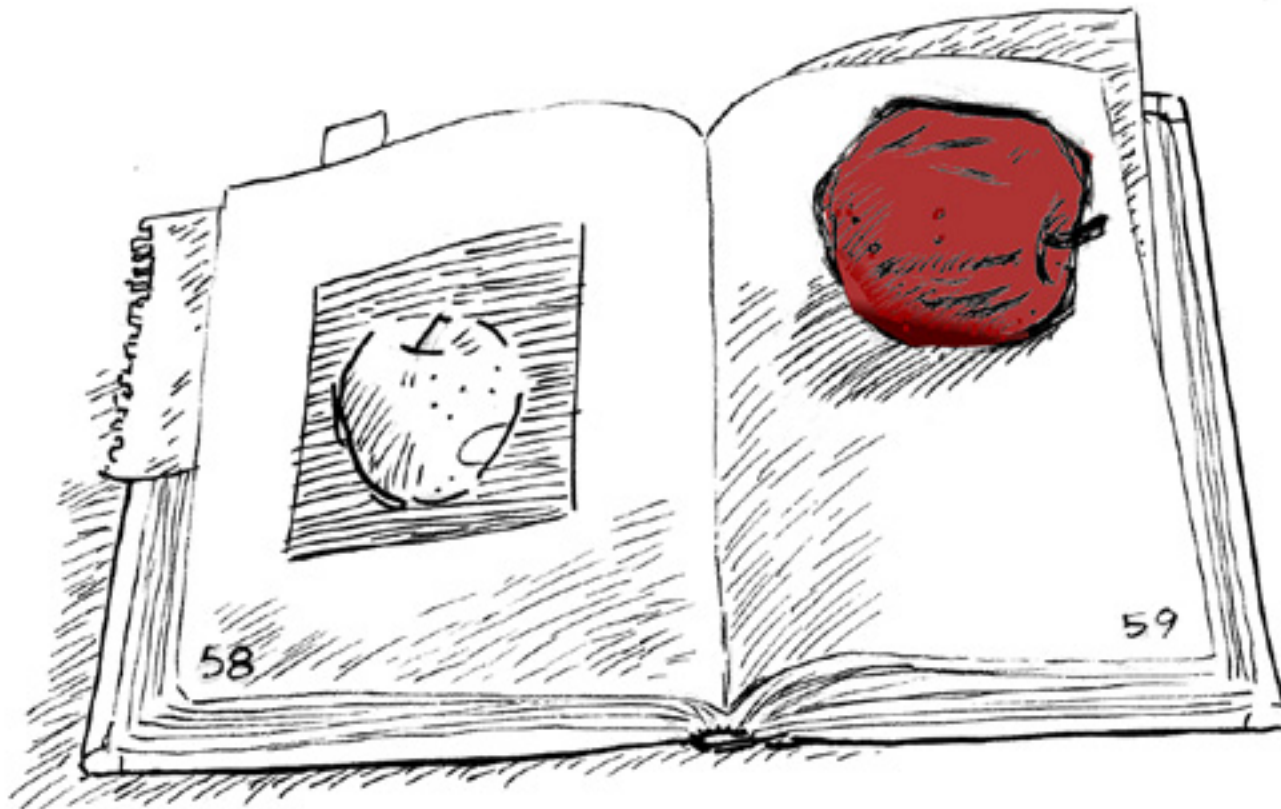


# Native American Folktales

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# *overview*

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## **Native Americans are a diverse collection of various social groups.**

- These groups are made up of networking tribes of unique people.
- Most origin myths related by the different bands do have common attributes:
  1. often show the people emerging from out of the land itself; some explain that their ancestors arrived out of a labyrinth-like cave underground
  2. some tribes say the first people emerged from lake-beds to settle in nearby territories
  3. all of these stories establish a divisional hierarchy of nature and human
  4. all of these are anonymous stories told in an oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation
  5. very few Native Americans developed written form of communication in North America

# *overview*

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**The system of oral traditions strengthened social knowledge for their individual structured cultures.**

These traditions include:

- myths
- rituals
- songs
- poems
- prayers
- parables
- legends
- narratives

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: U of Ca Press. 1983. Print.

# *overview*

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To complicated matters: when white Europeans began the process of removing First Americans out of their territories, the natives were forced to relinquish their languages, their society structures, their religions, their oral traditions as well as their land. Many stories have been lost and entire cultures erased due to Spanish and English settlement policies—but also because *the people themselves did not want to have their culture bond by the printed word.*

In a manner of speaking, Native languages exist as a living, spiritual, *and* meditative practice. The tribes who maintained their ancestral histories and folktales did not want to translate their beliefs into English: in their eyes, an aspect of the holiness of the prayer would be lost. The living word, the spoken phrase, would become static and penned up. The original intentions of a love chant or death prayer would be lost.

# overview

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- The oral tales more often were chants, performance pieces, art recitations.
- Extreme amounts of cultural meanings are lost in the appropriations.

Critic Kenneth Lincoln proposes, the reality of the song-poems is altered since the original word does not lie flat on the page—the spoken word may be visually presented in one line of text, or broken into stanzas and restricted to form.

The original Native American poems and stories were created by an unknown author.

- The intentions were to leave the works anonymous.
- No one could “own” the work, nor own the idea.
- The idea itself “found” the chanter.
- The song-poem was intended for the tribe and for nature. Through performance the poet, or story-teller gives the song, prayer, chant, story back to the world.
- **The spoken word is a living thing; language is a sacred idea.**

# *overview*

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## **Story Tellers themselves serve as:**

- historians, record keepers
- educators of natural history and science
- a source of culture; a physical representation of art
- a means to establish sense of self for a collection of people
- educators of traditional customs

# *Specific Folktale Characteristics*

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- magical creatures abound
- magical situations frequent
- protagonists down-trodden: orphan, stepchild, cast-out prince, prodigal son
- protagonist goes through psychological, physical, spiritual transformation
- protagonist must prove worthiness before transformation; must earn title
- protagonist is pure good
- antagonist is pure evil } no in-between grey areas
- extreme violence, gruesome situations
- pattern numbers
  - > in the Old World Europe the people used three as a pattern:
    - three tasks, three wishes, three journeys, due to Judeo-Christian influences
  - > in the New World, the pattern was set as four (sometimes five or seven)
    - perhaps due to the four principal directions of North, South, East, West
  - > some tribes associate specific deities with these cardinal points

# *Animal Guides*

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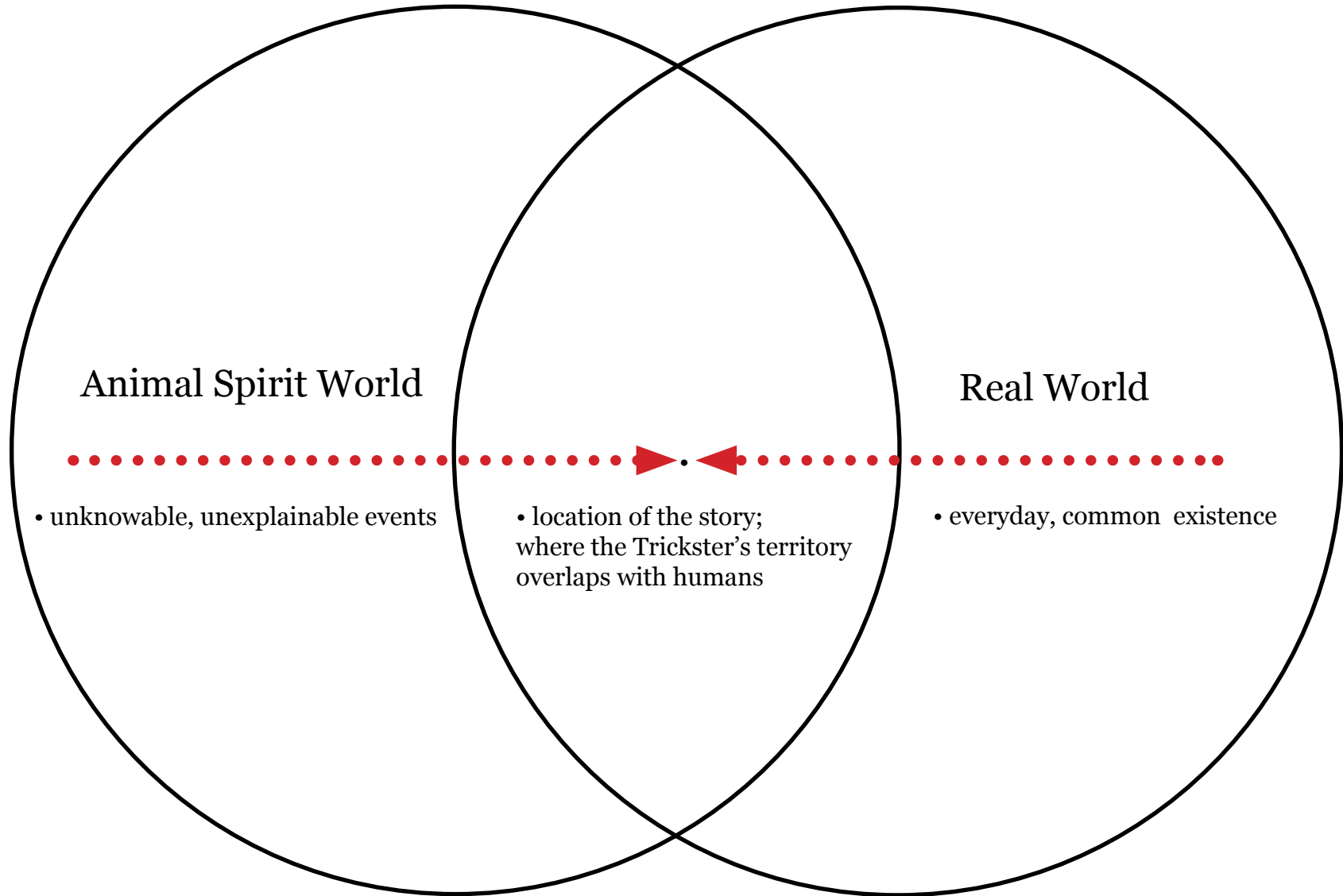
**Animal spirits or inanimate object spirits exist everywhere, some in disguise, some in plain sight.**

- It is the aim of humanity to recognize the spirit and to gain its good will in order to benefit their lives.
- An element of the supernatural exists in everything, including human-made objects. These spirits are present in everyday waking life interacting with humans.
- Each tribe often designed their own Trickster animal spirit; cycles of stories involve a specific hero-character who tricks a higher authority into action.



# *Spirit World || Real World*

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# Trickster Animal Guides

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- represents a complex psychological behavior
- acts as an anti-hero, vigilante, or clown
- he mainly represents everyone/anyone, an aspect of self identity, glorification of one's heritage
- not malicious, but self-serving, acting as a spoiled child
- oftentimes shown as a proud, vain figure, filled with self-importance
- will help out humans, for a price
- he often is shown as a shape-shifter
- he will allow himself to be shown as human — in order to gain notoriety
- sometimes in the story-cycle the trickster dies and later is reborn in another form.



*Illustration by F. N. Wilson, used in:  
Curtis, Edward S. Indian Days of the Long Ago. Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book Co., 1915.*

# *Trickster Animal Guides*

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- Most often depicted as a male but is willing to bend gender in order to achieve his goals. In some cases he has same-sex relations.
- as spirit-guides, rather than gods, they are imperfect and incomplete
- often make mistakes which result in a benefit for humanity
- they can be contradictory: selfish yet concerned for another's well-being; foolish or even childish yet intelligent enough to structure an organized and multi-tasked plan

*From Western culture, a good example from the Greek myths, is embodied in the figure of Prometheus, stealing fire for humans, or Hermes and Dionysius. For the Viking Norse culture, their trickster is named Loki.*

*Can you think of a modern example of a trickster spirit?*

# *Folktale || Mythology*

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**Both types of stories relate a time before recorded time, a prehistory, or a “once upon a time.”**

## ***Mythology***

Religious Mystery

Truth

History of a God

## ***Folktale***

Entertainment

Fiction

History of Folk Hero

Within the available canon of Native literature the defining notions of these two elements blur slightly. These types of stories are less likely to be easily cataloged by European notions of creative expression.

# *The Value of Folktales*

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*So—why study folktales? What is their value?*

**The study of folklore combines studies such as:**

- anthropology
- sociology
- theology
- literary criticism

Folklore may include references to a culture's beliefs, games, dances, and customs.

**Verbal folklore** includes sayings, proverbs, anecdotes, rhymes, riddles, songs, ballads, ghost stories, legends, and some form of myths.

# *Folktale* || *Fable*

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**On a basic level, the Native Folktales echo the intentions of the Ancient Greek Fables.**

Talking animals exist in fables as representatives of human personalities.

- Many modern characterizations of animals are based on these ideas:
- Lessons are taught on cultural behavior through the actions of the animals.
- The natural behavior of a particular animal is also explained.
- Oftentimes a cartoon-logic is mixed in to the plot for entertainment.
- A specific moral is presented at the closing of these allegorical stories.
- Usually these stories simply explain how to behave in a culture, (or how *not* to behave) and sometimes how to get along with fellow humans.

# Overall—

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**Due to the diverse nature of the various tribes in the North and South American territories, Native American Folktales are hard to quickly categorize.**

One story can blur into many different categories designed by Europeans.

On many levels the different tales can be seen as

- *creation myths*: explain the Universe and humanity's placement in the scheme of things
- *folktale*: describe historic events for the audience's entertainment as record of past and as a fiction
- *fable*: show how to behave in the Native culture
- *parable*: teach a religious morality

# *Creation of the Earth*

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Once, long ago, before the time of the oldest people, water covered everything. The only living creatures above the water were some small animals and birds who occupied a log raft drifting about on the great ocean. Nothing else could be seen above the surface of the water.

Each day the occupants on the large raft looked in all directions, but all they saw was water and the sky. The birds would fly out from the raft hoping to find land, but always there was just water. Soon the occupants of the raft grew restless and began talking about how to find land. They chose Horned Owl to be their council chief.

During their discussion one day, Horned Owl said, “Land is somewhere beneath the water. We must make it appear or we will starve. Who will look for land?”

Beaver spoke first and said, “I am a good swimmer. I will try.” Then Beaver dived into the water and swam toward the bottom. He was a strong swimmer, and at first he moved rapidly through the water. The water was very deep, however, and after he had been swimming for a long time and still did not reach the bottom, he began to tire. Eventually he had to give up the search for land and return to the raft.

Horned Owl called for another volunteer. This time Frog said he would look for land. He jumped into the water and started swimming for the bottom, but Garfish chased him and forced Frog to return to the raft.

Again Horned Owl spoke with the raft creatures of the need to make land appear. At the end of his talk, Horned Owl asked Crawfish to look for land.



# Creation of the Earth

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“Yes, I am ready,” answered Crawfish. “I will go now.”

Then Crawfish jumped into the water and swam toward the bottom. Garfish did not think he looked good to eat and did not chase him. Crawfish was also a better swimmer than Beaver and did not tire so easily, and so he came to the bottom of the great ocean. Now Crawfish has a wide tail which he can use as a scoop. When he reached the bottom of the water, he used his tail to scoop mud into a great chimney. He worked rapidly, building it higher and higher, until the top of the mud chimney stuck above the water, where it began to spread and form a mass of soft earth.

The birds and animals on the raft looked at the new earth and agreed that Crawfish had done a good job, but they thought the earth was too smooth. So Horned Owl sent Buzzard out to shape the earth’s surface.

Buzzard was a huge bird with long, powerful wings. He flew along just above the soft earth, flapping his wings. When he swung his wings down, he made valleys in the earth. When he swept his wings up, he formed the hills and the mountains. During the time that Buzzard glided along without flapping his wings, he made level country and plains.

After the earth had hardened, the animals and birds left their raft and made homes in the new land, each according to his needs.

“Creation of the Earth.” *Myths and Folktales of the Alabama-Coushatta Indians of Texas*.  
Ed. Howard Martin. Austin: Encino Press. 1977. Print.