
The Howling Muse: Chasing Coyote Tales in Northwestern California

*La muse rugissante : à la recherche des contes de Coyote au nord-ouest de la
Californie*

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The Howling Muse: Chasing Coyote Tales in Northwestern California

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Introduction

Northwestern California is an area of intense linguistic diversity, where stories thrive and take root in ways that echo the distinctive sounds of the languages themselves. Chief among the tales that circulate are those that feature Coyote in a starring role, which is the focus of this article. While it is common throughout the world for a supernatural being to serve as the source of inspiration for poets and storytellers, Coyote clearly has a special role here, as a very different kind of being from, for instance, the Greek Muses, who are not a visible part of everyday life. Through the act of storytelling, Coyote, the familiar canine species, becomes Coyote the subject of myth, to whom so much is attributed in everyday life. Coyote, in this way, becomes a muse—the inspiration for songs, the dances, and the stories. Yet, from there, the neighboring groups begin to part ways in how they tell these Coyote stories, with often sharply different emphases from one speech community to the next, despite the shared sense of myth and everyday cultural practice. Thus, while the stories certainly *sound* very different,¹ when intoned in one language or another, they are also *performed* according to different standards in each village. As revealed in stages in this article, a *literary divide* often rises up at

1. See Anthony WEBSTER's (2015) review article, "Why the World Doesn't Sound the Same in Any Language and Why that Might Matter," wherein the author reframes linguistic relativity partially in terms of the experience of *hearing* the world described in the different sounds and poetic features of the world's language.

the boundaries between neighboring languages. In this way, the article uncovers another dimension of *linguistic relativity*, one that operates on the level of the *social imagination* and thus separates neighboring speech communities just as profoundly as the differences between the grammars or sound systems. As one passes from one language to the next, the image of Coyote can be as different as night and day, as he himself passes from hero to antihero or from creator to a common figure in everyday folklore. In this way, the image of Coyote—as both a figure in myth and as a creature in everyday life—becomes a major source of inspiration for telling stories—in distinctive ways that reflect the character of the local speech communities.

Coyote's Homeland: Multilingualism along the Klamath and its Tributaries

This linguistic diversity reaches a critical highpoint along the banks of the Klamath and Trinity Rivers, where these stories are set, among the speakers of the Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk languages. The scale of the diversity here is extreme (O'Neill, 2008), even in comparison to the rest of aboriginal California, which is itself a highly multilingual area (Golla, 2011). Not only are these languages mutually unintelligible, they belong to completely different linguistic stocks (Sapir, 1921:213), while the oral literature is intensively diversified here as well. Two of the languages show clear relationships to stocks widely represented elsewhere on the continent, which begins to explain some of the rough similarities in the storytelling practices, given the historical continuities between the far-flung communities within the families. Hupa, for example, is Athabaskan, and thus clearly and closely related to Navajo and Apache of the American Southwest, as well as to many of the languages the Pacific Coast, where Coyote is also popular in oral literature. Yurok, in turn, belongs the Algic stock, with a distant connection to the Algonquian languages of the Plains (and beyond), where Coyote is also a popular figure. Karuk, on the other hand, is an isolate, without a clear linguistic relationship to any other language on the planet. Yet even the Karuk language bears a loose structural resemblance to many of the so-called Hokan languages of the West Coast, with which it is sometimes tenuously placed (Sapir, 1921)—in another area where Coyote stories prevail. In other words, each language bears a clear relationship to other tongues spoken outside of the region; these linguistic lines begin to explain how the stories spread so far geographically. Despite the profound differences among the languages, the Native peoples of this region nevertheless have much in common in terms of their everyday cultural practices.

As the linguist Edward Sapir once put it (1921:213):

The Hupa Indians are very typical of the culture area to which they belong. Culturally identical with them are the neighboring Yurok and Karok. There is the liveliest intertribal intercourse between the Hupa, Yurok, and Karok, so much so that all three generally attend an important religious ceremony given by any one of them. It is difficult to say what elements in their combined culture belong in origin to this tribe or that, so much at one are they in communal action, feeling, and thought. But their languages are not merely alien to each other; they belong to three of the major American linguistic groups, each with an immense distribution on the northern continent.

Sapir, for his part, may have slightly overstated the case, in an effort to draw attention to what is a very striking contrast between the tremendous diversity among the languages, on the one hand, and the profound similarities among the local culture traditions, on the other. Coyote is emblematic in this sense, as he is well-known among the speakers of all of these languages, who sing his praises every day. Yet, truth be told, the cultures are far from uniform, and there are significant local differences in everything from art to religion, including, of course, storytelling as a central index of regional difference (see O'Neill, 2006; 2008; 2012; 2013). Thus, while the cultural traditions of the Hupa, Yurok, and Karok are hardly identical, there are many profound similarities in the local lifeways and storytelling traditions, as we shall see in the pages to follow.

Coyote's People: Daily Living as Ethnographic Inspiration for Storytelling

In traditional times, when these stories began to circulate, community life revolved around the many small villages that dotted the banks or the area's many rivers. The economy along the Klamath River drainage, which includes the Trinity as one of its tributaries, was traditionally based what could be called a *riparian* way of life. Everything from fishing for salmon to daily ritual bathing revolved around the rivers and the precious sustenance they provided to all life forms, including the deer and rabbits who came there to drink. Above all, one was a member of a village community, as a home to family and a source of identity. The villages were many, and ranged from perhaps one-hundred to several hundred in population. In this setting, each village had a single *dominant language*, which served as a powerful marker of in-group status (see O'Neill, 2008). Given that fluency is not something one can easily fake, it served as a passport

almost, verifying one's membership within the greater community of speakers, which often stretched on for many miles beyond the immediate village. Though many people were multilingual in traditional times—some *active* and others *passive*—it was generally considered quite impolite to speak a language outside of its homeland. Wives, especially, often married into their husband's villages, and were expected to speak the local language at home, even if they were from another speech community. In this sense, strong "localist" language ideologies prevailed in most of Northwestern California (O'Neill, 2008; 2012), just as they did throughout the rest of the state (Golla, 2011).²

Moving beyond language as a salient marker of distinction, maintaining *some* sense of difference has simply been a general part of the *ethos* among the fiercely independent villages of Native Northern California. Each village stands out in its own way, partly by virtue of the language (or dialect) spoken there. The diversity of the region is striking, whether one is talking about the sounds of the languages, the structure of the stories, or the differences in the religious dances. During my fieldwork in the area, at the turn of the twenty-first century, I often encountered significant differences between families, even within the same community, in terms of every area of linguistic diversity, from pronunciation to vocabulary, grammar, and even stylistic preferences in storytelling. Yet every cultural feature is "accented" in a similar way by minute differences in style and performance, along the lines of what Fredrik Barth (1969) meant when he spoke of diacritica of ethnicity—namely, minor differences in form or expression that would be easily lost on an outsider, while taking on awesome symbolic significance within the communities. Thus, even where all of the groups share a similar feature of culture, such as a ritual or ceremony that nearly everyone observes, a premium is nevertheless placed on performing the ceremony in a unique way. Many of the elders who mentored me were critical of the way that the neighboring groups performed the ceremonies, delivering impassioned critiques of the way that other storytellers delivered the tales in neighboring communities.

By the mid-twentieth century, when the languages began to slip into a precipitous and devastating decline, these distinctions between the communities were maintained on other fronts—beyond the obvious differences between the sounds of the tongues and the literatures they bore. So, the boundaries that were once enforced with language came to be associated with other features, such those linked to oral literature and related customs, including how the religious dances were performed. Coyote plays a role even here, as he is often associated

2. A few of the villages, on the borders between the dominant speech communities, were apparently bilingual, as Lisa CONATHAN (2004:110) has revealed by combing through the historical sources.

with instituting the dances, according to the various legends attributed to him. In the Hupa and Karuk traditions, for instance, Coyote plays an instrumental role in the origin of the Flower Dance, an elaborate coming of age ceremony for young women.

Today, many of the stories are known to the speakers through translation (into English primarily), not simply through the original languages of the region. Yet, surprisingly, some of the stories were never translated even into English. So, when I was doing fieldwork in this region at the turn of the twenty-first century, I was able to reintroduce—or ‘repatriate’—many of the stories, since even some of the elders had not heard the earlier versions that circulated a century ago, before they were born and before the languages began to slip into decline, as children were sent away to boarding schools in a conscious attempt to break the transmission of the languages—and the oral traditions they bear—from one generation to the next. The loss of the storytelling traditions, together with the loss of language, only highlights the sense of *literary boundaries* between languages. English does not bear the same literature, and many of the oral traditions were lost during the shift to English—a process that is now being reversed through the active process of language renewal. Though few people live in the traditional houses, many of the villages are still along the rivers. So, today, as the languages undergo revitalization, the stories are once again being told both in English and in the original tongues, with passion and enthusiasm. It’s a time of real renaissance for the Native peoples of the Americas, and for indigenous peoples the world over, who are now actively reclaiming and renewing these traditions, both in English and in the relevant heritage languages (see Baldy, 2015).

Coyote’s Universe: The Cosmological Foundations of Storytelling

Cosmology is as good a place as any to start when it comes to understanding Coyote—especially from a perspective that resonates with ethnography, his meaning in everyday life. Coyote’s place in storytelling cannot be meaningfully understood without first knowing his place in the universe of human discourse. To begin, Coyote figures very prominently in the region’s creation mythology, where he often has a special role to play in establishing the world. The surrounding tales of Coyote can hardly be understood in an intelligible way without first taking Coyote’s Universe into consideration. In this sense, he is not to be confused with Wylie Coyote or other popular Coyote figures, even where there are obvious parallels between the foolish behavior, the silly plots, or even the ribald acts.³

3. See the ‘Preface’ to William BRIGHT’s *A Coyote Reader* (1993: xi-xx) for a particularly insightful introduction to the Coyote literature of the American West.

Instead, Coyote has a place in the *religious life*, even though he also makes an appearance in everyday folklore, becoming the butt of jokes or the focus of overtly sexual acts. For the Native people of Northwestern California, Coyote has a role in creating many features of the universe itself, such as the contours of the mountains and rivers, while he also establishes a charter for the good life—one that is filled with adventure and humor. Coyote is very *liminal* this way; he is both sacred and profane, hero and antihero, at the same time.⁴

To situate Coyote in a proper cosmological light, one must consider the vision of the universe that the tellers of these tales have assumed, which is not what an outsider might assume, in reading the translations alone. To begin, Coyote tales are often set in the ancient past, near the mythic center of the universe, not far from where the traditional territories of the three tribes converge, near the confluence of two of the Klamath and the Trinity Rivers; this mythic premise thus establishes Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk Country as sacred land, which Coyote himself tread upon in ancient times.

Moving beyond the surface of the earth, where many of these stories are set, one must also consider the larger model of the cosmos in order to gain a clear picture of Coyote's travels. For much of the time these stories circulated, before the coming of Europeans, the universe was conceptualized as a disc of solid land, surrounded by an enormous river that flowed north along the coast. Thus, in another reflection of the general riparian worldview of the area's peoples, which is rooted in everyday village life, even the ocean was as a variation on the "flowing river" theme. In this sense, even those who lived on the Pacific Coast felt a deep sympathy with those who lived along the inland rivers, which shared an ontology as river-dwellers within a riparian universe. The general direction of this massive body of flowing water—which we know today as the "ocean"—was *clockwise* around the earth. It is this universe, as understood in the traditional life of Northwestern California, which provides the backdrop for Coyote travels. It is here, on this solid disc, that most of the Coyote stories are set, with a mote-like river flowing around it. Above the solid land was an equally solid sky, beyond which lay the heavens, which also has a place in these stories. In many of the tales, Coyote shoots arrows into the solid sky, before climbing up to visit the heavens and travel within the stars.

4. Similarly, in the Christian tradition, Jesus is both divine and human as an incarnate deity, as is Krishna in the Hindu tradition. Liminality is a common trait in religious figures, who mediate between opposites.

Though the precise “center of the universe” is naturally a matter of debate among the members of the Tribes of Northwestern California, one common assumption is to place it near the Yurok village of Weitchpec. Going downriver from that sacred center, one heads further into Yurok country, which continues all the way to the Pacific Ocean, where Yurok villages continue along the coast. Coyote is certainly a popular character there, celebrated in everyday folklore and song, for many miles going north and south along the Pacific Coast. Going the opposite direction from Weitchpec, at the religious center of the universe, one travel against the current of the Klamath. From there, heading upriver on the Klamath, it is Karuk country for many miles, going almost as far as Mount Shasta. Here Coyote is just as popular in everyday folklore, though he plays an even more important role in the creation mythology. Traveling in still another direction from the ritual center of the universe, one can head roughly southeast along the Trinity River, heading into the heart of Hupa territory.

Moving beyond the spatial layout of the universe, cosmology also has *temporal* dimension, a timeline upon which the universe unfolds. In the creation mythology of the region, humans were considered recent arrivals on the planet, following an epic *transformation* that occurred only a handful of generations ago. The world as we know it today is, in this sense, very fresh, and humans co-exist within a larger family of living beings, such as Coyote, to whom they bear a deep ontological connection, as relative newcomers within a universe Coyote helped establish. Put another way, one might say that cosmology implies ontology, or a theory of how things come into existence, as well as their relationships to one another as different orders of existence—that is, their hierarchy in the original sense of the term, as a kind of *sacred order* among living and non-living things.

Before the era of the transformation, there were only spirit beings, but no humans. As pure spirit beings, these original spiritual deities could think and wish materials things into existence, such as mountains or even other forms of life. Among the Hupa these spirit deities are known as *K'ixinay*, while the Karuk call them the *'Iksaryéeva*. Among the Yurok these spirit beings are known as *Wo'gey*. All of these beings had awesome powers, though some, such as Coyote, were more active than others in the creation. After the transformation, when humans were coming into existence, many of the spirit deities fled for the heavens at the fringes of the universe, where they still watch over humanity from afar, maintaining an active sense of interest in the welfare of humanity and all living things. These spirit beings, according to the stories, continue to hold great dances there, both in the sky and along the rim of the sky along the horizon, as when Coyote travels there to witness these performances firsthand, bringing the news to humanity afterwards. Other spirit beings transformed themselves

into sacred animals and plants, who watch over people or provide medicines, in the case of many plants and healing herbs. Most, like modern humans, could *speak*, though many gave up this power at the time of the transformation. Dog is one example, as a canine who is closely related to Coyote; though Dog, instead of remaining wild, chooses instead to live with humans and watch over them within the home, rather than from afar, in the fields, like his close relative Coyote.⁵ Significantly, Dog also chooses never to speak again, until the end of the world was at hand.⁶

In short, Coyote is a religious figure for many of the area's inhabitants, existing since the beginning of time, before the transformation and before the coming of humans, while remaining with humanity until for all time. The Coyote stories reviewed herein recount his celebrated status as a part of the fabric of the universe, and an important player in the creation of the world. Beyond language, in the ordinary sense, Coyote also figures prominently in the heightened language of music, where he is celebrated both with lyrics and *vocables*—so-called “meaningless” syllables that imitate his distinctive howl in the stylized form of human songs.⁷ The capacity for suffusing the universe with beatific song is certainly one of his gifts, as seen in these stories, especially those the Karuks tell. Coyote in this sense is also something like a First Person, especially among the Karuk, one of the original life-forms on the planet who prepares the world for the coming of humanity in relatively recent times. Yet the neighboring speech communities are not in complete agreement when it comes to Coyote's status, as we shall see in the sections to follow. His important role in creation is not universally upheld, though his status as an eternal figure is generally acknowledged.

Alongside ontology and cosmology, ordinary geography plays an equally important role when it comes to understanding Coyote's place in everyday life.

5. For the full version of this tale, as related to Pliny Earle GODDARD in 1902 by a speaker identified as Senaxon, see “The Passing of the *K'ixinay*” (GODDARD, 1904:215-19).

6. When I was conducting fieldwork in Northwestern California at the turn of the twenty-first century, some of the storytellers used to joke that the end of the world was indeed at hand, citing a popular television commercial as evidence. At the time, an American fast food restaurant known as Taco Bell was running an advertisement with a talking dog, who declared his love for the food, saying in Spanish, “*Yo quiero Taco Bell*.” This was an ominous pronouncement, from an indigenous mythological perspective, featuring popular American culture as the butt of the joke.

7. For a detailed discussion of vocables in the indigenous music of Northwestern California, which is beyond the purview of this article, see Richard KEELING (1992) and O'NEILL (2016).

Given the diversity of languages, it should come as no surprise that Coyote goes by many names in Northwestern California, but generally he is loosely known as ‘The-One-Who-(Inhabits)-the-Prairie’, where, in an important way, he can still be seen today—at a distance from the villages as a non-domestic part of life. One can witness an important element in the creation cycle every day, as one sees this eternal character on the flats, among the prairies. Though ancient, he still lives among his people, and, in this sense, he is also *eternal*, sticking with humanity until the end of time. Thus, the Hupa know Coyote as *Xonteb-taw*, which literally refers to ‘the one who (lives) on the flats, prairies’. A similar image is present in Yurok, where Coyote is known as *Segep*, based on the underlying root *sep*, meaning a ‘prairie’, which also occurs in the word *sepolah* ‘prairie’; the use of the intensive infix *-eg-* in the name for Coyote (*Segep*) suggests a strong identification with this place, a sense of ‘always being on the prairies, the flats’. Then, in an everyday sense, the Karuk know Coyote, the visible species *canis latrans*, as *Tishram Ishkuuntthan*, which loosely translates as ‘the one who skulks along the prairies.’ Yet, in the heightened religious sense, invoked in storytelling, Coyote becomes *Pihnëefich* in Karuk, which loosely translates ‘Old Man (Excrement)’—or, even more colloquially, the ‘Shitty Old Man’ (Baldy, 2015:14).⁸ This remarkable construction reflects Coyote’s status as both ancient and as borderline human, given that he is constructed as an ‘Old Man’, while resting somewhere between sacred and the profane with the reference to excrement, which Coyote is known to consume in some of the stories, even when it is his own. Yet, even among the Karuk, that name is reserved for Coyote as the sacred character in oral literature, in which the translation “First Person Coyote” (Baldy, 2015) may be more apt, since the English image of excrement conveys no sense of his sacred status.

Upriver Coyote Tales: Mischief and Benevolence in Karuk Country

Our story here, in this overview, begins with Coyote’s status on the upper Klamath, among the speakers of the Karuk language, where Coyote is a central character in Karuk oral literature. Not only does Coyote appear in many of the familiar roles

8. The ordinary Karuk word for an old man is *pihnüich*, which is itself etymologically connected to the root *pibriiv* ‘widower’ (BRIGHT, 1957:373). In the case of Coyote’s name in storytelling (*Pihnëefich*), the root *’áaf* ‘excrement’ (BRIGHT, 1957:314) comes into play, creating a compound and occurring in the middle of the word almost like an infix. Compare with the comical English infix *-fucking-*, which modifies words like *believable*, becoming *un-fucking-believable*.

that circulate throughout the region (and the American West in general), he also plays a major role in the creation pantheon itself, among storytellers in the Karuk tradition. When Coyote takes the stage, he often plays the part of heroic trickster or beloved fool, winning over the audience whether or not he succeeds in his plots, and even when he fails miserably. Yet these two-dimensional characterizations—as trickster or fool, hero or antihero—barely begin to describe him, as he is understood in Karuk storytelling. Either way, his spirit is indefatigable; he never gives up and thereby he retains his powerful charisma.

Coyote for the Karuk goes many steps beyond the “trickster” or beloved fool, as described by outside observers, including most famously by Paul Radin in relation to the Winnebago of the Plains (Radin, 1956). In most of the tales that circulate in Karuk Country, Coyote has a hand in creating the universe, establishing visible feature of the world it can be seen today—such as the downward flow of rivers or the dramatic mountain peaks that rise above them, in the rugged terrain of Northwestern California. Coyote’s handiwork can be seen everywhere, to those familiar with these tales. Before Coyote came along, the rivers, of course, flowed both ways, allowing the intrepid traveler to venture in any direction without any real effort.⁹

Not only is Coyote a popular character in everyday folklore—in the jokes and anecdotes told through the day—he is also a celebrated protagonist in the pantheon of myth figures. Coyote tales are, in this sense, above all *heuristic* in function; that is, one can *learn* from listening to the wisdom imparted in the tales that celebrate his ancient exploits. Among the Karuk in particular, Coyote is featured very heavily in the stories and episodes that depict the creation of the cosmos. The same is not true of the neighboring traditions, where Coyote only enters into creation mythology in a minor way, and certainly not to the same extent as among the Karuk. Indeed, among the Karuk, Coyote often appears to stand at the very *heart of the entire oral tradition*. He is nothing less than a culture-hero *status* and in the *volume* of the tales devoted to him.

Not surprisingly, these stories are generally set in the heart of Karuk Country. From a cosmological perspective, these stories are set in mythical center of the universe, which the Karuk normally place on the upriver arm of the Klamath, going as far as the head waters in Oregon, near the Klamath Lakes. These Lakes are clearly set in the creation times, before the arrival of humanity, though Coyote occasionally makes it to the coast and what would be Yurok territory, he always returns to his homeland in Karuk country.

9. For one version of this popular episode, as told by Nettie RUEBEN, see “Coyote as Law Maker” (BRIGHT, 1957:200-203).

Coyote generally sets out in earnest, with a heartfelt sense of purpose, in his many adventures and, as luck would have it, misadventures. In one significant genre, Coyote heads out to the far ends of the earth in search of money, which he hopes to string together at the Klamath lakes, hundreds of miles inland in what is now the state of Oregon, far from his Northwestern California homeland.¹⁰ Storytelling, in this way, captures a sense of ethnography, as these strings served as the primary currency in traditional times. Often these daring journeys lead him from the familiar comforts of home to some far-off land, in search of money or some other heartfelt desire, including food or carnal pleasure. To his considerable misfortune—and to the great amusement of the audience—Coyote soon finds himself distracted with other possible plots him astray, not long after embarking on one of these *noble*—if slightly *vain*—missions. Coyote answers to his appetites, including his drives for food, water, and sex, as basic biological functions.

Not long after sending out, Coyote's plans are usually foiled, as he encounters *obstacles*, including his own penchant for distraction when it comes to satisfying his needs. He is his own worst enemy, as his vices generally lead to his own downfall, however temporary. He usually perseveres in the end, given its powers over life and death. Often his own hunger or thirst drive him to distraction, and he loses sight of his mission. In one popular tale,¹¹ he becomes hungry and steals sustenance in the form of juice from a person, destroying the container which was in the form of a beautiful basket. The victim curses him and wishes for a fire which soon breaks out, leaving coyote hungry and thirsty. He devours the tasty, smoked grasshoppers in the wake of the fire, which are too much, alas, for him to choke down. Yet they keep flying out his other end, his posterior! So, naturally enough, he plugs his anus with pitch to contain a great abundance of food. Ultimately, and with a loud and echoing boom, his rear-end catches fire—just desserts for the theft. In still another episode,¹² Coyote eats his own excrement with great delight, which may in part explain his name, *Pihnêefich*, “Shitty Old Man.” His penchant for comedy is endless, as is his great delight in the ordinary things in life, even when everything appears to be going wrong.

10. This journey to the Klamath Lakes is a key episode in many stories; for one example, see “Coyote Trades Songs” (BRIGHT, 1957:188-191), as narrated by Nettie RUEBEN. See also “Coyote’s Journey” (BRIGHT, 1957:180-85), as told by Mamie OFFIELD.

11. For one version of this episode, narrated by Chester PEPPER, see lines 15-58 in the story “Coyote’s Journey” (BRIGHT 1957:170-77).

12. For a full version of the story, as narrated by Nettie RUEBEN, see “Coyote Eats his Own Excrement” (BRIGHT, 1957:200-01).

In these many stories, it is clear that Coyote has awesome powers, despite his many weaknesses and obvious failures. Thus, it appears that there is no obstacle he cannot overcome, even as he grows weak, and even his very life comes under threat. He even *cheats death* on a regular basis, and has the power to return from the dead.¹³ In this sense, Coyote is immortal; he can return from the dead, or from a state very near death, not a surprising power for one who can create life or make things happen by wishing them into existence. As still another reflection of his powers—even over life and death—the songs he signs suffuse the universe with beauty and the power to heal.¹⁴ Sometimes his creative powers extend into the area of procreation, as revealed through his everpresent sexual appetite and abundant fertility, as revealed in one recurring episode, which goes as follows.¹⁵ In a desperate attempt to drink water from the river, he climbs onto the back of a fallen tree, to sip from the middle of the water, before plunging it by accident. Thereafter, he turns himself into a stick that floats downriver. This was the result of a desperate attempt to slake his thirst. At that point, he turns himself into a stick, which then floats downriver. This stick is very pretty, and attracts the attention of some young women who unwittingly picks it up, not knowing that it is really Coyote, transformed. Not long afterwards these young women became *pregnant*. So, in the sense Coyote is a fertility figure, with awesome powers in the area of procreation (as well as creation). With such powers, Coyote also *cheats death* when he is reduced to a pile of bones and the Yellow Jackets begin to eat what remains of his flesh. Somehow returning from the dead, he bounces back to life with enough vigor to pound the Yellow Jackets so hard that he gives them their characteristically small waist.

With many of these Karuk Coyote tales, the arc of the story is often complete when Coyote returns home to the heart Coyote country on the upper Klamath.¹⁶ He is often tired and hungry upon his return, exhausted from the travels. More remarkably, his return is often an accident. He apparently arrives by *grace* alone, having given up all hope, having been left for dead by one of the antagonists

13. Towards the end of “Coyote’s Journey,” as told by Nettie RUEBEN (BRIGHT, 1957:162-167), Coyote is reduced to a pile of bones as yellow jackets begin to consume what remains of his rotting flesh. See especially lines 120-127.

14. Coyote’s singing is extensive in these tales. See the first several lines of “Coyote’s Journey” (BRIGHT, 1957:176-181) as told by Julia STARRITT, wherein Coyote sings as he sets out. See also “Coyote Trades Songs” (BRIGHT, 1957:186-191), as told by Nettie RUEBEN; or “Coyote Trades Songs and Goes to the Sky” (BRIGHT, 1957:192-195).

15. For one example, see “Coyote’s Journey” (BRIGHT, 1957:162-167), as told by Nettie RUEBEN. The pregnancy occurs in line 113.

16. See “Coyote’s Homecoming” (BRIGHT, 1957:166-169), as told by Nettie RUEBEN. By line 62, Coyote has returned home.

in the tales who plot against him. Having all but died, he floats downriver from one of these epic misadventures, lost and tired and sometimes reduced to nothing but bones. Then he miraculously reawakens, restored to life with the realization that he has returned home to the center of the universe. At that point, Coyote rejoices! He can't contain his excitement, so he starts kicking with pleasure—kicking up so much dirt that he creates the mountains and rivers of Karuk Country. With scenarios like these, one is left wonder just how large Coyote might be! In other episodes, his deeds also set the stage for the modern world. He creates the downward flow of rivers, or establishes the annual return of salmon.¹⁷ In another tale, he gives Yellow Jackets their small waists, as mentioned above. Even the now-permanent mark on Coyote's rear end is the result of his own doing; for it caught fire one day, after he plugged it with sap, coming too close to the forest fire.¹⁸

Among Karuk storytellers, Coyote tales are generally set in the ancient past, before the coming of humans, when the spirit beings presided over the planet.¹⁹ Then, as recently as a few generations ago, there was a period of transformation when many of the spirit deities fled for the heavens on the fringes of the universe.²⁰ In many stories, they are said to watch over people from their home at the rim of the sky, along the horizon and directly above us. Karuk storytellers tend to speak of Coyote as if he is passing before the eyes of the audience. Though the narrator may begin by saying something along the lines of "once upon a time,"²¹ most of the scenes are unbounded in their temporal reference, referring just

17. See lines 68-73 of "Coyote's Homecoming" (BRIGHT, 1957:166-169), as told by Nettie RUEBEN. This episode is repeated in lines 55-58 of another version of "Coyote's Homecoming" (BRIGHT, 1957:168-71), also told by Nettie RUEBEN.

18. For the full episode, see lines 23-58 in "Coyote's Journey" (BRIGHT, 1957:170-177), as narrated by Chester PEPPER.

19. For an exception, see the Karuk texts collected by Jaime DE ANGULO (1931:221-23), where a non-mythological Coyote tale is told, relating an encounter with coyote pups in modern times. There the narrator relates a story about stumbling upon some coyote pups, who he steals away from their home in a log, taking them away and eventually clubbing them to sell the skulls. The venture was unsuccessful, as even those who expressed interest never paid up for the stolen prize. The story could be read as a warning to those who might kill wild animals for profit. Coyote wins again, and the humans who seek to profit from harnessing nature lose in the end.

20. See BRIGHT, 1957:160-61, for a succinct description of what distinguishes the creation times from the contemporary world, in the religious lore of Native Northwestern California.

21. Thus, a story occasional begins with the special introductory particle 'úkríi' 'once upon a time'. So specialized is this particle, BRIGHT points out (1957:167), that is the only word in the language that features a falling high tone.

easily to something that is happening either now or an ancient past or even in the future. In this sense Coyote is eternal, shaking off the boundaries of time just as he is unshackled by a mundane sense of power. What he says soon comes to pass; his verbal pronouncements shaped the world, just as one would expect from a mythical figure, an instigator of the creation itself.²² Thus, many storytellers end the tale by reminding the audience that Coyote established the world ancient past. So, the teller often says, 'he did so anciently', as the story comes to a close. Some announce it at the beginning, with the words, *Pinéefich* 'Coyote' *vaa 'ukuphanik* 'he did so anciently.'²³ Here the specialized tense marker *-anik*, a hallmark of Karuk storytelling and grammar, sets the story in the creation times, before the time of recent memory. Others reserve this expression for the end of a critical episode, during some highpoint in the plot. Yet, either way, the majority of the verbs remain unbounded in most Karuk stories, describing a general state of affairs that began in the ancient past, while still holding true today—such as Coyote's penchant for showing up on the prairies or even eating his own excrement, like other canines.

Downriver Coyote Tales: Heroism and Comedy in Yurok Country

News of Coyote has certainly reached Yurok country, at the opposite end of the Klamath River, going still further downriver all the way to the Pacific Coast. In this way, our story now moves to the other side of the Klamath. That is, heading *downriver* from Karuk Country, one eventually reaches Yurok Country, a designation that itself derives from the Karuk word for 'downriver'.²⁴ Karuk Country, in this sense, ends roughly where Yurok Country begins,

22. Similarly, in Judeo-Christian creation lore, the word is made flesh, as they say. When God speaks, his wishes come true.

23. See, for instance, "Coyotes Journey" (BRIGHT, 1957:170), as told by Chester PEPPER, which starts this way.

24. The English word *Yurok* comes from the word *yúruk*, which means 'far downriver' in the Karuk language. In traditional times, members of the Karuk tribe referred to all of the people within the region as 'people'; the word in their language is *'áraara* 'people'. When pressed to come up with a term for their neighbors on the other side of the Klamath River, the expression *karuk-'araar* came to mind, which simply means 'people (who live) far downriver.' These distinctions are modern ones, and in traditional times the differences were not so great. Language mattered, as did oral literature, but everyone was still a person, and they were treated as equals, regardless of this minor—and sometimes beautiful—differences in language, culture, and religion.

at village of Weitchpec, in the heavily fabled territory where the Klamath meets the Trinity—not far from what was traditionally considered the center of the universe. Then, along Pacific, Yurok villages continue for another forty or so miles up and down the coast of the Pacific, which was also considered a river in traditional times, in the time when these stories were originally set.

Though many of the same tales appear in both Yurok and Karuk oral literature, the biggest shifts come in terms of Coyote's status, which passes from that of central culture hero, in Karuk Country, to that of everyday folklore among the Yuroks. Then, not surprisingly, many Yurok Coyote stories take place in Yurok territory—when they are set in the heavens or even in the pure land of myth, unadulterated by the existence of physical space. In term of literary output alone, Coyote tales constitute a significant *genre* in the folklore and mythology of the Yurok Country.

Among Yurok storytellers, Coyote's deeds rarely transform the world; rather, it is Coyote who is more often transformed by his own failed plots. Some of these stories circulate almost as jokes; Coyote's reputation, of course, precedes him! So, the mere mention of his name is enough to stir intense interest in an audience familiar with his exploits—if not outright excitement and the anticipation of laughter. In one popular tale, which the Yurok share with the Karuk, Coyote travels to the heavens in search of the Sun. In one short Karuk account,²⁵ Coyote searches in vain, traveling from one mountain peak to the next without ever reaching the sun; this one is told almost as a joke, with Coyote coming up short it is foolish plot. Though again his spirit is indomitable, as is his sense of adventure, which is undiminished by the minor failure. In spirit, this story is parallel to some of the short ones that the Yurok tell, such as when Coyote goes out in search of acorns and capsizes his boat.²⁶ Predictably, this minor failure on the part of the overzealous Coyote brings this misadventure to a halt. The listener learns to carry on, despite minor setbacks, which may even bring a healthy laugh. In another variation on the theme Coyote tries to kill the sun, a version the Yurok also tell.²⁷

25. From the story "Coyote Tries to Reach the Sun" (BRIGHT, 1957:198-199), as told by Chester PEPPER.

26. For a full version of this tale, as told by Glen MOORE in 2002, see "Coyote and his Grandmother," which is available online at the Yuork Language Project Digital Archive (2001-2013). <http://corpus.linguistics.berkeley.edu/~yurok/text-details.php?style=default&text=GM11>

27. From "Coyote Tries to Kill the Sun" (SAPIR, 2001:1022-25), who told this story in Yurok, the language of her youth, even though she later came to learn Hupa, when she married and moved to Hoopa Valley to raise her children with her Hupa husband there.

Ultimately, of course, Coyote fails, but he comes dangerously close to this goal of finishing off the sun. Even when he fails, Coyote still contributes to folklore and humor, but he does not transform the world or create any of its wonders. That, for the Yurok, is mostly the work of the Old-Man-Across-the-Ocean, just as it is for the Hupa. For the Yurok, it is the Old-Man-Across-the-Ocean, not Coyote, who sets the sun into motion and carries it across the sky every day. Even Coyote, with all of his awesome power, cannot stop that cycle, which was set into motion during the times of the creation.

Yet Coyote is certainly *not* powerless in the bulk of Yurok narratives. Thus, in one popular tale, again shared with the Karuk, Coyote tries to fool the Crane, so that he can steal his wives.²⁸ To this end, he transforms himself into a Salmon, which attracts the attention of the Crane, who only wishes to eat him. Just as Crane spears him, Coyote steals Crane's spear, which is more valuable even than his meal. Coyote sloughs off death, only to reappear, asking to trade the stolen spear for Cranes two wives. Yet Coyote does not succeed in this plot. In the end, Crane's wives outsmart him and escape. Coyote loses the spears and his bid for the wives, but *not* his life. Again, Coyote gives humanity a gift of *comedy* and the sense of *perseverance* in the face of minor setbacks.²⁹

Time perspective is richly expressed in Yurok oral literature. While the story may still pass before the eyes of the audience, in the imaginary timeline of myth, there is little sense that the scenes may still be unfolding now in the world around us today. Most of the episodes in Yurok oral literature are set within one timeframe or another, as dictated by the terms of the grammar. Thus, the rationale is partly structural, along the lines of what Sapir and Whorf first expressed with their early work on concept of linguistic relativity, wherein the structure of a language influences how speakers see the world, up to a point.³⁰ To put the matter simply, tense marking is richly expressed structure of the Yurok language. As a consequence, Yurok storytellers naturally couch their narratives within a series of nested time frames, one embedded in another, almost like a Russian babushka doll—with each scene contained within the one that follows, like the doll figures that house still more dolls inside. To continue the comparison, each episode,

28. From "Coyote and Crane" (SAPIR, 2001:1017-1022), as told by Mary MARSHALL.

29. When I first moved to Oklahoma, around the turn of the twenty-first century, I was surprised to learn that a version of this story circulates within the Kiowa community, which once had historical ties to the Southwest, even though this group is based on the Great Plains today.

30. See SAPIR, 1949:160-66; WHORF, 1956; LUCY, 1992a-b.

in Yurok narrative, is generally embedded within another obligatory timeframe, following the structure of the many temporal relationships are richly expressed in the grammar of the language, which expresses more than a dozen tense distinctions (see O'Neill, 2008:167-173). At the beginning of a tale, the narrator sometimes situates the initial scene squarely in the past, with words such as these: *Segep* 'Coyote' *me* 'past action' *kweget* 'Crane' *kootsi* 'once' *mrkwitiksh* 'Crane'.³¹ Here the special tense marker *me* places the focus on past action, the initial visit which opens the story. A story might end with the general past tense marker *ho*, clearly situating the whole story in the past, with such words as these: *Wi'it* 'there' *ho* 'past' *wrymrkurbhl* 'it is tied up'.³² Thus, Yurok narratives feature many fine-grained temporal distinctions. On the other hand, many lines in Karuk oral narratives convey *very little detail* about the timeline, leaving it for the audience to infer, that the scene is set in the ancient past. On the contrary, Yurok storytellers often establish a basic timeline at the outset, while couching most of the episodes thereafter within clearly demarcated timeframes.

Coyote's Status on the Trinity: From Sacred to Profane and Back Again

Leaving the Klamath altogether, Coyote also enjoys a similar status among Hupa speakers, who live inland along the banks of the Trinity River. Echoing Karuk creation stories, Coyote continues to play an important role in mythology of the Hupa tribe, whose homeland begins almost as soon as one leaves the Klamath for its tributary, the Trinity. Though Coyote appears in many of the central episodes, he is often part of the *supporting cast* of characters who assist the protagonist. Yet he *does* give the present world *part* of its shape—much as he does in Karuk country—helping establish some of the sacred dances to maintain precious peace on the earth. Departing from the Karuk narratives, the Hupa, not surprisingly, situate the center of the universe in the seat of their own territory in Hoopa Valley, where many of the stories are set. Yet Coyote's role is only modest one when considered alongside his monumental role in Karuk oral literature. In sympathy with developments in Yurok Country, Coyote stories are rife in everyday life, making him a frequent subject jokes and anecdotes.

In the Hupa creation pantheon, Coyote frequently appears alongside major figures, such as the primary figure who set the present world into motion,

31. The *initial* line from "Coyote and Crane", as told by Mary MARSHALL (SAPIR, 2001:1017-1022).

32. The *final* line from "Coyote and Crane" (SAPIR, 2001:1017-1022).

Yimaan-Tiw'winyay, whose name loosely translates as “The-One-Who-Was-Lost-Across-the-Ocean.” The name, in this case, relates part of the story itself, reflecting the sense in which this figure left this world in his old age, retreating to the heavens across the ocean, in part due to his growing disgust with the misdeeds of humanity. In one of the stories, Coyote helps The-One-Who-Was-Lost-Across-the-Ocean establish the religious dances that would one-day safeguard humanity, helping them fix the world as people go astray, losing sight of the beauty in this world.³³ Yet Coyote does not dance alone, nor does he personally institute the dance, which instead originates with The-One-Who-Was-Lost-Across-the-Ocean. Coyote, for his part, merely works as part of a team collaborating with several other animals to establish the first dance. Again, all of Coyote’s friends—including Hawk, Wildcat, Wolf, Fox, and Crow—stand somewhere between animals and humans in ontological status; they are First People, not mere “animals” in the English sense of the word, an undignified name which strips these “animal” characters of the sacred status (for the most part) before the transformation, and sometimes afterwards. These animals are, in fact, spirit beings who chose, like the Dog, to continue existing within this world to watch over people and protect them, and to confer wisdom. Though Coyote is rarely the protagonist in these tales, he often has a *starring role*, working against the antagonists to defeat the fearsome antagonists, who pose very real threats, while sometimes providing ample comic relief. In this sense, Coyote even has a hand in defeating several of the most fearful monsters in the Hupa creation pantheon, including the fearsome monster, Two-Neck, who appears to be unique to the Hupa tradition.³⁴

Moving from creation lore to popular folklore, one popular Hupa tale pairs Coyote with Frog, as his wife, whom he badly mistreats after a failed attempt at cheating on her. This story bears a loose affinity not to the literature of the Klamath River Basin, but to the literature of the California Central Valley, suggesting a far wider pathway for the tales than just the neighboring tribes.³⁵ In this story Coyote appears in the capacity of abusive husband to his wife, Frog. One night, Coyote sneaks out of the house to attend a dance without her, after beating her up, so that he can be alone to flirt with the women there. When she awakens to discover he

33. For the full story, as told by MCCANN, see “The Spoiling of the World” (GODDARD, 1904:220-225).

34. For the full version of the story, as told by Oscar BROWN, see “Two Neck” (GODDARD, 1904:162-168).

35. See SHIPLEY (1963: 38-43) for the Maidu version and SHEPARD (1989:237-44) for the parallel Wintu tale.

is missing, she disguises herself so that she can spy on him, suspecting that he is going to the dance, presumably again. Upon arriving at the dance, she finds him with another woman, dancing and apparently courting her affection. But Frog, in her disguise, is even more beautiful, stepping in between them. Seeing his wife in disguise at the dance, though without recognizing her, Coyote advances on his own wife, the Frog in costume. When he discovers that he has been deceived by his own wife, he again and again beats her, this time almost to death. Here Coyote figures as a sexual predator, and as an abusive husband. The story probably provides an outlet for considering spousal abuse from a third-party perspective, projected onto characters in the land of myth, rather than among humans. Coyote is not a role model here, but an anti-hero.

Among the Hupa, the timelines of these tales go largely unannounced in the vast majority of the stories—in stark contrast to the neighboring Karuk tradition, where there is an explicit marker both for the ancient past and the creation story genre, as established in the previous section. Rather the characters are identified by their actions, and timelines are established by the events that occurred. If there is a reference to the creation of the world, obviously the story is set during the creation times and the storyteller does not need to revisit the entire cosmology or ontology of Coyote. This is part of what's lost in translation to English. The English audience is rarely familiar with the ontological and cosmological framing that is necessary to understanding Coyote. The pattern of elision in Hupa storytelling only underscores this point. The framing is beyond language, however much this framing can be captured in some languages, such as Karuk. Yet even for Karuk storytellers, the framing is tangential, often only occurring at the beginning and end of a tale, as the genre is announced or as a scene is set in the ancient past.

When the past tense is invoked, it is generally used to stress the fact at the state or condition no longer exists; that is, the past tense can be applied to a former spouse or a deceased loved one, when there is no longer an active relationship in the present.³⁶ Occasionally in Hupa oral literature there is a reference to the era of the spirit deities, some of whom later fled to the heavens, upon the arrival of humans. For those that fled, and no longer inhabit this world, the past tense can be used to establish their distance, as reflected in the common phrase *k'ixinay-ne'in* 'spirit deities that used to live here'. Coyote on the other hand, is still very much a part of the present; though Coyote existed for the coming of humanity, he remains an active presence in the universe, in the present,

36. Thus, one might say, *Whi'ad-ne'in* 'my wife-former', referring either to someone who has passed away, or to a relationship broken by divorce.

where he appears, for example, on the prairies, as conveyed in the Hupa designation for Coyote, *Xontebt-taw* 'the one who lives on the prairies.' Just as Karuk stories are told as if they are passing before the eyes of the audience, Hupa storytellers go one step further, almost *never* couching Coyote stories in the past and all—not even at the *beginning* or the *end* of a tale, as one might in the Karuk language. Instead, in Hupa, the timeline is often purely implicit when the reference is to the beginning of the world, before the time of the transformation. In a sense, the timelessness of the Hupa tales reflects the sense in which Coyote's influence lives on, and he remains a part of the present world. Even when a Coyote story is delivered strictly in English, one might start by saying, "He started out," with an explicit reference to Coyote, since he is often the default protagonist in the area's oral literature. Here the story is told in the present, not the past, even in English translation. Then, when I was doing fieldwork, people what often say, "Watch out for old man Coyote." Seeing him might be a blessing, conferring grace upon the recipient. But Coyote is also a teacher, and he teaches people to beware, to be one step ahead of the Trickster in all of us. Once an elder even jokingly called me Coyote, as if to say, "I've got my eyes on you; watch it!" The joke was delivered in a mischievous, if loving, way, as a gentle reminder to pay attention to the concerns of the elders, and not to become wrapped up in my own motivations.

Even when clearly set in the myth times, a handful of generations ago, Hupa stories are rarely couched in the past tense, in terms of their linguistic expression. Nor are the characters always announced by name, even at the outset, as an introduction. Rather the audience is left to infer the time in which the story is set, based on their existing knowledge of the familiar cast of characters and their general sense of the cosmology. The framing, in other words, goes *unstated* or merely *understated*, whether in terms of the timeframe or the characters. The actions and timelines in this sense are metonymic; the act itself implies the characters and their place in the universe. One well-known Hupa folktale, featuring Coyote in a starring role, opens only by saying that he was living 'with someone,' whose name is not even mentioned at the outset, since she is so well-known.³⁷ Yet anyone familiar with this story knows the Coyote is often paired with a Frog, his wife in many of the popular tales. The same pattern recurs in one of the stories that Edward Sapir transcribed during his fieldwork in 1927. In one short episode, Coyote makes an appearance at the Girls' Flower Dance; while Coyote is named at the start of the scene, his wife is not, even her presence is implicit.³⁸ But then this

37. For a full version of the tale, as told by Emma FRANK, see "Coyote and Frog" (SAPIR, 2001:408-411).

38. See "The Origin of the Flower Dance" (SAPIR, 2001:135-146).

much would be obvious to the audience. While he is not always paired with Frog, she is generally his partner when appears as part of an implicit couple. The same remarkable pattern of *elision*, that is leaving out what is obvious to the audience based on prior reference, is one of the defining features of Hupa oral literature. It is also a hallmark of storytelling among speakers of Athabaskan languages, as Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1979, 1981) noted in their work among the Chipewyan speakers of Canada. Characters are identified by their actions and their associates, not merely by name alone. In one very striking case, even the central character and Hupa creation lore goes on unnamed at the start of the epic tale him and is many world-making acts. Even when he goes unnamed, Coyote, who plays only a minor role in the plot, is mentioned by name later on.³⁹

Conclusions: Coyote's World and The Ecology of Coyote Tales

Like the *isoglosses* that separate dialects, many other features change as the listener passes from one community to the next, including the style of composition, the status of the characters, and the structures of the narratives. In many multilingual areas, such as the Klamath River Basin, this sense of difference is especially marked on the plane of oral literature, as seen throughout this article. In this way, the principle of *linguistic relativity*, which is often framed in terms of linguistic differences in grammar and vocabulary, applies even more profoundly at the level of the social imagination (Becker and Yengoyan, 1979; Bakhtin, 1981). Building on Dell Hymes' observation (1965) that linguistic relativity applies not just to the *structures* of languages, but also to the conditions in which they are spoken, one can clearly see in these pages that language shapes not only the flow of thought, as expressed in storytelling, but also the contours of the literary imagination, in terms of the traditions that are available to speakers of a particular speech community on a daily basis.

The scale of the diversity in Northwest California plays a part in shaping the tremendous diversity in the storytelling traditions. The linguistic diversity here is in fact rivaled by only a handful of other points on the planet, including such well-known areas as the Amazon Basin, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Northwest coast of Australia.⁴⁰ The linguist Johanna Nichols (1992)

39. Since gender is rarely marked on the surface in the Hupa language, Coyote could just as likely be female in some of the tales that do not involve a coupling.

40. For the sake of comparison, the reader may wish to compare this situation with more distant places like New Guinea (see KULICK, 1992), Australia (MERLAN, 1981), or the Amazon Basin (SORENSEN, 1967; AIKHENVALD, 2002).

once identified these areas as residual zones, as points where languages accumulate over time, as speakers move in from other areas. Like Northwestern California, all of these areas are also known for their profound ecological diversity, which is mirrored on the plane of languages. And, like the Australian Northwest or Amazon Basin, societal multilingualism is common, despite the fact that speakers place a premium on maintaining the boundaries between the languages, minimizing interference. Ecology also plays an obvious role here. Like the rugged contours of the area's mountains, which physically divide the villages, the speech communities are themselves separated by many equally imposing *social* boundaries. Like the languages themselves, the stories take very different shapes on either side of any given social or physical boundary. These boundaries, both physical and social, keep the communities separate on many levels, even as ideas, such as stories, regularly cross these boundaries.

Just as these differences can be *heard* on the audible plan sound, the boundaries between the communities can also be *experienced* at the level of performance, from tense marking to narrative structure and even the selection of the tales. Nevertheless, the intense sense of diversification within such regions—from Northwestern California to the Amazon Basin—still demands explanation, based on the pervasive insistence on difference at the local level, encompassing everything from sound patterning to grammatical categories and narrative structures. In this sense, the ecology of oral literature loosely echoes the curving contours of the landscape.

Ethnography also plays an important role in understanding these tales. Despite sharp difference among the oral traditions, many elements in these tales can only be understood in relation to common ethnographic background, in the details of everyday life, which provide the semantic underpinnings of narrative structure. So many of the details in these stories reflect everyday life in the traditional times, such as the sweat house, where Coyote lies waiting, in the traditional domain of men, with whom he is often identified by default. Coyote's role in establishing the Flower Dance is interesting in light of his pronounced sexual status, especially in terms of the sweathouse, the traditional domain of males, where Coyote often makes an appearance. Certainly, he is often portrayed as a male figure, and often his sexual prowess, or at least his heightened fertility, is noted in the stories. The Flower Dance, on the other hand, is a coming-of-age ceremony for young women, which is without parallel among the young men of the region. The young men, in contrast to the women, undergo no formal ceremony when becoming young man. Yet for women there is a formal ceremony, and Coyote plays a role, as an implicit male figure, revealing the dangers that await in adolescence, as he is sometimes associated with unwanted pregnancies.

By the same token, the foods Coyote provides were the traditional staples of the regional, such as salmon and acorns.⁴¹ For the people of Northwestern California, these foods were provided by the pre-human spirit deities, here specifically by Coyote, whose presence on the planet predated the arrival of modern people. Thus, they have a divine origin, and in the ontology of native Northwestern California, many of these animals and plants are still considered to be sacred beings, who stayed in this world, rather than fleeing for the heavens, for the benefit of humanity.

This sense of Coyote as creator reaches its highest point in Karuk country. The dances Coyote establishes, especially in the Karuk and Hupa traditions, remain central religious institutions of the region; these dances are of divine origin, and granted to humanity by Coyote. Given their divine origin, the dances also have the power to restore the life, and to reverse the harm released by human wrongdoing. After the transformation, the world needs to be restored on annual basis. If Coyote is the muse of storytelling, the inspiration for songs, the dances, and the stories—as I said at the beginning of this paper—then Coyotes also has an equally great love of humanity; in this way, Coyote takes people as *his* muse in his own creative acts on their behalf. Coyote infuses the world song, fills the skies stars, and stands with humanity to save them.

Coyote is so much more than a *trickster*; he is also a *creator* and sometimes a *role model*, just as he is alternatively a *hero* and an *antihero*. In this sense, the linguist Dell Hymes once productively framed Coyote as a “bungling host” (Hymes, 2003:203-27), given that Coyote sometimes stands in the role of provider or even savior, despite his often-comical behavior. Yet Coyote ultimately defies classification, and no single category appears to sum up his many traits; in this way, he teaches perhaps the most important lesson of all: that the nature of reality cannot be captured or circumscribed with words.

While Coyote clearly plays a central role in that oral literature of the entire region, he is not always the protagonist, pure and simple, but sometimes merely a comic character, or beloved fool. His role is liminal in this sense, standing in a place that is betwixt in between categories. He is both sacred and profane, and he is both *hero* and *antihero* at once in many instances. Sometimes Coyote causes problems for people. Yet even here his role maybe beneficial.

41. Even the word for “people” in the Hupa language makes a reference to acorns, identifying humans as the ones who eat them; while *k'iwinya'n* literally means ‘what one eats, it refers to acorns, the staple of the traditional diet; *k'iwinya'n-yaan*, extension, means those who eat acorns, where friend to all of the traditional peoples of the area.

Through his misdeeds, pranks, and tricks, Coyote gives instruction on how to behave through illustrating the opposite. While he may be silly, he has wisdom to confer. More to the point, one doesn't want to be duped by such a trickster, giving the audience reason to take the necessary precautions against such a character—thus, conferring a certain wisdom upon the attentive listener. Rather than being a role model, sometimes Coyote stands in the opposite position, providing an example of how *not* to behave. His role is liminal in this sense, standing in a place that is but twixt in between categories. He is both sacred and profane, and he is both hero and antihero at once in many instances. Above all, Coyote is a teacher. As the elders who mentored me during my days of fieldwork made clear, Coyote is a respected character with a great deal of wisdom to impart on humanity. Clearly, these Coyote stories serve a purpose; otherwise, they would not be so popular. Even in stories where Coyote is not a creator figure, pure and simple, he is still revered, respected, almost like elder. In this sense, Coyote can be understood as a First Person, a figure with a vital role to play in the creation (Baldy, 2015). Meditating on Coyote, one can become wise. Coyote is a *teacher* in this way.

Finally, a word is in order on Coyote's status in relation to gender, which may not always be male, as often assumed, even in the stories seen here; this theme is revisited in the conclusion. Clearly, he is a male in some of the stories, for instance when he is the husband to Frog, as illustrated in the classic Hupa story, reviewed above. The same is true for the episodes where Coyote pursues or even impregnates women—usually young women, as it turns out. Perhaps there is a warning here for young women to be careful in adolescence, as they experiment with their sexuality. And perhaps Coyote's masculinity is one way to keep male power in check, on the plane of everyday discourse and folklore, given that he is often unsuccessful in his conquests, appearing in a somewhat foolish role, however beloved.

But is Coyote always male? The languages of Northwestern California tend to be gender-neutral when it comes to person markers and nouns. Most of the coyote stories do not assign a clear gender Coyote, except where paired with a mate of the opposite sex. English, on the other hand, is far from gender-neutral in the third person, where one must choose between "he," "she," or "it" when referring to an established referent with a pronoun. Some of the confusion may result from the translations, since the English glosses usually feature a pronoun in relation to Coyote. Yet the gender is far from clear in the original stories. While it is often assumed that Coyote is male, most of the time, the storytellers make no formal commitment to gender status. Occasionally, Coyote is paired with a mate, in which case he appears to be the male figure, often with Frog or Duck as a partner, clearly in a female role. And yet, obviously, there must be females among the Coyotes, and one could interpret some of the stories as having female

protagonists. In one story about the Mourning Dove, the Hupa and Yurok accounts agree in most of the details. After missing her grandmother's funeral, the Mourning Dove promises to cry every summer to make reparations for this failure in relation to the family. Among the Hupas, the Mourning Dove is male, but for the Yuroks this equivalent character is female. The terms are simply inverted, as Donald Barr (2001) has observed in the American Southwest among the Navajos and their neighbors, including the Hopi. Otherwise, it may be a mistake to assume that Coyote is always male, rather than being gender neutral, which may in part be an artifact of the English translations. We'll return to this theme in the conclusion, after thoroughly reviewing Coyote's status in each of the communities.

Looking beyond the Klamath River drainage, the oral traditions of this region occur as part of a larger pattern, one that goes far beyond Northwestern California. It turns out that Coyote stories are enormously popular throughout the American West, occurring in great abundance in the traditional oral literature of the Pacific Coast, the Southwest, and the Great Plains. While coyote, the species, can still be seen throughout this vast terrain, the question remains as to how Coyote, as a central character in storytelling, spread throughout so many disparate communities. How did these Coyote stories, and the episodes they contain, cross so many geographical, linguistic, and cultural divides? Why is Coyote, the mythic figure, less popular in Meso-America or the Canadian Northwest, where coyote, the species, is just as common? Within this larger setting, the vast diversity of Coyote tales can be witnessed in *microcosm form* in northwestern California, where the Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk tribes all maintain quite distinct traditions regarding the place of this figure in their storytelling practices. Thus, Northwestern California appears almost like a fractal, echoing the diversity of the western Continent, in micro-cosm form. As Coyote reveals, stories can be circulated without limit, broadcast with endlessly new variations on the old themes, while effortlessly crossing multiple linguistic and geographical boundaries along the way. Coyote always has something new to teach, and surely there'll be more to learn from here.

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Abstract: Coyote is a popular figure in the oral literature of North America, with a sweeping distribution in the stories, songs, and folktales devoted to this beloved character. Coyote, the familiar canine species, has inspired a huge body of oral narratives, with striking similarities in the tales that circulate from the Great Plains to the Southwest and the Pacific Coast (which is the focus of this article). For some groups, such as the Karuk, Coyote occupies a central place in myth, playing a key role even in the creation of the cosmos; for other groups, such as the neighboring Hupa and Yurok, Coyote is displaced by other myth figures, even where similar episodes circulate, instead becoming the secondary focus of everyday folklore. However, wherever Coyote appears, as the subject of oral literature, this beloved muse tends to occupy a liminal position between the sacred and the profane; between the ancient past and the present; and between nature and culture.

Keywords: comparative literature, comparative linguistics, folklore, Coyote (character), linguistic relativity, North America, oral literature, storytelling, vocabulary

La muse rugissante : à la recherche des contes de Coyote au nord-ouest de la Californie

Résumé : Coyote est une figure populaire dans la littérature orale de l'Amérique du Nord, largement répandue dans les histoires, les chants et les contes que le personnage inspire. Ce canidé a inspiré un vaste corpus de pièces orales, avec des similarités frappantes entre les contes connus depuis les Grandes Plaines jusqu'au Sud-Ouest ou à la côte pacifique (à laquelle cet article est consacré). Pour certains groupes, comme les Karuk, Coyote occupe une place centrale dans le mythe, où il joue un rôle jusque dans la création du cosmos ; dans des groupes voisins, tels les Hupa et les Yurok, le mythe le remplace par d'autres figures, même si certains épisodes restent semblables, tandis qu'il garde sa place dans le folklore quotidien. En tout cas, où qu'il apparaisse, Coyote, qui joue aussi le rôle de muse, est aux confins du sacré et du profane, du passé et du présent, de la nature et de la culture.

Mots-clés : littérature comparée, linguistique comparée, folklore, Coyote (personnage mythologique), relativité linguistique, Amérique du Nord, littérature orale, narration, lexicque

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