

BLM 2 – Archibald on the Trickster

On my research journey I met many gifted and caring storytellers who readily shared their stories and understandings of the oral traditions. Many with whom I talked became new friends. With my “old” friends, a new dynamic to our friendship emerged as we shared story experiences. One of the new friends was Coyote. Among many First Nations, Coyote and her/his/its many manifestations is considered a Trickster character who has lots to learn and teach while travelling the world. The English word “trickster” is a poor one because it cannot portray the diverse range of ideas that First Nations associate with the Trickster, who sometimes is like a magician, an enchanter, an absurd prankster, or a Shaman, who sometimes is a shape shifter, and who often takes on human characteristics. Trickster is a transformer figure, one whose transformations often use humour, satire, self-mocking, and absurdity to carry good lessons. Other well-known Trickster characters include Raven, Wesakejac, Nanabozo, and Glooscap. Trickster often gets into trouble by ignoring cultural rules and practices or by giving sway to the negative aspects of “humanness,” such as vanity, greed, selfishness, and foolishness. Trickster seems to learn lessons the hard way and sometimes not at all. At the same time, Trickster has the ability to do good things for others and is sometimes like a powerful spiritual being and given much respect.

Trickster characters like Coyote have existed in our stories since “time immemorial,” as our people say. Each First Nations culture has particular attributes and types of teachings connected to the Trickster. Often tribal Tricksters nearly die, or they die and then are resurrected. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the tribal Trickster related to my storytelling research is Gerald Vizenor’s notion that she/he/it needs communal and land connections:

The trickster is in a comic world, surviving by his wits, prevailing in good humor. He’s in a collective, hardly ever in isolation. When he is in isolation, he’s almost always in trouble, in a life-threatening situation he has to get out of through ritual or symbolic acts. Through reversals he has to get back to connections to imagination, to people, to places. (1987, 295)

Vizenor, who is of the Minnesota Chippewa Nation, believes that the Trickster is a “doing, not an essence, not a museum being, not an aesthetic presence” (13).

The notion of the Trickster as a “doing” rather than a “being” fits with how I have come to appreciate the process of learning through Trickster stories. The Trickster as a doing can change and live on through time as people interact with the Trickster through stories; one does not have to be too concerned about what the Trickster looks like if she/he/it is a doing rather than a being. This notion of the tribal Trickster lets me interact with her/him/it. Coyote, then, helps me to reflect and to gain understandings, challenging and comforting me like a critical friend.

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