

## Gladstone

### Commentary on *Coyote and Brother Crow*

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Tricksters, by their very nature, are able to transgress boundaries of time and space. They are found in many cultures across many continents in this world, and perhaps beyond. They serve similar roles wherever they go, pointing out what we as people need to know so as to fittingly live in our place and time (Radin, 1956). Sometimes tricksters point out the obvious, such as the boy who announced that the king was naked, while others leave it to us to interpret their actions. Tricksters' actions can be socially acceptable or taboo, and we learn vicariously through the consequences of their acts. Regardless whether their messages are explicit or implicit; our role in their story is to make sense of these behaviors that tricksters act out on our behalf. The trick, then, is making sense of their stories.

In *Coyote and Brother Crow*, White (2008) presents a trickster story describing current reality for American Indians<sup>1</sup>, whom as a society have experienced encroachment into their ancestral homes and ways of life by outside settlers. White presents a historical viewpoint of this relationship through Coyote and Crow, traditional trickster and spiritual figures for many American Indian tribes. White's poem is a critical view of history

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is common in contemporary times to use the term *Native American*, the term is used interchangeably among the indigenous peoples of North America. The choice to use either *Native American* or *American Indian* (sometimes just *Indian*) often is a preference of the individual and either term is acceptable within the native community, of which the author of this commentary is a member. The preference appears to be related to age and experience, with older members using *Indian* and younger members preferring *Native American*. In this essay, *American Indian*, *Native American(s)*, or simply *Native(s)* are used interchangeably.

(Nietzsche and Hollingdale, 1983) pointing out the conflicting logics between two well-entrenched institutions, indigenous tribes and federal hegemonic bureaucracy. In this essay I describe the appropriateness of adopting Coyote as a role model for Western hegemony, first with a very brief description of the U.S. federal-tribal relationship followed by a description of Coyote's purpose in the universe.

White's poem describes the evolving conquest of Native Americans by white settlers whom have the advantage with bureaucratic support from the federal government. To understand this bureaucratic support requires knowing about Article 1, Section 8 of the United States Constitution, written shortly following U. S. independence. The young United States first sought to exert bureaucratic control over the tribes by granting itself the right "To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes" (U.S. Constitution). It is from this context that White describes Coyote's being within this story.

Through Coyote, White presents a good argument that "the remembered past is simply a manifestation of the cultural norms and values that allow it to be remembered" (2008, p. 1). He presents a different and, from a non-Native perspective, a novel interpretation of the past so that we may notice and hear the marginalized voices suppressed with the linear narrative (Boje, 2001) of the colonial power. White implies that through a Coyote story, sense can be made of these relationships from the perspective of the tribes by empowering these marginalized voices. However, his presentation for sensemaking is linear and retrospective (Boje, 2001). In his poem, Coyote's role is historical but with a

potential for prospective sensemaking (Boje, 2001), when he<sup>2</sup> travels to the edge of seeing the future, stopping short of this potential so as to nap. It is at this point in White's poem where the reader becomes active in the story, by deciding how to continue the future seen by Crow. This remainder of this essay will present an expanded view of the role that Coyote serves in making sense of actions played out by institutions.

My interpretation of Coyote's role in life differs from that described by White. Coyote is a common American Indian trickster, and thus a good model for White's message. My interpretation of Coyote comes from my opportunity to learn about him beginning with my childhood. It is important, however, to note that my experience with Coyote is mostly through one of his many alter-egos, Napi (pronounced "NAH-pi"), aka Old-Man among the Blackfeet Indians.

My father is a member of the Blackfeet Indian Tribe in northern Montana, as am I. My mother is Nez Perce Indian; therefore I have familial ties with that tribe, whose homelands are at the region encompassing the Idaho, Oregon, and Washington state borders. Having grown up in a Native environment, I have heard Blackfeet Napi stories and Nez Perce Coyote stories. I have also listened to many variations North American Indian trickster stories throughout my career living among and working with tribes in the Pacific Northwest and Southwest United States. It is through my experience with these stories that I disagree with White's interpretation of Coyote's being. My interpretation of Crow's being also differs dramatically from White's interpretation; I will explain this disagreement later in this essay.

White describes Coyote as an opportunist, which is correct (Wiget, 1990; Radin, 1956). However, White describes

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<sup>2</sup> Wiget (1990) makes an interesting point that tricksters are predominately described in masculine tenses. This is correct for the Blackfeet, for Napi is also known as *Old Man*. However Wiget notes that the feminist perspective of tricksters has little record, likely because Western-centric ethnographers assumed that men carried the knowledge for their tribes and overlooked the stories of the women.

Coyote's actions as malicious intent to harm and deceive. White introduces Coyote as "no good" (2008: 3). This is a broad and incorrect assumption (Radin, 1956; Lopez, 1977; Wiget, 1990; Nabokov, 2002). The significant misinterpretation is describing *all* of Coyote's actions as malicious. What must be understood is that Coyote cannot pass up opportunity. Writes Radin, Coyote "is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control" (1956: ix). Very infrequently will Coyote seek masochistic pleasure. What drives him most of the time is simple hedonism, and he seeks pleasure through either his stomach or his libido. Coyote "wills nothing consciously" (Radin, 1956: ix).

Temporality is important for trickster stories. White states that "Coyote loved forever" (2008: 17). Among those stories that I am familiar, Coyote – or his Blackfeet alter-ego Napi – consistently joins the narrative by simply walking along; he is always coming from somewhere else and going nowhere and specific. There is no specific beginning or end. Regardless of the outcome of his current story, he always manages to stumble into another one. Coyote lives in a nonlinear world, and outcomes often reflect on his entrance into the story. It is this stumbling, this haphazard way of travelling that White's Coyote lacks. Coyote's ways are that of a foolish teacher – we learn how to act by avoiding what Coyote does, or by emulating him.

Coyote also gives, even when his intent is to take. The Nez Perce would not exist today if Coyote did not willingly let himself be swallowed by the Monster so that he could free the people trapped inside; albeit that Coyote's intent was to demonstrate that he was smarter than the Monster, freeing the Nez Perce was simply serendipitous.

Most significant in Coyote stories is that he shows us what we are capable of understanding. Wiget (1990) points out that Coyote "functions not so much to call cultural categories into question as to demonstrate the artificiality of culture itself" (pp. 93 – 94). White's poem describes the artificiality of the relationship between the tribes and the federal government. The artificial he describes is the

bureaucratization (Weber, 1922/1968) of a society that had not experienced bureaucracy. In contemporary times, this bureaucratization could possibly be seen as the establishment of an artificial culture, however this assumption requires further investigation.

Investigation is what Coyote is all about. He wanders into the scene and investigates what he sees, hears, or smells. Although his senses trigger his id, his experiences are meant to trigger our superego. It is our role to make sense of his experiences, and to bring the unfinished back to the beginning and create a new perspective.

White closes his poem with Coyote sleeping as Crow sees the new day rising on the horizon. To fully understand Coyote, one must not see a flat horizon ahead of Crow, but a curving arc that is only part of a sphere. Reality, as seen through Trickster, is non-linear. Crow, in White's interpretation, can see into the future, but Coyote is grounded, experiencing the approaching day that he will live through, giving us more examples that we must interpret and make sense of. Rather than watching from the high seats, Coyote participates in the day-to-day. This is the story of Coyote – when he encounters the unknown, he acts. It is our responsibility to learn from his actions, and behave appropriately. White adds another character to teach us, that is Crow. Through Crow, White asks us to see beyond the bureaucracies that inhibit our growth as a society. Coyote's lesson is to make sense of them.

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