

The Trickster in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

A mischievous figure from traditional cultures around the world can contribute an alternative narrative for humanity in the Anthropocene.

Keywords

Anthropocene, humility, narratives, planetary boundaries, Raven, traditional culture, uncertainty

Contemporary environmental thinking is dominated by recognition that human influence on the planet is so large that it is disrupting climate, biogeochemical cycling and biodiversity at global scales, such that there are likely to be planetary feedbacks on the wellbeing of human societies and ecosystems. This discourse has been captured in the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’, which seeks to encapsulate the accelerating human domination and disruption of the Earth System and potential long legacies of this domination. While the validity, exact definition and starting date of the Anthropocene are debated (Hamilton, 2015; Lewis and Maslin, 2015), a key factor of this labelling is recognition of how a hyperdominant humanity on a finite planet is leading to tight feedbacks and cascades, where human decisions on, say, energy or water supply or food consumption, have Earth System consequences, and these consequences feed back to affect human and non-human welfare across many spheres.

New epochs such as the Anthropocene necessarily rest on narratives of change. Humans have evolved as storytellers to explain and cope with change, and one key response to the Anthropocene has been to develop stories of why such profound environmental change is occurring and what it means for humanity’s future. To date a number of epochal (and perhaps apocryphal) narratives have come to dominate discussions of global environmental change. These include at least at least four major types, each of which may contain valuable kernels: (1) Moral Jeremiad, which emphasises the urgency of the impending planetary crisis and admonishes against humanity’s globalised economy based on rapacious growth and consumption at terrible cost to the health of the planet and wellbeing of future humanity; (2) March of Progress,

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Figure 1. As a Trickster figure in North Pacific cultural traditions, Raven is associated with major environmental change.

Source: Glen Rabena.

which views human domination as an inevitable product of our evolution as intelligent social creatures and morally necessary to deliver adequate human welfare to further human progress; (3) Technofix Optimist, which emphasises climate change and other Earth System problems as solvable through human ingenuity and technology, whether through solutions such as cleaner energy supplies, more efficient urbanisation, or global geoengineering; and (4) New Genesis, which seeks a fresh vision of re-enchantment emerging from the Anthropocene in which humans reconnect with Earth systems in what Thomas Berry termed an ‘Ecozoic age’. These narratives each plot a course in which humans conscientiously and collectively recognise their plundering of the planet and behave as adaptive and ethical agents to remedy their ways. A recent combination of the more optimistic of these narratives is well encapsulated in the Ecomodernist Manifesto (Asafu-Adjaye, 2015).

While the tight interweaving of a globalised humanity with global environmental problems is a feature unique to the Anthropocene, at local scales societies have long faced the challenges of resource limits, unanticipated consequences, climate disruption, environmental change and feedbacks. They have also developed narratives to describe, interpret and navigate their journeys through these environmental disruptions. Understanding of the rich meanings of traditional narratives and archetypes may help us imagine and forge additional or alternative narratives as we struggle for adaptive pathways through this complicated Anthropocene. Traditional societies have much to teach us about experiencing and responding to epic social and environmental changes. Their narratives thus may serve as vital sources for ‘cognitive adaptation’ to the very concept of a human-disrupted planet.

Here we present one such traditional narrative that is rarely visible in global environmental discourse, that of the Trickster. The Trickster is not a devil but an amoral instigator of transgression and transformation of the existing order, pushing it toward something new. He – and Trickster is typically a he – is always an other-than-human or more-than-human person. An archetype in nearly every major cultural tradition, the Trickster can be found from Ancient Greece and Rome

(Hermes and Mercury) to Norse cultures (Loki), Native America and Siberia (Coyote, Raven), Africa and the Caribbean (Eshu, Anansi the Spider). While there are myriad variations in the details of Trickster narratives, key elements of the Trickster myth include a transforming capacity, unpredictability, clever, resourceful, deceptive, rule-breaking behaviour (sometimes combined with positive hero qualities), and unanticipated cosmic effects (good and bad) from this behaviour. As Lewis Hyde (1998) suggests, the Trickster represents the ‘disruptive imagination’ and ‘polytropic’ (‘turning in many ways’) quality of the life that is both basic to the evolutionary trajectories of planetary and cultural systems, and antithetical to simple apprehension, comprehension, or maintenance of those systems. Manifesting both human nature and nature itself in all its formations and transformations, ‘Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is always duped himself ... He possesses no values, moral or social, yet through his actions all values come into being’ (Radin, 1972). As a corpus Trickster tales embody all four of the Anthropocene narrative frames outlined above, positing optimistic ambitions, humiliating overreach and unruly uncertainty in dramatic tension. As such, like all good narratives, Trickster tales do not preach but rather teach through their non-storylines.

To illustrate, we focus on one manifestation of the Trickster, Raven (Figure 1), who features in the cultures of the North Pacific rim in the Americas and Asia. Here Raven is the witness and source of many great changes in the Earth System, including the Great Flood, the release of the Sun, the theft and (re)distribution of freshwater and fire, and the regularity of the tides (Thornton and Thornton, 2015). Raven does not create these things single-handedly, but rather transforms or manipulates earthly forces to bring them in to their present form. Raven is no god, scientist, humanitarian, engineer or manager, but instead a rogue demiurge, pushing social and planetary boundaries incautiously in pursuit of his selfish, short-term interests. He is never satisfied dwelling in the ‘safe operating space’ (Rockström et al., 2009) but rather refuses to be contained. Like humans of the Anthropocene, his selfish, ignoble, chaotic and insatiable appetites and acts have cosmic consequences, as well as unanticipated knock-on effects to which he is forced to accommodate and ultimately must adapt. Things often do not end well for Raven. In many Native American traditions he begins his existence as a pure white being, only to be permanently blackened by his own misadventures with fire and its sooty, hydrocarbon emissions. Viewed as an interspecies transformer and an agent of metamorphosis, Raven may be the best embodiment and protagonist we have of carbon’s metamorphisms, cycles, fluxes and reactions.

By holding a mirror to humanity we may recognise Raven as a metaphor for our own relations with the environment. Why could this metaphor be useful? Raven’s plots, wherein his local acts may have cosmic effects, embrace the nuances and complexities of what the Anthropocene means and avoid the simplistic anthropocentric storylines that inform other contemporary narratives, such as the Moral Jeremiad (‘all will be doom unless we change radically’) and the March of Progress or Technifix Optimism (‘our ingenuity will find a solution and all will be OK’). Raven’s (mis)adventures illustrate the dynamism, complexity, contingency and indeterminacy of Earth systems in which humans are just one constitutive force. His risk-taking and havoc-wreaking, when read as an archetype (Jung 1968) for humanity’s irrational and disruptive side, add a certain humility and recognition of unpredictability in our aspirations to manage our pathway through the Anthropocene, whether through rational, incremental, planned progress or sustainable equilibrium. Raven is clever but not clever enough. In this respect, Raven’s trickster narratives constitute ‘technologies of humility’ (Jasanoff 2007), a recognition of the uncertainty and the partiality of knowledge, and an antidote to human pretensions of omniscience. The more Raven tries to out-think the systems, the more complications arise. The Trickster’s machinations abhor stasis and explode equilibriums, even ushering in new worlds by altering the parameters of Earth systems.

Yet these narratives also paint an empathetic portrait of a complex, interdependent and resilient community of beings, recognising potency and creativity in the human spirit. Like the Raven, Anthropocene humanity is more powerful and more unmanageable than it realises, a rule-breaker that will get into trouble as it bounces against or trips up on regional and planetary boundaries. Yet the potential for these disruptions also creates opportunities and contingencies which Raven and other beings, in their adaptive capacity, must exploit. Ultimately his transformative, relational, human and other-than-human nature renders Raven a more sympathetic, systemic, ecological and supra-earthly figure than humankind. Although he may lack a moral compass, as a protagonist Raven shows us how to live and how not to live in this multifaceted and unpredictable world. His selfish transgressions and their planetary consequences, like the Anthropocene itself, thoroughly undermine ‘any lingering notion that we can think of the environmental and social realms as separate or separable’ (Head, 2015: 318). Further, they reinforce the need for humility and adaptive collaboration in the face of non-linear complexity, contingency and change in human–environmental systems. For these and other reasons Raven and other Trickster narratives remain strikingly relevant in the Anthropocene.

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