

# *Unsettling Fictions: Disrupting Popular Discourses and Trickster Tales in Books for Children*

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Educators have an important role in helping children learn to read literature critically. Some teacher education programs already provide educators courses that focus on this important topic. Within discussions of children's literature, there is a debate about books in which there is clearly expressed bias. It may be argued that it is appropriate to take up such books, pointing out the problems in order to provide opportunities to examine how and why inappropriate and inaccurate representations may have been portrayed. This adult guidance is sometimes seen as aiding children in gaining insights into stereotyping in literature and aiding them to be aware of the importance of more accurate representations (Hirshfelder, Fairbanks & Wakim, 1982). Conversely, Thompson (2001) argues that few adults can identify the stereotypes and biases of texts so it would be impossible for them to guide children in these activities nor towards understanding the inaccurate and misleading representations and lack of historical context presented in literature. It is very possible that child readers may well be more able to perceive and critique stereotypes than are adults.

This paper will examine why stories and storytelling within education are important, discuss reasons why appropriation of stories is problematic, raise issues with the process of sharing cultural stories from around the world, and discuss Trickster stories and the complexity of these stories. With this background, we will then critique the book *Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest* by Gerald McDermott as an example of the complexity teachers, parents, and librarians face in teaching with books for children that are appropriated from Indigenous knowledges. In an example of teachers engaging with a story told from an Indigenous perspective, *A Coyote Columbus Story* (King, 1992), students engage in disrupting boundaries and transforming the classroom experiences. These examples highlight the challenges and responsibilities of rejecting literature that appropriates Indigenous knowledges and moves towards teaching with Indigenous literatures. Educators are challenged to consider Indigenous literatures written from Indigenous perspectives and to engage with these in ways that transform educational experiences.

### Importance of Indigenous Stories for Children

"Story – in creative combination with encounters, experiences, image making, ritual, play, imagination, dream and modeling–forms the basic foundation of all human learning and teaching" (Cajete, 1994). Petrone (1990), quoting Ojibway author George Copway, indicates the important role of stories in the process of teaching in Indigenous communities. She recounts her experiences as "night after night for weeks have I sat and eagerly listened to these stories. The days following, the characters would haunt me at every step and every moving leaf would seem to be a voice of a spirit" (p. 10-11). The worlds created in the stories were carried with those who heard the stories and impacted upon their understandings of the world in which they live. Copway suggests that

stories have an important impact on the children in her nation. The stories are endeared to them and become located in their understandings of the world and life. They also aid in forming and strengthening the social habits of children.

Leroy Little Bear (2000) explains the role of storytelling in spiritual life of communities when he states that Indigenous peoples engage in "renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and resinging of the songs, [which] are all humans' part in the maintenance of creation" (p. 78). These practices sustain communities and cultures. Keeshig-Tobias (1991) explains that Indigenous stories aid us in realizing our humanity, share emotions, and help us acknowledge experiences we learn from. She explains that Indigenous stories are not just useful as entertainment but they have a role in communities. Storytellers are responsible in communities to the people, to keep the story alive, and to share it through their artful practice. Their art reflects the storytellers profound self-understanding and the significance of the story.

Smith (1999) emphasizes that Indigenous accounts and stories are rarely acknowledged as valid accounts of the past. She highlights the importance for Indigenous peoples to hold and honor alternative viewpoints so they can guide actions and pedagogies in the world today. Storytelling, as the oldest form of the arts, provides intergenerational communication of collective understandings (Cajete, 1994; Lanigan, 1998).

Indigenous peoples have been and continue to be misrepresented in educational resources, and in stories (Battiste, 2000; Iseke-Barnes, 2005). Hirshfelder, Fairbanks, and Wakim (1982) explain that "Native people continue to become inhuman, objectified 'Indians' in the minds of non-Native children; ... these children believe that Native Americans are people of the past or creatures of fantasy" (p. 73).

Misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples and stories can dominate

mainstream understandings and overwrite the voices and stories of Indigenous peoples (Young Man, 1998; Valaskakis, 1993; Doxtator, 1988). Keeshig-Tobias (1991), in writing about the issues of Indigenous stories appearing in books and articles by non-Indigenous people, writes that it is not just mainstream perspectives of history, oversimplifying Indigenous spirituality and worldview, or racist representations of Indigenous people and stories. The issue is not just the constraints of imagination placed on Indigenous peoples or the often-thoughtless responses of mainstream writers and readers. Her concern is culture theft, the theft of Indigenous voices, and the power politics that make this possible.

“Cultural appropriation is ... [defined] as the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (Rogers, 2006, p. 474). He further suggests that cultural appropriation is use without authority or right.

Appropriation is derived from the Latin *appropriare*, meaning ‘to make one’s own.’ ... These meanings parallel the use of the term in legal contexts, strengthening the connotation of an unfair or unauthorized taking—that is, theft. For example, in response to controversies over the use of elements of First Nations cultures by non-Natives, the Writer’s Union of Canada defined cultural appropriation as “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge. (as cited in Rogers, p. 475)

Further to this, Shugart (1997) maintains that

Appropriation refers to any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to another is used to further one’s own ends. Any instance in which a group borrows or imitates the strategies of

another—even when the tactic is not intended to deconstruct or distort the other’s meanings and experiences—thus would constitute appropriation. (Shugart, p. 210-211)

Rogers challenges Shugart’s definition by suggesting that he does not limit definitions of cultural appropriation to situations where it is to “further one’s own ends” but he does suggest that it is an active process and

... retains the meaning of a ‘taking.’ Mere exposure, for example, to the music or film of another culture does not constitute cultural appropriation. The active “making one’s own” of another culture’s elements occurs, however, in various ways, under a variety of conditions, and with varying functions and outcomes. The degree and scope of voluntariness (individually or culturally), the symmetry or asymmetry of power relations, the appropriation’s role in domination and/or resistance, the nature of the cultural boundaries involved, ...shape, and are shaped by, acts of cultural appropriation. (Rogers, p. 476)

Andrea Bear Nicholas (2008, p. 13) tells a compelling story about the process of denigrating the Elders who know the oral tradition and the process of appropriating Maliseet stories. She identifies the character Glooskap as “the most important personage in the oral traditions of Maliseets, Mi’kmaq, passamaquoddies and Penobscots, collectively known as Wabanakis” (p. 14). She describes a process of “altering and fabricating of traditions” by Charles Leland who “collapsed the various versions of the story into one” and also “fabricated important elements of the story.” The source of three of the four versions of the story of how Glooskap was born that Leland worked from is Gabe Acquin but Leland identified only that it was from a Micmac Indian and the name of the person who recorded the story. Anthropologist Gordon Day (1976)

questioned the authenticity of the story and questioned whether this story was actually even from Wabanaki mythology at all. Nicholas suggests that

Leland's reason for including this story, and other inventions, in his *Algonquin Legends*, is fairly evident. It supports his pet theory that Norse legends were the primary source of most Wabanaki traditions, a thesis which, incidentally, carries the serious implication that Wabanaki peoples were incapable of coming up with such stories themselves. (p. 16)

Leland's version has now been reproduced in tourist brochures and a story frequently and continually repeated in textbooks, especially those used in schools for children. Nicholas tells us that it is not only Leland's tampering with stories and appropriation of the cultural traditions of the Wabanaki that is so troubling but that "he has passed off his concoctions as ours so successfully that 'his' stories are now believed to be 'our' stories by generations of our people" (p. 17).

The devastating and more wide-reaching effects of misrepresentation and appropriation is that "racism in textbooks, especially those used in the early or middle grades, can wield enormous negative influence on public perceptions of First Nations peoples and their traditions" (Nicholas, p. 17). This impact on public perception is further evidenced by the fact that the questionable story that Leland told is now "uncritically showcased as the original story of the Maliseets in a recent poster published by the New Brunswick Government (p. 22). There is an ongoing process of denigrating through this appropriation and misrepresentation.

Alternatives to appropriation exist in Indigenous practices, processes and storytelling that assert the defining of cultural knowledges that are in-relation to the peoples who develop knowledge (Castellano, 2003; Ermine, 1995; Little Bear, 2000). Authors and readers need to be ready to

move beyond the romanticized and racist images of Indigenous peoples based in stereotypic images and understandings towards texts that show the reality of what it means to be Indigenous in the twenty-first century. Hade (1997) writes, "the meanings we hold about race, class, and gender (many of which may be stereotypes) mediate how we interpret text" (p. 235).

Owens (2001) suggests there is a compulsion amongst mainstream culture to erase and consume the Indigenous 'other.' He suggests that in a strange dance of repulsion and desire that has given rise to one of the longest sustained histories of genocide and ethnocide in the world as well as fascination drama in which the colonizer attempts to empty out and reoccupy not merely the geographical terrain but the constructed space of the indigenous Other. (p. 16)

A process at work in the emptying out and reconstructions of the Indigenous other is through the production of stereotypes "a reduction of the 'other cultural group' to a few essential characteristics which are fixed in meaning" (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007b, p. 31). In this process "Dominant culture retains the right and holds the power to define, classify, and reduce cultural groups to stereotypes and to use these reductions to market and sell products" (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2006, p. 31) in a process that Stuart Hall (1997) refers to as commodity racism.

An outcome is also to naturalize differences between groups and to maintain power of one group over another, creating false categories like 'Indian' and 'white' and masking the tremendous variance within these false categories. This process fixes differences and makes change and reinterpretation impossible. "Stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, which have been promoted around the world, are maintained to support the beliefs and biases of western society and exercise control" (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007b, p. 32). "The challenge is for Indigenous peoples to resist becoming commodities of market value or anthropological

classifications” (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007a, p. 8).

### Raising Issues with the Process of Sharing Cultural Stories from Around the World

Educators and parents may be caught by the unexamined assumption that a book is multicultural and worthwhile if it has non-European/American characters or themes and is critically acclaimed in well-known journals or has received prizes. Mendoza and Reese (2001) question these taken-for-granted assumptions and challenge the ways that multi-cultural books focus on aesthetics instead of information or educational ideas. They critique such texts as making choices of content based on the aesthetics of the book rather than reflecting important aspects of a culture.

The dominant society has created a homogenized history of tribal people for a television culture. Being an indian is a heavy burden to the *oshki anishinabe* because white people know more about the *indian* they invented than anyone. The experts and cultural hobbyists never miss a chance to authenticate the scraps of romantic history dropped by white travelers through *indian country* centuries ago. White people are forever projecting their dreams of a perfect life through the invention of the indian—and then they expect an *oshki anishinabe* [Vizenor’s tribal expression for his culture] to not only fulfill an invention but to authenticate third-hand information about the tribal past. (Vizenor, 1972, p. 15-16)

A poignant example of Vizenor’s point is made by a satire entitled *Basic Skills Caucasian Americans Workbook* (Slapin & Esposito, 1994) in which the typical ‘Native American workbook’ that typifies and stereotypes Indigenous peoples as all having similar lifestyles is



disrupted by creating a Caucasian workbook that stereotypes all white people as living the same lifestyles. This satire serves to demonstrate and disrupt stereotypes of Indigenous peoples while it produces another stereotype - that of whiteness.

By privileging some aspects of the story and dismissing others, authors and their publishers decide which parts of a culture are admissible into the dominant mainstream cultural representations (Battiste, 2000). These cultural stories become commodities to be marketed, digested and consumed by a public (Hall, 1997) that is eager for commodified misrepresentations that fit into their taken-for-granted understandings of the exotic or unknown other (Hall, 1997; Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2006, 2007). Commodity racism, as both McClintock (1995) and Hall have explained, is "the practice of engaging representations of the 'other' in order to define and market a product based on stereotypes associated with a product" (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007, p. 14). In this process, aspects of cultural knowledge and cultural life are taken out of context, stripped of their cultural location, and given new meanings as cultural commodities (Hall). In a dialogue about commodity racism, McClintock describes the process of colonial conquest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in which

Images of colonial conquest were stamped on soap boxes  
... biscuit tins, whisky bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars  
... No pre-existing form of organized racism had ever  
before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a  
mass of the populace. (McClintock, 1995, p. 209)

This colonial process of imprinting colonial ideologies on objects mass-marketed to consumers continues in the twenty-first century through advertising of all kinds of objects (Doxtator, 1988; Iseke-Barnes, 2005; Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). It also continues in the production of publications that reproduce stereotypic images of Indigenous peoples and mass-market these to consumers (Slapin & Seale, 2003).

Problems in this process that Indigenous scholars, critics, and activists have frequently identified include the co-opting of Indigenous voices by non-Indigenous writers and the fact that these acts frequently alter or misrepresent original cultural messages considerably (Gunn Allen, 1992). Young readers have no way to know about the cultures from which these stories have been taken without the author sharing this information.

If these books become a source of information about Indigenous peoples for children, then it is not surprising that children may develop misunderstandings and stereotypic understandings of Indigenous peoples. Peggy McIntosh's (1988) "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" encourages examination and critique of the unacknowledged and unwritten benefits of being white that are so normalized that they are usually invisible. This can lead to the assumption amongst children and adults that they do not 'have culture' and that 'culture' is an attribute of Indigenous peoples or marginalized groups (Kivel, 1996; Reese & Caldwell-Wood, 1997). This bi-product of white privilege obscures the real meaning of race in society and the racial identity development of children (Tatum, 1992). This may affect how a child further understands and incorporates other stories into their understandings.

### Trickster Stories

There are many stories that are shared within Indigenous communities. Trickster stories within Indigenous cultures are complex and variable. Trickster has particular purposes within cultural stories as educator and teacher. The trickster typically teaches by making mistakes so listeners can hear the stories and learn from the mistakes so they do not have to make them themselves. Trickster typically has some human and some superhuman characteristics and possibly some animal

characteristics as well that allow him to get into situations that otherwise would not be possible thus allowing stories to consider complex cultural, emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual domains. Joanne Archibald, a Stó:lō scholar and storyteller, explains that

First Nations/Indigenous stories about Coyote the Trickster often place her/him in a journeying mode, learning lessons the “hard” way. Trickster gets into trouble when she/he becomes disconnected from cultural traditional teachings. The Trickster stories remind us about the good power of interconnections within family, community, nation, culture, and land. If we become disconnected, we lose the ability to make meaning from Indigenous stories. (Archibald, 2008, p. ix)

Trickster stories sometimes explore exaggerated biological drives or amoral behavior or trouble that has a comedic edge. Marius Barbeau discusses the trickster Raven as

... transformer rather than a creator, for in his primeval wandering through chaos and darkness he chanced upon pre-existing things—animals and a few ghost-like people. His powers were not coupled with absolute wisdom and integrity. He at times lapsed into the role of a jester and a cheat, covering himself with shame and ridicule. (as cited in Erdoes & Ortiz, 1999, p. xix)

Howard Norman describes Trickster stories and their ability to “enlighten an audience about the sacredness of life. In the naturalness of their form they turn away from forced conclusions, they animate and enact, they shape and reshape the world” (as cited in Erdoes & Ortiz 1999, xix).

Moses (2004, p. 110) explains three purposes of storytelling are to entertain, thus enabling us to recognize the familiar; to educate, thus helping us to recognize the funny and the strange; and to help us heal.

After the pain of church and state education and the fear that became a part of the lives of Indigenous students of residential and day schools “The Trickster as we knew or rediscovered him, as Coyote or Weesageejak or Nanabush, as Raven or Glooscap, as ourselves, was so shifty and shiftless, so horny and greedy, so lucky, so funny, it almost did not hurt us to be human” (Moses, 2004, p. 111). If the purpose of a trickster story is to entertain, educate and heal then we will next consider an example of a so-called trickster story.

### Introducing “Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest” By Gerald McDermott

The book jacket describes the author, Gerald McDermott (2001), as a “dream weaver, tale spinner, portrayer of visions, interpreter of the human spirit” and his series of books focused on trickster tales as “bold, graphic renderings of timeless tales from around the world.” The jacket further explains, “McDermott communicates his deep understandings of the transformative power of myth.” I suggest that it is almost impossible to have a deep and culturally-located understanding of Indigenous stories from around the world. To know each of these stories in their contexts and situations and in relation to the people from whom they come would be a very onerous task. Archibald (2008) explains that in her Stó:lō community it takes more than forty years to become a storyteller.

It is not only developing the skill as an orator and developing ones memory to know the many stories that are necessary to become a storyteller in the oral tradition. One really must develop the knowledge to be able to interpret the stories and fully understand the complex ideas reflected there. This takes a very long time. But Archibald does see value in the written portrayal of oral stories. She explains that in her research with Elders, at times they drew upon a written edition of a story and it

reminded Elders of a story that had “gone to sleep” and stimulated their recall of a story not told for a long time. Some may feel that “the impact of a story from oral performance, aural reception, and visual contact between teller and listener lessens when the story is transferred to the printed page. Some may feel that the life force of the story has disappeared” (Archibald, p. 148). But the printing of stories “also creates an opportunity to activate a story’s life force” (p. 148) by helping the stories reach a broad audience who can be affected by the stories and the teachings within them. From the text the stories can again be retold. While this cannot replace the “magic and power of the interpersonal interaction between the storyteller and listener” it can create opportunities for “people interrelating with each other through story [to] bring a story to life as they relate story meaning to their lives in holistic ways” (p. 149).

Erdoes and Ortiz (1999) developed an anthology of numerous trickster stories *American Indian Trickster Tales* from many cultures, locating the cultural beginnings of each story, along with publication information regarding the original publication of the story (author/original publisher/origin). The book is divided into “Parts” according to theme/character, Part 14: Raven Lights the World, provides seven different stories from the Haida, Tsimshian, Tlingit and Quileute nations. The story in the Erdoes and Ortiz text called “Raven lights the World” is provided as a Tlingit story. McDermott uses a story similar to that which appears in the Erdoes and Ortiz text but does not identify the origins of the story nor the people from whom this story is taken. Archibald (2008) warns that without cultural sensitivity amongst users of Indigenous stories in text that “appropriation and disrespectful use of stories are more likely to occur” (p. 150).

Erdoes and Ortiz’ introduction provides detailed background information about trickster stories and divergent ideas about trickster located in cultures that show the significance of trickster tales to a certain

people and their vision of life. This can be contrasted with McDermott's account of trickster tales that presents this story focused on aesthetics and for its entertainment value. Indigenous stories come from an oral tradition amongst Indigenous peoples (Archibald, 2008). As Erdoes and Ortiz (1999) explain "Even Trickster stories told principally for entertainment must still be told strictly according to tradition" (p. xx). It is doubtful that McDermott's tale could follow tradition since he does not even divulge the people from whom this tale is derived.

### Examining the Cover of McDermott's book for Clues

I am an Indigenous educator in a teacher education program and graduate school of education and parent of three children. It was my daughter in grade two who brought home the McDermot text with it richly colored images on supposedly Indigenous themes. I was interested to read it with her. We were immediately drawn to the vivid and richly colored cover art that depicts Raven in art form that is reminiscent of that of the people of the West Coast of Canada (sometimes referred to as the Pacific North West in American descriptions) - with deep black lines and strong reds and blues. The cover image suggests that the story is grounded primarily in West Coast aesthetics; even the lettering of the title "Raven" is hollowed out and filled according to a design. Below this title is an image of a Raven taking up most of the page. The illustrative aspect of the book is clearly central. Combined with the bold colors and the cartoon-like depiction of the raven, this book appears to be re-creating Indigenous stories and cultural knowledge in a palatable and marketable way that the book jacket explains is for "an audience that spans adults as well as children."

The subtitle "A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest" posits two different ideas at once. The first part "Raven: a Trickster Tale" acknowledges the main point of the focus of the story on one idea –

Raven as trickster. The sole descriptor of “trickster” in effect invites an easy reading of Indigenous cultural knowledge and story by depicting raven in a comic and limited way. However, quite different from the first impression of the title, the second part: “from the Pacific Northwest” suggests a firm basis of authenticity and fact within the story by attaching a geographic location to the story. Using this phrase, the story validates itself and its ownership of the cultural images and representations in the book. In other words, McDermott tries to sell two ideas at the same time; locating a point of common interest for the audience, hence the comedic and simple idea of Raven as trickster, but at the same time validating this work in a culturally appropriate foundation. In these ways the book attempts to present the story as belonging to everyone in the cultural location of the Pacific Northwest rather than from the Indigenous peoples from whom it came. By marketing the book as geographically and culturally located within all culture of the Pacific Northwest it justifies the use of this story without acknowledging from whom it came and simultaneously obscures and rejects that this is an appropriation. Unpacking the title reveals the juxtaposition it maintains. In not naming the sources and ways that McDermott came to know this story nor identifying that this rendition is his own adaptations of it, he makes invisible the very people from whom this story is taken.

The back cover of the book depicts other children’s books by McDermott in the same series focused on trickster stories: “Read all of Gerald McDermott’s trickster tales,” the blurb on the jacket says. This marketing ploy of a series devoted to “trickster tales” from cultures from around the world masks the appropriation of the tales and the distinctiveness of the cultural location of each story. McDermott’s intent may be to show the universality of myth and culture but this act of universalizing negates each culture and disrupts learning about the cultures that produced and perpetuated these stories. By simply placing

the cultural stories under the heading “trickster tales” the series title suggests a mass-produced vision of culture, not one constructed by any real attempt to educate and cultivate informed understanding. The cover of the book is also marked with the Caldecott honour medal, denoting the prize awarded for this book providing acclaim and approval for this appropriative process and possibly making it more difficult for educators, parents, and librarians to critique its practices.

The raven character, explained in stories by Indigenous cultures of West Coast of Canada, is used by McDermott – a non-Indigenous but internationally acclaimed American children’s picture book author and illustrator. Raven’s adventure in the book is born out of his pity for all of humanity, as he watches the men and women live in darkness and shadows. McDermott’s version of a creation story lends itself to marketing to uncritical readers. It is based on stereotypic understandings of Indigenous knowledges and peoples and is based on adventure and fantasy stories that structure the plot and movement of the story. The author has appropriated Indigenous art and culture in the process of generating children’s literature. Archibald (2008) recalls her “gut-wrenching reaction” to an “enthusiastic non-Native woman [who] rhetorically asked whether she could tell a First Nations story.”

She didn’t know anything about First Nations stories, but said she wanted to learn more. Actually, her way of telling the story was entertaining. But my stomach churned, listening to her, and watching her. What bothered me was that she didn’t know any cultural protocols: Whose story was it? Who gave her permission to tell this story? What First Nations culture did this story come from? She reminded me of Coyote showing off some newfound knowledge without understanding or respecting its significance. It seemed like her storytelling was more for



her pleasure than for the benefit of others. She was appropriating this story! (Archibald, 2008, p. 150)

### Problems with Interpreting Indigenous Stories

Ramsey (2001) describes the problem of interpreting Indigenous oral stories by non-Indigenous readers and writers and the ways that misinterpretations may occur. He tells us that a first problem is that they have been taken from the oral tradition into print. The challenges of putting oral knowledge into print are well documented (Murray & Rice, 1999; Robinson, 2004; Washburn, 2004). Mildon (2008) following Derrida (1974) suggests that writing is privileged in Western traditions over the oral. Somehow, reading a text that is removed from the writer is assumed to provide some greater understanding of the 'truth' or intention of the writer. At times, however, the oral is privileged in that the presence of the speaker in the context makes the meanings more salient and more accessible to the audience. Both positions assume there is a truth that can be ascertained by the reader or listener and this is a false assumption that can be challenged (Archibald, 2008; Mildon, 2008).

The challenge of relying on either an oral or a written record is made evident in the Tsilhqot'in court case in which the lawyers wished to suggest that only the written record was accurate and that the oral record was changed with time and so could not be trusted. But Judge Vickers suggested that it was the methods of collecting and interpreting the stories and the process of writing the written record that should be questioned as these records were not made by Indigenous peoples themselves but by people from outside the community who brought their own bias to the task and may have taken literary license (Mildon, 2008).

Another problem is that they have been translated from an Indigenous language into English. In the process of translation there is a

transformation of meaning that can at times radically transform the understandings. Archibald (2008) suggested that the Elders she worked with were uncomfortable with the translations of their stories from the Stó:lō language into English that was completed by people from the younger generation from their own communities because the language they used was 'too fancy' and did not make space for the imagination which was part of the intention of the Elder's stories.

To intertextualize is to examine stories from within understandings of stories we already know (Rosen, 1985). When what one knows is from another cultural location and knowledge base, Ramsey (2001) suggests that Indigenous narratives, examined from a non-Indigenous perspective, may be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Paula Gunn Allen (1992) discusses problematic readings of Indigenous stories and ways mainstream adaptations transform them into stories reflective of mainstream themes and tropes. These include a focus on fantasy, plot and movement rather than the intended meaning of the Indigenous story based in Indigenous relationships to land, seasons, and kinship with all relations that is expressed in Indigenous stories. In particular, she identifies two major characteristics of Indigenous tribal stories. She locates the social function in Indigenous stories by "its tendency to distribute value evenly among various elements, providing a model or pattern for egalitarian structuring of society as well as literature" in contrast to Western literature that supposes hierarchies (p. 240-241).

In Indigenous stories, Gunn Allen suggests that the foreground and background in a story are similar in that no one thing (hero, villain) dominates the story to the effect of minimizing the other elements. In the Raven tale, as told by McDermott, there clearly is a central character – Raven – and the story is focused not on the relationships or kinships but on the central character and his role. If the foreground – Raven – and the background in the story – the cultural context and people from whom this story came – were similarly important the interpretation and

understanding of the story would shift dramatically. But McDermott would either have to be of the cultural group from which the story is told or be in a relationship with this culture and have their input and consent to tell their story. Given that we know McDermott is not of the cultural group from which this story is derived, we must ask how he came to know this story? Who gave him permission to use it? What are his understandings of the cultural protocols for telling this story? Is McDermott in a relationship to each of the communities from which he has drawn stories? Is he able to provide his cultural understandings to justify his storytelling?

According to Gunn Allen (1992), an appropriate title for a story should represent “a shift in focus” in the story that conveys the central point of the story “not the resolution of a conflict” (p. 242). The title, “Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest” suggests vague information about the story including the location of the story (“the Pacific Northwest” but not the particular region from which it originated), the category of story (“a Trickster Tale” suggesting benign Western ideas and associations as well as making the focus exotic), and the central hero and main character (“Raven” without ideas about the events actions or central themes in the story). The general detail about character, location, and general theme are intended to make the story accessible for a Western audience but given it has been removed from its cultural context, it does not speak to “the strong relationship between storytelling and the sacred” (Bruchac, 1992, p. 93). In contrast to the title “Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest” other titles of stories about the raven suggest the action and central point of the story. These include Fran Martin’s (1975), “Raven-Who-Sets-Things-Right,” Ronald Melzack “Raven Creator of the World,” and Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst’s (1984), “The Raven Steals the Light.”

McDermott’s use of the term “trickster” to define the central character raven is problematic for a number of reasons. While the raven

in some Indigenous cultures and stories does assume the position of trickster, this term is highly complex in meaning and usage and specific to cultural groups. In contrast, the term “trickster” may be an attractive or even exotic term to capture Western audiences’ attention. The unique and complex understanding of Indigenous stories and the meanings of tricksters within them are erased. Instead, the term reinforces the Western meanings and associations.

McDermott uses ‘trickster’ to categorize his book series about various cultural “tricksters.” This grouping of distinct and culturally located stories under the title ‘trickster’ homogenizes the idea of “trickster” and appropriates distinct understandings for use to market to a Western audience. Joseph Bruchac (2003) challenges this practice when he writes, “No story—in any culture—exists in isolation from the life of its people” (65). Bruchac highlights the problems of rationale, effectiveness and validity of taking stories from one cultural group for use by another.

Darling (1996) suggests that trickster stories provide a wealth of information and cultural understandings useful in the classroom. Darling notes various cultural trickster tales as a way of introducing children to the significant role of stories and storytelling and how it shapes a culture’s worldview and identity, representing in stories ethical and moral lessons for learners who seek guidance in how to live a good life. But Darling does not distinguish between the use of stories appropriated from Indigenous communities for consumption by Western audiences and the practice of engaging with trickster stories to challenge Western assumptions and to introduce alternative ways of knowing and interpreting the world besides those common to Western thought.

Darling provides three principles as criteria in selecting cultural stories emphasizing: “A trickster tale, like other traditional folktales should: Enhance students’ appreciation and respect for a culture: its people, its traditions, and its unique artistic expressions” (p. 180).

McDermott's book violates this first principle since it is a story appropriated on Western terms from an unidentified cultural group and location, and contains artistic expressions appropriated and misrepresented by an author from outside of this tradition.

Darling's second principle is to

... increase students' historical and geographical knowledge base. The tale should provide students with factual information about the climate, topography, and history of the place in which the story is set by including accurate representations of the landscape, the vegetation, the natural environment. (Darling, 1996, p. 181)

Again the McDermott text fails in this respect as the climate, topography, and history of the place and the inhabitants of this place are not represented. Darling's third principle is to "familiarize students with the language and dialects of a culture" but given that McDermott fails to even identify the cultural group from which this story has been taken it appears to fail this requirement as well.

In McDermott's story, the raven's status as "trickster"—a complex term according to many Indigenous traditions — is presented in a very straightforward manner without any of the distinct qualities that make him a "trickster." In McDermott's usage, the term "trickster" seems analogous to hero, raising concerns about the understanding and interpretation of the complexity of trickster characters and their relationships to Indigenous knowledge systems.

McDermott's other trickster tales are subject to similar critique. Reese and Caldwell-Wood (1997) suggest that McDermott misrepresents Pueblo social, religious, and ceremonial life in his book *Arrow to the Sun* (p. 175). They point out that McDermott's book places his protagonist in kivas – a place of ceremony and instruction for the Pueblo people. Yet in McDermott's retelling the characters undergo trials in the kivas rather than ceremony and instruction. Perry Nodelman (1988) notes that

McDermott's appropriation of Pueblo art in *Arrow to the Sun* is engaging but uses lines, shapes, and colors differently than Pueblo kiva art (p. 94-95). McDermott's misrepresentation of Pueblo art and ceremonial practices does not reflect Pueblo realities and misinforms readers of this book.

### Teaching with Indigenous Stories

It is clear that teaching with Indigenous stories, and particularly Indigenous trickster stories, is a complex task and educators are challenged to move beyond entertainment without context which McDermott's texts suggest. Leavitt (1996) remarks that in the process of reshaping Indigenous knowledges and practices to fit inside dominant expectations and practices, educators transform the knowledge into simplistic materials that stereotype and misrepresent and transform understandings of Indigenous peoples on the terms of mainstream audiences.

Leavitt (1996) further notes that educators need to include multiple aspects of culture in their educational practices with regard to Indigenous peoples. Particularly, he notes the importance of including material culture, social culture, cognitive culture, and linguistic culture. To do this he emphasizes "the need to base education *in* Native culture, rather than simply including components of material culture as content" (p. 126). He is critical of the typical education process of teaching about Indigenous peoples through the taking up of spiritual beliefs or stories as artifacts along with description of "kinship patterns, transportation and hunting techniques, and the names of languages, tools, and food plants" which together "make up a static set of data about Indian and Inuit peoples" (p. 127). These narrow, finite, and limited ideas about Indigenous peoples serve to perpetuate stereotypic and dismissive understandings of Indigenous peoples.

Illustrating these practices and having them understood by parents and teachers may be difficult. Oyate Press has a hilarious critique of these practices through the Basic Skills Caucasian American Workbook (Slapin & Esposito, 1994) in which they take up the notion of whiteness through material culture, in the process showing how homogenizing of culture and stereotyping practices are reductive and destructive. Another text, "10 Little Whitepeople" (Slapin & Esposito, 1995) exposes the rhyme of 10 Little Indians but this time uses stereotypes of whiteness that are hilarious to read but make the point that children's rhymes engage in a practice of stereotyping and misrepresent Indigenous peoples. The point that such portrayals are unacceptable is made very clearly when it is translated into a discussion of mainstream culture. Portrayals of Native material culture typical in mainstream practices "segments Native life in a Non-Native way, by viewing it in English terms as a composite of specializations" (Leavitt, 1996, p. 134).

Jo-ann Archibald (2008) recommends that in developing a classroom practice to teach about Indigenous storytelling and storywork it is important for non-Indigenous and Indigenous teachers to become culturally sensitive and become aware of storytelling protocols and fully begin to understand the nature of the stories. She recommends working with local Indigenous educators who have cultural knowledge and who can act as guides. She suggests that Indigenous storytellers should be hired and work with teachers to gain understanding of the "cultural principles embedded in storytelling and how to engage in meaningful storywork" (p. 150-151). Archibald also emphasizes that as teachers become more aware they may recognize that they do not have the cultural knowledge or the right to tell Indigenous stories. She suggests that using curricula developed by Indigenous scholars and recordings and materials from Indigenous peoples may aid teachers and reduce disrespect shown to Indigenous knowledges.

Archibald (2008) further helps us understand that...

... [t]he story was told in a way so that the story became a teacher. ... They can help one to learn, heal, take action, and then reflect on this action. However, if these stories are learned within contexts where the principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and reverence are not practiced, then their power diminishes or goes “to sleep” until awakened by those who can use the story power appropriately.” (p. 138)

### Taking up Trickster Tales to Help Children Learn

Erdoes and Ortiz (1999) suggest that in Indigenous stories the ideas of time and space are understood within an Indigenous worldview and so ideas of time and place are “not measured in miles or hours in any conventional European way... The events in the story have just happened, or are even still going on” allowing the events to feel more real than those typical in fairy tales in mainstream culture. This reality creates opportunities for stories to feel real and to be lived within classrooms.

Erdoes and Ortiz further write, “Among the Raven stories are found some of the most abstract and bizarrely plotted of all Native American legends. They seem to unfold in a realm of fantasy, totally divorced from the so-called real world” (xix). This suggests that they are potentially useful in creating a non-linear or non-Western story and narrative structure and that in creating a set of understandings that are outside of the Western notion of the ‘so-called real world.’ This creates opportunities for exploration and expanding understandings of how we see our world and relationships within it and moving beyond boundaries created within Western values and beliefs. The fantasy world of Indigenous stories is a rich environment for learning about and reinterpreting our ‘real world’. The idea of a creature that is both creator



and human, living and spirit, is typically accessible in Western thought only as fantasy. But in Indigenous understandings of the real world there is a balancing of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual realms and so the idea of a creature both creator and human, living and spirit, is accessible not as fantasy but as part of the real. The absolute dichotomy of real and fantasy that seems fundamental to Western thought is challenged as the space between is explored and is part of the intertextual understandings that Indigenous people bring to storytelling.

In *“Whatever happens to him happens to us: Reading Coyote Reading the World,”* Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine (2001), explore the transformative impact of reading about another trickster, Coyote. Their practices suggest engagement with Coyote, not so much to understand the cultures of Indigenous peoples, but to engage with Coyote in an effort to have children see themselves within the cultural context of the classroom and to transcend the usual boundaries of classroom and school environments.

Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine’s discussion outlines teaching a child they call Manuel already defined in grade one as “physically challenged, [and] severely disabled” (p. 10). Images of trickster allowed students and teachers to come together across difference, moving beyond the exclusionary practices such students might typically feel. In *“A Coyote Columbus,”* Thomas King (1992) suggests that sometimes educators and students “act as if they’ve got no relations” (p. 15). Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine assert that through the reading of Coyote stories children like Manuel can be understood outside of the usual institutional identifications and diagnoses in a different way that Coyote creates (p. 11). Coyote teaches the limits of the world by violating them so that students can learn about balance and respect. The children in this class not only read coyote stories but were inspired to spontaneously write coyote stories and through one of these stories “Manuel the monster child is welcomed in from the margins and given a home” (p. 12).

Reading the Coyote stories was more than a practice of decoding and more than a metaphor for understanding a 'real world' of children with attention deficit disorder, but

Rather, the living figure of Coyote became part of her living world, refiguring that world, adding to it and transforming its multiple relations. Reading texts about Coyote pulling tricks, getting into trouble, and teaching all of us lessons thereby ... The boundary between text and world gave way. Coyote became part of the text(ure) of the real world, not simply a figure within a text within that world. (Clifford, Friesen, & Jardine, 2001, p. 14)

In the context of the classroom reading and retelling, Coyote stories helped students and teachers to "'read' the stories of children like Manuel in ways that are more generous, more open, more forgiving than the flattening, psychological discourse of education generally allows" (p. 14). Reading Coyote demanded of the teachers that their response to the writing be deeper, for like Coyote they needed to engage in "bumping into the limits of the world" (p. 14). They needed to open up these limits and make them "visible, audible, readable, and understandable" (p. 15). The authors caution that reading Coyote in a romanticized way is still a problem. They suggest, however, that reading Coyote stories can help us learn balance and respect and help children and adults to understand some part of the wisdom of the world. They warn teachers that "the opening up of boundaries is thus both good news and bad news and sometimes both at once" (p. 15).

The symbol which Trickster embodies is not a static one. It contains within itself the promise of differentiation, the promise of god and man. For this reason every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew. No generation understands him full, but no generation can do without him. ... And so he became and remained

everything to every man – god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer, and creator. If we laugh at him, he grins at us. Whatever happens to him happens to us. (Radin cited in Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine, p. 16)

This inclusion of teachings of Coyote allowed him to be real in the classroom and to engage students in the process of reinterpreting their worlds. This is a stark contrast to the appropriation of a story by a writer whose goal is to market books of stories disconnected from their communities. Trickster stories have a complex and important place in Indigenous traditions and can be powerful teachers.

## Conclusions

Educators have an important role in helping children learn to read, write, and examine their worlds critically. Representational practices in children's literature can aid children in creating complex understandings of their own world and in beginning to engage with Indigenous knowledges from peoples with cultural histories. But literatures that simply appropriate Indigenous knowledges and misrepresent them in some mainstream retelling may actually reify stereotypes and promote cultural theft.

The challenge for educators, parents, and librarians, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, is to find ways to engage with Indigenous texts so they are understood not in simplistic and stereotypic ways but as deep knowledge understood in complex relations to context. To begin this practice, educators, parents, and librarians need to move beyond texts written strictly for entertainment purposes and to address diversity in their readings.

Instead, educators, parents, and librarians are challenged to critique practices of appropriation and stereotyping evident in common texts

about Raven and other 'so-called' tricksters. They are challenged to engage deeply with Indigenous knowledges and to begin a process of transforming their own understandings so they might be of assistance to children in this process. Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine (2001) show us that children are able to work with the imaginary and the spiritual in complex ways to disrupt boundaries and expectations. By welcoming Indigenous knowledges into the classroom there is a relearning of balance suggesting that we are all related. Children, through their malleable nature and reading and accepting lessons that Coyote provides, can welcome, accept and embrace a child who falls outside the norms while parents and teachers are challenged to catch up to the children.

What is the lesson that McDermott teaches when he appropriates and misrepresents Indigenous stories and art? That it is acceptable to engage in these practices. What are the lessons that Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine teach when they engage with complex Coyote stories told by Indigenous storytellers? That there is a need for balance, acceptance, and valuing of all human life, no matter if it fits within the expected norms of the classroom. What does their teaching say about culture? That all cultures have a place in the classroom and that these classrooms need to be transformed, not unlike Coyote does, to ensure spaces for all children within them and for Indigenous knowledges. It also suggests that knowledge is a complex undertaking and that it is appropriate to engage with complex knowledge in understanding oneself in relation to others and to understand oneself as a cultural being – even people who think they do not have a culture.

That literature could support or suppress the important undertaking of examining culture and self in relation is important. It suggests that educators need to look beyond simple romanticized ideas about "trickster stories" and need to move to complex understandings of Indigenous stories as tied to a people and created in culture. It suggests

that educators need to be prepared to undertake the challenge of transcending boundaries and transforming classrooms in the practice of recognizing the boundaries and ways they are barriers to children's learning. It also suggests that readers and writers need to be self-reflexive in understanding literatures about their own culture as well as with literatures from cultures to which they do not belong. It suggests the need to 'be in relation' with the stories, cultures, and understandings that one is working with so that the complexity of relationships and interpretations are understood. This is no easy task but an important one to undertake if Indigenous knowledges and the people that produce them are to be respected.

All my relations.

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