

BLM 3 – Vizenor on the Trickster

Tricksters are real in stories but not in the flesh. Tricksters are not blood or material, but imagination. Tricksters are the kind of thought that raises hope, that heals, that cures, that cannot be traced. The power of a trickster would be diminished, even abolished, by human representations. Humans are not tricksters, but tricksters can be human. Tricksters are not moral but live forever in imagination. And the trickster is not immortal either. Tricksters liberate the mind, and they do so in a language game. Tricksters do not represent the real or the material. Tricksters are not alive in tribal imagination to prove theories of the social scientists. Tricksters have become anthropologists, but no anthropologist has ever understood a trickster. Tricksters have become anthropologists if only long enough to overturn their theories and turn them into cold shit. But tricksters are not moral or functional. Tricksters are not artifacts. Tricksters never prove culture or the absence of culture. Tricksters do not prove the values that we live by, nor do they prove or demonstrate the responses to domination by colonial democracies. Tricksters are not consumables. Tricksters are not breakfast cereal. Tricksters are ethereal. Tricksters only exist in a comic sense between two people who take pleasure in a language game and imagination, a noetic liberation of the mind....

Gerald Vizenor, 1993
“A Trickster Discourse: Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature” in
Buried Roots and Indestructible Seeds: The Survival of American Indian Life
in Story, History, and Spirit, ed. Mark A. Lindquist and Martin Zanger,
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994 (originally published 1993): 67-83.

You’re known for coining terms like “*victimry*” and “*survivance*.” What do they mean?

From a white, European perspective, Natives are always a problem. “We owe them a lot” is a mantra. This is one example of victimry. But when Natives create art, which includes storytelling, it isn’t from the point of view of the victim. It’s playful, original, expressionistic, and grows out of the visionary power of creative writers. It breaks through the passive, two-dimensional approach of those who look from the outside in. The trickster character reveals life’s absurdities and exposes hubris and hypocrisy while telling tales full of natural references, ironies, and cultural ambiguities that are told differently in the dominant literature of Europe and America.

Survivance is a union of presence, resistance, and survival that is deliberate and focused. For example, my grandmother Alice married a blind man who sold brushes door to door, and Alice went with him. Always at the third house, a lonely woman would answer the door, and they’d begin telling stories. They were in survivance, conjuring the teasing trickster in the practice of Native stories, keen in the knowledge of gossip in the community, but transformational for that moment.

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