

## Trickster's Way

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# Duck Watch: Will the Real Trickster Stand Up

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# *Duck Watch*

## *Will the Real Trickster Stand Up?*

The literature is full of a great divide in trickster studies between the universalists and the indigenous culturalists. According to one camp or the other, either the trickster figure is a universal human construct or it is the narrative device specific to a culture. The trickster figure is either the source of clowning and ritual play, or it is the first suggestion of the Culture Hero. It may be that the trickster figure is a vestigial lingering of our primitive side, or just a coping mechanism for social dynamics and control. Perhaps the trickster figure represents the compensatory shadow of our developing minds, or it is essentially a narrative device which must be understood literarily. Moreover, the trickster figure is either a buffoon and picaro or a spiritual gate keeper whose narratives mark the seasons. The trickster figure is either the incarnation of play or instantiation of an irreverent satire of shamanism. Either the tricksters are crude forms of humor that release and control cultural tensions, or they are the embracing of the paradox and contradiction that express human mentality. It seems that the trickster figure is the enemy of cultural limitations and articulator of cultural boundaries, or it is a liminal generative device of cultural plenitude and a narrative instantiation of semiosis.

Of course, probably all of these are true at some level, and I suspect this "great divide" in trickster studies is actually more the results of methodological and ideological struggles in the academic community than it is from something fundamental to the trickster figure. Certainly Radin and other universalists (pyschological or classicist) can be justly critiqued for making projections of European notions (evolutionary or psychological) onto the trickster figure. It is easy to be so non-plused or so intrigued by the ambivalences of Trickster that one tries persistently, if not disparately, to find some rationalist connective for all of trickster's chaos, grossness, irregularity, irascibility, and charm, and the human penchant to see things in terms of one's natal experience does affect us all. Some culturalists, on the other hand, are so bent on critiquing 19th century notions or deconstructing the cultural absolutes of dead white men, they refuse to see the "family resemblances," to use Wittgenstein's term, that exist in the trickster figures across the world. It is equally easy to look at all those trickster paradoxes and contradictions and use them to affirm principles of cultural relativity, and the desirer to dazzle with new insights is never far

from academic pelt displays. Perhaps it is that cultural students (anthropologists, sociologists, or post-colonialists) are wont to use trickster to explain social dynamics or to justify their interests in other cultures. Or it may be that literary critics and deconstructionists want to "text"-ify all of trickster and mystify its rather pointed, if simple, humor into philosophically complex cultural studies that tweak mainstream cultures. It seems we all assemble our lists of trickster characteristics, index the tales that are told of trickster, chart the social, cultural, or biological connectives that will "explain" the trickster figure, and look for a common human thread that will, if not contain, at least categorize Trickster.

Apparently, our logical, anthropological, or critical minds find it hard to accept the trickster figure as it is, and the nature of scholarly and intellectual enterprises is seek explanations for Trickster, rather than chuckling knowingly. But I do think we, and by this I mean this journal and its essays, need to avoid what Louis Hyde called the "domestication" of Trickster, for as he suggests it really is an attempt to kill Trickster, to defang it penchant for disorder, and to categorize the figure out of the generative and puzzling chaos it seems to need to survive. I think one needs here to think fractally -- to recognize the complexity that comes from simple iterations, to ride the edge of the chaos, and to understand there is something in the trickster figure that is marvelously simple and elegantly beautiful. But we must also recognize that something is immensely powerful and centripetally destructive churning the very nature of what we perceive, what we feel, and what we hold sacred. Doing Trickster, Studying Trickster, Telling Trickster or Being Trickster is like being mounted on a tiger, it is an exciting ride, but its nearly impossible for us to let go for fear of being eaten or forgotten. So whether what its does to us or for us is sacred, profane, or simply alimentary and assimilative, let us enjoy the bounty of the mess!

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