Folktales: Trickster Stories Across Time - From African Ancestors to African American Rappers

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Abstract:

In traditional African settings, folktales could be used to criticize as well as to entertain and instruct. Captives brought folktales with them through the Middle Passage to the unknown land of America. What happened during the Middle Passage has remained unknown to students from both Africa and America. This unit undertakes to illuminate a key legacy of this journey that connects African American and African students: trickster stories. Trickster stories bridge across time and space, and across genres of oral and written literature. Tricksters from West African folktales like Anansi, Brer Rabbit, and Later African American characters such as John (of John and Old Master), Stagger Lee, Shine, and Signifying Monkey all became part of the literature of the African diaspora and of the Americas.

Over time, characters who showed the same resilience as the captives who were forced into slavery evolved into the contemporary tricksters found in rap music, who emulate the rap artists themselves. Many of the tricksters found in the lyrics of hip-hop share the traits of tricksters in African folktales. The lessons in the unit, tailored for ESOL students at Entering and Basic Levels, address the connections that persist between stories told by traditional storytellers from West Africa and by African American artists.

As folklorists and anthropologists have argued, Trickster mediates oppositions of all kinds. In addition to mediating between students of different ethnic backgrounds, Trickster will bridge across generations, as students work with elderly African storytellers in West Philadelphia to compile a class folktale book.