

# Education's Histories

---

Volume 1

Article 1

---

5-2014

## Our Trickster, The School

Adrea Lawrence

University of Montana, adrea.lawrence@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eduhist>



Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Nonfiction Commons, Other History Commons, Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons, and the United States History Commons

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Lawrence, Adrea. "Our Trickster, The School." *Education's Histories* 1 (May 01, 2014).

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eduhist/vol1/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education's Histories by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).



## Education's Histories

methodological grist for the history of education

### Notes

---

1. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 46–51.

2. Myrdene Anderson, “Pricking Trickster,” *The American Journal of Semiotics* 14, no. 1–4 (Winter 1997): 216.

3. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 47.

# OUR TRICKSTER, THE SCHOOL

by Adrea Lawrence

...

## Tricksters

*“How was school today?” the education historian asked herself.*

*“I don’t know,” she replied. “My sources didn’t tell me anything about it.”*

*“Well, what did you learn?”*

*“I learned that in spite of Horace Mann’s promises, school stages absurd scenarios, it bites people, and it benefits people. It’s a trickster. I’ve been duped. I’ve been saved.”*



We might not like to think of the school as a figure or institution that dupes us; it is supposed to affirm our studied efforts and sensibilities. But the school, as an institution, does not always do this. Even as it offers an opening into another world with myriad possibilities, it often serves as a foil to the educative. And as it can squelch the educative, it can open a “pore”<sup>1</sup> and offer a workaround out of a riddled situation. It is a trickster.

As linguistic anthropologist Myrdene Anderson writes, “trickstering presents the truth such that no one can believe it—nor can they afford not to.”<sup>2</sup> Might the school be a trickster? As a trickster, the school can serve as a methodological and axiomatic guidepost for historians of education. It can reveal explicit matters of curriculum, social endeavors, and educational intent. It can also cloak, concealing learning outside of school, broader matters of social formation, and cultural amnesia. The school as trickster likewise can manifest as a humorous tonic as it operates as “a pore-seeker,”<sup>3</sup> as Lewis Hyde puts it, looking for gaps and ways through a seemingly impossible situation that were previously invisible. The trickster is the spotlight and smoke; it is the fool and role model; it is a prismatically muddled and transparent wayfinder; it shows us how we should and should not live in this world.

## The Promise



*An Indian Boy in the Trail, Crow Reservation, Montana, 1909. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-2594.*



*Without undervaluing any other human agency it may be safely affirmed that the Common School improved and energized, as it can easily be, may become the most effective and benignant of all the forces of civilization. Two reasons sustain this position. In the first place, there is a universality in its operation which can be affirmed of no other institution whatever. If administered in the spirit of justice and conciliation, all the rising generation may be brought within the circle of its reformatory and elevating influences. And, in the second place, the materials upon which it operates are so pliant and ductile as to be susceptible of assuming a greater variety of forms than any other earthly work of the Creator.<sup>4</sup>*

— Horace Mann



4. Horace Mann, *Lectures and Annual Reports on Education* (Cambridge: Published for the editor, 1867), 42, <http://archive.org/details/lecturesannuale01manniala>.



*U.S. Indian School, Carlisle, Penna., 1909. Photograph by Haines Photo Co. Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., LC-USZ62-25558.*



*Lodge Grass Mission School Pupils Mounted, Lodge Grass, Crow Reservation, Montana, 1908. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-0947.*



## The School Reveals and Cloaks

Education historians study the school because it is important. It is an aperture of sorts through which we can see the world and one that sharpens our vision of our society's aspirations. For Horace Mann, the school had the potential to be the most beneficent and influential cultural creator the United States had ever seen. Nevermind that the nation, in 1848, did not quite cohere; the school had the potential to resolve the nation's growing pains. So, too, could it remedy cultural conflict by streamlining and smoothing out the school curriculum through standardization. The school could inculcate moral instruction, rearing children by the norms and measures set by the state.



*"It was ordained, just like the city on the hill," said the education historian.*

*"Wasn't it?" she questioned sardonically.*

*"Ha!"*



The seriousness that Mann and his likeminded contemporaries devoted to the school matched the gargantuan task of creating a common culture and a national ethos. And this is how the school found itself a trickster: parents, and eventually the state, gave it their children and set particular conditions on the school. It was to teach reading, writing, ciphering, pan-Christian values, and the like; in doing so, it would be cultivating American citizens. These were the conditions, and this was the revealed purpose of school. Would it succeed? Would it fail?

In the long game of social formation, the school was both a culture creator and an instrument of social control. For some, social control was an explicit purpose. Orville Taylor, an education writer and publisher of *The Common School Assistant*, wrote, "To govern men, there must be either Soldiers or Schoolmasters, Books or Bayonets, Camps and Campaigns, or Schools and Churches—the cartridge or the ballot box."<sup>5</sup> The choice was either school or social and political chaos. Historians Wayne Urban and Jennings Wagoner argue that the perceived threat of tumult was so dire in the increasingly urban, multi-ethnic, and mechanized Northeast that common school "crusades" were launched with the intention of pressing children into learning.<sup>6</sup> In urban areas, which had significant concentrations of

5. C. W. (Charles William) Bardeen, *Educational Journalism. An Address Before the New York State Teachers' Association at Its Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting, Saratoga Springs, August 7, 1881* (Syracuse, N.Y., C.W. Bardeen, 1881), 21–22, <http://archive.org/details/cu31924031762911>; qtd in Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr, *American Education: A History*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 108; Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 30–61.

6. Urban and Wagoner, Jr, *American Education*, 115.

7. Carl F. Kaestle and Maris Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 116, 121; See also Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early American Republic* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9–11.

8. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 17.

9. Ibid., 4–32; See also Ronald E. Butchart, “Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World: A Historiography of the American Struggle for Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 333–366.

10. Adah Ward Randolph, “Presidential Address African-American Education History—A Manifestation of Faith,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2014): 3–4.

11. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 63.

12. See, for example, David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence, K.S.: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Michael C. Coleman, *American Indian Children at School, 1850-1950, 1850-1950* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993); K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Robert A. Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

newly arrived immigrant populations, reformers were intent on recruiting larger numbers of children to school; in rural areas, reformers were concerned with improving facilities, teacher quality, and lengthening the school day as attendance was already high.<sup>7</sup> In both the urban and rural contexts, the school served as a liaison for adaptation. Communities in both the city and countryside experienced rapidly changing possibilities for work and thus social life. Both types of communities needed reassurance that some recognizable form of life with interpretable categories for understanding the world would continue. This, in part, became the job of the school. Formalized learning, though, also carried with it the potential of arming groups that were supposed to remain disarmed.

The school straddled its revealed purposes: before the Civil War it met the conditions placed upon it with free white children but withheld formalized learning from children who were slaves. By law, learning how to read and write were subversive activities for slaves. During the Civil War and immediately afterward, however, slaves and ex-slaves established schools for themselves and their children. Historian James D. Anderson writes that Blacks in the South “viewed literacy and formal education as a means to liberation and freedom.”<sup>8</sup> Schools were so important, Anderson argues, that Black parents and communities did not trust outsiders to teach their children how to read, write, cipher, and learn the workings of the political and economic structures. Black communities established their own schools.<sup>9</sup> For African Americans, historian Adah Ward Randolph writes, “The actual school itself was a manifestation of faith” in the revealed purposes and promise of formal education.<sup>10</sup> The ubiquity of private Black schools in the South marked a threat to the social and political order of the planter and poor white classes. The school was simultaneously a savior and disrupter.

With such focus on the visible roles of school in society, the broader role of learning as educative social and individual phenomena became submerged. In 1916, John Dewey wrote, “We have laid it down that the educative process is a continuous process of growth, having as its aim at every stage an added capacity of growth.”<sup>11</sup> If Dewey is right, then the shine of the school has worked to conceal a multitude of other educational processes.

American Indian education is an illuminating case in point. We know something about the formal schools that missionary societies and the U.S. government established to convert Native children to Euroamerican social, gender, economic, religious, and linguistic practices thanks to groundbreaking studies on boarding schools and children’s experiences in them.<sup>12</sup> But we have not necessarily looked at the larger educative processes in play, such as how did Native communities learn to navigate the colonization efforts of the U.S. government and non-Native populace? How did Native communities create new categories of meaning

to explain their places in the world? How did Native communities learn to navigate the economic and political systems imposed upon them? How have they learned to weather and even flourish in these systems?

The school was a plastic shape shifter that served multiple purposes to contradictory effect. While it was the emblem of individual advancement and social uplift, it was also the tool that attempted to permanently strip cultures and languages from children. The school helped create a national ethos that was muddled in a colonialist enterprise.

## The School Bites

*I worked two years in turning a washing machine in a Government school to reduce the running expenses of the institution. It did not take me long to learn how to run the machine and the rest of the two years I nursed a growing hatred for it. Such work is not educative. It begets a hatred for work, especially where there is no pay for such labor. The Indian will work under such conditions because he is under authority, but the moment he becomes free he is going to get as far as he can from it.<sup>13</sup>*

— Henry Roe Cloud

13. Henry Roe Cloud (Winnebago) qtd in Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 152. Roe Cloud was a graduate of the Yale and Auburn Theological Seminaries.



*Dear Sir Capt. Pratt:*

*I write this letter with much sorrow to tell you that I have spoken one Indian word. I will tell you how it happened: yesterday evening in the dining-hall Alice Wynn talked to me in Sioux, and before I new what I was saying I found that I had spoken one word, and I felt so sorry that I could not eat my supper, and I could not forget that Indian word, and while I was sitting at the table the tears rolled down my cheeks. I tried very hard to speak only English.<sup>14</sup>*

— Nellie Robertson

14. Nellie Robertson (1881) qtd in *ibid.*, 141.



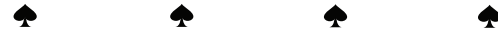


*Thomas Indian School Children Listening to Dr. Dixon, November 28, 1915. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-4311.*



*Thomas Indian School Children at Flag Raising Ceremony, November 28, 1915. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-4312.*





*“Hey! What did you do that for?” the education historian hollered as the sources tattle on the school.*

*“I cannot lie,” the source remarked (in the education historian’s mind).*

*The source continued, “That school ran me down and stripped me bare. It bit my heart. It made me a shadow of a human being.”*

*“I don’t know what to say. I want to cry,” said the education historian in response.*



15. For an extended discussion of the curriculum and its author, Estelle Reel, see K. Tsianina Lomawaima, “Estelle Reel, Superintendent of Indian Schools, 1898-1910: Politics, Curriculum, and Land,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 35, no. 3 (May 1996): n.p.; Estelle Reel, *Course of Study for the Indian Schools of the United States, Industrial and Literary* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901).

16. Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 191–206. Those images of flag raising ceremonies pictured here were staged and taken by Joseph K. Dixon, a Baptist preacher who headed the education division of John Wanamaker’s department store in Philadelphia. Dixon traveled with Wanamaker’s son, Rodman, to a number of American Indian communities across North America in 1908, 1909, and 1913 to study and capture vestiges of Native life, creating over 8000 negatives of sometimes spontaneous, often times staged scenes of American Indians. Following those expeditions, Dixon published a book. See Joseph Kossuth Dixon, *The Vanishing Race* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1913), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27616>. See also Thomas Kavanagh, *More Than Meets the Eye: Photographs as Research Documents* (William Hammond Mathers Museum, 1995), 3–5, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/16401>; Massachusetts Historical Society, “Photographs from the Wanamaker Expeditions, 1908-1913,” Archives Website, *Massachusetts Historical Society, Founded 1791*, accessed March 4, 2014, [http://www.masshist.org/photographs/nativeamericans/essay.php?entry\\_id=75](http://www.masshist.org/photographs/nativeamericans/essay.php?entry_id=75).

In the amplified U.S. appetite for land and natural resources after the Civil War, the school was to serve as the “civilizer” of children. It was also an unmistakable marker of colonization. For non-Natives, a school signified arrival; for American Indians, the school signified departure and even entrenchment. The Indian school and its curriculum, which followed a model of industrial training that was part academic and mostly vocational, ostensibly prepared Native students for life outside their home communities. American Indian students learned English, and with it, reading, writing, and ciphering; they also were supposed to learn individualism, materialism, love of country, Euroamerican gender roles, and functional trades.<sup>15</sup>

One such presumed manifestation of this learning is captured in Joseph Dixon’s images of flag raising ceremonies at different missionary and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools for Native children. As students were expected to develop a sense of individualism and love of country through their manual and academic studies, they were also to demonstrate these qualities during Arbor Day, Columbus Day, and U.S. Independence Day celebrations as well as through staged flag raising ceremonies.<sup>16</sup> In both of Dixon’s flag raising pictures featured here, children are dressed up, wearing ties and woolen hats and sweaters, and they are lined up, with the smallest in front and the tallest in back. In the first image, Joseph Dixon stands in the foreground holding the U.S. flag as children of the Thomas Indian School in upstate New York look on, many with their hands in their pockets. In the second image, students’ facial expressions are clearly visible. They are not smiling, and they do not seem to be looking at the flag or its raising; rather, they appear to be looking at the camera, which was offset from the flag. Does this image demonstrate how the school had “civilized” Native children? Or might it demonstrate the motions that American Indian children went

17. Like their counterparts at the 1893 and 1904 world's fairs, these Native children performed their school jobs in classrooms for a non-Native audience. See Adrea Lawrence, *Lessons From an Indian Day School: Negotiating Colonization in Northern New Mexico, 1902-1907* (Lawrence, K.S.: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 174–186; Robert A. Trennert, Jr., "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs and Expositions, 1893-1904," *American Indian Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 203–20.

18. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 6.

19. Adams, *Education for Extinction*.

20. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 72.

21. Anderson, "Pricking Trickster," 216.

through in school because it was simply part of the educational procedure?<sup>17</sup>

John Dewey warns that we should not mistake the educational for the educative. He writes, "It may be fairly said . . . that any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in an mold and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power."<sup>18</sup> In other words, when the motions of learning are motions, the growth and the curiosity that beget self-sustaining learning are no longer in play.

Was the school "vitally shared," or was it "cast in a mold" and thus drained of its educative potential? Operating a washing machine, as Henry Roe Cloud did, demonstrates that the industrial school operated on a shoestring budget; it also demonstrates that schooling American Indian children may have been as much about control as teaching reading, writing, and ciphering. The school could be brittle. It could also induce students to cultivate a strong sense of shame and self-hatred, as Nellie Robertson expressed after she "had spoken one word" of Sioux at Carlisle, one of the most well known industrial Indian schools in the U.S. As the industrial curriculum modeled at Carlisle rolled out across the country in Indian schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, it and its attendant school policies, such as hair cutting, military time, and renaming, ignored and shunned cultural categories of meaning and language that were resonant with Native students.

In fulfilling its promise for some, the school destroyed the promise for others. In fact, it actively worked to annihilate the languages, cultures, and values of American Indian children and communities. In this way, the school violated the conditions set upon it while simultaneously and seemingly fulfilling those same conditions: teaching children how to read, write, and cipher and be members of U.S. society. In demanding that Native children go all in for complete cultural conversion, only adhering to the curriculum being carried out in schools, the school violated that which was of paramount value—the students. Historian David Wallace Adams has called this process "education for extinction."<sup>19</sup>

Working as a vortex, the school sucked in American Indian children, attempting to recast them as Americans who would shun the historical and intergenerational influence of their families and communities. In so doing, the school and its muscle (Indian Office agents) pulled Native children into its "own uncanny territory" and "provoke[d] doubt."<sup>20</sup> Trickster changes us, and trickster just changes. It is a plastic shape shifter after all. As the school damaged children, it also created pores of absurdity and humor, thus opening up possibilities for new ways of making meaning.<sup>21</sup>

22. Don C. Talayesva, *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian* (New Haven; London: Pub. for the Institute of human relations by Yale University Press : H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1942), 97.

23. Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), x.

24. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 45.

25. Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, ix.

26. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 45.

## The School Chuckles

*“Stop! Stop! If I laugh any harder, I’m going to cry,” exclaimed the education historian to her source.*

*“He caught one by the tail and I clambered on its back and rode it about the pen. It was great fun. I felt better when I got off, and thought to myself that if my homesickness returned I would ride a pig again,” remarked Don Talayesva, a student at the Keams Canyon school in Arizona.<sup>22</sup>*

*“You and your friends rode pigs!”*

*“What else could we do?” Talayesva responded (in the education historian’s mind).*



The school might well stimulate learning, but that learning does not always follow the content and form of the formalized curriculum. For example, the school taught Talayesva that he was out of his home community and that in order to make it through his time at school and return home, he needed to remedy his homesickness. His method was perhaps unconventional, but that is what the school provoked. The comedic tonic of Talayesva’s episode is characteristic of the trickster. Anthropologist Paul Radin writes of the Winnebago trickster, “[l]aughter, humour [sic] and irony permeate everything Trickster does.”<sup>23</sup> These qualities are necessary as trickster is the fool and the wayfinder.

To be both the fool and the wayfinder, trickster has a plasticity that confounds and illuminates, sometimes simultaneously. Hyde argues, “[h]aving no way, trickster can have many ways.”<sup>24</sup> Trickster is a sort of blank slate and mirror. Radin adds to this notion, writing that Trickster “wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.”<sup>25</sup> Having “no way” and “no control” suggests that trickster is a conduit of sorts. Trickster responds to externally set conditions and sanctions. And because it does not know self-restraint, trickster is frequently overcome by its impulse to exaggerate and overreach. It is at this moment when trickster reveals its “creative fabrication, feigning, and fibbing”;<sup>26</sup> it is also at this moment that trickster reveals the absurdity of the situation.





*Araphabo or Shoshone Boy, Wind River, Wind River Reservation, Wyoming, October 11, 1915. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Matbers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-5516.*



*“It was soon reported to the superintendent that a new pupil had come. When the afternoon session opened and the pupils were seated, Little Tail was given a seat at one of the desks, but to our delight he slid down and sat on the floor. The teacher rapped the top of the desk with a ruler and cried, ‘Silence!’ and order was restored.”*

*“‘What is the name of the new boy?’ he asked.”*

*“‘Thin ‘-je-zhin-ga,’ answered one of the boys.”*

*“Gray-beard tried to repeat the name, but only set the whole school laughing. While this was going on, Little Tail reached down to his belt and drew out a roll of milkweed fibre. It was his ammunition. He tore off enough to make a bullet, chewed it, and, bringing the breach of the pop-gun to his mouth, inserted the ball, twisting the gun with his hands while he pressed the was in with his teeth, making many motions with his head. By pounding the butt of the rammer on the floor, he drove the ball to the firing point; then raising the gun he began forcing the ball with vigorous thrusts, aiming it at a mischievous boy who sat opposite making faces at him. Bang! Went the weapon; the bullet, instead of hitting the object aimed at, struck Gray-beard in the face, and made him throw his head back. We covered our faces to suppress the giggles that bubbled up at this mishap. The wounded man looked sharply at the young artilleryist, who, seeing the mischief he had done, very slyly thrust his gun in his robe, and, keeping an eye on his victim, sat perfectly still.”*

*“The teacher looked serious, then we became scared. After a moment his face relaxed, and he said in a pleasant tone, ‘We must have the name of the new boy on the Register; but we cannot have any name that is unpronounceable. We shall have to give him an English name. Will you suggest one?’”*

*“A number of hands went up and as many historic names were offered and rejected. Finally it was determined to call him William T. Sherman and that name was entered upon the Register.”<sup>27</sup>*

27. Francis La Flesche, *The Middle Five: Indian Schoolboys of the Omaha Tribe* (Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press, 1900), 74–75.



The naming of Thin'-je-zhin-ga (William T. Sherman) illustrates such “feigning,” “fibbing,” and absurdity. As the school’s teacher and agent, Gray-beard demonstrates how the school as trickster was the fool and thief. As Thin'-je-zhin-ga slid from his chair to the floor upon his introduction to the class and Gray-beard, playful disorder ensued, prompting Gray-beard to yell in order to effect silence. Upon attempting to pronounce Thin'-je-zhin-ga’s name, Gray-beard stumbles and becomes the object of students’ laughter. And, after Thin'-je-zhin-ga shot a spitwad that accidentally hit Gray-beard’s face, students again quietly, but gleefully, giggled. Gray-beard, as the school’s agent, was the fool. But he was also the thief. Gray-beard took Thin'-je-zhin-ga’s pop-gun, and he took Thin'-je-zhin-ga’s name, insisting that students assign another name to their peer. They chose William T. Sherman, the name of the Union general whose “scorched earth” policy against the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War made him famous and whom, ironically, was named after the famed Shawnee leader, Tecumseh. Had the thief again become the fool?





*Flathead Schoolchildren at Flag Raising Ceremony, September 19, 1915. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-4421.*



Having no compass, the school, our trickster, and its agents react to external forces and conditions in ways that overstep and make little sense. The school drew children in to its “uncanny territory,” and required its charges to act as colonialist operatives by renaming Thin’-je-zhin-ga. But the attempt at hegemony disintegrated as students gave Thin’-je-zhin-ga a Euroamerican name and an Indian name. Trickster’s trick boomeranged. Scholar Philip J. Deloria writes of the Lakota trickster, Iktomi, “At the moment he is tricking you, his trick backfires or reverses and become a trick on himself. Everything happens simultaneously.”<sup>28</sup> The school was duped as it attempted to dupe others.

28. Philip J. Deloria, “Thinking About Self in a Family Way,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (June 1, 2002): 28.

29. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 70.

In creating or acting in seemingly ludicrous situations, the school, in effect, creates or enacts contradictions; it lies. Lies can damage, and they can also serve as portals through which we can glimpse other potentialities. Hyde writes, “the problem is to make a ‘lie’ that cancels the opposition and so holds the possibility of new worlds.”<sup>29</sup> It is at this juncture—the lie or contradiction that illuminates the trickster’s simultaneously appearing pinnacle and nadir—

that the so-called pore opens. It is at this moment when the lie and the trickster become unhinged and when the novel learning can commence. The trickster shifts its shape and flashes alternate chances and choices. They are fleeting, ethereal, and real. What to do? If we miss the pore, the damage would seem to loom. But if we recognize that a pore has opened, do we look through the aperture and pounce on another potentiality? Can we counter the damage?

## The Pore



*Navajo Girls in Footrace, Navajo Reservation, Arizona, July 4, 1913. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-5386.*





*Navajo Boys at Start of Footrace, Navajo Reservation, Arizona, July 4, 1915. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-4760.*



*“How did you come through the experience of being schooled?” asked the education historian.*

*“I was born to words, truly, ma’am — very old words, from the time when dogs could talk,” responded John Pai.<sup>30</sup>*

30. N. Scott Momaday, *Three Plays* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 28.

*“Hmmm. Having an affinity for words doesn’t really explain how you made it through the gauntlet.”*

31. Ibid.

*“I . . . remember myself,” Pai said.<sup>31</sup>*

*“But, then, how did you come out to consider yourself an educated person?” asked the education historian.*

32. Ibid.

*“I was a camp child, a child of the cloth, trade cloth. I preached to the dogs in the name of the Sailor; the dragonfly, and the muchacho. Amen,” he said.<sup>32</sup>*



*“Ah ha! You subverted the school?!”*

*“Hmmm,” (Pai chuckled in the historian’s mind).*

*“Did you trick the trickster?” she asked, winking.*



33. Gerald Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse,” *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (July 1, 1990): 284.

The trickster is not a singularity. It acts and is acted upon. As it tricks and is tricked, as it opens up pores for alternate possibilities, it engages individuals and communities in sometimes mundane and sometimes transformative ways. Scholar Gerald Vizenor writes that “[t]he trickster is a communal sign, never isolation; a concordance of narrative voices. The trickster is not tragic because the narrative does not promise a ‘happy ending.’”<sup>33</sup> The school invites such a “concordance of voices” even if it doesn’t mean to, begging the chance for trickstering and other potentialities. Most conventionally, and as most non-Native reformers had idealized, the school was a means into the mainstream U.S. economy for American Indian students, offering manual training in recognized vocations. The formalized, written curriculum itself and student accounts of their experiences at schools run by the U.S. government attest to that. Designed for industrial schools modeled after the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, Estelle Reel’s 1901 *Course of Study for the Indian Schools of the United States, Industrial and Literary* delineated a manual training and domestic arts curriculum that included blacksmithing, carpentry, engineering, agriculture, printing, cooking, housekeeping, laundry, and sewing. The *Course of Study* also included study in traditional academic subjects like history, music, math, reading, geography, and physiology.<sup>34</sup>

34. Reel, *Course of Study for the Indian Schools of the United States, Industrial and Literary*.



*“Before [Max Hanley (Navajo)] le[ft] Sherman [Institute] he had mastered three trades. In the white man’s words, “I specialized,” and certificates were filled out for me which identified what I could do best.”*<sup>35</sup>

35. Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 43.



For Max Hanley, the Sherman Institute in California credentialed his skill in the several trades he had learned there. The credentials verified his vocational competency to the world outside the Indian school; they were a pore for Hanley. The credentials and the training that buttressed them were evidence that Hanley participated in a schooling experience that was familiar—at least on its face—to Americans with many different backgrounds. In this way, the school’s recognition of Hanley’s skills affirmed his potential as a viable “Ameri-

36. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 91.

37. See, for example, Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse," 284.

38. Amelia V. Katanski, *Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 190.

39. *Ibid.* See, in particular, chapter 5, "Runaways, Rebels, and Indolent Boys in Contemporary Re-visions of Boarding-School Narratives," 166-215.

can." But his credentials do not necessarily convey whether or not Hanley had converted himself in a wholesale fashion. Hanley appears to have stepped through the instrumental portal by specializing in several trades, yet he identifies himself as outside the Euroamerican pale. The ideals promoted by the school to refashion Indians into Americans fell in upon themselves. Hanley was a skilled Indian straddling cultures. As such, Hanley tricked the school as he confounded the reformer-idealists. Hyde writes, "trickster stories are radically anti-idealist; they are made in and for a world of imperfections."<sup>36</sup> Instead of a "happy ending," there is an ambivalent and ambiguous one.<sup>37</sup>



*[N. Scott Momaday's] John Pai uses English not to repeat the propaganda of the schools, like the paper Indians, but to engage in a type of wordplay doublespeak that exemplifies the 'riddle' of his identity (22). When his teacher Carrie compliments him on his command of the English language, he responds, 'Imagine. I am eloquent, and it isn't even my native language.' Carrie replies, 'But you have taken possession of it, appropriated it, made it your own, as if you were born to it.' Carrie means by this that he has been able to comprehend and reproduce the lessons in civilization that he has been taught at the school. She tells him, 'You will make a fine preacher, John. You will spread the gospel, as they say. You will glorify the word of God.' But when John Pai responds by saying 'I was born to words, truly, ma'am — very old words, from the time when dogs could talk,' suggesting that his eloquence is a Kiowa characteristic rather than an effect of English literacy, he puzzles her. And when he inverts her statement about glorifying the word of God, stating that he will glorify instead, 'the word of dog, the voice of the turtle,' Carrie says with exasperation, 'If we can get past your impertinence! Your riddling is . . . out of place. Remember yourself,' she commands. With a glance at the Medicine Wheel, John Pai insists, 'I do remember myself: I was a camp child, a child of the cloth, trade cloth. I preached to the dogs in the name of the Sailor [Seta], the dragonfly [Koi-khan-hodle], and the muchacho [Mosatse]. Amen' (22). Preaching to the Kiowa (in whose mythology the dog — and the 'giant dog' or horse — plays an important and respected role) in the name of the three frozen boys, keeping them alive by sharing their story with the people, John Pai sees himself with a far more complicated mission and repertoire of identity than his teacher claims for him.'*<sup>38</sup>



The ambiguity that trickster invites—in spite of itself—allows for a dynamism that can refashion and reformulate culture. As the school bit Native students, it also provided an unwitting forum where a pan-Indian identity and literature developed. For example, literary scholar Amelia V. Katanski writes that school newspapers were the subversive proving grounds for several American Indian writers. Though school superintendents attempted to control the content and form of articles published in the papers, students found fissures in the domineering authority of the school, and shimmied through them.<sup>39</sup> N. Scott Momaday's John Pai finds his way through the school's personnel and curriculum, winning a spot

40. Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

41. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 99.

42. Anderson, "Pricking Trickster," 216.

at seminary. When three of his friends freeze to death when attempting to escape the school and return to their families' camps in a winter blizzard, John Pai discreetly disembarks from his journey to seminary to return to his family's camp. The faculty laments his "running away," believing that he decided to forget his Euroamerican schooling. Katanski argues that John Pai had cultivated and acted with a "repertoire of identity" that the school and its faculty did not recognize. In writing John Pai, Momaday refashioned and reordered the categories through which John Pai might be understood. He was a careful study with a deeply rooted compass that could recognize learning portals and avert being sucked into the school's vortex. The Hopi did this on a grand scale, reformulating the categories of meaning derived from the school encounter all together. Historian Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert argues that the group of Hopi students, young and old, who went to the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California from 1907-1910 enacted another form of migration that was congruent with earlier migrations which had helped define Hopi experience and culture over many centuries.<sup>40</sup> Whether or not the school recognized this is immaterial. Lewis Hyde writes, "In creating cultural categories we give shape to this world, and whoever manages to change the categories thus changes the shape."<sup>41</sup> The Hopi "jumped into the liminality"<sup>42</sup> and bounced the colonialist purposes underlying the very existence of the school off of the school itself, creating a reformulation of cultural categories.



*Hopi Boy Racing Horse, Hopi Reservation, Arizona, July 8, 1908. Photograph by Joseph Dixon. Courtesy of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Wanamaker Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington, I.N., W-5687.*



43. Deloria, "Thinking About Self in a Family Way," 28.

Our trickster, the school, is a methodological and axiomatic guidepost. Historian Philip J. Deloria writes that the trickster "exceeds history, serving as a metaphor, a mode of inquiry, perhaps even a methodological position. Laced through that method is a lack of certainty, the possibility that any claim may invert itself and become its opposite. If one believes this, humility . . . stands as a critical ground."<sup>43</sup> The school, our trickster, shows us how we should and should not live in this world as it builds itself up and implodes in on itself. As it describes idealized forms of learning, it clouds unexpected learnings. It is prismatically muddled and a transparent wayfinder; it is the spotlight and smoke.

The education historian thus asks, "Is the school a trickster, or does it make tricksters of us?"



*Donald Warren of Indiana University and Christopher J. Frey of Bowling Green State University served as peer reviewers for this essay. We are grateful for their careful attention to and thoughtful feedback on this meditation.*



### Interested in writing with us?

Please send a brief description of your ideas to [educationshistories@gmail.com](mailto:educationshistories@gmail.com). We accept submissions on a rolling basis. All articles and essays are part of the open peer review process. Visit [www.educationshistories.org/submissions/](http://www.educationshistories.org/submissions/) for more information.

[www.educationshistories.org](http://www.educationshistories.org) • [educationshistories@gmail.com](mailto:educationshistories@gmail.com)

Adrea Lawrence & Sara Clark, co-curators

*Education's Histories*

methodological grist for  
the history of education