Coyote and Raven, American Tricksters: Crash Course World Mythology #22

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Mythology, and today, we're finishing up our series on trickster stories by looking at two of the most famous and popular of them all, Coyote and Raven.

There are many individual Native American mythological traditions from different tribes and in different regions, and stories about coyotes and ravens as grand tricksters pop up in tales across the whole continent. In many locations, these animals would have been known for making off with livestock or picking at the bodies of dead animals.

While scavenging isn't exactly clever in the way tricksters often are, it is sort of devious, which explains the wealth of trickster myths about these two figures. We're gonna focus a few of the best of them. And along the way, we'll see that sometimes playing a few tricks can really put a twinkle in your eye. Or make it pink.

[Intro Music]

Before I get into the specific myths, I should explain something about the content and context of some of these Coyote and Raven stories. We've already mentioned in many Native American myths the line between the human world and animal world is blurry.

Humans live alongside mythological animals that help create the world and establish important rituals. This handling of mythological animals is distinct from say the pantheon of gods and monsters that we see in Norse, Greek, or Egyptian traditions. Those traditions have myths about animals; it's true, but they aren't the stars of the show in the way that they are in Native American myths.

I also just wanna say upfront that the myths we're gonna discuss aren't exactly...umm...G rated. Some scholars have pointed out that many Native American myths feature particularly frank discussions of sexy-time and the organs that are used to accomplish it.

Thoth, buddy, there's no need to blush.

And, also, they talk a lot about the elimination of bodily wastes. So long story short, we're gonna talk about poop. One day, Coyote is out walking and he sees some tasty-looking, bright red rose-hips. He's about to gobble them up when those rose-hips, which can talk btw, warn Coyote that if gobbled that they're gonna give him horrible flatulence. But, Coyote doesn't listen so - chomp!

And wouldn't you know it, soon Coyote is stumbling around doubled over in pain from a rather intense and alarming build-up of gas. At about this time, Coyote happens across two crows picking over a dead buffalo. Devising a plan, Coyote asks if they wanna play a game. Which, I mean, of course, they do. Who doesn't love a game?

Coyote proposes a contest to see who can defecate from one side of the buffalo to the other. Whoever is able to launch their poop over the buffalo gets to keep it and eat it. The buffalo, I mean, not the poop. Not sure who gets that. Anyway.

The crows think that this is disgusting and, hey, samesies. But Coyote is very persuasive, and the contest begins.

One of the crows goes first. He turns around, and he poops as hard as he can. But only manages to poop shoot halfway. Coyote, now fit to burst with rose-hip's gas, turns around relaxes, and let's just say he wins the contest - easily. The crows cannot believe their eyes, and they beg Coyote to let them have some of the buffalo meat.

In an uncharacteristic bit of trickster compassion - Coyote is no Anansi - he agrees to give them the fat around the eye sockets and the joints and the ribs...hmm...Stan maybe cancel my lunch order.

Okay according to Leonard and McClure the moral of the story is: "Some are not honest in playing games, and trick others. One must watch out for these people, for they start trouble."

I might say the moral is also don't eat rose-hips, don't poop competitively, but maybe even with gastrointestinal crisis there could be found great opportunity? At least if you have your tricky cap on. Aww Thoth. Is that your tricky cap? Looks good.

This story also shows an important similarity Coyote shares with the tricksters of other mythological traditions. He is unable to resist giving into his out-sized hedonistic desires. Remember hungry Hermes and greedy Anansi? The entire poop shot put is a result of Coyote munching down on tasty looking rose-hips, even though he knows it's a bad idea.

Not all of Coyote's desires are quite so digestion oriented of course. There are a number of stories that involve his sexual appetites. And in many Native American stories, the tricksters desire for sex is interpreted as a mirror for the rest of humanity. A recognition that most of us have similar drives.

As our old friends Leonard and McClure put it: "...the Native American's trickster reminds us like no other that humans, for all their pretensions to intellectual and spiritual culture and all their moments of bravery, altruism, and generosity, are nevertheless animals ruled by appetites and impulses that make them equally capable of cowardice, selfishness, and cruelty."

We're not going to focus on those sexy stories though. This is a family friendly YouTube series. Well except for all the death. And the incest. Oh, and the castration. Okay, you know what? Let's just move on.

Coyote, like other tricksters, is creative and on occasion even helpful. In one story from the Wasco people of the Pacific Northwest, Coyote even helps place stars in the sky.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

One day, Coyote sees several of his wolf buddies looking up at the sky, so he asks what they're looking at. "Nothing," they tell him. The next night, he sees them looking up at the sky again and asks again. Finally, the youngest wolf says, "Ahh, let's tell him. He won't do anything." Which, I mean, have they not met Coyote?

The wolves tell him they're watching two mysterious animals up in the sky. Ever curious, Coyote suggests, "Let's go hang out with them." Coyote starts shooting arrows into the sky, and his aim is so good, that each arrow hits the last one, creating a ladder of arrows from Earth to sky. Coyote and the wolves climb up the arrow ladder which takes many days and nights.

But when the finally reach their destination, they find that the two animals are grizzly bears. Coyote warns the wolves not go near the bears, but the two youngest wolves walk over and sit down. Then, the two next youngest wolves do the same. Finally seeing that it's safe, the oldest wolf goes over and takes a seat. I guess sky bears are pretty chill.

Admiring the wolves and the bears, Coyote says: "I think I'll leave it that way for everyone to see. Then when people look at them in the sky, they will say, 'There's a story about that picture,' and they will tell a story about me."

So, Coyote leaves taking the arrows with him as he returns to Earth. From there he admires his handiwork. Which, you can still see today. Four wolves make up the handle of the Big Dipper; the youngest two wolves and the bears make up its bowl. So, I guess

Coyote was right. Here we are telling his story.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

This story is a great example of the trickster as creator. The wolves were probably pretty unhappy about being stranded in the sky with bears, but people sure do love constellations.

In this story, there's also something we haven't really discussed about tricksters or myths generally. The desire to be remembered. Coyote leaves no doubt. When he finishes stranding those wolves, he calls to Meadow Lark, and says: "My brother...when I gone, tell everyone that when they look up into the sky and see the stars arranged this way, that I was the one who did that. That is my work."

Here at Crash Course, we define myths as stories that persist through time. In our forthcoming episodes about heroes, we'll see that the desire for fame to be remembered through timeless tales, often motivates heroic deeds.

We could tell stories about Coyote all day, but there's another famous trickster in Native American myths, Raven. No, not that Raven. Not that one either. Come on, you gu...Yeah that one. Bingo. You got it.

Raven stories are common with the Native American peoples of the Pacific Northwest including Canada and Alaska. This one was recorded in English at Sitka, a small city in Alaska, and it starts like so.

Have you ever wondered why ravens are black? A very long time ago, Raven, the trickster, was actually stark white. And one day, he's journeying to see his brother-in-law Petrel, the seabird, who has an everlasting spring of water.

At the time, there wasn't any water to drink because Petrel kept his spring for himself, and he wouldn't share it. So, Raven comes to Petrel, and he tells him about all the marvelous things that he's seen throughout the world trying to get Petrel to leave his home, so that Raven can steal some of his water.

But, Petrel doesn't trust Raven, which is maybe a good call, and he won't budge. When the night falls, Raven and Petrel go to bed. Once Raven is sure Petrel is asleep, he creeps outside and finds some dog poo. Yeah, it's gonna be that kind of story.

He sneaks back in, and he spreads the poo all over Petrel's clothing. And the next morning, Raven wakes Petrel up by crying, "Wake up! Wake up, brother-in-law! Look what you've done to your clothes!"

And just a real quick aside here. I wanna point out that we're super unsure about what bird clothes are. Pants, a dicky maybe. Wait - are these birds with arms?

Anyway. Petrel goes outside to clean himself up, and Raven goes over to the spring, uncovers it and begins to drink. Just as Raven has slurped up almost all the water, Petrel returns, realizes he's been tricked and angrily chases Raven away.

Raven flies through the smoke hole in Petrel's house with the water in his mouth, and Petrel calls out to his spirits to catch him. As Raven is caught by the spirits, Petrel throws pitch-wood onto his fire to make the smoke turn black. While Raven struggles to get away, the black smoke soaks into his feathers - I bet, you can see where this is headed.

Now turned black, Raven struggles free without spilling a single drop of water but as he's flying, he tries to brush off some of the char and spills some water over Nass, making up the Nass river. He keeps flying and keeps fidgeting and keeps spilling water over Stikine, Taku, Chilkat, and all the other rivers. Even the small drops become creeks. So after just one poop-related trick, the world now has water, and Raven has the pitch-black feathers that we know today.

As you can, Raven and Coyote definitely spend their time getting up to no good. Sometimes their tricks are premeditated but other times, it's a matter of circumstance, often poop-related circumstance. And this reminds us that just because you are powerful, supernatural even, that doesn't mean you can escape being an animal with all of the confusion and danger and bodily functions that that entails.

This sort of thing reiterates the specific relationship in Native American culture between humans and the natural environment. As Therry and Deviney put it, "According to Native American mythology, all of nature participates in creation as keepers of the Earth, resulting in a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment."

So even though Raven and Coyote pull tricks that might seem outrageous and a little gross, it's hard to consider them evil or detrimental to society, especially when their tricks end up creating things that the rest of get to enjoy.

Thanks for watching, we'll see you next week!

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Thanks for watching and, insert poop joke here. We thought we had to make a poop joke so...I hope this suffices.