholic stumbling upon a medieval practice for reviving his faith, and the successful attack on him by Protestant churchmen and their legislators, whose power gets renewed to the degree that they can run the Catholic artist out of town." [194]

The fundamental question raised by Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photographs is whether they constituted "Art" or "Obscenity" – distinct categories, the law says. [194-107]

This controversy emerged (1989) at the beginning of the AIDS pandemic.

"There may have been a time when American democracy could afford to treat homosexual sex as an excluded anomaly, but once the AIDS virus was among us, that way of patterning social/sexual space no longer served. [196]

Mapplethorpe as classic trickster – "one who usefully disturbs the shape of things by crossing or reworking the line between the elevated and the excremental. [197]

Serrano worked within Christianity, not against it; Mapplethorpe is "truly transgressive, a challenge to the received order." [197-198]

A fight about dirt – a fight about how we have shaped/ordered our world. [198]

The wider question, then, concerns "how any community should structure itself so it can have such fights."

Communist regimes had been "fragile precisely because they never developed a way to work with the many things they had excluded." [198]

The labors of dirt-workers "promise a communal life that is flexible rather than repressive, that can tolerate and draw on its own exclusions, laugh at its own designs, and above all adapt itself to the contingencies this world will regularly offer up." [199]

PART FOUR: TRAP OF CULTURE

Chapter Nine: Hermes Slips the Trap

Hermes of the Light, Hermes of the Dark

The opposition between Gift and Theft is a common motif in Trickster stories. If Apollo won't give honor and wealth to Hermes, he will steal them. [2]4]

In many tribal groups, "a circulation of gifts is an agent of social cohesion." Indeed, a "sense of mutual indebtedness, gratitude, obligation" constitutes membership.

Is not something similar true of membership in 'the scientific community'?

If, however, you don't belong to the in-group, you may need to resort to subterfuge, perhaps even theft.

Thus, Hyde reads "the *Homeric Hymn* as the story of how an outsider penetrates a group, or how marginalized insiders might alter a hierarchy that confines them. Hermes has a method by which a stranger or underling can enter the game, change its rules, and win a piece of the action. He knows how to slip the trap of culture."

"The webs of signification by which cultures themselves are woven are the more complex and enduring sites of trickster's labor." [205]

There is an "almost unlimited number of knots" holding a culture together.

Cultures take shape from such distinctions as: gift/theft; clean/dirty; modest/shameful; essence/accident.

Trickster uses many cunning wiles as he "unravels a particular cultural artifice and weaves a new one in its stead."

Hyde seeks "a pattern or template with which to look at other cases of the marginalized undoing the snares that bind them."

Thus, Frederick Douglass as "the story of an African-American slave freeing himself from the plantation culture into which he was born."

The *Homeric Hymn* can be read on many levels, as a story about: [206]

- Creativity
- The psyche
- Social change
- An actual history.

Tricksters disrupt cultures that exclude or confine them.

Norman O. Brown (*Hermes the Thief*) charts the ways the Hermes myth altered from one era to another, exploring especially the tension between agrarian kinship and mercantile democracy.

Athenian democracy involved significant change from previously dominant agrarian aristocracy; a new "ethic of equality."

The new ethic of 'acquisitive individualism' conflicted with traditional morality, ie., "the body of customs and laws inherited from the age of familial collectivism."

The individualist ethic of the marketplace was perceived as "thieving." [207]

The *Hymn* reflects the change from economic/political oligarchy to democracy. Whether or not one accepts the details of Brown's analysis, it is "clear that some kind of 'outsideness' is at issue, and that Hermes hopes to change it."

Hermes has a double field of action here:

- Enchanter;
- Disenchanter.

As Hermes crosses the threshold of his mother's house, he 'enchants' the border guards, as he will later guardians/sentinels – carrying them into/out-of the underworld, into dreams or wakefulness, into foreign countries or back home. [208]

- "Hermes of the Dark is the enchanter or hypnagogue who moves us into the underworld of sleep, dream, story, myth." (The precondition of belief.)
- "Hermes of the Light is the disenchanter or awakening angel who leads you out of the cave." (Preparation for doubt.) [209]

Here, he "translates dreams into analytic language; he rubs the charm from the old stories until they seem hopelessly made up and mechanical. He walks you inland until you stop dreaming in your mother tongue."

He is "the god of the hinge" leading out *and* in, both amazing and unamazing.

The double motion of all great creative minds: "humming a new and catchy theogony even as they demystify the gods their elders sang about."

All cultures "guard their essences," setting "watchful dogs around their eternal cattle." Hermes must thus begin "by stupefying those dogs and making a raid on the middle." [209-210]

The theft itself is a disenchantment, for it "brings time and death to what was formerly timeless and immortal." [210]

Tricksters 'steal' the 'eternals' and "drag them into time where they become history."

The rules by which Apollo operates are contingent/arbitrary.

The creative person enters "an 'immoral' position," to "frame a new set of rules."

Communities commonly "establish shame thresholds to mark their internal boundaries." [211]

Brown interprets Hesios "as nostalgic spokesman for the older era of agrarian collectivism," whose 'shame threshold' separates market 'robbery' from gift exchange.

Hermes parodies Hesiod's advice to 'stay at home.'

Hermes is "unencumbered by the received ethical grid."

Hermes is also to be "ashamed of his origins." (The question of legitimacy and illegitimacy.) [212]

Hermes refuses this shame, singing the story of his conception. He refuses to stay in the cave, 'where he belongs.'

Hermes "refuses absolutely the picture of the world implied by his elders' morality, and refuses also the hierarchy that goes with it." [213]

He "improvises a new song."

Regarding 'truth' and 'falsity,' Hermes also "undercuts the current fictions by which reality is shaped."

In the fictive world, e.g., of plantation culture, it is a 'lie' to assert that "The slaves didn't steal Colonel Lloyd's fruit" (Douglass). Once the old story loses its charm, however, "it feels a little quaint to call it a lie." [214]

". . . trickster enters the old story in a way that makes its former clarity collapse into befuddling contradiction."

The old story knew only the duality - 'gift' or 'theft' - but Hermes posits "a third thing, created in a manic moment out of chance and mental insight."

Combination of technique and accident: he applies skill to the lucky find of the tortoise and creates the lyre.

Sacrificing the cattle, cutting the meat into twelve portions and distributing them by lottery, is another disenchanting chance operation. [214-215]

The 'lottery' disenchanters any sense of 'necessity' attending the existing order, "making it clear that any order is partly a matter of chance." [215]

Realistic hope of changing culture must await "lucky finds, contingencies, loopholes" - "There can be no sleight of hand until you have a hand to play." [216]

Chance the Rap and Slip the Trap

A community's (i) making the world shapely, and (ii) preserving that shape are different things - especially since the shape is always to some degree arbitrary, and because "the shaping requires exclusions and the excluded are hungry." [216-217]

Thus, there are rules meant to preserve the design. [217]

Hermes disenchanters the world into which he was born - after which he must begin "weaving a new world in place of the old."

He is a "double-tongued enchanter," moving "the conscious mind in one direction and the unconscious in another."

Hermes also sings a theogony - "he can sing a shapely cosmos if he wants to," and Apollo himself is amazed by it: "Story and song: these are two of the hypnotics by which social orders maintain their self-enchancement. . ." [218]

". . . the outsider seems to have become an insider," but one with a difference, "for he changes the center as he enters it." [219]

He sings a new song (thus, 'change the rap'), played on a new instrument.

Hermes has "a kind of wealth that eludes the received moral grid, "and uses it to exchange gifts with Apollo.

His 'theft' confuses the very definition of theft; his 'lies' muddy the 'truth' in a way that shifts the thresholds of shame, and chance operations dissolve hierarchy.

And at the end, the reallocation is *actual*, not just *mental*.

A question remains: Will Hermes stick to the new script, or continue being a pest? Enter the house of gods, or remain on the threshold? [220]

Three basic plot options for trickster stories: (i) he can come inside; (ii) he can leave entirely; (iii) he can remain on the threshold. [221]

In (i): "... human communities find it hard to live with the chaos tricksters portend, or the ambiguity and anomaly they being, and so there is always the pull to get trickster off the threshold and into the house."

(ii): Exile, destruction, or binding of trickster.

Hyde finds the Hermes of the *Hymn* to be largely domesticated, inside the house of gods. And yet, when the gods themselves are at odds, Hermes is still the trickster. [221]

"... a culture hero who comes to terms with the group, and that the terms are partly his own." [223]

Having Zeus be Hermes' father "is to claim that the changes he brings are part of the eternal and *not* contingent, relative, or dependent on historical situations." [224]

History is thus drawn back into myth.

Radical change agents are often "co-opted, outflanked, and contained by the larger culture."

Lévi-Strauss posited two cultural options – groups can either expel or ingest their troublemakers.

But the most successful change-agent "avoids either fate and manates to stay on the threshold."

From this perspective, the Homeric Hymn to Hermes is "an after-the-fact record of a disruption that has been contained and re-presented as something Zeus 'had in mind all along,' not an apocalypse."

"... the order adapts to contain the introject, the foreign thing it has swallowed." [225]

Thus, two forms of 'domestication':

1. Submitting to an old set of house rules;
2. Entering a house that you yourself have helped build.

Chapter Ten: Frederick Douglass and Eshu's Hat

Answering Back

“The birth of a Hermes0like threshold consciousness is partly a matter of temperament and partly a matter of setting” – and it is setting that situated Douglass so clearly at the margins “where two distinct moral systems conflicted” and he needed “to mediate between them.” [227]

Learning to read – despite his master’s bitter opposition: “through access to books he became the child of two cultures, not just two races.”

Thus, Douglass’s “central theft is literacy.” [228]

White opposition to his literacy revealed to him something of the very nature of enslavement.

In violating the rule, Douglass makes a world of sense where sense was previously absent.

“The Bible, for example, reads differently in the dirt-floored cabin than it does in the Great House.”

The very acts of a slave writing and speaking by themselves undercut plantation culture – because one of the ‘eternals’ of that culture is that writing and speaking belong inherently to whites. [229]

Hume/Kant/Hegel/Jefferson all held Africans as different in kind from whites because of the absence of writing.

The Plantation was primarily a culture of terror, not shame, but that also produced a system of shame barriers.

Thus, there are clues that Douglass had to struggle before he found the ‘impudence’ needed to speak up. [230]

Even in the North, he felt an internal prohibition against speaking to whites that he had to break through. [231]

Contradiction/answering-back (something forbidden to slaves) is Douglass’s main tool in dispelling the enchantment of plantation culture.

This confuses polarity, baffling those who were moving in a pure, straight line.

Whites had set up an interlocking system of ‘barriers of difference.’ [232]

Simply by describing it, Douglass contradicts this cosmos.

Whites even denied that the *Narrative* had been written by a slave.

Douglas then moves from the contradiction of purple diction “to a fuller register, joined by contradiction’s cousins, irony and scorn.” [233]

Readers soon “discover they are in a world where civilized men are savages, Christians are pagans, impudence is genteel, genteel women are beasts, illegalities are embodied in the law, thieves are noble, and honest men are thieves.”

The “cultural pattern” collapses, becomes senseless.

Once its ‘dirt’ has been exposed, plantation culture no longer makes sense.

In the Narrative, Douglass analyzes the tradition of “pervasive misrule,” the custom in plantation culture whereby slaves were given a holiday between Christmas and New Years.

Similar to the Roman Saturnalia. [234]

This “social release” served to immunize against ‘the spirit of insurrection.’

Getting slaves intoxicated during holiday served ‘to disgust. . . slaves with freedom.’ [235]

Restraining appetite (like Hermes declining to eat the meat) during holiday, however, subverted the slaveholders’ intention. Those slaves who worked for themselves during this time obtained a taste of real freedom – which is precisely why Masters tended to keep their slaves supplied with booze. [236]

In 1836, Douglass “refused the endless ritual of contained release in favor of something a little more apocalyptic” – and begins planning his escape.

“Shame” revisited: Slaves “‘wallowing’ in filth” during the holidays created/intensified “a self-disgust derived from bodily appetite” – “a slave craves applejack, his boozing shames him, and thus his station in life is part of nature.”

Unmaking such a “constellation” requires entering the myth and changing it from within – like Hermes slipping the trap by restraining his appetite.

Thus, as Douglass reimagines his body (by refusing the shame of holiday indulgence), “he reimagines his world.” [237]

Boundary-workers move; in both cases (Hermes and Douglass) – “To believe his story is to enter a new fiction, a new shaping of the world.”

Refusing holiday drunkenness, Douglass “create(d) the possibility of *uncontained* contradiction.”

Plantation culture’s “sphere of silence” enabled the essential difference of the races to be an “eternal truth.”

By “answering back,” Douglass’s “voice portends a new world shaped. . . by the ‘eternal truth’ of racial equality.”

Thus, at this point, “we could assign Douglass’s story to that plot in which the marginalized one successfully unravels the trap of culture that contains him and weaves another in its stead.”

The Color Line

The collapse of plantation culture did not end the tendency in American culture to distinguish between ‘white’ and ‘black.’ [237-238]

James Baldwin: "As long as you think you're white, I have to think I'm balck." [237]

Yoruba trickster story: Eshu rode a horse through town, wearing a two-colored hat (black on one side, white on the other), which set two life-long friends arguing about what color the man's hat had been. [238-239]

The slave trade had carried this story to America. [239-240]

"... through his mother, Douglas was heir to an unusually stable and enduring African-American tradition" (which involved 5 generations of native English-speaking, his grandmother's marriage to a free black man, and his mother's literacy). [240]

His first master (and probably his father), Aaron Anthony, was barely literate.

Herman Melville once noted that when the platypus was first brought stuffed from Australia to England, "the naturalists, appealing to their classifications, maintained that there was, in reality, no such creature." So, too, "In Talbot County, Maryland, there were, in reality, no black Englishmen, no Afro-Saxons, no sweat-potato captains." [241]

Douglass was "born on the boundary and possessed of a disruptive wit." Unable to unsettle the color line legally, he engaged in theft of literacy (recall Hermes: "If my father won't give. . . I will steal.")

He took Caleb Bingham's book, the Columbian Orator, which included an argument between master and slave.

In renaming himself 'Douglass' (after a hero in Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*), he was claiming his Scottish patrimony. For some time after his escape, he learned Scottish ballads and songs ("singing and playing them on the violin for the rest of his life"), and initially refrained from abolitionist involvement. [242]

His very involvement with the Garrisonians can be understood as "an escape from blackness," as they "seemed to promise an erasure of the color line itself."

Thus, his "early years of freedom offered a shining hope that there might be such a thing as a community that did not shape itself in terms of color."

It soon became clear, though, that he remained "non-white" in the definition of the world around him. There was even a galling racism in the white abolitionists, who "treated Douglass as a specimen for their cause." [243]

They wanted a 'black' speaker, "not some anomalous Afro-Saxon, the duck-billed beaver of Talbot County." [244]

History gave Douglass the opportunity "to participate in the unraveling of plantation culture; it did not so favor him when it came to the color line in America."

Douglass left the threshold, submitted "to the artifice of race language," and "became a black man."

In the first version of his *Narrative* (1845), Douglass straightforwardly named his white father, and claimed never to have seen his mother in the daylight. In the third version (1881), he writes, "Of my father I know nothing," but pictures him mother vividly and posits her literacy as the source of his own. [244-245]

In this, he spins a new myth of origins, his true self being black, the child of Harriet Bailey. [245]

In the early years after his escape, he was "authorized" by white abolitionists, and his "audience" was white.

In the Fall of 1847, Douglass had a serious argument with Garrison (over Douglass's desire to publish his own newspaper. She subsequent rupture was extremely painful for both. [245-246]

Douglass's story is history, not myth. There is "no father [who] laughingly acknowledges his paternity," as had Zeus for Hermes. [246]

He also discovered that he was losing his audience – they were not interested in a "polytropic" man, "who acts as he were heir to the white estate," singing Scottish ballads, and excising plantation dialect from his speech.

They wanted "darky speech," and thus Douglass was faced with the revelation of finding himself "in a land where the color line persists."

Having discovered that that world does *not* include him, he is forced back to the threshold to re-find his voice.

It was in publishing his newspaper that Douglass found his "'colored' voice. [247]

Eshu – "the god of uncertainty. . . who can tear a hole in the fabric of fate so a person might slip from one life into another" – "was present when Douglass took on the culture of slavery.

But there was no possibility for this when it came to the line that Americans draw between black and white.

Douglass needed to fashion a home, an identity, "out of two worlds that had no common place to stand."

After 1847, Douglass "became black" and redirects his voice to a more receptive audience. He "had to work with the hand that history had dealt" – accommodating himself to his fated place in American society. [248]

From the point of view of the wider American culture, Douglass is Hermes-like, "a willing disenchanter of confining artifice, but also a Hermes of the Dark who can sing a new theogony when he wants to, connecting the accidents of his own life into essences when need be, and mingling them with the unchanging portion of the world around him."

Of his Christian faith, Douglass wrote: "I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding. . . Christianity of this land." [249]

Similarly, he professed trust in the American constitution, a 'pure' democracy.

Douglass is not pulling “eternals down into time;” rather, in him, “we are watching a new cosmos emerge with its obligatory higher truths.”

Thus, he “published his vision of a *true* and *real* America,” asking “that Americans join him in remembering their original homeland where Christianity and democracy were not corrupt.”

He “accommodated himself to American ideology and religion,” but “in a world he had helped to change.” [250]

Moving from periphery to center, he changes the center.

‘White’ and ‘black’ – “The terms are contextual, and there is no end to context.” [251]

Adding to the unimaginable complexity is the evidence “that Frederick Douglass was the descendent of Native Americans through his maternal grandmother.”

“What color was that hat?”

Chapter Eleven: Trickster Arts and Works of Artus

Go for the Joints

In writing of tricksters, Hyde seems to write “about the disruptive imagination and the art it gives us.” [252]

In Ossete (southern Russian Caucasus) myth/culture, the trickster Syrdon understands the sun-god Soslan to have a weak spot in his knees, and is thus able to cut him down. [253]

“ . . . the eternals are vulnerable at their joinings. To kill a god or an ideal, go for the joints.”

Latin *articulus* can mean, e.g., a bodily joint or a turning point in the solar year. Greek *árthron* can mean both bodily joint and a linguistic conjunction; *harmós* can also be a joint (especially shoulder), but also “denotes the joints made by artisans” (masonry, solder, door hinge). [254]

Related to these two Greek words are the Latin *ars* and *artus*, the latter being the root of *articulus*.

In English, artisan/artifice/articulate.

Greek *harmonia* connotes stability and order, a fixed ‘joining.’ [255]

“In human speech, the tongue and the lips are the organs of articulation. They do the joint-work in a stream of sound. In written language there is joint-work to be done as well. To break an uninterrupted flow of letters into words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters (or the older ‘articles’), to divide it with spaces, commas, periods and indentations, is to articulate it, to make evident the places where thought itself has joints or parts of denomination.”

Tricksters like *flexible* or *movable* joints. [256]

They often do the work or *rearticulation*.

Both Prometheus and Hermes seek to rearticulate the cosmos, and each begins with the carving of an animal body.

Ancient word for such carvers, *artamos*, refers to 'the one who cuts along the joints.'

These stories "symbolically knit the animal's articulated body to larger social and spiritual articulations." As the pieces (of meat) are ritually distributed (each to its appointed recipient), "the shape of the animal comes to represent the shape of the social and spiritual worlds."

"The ritual holds the articulated animal up against the articulated social and spiritual worlds and means to demonstrate by their congruence that these various levels of existence participate in a single grand and stable harmony." [257]

The harmony remains stable until some trickster "alters the way the portions are handed out, disrupting the second-order articulation and so changing the manner in which nature, community, and spirit are joined to one another."

In many cultures, trickster stories do not involve such literal 'carving.'

Still, they represent "the possibility of reallocation, the chance that the links between things on earth and things in heaven may be loosened."

The 'art' of the trickster is to play with second-order articulating.

Trickster unmakes old harmonies, "singing new ones to fill the ensuing silence." [257-258]

In the *Hymn*, "by the time Hermes appears all the other gods have their prerogatives and spheres of influence; the cosmos would appear to be complete." [258]

Jenny Strauss Clay, though, points out that "something essential to its functioning is still lacking." The system "was static and lifeless unless it acquires the possibility of movement between its spheres and limits."

Hermes as "the principle of motion" – allowing the cosmos to retain its ordered structure, "which simultaneously *instituting movement between its articulated components.*"

"Before a body can come to life, every separation, every boundary, must be breached in some way; each organ must have its pores and gateways through which something (lymph, blood, bile, urine, electricity, neurotransmitters) may flow. Unless they can incorporate internal forces of transgression, organic structures are in danger of dying from their own articulation."

The Olympian gods tend to solidify boundaries. Each sphere is protected, drawn apart from the other, and the 'whole' loses vitality. [259]

"It is in Hades' nature to seal the gates of the underworld; no soul escapes. But when the full expression of his nature means that Persephone cannot return to earth, springtime never comes and the world begins to die. Then the gods send Hermes to bring her back."

In African (Yoruba and Fon) myth, communication breaks down between the gods, and trickster "translates among the spheres."

Such stories “widen our sense of what can happen if there is no figure to move among the articulated components of a cosmos.” [360]

Trickster is “the hunger-artist who inhabits the cracks between languages or between heaven and earth.”

Hyde sees two parts in the life stories of tricksters: (1) a past period of ‘first deeds’; and (2) a present of ongoing actions.

The ‘first deeds’ typically bring disorder, undo hierarchy. Here, tricksters get to the center of things, from which they create/reveal the shape of the new world. [360-361]

After this, though, they tend to keep divisions intact and “turn their attention to keeping them porous and flexible.” [361]

“ . . . a non-disruptive boundary-crosser.” (Thus, Hermes’s friendship with Apollo at the end of the *Hymn* – a balance between their functions.)