EXCUSE ME WHILE I ACT A FOOL: A HOMILETIC EXAMINATION OF THE

AFRO-AMERICAN TRICKSTER

By

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DEDICATION

To my father, Russell Henry Mills, who taught me the sacred calling of living life as a

complete Fool

and

To my mother, Janet Lea Mills, who taught me to love Fools unconditionally

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A mentor of mine once stated that starting the race is easy, finishing the race is difficult. This thesis, three years in the making, has proved that adage true. There were moments after eagerly starting this thesis that I doubted whether or not I would finish. Every word of this thesis was written while serving as the full-time Associate Minister of Hyde Park Union Church. During the production of this thesis, I officiated one wedding, four funerals, served as an adjunct faculty professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, served on a planning committee for McCormick Theological Seminary, served on a national planning committee for the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education's Congress for Urban Ministry, taught multiple Bible studies and adult education classes, proofread multiple graduate student papers and advised graduate students, and preached 50 sermons. Most of this thesis was written while I was recovering from surgery, unable to walk, with my right leg in a cast. I am grateful and indebted to those mentors, friends, and family members who encouraged me, during the most difficult moments, to keep writing. And I am grateful to God for giving me the mysterious energy and enthusiasm that pushed me, late at night and early in the morning, to press on until this race was completed. I am in awe, and on some days in disbelief, that in spite of every challenge, frustration, and unexpected detour this project is indeed finished.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, groundbreaking advances in literary critical theory

among African American scholars have forever changed the way literary critics, biblical

scholars and even homileticians have engaged texts composed by black authors. A host

of African American scholars pioneered this new academic trajectory. Two of those

scholars, whose work serves as the theoretical foundation for this thesis, include Huston

A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates Jr.[1] Their seminal works, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-

American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (1984)* and *The Signifying Monkey (1988)*,

*r*espectively, have offered literary critical theory *other* investigative tools to reach where

previous tools had not. Consequently, in light of Gates' and Baker's work, literary and

oral works produced by authors of African descent were no longer solely judged

according to classical Eurocentric literary critical standards. These scholars' academic

contributions served as undeniable evidence that the single Eurocentric standard of

literary criticism, though valuable, could not exhaust the potential meanings in texts

produced by non-white authors.[2] More pointedly, Gates and Baker demonstrate that

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[1] Houston Baker, Jr.'s work analyzes cultural at the vernacular level. His primary
concern in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* is to examine the relationship
between an American culture fueled by the commercial deportation of black bodies and
the artistic and expressive productions that emerge from communities of enslaved
Africans and African Americans. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s analyzes a specific vernacular
ritual utilized within Afro-American culture known as Signifyin(g). Signifyin(g) refers to
the rhetorical play, characterized by critique and revision, utilized by Africans and
African Americans to navigate slavery and racism. Baker's work provides the theory
from which this thesis is derived and Gates provides the application to which this thesis
points.
[2] It must be noted that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker, Jr. certainly do not
exhaust the repository of African American scholars who made pioneering inroads into
transforming American literary-critical theory. Indeed there are likely scholars, women

distinctively "black"[3] theories of literary criticism stand to offer insights about texts

produced by black authors or orators that traditional literary-critical axiology utilized by

white scholars cannot, alone, adequately mine.

   The method of analysis proposed by scholars like Gates, Jr. and Baker, Jr.

endeavors to create in readers an epistemological shift, that is, an enlargement of

perspective that alters notions of historicity altogether.[4] In light of Gates' and Baker's

work, the literary world had to confess that the written history of literary critical

discourse in America was insufficient, or at the very least, incomplete, and thus in need

of *re-figuration*. This subsequent paradigm shift is what Michel Foucault refers to as an

epistemological rupture.[5] This rupture is succinctly illustrated in the retelling of the

discovery of a pre-historic fossil in the early 1800s:

> In 1822, Gideon Mantell, an English physician with a consuming interesting in
> geology and paleontology, made a routine house call in Sussex. On the visit, he
> discovered a fossilized tooth that seemed to be a vestige of a giant, herbivorous
> reptile. Since he had nothing in his own collection comparable to his find, he
> traveled to the Hunterian Collection of the Royal College of Surgeons in London
> and spent hours searching drawers of fossil teeth attempting to find a comparable
> specimen. When he had nearly exhausted the possibilities, a young man who was
> also working at the Hunterian, and who had heard of the Sussex physician's quest,
> presented him with the tooth of an iguana. The match was nearly perfect. On the
> basis of the similarity between the tooth of the extant iguana and his own fossil
> discovery, Mantell named the bearer of the older tooth *Iguanodon* ("iguana

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and men whose academic contributions to this subject are not formally recorded or
published. Other scholars thinking about this subject might have chosen to list two
entirely different scholars to signify key changes in literary-critical theory. I highlight
Gates and Baker simply because their respective works most appropriately serve the chief
aims of my goals for this thesis.

[3] By using the term "black" here I'm referring to Stephen Henderson's idea of the inner
life, or constellation or matrix of cultural values and beliefs of black folk. It will be
helpful to read Baker's description of Henderson's use of the term "reference public" in
Baker's work

Baker, Huston, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago and
London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 78.

[4] Baker, 61.

[5] Ibid., 61.

tooth") … As the nineteenth century progressed and the fossil record expanded, it became apparent that Iguanodon was but one member of a family of reptiles that, in 1841, received the name 'dinosaur' from Sir Richard Owen. By mid-century, it was possible to construct a feasible model of Iguanodon. Available evidence (including assumed homologies with living animals) indicated that the prehistoric creature was a giant, quadripedal reptile with a small triangular spike on his nose. The concrete and plaster model that was built on this plan in 1854 can be seen in England today. The story of Iguanodon does not conclude at mid-century, however. The fossil record was substantially augmented later in the century by a splendid find of Iguanodon fossils at Bernissart, Belgium. Louis Dollo, the French paleontologist who oversaw the Bernissart site, was able to revise all existing models. Through cross-skeletal comparison and ethological inference, he concluded that Iguanodon was, in fact, bipedal. Moreover, he persuasively demonstrated that the triangular bone that had been taken for a nose spike was actually a horny thumb spike peculiar to dinosaurs.[6]

Although academic determinations had already been published about Iguanodon, Louis Dollo's discovery required that the model of Iguanodon, and the entire body of literature produced on the subject, be *re-figured* to account for the new discovery. Similarly, African American scholars' respective discoveries about standards of literary criticism indigenous to black culture and experience, which emanate from outside classical standards of criticism, have resulted in new figurations of American literary history and criticism.

Vernacular Theory

The goal of this thesis is not to re-figure the history of American literary critical discourse. Moreover, it is not to cause in the reader the kind of epistemological shift central to Gates' and Baker's projects. Rather, this thesis is interested in using a particular theory of Afro-American criticism, namely, vernacular theory, to examine Afro-American sermons, speeches, and relevant narratives in order to analyze a particular

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[6] Baker, 16. The story of Gideon Mantell and Iguanodon is recorded in Edwin H. Colbert's work *Men and Dinosaurs* New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968.

trope within Afro-American literary, cultural, and religious traditions: *the trickster*.

While the trickster is a central trope in Afro-American literary, cultural, and religious

traditions, an adequate exploration of how this trope informs and might inform

contemporary preaching has not been undertaken. A more substantive analysis of the

trickster figure in relation to the field of homiletics stands to offer contemporary

preachers new insights into more relevant, creative, and prophetic preaching.

In short, the goal, in analyzing the trickster figure in Afro-American literary,

cultural and religious traditions, is to *re-figure* understandings of the nature of Black

preaching and the role of the Black preacher. Presently, North American Christian

pulpits are undergoing intense criticism for being seemingly sparse of both creativity and

relevance. In addition, questions about whether ministers occupying contemporary

pulpits have neglected the Gospel's prophetic mandate to challenge institutional injustice

loom prominently in both theological institutions and congregations.

It is no secret among protestant parishioners in American (and especially

mainline) churches that the preaching on Sunday mornings could stand a revival of sorts.

American pulpits desperately need new images, broader interpretive lenses, and more

relevant applications, in short, essentially greater imaginative work. Again, however,

perhaps most striking is the need for contemporary preaching to reclaim its prophetic

mandate. For the call to proclaim the Gospel is first and foremost a prophetic one. In his

first recorded sermon, Jesus, quoting the prophet Isaiah, offers his fundamental aim as

one who preaches the Gospel:

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good
> news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and

recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.[7]

Jesus understands the role of the preacher to be one who makes the Gospel speak to the concrete realities and especially the injustices of contemporary life. Therefore, those preachers endeavoring to speak in the name of Christ are automatically in covenant with Christ to more faithfully speak to contemporary injustices as well as to those powers and principalities inhibiting the life-giving work of the Gospel. A revival among contemporary preaching practices will help enable preachers to more closely follow the paradigm of prophetic preaching Jesus modeled.

This thesis argues that an analysis of the Afro-American trickster can yield a compelling trope that can potentially inaugurate a revival of more creative, relevant, and prophetic preaching. A careful analysis of the characteristics, behaviors, and methods exhibited by tricksters in Afro-American literature and folklore, and by black preachers who evoke and embody the trickster in their preaching, will reveal how the trickster figure lived as an enduring cultural and vernacular tradition that inspired, guided, and protected members of the black Diaspora during slavery. Yet, the implications of the trickster as a trope extend beyond mere historical significance. Later in this thesis, I will demonstrate how the trickster is indeed a living tradition in black religious discourse that inspires, guides, and protects members of the black Diaspora in the twenty-first century.

Before proceeding to expound upon the particular contours of this thesis, it is necessary to more adequately introduce the theory of Afro-American criticism that this thesis will utilize, namely, vernacular theory. Since *black* texts emerge from everyday, black cultural experience, the most adequate way to examine such texts, either written or

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[7] Luke 4:18 NIV.

oral, is to consult those who are experts in the culture's vernacular, those whom Baker refers to as the *vernacular natives*.[8] These vernacular natives, Baker argues, have direct access to and insight about their cultural group's *inner life*, which is essentially a culture's constellation of cultural values and beliefs.[9] This shared repository of meaning characterizes what is known as a *reference public*, a term Baker borrows from Albert Hofstadter:

> Predication of "good" … tends to lose meaningful direction when the public whose valuations are considered in judging the object is not specified. I do not see how we can hope to speak sensibly about the aesthetic goodness of objects unless we think of them in the context of reception and valuation by persons, the so-called "context of consumption." Properties by virtue of which we value objects aesthetically—e.g., beauty, grace, charm, the tragic, the comic, balance, proportion, expressive symbolism, verisimilitude, propriety—always require some reference to the apprehending and valuing person … Any public taken as the public referred to in a normative esthetic judgment I shall call the judgment's *reference public*. The reference public is the group whose appreciations or valuations are used as data on which to base the judgment. It is the group to which universality of appeal may or may not appertain.[10]

According to Baker's theory, texts produced by black folk are the manifestations or transliterations of black folks' *inner lives*. Therefore, for Baker, utilizing Afro-American expressive culture (made up of the vernacular natives) as the primary reference public when examining black texts is a crucial methodological step.

Vernacular theory studies the particular ways a cultural group's vernacular shapes the ways that meanings (in expressive cultural works for example) are conceived, understood, and defined. In short, a culture's *vernacular* influences the expressive works

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[8] In this thesis the term "black text" refers to texts produced by Africans or African Americans. Thus, black texts here are those produced by Afro-Americans.

[9] A more substantive description of the "inner life" can be found in Baker's work *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, 78.

[10] Baker, 78. Baker's notions of reference public are attributed to Albert Hofstadter in his work, "On the Grounds of Aesthetic Judgment." In *Contemporary Aesthetics*, edited by Matthew Lipman. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1973, 473-74.

of that culture. According to Stephen Henderson, "the expressive modes of a black urban

vernacular are dominant shaping influences in the work of Afro-American poets."[11] It is

not surprising then that within black vernacular is the constellation of techniques and

timbres of the black sermon.[12] Hortense Spillers goes so far as to describe black

preachers in America as America's first poets and preaching as America's first poetry.[13]

There is, then, an inevitable reciprocity between vernacular expression and what

Baker calls self-conscious, literary (and what I would broaden to describe as) artistic

expression.[14] Both Baker and Henderson conclude that all black poetic expression can be

understood in terms of such a relationship. Yet, vernacular theory is not only an effective

tool for analyzing Afro-American *texts*. It is also an analytic tool that enables a

researcher to more adequately understand a particular Afro-American artistic text in

relation to *antecedent texts* that made the text under analysis possible:

> What Henderson seeks to establish or to support with this claim, I think, is a kind
> of cultural holism—an interconnectedness (temporally determined) of Afo-
> American cultural discourse—that can only be successfully apprehended through
> a set of theoretical concepts and critical categories arrived at by in-depth
> investigation of the fundamental expressive manifestations of a culture. In order
> to apprehend the wholeness of a culture, the literary investigator (like the cultural
> anthropologist) must go to the best available informants—to a "reference public"
> or, better, to the vernacular "natives" of the culture.[15]

In this thesis, I have chosen to use black vernacular theory to examine black

sermons, speeches and folkloric narratives. Although the respective projects of Baker

and Gates (and Henderson) deal primarily with using vernacular theory to conduct a

literary analysis of non-sermonic texts including novels, poems, the blues, and

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[11] Ibid., 80.
[12] Baker, 80. Stephen Henderson's quote is found in his work, "Introduction: The Forms of Things Unknown." In *Understanding the New Black Poetry, Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, edited by Stephen Henderson. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973, 30-31.
[13] Spillers, Hortense J. "Fabrics of History: Essays on the Black Sermon." Brandeis University, 1974.
[14] Baker, 80.
[15] Ibid., 78. Baker is referring to Henderson's work, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, 62.

autobiographies, their methods are most appropriate for this thesis on homiletics because they provide strategies for dealing adequately with *antecedent texts* from which present texts (in this case sermons utilizing particular Afro-American tropes) have inevitably emerged. At work in such analysis is a cultural anthropology, which is the foundation of literary-critical axiology.[16] Put differently, Afro-American vernacular theory is an analytic tool that enables the substantive examination of black texts in relation to other black texts (and their antecedent texts) and facilitates a serious examination of the cultural conditions or *material world* in which those texts were created. Before engaging the particular premise of this thesis, a brief word is needed about the general material world in which texts are produced.

The Material World of Texts

No artistic *text* is produced in a vacuum. Every cultural expression emanates from a particular context. The antimonies of a given context (i.e., language, culture, values, class, race, economics, and political realities) inevitably influence the form and content of any given artistic expression. For example, literature, music, painting, oratory and sermons are all a culture's artistic *transliterations* of the material conditions governing daily life.

Therefore, any credible analysis of an artistic production of Afro-American culture must adequately examine the concrete, material conditions of the world in which Afro-American texts were produced. A fundamental conviction grounding this thesis is that Afro-American culture artistic expressions are creative *negotiations* of prevailing

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[16] Henderson, 65-66. Henderson stresses the importance for the literary critic to immerse themselves in the totality of black cultural experience when examining black texts, since every black text, as Gates argues, is in some way responding to or emanating from the black texts that preceded them.

economic realities and most notably the economics of slavery. The economics of slavery refers to the American social system that hinged on the commercial deportation of black Africans to American shores. Baker provides a succinct definition of this economy of slavery:

> In specifically Afro-American terms, the "economics of slavery" signifies the social system of the Old South that determined what, how, and for whom goods were produced to satisfy human wants. As a function of the European slave trade, the economy of the Old South was an exploitative mode of production embodied in the plantation system and spirited by a myth of aristocratic patriarchalism … At the level of economic production, the slave's labor was brutally exploited to maximize their master's profit.[17]

In short, the material world of Afro-American culture has always existed, functioned and performed within an economic system designed to exploit black bodies. This has been the context in which enslaved Africans and African Americans have lived and worked. "Their lives have always been sharply conditioned by an 'economics of slavery' as they worked the agricultural rows, searing furnaces, rolling levees, bustling roundhouses, and piney-woods logging camps of America."[18] Thus, the most poignant, probing articulations about the idolatrous economic ideology enslaving Africans and African Americans were spoken at the vernacular level. The enslaved often sang songs designed to warn others when slaveholders were near, or when it was safe to escape under the cover of night by means of the Underground Railroad. Others strategically syncopated the rhythms of their work in the fields to the musical notes in their songs in order to ease the rigors of their labor.

Consequently, artistic texts produced through the vernacular of enslaved Afro-Americans are hardly just ingenious manifestations of a rich folk culture. They are the

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[17] Baker, 26-27.
[18] Ibid., 3.

subversive negotiations of oppressed people living within the confines of an unjust, obdurate economic system. These *negotiations*, I argue, are as much a contemporary practice among African Americans as it was among their black forbears during slavery. Indeed, subsequent forms of the economy of slavery are embedded within contemporary American culture. No longer based on a chattel system, the subtle, clandestine economic, educational, and social disenfranchisement of people of color is the primary grease that fuels the engine running the current American economy. Moreover, contemporary preaching among African American preachers serves as a means of negotiating racial injustice in America. However, a practical theological examination of the creative ways contemporary African Americans in Christian communities have utilized vernacular as a means of agency in response to and in spite of an unjust American economy has not been undertaken. This thesis endeavors to forge such a path by examining the Afro-American trickster figure, a central trope in Afro-American culture.

As a popular trope in Afro-American culture, the trickster fundamentally stands as a *figure* for the savvy *negotiation* of the economy of slavery in America. In Afro-American culture, the trickster responds to a chief ideology (or ideologies) governing an economic system that depends upon *the displacement and disenfranchisement of people of color for profit*. Thus, within the methodological framework of vernacular theory, this thesis uses *ideological analysis* of black sermons, speeches and narratives (and the economy of slavery itself) via the trope of the trickster to reveal how artistic black texts in general, and black sermons in particular, respond to the economics of slavery as a means of social, psychological, and spiritual liberation. An ideological analysis will show how black texts, such as black sermons and speeches in general, have in themselves

historically functioned as creative, subversive responses to systems of social oppression oriented around the commercial deportation of black bodies. Again, such an analysis will also yield a particular reading of the trickster as a trope for the savvy methods of negotiating the economy of slavery and its subsequent manifestations.

In sum, this thesis offers a tropological reading of the *trickster* as a figure for Afro-American criticism to be utilized within contemporary Afro-American religious experience within the field of homiletics by black preachers. Essentially, this thesis seeks an "inventive, tropological investigative model"[19] that conveys the metaphorical and prophetic implications of the Afro-American trope of the trickster, and, as the reader will discover shortly, the trope of the *Fool*. To be sure, focusing on the trickster as a tropological vehicle will inevitably foreclose certain investigative possibilities that other tropes might yield. However, I am convinced that, as a central trope in Afro-American expressive culture, the *trickster* is the most consonant with the role of the black preacher within a marginalized community surrounded by often-hostile economies and racist ideologies governing modes of production.

Tropological Vehicles: *Trickster* then *Fool*

Fundamentally, this thesis seeks a distinctive trope for cultural, or more specifically, homiletic explanation. The trope of the trickster serves as a vehicle for investigating Afro-American sermons, speeches, and narratives. The advantage of a tropological vehicle is that it makes concrete and intelligible, the complex, taken-for-granted, and often amorphous processes at work in a particular cultural production or phenomenon such as preaching. Tropological vehicles serve as invaluable tools for

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[19] Baker, 10.

cultural explanation. In his description of the *blues* as a trope for cultural explanation,

Baker offers a helpful description of the goal of tropological thought:

> While monographic histories of slavery describe important dimensions of the economics of slavery, it is possible to telescope many dimensions of such economics by means of a vertical, associative, metaphorical decoding. The diachrony of traditional historiography can be productively complemented, I think, by a nonsuccessive, synchronic prospect. The employment of such a prospect amounts to the introduction of what Hayden White defines as "tropological" thought. Tropological thought is a discursive mode that employs unfamiliar (or exotic) figures to qualify what is deemed "traditional" in a given discourse. To extrapolate from White, one might assert that attempts to signify the force of meaning of the economics of slavery by invoking buildings *and blues* (as I shall do forthwith) constitute an analytic move designed to incorporate into reality phenomena to which traditional historiography generally denies the status "real." The end of a tropological enterprise is the alteration of reality itself.[20]

In short, the tropological approach, which turns logic on itself through conscious

employment of metaphor "is designed to achieve an enlarged, altered, more adequate

discursive rendering of the object of knowledge."[21] Through a trope, previously

unacknowledged phenomena are acknowledged.

Consequently, the ultimate goal of tropological thought is facilitating a *new*

figuration of the prevailing wisdom or traditional lexicons of meaning typically sought

out for normative determinations about particular objects or phenomenon. Using

tropological thought, then, one is able to study, for example, the images of dilapidated

black residential housing units and make critical determinations about the economics of

slavery. For example, Baker argues that impoverished black dwellings *signify*

consequential realities created by the exploitative system of American slavery:

> The scant diachronic modification in "*size* and arrangements" of black dwellings allows them, I suggest, to stand as *signs* for the continuing impoverishment of

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[20] Baker, 28. Baker borrows the notion of "tropological" thought from Hayden White's work, *Tropics of Disourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1978, 5.
[21] Ibid., 28-29.

blacks in the United States. The places where Africans in America have lived (and continue to live) signify the economics of slavery.[22]

Baker uses what he refers to as the *blues matrix* as a vernacular trope for cultural explanation, or more specifically, the particular existential negotiations black folk have made around oppressive systems. This trope offers tremendous force for the study of literature, criticism and culture.[23] For Baker, the blues matrix is a *mediational* site where cultural elements can be studied for cultural understanding. Put differently, tropological thought can be utilized to examine the blues for rich information about Afro-American culture. The trope of the blues matrix (and blues singer) allows for the *deconstruction* of the complex processes involved in Afro-American cultural production. The blues, Baker argues, are essentially *interpretations* of the world around us. The blues recapitulate vast dimensions of life experience. The blues singer and her production "are always at this intersection, this crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience's multiplicities."[24] They are the *lyrical transliterations* of oppressive life experience. The blues singer fashions the raw, material experience of life into a figure or metaphor that stands for (or *signifies*) them.

In short, the blues singer is a master at *troping*. One of the greatest traditional blues singers, Sleepy John Estes lived in an extremely dilapidated cabin outside of Brownsville, Tennessee. Through his blues music, Sleepy John captures the inevitable consequences of slavery. The blues, Baker argues, just like impoverished black dwellings, *signifies* the reality of the economics of slavery:

> The expressiveness represented by Sleepy John is as much a feature of the economics of slavery as deprivations of material resources that have characterized

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[22] Baker, 30.
[23] Ibid., 14.
[24] Ibid., 7.

African life in the New World. It is not, however, the field, country, or classic blues that provide a *first* occasion for examining the operation of "economics of slavery" and "commercial deportation" as governing statements in Afro-American discourse. A first view is provided, instead, by African slave narratives. When such narratives are analyzed in ideological terms, they reveal subtextual contours rich in "blues resources"—abundantly characterized, that is, by aspects of meaning which reveal profoundly brilliant economic expressive strategies designed by Africans in the New World and the Old to negotiate the dwarfing spaces and paternally aberrant arrangements of western slavery.[25]

The blues gave the vernacular realm of American society (here African American), a concrete form of expression that was composed of the profound struggles and hopes of a people living within an economy systematically oppressing them.[26] Therefore, the blues is a fitting trope to examine and explain how black people in America have *responded* to the economics of slavery.

Baker's trope of the blues matrix has been a primary source of inspiration for this thesis. Again, the trickster is not at all the only (and perhaps in the view of some scholars even the best) trope to utilize in the present investigation. However, as Baker demonstrates, the decision to choose a single trope is less a symptom of elitist, myopic pathology and more a summons to creative scholarly engagement.

Ultimately, this thesis proffers a contemporary tropological reading of the trickster in Afro-American discourse as an image to inspire and enliven more imaginative, prophetic, and relevant work among contemporary preachers in general and black preachers in particular. The current crisis in North American pulpits is one that is at least partly due to *constricted* imaginations among ministers and images of life that have become *fixed* and *inflexible*. *This is* an ideological illness to which the blues singer refuses to succumb. Yet, many Christian preachers occupying twenty-first century

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[25] Baker, 31.
[26] Ibid., 11.

pulpits in America have fixed concrete borders encompassing the ways that they both

conceive of and perform their roles as preachers and the messages they are preaching.

The trickster is a trope for one who critiques, challenges, revises, *Signifies*[27], self-

empties, risks, protects, and dreams within the matrix of African American religious

experience in order to induce liberation as well as illumine paths of exodus from

dehumanizing worlds. The trope of the trickster allows for the deconstruction of the

complex processes at work when contemporary African American homiletics is, at its

best, responding to social injustice.

While the vernacular trope of the trickster serves as the central figure of this

thesis, in the spirit of the trickster, I playfully build and improvise on this ancient trope in

order to render another contemporary trope, namely, that of the *Fool*. Thus, the aim of

this thesis is to accomplish a tropological *re-reading* of the trickster to yield a

contemporary tropological reading of the preacher as *Fool*. It is important to emphasize

that the *Fool* is a trope that refers to one who creatively negotiates oppressive systems

through imaginative, prophetic, and even pastoral activity. Just as the blues and the blues

singer are both tropes for the cultural phenomenon of critique and revision in Afro-

American culture, the *Fool* is a trope that more adequately than the trope of the trickster

represents the prophetic critique and imaginative vision and revision at work in the

twenty-first century black preacher.

Given America's tragic racial history, it is necessary to explicitly distinguish the

definition of the *fool* as one who is simple, absurd or insanely eccentric from the *Fool* as

one who strategically deploys a potent combination of provocative, absurd, prophetic,

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[27] In short, the term Signifyin(g) refers to rhetorical play. This term will be explained more adequately in Chapter 1.

and imaginative energies in order to point out paths leading to social liberation. In order to signify this distinction, any references to the former definition will be lower-case (fool) while references to the latter definition, my definition, will be capitalized (Fool). The *fool* does not think seriously about consequences. The *fool* is lustfully wreckless. "There is no reasoning with fools; on the contrary, because they allow themselves to be used and exploited, fools become passive instruments."[28] The *fool* underestimates opposing forces because of an overwhelming self-righteousness and arrogance. Thus, emptied of moral conscious, the *fool* is vulnerable to capriciousness, more open to manipulation, and "capable of any evil and at the same time, incapable of seeing that it is evil."[29] In contrast, in the manner in which the trope operates throughout this thesis, the *Fool's* cultural fluency and figurative genius uniquely situates him/her to challenge societal convention. The *Fool* is a re-figuration of the *fool*, yet is often thought to be a *fool*.

I interpret Baker's work, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* to be a carefully constructed anthology of prominent Fools within Afro-American experience. Baker's work is a rich cultural catalogue providing "suggestive accounts of moments in Afro-American discourse when personae, protagonists, autobiographical narrators, or literary critics successfully negotiate an obdurate 'economies of slavery' and achieve a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity. Such moments and successful analyses of them provide cogent examples of the blues matrix at work."[30] Similarly, through thoughtful analysis of sermons, speeches and narratives composed during slavery, this thesis will provide cogent examples of the Fool at work in Afro-American religious experience, and specifically within African American Christianity. As I construe the

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[28] Stewart, Elizabeth-Anne. *Jesus the Holy Fool*. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 1999, 32.
[29] Ibid., 32.
[30] Baker, 13.

trope, the Fool, is an improvisation on antecedent vernacular tropes to create a distinctive trope for cultural explanation.[31] The goal of this thesis is to provide a brief but substantive cultural catalogue mapping how the Fool can potentially achieve a resonant, improvisational, nomadic, expressive dignity and relevance within twenty-first century African American Christianity.

Chapter 1 offers a brief genealogy of the Fool and trickster respectively. This chapter also introduces readers to Gates' theory of Signifyin(g). Chapter 2 highlights four key Signifyin(g) practices among African Americans: *Playing the Dozens, Parody/Burlesque, Inversion/Reversal, and Indirection. The chapter concludes by* analyzing four sermons, preached by African Americans during slavery, for concrete examples of the trickster's rhetorical arsenal at work. Chapter 3 analyzes two speeches by Malcolm X and one speech by Louis Farrakhan to demonstrate how the trope of the trickster transcends denominational and religious traditions and is in fact a primary trope within black American religiousity. The chapter's conclusion will develop a contemporary trope, the Fool, by re-figuring the ancient trope of the *trickster* and discussing its implications for preaching. The Fool, this thesis concludes, is a contemporary trope that signifies a living tradition (or vocation) within African American religious experience that is committed to the prophetic critique of and creative negotiation around the oppressive economies in the twenty-first century. The goal of the final chapter is to demonstrate how the Fool is a living tradition that has concrete implications for preachers in the twenty-first century.

In the conclusion, readers are briefly invited to explore the potential implications of the Fool in contemporary congregational contexts. Many urban congregations,

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[31] Baker, 14.

responding to changing demographics and increased development in surrounding

neighborhoods, are facing a host of unique challenges. Gentrification, urban sprawl,

violence, poverty, and homelessness are a few of the challenges urban congregations

face. It is my hope that the trope of the Fool might offer valuable insight both to black

preachers and scholars striving to improve the lives of people living in urban contexts.

CHAPTER I

A GENEALOGY OF KEY SIGNIFYING TROPES

If Vico and Burke, or Nietzsche, de Man, and Bloom, are correct in identifying four and six 'master tropes,' then we might think of these as the 'master's tropes,' and of Signifyin(g) as the slave's trope, the trope of tropes, as Bloom characterizes metalepsis, 'a trope-reversing trope, a figure of a figure.' Signifyin(g) is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis (Bloom's supplement to Burke). To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechresis, all of which are used in the ritual of Signifyin(g).[32]

-Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The reader may still be curious about the construction of the *Fool as a trope*. The seeming paradox between the definition espoused in this project and more traditional definitions of the *fool* as ignorant or simply absurd is understandably jarring. Indeed, the reader should be questioning why the researcher chose to hinge an academic project endeavoring to encourage more responsible preaching on a term that has traditionally signified an absence of responsibility, and even sanity. Could not another, better term have been chosen, one that did not immediately collide conventional meanings with newer ones, creating unnecessary semantic confusion? Given these initial concerns, it is necessary to briefly explain my decision to use the trope of the Fool and offer a glance at resources used to conceive of the Fool as a trope informing contemporary homiletics.

I chose to play on the word *fool* because the word is commonplace in the vernacular used in many African American Christian congregations. During especially emotional, climactic moments during a sermon congregants or fellow preachers will often

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[32] Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 52.

say of the person preaching, "She's a *fool*!" Or, overwhelmed with the truth and relevance of a sermon, others will exclaim, "That *fool* is preaching!" These statements are not meant to disparage a preacher. On the contrary, they are unsolicited affirmations recognizing a preacher's homiletic prowess. This particular use of the word *fool* signifies something other than someone who is intellectually, morally, or spiritually deficient. This *other* meaning, this play on traditional language rules, is where the *Fool* enters. The Fool is deeply embedded in black vernacular. To have not turned to black vernacular to inform a thesis on black vernacular theory would have been a critical methodological misstep.

Therefore, rendering *Fool* from *fool* is actually a reflection of what black vernacular has already done with the term; it has improvised on a formal structure to yield an alternative definition that more adequately addresses newer contemporary cultural situations and expectations. Again, *Fool* does not refer to one whose speech or behavior is irrationally impulsive or absent of critical thought. Rather, it refers to one who intentionally deviates from *conventional modes* of communication and behavior in order to challenge and change existing expectations and structural realities.[33] By undermining normative categories, the Fool acknowledges implicitly and explicitly that there are particular social realities that do not provide a sufficient context for human flourishing. In fact, the Fool works to expose the structural realities and cultural norms that keep people bound in myriad ways. Fundamentally, the Fool's actions signify a prophetic *critique* of the status quo.

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[33] Lerner, Ralph. *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 6.

Before turning to this project's primary task, exploring the trickster figure in Afro-American literary traditions, oral culture, and slave preaching, it is necessary to ground the Fool and trickster historically. My reading of the Fool is, to use Baker's language, an *improvisation* on pre-existing and related tropes. Therefore, it is important to identify these tropes. One helpful way to understand the pre-existing tropes that informed the Fool is to think in terms of Carl Jung's concept of *psychological archetypes*. Psychological archetypes are characteristic patterns that "pre-exist in the collective psyche of the human race, that repeat themselves eternally in the psyches of individual human beings and determine the basic ways that we perceive and function as psychological beings."[34] For Jung, archetypes occur in the context of the collective unconscious, and unlike the personal nature of our immediate conscious, do not develop individually but are *inherited*.[35]

The trope of the Fool is inevitably derived from the repository of psychological archetypes inherited from prior cultures in other generations. Clowns, court jesters, comedians, circus ringmasters, and drum majors were just a few of the brightest stars in the vast constellation of meanings and types. In addition, the misfit is a popular archetype within Southern fiction. As a product of a fiery religious culture, the misfit is one whose religious fervor and extremism seem odd, even repulsive, yet intriguing:

> …his exuberance for all things religious, particularly the Bible and preaching, frequently reaches a fevered pitch that, strangely, both attracts and repels everyone within earshot.[36]

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[34] Johnson, Robert. *Inner Work*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986, 27.

[35] Jung, C.G. "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious." In *The Portable Jung*, edited by J. Campbell. New York: Penguin, 1971, 60.

[36] Ramsey, G. Lee, Jr. *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves: The Minister in Southern Fiction*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 114-115.

Numerous archetypes daily hang in our mental skies, actively informing our lives, archetypes of "the hero, the sage, the trickster, the magician, the divine child, the dying and rising god appear in dreams, myths, literature, and art."[37] These archetypes (and many others) constantly influence the decisions we make, shape how we frame our contextual realities and motivate our responses to particular life situations. By naming and analyzing these archetypes, I sought to revive the Fool as a twenty-first century trope with potential to adequately expand views of preaching among seasoned and emerging black preachers:

> For some it is the absence of an archetype that is problematic. In Western culture, it seems that many of us suffer from an insufficiency of "fool" in our lives. Frenetic and uptight, we take ourselves too seriously, trying so hard to conform to a world which promotes workaholism, efficiency, and productivity that we might as well be cogs in a machine. Forgetting that playfulness is a basic human need, we shackle ourselves to our calendars, doing nothing for ourselves unless it is scheduled. Wondering why we so easily become bored and exhausted, we lose all capacity for spontaneity, authenticity, and passion. The antidote to all this would be to give the fool archetype some space, without moving into excesses of debauchery, irresponsibility, or inappropriate levity.[38]

While psychological archetypes are a useful category for understanding the Fool as a trope for prophetic and creative preaching, they have limitations. Psychological archetypes live more theoretically. People have heard them or read about them but may not be constantly *consciously* and somatically engaged with them. The alternative meaning undergirding the construa of the *Fool* is regularly used in African American vernacular and embodied in daily living situations. *He acted a fool on the basketball court! I'm going to act a fool on this job interview! That fool is preaching!* Consequently, African Americans regularly *use* the trope of the Fool.   This thesis offers a formal definition and sign for this consciously embodied, yet unexamined vernacular

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[37] Stewart, 16.
[38] Ibid.,17.

phenomenon. So as a *trope,* the Fool is related to but distinct from Jung's understanding of the fool as an *archetype*.

This chapter briefly underscores a historical perspective of the social significance of those who intentionally push against society's conventions for the sake of transformation. I accentuate this historical perspective by tracing a genealogy of antecedent tropes drawn on to develop the concept of the Fool and trickster respectively. I use four thematic categories to construct this genealogy of tropes: *The Fool in the Ministry of Jesus, The Fool in the Ministry of Apostle Paul, The Fool in Russian Eastern Orthodoxy*, and *the Trickster in Afro-American Antebellum Folklore.* The genealogy of key tropes offered here is by no means comprehensive. It is simply a brief glance at how the primary tropes undergirding the Fool in this thesis have lived in literature and been incarnated in culture during four distinct historical and cultural situations. Familiarity with this brief genealogy will be beneficial later in this thesis when an attempt is made to show how the Fool is a living tradition that can be mapped in contemporary African American homiletic discourse. This chapter concludes with an introduction to Gates' concept of Signifyin(g), which will provide a critical framework in which to examine the trickster's actions and the implications of those actions in Afro-American literary, homiletic and forensic texts.

The Fool in Jesus' Ministry

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of Jesus' ministry, other than its divinity, is its unconventionality. In fact, Jesus' life and ministry, from the beginning, were fundamentally unconventional in comparison to dominant expectations of religious,

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political, and social personalities of the day. The people of Israel were expecting the Messiah to be a great king, born in royalty. Yet, the Messiah is not born in a palace surrounded by political pontiffs or royal demagogues. Rather, the Messiah is born in an animal stable. As an adult, Jesus' unconventional origins transform into unconventional practice.

The unconventional nature of Jesus' ministry is emblematic of the Fool. The Gospels are filled with numerous examples of Jesus personifying this trope. For example, in Mark 11:15-19, there is a dramatic story in which Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers and the benches of those who were selling doves in the synagogue in Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest that certain business owners, seeking to capitalize on the increased traffic due to the Jewish holiday of the Passover only a few days away, are taking advantage of the poor by raising the price on doves, which were used in daily sacrifices at the temple.[39] The money changers, Jesus observes, are also guilty. Scholars suggest that some money changers are engaging in fraud, lying about exchange rates, cheating people out of their hard-earned money. Evidence even suggests that the temple priests received a sizeable profit from all these unethical business transactions. In fact, the high priest, whose responsibility it was to oversee the temple practices, is believed to have received a portion of these profits.[40]

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[39] Chavez, Emilio G. *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel*. Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, 70-75. Jesus was in Jerusalem, along with thousands of others, to celebrate the Jewish holiday of the Passover, just a few days away. Daily sacrifices were customarily offered in the temple as part of the celebration, and doves were used for various purification purposes. Business owners were likely preparing to sell doves to people to offer during the temple's daily sacrifices. However, in order to participate in the temple sacrifices, people had to pay a temple tax. Therefore, money changers setting up tables, preparing to exchange peoples' Roman coins to Jewish coins, since the temple treasury only accepted Jewish coins. Jesus' peculiar outburst is prompted by an apparent culture of corruption among certain temple officials.

[40] Halley, Henry H. *Deluxe Edition Halley's Bible Handbook*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007, 552.

The turning over of tables and chairs is Jesus' announcement that he knows about

the particular scandal in the temple in Jerusalem, the scandal of a corrupt economic

system sanctioned by religion that is exploiting society's most vulnerable. Jesus breaks

ranks with his guilty colleagues and exposes their unjust schemes through a dramatic

expression that deviates wildly from accepted behavioral norms. In short, Jesus

dramatizes the private scandal by publicly acting "scandalous." Such defiance conveys

Jesus' dissatisfaction with the narrow-mindedness of a religious culture that was often

quick to exclude others. In the tradition of Holy Fools, which is briefly described later in

this chapter, Jesus resists convention in hopes of inducing transformation. In his book,

Holy Fools: Following Jesus with Reckless Abandon, Matthew Woodley emphasizes

Jesus' protest of unjust convention as a defining characteristic of the Holy Fool:

> He subverted the entire structure of the religious establishment by changing the
> boundary markers. He picked up the ghetto wall and moved it a few hundred
> miles down the street. In the process, he blew away our often rigid social
> categories of innies and outies—and he created a scandal.[41]

Indeed, if Ralph Ellison is correct that "protest" is an element of all art, then Jesus' act in

the temple can offer creative insight as a liturgical act aimed at altering any social space

that denies dignity to marginalized communities.[42]

Though Jesus is typically described as a Holy Fool, he also displays

characteristics emblematic of the trickster, using trickery not for ill, but both as "a means

of survival and a pedagogical tool."[43] Often the term trickster — similar to the fool —

carries negative meaning. The trickster is often viewed as one who spitefully uses and

manipulates others. Yet trickster figures are more complex. Paul Radin describes the

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[41] Woodley, Matthew. *Holy Fools: Following Jesus with Reckless Abandon*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale
House Publishers, Inc., 2008, 44.
[42] Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York Random House, 1964, 137.
[43] Stewart, 37.

trickster in Native American traditions as a morally ambiguous agent who is both creator and destroyer.[44] The trickster figure in Afro-American folklore is often characterized in shadowy, destructive, and yet still often morally ambiguous terms. As with all archetypes, there are negative and positive, dark and light poles to consider. Therefore, to suggest Jesus is a trickster is not to argue there is evidence of Jesus' inherent deceitfulness or of a contradictory inner darkness. Rather, to describe Jesus as a trickster is to a claim the undeniable truth of the complex, nuanced dimension of prophetic religious leadership:

> In the case of Jesus, the trickster was not shadow material but a capacity for "savvy" that relied on reversals. As trickster, Jesus dealt back what he received without losing his dignity or compromising his integrity. It was the trickster in him which allowed him to have the final word when the "best and brightest" found themselves defenseless in his presence. With masterly skill, he punctured the balloon of the ego, making a point which could neither be easily overlooked or ignored.[45]

Jesus clearly established a regular vocational niche as a political dissident, a religious rebel rouser, and an overall disturber of the peace. His sustained unconventional engagement with the status quo, and his diligent fellowship with society's outcasts gave him a reputation as an eccentric, an idiotic zealot — a *fool*. Indeed, at times Jesus — like the prophets before him — resorts to seemingly ludicrous tactics.[46] From a first century perspective it was an absurd idea for this carpenter from Nazareth, claiming to be the Son of God, to not embrace the kingly status consonant with the general public's expectation of the long-awaited Messiah. Instead, Jesus embodied

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[44] Radin, Paul. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. New York: Schocken Books, 1972, xxiii.
[45] Stewart, 39.
[46] Ibid., 29.

profound humiliation throughout his ministry and most especially on the cross, taking the form of a slave, dying as a convicted felon.

In fact, in the minds of his opponents, the cross was perhaps the best evidence against Jesus' claims as the Savior of the world. Even his own disciples abandoned him as he hung on the cross. This man for whom they had risked everything, for whom they had left jobs and families, was now hanging on the cross, seemingly unable to offer them a word of comfort let alone eternal life. "No wonder they ran—not from Christ but from this Holy Fool whose very foolishness made them appear ridiculous."[47] The scandal of the cross was the ironclad closing argument that proved the prosecution's case that Jesus was at best a simple-minded fool, and at worst an insane, psychopathic blasphemer:

> As he hung upon the cross, Jesus was both king and felon, both savior and victim. In his death agony, he was a king without a kingdom, a guru without followers, a man of prayer without God. Despite promising beginnings, he had come to a fool's end, and with him, all who believed in his "fooldom." Battered and bruised, he hung between heaven and earth, a naked "foolospher" whose fool's errand had led him to a fool's paradise…[48]

Judging solely by external criteria, Jesus seemed to be, using the technical term, a certifiable wacko. However, Jesus' particular manner of negotiating his social, religious and political world clearly demonstrates that he was in fact something more:

> Though the Gospels present many examples in which Jesus' actions provoked the wrath of authorities or defied conventions, they do not suggest thoughtlessness or the inability to see consequences. On the contrary, the Jesus of the Gospels knew what he was doing and precisely how others would react. In fact, he frequently anticipated the response he would receive, speaking and acting with this in mind, thus having the upper hand in dealings with his opponents. What Jesus demonstrated more than anything else were skills of verbal repartee and quick thinking. There was nothing of the simpleton about him.[49]

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[47] Stewart, 6.
[48] Ibid., 7.
[49] Stewart, 28.

Throughout his ministry Jesus effectively deployed a potent concoction of irony, comedic timing, and vernacular dexterity. Jesus' rhetorical arsenal, often displayed extemporaneously in response to personal challenges or sudden conflicts, demonstrates the remarkable savvy of this country preacher from the backwaters of Nazareth. Not only did Jesus succeed in his unconventional approach to ministry. He successfully maneuvered around the political systems and personalities working against him. Rather than being a fool's work, such artful negotiation required a person of unique intelligence.

The Fool in Paul's Ministry

In his epistles, Apostle Paul writes extensively about those who transgress societal convention to induce social change. Paul describes these peculiar people as "fools" or as acting "foolish." However, Paul does not mean that these people are actually incompetent imbeciles. When Paul uses the word *fool* he has a double meaning in mind. On the one hand Paul's description of the *fool* is his articulation of the way dominant culture views those who choose to transgress social, political and religious norms in the name of a crucified Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV), Paul articulates the way those outside the Christian tradition view the religion:

> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

To the world, the Gospel is a *foolish* message: A virgin giving birth to God's Son; God becoming flesh, walking among mortals and letting himself be beaten, humiliated, nailed to a cross, killed to save sinners, and then rising from the dead three days later. From the perspective of society's powerbrokers, these political deviants known as Christians who

were calling for a radical reconstruction of the social order — in the name of a savior who died on a cross — were fools.

However, on the other hand Paul himself understands Christ's followers to be uniquely savvy, courageous pioneers who are blazing a trail for future generations. From Paul's perspective these people are not unmotivated, intellectually vapid *fools*. They are spirit-driven, effervescent *Fools*:

> For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.[50]

Here, Paul is engaged in a sophisticated rhetorical play on the word *fool*. He uses parody, irony and sarcasm to *invert* traditional definitions of a fool as someone who is weak, idiotic, and absurd ultimately rendering an entirely different, life-giving meaning that signifies strength, intelligence, and cultural sophistication.

Paul has launched a semantic assault on the word *fool*, emptying the signifier of its received meaning and pouring into the hollow shell a *Gospel vernacular*. Followers of Christ, Paul proclaims, are *Fools*, not *fools*. And Fools are uniquely empowered with a strange vitality to navigate and challenge the conventions of the ruling powers and principalities. Paul ultimately concludes that he and others like him have become the scum of the earth because they do things most people *cannot* bring themselves to do. Strangely, when they are cursed, they bless. When they are persecuted, they endure it. When they are slandered, they answer kindly. "The Christian, who believes in the

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[50] I Corinthians 4:9-12 NIV.

crucified and risen Christ, appears to be a foolish believer in the eyes of a world that lacks faith. However, Paul insists, this very folly is true wisdom."[51] Thus, Paul redefines the notions of fool and foolishness altogether, exposing the flaw in using traditional understandings of the *fool* to refer to Christians.

This practice of repetition and difference, repeating a well-known term but using an alternative meaning, is a practice black vernacular theorists refer to as Signifyin(g), a characteristic practice of tricksters in Afro-American expressive culture. And in redefining what it means to be a fool or to be foolish Paul is also making a theological statement about God. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Paul suggests that God, contrary to popular belief, is actually potently at work in life's seemingly mundane and even scandalous realities:

> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."[52]

Paul takes great pride in being a Fool precisely because it serves as evidence of God's grace at work. Paul considers his role as a Fool to be an honor, given what others stand to benefit from his actions, or rather, his spirituality. Thus, Paul proclaims, "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith."[53]

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[51] Feuerstein, George. *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992, 9.
[52] 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 NIV.
[53] Romans 1:16 NRSV.

The Fool in Jesus' ministry is a trope that seems to have its most power when viewed in terms of incarnation. Jesus most definitely teaches an unorthodox message in an equally unorthodox manner. But, more importantly, Jesus *inhabited* the world differently by eating and drinking with sinners. As a trope, Jesus' Foolishness refers to the particular way he lives and ministers. The Fool in Paul's ministry is a trope that definitely has incarnational, countercultural dimensions. Yet the full force of the trope of the Fool in Paul's ministry is experienced more in the *content* of what Paul teaches and his *style* of writing — his rhetorical prowess — than in specific examples of his actions in scripture.

The Fool in Russian Eastern Orthodoxy

Early Christianity boasts a strong tradition of those who willfully and creatively opposed the status quo. Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul serve as early examples of this work through their rhetoric and ministerial embodiment. In subsequent generations, different cultures sought to embody the unique spirituality of the Holy Fool in pursuits of social transformation and critique. It is important to note that the tradition of Holy Fools is highly nuanced. In fact, traditions of Fools exist in diverse religious and spiritual traditions around the world.

Later traditions of the Fool improvise on the trope found in scripture. For instance, one tradition within Christianity is the *iurodivii* (or yurodivi) found in the Holy Orthodox Churches of the East. These iurodivii, or Holy Fools, are in every case "ascetic Christians living well outside the boarders of conventional social behavior, including

conventional religious behavior."[54] By the sixteenth century the iurodivii were at the

height of their prominence in Russia, "an observable part of daily life and a source of

amazement to travelers who were both repelled by their wild behavior and nakedness,

and surprised at the license with which they could speak."[55] Some of the more famous

Holy Fools in Russian Eastern Orthodoxy included Basil the Blessed and Xenia of St.

Petersburg. The aim of the iurodivii was uniform, to create scandal aimed at

illumination.

According to John Saward, the history of Russian Holy Fools traces back to the

pioneers of Christian monasticism in the deserts of Egypt and Syria.[56] That early

monasticism, Saward argues, displayed two forms of "holy unwisdom," namely *Holy*

Idiocy and the *fool for Christ's sake*.[57] The former referred to one who was ignorant of

the world's wisdom while the latter referred to one who was, because of their passionate

devotion to Jesus Christ, considered foolish by both Christians and non-Christians —

basically a fool twice over. Elizabeth-Anne Stewart, in her book, *Jesus the Holy Fool*,

describes the evolution of the Holy Fool from somatic rituals of faith to more literary

incarnations:

> The seventeenth century, which brought with it the canonization of the last Holy
> Fool, marked the end of the church-sanctioned Holy Folly. Perhaps the approach
> of the Age of Reason accounts for this, or perhaps the growing influence of
> Western European thought and customs, especially the frivolity and luxury of the
> French court. From this time, the living reality of the Fool for Christ became a
> literary motif, appearing in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, in Tolstoy's *Childhood,
> Boyhood and Youth*, and Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.[58]

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[54] Forrest, Jim. "Holy Foolishness." *The Tablet*, July 1994, 917.
[55] Ibid., 917.
[56] Stewart, 186.
[57] Ibid. Stewart is drawing from John Saward's history of the Russian Holy Fools in his book, *Perfect
Fools*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 12.
[58] Stewart,190.

The Holy Fools in Eastern Christianity have been described by some as operating from a highly evolved spirituality characterized by a unique self-awareness. This awareness is known in certain circles as *individuation*. In her essay, "The Process of Individuation," Marie-Louise Von Franz, describes individuation as "the conscious coming to terms with one's own inner center.[59] This particular spirituality is cultivated through an intimate familiarity with one's self:

> Those committed to the process of individuation will courageously explore their "shadow side," that is, their repressed fears, memories, and desires, bringing to light what was previously hidden. In this way, a new, stronger self is forged from the forgotten fragments of one's identity; the new self is an integrated self fully grounded in awareness—awareness of one's hopes, dreams, attitudes and motives … For the Christian, the individuated self is nothing les than the Christ-Self. All that is stripped away allows the real self—the Christ Self—to surface. Petty ambitions, grudges, and wishes fall away; the desire for praise and accolades is extinguished. Instead, one is left with a new compassion, a new willingness to be attentive to God's will, and with an open-handed response to life. One clutches at nothing, while finding everything in one's relationship with God.[60]

Scholar and mystic Howard Thurman describes this process as one in which a person becomes *unanimous* within themselves. When one hears, as Thurman would say, *the sound of the genuine* within, they are empowered to pursue their vocations with integrity and power. It is from this particular spirituality that the Holy Fool, a fully individuated self, is empowered to do their work — which often involves profound intimacy and solidarity with society's outcasts. The Holy Fool's labor is axiomatic. In his book, *The Inner Kingdom*, Bishop Kallistos Ware argues that sharing in the suffering of others, fully identifying with the brokenness of society's least, last and left out is the

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[59] Franz, Marie-Louise von. "The Process of Individuation." In *Man and His Symbols*, edited by C.G. Jung. New York: Dell Publishers, 1964, 169.
[60] Stewart, 185.

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Holy Fool's fundamentally calling. "Such is the axiom that the fool lives out: no healing without solidarity, no salvation without participation."[61]

Again, it is important to clarify that the tradition of Holy Fools is vast. Stewart emphasizes that the tradition is ecumenical, intercultural, and even interdisciplinary. "Again and again, the motif of Holy Fool crops up in the lives of saints and martyrs everywhere—those who choose integrity over security and are willing to pay the price for their choices, those who abandon the world to live the life of the Spirit more fully."[62] It is not the scope of this thesis to offer a comprehensive examination of traditions of Holy Fools. The above introduction to Russian Holy Fools is sufficient for this thesis. Those interested in further study of Holy Fools can read Ewa M. Thompson's work about Russian holy foolishness in her book, *Understanding Russia: the holy fool in Russian culture (1987)*. Additionally, a historical figure worthy of study is Theodosius (d. 1074), who was known to intercede for ordinary folk before royal figures.[63] And finally, fictional Holy Fools worthy of further study include Father Ferapont in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov,* Sonia in *Crime and Punishment*, and the Prince in *The Idiot*.

The Trickster in Afro-American Folklore

Many different trickster figures emerged from the cultural experience of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Interestingly, tricksters are part of a larger tradition of black folk heroes. This tradition of heroes is often subsumed by scholars under a more general category of folk heroes that is defined by the idealized Eurocentric values of the western world. However, this incorrect placement portrays black folkloric hero traditions

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[61] Ware, Kallistos. *The Inner Kingdom*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000,175.
[62] Stewart, 2.
[63] Ibid., 188.

as traditions that are merely reacting to cultural conditions rather than cultivating cultural treasures as a means of celebrating and expressing the richness of African and African American culture. Therefore, it must be noted that Afro-American folk heroes and tricksters did not simply emerge as responses to the negative, dehumanizing Euro-American values that perpetuated chattel slavery:

> The tendency to evaluate all African American folklore as a reflection of Euro-American values is deeply rooted in folkloristic thinking. This approach to African American folklore has served from the earliest times as a denial of the importance of the African cultural heritage of African Americans to an understanding of black folk traditions.[64]

Enslaved Africans and African Americans possessed a deep repository of cultural meaning from which they drew to create their heroes. Thus, according to Adrienne Lanier Seward, Afro-American folk culture must be evaluated in terms of its "African antecedents."[65] Such resistance to the African roots of black folk hero traditions, Seward argues, is supported less by scholarly evidence and more by methods of scholarly analysis distorted by prejudice.[66] The remainder of this chapter will examine four Afro-American trickster figures: Brer Rabbit, High John the Conqueror, Esu-Elegbara (Esu) and the Signifying Monkey.

Brer (Buh) Rabbit

Brer Rabbit was a popular trickster figure within Afro-American folklore during slavery. There are many tales about Brer Rabbit, who routinely outsmarts and escapes

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[64] Roberts, John W. *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, 7.
[65] Seward, Adrienne Lanier. "The Legacy of Early Afro-American Folklore Scholarship." In *Handbook of American Folklore*, edited by Richard M. Dorson. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983, 49.
[66] Ibid., 49

the clutches of his opponents using wit, cunning, and creativity. The Brer Rabbit tales are part of a tradition of animal trickster tales.[67] The Brer Rabbit tales are often characterized by a contest between the protagonist, a rabbit, and the antagonist, a fox. These tales usually emphasize Brer Rabbit's cunning over the Brer Fox. This motif was so well known that hearers would expect that Brer Rabbit would eventually emerge triumphant — they just didn't know *how*.

In one such tale, *Brer Rabbit in the Well*, Brer Rabbit successfully outwits Brer Fox. As the story goes, one day Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Brer Coon, and Brer B'ar were all tilling the soil for planting. The sun was shinning brightly. Brer Rabbit gets hot, but does not tell anyone. He eventually tells everyone he had a brier in his hand. He then goes to hunt for a cool place to rest. He finds a well. When he gets into the bucket at the top of the well to take a nap the bucket plunges to the bottom of the well. Now Brer Fox actually sees Brer Rabbit sneak off to the well and even sees him fall into the well. Brer Fox becomes curious about what Brer Rabbit is doing in the bottom of the well. So he leans in close to listen. When he does not hear anything he calls down to Brer Rabbit, asking what he is doing. Brer Rabbit tells Brer Fox that he is fishing because he was planning on surprising the group with a mess of fish for dinner. Brer Rabbit paints a colorful picture of how many fish are in the well. Then he suggests that Brer Fox jump into the bucket at the top of the well to help him fish:

> "Brer Rabbit talk so happy en talk so sweet dat Brer Fox he jump in de bucket, he did, en, ez he went down, co'se his weight pull Brer Rabbit up. W'en dey pass one nudder on de half-way groun', Brer Rabbit he sing out:

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[67] For a more detailed description of the content, themes, and dynamics of Afro-American animal tales please see Harold Coulander's work, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore: The Oral Literature, Traditions, Recollections, Legends, Tales, Songs, Religious Beliefs, Customs, Sayings and Humor of Peoples of African Descent in the Americas*. New York: Marlowe & Company 1996, 466-467.

> "'Good-by, Brer Fox, take keer yo' cloze,
> Fer dis is de way de worril goes;
> Some goes up en some goes down,
> You'll git ter de bottom all safe en soun'.'"[68]

The tale of *Brer Rabbit in the Well* serves as a quintessential example of Brer Rabbit's skill as a trickster figure. Brer Rabbit effectively negotiates difficult, even dangerous environments through a creative brokering, and indeed manipulation, of social relationships. Fundamentally, Brer Rabbit uses relationships, and especially relationships with those seemingly more "powerful" than he in order to obtain security, and simultaneously, amusement!

In his work *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, & Community in the Slave Mind*, Riggins Earl, Jr. argues that Brer Rabbit is the slave community's symbol for *playful versatility*. Playful versatility was a primary cultural characteristic among enslaved Africans and African Americans in the antebellum south. Enslaved communities utilized this characteristic to subvert dominant Eurocentric biblical hermeneutics, which were designed to enslave the minds of slaves:

> Brer Rabbit became the unconventional symbol for countering the ethic of servile labor. If this Jesus demanded that they arbitrarily be committed to this ethic, Brer Rabbit offered a philosophy that fused work and play.[69]

Slaves created what Earl refers to as an "ethical gap" in which the slave intentionally confused or reversed the conventional boundaries between right and wrong. This gap creates space for new meaning:

> While the intentional actions causing confusion look like moral chaos to the oppressor, the oppressed see it merely as being the creative inversion or reversal of oppressive ethical logic. It is only in creating the ethical gap that the oppressed are able to get the attention of the oppressor, which is prerequisite for moral

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[68] Coulander, 470.

[69] Earl, Riggings R., Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self & Community in the Slave Mind*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993, 149.

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discourse. This ethical gap requires the oppressor to become a partner with the oppressed in the redefinition of ethical norms and values.[70]

Trickster figures exist in many cultural traditions. Within historically marginalized communities in particular, trickster figures emerge as symbols that empower people to overcome the psychologically torturous and depersonalizing structures of oppression. Yet Brer Rabbit shares a unique distinction among his fellow tricksters:

> What is apparent, of course, is the fact that no stories portray Brer Rabbit as a willful liar, thief, or murderer. For this reason, it might be argued that all of this is indicative of the fact that the community never lost its sensitivity to what was right and wrong at a higher moral level. We might say that this is the mark that distinguishes the slave community's appropriation of the trickster stories from other ethnic groups.[71]

It is not within the scope of this thesis to examine trickster figures in other cultural traditions. However, a comprehensive analysis of trickster figures forged in historically marginalized communities might yield compelling insights into a particular community's concept of higher moral or cosmic principles that govern daily life.

While Brer Rabbit was a central trickster figure in Afro-American animal tales, other significant trickster figures existed. For example, the Signifying Monkey was another popular animal trickster figure in Afro-American folklore. Much like Brer Rabbit, the Signifying Monkey secures safety, and amusement, through cunning. We will learn more about the Signifying Monkey shortly. A brief examination of the Monkey's African antecedents will offer a more substantive understanding of the figures

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[70] Earl, 149.
[71] Ibid., 150. Earl borrows this suggestion of the distinctiveness of the slave community's trickster from Lawrence W. Levine's work, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

from which the Monkey's role as a trickster has emerged. But first it is appropriate to offer a brief examination of the trickster known as High John the Conqueror.

High John the Conqueror

Thanks to the work of anthropologists studying Afro-American Antebellum culture there is a rich archive chronicling the diverse cultural dimensions of life in slave communities. Anthropologists like Zora Neal Hurston worked tirelessly to catalogue the expressive culture of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Much of Hurston's work recounts the experiences of slaves on southern plantations, including the unique tactics slaves developed to nurture their humanity and psychological health while shackled in the bonds of slavery.

A significant dimension of slave culture involved the creation of imaginary heroes. These heroes came to visit slaves on plantations, telling them stories, making them laugh, easing their labors, even annoying and mocking their masters. In short, an imaginative visitation from one of these heroes provided a critical psychological refuge. One of the most famous of these heroes was named High John the Conqueror. Fundamentally, High John was a trickster. He outwitted slave masters while he comforted his enslaved sisters and brothers. In one story, John visits a plantation where the work was especially hard and the slave master particularly mean. John then meets the slaves under a hickory nut tree while they were resting from their labors. Their master and his wife watched them from the veranda of the big house. Even under the watchful eye of their master John convinces the slaves to accompany him on a grand adventure to find a song to help ease their anguish. They all dress in their best cloths, climb on top of

a giant flying crow, and begin their journey to find a song. They travel to many places and had many adventures. Eventually they visit Hell and then Heaven. In Heaven God makes them a song. All of a sudden the slaves hear their master calling. They immediately find themselves under the hickory nut tree, with their master yelling at them from the veranda to get back to work. Then they remember the song God had made. And they begin singing. And the work did not seem as hard as it had before.[72]

The *figurative* realm of black vernacular succeeded in inaugurating emotional and psychological emancipations among enslaved Africans and African Americans from the bondages of chattel slavery. Yet existential transportation was merely one aspect of the subversive role of figuration. Figurative speech personified in imaginary characters like High John allowed the enslaved to literally be in two places at the same time, without ever physically leaving the line of sight of slaveholders. Figuration equipped slaves to escape slavery without ever leaving it. Through the figurative language of black vernacular slaves had access to a world as elegant and loving as Heaven — a world racist whites could not enter because they did not possess the necessary figurative keys.

These discussions about Brer Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, have revealed for the reader how the trope of the trickster has existed within the vernacular realm of Afro-American public discourse. To be sure, the figure of the trickster in black vernacular was not birthed on American shores. It is an ancient figure enslaved Africans brought with them from Mother Africa, a figure inherited by African Americans. Attempting to posit a theory of literary criticism of black texts that is inherently inscribed in the black vernacular tradition, Gates traces two dominant tropes within the Afro-

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[72] For the full text of this story as told by Zora Neale Hurston please see Hurston's work, *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1981, 75-78.

American vernacular tradition — Esu and the Signifyin(g) Monkey. Both Esu and the

Signifyin(g) Monkey serve as figures of formal language use. Studying these two tropes

provides key insight into the fundamental elements involved in the theory of black

literary criticism. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I merely intend for the brief

reflection on these two tropes to help the reader trace the movement, or rather the

evolution of the trickster in Afro-American discourse at the vernacular level.

Esu-Elegbara (Esu)

According to Gates, the trickster figure espoused in black vernacular has its

origins in a mythic, divine figure named Esu (also referred to as Elegbara). This trickster

figure, Gates observes, recurs with tremendous regularity in black mythology within

African, Caribbean, and South American folklore traditions.[73] The character Esu has

different names in different oral traditions. However, in each version Esu is the sole

messenger of the gods:

> …he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man
> to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus,
> the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical
> barrier that separates the divine world from the profane.[74]

Esu appears in Yoruba, Fon, Lucumi and Nago religious discourses as the god of

indeterminacy, a figure of formal language use and its interpretation. Esu's role within

African traditions is seen clearly in the Yoruba's understanding of Ifa divination, a

system of West African divination.[75] Stated plainly, the process of Ifa divination

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[73] For a more substantive analysis of the topos of Esu within African vernacular traditions, including the various geographical areas in which this topos recurred and the various names for Esu in particular African traditions, please see Gates' work, *The Signifying Monkey*, 4-5.
[74] Gates, 6.
[75] For a more substantive description and explanation of Ifa divination please see Gates, 10-11.

involves 16 coconuts that function as a text awaiting interpretation. A person (or propitiate) interested in understanding the meaning of this text approaches an interpreter, referred to as a *babalawo*. The babalawo then begins interpreting the text. The propitiate can ask the babalawo to pause at any time to explain something. The babalawo's "speech must be seen by the propitiate to be a chain of signifiers (like writing), which must be interpreted through a process of interpretation … a process that is always both open ended and repeatable."[76] Thus, Esu is the god of interpretation:

> Esu's most direct Western kinsman is Hermes. Just as Hermes' role as messenger and interpreter for the gods lent his name readily to hermeneutics, our word for the study of methodological principles of interpretation of a text, so too is it appropriate for the literary critic to name the methodological principles of the interpretation of black texts Esu-'tufunaalo, literally "one who unravels the knots of Esu."[77]

In sum, Esu is a trope for critical activity.[78] "Esu is the free play or element of undecidability within the Ifa textual universe; Esu endlessly displaces meaning, deferring it by the play of signification. Esu is this element of displacement and deferral, as well as its sign."[79] Indeed, Esu provides a concrete figure that helps us grasp the complex process of interpretation. But Esu's status as a trickster, inextricably bound to his role as interpreter, must not be forgotten. Esu is highly skilled in using (and even manipulating) formal language, a trait of all tricksters possess. Esu's character is emblematic of the trickster in that it consists of a matrix including but not limited to parody, individuality, open-endedness, disruption, ambiguity, irony, chance, and satire.[80] Fundamentally, Esu's discourse is figurative, or what Gates metaphorically refers to as *double-voiced*. The

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[76] Ibid., 40.
[77] Ibid., 8-9. See Gates' note on the creator of this neologism.
[78] Ibid., 35.
[79] Ibid., 42.
[80] Ibid., 6.

ability to speak figuratively is perhaps the most defining characteristic of the trickster figure in Afro-American public discourse.

The Signifying Monkey

A different, but related trickster figure in Afro-American folklore is the Signifying Monkey. The Signifying Monkey is a trickster figure Gates argues is a descendent of its Pan-African cousin, Esu-Elegbara. This line of descent between Esu and the Signifying Monkey is drawn not because of unearthed "archeological evidence of a transmission process, but because of their functional equivalency as figures of rhetorical strategies and of interpretation."[81] A significant difference, however, is that the Monkey's chief defining characteristic is the use of intentional rhetorical play or figurative language to *trick* or confuse opponents.

The plot of the Monkey tales emanates from the interaction of three characters — the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. The Monkey is a master of figurative discourse. In fact, in one of the Signifying Monkey stories the Monkey tricks the Lion into a violent confrontation with the Elephant in which the Lion is dethroned as king of the jungle. In the story the Monkey repeats to the Lion a series of insults supposedly uttered by the Elephant about the Lion's closest relatives, his wife in particular. The Lion, who does not know the Monkey is speaking figuratively, confronts the Elephant only to be trounced by the Elephant and ultimately dethroned as the king of the jungle. The scheme is so effective because the Monkey knows the Lion is not able to discern literal language from figurative. Thus, the Monkey reverses the Lion's status as king of the jungle essentially

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[81] Ibid., 53.

by exploiting the Lion's inability to comprehend figurative speech.[82] Therefore, the

Monkey becomes a powerful black trope for figurative use of formal language.

Unlike his Pan-African cousin Esu, the Signifying Monkey is not so much a

character in a narrative but a vehicle for narration.[83] "Like Esu, however, the Signifying

Monkey stands as the figure of an oral writing within black vernacular language

rituals."[84] Said another way, the Signifying Monkey is a trope for the ritual *speech* act:

> If Esu is the figure of writing in Ifa, the Signifying Monkey is the figure of a
> black rhetoric in the Afro-American speech community. He exists to embody the
> figures of speech characteristic to the black vernacular. He is the principle of self-
> consciousness in the black vernacular, the meta-figure itself.[85]

The Signifying Monkey is a *figure* for critical activity. This figure manifests

itself in a variety of forms within black vernacular traditions. However, one must not

lose sight of the subtextual reality at work in the Signifying Monkey tales. The tales are

"fantasies of reversal of power relationships" which repeatedly stress "the sheer

materiality, and the willful play, of the signifier itself."[86] The willful rhetorical play of

the signifier is essentially what it means to *Signify*. It is necessary now to turn attention

to the definition and practice of Signifyin(g).

Signifyin(g)[87]

Generally, the term Signifyin(g) refers to the act of engaging in rhetorical play.

However the term is complex. More specifically, Signifyin(g) involves a fundamental

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[82] For the full version of this particular Monkey tale see Gates, 56-57.
[83] Ibid., 52.
[84] Ibid., 52.
[85] Ibid., 53.
[86] Gates, 59.
[87] For a more adequate explanation of Gates' rationale for distinguishing the white signifier "signifying"
and the black signifier "Signifyin(g)" see Gates, 46.

critique of traditional modes of discourse, characterized most often by creative repetition and revision of such discourse. To use Gates' language, Signifyin(g) is a trope of tropes. The term perhaps can be better understood, at least initially, by thinking of it as a general literary category under which other related figures are subsumed.[88] Signifyin(g) is basically "the 'rubric for various sorts of playful language games, some aimed at reconstituting the subject while others are aimed at demystifying a subject."[89] However, its significance goes beyond categorical reference. Signifyin(g), is fundamentally an *act* of rhetorical play.

By now it should be obvious, at least visually, that there is a significant distinction between the term signification or *signifying* and *Signifyin(g)*. The word, when spoken by black people in the vernacular is, more often than not, pronounced without the final 'g' (signifyin').[90] Therefore, Gates has chosen to graphically denote this distinction in meaning by rendering the word with a bracketed 'g' — *Signifyin(g)*. Changing the word, both in the vernacular and in writing, signifies a savvy rhetorical assault upon conventional modes of communication. The act serves as a significant challenge at the semantic level, a critique of the nature of white meaning itself:

> This political offensive could have been mounted against all sorts of standard English terms—and, indeed it was. I am thinking here of terms such as *down*, *nigger*, *baby*, and *cool*, which snobbishly tend to be written about as "dialect" words or "slang." There are scores of such revised words. But to revise the term signification is to select a term that represents the nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation. Few other selections could have been so dramatic, or so meaningful … It is not sufficient merely to reveal that black people colonized a white sign. A level of meta-discourse is at work in this process. If the signifier stands disrupted by the shift in concepts denoted and connoted, then we are engaged at the level of meaning itself, at the semantic register. Black people vacated this signifier, then—incredibly—substituted as its

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[88] For more information, see Gates, 52.
[89] Ibid., 54.
[90] Ibid., 46.

concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition. Rhetoric, then, has supplanted semantics in the most literal metaconfrontation within the structure of the sign.[91]

The creative rendering of the term signification is a profoundly political act. Black folk essentially "defined their ontological status as one of profound difference vis-à-vis the rest of society.[92] This act of re-naming, Gates argues, is evidence that there is inscribed within the black vernacular, rules for reading black texts that exist outside the bounds of Western, Eurocentric standards of literary criticism. Rather, these rules emanate from standards inherent to black cultural traditions to read black texts on their own terms.

Therefore, in vacating the white signifier, black folk "undertook this act of self-definition, implicit in a (re) naming ritual, within the process of signification that the English language had inscribed for itself."[93] Thus, the creation of the term *Signifyin(g)* demonstrates an important critique on traditional modes of criticism which ultimately concludes that classical modes of criticism cannot sufficiently probe the depths of texts produced by black "artists." Consequently, Signfiyin(g) is perhaps most appropriately described as a trope for rhetorical *acts* of formal critique and revision.

Gates uses the term Signifyin(g) as "an indigenous black metaphor for intertextuality as configured in Afro-American formal literary discourse."[94] The Afro-American literary canon, Gates concludes, is the result of a process involving rigorous interrogation of antecedent texts in the production of contemporary texts. "Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-

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[91] Gates, 47.
[92] Ibid., 47.
[93] Ibid., 47.
[94] Gates, 59.

called Black Experience."[95] This urge to begin again is inspired and fueled by acts of

repetition and revision. As authors explore and revise past themes and tropes, they

discover new meanings for present contexts.[96]

Historically, Signifyin(g) has been a primary method among African American

for launching creative semantic assaults on lexicons of white vocabulary and meaning.

The ultimate end of Signifyin(g) is new *figuration*, which stands to offer new meanings

for life by offering fundamental critiques on the governing matrix of meaning. Again, to

Signify is to trope — to speak figuratively. "Signifyin(g), of course, is a principle of

language use and is not in any way the exclusive province of black people, although

blacks named the term and invented its rituals."[97] The list of rituals subsumed under the

category of Signifyin(g) is long. Rapping, testifying, and calling out (of one's name) are

all practices of Signifyin(g) that occur at the vernacular level within African American

public discourse.[98] Though one can Signify for many reasons, the ultimate purpose of

Signifyin(g) or troping is critique and revision through repetition and difference.

In the next chapter, I turn to examining specific rituals of Signifyin(g). Greater

familiarity with Signifyin(g) practices in Afro-American culture is necessary to critically

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[95] Ibid., 111.

[96] Ibid., 113. An excellent example of this theory of *Signifyin(g)* as a black metaphor for both intertexuality and textual revision is found in author Ralph Ellison's critique of Richard Wright's version of naturalism. Gates provides a clarifying account of Ellison's Signifyin(g) upon Wright's work in his book *The Signifying Monkey*, 106-107. By parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference Ellison is able to build upon concepts for the purpose of cultivating new narrative space for alternative insights about black identity and experience. Through the act of *Signifin(g)* Ellison *critiques* Wright's work by repeating key genres of scenes and motifs, critiquing Wright's view of the world with an alternative one. Ellison appropriately describes this theory of criticism as necessary dissent or protest, which he claims should be an element of all art.

[97] Gates, 90.

[98] Ibid., 52. Here Gates references Geneva Smitherman, who defines these and other black tropes, then traces their use in several black texts. Smitherman's work, like that of Mitchell-Kernan and Abrahams, is especially significant in literary theory. See Geneva Smitherman's work, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1977, 101-67. For more information on signifying as a rhetorical trope see Smitherman, *Talkin' and Testifyin*, 101-67.

examine black preaching practices based on the trope of the trickster, who is a master at Signifyin(g). As the reader shall discover, these Signifyin(g) rituals are key tactics or *tools* utilized by tricksters (and preachers) in African American literature and folklore (and sermons) to subvert certain social conventions as well as oppressive personalities, powers and principalities.

CHAPTER II

THE TRICKSTER'S TOOLS AND SLAVE PREACHING

"At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced."

-Frederick Douglass *(What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?)*

In his classic work, *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates provides one of the most comprehensive examinations of the trickster in Afro-American literature. Gates' research spans the Middle Passage to the twentieth century, from Olaudah Equiano's account of life as a slave in *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* to Alice Walker's novel of self-discovery and liberation in *The Color Purple*. Gates' genealogy of trickster figures within black culture in America reveals that the trickster is always engaged in some aspect of rhetorical play. As we have learned in Chapter 1, this black vernacular play of rhetoric is referred to as *Signifyin(g)*. Without exception, tricksters in Afro-American literature and folklore display an adeptness at *Signifyin(g)*. Ultimately, the rhetorical play or Signifyin(g) tricksters engage is aimed at negotiating particular existential realities, usually oppressive systems or unjust powers bent on domination, demoralization and destruction. A facility in Signifyin(g) is a defining characteristic of trickster figures in black literature and, as I argue in this chapter, within black sermons.

In this chapter, I offer a pragmatic exploration of Gates' theoretical claims about Signifyin(g). This chapter explores four Signifyin(g) practices commonly utilized by tricksters within the Afro-American literary and cultural traditions: (1) *Playing the Dozens* (2) *Parody/Burlesque* (3) *Inversion/Reversal* (4) *Indirection*. Each practice is a significant tool in the trickster's rhetorical repartee. A chapter could be written on each. However, given the scope of this project, I will offer only an abbreviated description of each practice. Understanding the following Signifyin(g) practices will yield insight into some of the most effective pedagogical methods at the trickster's disposal. After a brief introduction to these four Signifyin(g) practices, I will analyze four black preachers and their sermons (all delivered during slavery) in search of how these practices were at work in public religious speech among African Americans in the nineteenth century.

Playing the Dozens

In his book, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, Henry H. Mitchell argues that the ancient rhetoric of African *ritual insult*, a ritual in which a person vents anger or frustration against an offender, survives in a modified form within modern African American street culture.[99] One manifestation of this adapted version of ritual insult within modern black vernacular is known as the Dozens. While the Dozens offers an avenue to express anger or frustration, it also offers a means of playful verbal sparring between people. The Dozens is perhaps the best-known mode of Signifyin(g) "both because it depends so heavily on humor and because the success of its

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[99] Mitchell, Henry H. *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*. Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, 7.

exchanges turns on insults of one's family members, especially one's mother."[100]

Lawrence W. Levine defines the Dozens as a ritual of insult involving "symmetrical joking relationships in which two or more people were free to insult each other and each other's ancestors and relatives either directly or indirectly. The mother was a favorite but not an invariable target. A group of onlookers was generally present, audibly commenting upon the performances of each player, judging their relative abilities, inciting them, and urging them on."[101] Figures like H. Rap Brown had become masters of black rhetorical games, like playing the Dozens.[102] The Dozens was a game black youth like Brown played to test each other's vocal dexterity, improvisational skills and creativity — all while under the pressure of a crowd of onlookers and instigators. Brown exercised his mind by playing the Dozens, which can be imagined metaphorically as a school of verbal art. "I learned to talk in the street," Brown writes, "not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit."[103] Below Brown shares one example of this ritual of insult known as the Dozens:

> I fucked your mama
> Till she went blind
> Her breath smells bad,
> But she sure can grind.
>
> I fucked your mama
> For a solid hour.
> Baby came out
> Screaming, Black Power
>
> Elephant and the Baboon
> Learning to screw.
> Baby came out looking

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[100] Gates, 99.
[101] Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 347.
[102] Gates, 72.
[103] Ibid., 72.

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Like Spiro Agnew.[104]

Notice the imagery of the elephant and the baboon. These are most likely references to the Signifying Monkey tales, which centered on the figures of the elephant, monkey, and the lion. By evoking the imagery of elephants and baboons, Brown's practice of the Dozens demonstrates how the figure of the trickster is an inherited tradition living on within contemporary African American vernacular discourse.

Whereas the Dozens was an unrelentingly mean game in which players tried to destroy one another with words, Signifyin(g) represents a broader category of rhetorical play. Some of the practices subsumed under the category of Signifyin(g) were more humane, giving a player the option of coming down on their opponent directly, rather than, for example, on their mama. A more substantive analysis and example of the Dozens can be found in Brown's book, *Die Nigger Die*.[105] Brown is clear to define the Dozens as a *figure* of Signifyin(g). He makes a sophisticated distinction few scholars make between the general category of Signifyin(g) and the figures subsumed under it. For Brown, Signifyin(g) is defined as the rhetorical structures at work in a particular discourse rather than the content uttered.[106]

Again, the Dozens has historically provided an important training ground for cultivating rhetorical acuity, especially among black adolescents. The Dozens served to train adolescents in self-discipline, providing alternatives to physical violence among other black youths.[107] According to John Dollard, the Dozens also served as a "vehicle for deflecting aggression away from the white world, where it was dangerous, into a

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[104] Gates, 72.
[105] Brown, H. Rap. *Die Nigger Die!* New York: Dial Press, 1969, 26-29.
[106] Gates, 73.
[107] Physical violence from a player during the Dozens was the telltale sign someone had exhausted their verbal creativity.

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permissive channel within the black world where it would have few serious consequences."[108] Thus, the Dozens was a ritual that provided black people living during slavery and after with critical survival tools as well as creative avenues to navigate their experience of suffering.

The Dozens is one of the most commonly used Signifyin(g) practices within contemporary African American vernacular traditions. Its faithful practice *cultivates* black participants' creativity and improvisation skills, which are especially useful for members of a historically marginalized community living within an economic system compromised by racism. The tricksters in Afro-American literature and folklore who successfully negotiate human or institutional opponents have each mastered this ritual of insult, intuitively knowing how to demystify their subjects in one deft, discursive act. The Dozens, used strategically, can be a potent ally of contemporary tricksters, and of a generation of disenfranchised African Americans seeking redress of an obdurate economic system.

Parody/Burlesque

Another Signifyin(g) practice the trickster uses is parody, also referred to as lampooning or burlesque. Parody or burlesque is basically a humorous satirical imitation of a person or thing.[109] Literary or dramatic works such as songs, skits or dances are the most common forms of parody/burlesque. Usually, this witty, theatrical practice is

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[108] Levine, 356. It is important to state that Roger Abrahams critiques Dollard's thesis as explaining too much and too little, noting that, in Dollard's thesis, is that *any* aggression in a particular marginalized group can be written off as substitute aggression.

[109] *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 1997, 536.

directed against an individual or institution, intending to mock or challenge fundamental assumptions.

Historically, tricksters within Afro-American vernacular traditions have utilized this practice to successfully navigate oppression, exposing and mocking the dominant, Eurocentric culture's pretensions, hypocrisies and fragilities, challenging its fundamental implicit and explicit assumptions. According to Walter Wink, parody is a particularly effective tactic for engaging and unveiling the contradictions embedded within the logic of oppressive powers.[110] Levine retells a popular story circulated through black vernacular traditions that serves as a potent example of the trickster's use of parody as a Signifyin(g) practice:

> Indeed, nothing more effectively burlesqued the entire notion of ownership in human beings than the incessantly told story of the slave who was caught killing and eating one of his master's pigs and who mockingly rationalized his act by arguing that since both the animal and the slave were the master's possessions nothing was lost: "Yes, suh, Massa, you got less pig now but you sho' got more nigger." In this popular joke we can see a paradigm for an entire strain of Afro-American humor which produced laughter by carrying the whites' claims to their logical and absurd conclusion … without warning they stripped the actors bare revealing the ludicrousness of the white man's puffery and the black man's situation. It was on this plane of absurdity that much of Afro-American humor took place.[111]

The chief aim of the trickster's use of parody/burlesque is to rob an unjust system of its legitimacy by *dramatizing* the ridiculous conclusions that system's flawed ideological underpinnings will inevitably yield.[112] While the forms and styles of parody/burlesque can be diverse, *repeat and reversal* (which shall be explored more in

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[110] Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 179.
[111] Levine, 309-310.
[112] Both Walter Wink and Charles L. Campbell have written substantively on the role of burlesque in Jesus' ministry. Both Wink's article "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way," *Forum* 7 (1991), and Campbell's book, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (2002), offer significant insights into the implications of burlesque for members contemporary Christianity interested in creatively engaging unjust powers in pursuit of social transformation.

the following section) are defining aspects of Signifyin(g) through parody/burlesque.

Gates provides a stunning example of literary *repeat and reversal* in his account of

Ethiop, a black person whose essays were published regularly in black periodicals in the

1850s. In his essay, "What Shall We Do with the White People," Ethiop is Signifyin(g)

upon a particular genre of essays that endeavored to engage the masses about what they

should do with negroes, or, more specifically, the Negro Problem.[113] These essays

followed particular eighteenth and nineteenth rules of form, primarily turning "on the so-

called absence of black progress in the mastery of formal letters, euphemistically called

the arts and sciences."[114] Ethiop masterfully signifies upon this genre of essays through

parody, *repeating* the form and structure of his opponents' arguments, then dramatically

reversing the entire argument:

> We give them [white people] also high credit for their material progress.
> Who knows, but that some day, when, after they shall have fulfilled their
> mission, carried arts and sciences to their highest point, they will make
> way for a milder and more genial race, or become so blended in it, as to
> lose their own peculiar and objectionable characteristics? In any case, in
> view of the existing state of things around us, let our constant thought
> be, *what for the best good of all shall we do with the White people?*[115]

The goal of burlesque, then, is to expose the absurdity of logic within an unjust system.

Since unjust powers depend upon a measure of dignity to thrive, burlesque is a *tactic* for

swiftly disempowering them.[116]

While the prophetic implications of parody/burlesque are obvious, it is important

to point out that the trickster's use of parody (essentially joke telling) has, at least

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[113] Gates, 94. Gates uses Ethiop, "What Shall We Do with the White People," Anglo-African Magazine II, no. 2 (February 1860): 41-45

[114] Ibid., 94. Gates cites David Hume's essay "Of National Characters" as an example of the genre of essays that argued that there was an absence of black progress in the arts and sciences.

[115] Ibid., 94. Gates quotes from Ethiop's "What Shall We Do with the White People," Anglo-African Magazine II, no. 2 (February 1860): 45

[116] Wink, 179.

potentially, profound *pastoral* implications. Levine, borrowing Sigmund Freud's theories

of the psychological implications of joke telling, agrees that humor (and in the case of

this thesis, black humor) offers liberation from psychological inhibition.[117] As the latter

section of this chapter will reveal, some black preachers during slavery were particularly

deft in the art of parody/burlesque. Some of their sermons serve as archetypes for

homiletic burlesques to which contemporary preachers still turn for counsel in

negotiating individual and institutional antagonists, and for insights into their potential

prophetic and psychologically healing capacities.

Inversion/Reversal

Tricksters often engage in a practice of creative inversion or reversal. This

practice involves turning normative expectations and categories on their heads, inverting

them, in order to establish a context in which new meaning can be experienced. This

Signifyin(g) practice is effective precisely because we as human beings are creatures of

habit. We so easily and comfortably confine ourselves within particular norms of

behavior and structures of meaning. Henri Bergson offers a helpful illustration:

> Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the
> situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene….Thus, we laugh at the
> prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate; at the child presuming to teach its

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[117] This is especially true when the trickster is a member of a historically marginalized community living within a system that has designed myriad barriers inhibiting psychological health and wholeness. Here, I am referring specifically to the self-hatred, internalized racism, and the understandably paralyzing fear of verbally protesting an unjust system — all of which are perpetuated by an economy of slavery. Thus, parody or joke telling served a significant pastoral function in cultivating the psychological and emotional health of people living in historically oppressed communities. Exploring the *pastoral* dimensions of the trickster in Afro-American literature is a project not yet undertaken by contemporary scholars. Such a project would be an invaluable contribution to academic and spiritual communities. For a more detailed analysis of the pastoral dimensions of humor see Lawrence W. Levine's description of Sigmund Freud's theory of the liberating aspects of joke telling, which can be found in Levine's work *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 321.

parents; in a word at everything that comes under the heading of 'topsyturvydom.'[118]

Inversion or reversal signals a dramatic deviation from the received structures of meaning. Such deviation opens the path for new ways of experiencing the world and, ultimately, new meanings.[119] It evokes an immediate *topsyturvydom* that alters our reality, and thus invites us into *new* reality. British actor and comedian John Bernard (who lived in the United States between 1797 and 1819) observed this topsyturvydom to be constantly at work in slave humor. Bernard describes slaves' humor as that "which lowered the most dignified subjects into ludicrous lights and elevated the most trivial into importance."[120] Playing with diametrically opposed realities gave much of slave humor its force. In short, slave humor hinged on reversal.

A helpful way to grasp the practice of inversion/reversal is to examine the fundamental context in which it occurs — *human relationships*. The human relationship is the field that makes reversal possible. Richard H. Armstrong describes a *relationship* in terms of two bubbles sharing an overlapping surface.[121] In his book, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, Frank Thomas improvises on Armstrong's bubble metaphor, ultimately articulating the pedagogical and prophetic nature of reversal:

> Reversals, then, are deliberate and disappointing behaviors in direct contrast to the projected expectations of others that do not rupture the shared surface, the emotional field of the relationship. Within the emotional field is contained the paradox of disappointing behavior and yet sustained relationship. Though we automatically and intuitively assume that relationship means nondisappointing

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[118] Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. London: Macmillan, 1911, 94.
[119] Additional discussions on this aspect of humor include D.H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (1963) and Ralph Piddington, *The Psychology of Laughter* (1933); Reik, *Jewish Wit*, 208.
[120] Levine, 301. Levine quotes from James Weldon Johnson's *Along This Way*, 120.
[121] Thomas, Frank A. *They Like to Never Quit Praising God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997, 13. See Thomas' note regarding Richard H. Armstrong's work, "Reversals: Their Care and Feeding," which appears in *Georgetown Family Symposia* 1. 1971-1972, 139.

behavior, the paradox of disappointing behavior and sustained relationship facilitates fresh encounter … At the place of the shared surface of the relationship, in the face of disappointing behavior and sustained relationship, one experiences a fresh sense of wonder about old patters, behaviors, and beliefs. Reversals set the stage for fresh encounter.[122]

The goal of reversal, then, is to intentionally *disappoint* one's expectations in order to create new *experience* that consequently creates new ways of inhabiting human relationships and relating to institutional networks and environments. Fundamentally, the practice of inversion/reversal involves a willingness to engage in calculated risk aimed at both individual and communal transformation. Thomas offers a helpful illustration of reversal at work in Jesus' ministry, as recorded in John 8:1-11, when Jesus disappoints the expectations of religious leaders by refusing to stone a woman caught in adultery. Instead, Jesus writes in the sand:

> His reversal so impacted their core belief that they experienced a fresh sense of wonder about the old ideas and patterns about the law, mercy, and justice. The result of the reversal was that they dropped their stones, accusation, and plan of entrapment, and left.[123]

Inversion/reversal continues to be a precious element in the alloy of black vernacular. According to Levine, the *reversal of roles* was one of the "chief mechanisms of black laughter long after slavery, not only in the trickster tales which continued to be popular but in the entire body of jokes which the freedmen and their descendants told one another."[124] When used effectively, this practice is arguably the most immediately potent and transformative of the Signifyin(g) practices discussed thus far.

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[122] Thomas, 14.
[123] Ibid., 16.
[124] Levine, 301.

Indirection

Indirection involves the communication of messages through an intentionally subtle, cryptic or roundabout way. According to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, instances of *indirection* are produced when "the correct semantic (referential interpretation) or signification of the utterance cannot be arrived at by a consideration of the dictionary meaning of the lexical items involved and the syntactic rules for their combination alone. The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. *The apparent meaning of the sentence signifies its actual meaning.*"[125]

Indirection, Gates argues, is the most defining characteristic of all figures of Signifyin(g).[126] Because all Signifyin(g) practices turn upon figuration, all Signifyin(g), in a sense, involves indirection. In his book, *Talking Black*, Roger Abrahams offers a description of Signifyin(g) as indirection:

> These range from the most obvious kinds of indirection, like using an unexpected pronoun in discourse ("Didn't *we* come to shine, today?" or "Who thinks his drawers don't stink?"), to the more subtle technique, of *louding* or *loud-talking* in a different sense from the one above. A person is loud-talking when he says something of someone just loud enough for that person to hear, but indirectly, so he cannot properly respond (Mitchell-Kernan). Another technique of signifying through indirection is making reference to a person or group not present, in order to start trouble between someone present and the ones who are not.[127]

A discernable sign that one has been successful Signifyin(g) through indirection is the sound of a resentful "What?" from the third party, to which the speaker replies, "Oh, I

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[125] Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia. "Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art." In *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, edited by Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973, 325.

[126] Gates, 85.

[127] Abrahams, Roger D. *Talking Black*. Rawley, Mass: Newbury House, 1976, 19.

wasn't talking to you." Of course the speaker simultaneously was and was not talking to the third party.[128]

Indirection can be a useful tactic for exposing or naming personal and institutional injustice or scandal. Gates testifies about a personal experience with indirection in church. Once, when Gates was worshiping in a church with his father, he witnessed a preacher use indirection in a sermon:

> I once heard a black minister name the illicit behavior of specific members of his congregation by performing a magnificent reading of "The Text of the Dry Bones," which is a reading or gloss upon Ezekiel 37:1-14. Following the sermon, a prayer was offered by Lin Allen. As "Mr. Lin," as we called him, said, "Dear Lord, go with the gambling man … not forgetting the gambling woman," the little church's eerie silence was shattered by the loud-talking voice of one of my father's friends (Ben Fisher, rest his soul), whom the congregation "overheard" saying, "Got *you* that time, Gates, got *you* that time, Newtsy!" My father and one of our neighbors, Miss Newtsy, had been Signified upon.[129]

For a more substantive explanation of the technical aspects of Signifyin(g) in general and indirection in particular see Gates' analysis of Mitchell-Kernan's theories of Signifyin(g) in his work *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*.[130]

This chapter has provided a brief analysis of some of the primary tools both fictional and non-fictional tricksters in Afro-American literature and culture utilize to negotiate the particular social, political, and economic barriers surrounding them. This analysis is by no means exhaustive. It is meant to inspire further exploration of the vast universe of Signifyin(g) practices. In fact, Gates references a list of over twenty-eight Signifyin(g) tropes at the Afro-American trickster's disposal.[131] Though much shorter

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[128] Gates, 82.

[129] Ibid., 83. Gates borrows an understanding of what it means to be "Signified upon" from Claudia Mitchell-Kernan's "Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art" in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, 316.

[130] Ibid., 86. Gates borrows again from Mitchell-Kernan's work "Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art" in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, 325.

[131] Ibid., 77-78.

than Gates' list, the list of Signifyin(g) practices included in this chapter is an adequate distillation of the most commonly used tropes among tricksters in Afro-American literature and folklore. Having considered some of the trickster's primary tools this discussion will turn to a more analytic, constructive and concrete examination of the trickster at work in sermons preached by black preachers and orators during American slavery.

The Trickster in Slave Preaching

The remainder of this chapter examines the trickster as a trope evoked and performed in slave preaching. While this particular section examines several sermons preached by former slaves (including Lemuel Hayes, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass) special attention is given to John Jasper's sermon "De Sun Do Move." With the exception of Frederick Douglass' "What, to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", Jasper's sermon more adequately than any other slave sermon that I have encountered demonstrates the trope of the trickster as a method for negotiating and critically engaging oppressive cultures and systems of thought. In the sermon, Jasper not only evokes the trope of the trickster, he *performs* it.

This chapter's objective is to show how the trope of the trickster was a living tradition in African American preaching during slavery. The use of this trope conveyed a conscious desire among some of the enslaved to exercise agency in determining their destinies in spite of chattel slavery. According to historian Eugene D. Genovese, after 1831, "laws forbade free Negroes to preach to slaves or sought to register and control them or required whites to be present when any black man preached. But the preachers,

free and slave, carried on."[132] And slave preachers did not just preach. They engaged in

subtle, sometimes blatant, yet sophisticated critiques of the social ills of slavery. Such

preaching was, as Genovese describes it, important and extremely difficult work:

> "Straight preachin' from the Bible" does not suggest political fireworks, but
> neither does it suggest ideological neutrality. The slaves appreciated the artificial
> construction and political purpose of the white man's words and opposed to them
> a biblical view of the world, which implied a sense of a higher organic order in
> the universe and therefore a Truth far above the claims of temporal relations …
> To remind black slaves that God made no distinction of class or race was not
> revolutionary, but neither was it without dissident ideological content … The
> black preachers faced a problem analogous to that of the early Christian
> preachers: they had to speak a language defiant enough to hold the high-spirited
> among their flock but neither so inflammatory as to rouse them to battles they
> could not win nor so ominous as to rouse the ire of ruling powers …[133]

Some black preachers often used the sermon as a highly coded message to be

grasped by "insiders" and, though intelligible to the English speaker, often remained out

of the full reach of "outsiders." These coded messages (sermons) were achieved and

performed through the savvy use of words, of course, but also through a unique body

language and tone. In other words, the preacher, like the trickster in Gates' work, was a

master of rhetoric. And in the case of the preacher this rhetoric was not always rhetoric

embalmed with words:

> The preachers had to communicate with more than words, if only because too
> often whites were listening. Even when whites were not listening, the tradition of
> *indirection* [emphasis mine], necessary for survival under conditions of white
> domination, manifested itself as a way of life, not merely a mask to be put on and
> dropped at will. Thus, the preachers relied heavily on tone, gesture, and rhythm
> and combined an adequate verbal message with a deep emotional appeal that
> transcended the words themselves. In a sense every preacher has to do so, but the
> problem facing the black preachers was specific and especially difficult.[134]

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[132] Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Mad*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976, 257.

[133] Ibid., 264-266.

[134] Ibid., 269.

The point to be made here is that black preachers during slavery were well aware of the inhibitions and impending torturous consequences the governing social structures and personalities had imposed upon and planned for them. Yet, many still — with courage and ingenuity — dared to preach. It is impossible determine exactly how many preachers during slavery were preaching prophetic messages against the dehumanizing system.[135] However, in his book, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*, Brad R. Braxton argues that there have been just enough black preachers to inspire masses of black people to "imagine a world of thoroughgoing justice and equal opportunity."[136] Thankfully, in spite of calculated efforts to suppress the unfettered self-expression and dignity of black personhood, there were faithful black preachers during slavery who refused to be silent.

Again, the kind of preaching exhibited by some black preachers during slavery was saturated with a unique intentionality and sophistication, an ingenious mastery of indirection that scholars have not adequately mined. Genovese highlights an compelling example of this kind of preaching in the recalling of a testimony given by a white minister named J.G. Williams, who memorized black sermons, but unbeknownst to him, never fully grasped them:

> The Reverend J.G. Williams, a white man who lived among the Gullah slaves, left us some instructive illustrations of the subtle techniques of the plantation preachers. He reconstructed from memory and perhaps from notes the sermons of Brudder Paul Coteny, who never so much as hinted that his fellow slaves ought to protest against their enslavement. "Good Negro" that he ostensibly was, he dutifully preached the standard sermon against stealing from dear Old Maussah, whose Christian devotion to the slaves he warmly praised.[137]

[135] Hamilton, Charles V. *The Black Preacher in America*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1972, 43.
[136] Braxton, Brad R. *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 3.
[137] Genovese, 265.

This initial perception of slave preaching was often tragically flawed. For as Genovese

states, little by little, "under the nose" of whites like Revered J.G. Williams, Brudder

Coteny consistently hammered away his attack on whites:

> Mind you, nigger! d debil ent shine you eye wid dem buckra watermillion.
> Watermillion is berry shine eye ting to nigger eye. Buckra chicken and buckra
> hog—dems a shine eye ting …. And dem shinin silver and gold dollar is a shine
> eye ting to buckra, an dat's de reason some dem bukcra want to get to hebin—
> case so much gold da, till de berry street pave wid gold. And nigger is a shine eye
> ting to buckra. Ef he look pun a nigger he say: "A thousand dollar in dat nigger."
> O, I tell you, nigger gwine send heap of dem buckra to struckshun.[138]

Slave preaching that endeavored to undermine the system of slavery emanated

from the particular needs of enslaved communities. In general, the complexities of

plantation life required the black person in general to live and speak artfully. Each day

the enslaved faced situations where the right or wrong response could usher in life or

death. Over time, a unique spirituality, imbued with humor, deception, political

sophistication, and fantasy emerged among enslaved communities. In his classic work,

The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Dubois describes this spirituality in terms of folly:

> Political defence is becoming less and less available, and economic defence is still
> only partially effective. But there is a patent defence at hand,—the defence of
> deception and flattery, of cajoling and lying. It is the same defence which
> peasants of the Middle Age used and which left its stamp on their character for
> centuries. To-day the young Negro of the South who would succeed cannot be
> frank and outspoken, honest and self-assertive, but rather he is daily tempted to be
> silent and wary, politic and shy; he must flatter and be pleasant, endure petty
> insults with a smile … [139]

Though Dubois argues this folly often inspired immoral silence and shameful blindness

to injustice, the fundamental point to glean from Dubois here is that many black

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[138] Ibid., 265.
[139] Dubois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classic, 1995.
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communities during slavery and in the aftermath of Emancipation cultivated a spirituality

rooted in artful negotiation around the sin of racism. The black preacher, Dubois argues,

was chiefly responsible for cultivating this artfulness within the spirituality of their

parishioners:

> The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist, —all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it.[140]

Indeed, not every black preacher used the sermon as coded prophetic critique,

rebuke and protest. It is important to understand the complex tension the black preacher

faced during slavery. Many preachers remained unwilling to separate theology from

sociopolitical questions, not because of "indifference to theology but from a holistic

vision of life. Thus, they had to make many compromises in order to be able to do the

very first thing incumbent upon them — to preach the Word."[141] Some preachers,

motivated by pragmatic concerns in the face of the brutal chattel system, decided not to

defy the wishes of slaveholders by preaching a gospel other than the one approved by the

status quo. The plantation system was deeply embedded into the fabric of everyday life

for the enslaved person. And without the protection from masters enslaved Africans and

African Americans were even more vulnerable to brutality for preaching other gospels:

> When Old Afred Williams, a slave preacher of Tennessee, had to contend with the hostility of patrollers to his prayer meetings, he had a ready response: he sent for his master on whose protection he knew he could depend.[142]

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[140] Dubois, 211

[141] Ibid., 263

[142] Genovese, 263. Genovese borrows this account of Afred Williams from narratives compiled in the Fisk University Social Science Institute's work, *Unwritten history of slavery; autobiographical accounts of negro ex-slaves*. Washington, NCR Microcard Editions,1968, 2.

Slave preachers had to wrestle with the tragic reality that their masters offered a certain measure of security. Unfortunately, this security did not signal an altruistic motivation on behalf of slave masters to protect slaves for whom they held genuine regard. Rather, slave masters seem to be have been marking their territory, communicating to other whites that they alone reserved the right to brutalize their slaves, and potentially damage their own labor instruments.

Nonetheless, there are extraordinary examples of preachers who, in spite of the potential violent repercussions, preached against the system of slavery. These preachers used the rich cultural and rhetorical traditions bequeathed to them in service of ministry. "Usually illiterate, the slave preacher often had native wit and unusual eloquence."[143] In his classic work, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, James Weldon Johnson describes these preachers in artful detail:

> The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor. He knew the secret of oratory … He was a master of all the modes of eloquence. He often possessed a voice that was a marvelous instrument, a voice he could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunderous clap … His imagination was bold and unfettered. He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was often swept away.[144]

In his book, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching*, Evans E. Crawford offers a similar sentiment about the musical dimensions of black sermons. Crawford identifies the "homiletic musicality" in black preaching as a legacy of West African culture.[145] Both Johnson and Crawford's description of the folk preachers during

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[143] Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South, 232.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 232.

[144] Johnson, James Weldon. *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Edited by Jr. Henry Louis Gates New York: Penguin Group, 2008, 3-4.

[145] Crawford, Evans E. *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995, 21. Crawford borrows the term "homiletic musicality" from Jon Spenser's works *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (1987) and *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (1990).

slavery and after resembles the portrait of the nature of the trickster's vernacular tropes this project has already painted.

Those who dared to preach trumpeted a clarion call among the oppressed to challenge the poisonous doctrines justifying slavery. The task was difficult and dangerous. Some preachers were even killed, for preaching. In the book, *Five Slave Narratives*, William Loren Kats records the testimony of Moses Grandy of Boston. Grandy's brother-in-law was a preacher from North Carolina who was tortured for months (and eventually died from his injuries) for leading worship services without the permission of whites.[146] Slave masters worked religiously to silence black preachers from preaching a gospel of freedom or equality. Yet, Rev. Anderson Edwards, a Baptist preacher born March, 12 1844, who worked on a plantation in Rusk County (near Henderson, Texas), testifies that some preachers, like himself, found creative ways around the gospel gag orders slave masters imposed:

> I started preaching right after I jined the chu'ch. Course when I started preaching, I was a slave and couldn't read or write. Till freedom I had to preach what they told me to. Master made me preach to the other Niggers that the "Good Book" say that if Niggers obey their Masters they would go to heaven. I knew there was something better for them but I darsn't tell them so lest I done it on the sly. That I did lots. I told the Niggers, but not so Master could hear it, if they keep praying that the Lord would hear their prayers and set them free.[147]

Edwards' goal, as was the goal of like-minded black preachers, was to help engender an ideological emancipation among the enslaved. Those who dared to embrace such a ministry were fully aware of the dangers. However, their enduring sense of call

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[146] Katz, William Loren. "Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy." In *Five Slave Narratives*. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969, 35-36

[147] Rawick, George P. "The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography " In *Contributions in Afro-American and African studies*, edited by George P. Rawick. Westport, Conn., 1977, 1266. This excerpt can be found in the Texas interviews (Series 2, Volume 4, Part 3).

compelled them to act. Mitchell commends those preachers who dared to preach in spite

of the hazards. "Accounts such as this leave little doubt about the sincerity and

dedication of the great majority of those whose preaching was prohibited and

underground."[148]

Again, the more progressive preachers within slave culture constantly walked a

difficult tightrope. They recognized the importance of the protection their masters

provided. Yet they still felt compelled to preach a Gospel of freedom.[149] To aid and abet

their efforts to be prophetic yet pragmatic, these preachers cultivated a well-calculated

public ignorance. In his book, *Images of the Black Preacher: The Man Nobody Knows*,

H. Beecher Hicks, Jr. argues that these wily preachers played as fools:

> Not only did the sermon of slave preachers aid in the process of psychological
> survival, but in a profound, albeit limited, way the preachers were also able to
> take what the white man meant for evil and extract from it an intrinsic good.
> Resistance to the religion of perverted oppressors gave rise to a black religious
> motif which, dressed in the clothes of external weakness, abounded in internal
> strength.[150]

Those preachers who discerned the fundamental contradictions within the slave master's

religion began articulating an alternative religion, a religion they believed more

accurately conveyed the good news of freedom in Christ to which the Bible pointed.

According to James Cone, religion emanates from the "experience of people who

encounter the divine in the midst of historical realities" and not from a lexicon of rules

committed to memory.[151] Thus the enslaved, who were introduced to Christianity within

a historical context of suffering, were able to construct a religion that resembled white

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[148] Mitchell, Henry H. *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990, 29

[149] Genovese, 263.

[150] Hicks, H. Beecher, Jr. *Images of the Black Preacher: The Man Nobody Knows*. Valley Forge, PA.: Judson Press, 1977, 33.

[151] Cone, James. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1972, 29-30.

Christianity but emphasized the themes of freedom, equality, and justice that slave masters read *out* of scripture. Preachers were instrumental in the forging of this "different" Christianity.

Indeed, there is a rich tradition of preachers who creatively and publicly condemned the dehumanizing system of slavery, offering an alternative vision for life. Preachers within this tradition demonstrate preaching as a powerful form of "resistance" to systemic injustice.[152] The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to exploring the sermonic performances of four of these preachers: *Lemuel Hayes*, *Sojouner Truth*, *Frederick Douglass* and *John Jasper*. In the case of John Jasper's sermon, the trope of the Fool is most quintessentially performed, even while explicit references to race and slavery are not readily made in his sermon. The preachers examined in this chapter offer a homiletic genius as their legacy. And they possess a unique proficiency in instilling within their people "a strong sense of moral values, without which no future movement for liberation would have been possible."[153]

Lemuel Hayes

Lemuel Hayes was born in 1753 to a black father and white mother. His mother abandoned him in his infancy and he was taken in by a white family.[154] Hayes worked as an indentured servant in Granville, Massachusetts until the age of 21. He was licensed as a preacher in 1780 and ordained in 1785, becoming "the first Afro-American to be

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[152] Saunders, Stanley P., Charles L. Campbell. *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000, 74. Here Saunders and Campbell offer a theology and definition of preaching as counterspeech to the injustice, violent and abusive speech of the powers and principalities.

[153] Ibid., 263. Genovese is paraphrasing from Henry H. Mitchell's *Black Preaching*, 134.

[154] Edwards, O.C., Jr. *A History of Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004, 531.

ordained by any religious denomination."[155] Hayes learned both Latin and Greek and had

extensive experience preaching in predominately white congregations. In fact, Hayes

spent over three decades serving predominately white churches in New England.[156] He

is believed to be the first black pastor of a white congregation in the United States.[157] It

is from within a congregation where he represented a racial minority that Hayes

embodied the nature of a trickster. In his book, *A History of Preaching*, O.C. Edwards,

Jr. categorizes Hayes' preaching style within the elite literary tradition.[158] This more

formal style of preaching (which perhaps was appealing to Hayes given his privileged

upbringing) was distinct from the less formal "emotional" folk preaching practiced by

preachers like John Jasper, for example.[159]

A classic example of how contextual realities served to conjure the trickster

within Hayes is found in a sermon he once preached on the doctrine of universal

salvation. The title of the sermon, "Universal Salvation: A Very Eminent Doctrine; with

Some Account of the Life and Character of its Author," is based on Genesis 3:4: *And the

serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die*. The context of this sermon is

significant. Hayes and a white Universalist preacher named Reverend Hosea Ballou had

been involved in an ongoing disagreement about the doctrine of salvation. Hayes, a

Calvinist who believed in predestination and election, disagreed with Ballou's doctrine of

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[155] Sernett, Milton C. *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985, 51.
[156] Ibid., 51.
[157] Simmons, Martha J., Frank A. *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010, 56.
[158] Edwards, 538
[159] Ibid., 546

universal salvation for all. Their doctrinal disagreement was well known and many were

expecting some sort of encounter between the two preachers.[160]

In his sermon, Hayes makes masterful use of metaphor. Early in the sermon

Hayes refigures the serpent as a preacher, brilliantly insinuating that Reverend Ballou is

like a serpent leading people astray. The first part of Hayes' sermon involves six distinct

points about the preacher (serpent) in the text. In each of the points, Hayes is making

metaphorical comparisons between the serpent in Genesis and Reverend Ballou that serve

as staggering criticisms of Ballou:

> As to the preacher, I would observe, he has many names given him in the sacred writings; the most common is the devil … He was once an angel of light and knew better than to preach such doctrine: he did violence to his own reason … He is an old preacher. He lived above one thousand seven hundred years before Abraham; above two thousand four hundred and thirty years before Moses; four thousand and four years before Christ. It is now five thousand eight hundred and nine years since he commenced preaching. By this time he must have acquired great skill in the art. He is a very cunning, artful preacher … He is a very laborious, unwearied preacher. He has been in the ministry (a minister of sin) almost six thousand years; and yet his zeal is not in the least abated … He mixes truth with error, in order to make it go well, or to carry his point, in ruining souls … He is a very successful preacher. He draws a great number after him. No preacher can command hearers like him …[161]

Hayes draws the hearer into an artful oration that imagines the serpent as a manifestation

of an ancient evil that has perfected the art of persuasion in order to enslave or abuse

others. This particular picture of evil is not only compelling, it is biblical. Therefore,

Hayes is able to build credibility and trust with his hearers early in the sermon. Yet it is

Hayes' mastery of metaphor and parody that gives the sermon its potency. Hayes

ingeniously fuses his description of the characteristics of an ancient adversary with the

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[160] Simmons., 57.
[161] Ibid., 58-59.

characteristics of his present adversary, Ballou. The goal is to create a unique crisis in his hearers as they wrestle to distinguish Ballou from the ancient evil depicted in Genesis.

Having successfully arrested his hearers' attention on the common ground Ballou and the serpent allegedly share, Hayes links his opponent to those in the Israelites' history who, through their preaching, deceived others into thinking there was no consequence for disobedience or sin; that they would surely not die after defying God's commands. In his retelling of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Hayes is even bold enough to more explicitly critique Ballou, who was preaching a message of *universal* salvation as opposed to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and election that Hayes espoused:

> Lot preached to them; the substance of which was, *Up, get ye out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city*—Genesis 19:14. But this old declaimer told them, *No danger, no danger, ye shall not surely die* … they believed the universal preacher…[162]

Essentially, Haynes rhetorically links Ballou with these defiant distorters of the truth in order to further discredit him. Consulting the Bible as a primary source on which to build a case against Ballou is the deft rhetorical move of a gifted homiletician.

By preaching *Ye shall not surely die*, Hayes claims, Satan's chief crime in the Garden of Eden was to suggest that there would be no consequence, no punishment for sin. This, Hayes suggests metaphorically, is Ballou's chief sin:

> What Satan meant to preach, was that there is no hell, and that the wages of sin is not death, but eternal life … The devil is not dead, but still lives; and is able to preach as well as ever, *Ye shall not surely die*. Universal Salvation is no newfangled scheme, but can boast of great antiquity. See a reason why it ought to be rejected, because it is an ancient devilish doctrine.[163]

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[162] Simmons, 59.
[163] Simmons, 59, 61.

Through the use of metaphor Hayes argues that Reverend Ballou, in his affirmation of the doctrine of universal salvation, is in fact preaching an erroneous, misleading, and even destructive message. Since Hayes believes in predestination and election, he argues Ballou's doctrine of universal salvation ignores, or at least fails to take seriously, the inevitable reality and seriousness of human sin.

In his sermon's close, Hayes creatively launches one last indictment against Ballou. This indictment is veiled under the cloak of collegiality that is rooted in Hayes' fundamental belief in God's judgment of human sin:

> To close the subject: As the author of the foregoing discourse has confined himself wholly to the character of Satan, he trusts no one will feel himself personally injured by this short sermon; but should any imbibe a degree of friendship for this aged divine, and think that I have not treated this Universal Preacher with that respect and veneration which he justly deserves, let them be so kind as to point it out, and I will most cheerfully retract; for it has ever been a maxim with me—RENDER UNTO ALL THEIR DUES.[164]

Haynes demonstrates several distinct characteristics of the trickster. Most prominent is the use of parody. In addition, Hayes uses irony in his suggestion that this agent of light (Ballou) is actually an agent of darkness. Hayes' rhetorical tactics are subtle and *indirect*. However, given the reality that the disagreement between he and Reverend Ballou was widely known, it is probable that even his indirect rhetorical and metaphorical musings were automatically taken to refer to Ballou. Haynes' savvy use of metaphor allows him to dig deeper in his public indictment of the message of universal salvation because he is not directly confronting Ballou. Hayes, like all tricksters, is a master of indirection.

Sojourner Truth also exemplifies the trickster in a sermonic performance. However, she is even bolder than Hayes in confronting opponents. Truth demonstrates

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[164] Ibid., 63.

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how the trickster was powerfully at work in the preaching ministry of black women during slavery.

Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797-1883)

It is held that Isabella Bomefree, also known as Sojourner Truth, was born into slavery in Ulster, New York in or around 1797. In 1827, when slavery was declared illegal in New York, Truth ran away from her third slave owner John J. Dumont. Around that time Truth testifies that the Holy Spirit first inspired her preaching as well as her abolitionist and women's rights work.[165]

In what is arguably her most famous public address "AR'N'T I A WOMAN" (also known as Ain't I a Woman), originally delivered in December 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, Truth boldly argues for women's rights and the rights of black people in America. Throughout this speech, Truth uses parody to challenge the dominant culture's venerated notion and practice of chivalry:

> But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place [and, raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked], And ar'n't I a woman?[166]

Truth effectively carries the notion of chivalry to its logical conclusion — that *all* women should be respected all the time. Thus, she exposes the rule's fundamental flaw, namely that in practice the rule certainly does not apply to *all* women.

In her speech, Truth engages her audience with a magnificent combination of wit and humor, masterfully timing particular gestures that ingeniously garner affirmation

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[165] Simmons, 217.

[166] Ibid., 221. This particular version of the speech is from a letter Frances Dana Gage sent to a newspaper known as The Independent on April 23, 1863.

from the crowd. Such well-choreographed gesturing is consonant with the dramatic

characteristics emblematic of tricksters:

> When dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head—what dis dey call it? ["Intellect," whispered some one near.] Dat's it honey. What's dat got to do with women's rights or niggers' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? [And she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud]. Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much right as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman. *Whar did your Christ come from?* [Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eye of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated,] Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had noting to do with him. [Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man.][167]

Truth is publicly Signifyin(g) upon those who are actually challenging her in the midst of

her speech. Clearly she possesses gifts for spontaneity and improvisation that afford her

a unique ability to stymie, in the moment, any would-be opponents from gaining

rhetorical ground.

A significant subtext of Truth's speech is her prophetic critique of the inadequacy

of a certain theological and hermeneutical lens that poisons many sermons. While

addressing a particular objector during her address Truth offers a brilliant reinterpretation

of the biblical character Eve, not as a sinful woman, but as a woman with profound power

to change the world:

> if de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all 'lone, all dese togedder [and she glanced her eye over us], ought to be able to turn it back an git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to do it, de men better let 'em.[168]

Here Truth rhetorically spars with biblically sanctioned notions of women as sinful and

weak in order to *refigure* a newer, more life-giving and empowering understanding of

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[167] Simmons, 221.
[168] Simmons, 221

women and womanhood. Truth takes conventional interpretations of canonical texts and renders alternative meaning in order to uplift generations of people whose unique vitality has been sapped and wasted by the daily physical and psychological brutality of chattel slavery. Truth, like all effective tricksters, *out imagines* the system of domination threatening her existence.

Truth essentially endeavors to expand her peoples' constricted imaginations so that each of them, and especially black women, refuse to remain confined indefinitely in the narrow categories assigned by a status quo that endeavored to systematically oppress them. Truth's homiletic reversal of the character profile of Eve provides sufficient underpinnings for an ideological emancipation among women. But Truth is not simply after an expanded imagination among her people. The primary subtextual dimension of Truth's speech is that she wishes for the imaginations of those representing the dominant culture to be forever expanded. In this sense, Truth embodies the aspect of the trickster that shows no partiality.

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass, much like Sojourner Truth, possesses a unique artfulness in his manner of more boldly dramatically confronting opponents. In his message, "What, to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Douglas expounds upon the horrors of slavery and exposes the wicked acts of those who use the Constitution and the Bible to sanction the dehumanizing system. More specifically, Douglass decries the injustice of the Fugitive Slave Act. Yet Douglas, true to the nature of the trickster, chooses his words methodically. Instead of starting in the raw and condemning language used throughout

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most of the speech, Douglass begins, cunningly, with *praise*. He diligently crafts

successive clusters of emotionally charged, nostalgic and celebratory paragraphs,

honoring the witness and emphasizing the character of those revered statesmen who

signed the Declaration of Independence:

> They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to
> bondage. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against
> oppression. They showed forbearance; but that they knew its limits. They
> believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny. With them nothing was
> "settled" that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were "final,"
> not slavery and oppression. You may well cherish the memory of such men. They
> were great in their day and generation. Their solid manhood stands out the more
> as we contrast it with these degenerate times.[169]

Douglass intentionally emphasizes the particular virtues of honor, integrity and courage

as those most quintessentially embodied in the founding fathers. By beginning with

praise, Douglass attempts to ingratiate himself to the members of his audience who have

gathered expecting to hear a message celebrating the nation's birth. Thus, Douglass

prepares the way for a powerful *reversal*.

Through his initial remarks, Douglass' hearers have intimately identified with

their heroic founding fathers. Their pride is bubbling over as they consider the country's

glorious present and promising future. Douglass knows his audience expects a particular

tone, content, and decorum, all sublimely illuminating the righteous past and present of

the United States of America. Instead, about a third of the way into the address, with the

deftness of a trickster, Douglass dramatically disappoints his audience's expectations:

> Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have done much of it
> well. You live and must die, and you must do your work. You have no right to
> enjoy a child's share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be
> blest by your labors. You have no right to wear out and waste the hard-earned
> fame of your fathers to cover your indolence…There are illustrations of it near
> and remote, ancient and modern. It was fashionable, hundreds of years ago, for

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[169] Simmons , 142.

the children of Jacob to boast, we have "Abraham to our father," when they had long lost Abraham's faith and spirit. That people contented themselves under the shadow of Abraham's great name, while they repudiated the deeds which made his name great. Need I remind you that a similar thing is being done all over this country to-day?[170]

Douglas uses scripture creatively to reverse the audience's expectations and create space for new revelations. In his book, *Stoney the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Cain Hope Felder describes such uses of the Bible by preachers like Douglass as critical sources for crafting effective *prophetic apologies* for America:

> By this term I mean to refer to African Americans' use of the Bible in order to make self-assertive claims against a racist America that claimed to be a biblical nation.[171]

Douglass' imagery of tarnished reputations and misappropriated bequests tacitly alludes to other biblical images like the Parable of the Prodigal Son, who squanders his family inheritance in gluttony, greed and lust. The scandal in America to which Douglass points is that the generations following the founding fathers are in fact generations of people mismanaging the family heirlooms of peace and justice that their founding fathers bequeathed to them. Recipients of a rich inheritance, Douglass claims, are lazily living off the previous accomplishments of their forbears. In short, Douglass condemns generations of Americans who tragically look upon America as a completed work and who consequently fail to wisely invest their inheritance in the unfinished project of perfecting the Union. This dramatic reversal creates a significant opportunity for Douglass' hearers to rethink notions of justice and peace, which are revered as pillars upholding the nation but yet being withheld from particular populations of the nation's citizens.

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[170] Simmons, 144.

[171] Felder, Cain Hope. *Stoney the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 92.

While reversal remains a strong tool in Douglass' rhetorical arsenal, his grammatical skill seen in his intentional use of the pronoun "your" throughout his speech is equally effective. Each time Douglass refers to the hallowed day of the nation's independence, the Fourth of July, he frames the day as "your" celebration. It seems harmless to the hearer. As far as the hearer is concerned such language could simply be evidence of the particular style of the orator who has chosen to speak to his audience in second person. But the language is intentionally indirect, and figurative. Douglass has set a rhetorical snare into which his hearers have already fallen. Soon it becomes clear that Douglass is making a profound distinction between how whites and blacks view the Fourth of July — "This is *your* celebration," Douglass exclaims, "not *mine*, and definitely not *ours.*" The audience's illusions quickly dissipate as they experience the full weight of the irony Douglass has served them:

> Fellow citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? ... The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?[172]

At this point in the speech, Douglass has moved from historical to almost exclusively figurative language. There is a distinct transition from the political pundit to the vernacular poet. Douglass, like any seasoned trickster, intuitively understands that the figurative power of the vernacular is more effective at inducing conversion than the legalistic erudition of the dominant culture:

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[172] Simons, 144-145.

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.[173]

Interestingly, Douglass concludes that scorching irony, not meticulous argument, is the liberating way forward and the most effective means of treating the disease of slavery. According to Gates, the times were calling for a more "purposeful rhetoric" among Americans in general and black people in particular, a discourse "with an immediate end in mind."[174] This emphasis on the figurative power of the vernacular to birth social change is an unconventional pedagogical move during a time in American history when logic and rational debate were seen as the primary means of exhuming truth.

Douglass' mastery of black vernacular, much more so than (but not in isolation of, and definitely in collaboration with) his familiarity with the dominant culture's lexicons of words, enables him to communicate the profound paradox of America's most venerated holiday, which is both a climactic crescendo of joy and a degenerating nadir of chaotic, dehumanizing brutality:

What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is

[173] Ibid., 147-148.
[174] Johnson, James Weldon. *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Edited by Jr. Henry Louis Gates New York: Penguin Group, 2008, 4-5

not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.[175]

Douglass is a master of figurative language, and irony in particular. Not only does Douglass' performance conceive of the vernacular as a sign of prophetic critique. Through his performance, Douglass actually becomes the embodied sign — the protoplasmic transliteration — of the vernacular's vocation of prophetic critique and revision.

Finally, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of Jasper's sermon "De Sun Do Move." This sermon provides an excellent example of the trickster at work challenging, mocking, and dethroning, the status quo's pretensions.

John Jasper

John Jasper was born into slavery in Virginia's Fluvanna County in 1812. Jasper's father, Philip, was a preacher who died before Jasper was born. In 1867, at the age of 55, John Jasper started the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond. William Eldridge Hatcher, a white pastor of a nearby church, described Jasper as a preacher of extraordinary skill and eloquence.[176]

In his most celebrated sermon, "De Sun Do Move," Jasper uses the Old Testament passage of Joshua 10 to boldly challenge the notions some had stirred up among his people that the earth moved around a stationary sun.[177] Jasper argues his case before the area's most affluent whites and poorest slaves. "It was of that combative type of public speech," Hatcher observed, "which always put him before the people at his

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[175] Simmons, 148.
[176] Simmons, 281. Eldridge was pastor of Grace Street Baptist Church and chronicled his experience in ministry with Jasper in his work *John Jasper: The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher*.
[177] Genovese, 269.

best."[178] In the biblical story in Joshua 10, Joshua leads the Israelites in battle against the

Amorites. At Joshua's request God makes the sun stand still, which, Jasper argues, is

evidence that the sun does in fact move.

Jasper begins his sermon with a personal *burlesque* to disarm his audience by

challenging certain implicit notions of white intellectual superiority. Jasper professes

humility in the face of divine mystery, unlike his opponents whom he intimates

masquerade as pseudo sages who have fooled themselves into thinking they can fully

grasp God's mysteries. This arrogance, Jasper concludes, is down right foolish:

> Not, my breathren that I am a fool to think I know it all. No! Far from it! I don't
> hardly understand myself, nor half of the things around me, and there is millions
> of things in the Bible too deep for Jasper, and some of them too deep for
> everybody. I don't carry the keys to the Lord's closet, and He ain't tell me to peek
> in, and if I did, I'm so stupid, I wouldn't know what when I sees it. No, friends, I
> know my place at the feet of my masta' and there I stay.[179]

Here Jasper is invoking classical definitions or psychological archetypes of the fool as

one who is idiotic, insane or absurd in order to invert them. He ultimately alters

traditional notions of the fool by suggesting that the truly wise person is one who admits

their limitations, an act, he implies, to which his opponents fail to demonstrate.

Fundamentally, Jasper challenges traditional semantic meaning espoused by the

dominant, white culture by inserting an alternative meaning for the word understood be to

diametrically opposed to the knowledge of whites — *fool*. Jasper essentially launches a

technical assault on the signifier "fool" by inserting another rhetorical meaning. In

Jasper's *refiguration* of the fool, he engages in savvy self-deprecation that opens him to

God's infinite wisdom. Though he is not a trained astronomer or astrologer, Jasper

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[178] Hatcher, William Eldridge. *John Jasper: The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher*. New York:
Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908, 133.
[179] Simmons, 283.

possesses a unique knowledge about the sun that enslaved Africans and African Americans, but not whites, also possessed — knowledge of how the sun's scorching heat causes fatigue, blisters and menaces open wounds. Basically, Jasper has a unique knowledge of how the sun affects bodies in bondage — scientific, biological and existential knowledge white folk, no matter how intelligent, just did not, and could not, possess. This knowledge, Jasper argues, makes the black slave, one whom the dominant culture assigned an inferior intellect, to be a person of unique expertise on matters of science, astronomy and the universe.

After initial musings on the story of Joshua and the sun standing still, Jasper advances his sermonic plot by evoking the Old Testament story found in 2 Kings 20. In this biblical passage, King Hezekiah gets sick. God proclaims that the king's illness is a sickness unto death. But Hezekiah prays fervently for God's mercy and God promises to spare Hezekiah's life. God tells Hezekiah that there will be a particular sign that will prove that what God has said will come to pass. The sign is "the shadow" going backwards. Jasper uses this sign of the shadow as further evidence supporting his sermon's primary claim about the sun:

> I ain't acquainted with them sundials that the Lord tol' Hezekiah 'bout, but anybody that has got a grain of sense knows that they was the clocks of them ol' times and they marked the travels of the sun by them dials. When, therefo', God tol' the king that He would make the shadow go backward, it mus' have been just' like puttin' the hands of the clock back; but mark you, Isaiah expressly say that the sun return ten degrees. There you are! Ain't that the movement of the sun? Bless my soul! Hezekiah's case beats Joshua. Joshua stop the sun, but here the Lord make the sun walk back ten degrees; and yet they say that the sun stand stone still and never move a peg! It look to me like he move around mighty brisk, and is ready to go anyway the Lord orders him to go. I wonder if any of them philosophers is round here this afternoon? I'd like to take a square look at one of them, and ask him to explain this matter. He can't do it, my brethren. The philosophers knows a heap about books, maps, figures and long distances, but I

defy him to take up Hezekiah's case and explain it off. He can't do it. The Word of the Lord is my defense and bulwark ...[180]

Interestingly, Jasper seems to be asking people to acknowledge the contradiction between what the Bible says and what philosophic theories say. Jasper is not so much concerned with whether or not the sun actually moves. More than anything else Jasper wants people to take the Bible more seriously. The Bible suggests the sun moves, but yet the philosophers and others quickly dismiss this possibility. Fundamentally, Jasper is constructing a passionate apologetic for God's omnipotence and the Bible's authority as a book of sacred scripture:

> Allow me, my friends, to put myself square about this movement of the sun. It ain't no business of mine whether the sun move or stand still, or whether it stop or go back, or rise or set. All that is out of my hands entirely, and I got nothing to say. I got no theory on the subject. All I ask is that we will take what the Lord say about it …[181]

The primary point of Jasper's sermon is to communicate that the only thing that doesn't move or change is God's word. This is the message Jasper's opponents continuously miss because they are too hung up on the sun. Jasper is looking forward to the fulfillment of God's unchanging word and the second coming of Christ, when the sun and the moon and the stars will be obsolete because Christ will be sufficient light for the world.

In a masterful close to his sermon, Jasper specifically addresses those scholars and philosophers — those men of science — who present for the sermon. Some of these philosophers had sent Jasper their academic papers demanding answers to their critiques:

> But I hears you back there! What you whisperin' 'bout? I know you say you sent me some papers and I never answered them. Ha! Ha! Ha! I got 'em. The difficulty about them papers you sent me is that they don't answer me. They never mention the Bible one time. You think so much of yourse'f and so little of the Lord God, and thinks what you say is so smart, that you can't even speak of the Word of the

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[180] Simmons, 285-286.
[181] Ibid., 286.

Lord. If you ain't got yah feet on the Word of God, the devil will get you sure, just like he's got the philosophers.[182]

Again, Jasper is creatively playing with traditional definitions of the fool. Jasper explicitly describes the scholars of his day as the fools they accused him of being. Fittingly, the final words of this homiletic burlesque of classical scientific and philosophic knowledge are words of ridicule to Jasper's opponents. Their skillful minds, Jasper argues, have creatively conjured seemingly brilliant insights about the sun, yet those same minds (and their academic works) have clumsily stumbled over the simple, unchanging truths about God and their ultimate dependence upon the Divine for knowledge:

> I done worked over them papers that you sent me without date, and without your name. You deals in figgers and thinks you bigger than the archangels. Lemme see what you done said. You set yoese'f up to tell me how far it is from here to the sun. You think you got it down to a nice point. You say it is 3,339,002 miles from the earth to the sun. That's what you say. Another one say that the distance is 12,000,000; 'nuther got it to 27,000,000. I hear that the great Isaac Newton worked it up to 28,000,000, and later on the philosophers give another rippin' raise it to 50,000,000. The last one gets it bigger then all the others—up to 90,000,000. Don't any of 'em agree exactly! And so they runs a guess[ing] game, and the last guess is always the bigges'.[183]

Jasper mocks the philosophers, asking them to show the fruit of their lengthy debates. He is fundamentally concerned about the return, the meaningful gain — the pragmatic accomplishment of such theoretical, philosophical pontificating:

> Heaps of railroads has been built since I saw the fus' one when I was fifteen years ol'. But I ain't hear tell of a railroad built yet to the sun. I don't see, if they can measure the distance to the sun, why they might not get up a railroad or a telegraph and enable us to find something else 'bout it than merely how far off the sun is.[184]

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[182] Simmons, 288.
[183] Simmons, 289.
[184] Ibid., 289.

Jasper characterizes the philosophers' actions, at least in relation to the circumstances that motivated his sermon, as time wasted in petty, ego-centered debates that have ultimately yielded very little to the concrete lives of human beings. A poignant subtext of Jasper's message is that an oppressed population, tormented daily under the tyrannical boot of chattel slavery, does not have the luxury, nor does it generally think it prudent, to devote time solely to abstract reflection without a method for merging such thought with relevant practice.

The chief subtextual dimension of Jasper's sermon is that black preaching should be concerned with merging critical reflection with relevant praxis. From the bonds of slavery a person who wielded abstract ideas — and those enslaved African American Christians who wielded the Word of God — had an obligation to make them *real* in the world, useful for life circumstance, creatively refracted through clay vessels for the betterment of individuals and communities. Another prophetic yet comical subtext in Jasper's sermon is that the philosophers and their affluent contemporaries, have had, unlike African Americans at the time, life-long luxuries of taking intellectual flights tens of thousands of feet in the air without worrying too much about basic survival, physical health and psychological wholeness. On the contrary, Jasper claims, the philosophers have had the luxury to live in a world where their skin color has not made their bodies valuable commodities for commercial deportation, a world where an entire economic system has not dedicated itself to fragmenting their families, maiming their bodies and injecting their minds with a debilitating sense of inferiority.

The philosophers' assumed privilege and sense of entitlement which yields obliviousness to the larger cultural realties surrounding them is the chief folly of which

Jasper's opponents are daily guilty. And while the dominant culture that his opponents represent purports to mock foolish old Jasper, and those like him, Jasper implies that in fact the real joke is on dominant culture:

> Oh! my brethren, these things make you laugh, and I don't blame you for laughin', 'cept it's always sad to laugh at the follies of fools. If we could laugh 'em out in count'in, we might well laugh day and night.[185]

The last two lines of Jasper's sermon almost seem to evoke imagery of an entire class of people, marginalized by a dehumanizing system of slavery, engaged in collective laughter as they endlessly mock, out of earshot of the masses, the hilarious folly of intellectuals who are unaware that their hubris and their neglect of and respect for God's mysteries actually makes them fools. To be so acutely unaware of their folly, Jasper suggests, is his opponents' and the status quo's chief folly.

Jasper's sermon provides a vivid example of the trickster at work in black preaching during slavery. But, more importantly, his sermon yields for us a compelling trope for further examination. In his constant semantic assault on classical notions of wisdom and the *fool*, Jasper's preaching invokes what I have come to refer to as the trope of the *Fool*, one who creatively *negotiates* conventional boundaries, and often, unjust powers for the sake of transformation.

This chapter has examined how African American preachers and orators in the nineteenth century deployed in their public rhetoric tropes utilized by Afro-American trickster figures. The regular use of these tropes among the leaders examined in this chapter demonstrates the trickster figure's influence on public oratory within African American communities. Though the people examined in this chapter vary in gender, geographic origin and experience each deploys similar rhetorical tactics consonant with

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[185] Simmons, 289.

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Afro-American trickster figures. Thus, this chapter provides evidence that the trope of the Afro-American trickster is a significant trope informing black vernacular.

The final chapter examines how the trope of the Fool can inform more creative, relevant and prophetic preaching in the twenty first century. This last chapter demonstrates a practical theological examination of the Fool as a living, enduring tradition in African American spirituality that can be deployed in contemporary congregational contexts.

CHAPTER III

THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY FOOL

"When we are living a life of purpose, it is not conflated with a life of popularity."

-Benjamin Ledell Reynolds

"The fool is the symbol of the lost ones of this world who are destined to inherit eternal life. The fool is not a philosophy, but a quality of consciousness of life, an endless regard for human identity. The fool is the essential poetic integrity of life itself, clear and naked, overflowing in cosmic fun; not the product of intellectual achievement, but a creation of the culture of the heart."

-Cecil Collins

"As bad as things are, we have faced worse conditions. We have always had courageous people willing to stand up and tell the truth, expose lies, and bear witness to love and justice. We still have people who say they are willing to build on this tradition."[186]

-Cornel West

      This chapter demonstrates the implications of the Afro-American trickster for constructive homiletic purposes. The following analysis reveals the trickster's practical implications within contemporary spiritual communities by examining speeches of two prominent Muslims leaders in America during the twentieth century — Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan. By examining leaders outside the Christian tradition this chapter reveals how the Afro-American trickster is a vernacular trope that informs the vast constellation of black religiosity. In other words, an analysis of the trope of the trickster within key speeches by Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan reveals that the

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[186] West, Cornel. *Hope on a Tightrope*. New York: Hay House, 2008, 4

influence of the Afro-American trickster as a trope transcends denominational and religious tradition within black religious experiences.

The constructive proposal of this thesis offers the Fool, as I have defined it, as a trope to aid and abet more creative and prophetic work among preachers in general and among black preachers in particular. After a recapitulation and conclusion of this project's key insights, including suggestions of trajectories for future research on the Fool, I will offer a brief list of key characteristics that define my conception of the Fool. This chapter's analysis begins now with an examination of two speeches by Malcolm X.

Malcolm X: A Harvard Speech

The Black Muslim Movement emerged alongside the Civil Rights Movement and gained steady momentum between 1955 and 1965 as millions of African Americans struggled to secure civil rights.[187] Both movements had distinct missions. The former sought separatism from white power structures. The latter sought full integration. Yet both movements had a common goal of uplifting the black race while exposing systematic oppression perpetuated by white racist ideology.

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, was arguably the Black Muslim Movement's most influential leader during the 1960s. His fiery oratory, political savvy, intellectual prowess, and unapologetic belief in using force and even retaliation as a means of justice, earned Malcolm X the reputation of an instigator among opponents and a prince among the oppressed. Malcolm X traveled throughout the country speaking about the struggle of

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[187] Epps, Archie. *The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc, 1968, 7.

African Americans, exposing the sickness of racism, and clarifying the goals of the Black

Muslim Movement in America and abroad.

On March 24, 1961, while serving as minister of Mosque No. 7 within the Nation

of Islam in Harlem, New York, Malcolm X spoke to the Harvard Law School Forum.

His speech was entitled, *The American Negro: Problems and Solutions*. Malcolm X

begins his speech by disabusing any incorrect perceptions of the Nation of Islam and its

leader, Elijah Muhammad. Very early in his speech, Malcolm X challenges the room full

of seasoned and budding legal scholars to consider that their repository of knowledge, as

substantive as it is, has significant gaps. The occasion exudes with irony as Malcolm X

questions the integrity of the epistemology and the efficacy of the pedagogy undergirding

Ivy League education and then invites his hearers to view their academic journeys, filled

with entitlement and prejudice, much like many have viewed the Nation of Islam, as

folly:

> We see by reports in the daily press that even many of you who are scholars and
> scientists think that the message of Islam that is being preached here in America
> among your twenty-million ex-slaves is new, or that it is something Mr.
> Muhammad himself has made up. Mr. Muhammad's religious message is not
> new.[188]

In this speech, Malcolm X does more than simply point out that America's

epistemological cannons are Eurocentric in nature and are thus disinterested in tapping

the repositories of Afro-American social, religious and political experience. Malcolm X

argues that his current audience (legal scholars) is not familiar with the Judeo-Christian

traditions to which many of them espouse allegiance. This unfamiliarity with Jewish and

Christian scriptural cannons, Malcolm X argues, leads to profound misinterpretations

about Elijah Muhammad and his teachings about Islam:

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[188] Epps, 117.

All of the scientists and prophets of old predicted that a man such as he, with such a doctrine or message, would make his appearance among us at a time as that in which we are living today. It is written too in your own scriptures that this prophetic figure would not be raised up from the midst of the educated class, but that God would make His choice from among the lowly, uneducated, downtrodden, oppressed masses, from among the lowest element of America's twenty million ex-slaves. It would be as in the days when God raised up Moses from among the lowly Hebrew slaves and [com] missioned him to separate his oppressed people from a slave master named Pharaoh. Moses found himself opposed by the scholars and scientists of that day, who are symbolically described in the Bible as "Pharaoh's magicians." Jesus himself, a lowly carpenter, who was also [com] missioned by God to find his people, the "lost sheep," and to separate them from their Gentile enemies and restore them to their own nation. Jesus also found himself opposed by the scholars and scientists of his day, who are symbolically described in the Bible as "scribes, priests, and Pharisees." Just as the learned class of those days disagreed with and opposed both Moses and Jesus primarily because of their humble origin, Mr. Elijah Muhammad is today likewise being opposed by the learned, educated intellectuals of his own kind, because of [his] humble origin. These modern-day "magicians, scribes, and Pharisees" try to ridicule Mr. Muhammad by emphasizing the humble origin of him and his many followers.[189]

For Malcolm X, the fundamental point to be made here is not so much that scripture points directly to the coming of Elijah Muhammad. Rather, Malcolm X wants to clarify that the idea of a prophetic leader coming from a historically marginalized community with a radical message of liberation is not a new doctrine. Therefore, any attempt to make such an argument, he concludes, is absolute folly.

Similar to the Signifyin(g) trope of loud talking, Malcolm X both directly and indirectly concludes that those within the Harvard Law Forum who oppose the teachings of Elijah Muhammad are much like the ancient magicians, scribes and Pharisees in sacred scripture. Malcolm X interprets these biblical characters to be unknowingly narrow-minded, blinded by arrogance and oblivious to the limitations of the knowledge they possessed. Fundamentally, Malcolm X uses this speech to challenge the integrity of Eurocentric epistemology. The imagery he evokes from scripture signifies that

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[189] Epps, 117-118.

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institutions like Harvard, despite the significant academic insights they offer, are bastions of folly.

The rhetoric and imagery infused in Malcolm X's speech are strikingly similar to the rhetoric and imagery John Jasper deploys in his sermon, "The Sun Do Move." Jasper also challenges the "wisdom" of modern scholars, concluding that their arrogance and entitlement, and consequently their narrow perspectives, actually made them fools. Like Jasper's sermon, Malcolm X's speech suggests there will be a day of reckoning for such purveyors of folly, a moment that will expose and demystify the folly of fools:

> But as God made Pharaoh's magicians bow before Moses, and the scribes and Pharisees bow before Jesus, He plans today to make all opposition, both at home and abroad, bow before the truth that is now being taught by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.[190]

After questioning the efficacy of the "wisdom" of the status quo, Malcolm X moves to expose the flawed logic within American politics in its dealing with the issue of civil rights. Malcolm X begins his argument by outlining his plan for civil rights, which involves designating land on which black Americans can live and work, outside of the control of whites. On the one hand, Malcolm X acknowledges, many white Americans believe providing black Americans separate territory to flourish is ridiculous, especially when efforts for integration were underway:

> Integration is not good for either side. It will destroy your race, and your government knows it will also destroy ours, and the problem still remains unsolved. God has declared that these twenty million ex-slaves must have a home of their own. After four hundred years here among the Caucasians, we are absolutely convinced that we can never live together in peace, unless we are willing to remain subservient to our former masters. Therefore, immediate and complete separation is the only solution.[191]

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[190] Epps, 119.
[191] Ibid., 127.

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On the other hand, Malcolm X argues that if black people are offered equal education they will demand justice more passionately in every area of their lives as American citizens. These demands, he concludes, will topple the current American economic system since fully integrated black folk — armed with equal knowledge and access to resources and infrastructure — will refuse to passively accept second-class citizenship. Malcolm X deftly advances his argument by using a savvy scare tactic that appeals to white conceptions of power and control.

Malcolm X posits that the control and power whites presently wield will be lost if full integration is achieved. Through a moment of brief but clever self-deprecation, he acknowledges the seeming irrationality of his argument. However, he concludes, if his hearers critically analyze race from sociological and psychological perspectives within American history then his argument should seem completely rational:

> To many of you here at the Harvard Law School Forum this sounds ridiculous; to some it even sounds insane. But these twenty million black people here in America now number a nation in their own right. Do you believe that a nation within another nation can be successful, especially when they both have equal educations? Once the slave has his master's education, the slave wants to be like his master, wants to share his master's property, and even wants to exercise the same privileges as his master while he is yet in his master's house. This is the core of America's troubles today: there will be no peace for America as long as twenty million so-called Negroes are here begging for the rights which America knows she will never grant us. The limited education America has granted her ex-slaves has even already produced great unrest. Almighty God says the only way for America to ever have any future or prosperity is for her twenty million ex-slaves to be separated from her, and it is for this reason that Mr. Muhammad teaches us that we must have some land of our own. If we receive equal education, how long do you expect us to remain your passive servants, or second-class citizens? There is no such thing as a second-class citizen. We are full citizens, or we are not citizens at all. When you teach a man the science of government, he then wants an equal part or position in that government, or else he wants his own government. He begins to demand equality with his master. No man with education equal to your own will serve you. The only way you can continue to rule us is with superior knowledge, by continuing to withhold equal education from our people. America has not given us equal education, but she has

given us enough to make us want more and to make us demand equality of opportunity. And since this is causing unrest plus international embarrassment, the only solution is immediate separation. As your colleges and universities turn out an ever-increasing number of so-called Negro graduates with education equal to yours, they will automatically increase their demands for equality in everything else. Equal education will increase their spirit of equality and make them feel that they should have everything that you have, and their increasing demands will become a perpetual headache for you and continue to cause you international embarrassment. In fact, those Negro students whom you are educating today will soon be demanding the same things you now hear being demanded by Mr. Muhammad and the Muslims.[192]

Some might argue Malcolm X's oratory in this speech (and in other speeches) does not offer much evidence of the influence from Afro-American trickster figures. Rather, some might argue that Malcolm X's oratory emanates from more classical modes of debate, argumentation and logic. In his book, *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times*, Ralph Lerner traces the public works of six historical writers and thinkers (Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Robert Burton, Pierre Bayle, Benjamin Franklin and Edward Gibbon). Lerner argues that each ideologue strategically uses classical paradigms of rhetoric to speak prophetically in the midst of turbulent political times.

Similar to historical personalities who utilized classical rhetorical strategies to couch prophetic messages with humor so as not to alienate their audiences, Malcolm X's oratory could also be drawn from the well of the fathers of classical rhetoric. However, any serious examination of Malcolm X's speeches reveals that the activist was not interested in using humor to *veil* his prophetic critiques. Malcolm X's rhetorical repartee did not favor, as did the personalities in Lerner's analysis, the "quiet power of irony."[193] On the contrary, Malcolm X used humor as the chief avenue to deliver loud, explicitly harsh critiques. Malcolm X was not concerned about alienating his opponents. He

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[192] Epps, 129-130.
[193] Lerner, 1.

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directly confronted them, boldly challenged them, all while laughing at them. This kind

of engagement with oppressive powers is emblematic of trickster figures like the

Signifying Monkey, who hurls insults at opponents within their line of sight from tree

branches. Therefore, any argument that Malcolm X's oratory is shaped more by classical

rhetoric than the tropes of Afro-American vernacular (like the trickster) fails to take

seriously the historical, social and political realities that clearly shape Afro-American

vernacular theory.

Malcolm X: A Last Speech

On February 15, 1965, Malcolm X spoke to an audience gathered for a meeting

organized by the Organization of Afro-American Unity in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom.

He would be assassinated in that ballroom six days later. Malcolm X gives this speech to

the Organization of Afro-American Unity a day after his home was bombed. In this

speech, one of his last public addresses, Malcolm X criticizes the Black Muslim

Movement in America. He apologizes for his prior leadership with the movement and

offers a scathing critique of his former mentor, Elijah Muhammad, whom he refers to as

an immoral, abusive, senile tyrant:

> And I might point out right here that it was not a case of my knowing all the time,
> because I didn't. I had blind faith in him, the same as many of you have had and
> still have blind faith in me or blind faith in Moses or blind faith in somebody else.
> My faith in Elijah Muhammad was more blind and more uncompromising than
> any faith that any man has ever had for another man. And so I didn't try to see
> him as he actually was.[194]

Early in the speech, Malcolm X reveals how his journey to Mecca in September

1964 helped him gain a critical perspective regarding Muhammad's leadership. Malcolm

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[194] Perry, Bruce. *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989, 116.

X refers to a scandal he claims Muhammad told him involving Muhammad allegedly

seducing nine teenagers into sexual relationships. In reference to this alleged scandal,

Malcolm X describes Muhammad as a religious fraud:

> Yes, he's immoral. You can't take nine teenaged women and seduce them and
> give them babies and not tell me you're—and then tell me you're moral. You
> could do it if you admitted you did it and admitted that the babies were yours. I'd
> shake your hand and call you a man. A good one too. [Laughter] Any time you
> seduce teenaged girls and make them be childs with adultery, make them hide
> your crimes, why, you're not even a man, much less a divine man. [Laughter] So,
> and this is what he did. He took at least nine that we know about. And I'm not
> speculating, because he told this to me himself. Yes, that's why he wants me dead
> because he knew as soon as I walked out that I'd tell it. Nine of them. Not two of
> them who are suing him, but Nine of them. And the FBI knows it. The press even
> knows it. And they don't expose the man.[195]

This vernacular exposé not only reveals the radical shift in Malcolm X's thinking about

his former religious advisor. It demonstrates Malcolm X's adeptness in demystifying a

subject, a common skill among Afro-American tricksters. For example, Brer Rabbit's

bold, brash method of expanding constricted imaginations is a striking parallel to

Malcolm X's public engagement with both supporters and opponents. Both Brer Rabbit

and Malcolm X understand their lives in terms of a vocation of demystifying and

reconstituting subjects. One of these subjects is the white media.

Malcolm X believed there was a conspiracy among America's supposed

watchdog institutions to cover up Muhammad's behavior. This strategic subversion,

Malcolm X argues, hinges upon a shared belief among powerbrokers that the ideology

governing the Black Muslim Movement, which was struggling against a racist American

economy, had begun to engender volatility and enmity between black people within the

movement. This tension was exemplified in the conflict that emerged between

Muhammad's supporters and the post-Mecca Malcolm X. Since institutions run by racist

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[195] Perry, 121-122.

ideology benefited from such internal fragmentation, Malcolm X argues, it was not in the

white media's best interest to expose Muhammad to the public:

> And don't let me get out of here tonight without telling you why they won't
> expose him. Why they're afraid to expose him. They know that if they expose
> him, that he has them all set. See, the Black Muslim movement, it was organized
> in such a way that it attracted the most militant, the most uncompromising, the
> most fearless, and the youngest of the Black people in the United States. That's
> who went into it. Those who didn't mind dying. They didn't mind making a
> sacrifice. All they were interested in was freedom and justice and equality, and
> they would do anything to see that it was brought about. These are the people who
> have followed him for the past twelve years. And the government knows it. But
> all these upfront militants have been held in check by an organization that doesn't
> take an active part in anything. And therefore it cannot be a threat to anybody
> because it's not going to do anything against anybody but itself. [Applause][196]

Malcolm X argues that the white media was convinced members of the Black Muslim

Movement would be less of a threat to the status quo if Muhammad's image remained in

tact. Malcolm X believed strongly that if black Muslims' eyes were opened then more

would join the nonviolent struggle for civil rights. This would cause significant problems

for the white establishment, he argued, because the Black Muslim Movement was made

up of militant, young radicals who were willing to die for their beliefs.

Malcolm X concludes that if black Muslims caught wind of the scandal of

Muhammad's leadership then their energy, militancy and devotion would become assets

of the nonviolent struggle for freedom and that such newly acquired talents could tip the

scales in the favor of integrationists. Malcolm X criticizes the white media for

intentionally using the polished image of Elijah Muhammad as an opiate for militant,

courageous and dynamic blacks. And the media, he argues, supplied this tranquilizing

drug with fierce religious relentlessness:

> They continue to make him look like he's a prophet somewhere who is getting
> some messages direct from God and is untouchable and things of that sort. I'm

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[196] Perry, 122.

telling you the truth. But they do know that if something were to happen and all these brothers, their eyes were to come open, they would be right out here in every one of these civil rights organizations making these Uncle Tom Negro leaders stand up and fight like men instead of running around here nonviolently acting like women.[197]

Malcolm X's speech centers on his conviction that the Black Muslim Movement had a propensity to commit violence against other black people instead of galvanizing forces against white oppressors, like the Ku Klux Klan. He points out a flawed internal logic of the Black Muslim Movement, which he doesn't believe is actively engaged in the liberation of black people. Rather, Malcolm X argues, the movement torments, feeds upon and abuses its own.

The central thesis of Malcolm X's speech is that the world is governed by an international Western power structure that safeguards the interests of the white cultures who colonize people of color. Thus, in this speech Malcolm X endeavors to evoke in his hearers the image of a worldwide revolution against this international Western power structure. As this revolution occurs in places like Africa, he argues, it offers black people everywhere more positive images of themselves. And Malcolm X posits that the resulting self-assuredness cultivated among black Americans will eventually change the relationship between the black person and the white person in America.

In reflecting upon his tenure as a minister within the Black Muslim Movement, Malcolm X accepts responsibility for participating in the white media's conspiracy to protect Muhammad's image. Though he names his involvement as unintentional participation, he does not exonerate himself of wrongdoing, especially since he believes strongly that the problems within the Black Muslim Movement, which he critiques in this speech, are precisely caused by uncritical, zealous devotion:

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[197] Perry, 126.

So, I feel responsible for having played a major role in developing a criminal organization. It was not a criminal organization at the outset. It was an organization that had power, the spiritual power, to reform the criminal. And this is what you have to understand. As long as that strong spiritual power was in the movement, it gave the moral strength to the believer that would enable him to rise about all his negative tendencies. I know, because I went into the movement with more negative tendencies than anybody in the movement. It was faith in what I was taught that made it possible for me to stop doing anything that I was doing and everything that I was doing … Now it has become a movement that's organized but not on a spiritual basis. And because there's no spiritual ingredient within the organization, there's no moral discipline.[198]

In this speech, Malcolm X embodies significant parallels with the Afro-American trickster. Most notably, like the trickster, Malcolm X strives to expose the flawed logic of unjust institutions. In this speech Malcolm X brings to the surface the internal contradictions both within the white media (a facet of the international Western power structure) and the Black Muslim Movement. Again, this vocation of demystification and reconstitution exemplifies a chief characteristic among Afro-American trickster figures. And like the trickster, Malcolm X, especially in the final days of his life, understands this vocation to be his life's work, and his legacy.

Another similarity between Malcolm X and Afro-American trickster figures in this speech involves his skill speaking extemporaneously. Interestingly, in this speech Malcolm X does not deploy explicit uses of metaphor, indirection or inversion as often as the Christian preachers examined in the previous chapter. Malcolm X's public rhetoric in this speech is distinct from the Christian preachers examined in the previous chapter. The preachers previously examined crafted carefully polished arguments in which they strategically deployed metaphor, indirection, and reversal. This more polished rhetorical style can be attributed to the fact that the preachers previously examined are mostly

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[198] Perry, 132.

working from written manuscripts. Malcolm X's speech generally tended to be more ad hoc and extemporaneous even when he utilized a manuscript.

While the content of the speech examined above is not as explicitly metaphorical, nor is it as thoughtfully crafted around inversion or reversal, its performative dimensions as an act of public oratory are consonant with Afro-American trickster figures (often even more so than the preachers examined in the previous chapter). There is a compelling similarity in the existential nature between Malcolm X and Afro-American trickster figures. For example, when reading the Brer Rabbit tales it is difficult to not make sonic and somatic connections between Brer Rabbit and Malcolm X. Malcolm X's quick wit, unapologetic boldness, resourcefulness and extemporaneous oratory are all qualities exemplified in Brer Rabbit.

Interestingly, the invention of audio and video recordings allow for a particular analysis of Malcolm X's speeches and interviews that simply was not possible during the lifetimes of the preachers studied in the previous chapter. In studying video interviews between Malcolm X and journalists one can witness the trickster's tropes embodied in real time. During interviews, Malcolm X's vocal dexterity, charm, savvy and his unwavering prophetic critique are all emblematic of Afro-American trickster figures. The similarity between Malcolm X and the Afro-American trickster goes beyond Malcolm X borrowing the trickster's tropes for particular occasions of public oratory. Perhaps more than any other person analyzed in the prior chapter, it can be argued that Malcolm X is fundamentally a trickster in motion.

Minister Louis Farrakhan: The Million Man March

Louis Farrakhan Muhammad, Sr., born Louis Eugene Walcott on May 11, 1933, is the current leader of the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan has been widely praised and criticized for his activism, advocacy and political views. Currently, Farrakhan's ministry seeks to address injustice within African American communities.

On October 16, 1995, Farrakhan, in conjunction with other civil rights organizations, led the Million Man March in Washington D.C. An estimated one million African American men from across the country attended the march, which endeavored to galvanize recommitments to rebuilding the family and uniting against the social ills affecting African American communities. Farrakhan delivered the keynote address at the gathering. In his speech, entitled, "Toward a More Perfect Union," Farrakhan carries on "the tradition of the performance of African American rage in the public space…"[199] By using language found in the U.S. Constitution, Farrakhan, much like Frederick Douglass in "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July," *Signifies* upon the rhetoric of equality, justice and freedom espoused within the ideology undergirding American political economy.

Early in his speech Farrakhan invokes the words of Willie Lynch, a white slaveholder who in 1712 allegedly devised a plan to systematically oppress enslaved Africans and African Americans by indoctrinating them with a debilitating sense of inferiority. By referencing Lynch's blueprints for racial subjugation in the context of the Million Man March in Washington D.C. Farrakhan points to the institutional racism the United States has historically perpetrated against people of African descent.

In the beginning of his speech, Farrakhan uses a tactic much like the Afro-American trickster figure's tactic of *loud talking*. Farrakhan is quick to inform his

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[199] Simmons, 655.

audience that the purpose of the gathering is not to name names or point fingers. Yet, by using a historical quote from a former slaveholder Farrakhan is able to point fingers at the nation indirectly by framing the conversation as if the gathered group were talking to a third party who was not present. White leaders watching would hear Farrakhan talking about Willie Lynch but would begin to wonder if (and rightly conclude) he was referring to them. Loud talking, which involves criticizing someone in an indirect way, is a tactic regularly employed by Afro-American trickster figures, like High John.

Interestingly, Farrakhan's loud talking becomes more explicit as the speech unfolds, shifting from more indirect, abstract historical imagery to more concrete, metaphorical imagery. Farrakhan actually begins *naming* the powers and principalities of ethnocentrism that have sought to oppress people of color, and even tried to thwart the Million Man March:

> And why did we come? We came because we want to move toward a more perfect union. And if you notice, the press triggered every one of those divisions. You shouldn't come, you're a Christian. That's a Muslim thing. You shouldn't come, you're too intelligent to follow hate! You shouldn't come, look at what they did, they excluded women, you see? They played all the cards, they pulled all the strings. Oh, but you better look again, Willie. There's a new Black man in America today. A new Black woman in America today.[200]

Farrakhan's critique of the media echoes Malcolm X's sentiments decades earlier regarding the existence of an international Western power structure that safeguards the interests of the white cultures who colonize people of color. Both Malcolm X and Farrakhan seek to expose and dethrone this unjust power structure, which often finds potent expression within the infrastructure of American media.

A substantial portion of Farrakhan's speech is devoted to outlining eight steps for achieving atonement and reconciliation: (1) *pointing out wrong,* (2) *acknowledging*

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[200] Simmons, 658.

responsibility for wrongdoing, (3) *confession,* (4) *repentance,* (5) *atonement,* (6)

forgiveness, (7) *reconciliation/restoration* (8) *perfect union with God.* Farrakhan's eight

steps provide a classic example of the trickster's facility with indirection. In each of

these eight steps, Farrakhan is both explicitly and implicitly talking to both African

American men and to a nation guilty of institutional racism against black men and people

of color.

Though Farrakhan foregrounds his speech by suggesting he is not going to call

out wrongs, the first of his eight steps for achieving atonement and reconciliation

involves calling out wrongs. From the outset of his speech Farrakhan is intent on

exposing the powers and principalities:

> Now, look, whoever is entrusted with the task of pointing out wrong, depending on the nature of the circumstances is not always loved. In fact, more than likely, that person is going to be hated and misunderstood. Such persons are generally hated because no one wants to be shown as being wrong. Particularly when you're dealing with governments, with principalities, with powers, with rulers, with administrations.[201]

Farrakhan argues that the reason atonement and reconciliation are necessary in the first

place is because of governmental sanctions of racism historically imposed on people of

color. The institutional evil perpetrated in the past and still being perpetrated against

black people demands rituals of atonement and reconciliation to achieve adequate

healing. As far as Farrakhan is concerned, the most effective tactic for confronting

institutional evil is to directly call it out:

> When you're dealing with forces which have become entrenched in their evil, intractable, and unyielding their power produces an arrogance. And their arrogance produces a blindness. And out of that evil state of mind, they will do all manner of evil to the person who points out their wrong.[202]

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[201] Simmons, 659.
[202] Simmons, 659.

Like all tricksters, and very similar to Malcolm X, Farrakhan embodies a vocation of

demystifying oppressive subjects. And, like all tricksters who embrace this vocation,

Farrakhan acknowledges that in order to be successful he must be willing to risk facing

even violent consequences.

One cannot simply dismiss Farrakhan's comments as the uncritical, zealous

comments of a black nationalist. He is clearly encouraging and challenging his African

American brothers assembled at the Million Man Mach to be better, more responsible and

more constructive American citizens. Yet, at the same time, Farrakhan is launching a

harsh indictment against the American government. In the conclusion to his speech,

Farrakhan invites his hearers to atone for their sins, providing hope to his bruised and

broken brothers, while also inviting the nation to account for its crimes against his

brothers (and people):

> Now, let us not be conformed to this world, but let us go home transformed by the
> renewing of our minds and let the idea of atonement ring throughout America.
> That America may see that the slave has come up with power. The slave has been
> restored, delivered, and redeemed. And now call this nation to repentance. To
> acknowledge her wrongs. To confess, not in secret documents, called classified,
> but to come before the world and the American people as the Japanese prime
> minister did and confess her faults before the world because her sins have affected
> the whole world. And perhaps, she may do some act of atonement, that you may
> forgive and those ill affected may forgive, that reconciliation and restoration may
> lead us to the perfect union with thee and with each other.[203]

Within Farrakhan's eight-step process of atonement is highly subversive rhetoric.

In his book *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam*,

Mattias Gardell argues that Farrakhan's "day of atonement" is a concept the leader meant

to be understood on two levels.[204] One the one hand, Farrakhan expects for black people

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[203] Ibid., 666-667.
[204] Gardell, Mattias. *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam.*
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996, 343.

(and black men especially) to abide by the eight-step process of atonement and reconciliation. However, more prophetically, Farrakhan also expects for those responsible for perpetuating institutional violence against black people — the powers and principalities — to begin this process of atonement. Farrakhan's use of the eight-step process of atonement as *doublespeak* is the feature that perhaps most fully distinguishes this speech as one influenced by the Afro-American trickster's tropes. The doublespeak used in Farrakhan's speech is an example of a trickster at their best, masterfully couching a potent prophetic critique of the ruling powers within a pastoral vernacular address to their own people.

The tropes of loud talking, indirection, and doublespeak are all tropes one can hear in Farrakhan's rhetoric today. Farrakhan, like Malcolm X, provides a fascinating example of how one uses the vernacular to creatively negotiates systems of oppression within America. Farrakhan's oratory and public ministry are rich repositories for both scholars of religion and for those scholars of communication studies. There is indeed a fascinating research trajectory to be pioneered within communication studies departments that are interested who are in analyzing the links between rhetoric and public (and vernacular) culture.

A Contemporary Trope: The Fool

There are many negative perceptions of black preachers currently circulating through North American church and secular cultures. Black preachers have often been consciously and subconsciously perceived, both in and outside the black community, as overly emotional, adulterous, swindling, alcoholic, anti-intellectual, sexually aggressive

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derelicts passionately moving to the dictates of a defective moral compass. In other words, black preachers are often perceived as *fools*.[205] Sadly, contemporary black preachers, no matter how gifted and full of integrity, are constantly battling against the psychological archetype of the *foolish* black preacher.

Unfortunately, recent scandals involving prominent African American pastors only help solidify negative perceptions of black preachers.[206] It is not within the scope of this project to comment on the guilt or innocence of the preachers involved in recent scandals. However, it is within the goals of this thesis to argue that the current crisis in African American pulpits is due in part to preachers intentionally and unintentionally living below the standards of their calling, and thus, living *into* a tradition of *fools*. The willful practice of being unprepared, unserious, undisciplined and unscrupulous has a directly negative affect on preaching and on the perceptions parishioners and others have of black preachers. Sermons preached by such *foolish* preachers are more often than not shallow, poorly organized, boring, unimaginative and entirely too long. On the other hand, many well-intentioned preachers simply have not had access to proper mentorship or education and are unintentionally perpetuating the archetype of the black preacher as a fool.

Yet, as this chapter argues, a constructive response to the contemporary crisis of negative perceptions of black preachers, and the crisis of poor preaching more

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[205] Again, I am using the lowercase reference of *fool* to define one who is simply absurd or insanely eccentric. I distinguish this meaning from the capitalized reference (Fool) by suggesting that the Fool is one who embodies and deploys a potent combination of creative, provocative, absurd, prophetic, and imaginative energies historically utilized by black preachers to illumine the paths leading to social liberation.

[206] The most recent scandal involves Bishop Eddie Long, pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia. In the fall of 2010, four young men filed separate lawsuits in DeKalb County Superior Court, Georgia alleging that Bishop Long used his pastoral influence to coerce them into sexual relationships with him when they were teenagers.

specifically, involves launching a semantic assault on the word (and archetype) *fool*,

deconstructing it to render a newer, more life-giving definition, and, consequently, a new

model and standard for preaching. As stated in the thesis' introduction, we hear slivers of

this new definition echo at the vernacular level within the church in statements like: *That*

fool is preaching! Pastor acted a straight fool today! Pastor acted a monkey! These

vernacular statements suggest that the words *fool* or *foolish* mean something *other* than

irrational, simple, irresponsible or illicit speech or behavior. At the vernacular level,

traditional definitions of the *fool* are often modified within contemporary African

American Christian congregations to refer to prophetic, imaginative activity in which one

creatively negotiates the world, thwarts systems of oppression and disrupts prior

expectations, intentionally pushing against normative categories for transformative ends.

In short, this thesis has attempted, through vernacular improvisations upon

traditional definitions of the word *fool*, to create a tropological re-reading of the word,

thus framing the black preacher as a *Fool* and ultimately offering new homiletic values

and standards to which black preachers can aspire as they make a conscious mass exodus

out of the *foolish* practices of the past. My hope is that this trope of the Fool serves as an

enduring model the next generation of preachers can analyze and embody in order to

achieve best preaching practices. If after reading this thesis readers more seriously

consider the homiletic possibilities of the trickster (and Fool) for contemporary preachers

I will consider this project a success.

However, in endeavoring to provide a trope for contemporary homiletics I realize

the difficulty in embodying the Fool in contemporary congregations. Much is at stake.

Reputations, church memberships, valuable institutional relationships, financial giving,

and comfort and convenience are all affected and put at greater risk by the decision to become a Fool for Christ. To covenant daily to delve into deeper commitments to integrity and rigor, prayer and creativity, humility and self-sacrifice, eating and drinking with sinners, breaking long-held conventions and embodying a more prophetic social witness will inevitably add a challenging, inconvenient weight to the preacher's life.

In fact, the decision to use the Fool as a central trope guiding one's ministry will eventually put preachers in direct conflict with certain ministerial colleagues and clerical cliques who refuse to make similar commitments and cultivate a similar spirituality. The ever-present temptation for the preacher is to march to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo. As the author of this project, I too have wrestled vigorously with the logical consequences involved with more fully embodying the Fool in my own work as an emerging homiletician and pastor. I too have considered the future strained relationships, anxieties and criticisms. I have considered what the Fool could potentially (and has already) cost me.

However, perhaps, like myself, the reader will be strengthened by Apostle Paul's words found in Romans 1:17. Though the Roman church was saturated by a culture fascinated with rhetoric, rational debate and logic, Apostle Paul dares to proclaim publicly that he is not ashamed of the message preached by a country preacher born in the backwaters of Nazareth who ate and drank with sinners and prostitutes, and died as a convicted criminal.[207] Paul proclaims that he is not ashamed of the Gospel because it liberates the oppressed. The last thing Roman leaders wanted their lower-class citizens and slaves *reading* were "foolish" letters suggesting that God was on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Roman officials knew if slaves embraced Paul's message, if they

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[207] This statement is an informal reference to Romans 1:16.

came to terms with their identity in Christ, they might demand their freedom and disrupt the social order. Since Jesus taught that God was on the side of the oppressed, the Gospel was a threat to the Roman Empire.

Roman officials did not want any "foolish" Christian protesters disturbing the peace. To keep its citizens from acting-a-fool, Rome had many "proper" things for them to read to keep their minds occupied, or rather, enslaved. There was royal legislation, exquisite poetry and finely crafted moral philosophy.[208] Apostle Paul recognizes that there are many people in Rome who need their souls cleansed of the Empire's sinful ideologies and practices. Paul dares to embrace a vocation of demystifying subjects, to awaken members of the Christian church in Rome, sobering Christians from the tranquilizing drug of subjugated knowledge with the illuminating light of the Gospel.

Perhaps, then, one can interpret Paul's letter to the Romans, and most especially his greeting in Romans1:17, as a unique disclaimer. Perhaps as Paul writes he is considering all the religious leaders whose ranks he is endeavoring to break. It seems the subtext of Paul's preamble is saturated with a preemptive agenda. Rhetorically, Paul is excusing his behavior in advance, before he reaches Rome. He means no harm or disrespect. He means no ill intent. He means no enmity or hostility. Paul means only to refuse to bow at the popular but destructive altar of idolatry. He means only to withdraw from religious cliques brewing bludgeoning pathologies of hermeneutic and homiletic violence. He means only for the world's transformation. Paul's preamble to Romans is the apostle excusing himself before he enters Rome to creatively negotiate the Empire's oppressive systems, practices and ideologies. Paul excuses himself in advance, before he

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[208] Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message Bible.* Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002, 2030.

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dares, in Rome, to be unanimous within his sense of call. Paul excuses himself, in advance, for acting a Fool in Rome.

Whatever challenges this project (or the trope of the Fool) has conjured for the reader the fact remains that the world is in desperate need of Fools. As Cornel West eloquently articulates, humanity has a long tradition of such people who have effectively negotiated systems of injustice. Yet this tradition, West intimates, is not fixed in the past in some disembodied nostalgic monument of imagination. There are leaders in religious communities who embody this tradition, acting as tricksters in residence, collectively becoming a *living* tradition of Fools within contemporary Christianity and religious communities in America.

While it is no longer legal to discriminate on the basis of race in America, racism and segregation have evolved into more subtle forms of oppression, and ones not just perpetuated by whites. Thus, the Fool is a much-needed, contemporary American hero:

> It is not possible to draw a hard and fast line between the prime of the slave trickster in slavery and his decline in the twentieth century. Continued Negro vulnerability—the lack of independent political and economic power bases and protracted dependence upon whites and the institutions they controlled— prolonged the need for tricksters and the lessons they had to impart … Thus the trickster, and the need for the trickster, endured long past slavery.[209]

It has been my conviction in this thesis that studying vernacular theory will reveal the extent to which the nature of fictional and non-fictional Afro-American tricksters of the past are reincarnated in the Fools of the twenty first century. The historical trickster's creative energies, imaginative capacities, rhetorical repartees and intellectual adroitness are embodied in the lives and ministries of many contemporary African American men and women who are much further along, yet still trudging forward on the stony road

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[209] Levine, 370-371.

leading to justice. If preachers will spend enough time exploring the subsequent forms of

the economies of slavery in the twenty first century, conducting their own ideological

analyses of such economies, then they can better decide *how* to be Foolish for the sake of

the transformation for which the present time — and their crucified, resurrected Savior —

is calling.

Conclusion: Recapitulation and Reflection on Future Research

In this thesis I have attempted to reveal the implications of African American

vernacular theory for contemporary homiletics. By utilizing Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s and

Huston Baker, Jr.'s theoretical approaches to the ideological analysis of Afro-American

texts I have improvised or *Signified* upon prior tropes in order to fashion a contemporary

trope, the Fool. The *Fool* serves as a cultural signifier for one who creatively negotiates

oppressive economies (or oppressive principles within economies) that inhibit the

flourishing of life. More specifically, I have argued that the Fool should serve as a trope

for a vocational identity that inspires and empowers preachers of all cultures and

ethnicities, and black preachers in particular, to live more fully into their authentic selves

while they engage in more creative, prophetic and relevant preaching (especially to and

from within unjust systems).

By offering a genealogy of classic and modern tropes, distilling key Signifyin(g)

practices from tricksters in Afro-American literature and folklore, and analyzing

historical and contemporary preachers who embody these practices in their preaching, I

have attempted to demonstrate that my present construction of the Fool emanates from a

historical and cultural precedent. Additionally, I have endeavored to reveal that the trope

of the Fool signifies a living tradition of Christian preachers and black religious leaders in

American that creatively negotiates power and facilitates communal change at the

vernacular level in the twenty first century. I conclude this thesis with the conviction that

this tradition of Fools is in desperate need of future recruits to successfully challenge the

social ills of our time.

Though I have attempted to render a tropological reading of the Fool to be deployed

in a variety of congregational contexts by a variety of preachers, I am particularly

interested in exploring the potential for this trope to serve as a critical methodological

approach for black preachers serving in contexts where they do not represent the racial

majority. This particular focus is not at all meant to make the Fool's vocation the

exclusive province of black preachers. The creative implications of the trickster on

contemporary homiletics can and should benefit all preachers everywhere who are aiming

for more relevant, creative and prophetic preaching. I have merely chosen to narrow the

field of analysis to appropriately dramatize the Fool's potential impact in contemporary

spiritual communities.

Based on my research I have distilled several key characteristics at work in the

contemporary Fool. The list is by no means exhaustive. This brief list of characteristics

is meant simply to insinuate for preachers the potential constructive applications of the

trope the trickster for contemporary faith and communities:

- The Fool possesses originality, or the ability to engage in sufficient *revision*[210]
- The Fool is skilled in demystifying and reconstituting a subject[211]
- The Fool exposes ideological injustice infecting institutions
- The Fool challenges oppressive social convention
- The Fool cultivates the imagination

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[210] Gates, 113.
[211] Ibid., 55.

- The Fool is a master of figurative language
- The Fool embodies a spirituality of risk and vulnerability
- The Fool envisions a reality beyond that which is immediately present

Again, the above list is certainly not exhaustive. My task in this thesis has not been to provide a comprehensive list of the Fool's characteristics. Rather, my task has been to provide a compelling trope to inform and inspire contemporary homiletics. Therefore, I have merely offered the above list to stir the imaginative capacities of scholars and preachers who might take up future projects to more comprehensively examine the particular nature of the contemporary Fool.

It must be noted that I do not mean for this thesis to inappropriately glamorize the Fool while also failing to give necessary attention to the seriousness of the Fool's vocation. The Fool's labors to restore justice, expose corruption, expand imaginations and transform social terrain are most certainly praiseworthy. Yet the life of the Fool is fraught with potential peril at every turn. It would be a tragic abuse of this project to not fully disclose what is at stake for those who endeavor to be Fools:

> Fooling can also be existentially dangerous. Who would trade places with the circus clown catapulted across the ring from a fiery cannon? Or with the clown whose cloths catch fire while he or she is attempting to save a burning house? Or with the clown riding high above us on the high-wire, bravely peddling a dilapidate unicycle in serious need of wheel alignment? Or with the clown who enters the lions' cage, grasping only a mop and bucket as security? While we may laugh at the *auguste*, victim of slapstick humor, or at the white-faced clown who argues with ring master and public, while we may be mesmerized by equestrian comedy or acrobatic comedy, the truth is that the dividing line between the comic and the dangerous is thin. The illusion before us may seem to be carried out with the sleight of hand of a magician, but one false step, one error of judgment and the "near miss" could well become tragedy. Sitting in the safety of our seats, we feel the thrill of the drama unfolding before us, but seldom know what risks are being taken in the name of entertainment. In the passion narratives, Jesus the Holy Fool submits to slapstick which is ultimately death-dealing: for him, there is no safety

net, no last minute reprieve, no deus ex machina, no standing ovation. There is only the laughter of mockery and the silence of the tomb.[212]

The Fool's work inevitably brings her into trouble's line of sight. Yet, one must not lose sight of the fact that the present generation is in desperate need of Fools, "preachers who subvert the status quo, that rock the systemic boat, that rattle the cages in which we have become so comfortable."[213] The sedative of political correctness and the tranquilizing drug of gradualism have anesthetized many people of faith within this generation. However, there is a righteous remnant of Fools whose ministries stand to induce the potent sobriety necessary for galvanizing and participating in social change.

While physical harm is a potential cross the Fool must bare, the Fool must also bare the psychological weight of being constantly ostracized, criticized, and even labeled insane. The Fool's trials will be many because oppressive systems have much at stake and the Fool has the capacity to envision a reality beyond the foreclosed realities initiated by those systems. In other words, the Fool envisions reality beyond that which is immediately present. The Fool lives in that expanded reality. The Fool's language and actions emanate from that reality. And the Fool invites others to live in that reality. The Fool has the capacity to induce ideological emancipation. Therefore, oppressive institutions view the Fool as a threat and attempt to convince others that the Fool is crazy. Such institutions even try to convince the Fool that they are crazy. The Fool, however, could not be saner. The Fool simply understands that theirs is a perpetual calling to be

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[212] Stewart, Elizabeth-Anne. *Jesus the Holy Fool*. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 1999, 36-37.
[213] This is an excerpt taken from "The Clown Before the Powers: A South African Response to Charles Campbell's Comic Vision on Preaching," 5. The paper was delivered at the eighth international conference of *Societas Homiletica*, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, 19-25 July 2008 by Johan Cilliers, Associate Professor in Homiletics and Liturgy at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

the present embodiment of a future hope, no matter how dissonant or out of place that hope may seem to the present.

While the Fool is indeed a cultural trope for prophetic critique it is also a homiletic (and hermeneutic) trope for empowering more efficacious preaching. By utilizing the trope and tools of the Fool preachers can engage the convoluted and contentious issues of the day with more care, rigor, creativity and constructive energy. I invite scholars to use this trope as a figure for constructive work in addressing contemporary religious and secular issues. For example, serious interfaith collaboration is a vast American frontier awaiting exploration. How might the Fool aid and abet transformative expeditions through such unfamiliar territory?

Indeed, I am fully aware that I have appropriated the vastness of the vernacular in black preaching to a single trope. But, in the words of Baker, "I trust that my necessary selectivity will be interpreted, not as a sign of myopic exclusiveness, but as an invitation to inventive play."[214] I hope my construction of the Fool inspires intellectual and vernacular improvisations to render other, inventive tropes for preaching. This is the work of the Fool, to cultivate the imagination, and induce prophetic play. Dominant cultures often attempt to dilute and enslave the imagination. Thus, the Fool is the drum major leading the procession out of rigid, constricted imaginative borders. In his article, "Holy Fools: Ushers of the Next Generation of the Church," Richard Rohr writes:

> It will be "holy fools" who will lead us into a new future and the next generation church. The holy fool is who the Holy Bible and mythic literature have always presented as the "savior." Holy fools are happily, but not naively, innocent of everything that the rest of us take as self-evident. It is the last stage of the wisdom journey: Jesus in his parables, Frances in his patches, and Dorothy Day obedient to petty churchmen for paramount reasons. Reasonable people will always be able

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[214] Baker, 14.

to criticize such fools, but they will bring to every exile a whole new way of imagining—and thereby usher in the new age.[215]

The Fool illumines paths leading to more constructive, life-giving words and worlds. Thus, the Fool, though constantly burdened by the weight of their vocation of holy folly, can be simultaneously vivified by the new life their ministries offer broken people and institutions. The Fool, though often battered and bruised because of their sacred calling, can be ever inspired and encouraged by the resurrection, and all its wondrous manifestations in the life of the believer in Christ.

As a trope for contemporary use, the Fool has many possibilities. The trope stands to offer constructive insights for addressing the world's most complex social issues. Thus, as a trope for academic inquiry, the Fool yields many compelling questions for contemporary scholars. For example: how might the Fool inform ways scholars, activists and preachers in classrooms and on Sunday morning negotiate contemporary injustices such as homophobia, violence, poverty, racism and religious persecution? What names should be given to the intricate mechanisms making up economies of slavery in the twenty first century? What unique manifestations of the Fool are needed in contemporary Afro-American communities, and communities standing in solidarity with them, to successfully subvert oppressive economies? What new practices must contemporary preachers inaugurate so that the good news of the Gospel is radiantly refracted through humble clay vessels in order to engender individual and communal transformation? I pray, dear reader, that you will make it your vocation, as trickster in residence, to seek answers for these questions.

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[215] Rohr, Richard. "Holy Fools: Ushers of the Next Generation in the Church." *Sojourners*, July 1994, 19.

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