

# **Coyote is not a metaphor: On decolonizing, (re)claiming and (re)naming Coyote**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines Indigenous oral traditions as methodologies for decolonization by extending Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) settler moves to innocence to include "colonial parallelism." This article also looks at how western attempts at colonial parallelism have resulted in Coyote First Person being compared to and identified with "trickster" characters and argues that drawing this colonial parallelism of Coyote First Person as part of a universal trickster archetype renders Coyote First Person as a metaphor and erases how Coyote First Person actually builds and supports Indigenous ideas about the world and unsettles western ideas about the world. Ultimately this article asks readers to consider that, as we engage with Coyote First Person as a philosopher and philosophy of decolonization discourse, we should consider how the (re)naming of Coyote, rather than Coyote First Person or the given Indigenous language name, speaks to our theoretical standpoint.

**Keywords:** *oral history; decolonization; literature; Coyote; trickster; revitalization*

## Introduction

Storytelling is a tradition of Indigenous peoples that encompasses all aspects of Indigenous culture and society, where spirituality and religion is not separated from science or politics and where Indigenous intellectualism and education includes rigorous training in the oral tradition. Oral traditions are native literatures that exist for time immemorial and provide ways to live with and be responsible to the earth. While Indigenous peoples have continuously been written about as a ‘dying race’ that would eventually cease to exist, the grounding of oral traditions as building blocks for contemporary discussions in Native American and Indigenous studies (and by extension the use of the oral narratives in (re)claiming and (re)naming theories of law, gender, science and history), reflects a continuing tradition, and ties contemporary writers and scholars to an ancient “before time”. Oral traditions, when treated as substantive bodies of knowledge, provide a concrete way of accessing and analyzing living epistemological theories from Indigenous nations.

The context for this article is to explore how we talk about “Coyote” versus Coyote First Person to demonstrate how Coyote First Person stories are unsettling and can be utilized as a tool for decolonization in Indigenous communities. This is primarily approached through a community/ tribally based literary analysis of oral narrative stories to demonstrate how these stories contain a decolonizing philosophy that is built from acts of survivance<sup>1</sup> enacted by Indigenous First People in the “before time” or throughout ancient history. “Coyote” has been conceived of, analyzed and interpreted by countless scholars from around the globe. The engagement with “Coyote” and Coyote First Person in contemporary discussions has created a substantive Coyote discourse that demonstrates Indigenous epistemologies and intellectualism.

However, scholarship has often relied on what I call “colonial parallelism” to discuss and analyze the role of Coyote First Person in Indigenous oral traditions as part of a universal trickster archetype which, I argue, renders Coyote First Person as a metaphor and erases how Coyote First Person actually builds and supports Indigenous ideas about the world and unsettles western ideas about the world. This is not to negate the growing body of Indigenous studies scholarship that engages with Coyote First Person through trickster discourse but to instead complicate this discourse by demonstrating how Coyote First Person is not only a trickster, but also a complex embodiment of Indigenous decolonizing epistemologies.

This colonial parallelism has also resulted in universalizing Coyote First Person’s name, and very little engagement with Coyote First Person’s Indigenous names. “Coyote” is a translation of the name given to this First Person by different Indigenous peoples. The etymology of the English term “Coyote” can be traced back to the Nahuatl peoples of what is now Mexico

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<sup>1</sup> Vizenor explores the aesthetics of survivance in literary theory in his book *Manifest Manners: Narratives of Postindian Survivance* where he stresses the continuance of Native stories, traditions and cultures as “renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (p. vii). Vizenor argues that survivance is an active and contemporary methodology for Native nations. Other Native critics, like Jace Weaver, have extended this analysis to read survivance as encompassing both survival and resistance and providing a means to speak to how Native peoples not only survive settler colonialism but also actively resist it.

who called this First Person Coyote. The word was adopted by the Spanish as “Coyote” to refer to the animal species *Canis Latrans* and quickly became used by scholars as the translated name for Indigenous terms for Coyote First Person, even if this translation does not accurately reflect the meaning of the Indigenous names. The continued problem of translating these Indigenous names with the term “Coyote” portrays each Coyote First Person as a universal character, both across Indigenous nations and also in regards to cultures throughout the world.

This article looks at what it means to (re)name Coyote First Person by utilizing his/her Indigenous given name to move beyond essentializing “Coyote” as merely an animal or trickster figure. This is not to claim that Coyote First Person’s Indigenous name is the more legitimate name or that there is a need to “police” the naming or (re)naming of figures like Coyote First Person. Instead, this article interrogates the uses of various names for Indigenous First People as a methodology of decolonization. This article is meant to create a space for discussion as to how this engagement with naming becomes part of a decolonizing praxis.

(Re)claiming and (re)naming are two decolonization projects from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, where she specifically notes that, “A critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as indigenous peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts” (p. 29). Though Indigenous peoples have always had names for their lands, theories about how the world works, and histories of their own, they have been portrayed as being without a tradition of intellectualism and philosophy. Smith acknowledges in her work that, “Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to *rewriting* and *rerighting* our position in history” (p. 29). In her 2013 book *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, Mishuana Goeman explains her framing of “re” with parenthesis by stating “I use the parentheses in (re)mapping deliberately to avoid the pitfalls of recovery or a seeming return of the past to the present” (p. 4). She further notes, “Recovery has a certain saliency in Native American studies; it is appealing to people who have been dispossessed materially and culturally. I contend, however, that it is also our responsibility to interrogate our ever-changing Native epistemologies that frame our understanding of land and our relationships to it and to other peoples” (p. 3). In this article, I choose to continue Smith and Goeman’s methodologies by employing the use of parenthesis to designate the (re)claiming and (re)naming of Indigenous epistemologies involving Coyote First Person.<sup>2</sup> Like Goeman, I am concerned with how best to illustrate that, while these concepts and

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<sup>2</sup> As is often the case, writing in English about “Coyote” necessitates a categorization of the various Coyote persons I am speaking about throughout this article. Because the language of English does not clearly denote between Coyote as animal (or species *Canis Latrans*), Coyote as “Trickster” character, or Coyote as a “First Person” I have chosen to delineate these differences in a few key ways. When referring to “Coyote” as written in quotes, I am denoting that this is a western universalized term that uses “Coyote” indiscriminately. When referring to Coyote First Person, I use this as a way to show that this embodiment is tied to Indigenous epistemologies. In many California tribes, stories of the First People are creation stories that tie Indigenous peoples to their land, flora and fauna and are about an ancient society of beings who inhabited the earth before human beings. I also make every effort to refer to Coyote First Person by his/her given Indigenous name when relaying stories about him/her in a community based context.

projects of claiming and naming are part of the ancient knowledges developed by Indigenous peoples, I am not advocating for a “return to the past,” or even privileging the past, but instead trying to demonstrate how these epistemologies are modern philosophies of decolonization that can build a vibrant future. I find that in putting (re) in parenthesis, I am able to more fully demonstrate that Indigenous peoples are not just claiming and naming (or mapping, or creating) in the present but they are participating in a (re)vitalization that builds a future with the past, and shows how these epistemological foundations speak to a lasting legacy, that is both ancient and modern in their discourse that challenges settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism relies on the continued erasure and silencing of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges to prevent challenges to settler colonial claims to land and history, and to subvert Indigenous efforts of decolonization. Settler colonialism is reaffirmed continuously through western languages, ideologies, policies, institutions and philosophies as articulated through a western epistemological framework of education, law and government that does not engage with decolonization, and actively resists the unsettling of these ideologies. In a more nuanced context, settler colonialism is also reaffirmed by (perhaps) well-meaning scholars and theorists engaged in “decolonization as metaphor,” a phrase made popular in Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s (2012), “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.” Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that, “the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences,” which in turn has supported “settler moves to innocence” that hide ongoing settler culpability in colonialism (pp. 2-3). When decolonization is not anchored to Indigenous struggles for land and life, it becomes an “empty signifier to be filled by any track toward liberation” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Tuck and Yang remind their readers that decolonization is and must be “unsettling” and may “destabilize, un-balance, and repatriate the very terms and assumptions of some of the most radical efforts to reimagine human power relations” (p. 28).

Tuck and Yang (2012) explore six “settler moves to innocence” that they frame as representing “settler fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation” (p. 4).<sup>3</sup> The first move, “Settler nativism” notes that settlers will “locate or invent a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had ‘Indian blood,’” which Tuck and Yang argue is a means by which settlers can “mark themselves as blameless in the attempted eradications of Indigenous peoples” while “continuing to enjoy settler privilege and occupying stolen land.” (2012, pp. 10-11). The third move to innocence is “Colonial equivocation” which they describe as “homogenizing of various experiences of oppression as colonization” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 17).

I have added to this list an extension of these two settler moves to innocence to acknowledge what I call “colonial parallelism.” Unlike finding a long lost Indian ancestor or a homogenization of experiences of oppression, “colonial parallelism” attempts to portray commonality between cultural epistemologies and erase culturally based knowledge, which contributes to a settler colonial mentality that we are all “one world” who can be united as “one

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<sup>3</sup> The six settler moves to innocence include: (i) Settler nativism; (ii) Fantasizing adoption; (iii) Colonial equivocation; (iv) Conscientization; (v) At risk-ing/ Asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples; (vi) Re-occupation and urban homesteading.

people” through universal knowledges or experiences which, conveniently, parallel westernized ideas of how the world works. While this generalized notion of “parallelism” may seem, on the surface, of very little consequence to many Indigenous peoples, it is precisely through this type of attempted parallelism that Indigenous knowledges have been dismissed, devalued and therefore disregarded. The knowledge contained in the oral tradition is treated as metaphor, and not only that, a universalized metaphor that stretches across tribal and Indigenous groups. The settler aims to move toward innocence by embracing this knowledge but only in so far as they are able to draw parallels between this knowledge and western ideologies. Indigenous peoples are consistently asked to draw parallels between their culture and western ideas about the world in order to legitimize and utilize this knowledge within a western paradigm. This article also looks at how western attempts at colonial parallelism have resulted in Coyote First Person being compared to and identified with “trickster” characters throughout the world.<sup>4</sup>

It is because the oral tradition has been and continues to be a lasting illustration of Indigenous epistemologies and intellectualism that oral traditions are also a source of methodologies and strategies for decolonization in a modern context. As Tuck and Yang (2012) write: “Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place - indeed how we/they came to *be a place*” (p. 6). The oral tradition undeniably ties Indigenous peoples to their land through knowledge utilized as an important demonstration of living Indigenous epistemologies, while also helping to shape decolonization, not as a metaphor but as a guiding principle built into the histories, presents and cultures of Indigenous peoples. These “stories” should be analyzed to encompass the disquieting and unsettling nature of this knowledge. Coyote First Person, in his/her many iterations and stories, actively participates in building a decolonizing praxis for Indigenous communities by challenging settler colonialism. Tuck and Yang (2012) note that “decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity,” (p. 5) and it is Coyote First Person who embodies this futurity for Indigenous peoples. What better way to honor and bring to the forefront Indigenous futurity than by supporting and representing decolonization as a living epistemology of Indigenous people, and to demonstrate how decolonization has been enveloped into their most ancient traditions and knowledge through Coyote First person?

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Radin’s (1956) text *The Trickster: A Study in Native American Mythology* became one of the most popular foundational texts to study Native American oral narratives and the oral tradition for a number of years after it was published. Radin attempted to codify Indigenous First People of ancient oral traditions as primitive psychological attempt by ancient man to “solve his problems inward and outward...” (p. x) This built the trickster discourse regarding Indigenous First People (like Coyote) as being about the universal trickster archetype. Radin’s interpretation was supported further by leading scholars like Carl Jung and Mac Winscott Ricketts. Vine Deloria, Jr. provides a thorough and critical response of this “predominant interpretation” of the trickster figure in his 1999 text *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*.

## Storytelling and Indigenous oral tradition

The tradition of Indigenous storytelling and the continued importance of this knowledge has long been ignored and silenced by western academic institutions which instead promoted and supported ideas about Indigenous peoples that categorized them as savage and primitive and their knowledge as rudimentary or child-like. Vine Deloria, Jr. (1999) explains how there is a persistent belief held by Western colonizers and intellectuals which supports the notion that, “non-Western peoples represent an earlier stage of their own cultural evolution... Non-Western knowledge is believed to originate from primitive efforts to explain a mysterious universe” (p. 41). Deloria, Jr. (1999) argues that tribal methodologies (like the oral tradition) are considered “prescientific” which he calls “wholly incorrect” (p. 41). To justify and support the continued colonization of the land and its peoples, Indigenous peoples, and by extension their knowledge and literatures, are marginalized and separated from a reasoned and enlightened culture.

These types of categorizations were used to motivate and justify the ongoing colonization of Indigenous societies. Not only were European nations justified in dispossessing Indigenous societies because their superiority, but Indigenous peoples would benefit by receiving the gift of “civilization”. In some cases, the civilizing mission was a moral imperative that required Europeans to spread civilization. These narratives of conquest were built into the social ideas of Western imperialists. More than just a blind ignorance to Indigenous intellectualism and thought, it was a deliberate and calculated move to silence Indigenous knowledge and erase it from contemporary discussions of “civilized” people. This was an effective way to claim the land by claiming the “true,” and “rightful” stories of the land and re-writing the history to support “manifest destiny” and the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. Ines Hernandez-Avila (1995), noted literary scholar, writes:

The process of dehumanization of cultural beliefs matters is an important aspect of colonization. The total dehumanization of Indigenous peoples of the Americas was and is necessary in order to justify their continuing exploitation in the United States and throughout the hemisphere. (p. 342)

This dehumanization of Native peoples included the degradation and dismissal of Indigenous oral stories as “mythology.” This attempted to strip these stories of the ability to empower Native peoples as these narratives tie Native peoples inextricably to their culture, land and history. Deborah Miranda (2013) declares in the introduction to her book, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*, that, “Story is the most powerful force in the world - in our world, maybe in all worlds” (p. xvi). She writes that, “Culture is lost when we neglect to tell our stories, when we forget the power and craft of storytelling” (2013, p. xiv). Native knowledge, and by extension Native literatures and the oral tradition, were attacked because of their power to resist colonization. Stories were and are how Indigenous peoples define and redefine their sovereignty, spaces, cultures and knowledge. Therefore, storytelling reclaims “epistemic ground that was erased by colonialism,” and in the process, “also lays a framework and foundation for the

resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and the reclamation of material ground” (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. III). Waziyatawin (2004) writes that, “The recovery of traditional knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization...” (p. 72). This (re)covery is but a first step and is not addressed by simply utilizing, but by also acknowledging the power of these oral narratives to develop, sustain and empower Indigenous peoples and communities despite the continuing colonization of their lands and histories.

Many of these oral traditions were gathered in textbooks to be published as academic treatises on pre-colonial Indigenous cultures. While Native peoples were often consulted as “informants” for these ethnographic studies, interpretation and translation of the literatures was left to “trained academics” who believed they could objectively and accurately portray the Indigenous oral tradition. While this ethnographic methodology continues, other scholars (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) have endeavored to build frameworks for analysis that dialogue with Indigenous peoples in relation to their communities and nations. As the oral tradition is epistemologically tied to each tribe, the reading and analysis of that oral tradition must be based in tribal knowledge. To reflect on this knowledge, several scholars have looked to Indigenous languages to find within that language constructs of Indigenous literature, law and politics (Black, 2011; Womack, 1999; Alfred, 1999).<sup>5</sup> In *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here: Work, Community, and Memory on California’s Round Valley Reservation, 1850-1941*, Wailacki and Concow scholar Willie Bauer (2009) utilizes the oral histories and traditions of his tribes to demonstrate “the ability of Round Valley Indians to adapt to economic change and integrate into the wage work market...” (p. 9). Bauer begins his book at the creation of the world and argues that, “the foundation of Round Valley Indian work, labor, and community rests... on those very practices that occurred in ‘ancient time’ in California” (2009, p. 14). Bauer is engaging with the oral literatures of his tribes to decolonize the historical record and create a history of labor that speaks to how Round Valley Indians conceptualized and understood labor and work in a history that reaches from time immemorial.

The use of what has often been classified as “literary” devices like the oral tradition to impart and develop ideas about decolonization is an Indigenous way of using stories to educate, change, and understand the world. Robert Warrior (1995) remarks that Native traditions of storytelling are “continuous with Native traditions of deliberation and decision making” and frame “intellectual sovereignty,” a process that he says is, “...not a struggle to be free from the influence of anything outside ourselves, but a process of asserting the power we possess as communities and individuals to make decisions that affect our lives” (p. 118, p. 124). Creek scholar Craig Womack (1999) argues that the oral tradition can be read for nationalist themes to show that oral narratives, “performed in their cultural contexts have always been nationalistic and are told for the purpose of cultivating a political consciousness” (p. 61). Womack further

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<sup>5</sup>The use of the term literature does not imply the use of a written script. Indigenous literature encompasses the many forms of story that exist in Indigenous cultures throughout the world. This is not to imply that orality is inferior to literature or needs to be validated as literature but instead to complicate our discussion of literatures to show how Indigenous peoples have always participated in literary discourse and production, though their contributions were often ignored or silenced.

explains that the oral tradition is an “ongoing, dynamic process, rather than a fixed creed, and evolves according to the changing needs of the nation” (1999, p. 59). Dian Million (2014) writes that, “American Indian, First Nations, and Indigenous scholars recognize orally based communal knowledge as organized epistemic systems that *do exist* and whose influence is active even though they might not be legitimized by academia” (p. 35). She further argues, “These systems are theory, since they posit a proposition and a paradigm on how the world works.... Story has always been practical, strategic, and restorative. Story *is* Indigenous theory” (p. 35). Million is writing, in part, to show how the storytelling tradition that reaches from time immemorial, is built on an Indigenous epistemological framework that values story as a means of knowledge production and healing, and also builds systems of theory and philosophy.

Building this Indigenous decolonizing praxis has extended into work specifically being done in decolonizing theory as well. Michelle Jacob (2013) explores what she calls a “Yakama decolonizing praxis” in her book *Yakama Rising: Indigenous Cultural Revitalization, Activism and Healing*, where she explores how her tribe’s cultural revitalization efforts “have two interconnected goals: 1) recovering traditional cultural practices, and 2) dismantling oppressive systems that harm our people, land, and culture” (p. 12). She argues that, “Through their everyday actions in and around the Yakama Reservation, in their travels to other institutions and gatherings,” her tribal people are articulating a Yakama decolonizing praxis (p. 12). Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes (2013) open the second volume of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* with their assertion that “...decolonization, despite its relatively new entry into academic vocabulary, has been practiced and engaged and theorized in Indigenous communities in ways that have already yielded rich, complex layers of thought” (p. II). They refer to the work being done in *Decolonization* as a “testament” to the personal as political and to “Indigenous communities as the loci of decolonization theory” through “Indigenous knowledge production and storytelling” (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. II).

Among the many roles that the oral tradition plays in Indigenous societies, these stories also are epistemologies of decolonization that build a decolonizing praxis. In my experiences in my own communities, decolonization theory is gaining ground in discussions of tribal politics and cultural revitalizations. Tribal leaders are interested in how theoretical constructs speak to their lived experiences, and as more Indigenous peoples enter in to the academic world, more Indigenous communities are able to see their own tribally based knowledge reflected in academic discourse. In tribal communities, decolonizing praxis is built into ceremonial and cultural actions meant to (re)vitalize and (re)build Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities engage with decolonization through action, demonstrating how important praxis is to theory, and how decolonization is a part of living Indigenous communities.

Gerald Vizenor (1990) writes that “Native American Indian literatures are unstudied landscapes, wild and comic rather than tragic and representational, stories with narrative wisps and tribal discourse” (p. 279). It is precisely because of these complicated and un-disciplinary meanings that the oral tradition plays a key role in the decolonization of Native communities. Part of enacting decolonization and not treating it as a metaphor is to tell these stories, not only

to preserve our culture but also to “imagine our future” (Miranda, 2013, p. xiv). Decolonization can be both aided and diluted by modern interpretations and understandings of the oral tradition. Coyote First Person, a central interest to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, has been commodified and his/her stories diluted by many modern scholars who center their work on the “trickster” archetype. Coyote First Person is not an archetype or “character.” Coyote First Person is discourse and knowledge. Coyote First Person is a building block for decolonization in a modern context and should be explored as an unsettling force that challenges settler colonialism.

## The Indigenous oral tradition and Coyote First Person

As one of the most popular “characters” in the oral traditions of the Western Americas, “Coyote” is often explored as a model “trickster character” and has been a prevalent subject of scholarly research on Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge. To the Chinook s/he is Italpas. The Navajo call him/her Ma’ii. The Lakota call him/her Mica. S/he is Skinkuts in Kutenai and Isil in Cupeno. The Pima call him/her Tcu-unnkita and consider him/her the off-spring of the moon. Throughout the Americas s/he<sup>6</sup> takes on many different roles, sometimes as a parental figure, sometimes as spoiled and childlike, and sometimes as savior or hero. Most commonly referred to as “he,” Coyote First Person stories can also reflect a feminine role or even a genderless role depending on region or tribal nation. These stories are often misinterpreted or portrayed as tales about the *Canis Latrans* the western scientific name that denotes the animal species as Canis (dog) Latrans (barking). As Coyote First Person is intimately tied to this animal species, the stories about Coyote as an Indigenous First Person are most often associated with “animal tales,” “fables” or children’s stories.

The Indigenous oral tradition has alternatively been compared to ancient mythology, fables and folklore. In a 2000 article, anthropologist Ronald J. Mason argues that Native oral traditions are comparable to and nothing more than “myths” writing that they are “cultural specific, memory dependent, and accepted on faith” and that their use by archaeologists as historical fact contributes to a “re-mystification of the past” (p. 262). The consistent reference to Indigenous teachings/knowledge/traditions as “myths, fables or legends” reduces the Indigenous conceptual framework of oral tradition to mythology and negates their complex construction. These stories are not animal tales or fables but rather ancient histories, philosophies and knowledge about the world and the origins of Indigenous peoples.

However, as similar as some of the traits and discourses between nations and stories may be, many times views and beliefs about Coyote First Person differ. They can even be quite diverse among nations that share common cultural elements or who are in very close contact with each other. This demonstrates quite clearly how these stories reflect societal, educational

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<sup>6</sup> Because I value the notion that Coyote inhabits genders and forms beyond categorical approaches ingrained in western ideologies about gender and sexuality, I have chosen to refer to Coyote First Person as s/he when necessary throughout the article.

and scientific knowledge based in these different Indigenous communities and why it would be important to recognize and understand those cultural differences.

It would be a disservice to the multiple iterations of Coyote First Person in these many diverse Indigenous cultures to attempt to generalize the experiences and/or creation stories across cultures. Instead, here I will focus in on tribal peoples of the west coast of what is now called the United States, with a particular focus on tribes that live in what is now called California. Coyote First Person, like many others in Indigenous histories, is not simply an animal character. William Bright (1993) explains that, “[First People] had names that we now associate with animals... When humans came into existence, the First People were transformed into the species of animals that still bear their names. All this is to say that the First people were not animals” (p. xi-xii).

In many California tribes, stories of the First People are creation stories that tie Indigenous peoples to their land, flora and fauna. The stories often feature a race of beings that exist before humans. When their time on earth is over, they (most often) go into the land, trees, mountains, rocks and animals that still exist in the world today. California Indian historian Willie Bauer (2009) calls this “place making” and he writes that, “Creation stories emphasize the indigenoussness of their respective people by featuring and naming the important features of the land” (p. 16). By extension, Indigenous people become responsible to all things of creation, including those “inanimate objects” like rocks, mountains, rivers and trees. Each of these things is endowed with a spirit, a literal “force of nature” that Indigenous peoples regard as creators of their world. When the First People transform and become part world that is now inhabited by humans, they also endow animals with their spirit and these animals become intimately tied to human beings as their ancient ancestors. Coyote First Person, therefore, is an ancestor of Indigenous peoples and the physical manifestation of this ancestor as *Canis Latrans* embodies this First Person.

Coyote First Person lives throughout the Western Hemisphere. Origin stories and retellings of these adventures can be found in tribes throughout the west, where s/he often takes on a central role in building Indigenous philosophies and histories. In William Bright’s (1993) “A Coyote Reader,” Bright collects stories from over 20 Indigenous groups, who all feature Coyote as a central part of their world. The Rumsen Costanoan people of California are “The Children of Coyote” and trace their creation back to Coyote First Person (táččikimáčan) as the father of five separate village communities in the Monterey, California region. The narrative begins with their First People (Coyote<sup>7</sup>, Eagle, Hummingbird) who are all escaping from a catastrophe on the earth. Once they are safe, táččikimáčan finds a young girl and is instructed to marry her so “people may be raised again” (Kroeber, 1907, pp. 199-201). Recorded in the early 19th century

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<sup>7</sup> The Rumsen Costanoan name for “Coyote” is táččikimáčan. I have not at the present moment been able to find a direct translation of the term to reflect how the Rumsen language encapsulates meaning for their Coyote First Person.

by anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, this narrative has been interpreted as one of “rebirth and regeneration, one that recounts how the First People were brought to the brink of destruction yet survived to re-people their land. It is a story of setbacks, false starts, doubts, and departures, all on the way to recovery” (Hackel, 2005, p. 16). Here, the First People provide a narrative history of decolonization and provide a meaningful demonstration of the continued survivance of the people despite the attempted destruction of their way of life.

## **(Re)naming Coyote First Person**

The engagement with “Coyote” and Coyote First Person in contemporary scholarship, fiction, poetry, art and numerous creative outlets has created a substantive “Coyote” discourse that has contributed to a continued storytelling tradition and Indigenous intellectualism. (Re)naming Coyote First Person is not about erasing or challenging the extensive work that has been done to engage with “Coyote” discourse but to instead move beyond essentializing “Coyote” as merely an animal like or trickster figure. How we discuss and choose to name our Coyote First Person and by extension our Coyote First Person philosophy should be informed by our understanding of decolonizing praxis.

In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) analyzes the methodologies of colonization to highlight the continued subjugation of Indigenous peoples through research and appropriation of knowledge. One particular colonizing methodology highlighted by Smith is that of “naming” (p. 51). Smith (2012) focuses on how colonizers renamed the land and how, “Renaming the land was probably as powerful ideologically as changing the land.... This newly named land became increasingly disconnected from the songs and chants used by Indigenous peoples to trace their histories, to bring forth spiritual elements or to carry out the simplest of ceremonies” (p. 51).

Smith (2012) offers a methodology of decolonization that utilizes the knowledge and strength of Indigenous communities to “rewrite and rereign” history (p. 98). She advocates for an Indigenous research philosophy that furthers projects and methodologies that support decolonization. One particular project is called “Naming” and Smith defines this project as “renaming the world using the original Indigenous names” (2012, p. 157). For Smith, naming is about “retaining as much control over meanings as possible. By ‘naming the world’ people name their realities. For communities there are realities which can only be found in the indigenous language; the concepts which are self-evident in the Indigenous language can never be captured by another language” (2012, p. 158).

There is so much in a name. There is power in a name. There is the right to self, respect of knowledge and acknowledgement of existence in a name. When Indigenous people were forced to accept the renaming of their lands and, in many instances, forced to accept new names for their own peoples and themselves, this was a systematic attempt to destroy these peoples. Naming became a weapon of destruction in the hands of colonizers and is a tool of strength, power and rebuilding in the hands of Indigenous peoples. Colonizers renamed Indigenous

peoples as groups but also individually, in many cases forcing them to adopt Hispanic or English names (depending on location). In Boarding Schools, Indigenous children were forced to give up their Indian names in favor of names like “John” or “Jacob.” The repercussions of this loss of identity and personal autonomy are still being felt today.

Each of us, as we engage with Coyote First Person as a philosopher of decolonization discourse, should consider how the naming (and (re)naming) of Coyote First Person speaks to the ideologies and understanding of Coyote First Person and his/her many iterations. The choice of naming, either as Coyote, Coyote First Person or through the use of the given Indigenous language name, ultimately speaks to our theoretical standpoint. As we engage in our own relationships with the complex Indigenous epistemologies contained in the oral tradition, it is important to demonstrate how the naming of Coyote First Person frames the work being done in (re)building and (re)vitalizing Indigenous ways of knowing. Reclaiming Coyote’s Indigenous name can be a powerful decolonizing methodology that teaches the next generation of Indigenous peoples that the fundamental building blocks of their cultural beliefs and how the names of their “First Peoples” are just as important as the English translation of those names.

In his book, *Coyote was Going There*, Jarold Ramsey (1977) specifically looks at a cross section of oral histories from Northern California, Oregon and Washington. In his introduction he states: “It seems to me to be important that we now try to confront such names and words and learn to voice them correctly in their stories, instead of accepting the denatured English substitutes – at’at’a’hliia in place of “Owl woman”; Diab, xwa’sxwas in place of “Chief Big Foot” (pg. xxxvi). However, immediately after providing this framework he continues to refer to “Coyote” as “Coyote” and does not provide a name for this Coyote First person.

Dell Hymes (2003) demonstrates the problems of translations of oral narratives by exploring the “mode of presentation” which has says involves “not only translation but also transformation, transformation of modality, the presentation of something heard as something seen” (pg. 40). Arnold Krupat (2005) echoes this sentiment by concluding, “In all too many cases it is not possible to ‘know what they said’ for what they said was never transcribed, or if transcribed not preserved... Hymes himself, unusually learned in Native languages, has shown how informed scrutiny of transcriptions can reveals structural patterns which had been entirely obscured in English prose translation” (pp. 323-324).

The Nez Perce for example have multiple names to distinguish Coyote in his multiple roles:

Coyote, (*Canis latrans*): ‘iceyé ‘ ice  
 coyote (in stories, normal): nisé-weynu  
 coyote (in stories, pejorative) lisé-weylu  
 coyote guest, guest who is Coyote: ‘iceyeye’stúkes istúkes  
 coyote story, folktale: titwantiná-wit titwati

I offer here another example from my own tribes, the Hupa, Yurok and Karuk of Northern California. I am enrolled in the Hoopa Valley Tribe, though I would not and could not discount

my deep, personal and familial ties to my other tribes. In Hupa, Coyote First Person is called *xontehł-taw*, and in Karuk *pihnêefich*. These two tribes present a particularly clear demonstration of the importance of Coyote First Person's name as a reflection of cultural and social values. The tribes in our area have often been described by anthropologists and linguists as sharing a "common culture." Their close proximity to each other facilitated a mostly peaceful existence and they often intermarried and came together to participate in cultural ceremonies. Linguists have spent many years attempting to decode the relationships between language and culture. While the languages of the Hupa and Karuk were very different from each other, they also shared common traits. Shawn O'Neill (2008), discusses the cultural contact and linguistic relativity among the Hupa, Yurok and Karuk and points out that, "For instance, none of these languages has generic categories for 'insects,' 'plants', or 'animals' as general classes of life, instead there is a profusion of terms for individual species" (p. 11). This actually highlights the importance of maintaining the names of the First People featured in the oral narratives. These names were not given haphazardly or lightly and many times reflected cultural, social, political and particular knowledge about the world.

Naming was also very important to the Hupa people. In the traditional Hupa way, names were not given to children until after a ceremony was performed ten days after birth. For the Hupa, names reflected your village (or home) as well as your individuality. Your name, delineated by your village name, would tell people where you were from, and what village or land place you were intimately and forever tied to. Words or names were not chosen lightly, and many times were a reflection of a communion with the spirit. Some Hupa people were given new names late in life when they moved into a more spiritual or leadership role. These new names often reflected a message from the K'ixinay (First People).

In Hupa, *xontehł-taw*<sup>8</sup> is a First Person portrayed as "only human" in that s/he makes mistakes or makes bad decisions. His/her fallibility speaks to the tribal culture of the Hupa and their continued telling and retelling of *Xontehł-taw*'s fetes highlight their importance to these tribal peoples. *Xontehł-taw* is not simply "Coyote" but instead is grounded in his/her place in the world. *Xontehł-taw* roughly translates to "flats - the one that is around" although there has been some suggestion by linguists that this was a specialized term used only in certain instances.<sup>9</sup> However, this is the term which survived assimilation and colonization efforts and it reflects the specialized nature of the Hupa language that focuses on place, location and ties to the land. The Hupa language is known for the often complex thoughts contained in each of their words. This clearly demonstrates that the oversimplification of *Xontehł-taw*'s name, as translated to "Coyote", does not account for these important aspects of the language and tribal culture.

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<sup>8</sup> *xontehł-taw* • coyote [literally, *the one that is around the flats, clearings*]  
<http://www.linguistics.berkeley.edu/~hupa/hupa-lexicon.php?ge=coyote&db=on&tab=results&id=4404>

<sup>9</sup> *t'o:q'-nahł'awh* • another name for coyote (not common) [literally, *they go around in prairies*]  
<http://www.linguistics.berkeley.edu/~hupa/hupa-lexicon.php?ge=coyote&id=641&db=on&tab=results>

XontehL-taw is referred to as “one” who hangs around the flats, not “animal” or “dog” or even “other” but instead, part of the tribe and people themselves.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, the Karuk word for Coyote First Person is pihnêefich<sup>11</sup>. Translated this name becomes “old man – excrement - dim” or “shitty old man.” However, the Karuk also have a designated word for Coyote as an animal that lives in Karuk country or the species *canis latrans*. The Karuk refer to Coyote (*canis latrans*) as tishráam ishkuuntíhan or “flats-skulk-dur-agt” or “he who skulks in the valleys.”<sup>12</sup> “Coyote” translated into Karuk can have very different meanings. This is precisely why knowledge of the intended use of each name is required in order to more accurately reflect the meaning of these oral narratives. In this instance we can clearly see that using the blanket term “Coyote” oversimplifies the beliefs, knowledge and cultural values of the Karuk peoples who are sharing these histories. There is a very big difference between referring to the character in Karuk stories as “Coyote” or referring to her/him as pihnêefich with all of the nuances and cultural meanings that are a part of this name.

As demonstrated in these two examples, reflected throughout Indigenous languages is a complex worldview that often cannot be translated in a meaningful way into English. Many Indigenous peoples have also adopted the name “Coyote” for their historical trickster character. However, for some of these Indigenous people, there is a type of collective memory which often allows them access the true nature of the Coyote character, one that is based in an understanding of the cultural, social, religious, political and linguistic factors that can only be experienced by total immersion in the society. The decisions of Indigenous people in how they refer to or name their First People when telling and re-telling these histories should be a part of how these stories are engaged with and analyzed.

Coyote First Person’s ability to inhabit such a deep, self-actualizing philosophy and to speak to the past, present and future, is perhaps why s/he has fascinated settlers and theorists hoping to find a connection between Coyote First Person and settler memory. Western theory has attempted to explain Coyote First Person, to codify and make a systematic analysis, which has supported settler colonialism. By (re)writing and (re)vitalizing these oral traditions, stories like those featuring Coyote are able to unsettle the knowledge we take for granted as “universal” and

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<sup>10</sup> This could also reflect a Hupa believe that anyone/person could be a type of XontehL-taw as it leaves the definition open to include reference to a person as “one” (or any person) who hangs around the flats. It makes XontehL-taw a part of all of the people of the tribe, as they could at any time be referred to in this manner when presenting these characteristics.

<sup>11</sup> pihnêefich / pihneef- • N • coyote  
<http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~karuk/karuk-dictionary.php?exact-match=&lx=&ge=coyote&sd=&pos=&lxGroup-id=4782&audio=&index-position=&index-order=>

<sup>12</sup> tishráam ishkuuntíhan • MWU • by-name for coyote *Canis latrans*.  
<http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~karuk/karuk-dictionary.php?exact-match=&lx=&ge=coyote&sd=&pos=&lxGroup-id=6098&audio=&index-position=&index-order=>

call in to question ideas of “objectivity,” “truth,” and “fact” (some of the very building blocks of western epistemologies).

## **Coyote: More than a trickster**

Coyote First Person is often compared to and identified with “trickster” characters from around the world. Classified by western scholars and theorists, the “trickster” becomes a universal character representing: “a primitive ‘cosmic’ being of divine-animal nature. On the one hand superior to man because of his superhuman qualities, and on the other hand inferior to him because of his unreason and unconsciousness” (Jung, 1959, p. 254).

Paul Radin’s (1956) text, *The Trickster: A Study in Native American Mythology*, became one of the most popular foundational texts to study Native American oral narratives and the oral tradition for a number of years after it was published. Radin attempted to codify Indigenous First People of ancient oral traditions as primitive psychological attempts by ancient man to “solve his problems inward and outward...” (pg. x). This built the trickster discourse regarding Indigenous First People (like Coyote) into the universal trickster archetype. Radin’s interpretation was supported further by leading scholars like Carl Jung and Mac Winscott Ricketts.

Ricketts (1966) defines the role of the trickster as (1) cultural hero who “risks his life and limb in daring entanglements with supernatural powers in order that the world may be a better place for those who are to come”; (2) transformer, “a being of myth times who goes about doing things that set the pattern and form the world for all time”; and (3) trickster, “a worldly being of uncertain origin who lives by his wits and is often injured and embarrassed by his foolish imitations and pranks” (1966, p. 338).

Noted Sioux scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. (1999) takes apart most of Ricketts’s assumptions in his book *Spirit and Reason*, arguing that Ricketts’s oversimplification of oral histories is “modernistic value judgment” that “generally involves an uncritical approval of present knowledge. It further suggests that, apart from cultural quirks and historical accidents, each human society would inevitably march along a civilized incline the goal of which would be a scientific, technological society holding the same beliefs and adhering to the same interpretation of the world as that which we presently enjoy” (1999, p. 20).

Gerald Vizenor is a noted scholar of Native trickster discourse. Vizenor represents and understands the Native trickster as a “holotrope” which exists as part of all Native discourse. (1998, p. 191). Vizenor complicates the western interpretations of “trickster archetypes” by introducing and re-interpreting the Native trickster as one who “is a communal sign in a comic narrative; the comic holotrope (the whole configuration)” and who creates and showcases a cosmic, comic philosophy of Indigenous theory (1990, p. 284). Kerstin Schmidt (1995) refers to Vizenor’s work as demonstrating “the possibility of comic theory” with the principle of “disrupting and subverting, transgressing the limitations set by the dominant discourse...” (p. 66). Vizenor (1993) further holds that “Missionaries and anthropologists were the first to

misconstrue silence, transformation and figuration in tribal stories; they were not trained to hear stories as creative literature and translated many stories as mere cultural representations” (p. 12).

Vizenor’s contribution to Native trickster discourse has allowed for and encouraged the “unsettling” of the trickster archetype as a means to understand Native literatures and oral narratives. Vizenor and subsequent scholars have adopted the term “trickster” to refer to the “comic holotrope” of Native discourse and philosophy and have started to recognize and discuss the role that these Native tricksters play to “complicate or even refute many preconceived notions of Native American storytelling” (Tidwell, 1997, p. 627). These scholars believe that the development of Native trickster theory “focuses new attention on both the viewer/ critic and on the powerful role that linguistic reversals play on cultures we interpret” (Tidwell, 1997, p. 627). Vizenor (1993) also notes that “The elusive and clever trickster characters in tribal imagination are seldom heard or understood in translation” (p. 12). Franchot Ballinger (2006) further notes that “...trickster stories we have read are translated and most of them not by Native peoples, so they don’t truly reflect the role of the story in the culture” (p. 9).

The problematic portrayal of Coyote First Person as a trickster archetype renders these stories as metaphor. They are translated and consequently mis-translated as animal stories about the trickster subconscious. This universalizing of Coyote First Person separates Coyote First Person from his/her people and his/her land and erases an important intent of Coyote’s stories - to establish an everlasting connection and responsibility to the land and its inhabitants. The “trickster discourse” as developed by western anthropologists and philosophers, marginalizes Coyote First Person by rendering him an “archetype” and metaphor for the development of an “evolved” human consciousness.

Indigenous readings of trickster narratives also contain deep-rooted philosophies about land, culture and decolonization. Coyote First Person is a decolonizing figure. He asserts Indigenous claims to land, he unsettles western theories and he builds a methodology for survivance and reclamation of Indigenous ways of life. I draw again from stories of my own tribes, the Hupa, Yurok and Karuk of Northern California. My grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, extended family and community members told the stories of Xontehł-taw to me. Throughout my life, I heard about Xontehł-taw’s consistent attempts to subvert dominant expectations, to assert his own identity, to make mistakes and to rely on his culture and family to move on from those mistakes. My mother’s favorite story to tell me was “Xontehł-taw and the stars” where Xontehł-taw decides that he wants to join the star women as they dance all night long. In this story Xontehł-taw is a male figure who longs to leave the Hoopa Valley and explore the world. He is able to reach the stars, where he dances with them. They wear beautiful white shell dresses and he is convinced he can stay with them forever. After dancing all night Xontehł-taw gets very tired. He wants to stop dancing but the stars explain to him that when they are done dancing in the skies over Hoopa, they must then go to the other side of the world and dance there. They are always dancing and they never stop. Xontehł-taw decides to return home because he cannot continue dancing. They drop him to the ground. The version my mother told would usually end with “and he was so hungry he ran to get a hamburger and fries. Many of his family

were there at the burger joint. They were excited to see him and wanted to hear all about his adventure. But first... they ate.” This story taught me not only about astronomy (stars are always in the sky, it is night on the other side of the world when it is day in Hoopa) but also about the grounding, meaningful support that comes from returning home. When Xontehł-taw returns, he is greeted by his family who want to know about his adventure.<sup>13</sup> They laugh and encourage him. His curiosity and subsequent return are not seen as negative experiences but instead support Xontehł-taw in his continued attempts to understand his place in the world. Many of the oral narratives that I would learn would involve philosophies that grounded me in a very deep and meaningful way to the Hoopa Valley. They would encourage my curiosity to see the world and remind me that I was safe to do this because when I returned home I would always have a place to land. Tying me in this way to my history as a Hupa person, provided me with the methodologies to enter a western society that would challenge who I was as an Indigenous person and to remember that I was from the Hoopa Valley where I had been from since “time immemorial.”

Another story that was told to me often as a child was *Coyote Steals Fire*, a Karuk story that was translated in William Bright’s text *A Coyote Reader* (1993, pp. 84-85). In the text, Bright translates a story told by Karuk elder Julia Starritt. He uses the name “Coyote” throughout the story and I will utilize this translation here because I cannot be sure which name for Coyote First Person Ms. Starritt used as she was telling her story. In this story, Coyote must go to the “upriver world” to retrieve fire where it is being kept from the First People. He is able to do this by entering the house where the fire is being hoarded, tricking the children who are there, and sticking fir bark between his toes, which he lights on fire to become coal. He then runs back downriver. When he gets tired he passes the coal to the next person who also runs. Eventually the fire is brought back to the “center of the world” so that it can be left for the humans. The last lines of Bright’s translation are “And then people said,/ ‘Why, they’ve taken it back from us,/ our fire!’” (1993, p. 86). In this story, Coyote demonstrates the continued resistance of Native people against those who would keep from them the basic necessities of life. This culminates in his efforts to return fire to the center of the world, to take back what was once a part of his world and return it. Coyote uses his brain, not weapons or violence to complete this task. And it is because of Coyote’s resilience against the oppressive hoarding of fire that he is able to set the world back into balance. This is also a community effort involving others who participate in carrying the fire back to the center of the world. Conceptually, this is a decolonizing methodology built into an ancient oral tradition. Native people here are instructed by the knowledge that their First People can guide Native people back to the center of the world and take back “the fire” from those would attempt to hoard it. Built into this story are philosophies of reclamation and survivance, which demonstrate that Karuk people (or Indigenous people) can find ways to bring back those things that were taken from them and reignite the center of the world.

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<sup>13</sup> There are additional versions of this story for the Karuk and the Yurok. In one Yurok story, Coyote falls to the earth and shatters into several pieces of driftwood.

## Conclusion

The acknowledgement that this ancient oral tradition is also part of contemporary decolonization praxis and methodology brings to light how these oral narratives are in fact much more than stories, myths or legends. Among the many forms and roles that they play in Indigenous societies, they also function as a deep, complicated philosophy, psychology, science and knowledge of the world. And it is precisely because of these complicated and un-disciplinary functions that the oral tradition plays a key role in the decolonization of Native communities. This is also why it becomes necessary to decolonize the oral tradition, to (re)claim, (re)name and (re)tell these stories with a tribally based epistemological analysis.

Held within these stories of Coyote First Person are Indigenous claims, rights and responsibility for their land and all beings. Coyote First Person helped to prepare the earth for Indigenous peoples so that they could thrive and care for their land. The knowledge about the interrelationship between Indigenous peoples and their land stretches from time immemorial. These narratives, therefore, document the rightful claims that Indigenous peoples have to the land. These integral and undeniable ties to place, land and history become an important testimony to the everlasting connection that Indigenous peoples have with their lands and cultures, which is contained in and reaffirmed by their oral traditions. This unbroken, deeply interconnected, multi-layered epistemology unsettles the machinations of settler colonialism that validate settler's claims to land and by extension their claims to peoples and history.

Indigenous oral narratives were developed as living histories and were understood not only as documents of the past, but also living philosophies of the present and future. How we talk and write about Indigenous oral tradition can be a “reaffirmation of Indigenous epistemological and ontological foundations” which, Waziyatawin (2004) portends, “offers a central form of resistance to the colonial forces that have consistently and methodically denigrated and silenced them” (p. 71). Karuk storyteller Julian Lang (1994) writes that the stories of the Ikaréeyav (Karuk First People) “are considered to be living entities. They have an existence unto themselves, being a part of the creation like the trees, the animals, and the mountains. Accordingly, we are responsible to regard them with the utmost respect, taking care not to abuse them” (1994, pg. 29). An Indigenous decolonizing praxis should not only pay respect to these knowledges but also engage with the ancient ideas left by the First People to help build a future with the past. *hayah-no:nt'ik*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> (Hupa) it (string) reaches so far; the (story, meeting, etc.) extends to there, reaches an end, that's the end of it ("The End", concluding formula for a traditional story) [literally, *there-it stretches to*]

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