

*Whatever Happens to Him Happens to Us:
Reading Coyote Reading the World*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how a young child, heavily laden with psychologistic “troubles” was recast by a fellow classmate into the trickster figure of Coyote and what differences such recasting made for all concerned.

RESUME: Ce papier traite du cas d'un jeune enfant manifestant de lourds désordres psychologiques. Un camarade de classe a écrit une histoire dans laquelle il a transposé son image dans celle du perfide personnage de Coyote. Au long de l'histoire, ce changement d'identité a provoqué des modifications de comportement que les intéressés analysent.

I

COYOTE

by starlight hush of wind the owl's shadow voice,
the campfire embers glowing inner universe
by firelight smoke curls weaving faint the voices,
coyote voices faint the pain and smell of pitch,
fire, I sing you stars,
fire, I breath obsidian
& again the owl's shadow voice leans back

into times past
singing firs fire,

brittle spine bent bowed toward the fire,
voices low to murmur a child whimper,
deer fat sucked upon to gentle dreaming,
the mother her song the night cradles,
child, the owl, too, has young,
tiny hearts and warmth of down,
& old man coughing guttural spit to fire,
young people giggle beneath hide fondlings
soon to sleep,
again coyote voices drown the mind in a loneliness
of deep respect in love of those who camp
just up the hill,
& tiny crystals of tears spatter the dust,
my people,
legs that cannot ever carry me back to you,
soul that holds you
forever.

(Peter Blue Cloud, cited in Snyder, 1977, p. 56)

II

When Robert Coles was a resident psychiatrist, one of his professors kept insisting that he tell stories, not clinical synopses, of the patients with whom he was working. He would say to Coles (1989, p. 28), "At times I feel you're explaining *away* those people – and I know you don't want to do so; I know you are a friend of theirs, and they are friends of yours." Today, we propose to tell the story of one child whom we will call Manuel, a child who came to us three years ago full of problems. Grounded in the "stubborn particularity" (Wallace, 1987; Jardine, 1995) of one child, we offer his story not to explain him away, but instead to offer ways of reading differently the difficult, abnormal, troubled children who haunt the margins of educational practice and theorizing.

What we propose is, in some sense, quite radical, for we want to call into question the pathologizing of difference that

underpins so much of the way education understands children, their lives, their experience, and their reading and writing of the world. We want to call into question the usual understanding of classrooms as collections of individuals whose separate worlds connect from time to time and who come together simply so that each can mind their own business (Dressman, 1993). We want to interrogate the very idea that difference can be merely understood and thereby eradicated as a problem of practice, and we want to challenge what is, sometimes, education's neurotic compulsion (Evetts-Secker, 1994) to tame and understand the exotic other. Instead, we believe, the intractable, irreducible differences of individuals can form the ground of true freedom, for in:

Coming together in their pluralities and their differences, ... [students] may finally articulate how they are choosing themselves and what the projects are by means of which they can identify themselves. We all need to recognize each other in our striving, our becoming, our inventing of the possible. And yes, it is a question of acting in the light of a vision of what might be – a vision that enables people to perceive the voids, take heed of the violations, and move (if they can) to repair. Such a vision ... can be enlarged and enriched by those on the margins, whoever they are. (Greene, 1993, pp. 219-220)

Manuel came to us in Grade One already wearing almost every one of the flattening, professional pseudonyms available for troubled children. He was "physically challenged," "severely disabled." He possessed, we were told, "a file this thick" documenting his "behavioural difficulties" (this file, it turned out, did not exist). He could not count reliably, could not print between the lines, could not sit still, could not resist touching his classmates or calling out in lessons. Unable, it seemed, even to *recognize* any given task at hand, Manuel certainly had problems devoting any time to the classroom agenda. Sometimes he would wander like a lost soul, apparently unconnected to anyone or anything around him. At other times, the mere prospect of a day at school with his friends made him so happy, so excited he would have a coughing fit and his breakfast would slide out on the floor. Manuel was a puzzle. Of that we were certain. In him, we saw the puzzle of difference constructed as either remediable or

irremediable deficiency by the institutions that had already labeled him for us. The walls had gone up, and Manuel had already been offered two choices: learn to be more normal, more ordinary, or face exile forever beyond the pale.

Meanwhile, he bore the brunt of feigned clarity that comes from this odd, harsh-edged, school board version of educational psychology.

Manuel's parents had felt compelled to leave their homeland to come to Canada because the only classroom that could be made available for such an unusual child was one that already contained 19 autistic children. That's how it started for Manuel in kindergarten in his own country, half a world away. His parents were afraid, almost literally, for his life when they moved to Canada.

And his welcome, here, was that the very first teachers who took him in kept him for only one day and asked that another placement be found for him because they already felt themselves overwhelmed by the number of problem children in their charge. All three of us recognized, in Manuel's arrival, a scenario we had played out with other children. The principal appeared at our door early one morning:

"Will you take him? No one knows quite what to do with him." And of course we took him in, for we knew what leaving him outside the door, outside the walls of our classroom might mean. Unable to find a home, exiled from his own life, Manuel might well have become a latter-day Caliban, a monster child labeled and enslaved by the malefic generosity (Greene, 1978) of school – a child confined to its margins.

The margins of the institution are not places anyone would necessarily self-select. Certainly, there exist boundaries that are full of adventure and the possibility of transgression, transformation, and movement (Clifford & Friesen, 1995). But there are also boundaries that imprison and demand either inclusion or exclusion, either normality or pathology – and those were the boundaries that had already begun to close around Manuel.

Not without care, not without concern for his difference, of course. The impulse behind institutional labeling and

classification, however toxic the effects, may well have deeply generous roots in professionals' wanting to help, wanting to do well by the child – wanting to fix his wounds and put an end to everyone's suffering. But fixing is such a dangerous enterprise. It seeks to eradicate difference; but it also eliminates openings and possibilities, especially the unhesitant, grotesquely self-certain fixing we have come to expect from many educational psychologists in our respective professions. Fixing has a dark, colonial shadow that educators do not always acknowledge – outsiders stream into our classrooms, find an ambiguous and difficult child like Manuel, and proceed, with clarity and confidence to order us around, all, of course, "for [our] own good" (Miller, 1989).

As Coyote Columbus incites, too often "they act like they got no relations" (King, 1992).

Children like Manuel can sometimes show us that what is often dismissed as in need of identification, naming, intervention, and eventual transformation by the institution may become understood in a totally different way. Monster derives from the Latin *monere*, the word for portent, for warning (Werner, 1994; Jardine, 1994). Manuel and marginal children like him can sometimes offer warnings or demonstrations to the clear and confident centres of normality in the classroom, and the ordinary, taken-for-granted course of things that classrooms often portray and defend. Such children can bring about the transformation and renewal of the center, providing that center can remain vulnerable and open to their arrival – provided, that is, that those at the center are able and willing to read their arrival more generously than the institutionalized discourses of marginality and normality have often allowed. The troubles that Manuel brings may thus be understood as what James Hillman calls *lacunae*, weak places which give opportunity:

Perception of opportunities requires a sensitivity given through one's own wounds. Here, weakness provides the kind of hermetic, secret perception critical for adaptation to situations. The weak place serves to open us to what is in the air. We feel through our pores which way the wind blows. We turn with the wind; trimmers. An opportunity requires ... a sense ... which reveals the daimon of a situation. The daimon of a place in antiquity supposedly revealed what the place

was good for, its special qualities and dangers. The daimon was thought to be a *familiaris* of the place. To know a situation, one needs to sense what lurks in it. (1979, p. 161)

III

At one point in the year we taught Manuel, we began reading stories about the native trickster figure, Coyote, himself a creature from the boundaries and margins, whose wild energy and tricky ways enchanted us all. We read picture books together; listened to told stories; drew pictures; studied the art of native illustrators and of artists like George Littlechild. Because we, ourselves, had become fascinated with what we were now calling "borders work," the interrogation of taken-for-granted protocols under which we live, we offered the children the heady opportunity to inhabit some of the spaces that a character like Coyote offers. While nominally attached to curriculum requirements that we study native people in Alberta, the Coyote stories took us far away from the rampant literalism of the prescribed program of studies. And we could never avoid the coincidence: Coyote himself, in such stories, always reaching out beyond prescription and teaches thereby.

We knew for ourselves that the possibility of creating a world that is different from the one given to us in experience is the work of the imagination (Bogdan, 1992; Clifford & Friesen, 1993; Coles, 1989; Hillman, 1983). The possibility that things might be otherwise than they seem can be apprehended *only* in the imagination, and the strategies for resistance and for unnamings, reshaping, and renaming the world come only from imagination as well. It is no wonder, then, that we loved Coyote so much, for Coyote, both fool and savant, was given the power to create anything he could imagine. Calling to us from the boundaries of our own world, Coyote howls holes in the taken-for-granted, the assumed, the unuttered, and the unutterable. But he doesn't simply howl such holes: he incites us "in" through such openings, such opportunities for understanding, with his silly grin and his all-too-human foibles and the energy and foolish wisdom he exudes.

That is, he teaches. And he teaches by teaching us the limits of the world. And he teaches such limits through their violation, through "keeping the world open" (Eliade, 1968, p. 139) so that the lessons of balance and respect can be learned once again, here, by this child that:

child, the owl, too has young,
tiny hearts and warmth of down.

Like almost every child in the class, Sinead decided to write Coyote stories. We never asked the children to do this; never required or even suggested that they take up Coyote for themselves. They just did it anyway, so fully had this ratty creature captured their hearts. Through one of Sinead's stories (and, we suggest, also through the feral agency of Coyote herself), Manuel the monster child is welcomed in from the margins and given a home. A close reading of Sinead's story will show something of how one of the children in Manuel's class did the generous, generative work that was so difficult for many adults in Manuel's life to accomplish.

IV

COYOTE AT THE CHRISTMAS CONCERT

by Sinead O'Brien

Sinead, Robert, and Manuel were helping Ms. Patrick and Ms. Charleston decorate the gym for their Christmas concert. Sinead asked Manuel, "*Is your dad coming to the concert tonight?*"

"*Yes. Bah humbug,*" said Manuel, fake-laughing and throwing his head back.

"Oh really," thought Sinead to herself.

"*Come help me lift this,*" yelled Robert.

"*I'll be there in a second,*" replied Cheryl, who had just come back from gym.

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"*We come as clouds, the ...*" the class recited together, practicing for the evening's performance.

"*WE COME AS CLOUD,*" yelled Manuel, walking into the classroom. Sinead rolled her eyes.

"*Guess what? We're going to read The Christmas Carol,*" said Joanie as she came over to Cheryl and Robert.

"YES!" yelled Robert.

"YES!" yelled Manuel, jumping up and down.

"*I already knew that,*" said Cheryl.

Just then, Mrs. Smith came on the speaker. "*Boys and girls, may I have your attention.*"

"No you can't," thought Sinead.

"*Students in the gym, may I have your attention.*"

"I'm not in the gym, so I don't HAVE to pay attention," thought Sinead again.

"*Remember to have your best manners on tonight and great voices. We want our parents to be impressed, don't we? Of course we do.*"

"Not me," thought Sinead to herself.

"*Good afternoon.*"

RRRRRRRRRRRIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGGGGG. The bell rang.

"*Try to wear something nice tonight,*" said Mrs. Cliffrie.

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"*Ayeeeeya aeeeeeya,*" sang the choir, beginning a native song.

Coyote, coming in the door, heard the wonderful singing. After his hard day with Grandfather Rock, he sure did feel like singing – especially when they got to the part with the "Harpooooooooooooooooooooooooon him?" That tricky Coyote, he started singing along with the choir. OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO. OOOOOOOO. OOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO. OOOOOOOOOOO.

"What fun," thought Coyote to himself.

But not very many parents in the audience thought that listening to OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO was the most pleasant way to spend the Christmas concert.

"*Who's making that racket?*" someone whispered to Zoe's dad.

"I don't know," said Don under his breath, "but it certainly isn't Zoe or Jeremy."

Robert's mum turned to look. "Oh no, Don. I can't believe it. That's not a child at all. It's a big dog or something."

"Oh don't be ridiculous, Pam. There can't be a dog in here. It must be someone's child" and he turned around to see whether it was anybody he knew.

"Oh NO! It's a coyote. A coyote! COYOTE AT THE CHRISTMAS CONCERT!" And he fainted dead away.

Suddenly, from the other side of the gym, a sound started to build. It was Coyote number two, Manuel the Magnificent. He wanted to sing, and he did. And guess what? Everyone else started singing and even Sinead was happy and they had the best Christmas concert ever – at least for that year.

V

The voyage out of the (known) self and back into the (unknown) self sometimes takes the wanderer far away to a motley place where everything safe and sound seems to waver while the essence of language is placed in doubt and profoundly destabilized. Traveling can thus turn out to be a process whereby the self loses its fixed boundaries – a disturbing yet potentially empowering practice of difference. (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1994, p. 23)

Sinead's reading of Coyote stories is a type of reading with which many of us are familiar. However, it is a type of reading that is not often consciously done with children; a reading that touches the very world we live in, that makes the world "waver and tremble" (Caputo, 1987, p. 7) and, as a result, become more multi-vocal, complex, ambiguous, and alluring than it was before. Such readings don't simply add stockpiles of images or concepts to the one doing the reading. They reveal layers of the living world, add meaning to the creases on the faces seen. They are readings that, in other places, we have called "edgy readings" (Clifford & Friesen, 1995; Jardine, 1995), the sense of which is eloquently captured by bell hooks (cited in Greene, 1993, p. 220):

Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.

And, of course, it is especially Coyote (not unlike Hermes) who tracks the passages and openings in between inside and outside, between center and margin. One could add, between young and old, between new and established, between teacher and learner, since Coyote is a figure who most often appears in the elders stories to and for and about the young and their ways in the world.

As we considered the text of Sinead's story, it became clear that Coyote was not just a concept or an image or a literary figure housed inside this and other writings and readings we had done. Reading Coyote stories did not mean simply decoding the literal meaning of what she heard or read, nor did it mean instrumentally using Coyote simply as a metaphor for what was somehow "in fact" and otherwise literal, "real" world of "children with A.D.D." Rather, the living figure of Coyote became part of her living world, refiguring that world, adding to it and transforming its multiple relations. Reading *texts* about Coyote pulling tricks, getting into trouble, and teaching all of us lessons thereby, and reading the *world* of the upcoming Christmas concert became strangely akin. The boundary between text and world gave way. Coyote became part of the text(ure) of the real world, not simply a figure within a text within that world.

In Sinead's story, Coyote is not just the wild animal with which we are all familiar. Neither is he just a figure in a wide open range of stories presented to children. Through Sinead's reading and writing, Coyote has somehow escaped the orbit of such literalism. He may be understood, through Sinead's own work, to be a living, breathing figure that haunts the living, breathing world – and not just "Sinead's world," as might go the individualistic, psychologistic formulation. As Native tales show, Coyote doesn't live inside people's heads. His tracks are real tracks, if only one knows how to "read" the world for them. He is,

to reiterate Hillman, "the daimon of ... [the] place, ... [revealing] what the place is good for, its special qualities and dangers:"

While laughing at Coyote with their friends and family, native children learn how to behave and how not to behave. This is why Coyote is a sacred fool. This clown gives us a way to know and accept ourselves. His foolish mistakes and his heroic imagination teach about balance and respect. This is the balance in ourselves and in our interrelationships with all life-forms. (Ange's Vanderburg, Flathead Indian Elder)

In Sinead's story, it is not only Coyote who becomes deliteralized. Manuel, the classroom, the Christmas concert, parents and their concerns and embarrassments, school administration, interruptions, teachers — all of these become *readable* beyond their mundane, taken-for-granted, literal, surface features. They take on a spacious, generous, imaginative character. The "real" world of the Christmas concert is no longer a mere actuality. It opens up into the ephemeral temporality of "in-between;" into a world constituted by *possibilities of interpretation*, a world that could, therefore, be read other-wise than the protocols of everyday life might allow. Manuel, therefore, is not really a child with Attention Deficit Disorder who can incidentally be read-as-Coyote; neither is he literally Coyote (as if we can overcome the strangulations of educational psychological discourse by simply appropriating another, more exotic discourse with the same literal-mindedness). *Both* Coyote and A.D.D. become possible ways to read a real child who exists in the cracks and edges between these (and many other multiple) readings.

Reading in this edgy sense opens us up to a world of meaning, attachment, and consequence; a world that, if deeply understood, generously counterposes the world we take for granted, putting that world, our ordinary world, into perspective. It makes our horizons of action, belief, and hope visible as not simply "the way things are," but as readings that could have been read otherwise. Instead of a world in which margin and center are at odds, we get a glimpse of how margin and center might make sense only in relation to each other, how we might get along well, with some sense of balance and respect, not *in spite of* figures like Coyote but *because of them*. We and the disciplines we teach do, in an odd way, owe such figures our lives. Such figures herald places of movement, of difference, of openness and transformation, or

regeneration and the "original difficulty" (Caputo, 1987, p. 1) entailed in having "life itself" (Smith, 1999) erupt right in the midst of our shared and contested worlds.

Reading in this way thus deliteralizes our professional understanding of real-world, upper-case events like Attention Deficit Disorder, Hyperactivity, Learning Disabilities, Developmental Delays, all of which had been attributed to Manuel. It opens up the possibility that these disabilities can be understood otherwise. Horizons of meaning are not fixed; educational categories and typifications that freeze children into codes and into terse objectifications, might thaw and release; boundaries might flutter and shift, holes and spaces open. And through those holes would pour children like Manuel, now with proper names, with bodies and hearts and minds that we might know other-wise.

VI

Interpretive readings set Coyote loose. Coyote, the trickster who loosens and violates boundaries, works in Sinead's story to blend and blur two realms: the real world of the concert at which there was a "real" disruption and "fictional" tales of Coyote as a disruptive character. Through Coyote stories, Sinead makes the world in which she and Manuel live *readable* again beyond its surface actualities. The "real" world becomes an imaginative space readable in its possibilities, containing both the discourse of Attention Deficit and the goofiness of Coyote. The "real world," interpretively understood, thus becomes a place in which we must decide what reading might be best here, now, in these circumstances. Reading becomes a deeply ethical and pedagogical act. What way of proceeding would best evoke balance and respect in these circumstances we face? Because of Coyote, Sinead makes visible, just for a moment, all the parental concerns and pretence, all the rhetoric of school announcements and protocols, all the howls of children full of excitement. We can now "recognize ourselves in the mess of the world" (Hillman, 1983, p. 49). Coyote stories are about us, about this real world and these real children.

Which is not necessarily to say that this news is good news for everyone. The pedagogical context in which such edgy readings are accomplished is crucial, for:

This fluidity of boundaries between self and the world, ordinary existence and imaginative experience, consciousness and repression of consciousness, identity and loss of identity – makes the reading experience fraught with the potential for the kind of destabilizing that student readers may neither expect nor welcome, depending on where they might be in terms of feeling, power, and location, especially in a classroom. (Bogdan, 1992, p. 192)

Sinead's reading of the Christmas concert could have exploded like a bomb in the middle of a classroom where protocols were never read, never challenged, never really understood or understandable as living decisions made in response to a living world. Sinead, herself, might have become problematic: the wilful girl-child who lacks respect for her elders and betters. Or her story could simply have disappeared, misread, beneath the weight of the everyday crush of events in a busy school. "*That's nice, Sinead. Thank you for sharing your story with us,*" someone might have said as they plunked her into Author's Chair (Calkins, 1986) and unleashed a barrage of profound illiteracies:

"How long did it take you to write?"

"Where did you get your ideas from?"

"I like the part with the howling. What part did you like the best?"

Sinead's story allows us to read the howling of the Christmas concert as a lesson badly in need of learning. Reading and retelling Coyote stories helped Sinead, and can help all of us, to "read" the stories of children like Manuel in ways that are more generous, more open, more forgiving than the flattening, psychologizing discourse of education generally allows. And she demanded from us a response to her writing that was deeper and more difficult than the hallucinogenic niceties of "*tell me about your writing.*" We were *addressed*, we were *directly claimed* by her work. Through it, we can "read" in the same way as children like Manuel not as deficient and in need of fixing, but, like Coyote, as bumping into the limits of the world, opening them again, making them newly visible, audible, readable, understandable.

But there is a deeper, more urgent claim at work here: by way of Coyote's lessons, Manuel, this real, difficult child, this wild thing whom others would not, could not allow in the world of their classroom, *became one of us*, that one, Coyote-like. Re-membered in Sinead's story, Manuel becomes understandable in the sense of livable, bearable, here, with us. He became a child who once bore a tale of suspicion and isolation, and who now bears as well the possibility of a more generous tale of tolerance and necessity and relation and community. He came to have a place in the classroom uniquely his own, one without which the classroom would have been a very different environment, lacking the sharp edged reminder of the protocols of the world we so comfortably assume. And Manuel was often protected by other children in the classroom when outsiders arrived with their clinical gazes and tightly gripped clipboards. They helped him "do normal" 'til the troubles passed. In this way, just as surely as Manuel became one of us through Coyote, this "us" *became different because of him*.

VII

Of course, we cannot romanticize here. Coyote would be difficult to be around as often as he would be wonderful to be around. He is a playful trickster and a greedy, arrogant, self-centered fool who never, ever learns and who often falls out of trees at exactly the wrong time and ends up dying, rotting, and smelling up the place.

Reading Coyote stories as a reading of the world of the classroom does not simply dispel the negative characteristics of Manuel and make him always and everywhere wonderful to be around and a joy. Sometimes his openings of boundaries and his violations of protocols are tolerable and revealing. Sometimes they are most decidedly not. The issue becomes not only pedagogical. It is an ecological and ethical one as well: how much disruption can a community of relations *sustain*? What course of action is best in the circumstances we individually and collectively suffer? And how does Sinead's story help us address this question in better ways than we might otherwise have done? Her story doesn't necessarily help us tell which openings are tolerable and sustainable and which are not. It does remind us

that there is a *difference*, and there can be a lesson of balance and respect to be learned through Coyote's ways.

The question about disruption can never be answered in advance or alone. What Coyote does, however, is teach us about the issues of balance and respect from which an answer might come, here, today, this time around, in this place and at this time with these children, about this bit of wisdom of the world. Coyote puts the difficult child (and the difficult work of pedagogy) back into perspective, back into "place," back with all his relations. The opening up of boundaries is thus both good news and bad news and sometimes both at once. And the point may be that we have to learn to take the good with the bad and tolerate disruption in the classroom if it can help us read our world more generously and help us treat children on the margins more generously as well: more like one of us, with more humour and forgiveness and protection. Again, the lesson of balance and respect. Coyote loose again.

Through interpretive readings, we can perhaps resist pathologizing the figures who disrupt our complacency. Through interpretive readings we might come, in however grudging a way, to honour those who live on the margins as essential to the life and vigour at the center. We owe such figures a debt of gratitude for the lessons they might teach us. Such figures might teach us about the character of pedagogy as boundary work. The portals they open for us provide opportunities, images, and the will we need "to name the impossible space we inhabit" (Bogdan, 1992, p. 218). Under-standing, seeing from below and from the edges, we learn to converse with "the world as coding trickster" (Haraway, quoted in Bogdan, 1992, p. 218).

Embodied, irretrievably grounded in partial perspectives and located in "the tangibly real that makes claims on people's lives in the infinite playing out of the creative imagination" (Bogdan, 1992, p. 219). But we should not leave with unwarranted optimism, for Sinead's story also leaves us with a disturbing picture of what might become of Manuel – and us. Our classroom opened a space for Manuel that was large enough to house his special ways in the world and Manuel himself helped make that opening possible and transformed us and the classroom and the work we pursued in the process. We refused either to cut him

loose or to abandon him to psychological isolation and caricature. We refused to pin him down, for:

The symbol which Trickster embodies is not a static one. It contains within itself the promise of differentiation, the promise of god and man. For this reason every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew. No generation understands him full, but no generation can do without him And so he became and remained everything to every man – god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer, and creator. If we laugh at him, he grins at us. Whatever happens to him happens to us. (Radin, cited in Bright, 1993, p. 183)

We might well ponder, as we close, how all of us will deal with those who know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Coyote is but a fiction.

Whatever happens to him happens to us.

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