

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

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Overview There is an area of overlap between folklore and myth. In general, the myths and legends of North America have to do with origins and identity, and also the aspirations of the people. Folklore often occupies an almost literary space with stories that can easily move into the space of high culture (as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving). In contrast, the myths of origin, heroes, and aspirations are spun through the fabric of the American identity and discourses of explanation, and they can even affect political decisions and international policy.

Classical

Origin Myth of the Acoma (Pueblo): According to the story, the Acuma Pueblo people were created when the Old Spider Woman goddess, Tsichtinako, sent two sisters to the world. As in the case of the Incas, the deities came up from the ground. The Old Spider Woman taught the sisters how to plant corn, tend and harvest crops, how to use it for food, and how to cook using fire. The two sisters chose clan names – one being the Corn Clan and the other being the Sun Clan.

Kokopeli (Pueblo): Kokopelli is the fertility deity of the Pueblo Indians, and he is usually portrayed as a flute player leaning forward and appearing to have a hump back. For the Hopi, Kokopelli is a trickster god as well as a fertility god. He carries unborn children on his back and distributes them to women. A similar deity has been found in the artifacts of the Mississippian culture of the American southeast from 1000 – 1400 AD.

Coyote (Navajo): The Navajo have many stories that include the coyote, who is a change agent with many seemingly contradictory qualities. He's a trickster and yet also powerful. He helped form the Milky Way which is the pathway for the spirits traveling between heaven and earth. He also controls the rain. The Coyoteway ceremony is considered a transformational one that restores good relations among family members.

Iktomi: For the Lakota Sioux, Iktomi is a shape-shifter and a trickster spirit that takes the shape of a spider. According to the many stories and myths featuring Iktomi, the enormous web that Iktomi spun made language and communication possible. He is a shapeshifter and uses strings to control human beings. He is also capable of creating potions or philtres that allow him to control people.

Thunderbird: For many North American indigenous people, the Thunderbird is a being of power and strength. The thunderbird controls the rain and hail, and their purpose is to fight evil spirits. The thunderbirds also use their power to punish humans who break the rules of morality. For some tribes, to have a vision of a thunderbird means that you will become a warrior chief.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Origin myth: According to the myth of origin, America came into existence when Christopher Columbus landed and brought civilization to a wild, untamed land. In reality, Columbus was not the first European explorer to land in North America. In fact, Norsemen from Iceland established a settlement in Newfoundland, Canada, around 1000 AD.

Pocahontas: The myth holds that Pocahontas, the daughter of a powerful chief, Powhatan, intervened to save the life of her true love, the founder of the Jamestown colony, John Smith. The truth was that Smith was not in danger of being killed. Nor did they fall in love. After all Pocahontas was only 12 and Smith was 28 when they met.

George Washington and the Cherry Tree: Legend has it that the first president of the United States, was an upstanding war hero and also a paragon of honesty, exemplified by his behavior when he was a child. Supposedly, he cut down a cherry tree, and when his mother asked him about it, he said, "Mother, I cannot tell a lie. I cut it down." This legend was so important to American culture that it used to be a tradition on Washington's birthday (February 22), to eat cherry pie. In reality, there is no evidence that this happened, and in fact, Washington was a spymaster who organized a ring of spies before and during the conflict with England. In fact, his deception skills were of immense importance to the war effort and helped convert the volunteers into a unified army.

Betsy Ross and the First American Flag: In 1871, Betsy Ross was credited with designing the first American Flag (the Stars and Stripes) and writing the first national anthem of the United States. Although there was no evidence that any was true, the legend supports the idea of democracy and full support and participation of the people, including women and children. This legend masks the fact that the population was very divided and there were many supporters of King George III amongst the citizens, even after independence.

Nineteenth Century

Frontier myths and heroes: The overwhelming depiction of the American West, which was reinforced by American artists Charles Marion Russell, George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, shows a paradise, a new Eden of mountains, deep canyons, and a transcendentalist vision of unity between earth, the heavens, and humanity. God was in nature and nature was God – and all who entered would be transformed. They were compelling advertisements and created an important motivation for making the difficult journey in wagon train, with an unknowably high mortality rate in transit.

Johnny Appleseed: The presence of apple trees throughout central, eastern, and northeastern United states. Supposedly, he roamed about barefoot, with a tin pot hat, and a sack of apples. Johnny Appleseed was not an itinerant vagabond, but in fact, a very calculating horticulturist who took advantage of the law stating he could lay claim to land if he planted 50 apple trees. Chapman would plant seeds in key locations, primarily in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois. Not only did he gain title to more than a thousand acres of land, he was able to sell the orchards to newcomers at a dramatic profit. The apple trees he planted were hardy and produced tiny, tart apples used in the production of cider.

Daniel Boone: While Daniel Boone was in fact an important explorer and settler who established much of what is now Kentucky, and he was captured by Indians, he did not wear a coonskin cap, nor did he even stay in Kentucky. He left the United States entirely, fleeing debtors, and resettled in the Spanish territory in the Mississippi River valley west of St. Louis, Missouri in "Upper Louisiana." He later lost all his claims to the land when the land was ceded to France, and then later was obtained by the United States in the Louisiana Purchase. The government granted Boone 850 acres, but he quickly lost that, as his debtors found out about it and insisted upon collecting what was owed.

Battle of the Alamo: Whether the Alamo was a glorious triumph for Texans or a humiliating example of dark, treasonous behavior on the part of a corrupt and incompetent Mexican General is a matter of perspective. The Alamo was a mission established by Franciscans in what is now San Antonio, Texas, near the San Antonio River. It was an important trading hub and the German and English settlers wanted to claim it and take it from the newly independent Mexico. In a bloody battle, the Texans won, and Texas became its own sovereign nation. The battle became of such importance in the shaping of Texas identity that the silhouette of the mission has been used as an important logo, decorative motif, and architectural design throughout Texas.

Twentieth Century

Myths of transformation / re-invention:

This myth focuses on the idea that arrival in the U.S. can allow one to profoundly transform oneself. It also involves the notion that America really is a melting pot where all are treated equality. This belief, which has mythical elements because it is aspirational and not really borne out by the facts, is an idea

important to the identity and core vision of the U.S. As such, it is something to aspire to, and has been the foundation of the Civil Rights movement.

Myths of exceptionalism: From its inception, the American Revolution was framed in terms that had been forged by the French philosophes, who were concerned of the idea of personal liberty, freedom, and equality. The concepts took root and shaped Americans' sense of self, even though those notions did not actually extend to the majority of inhabitants (women, Indians, slaves, indentured servants and landless workers). Nevertheless, the idea persisted and in the twentieth century, the idea that the American vision is so unique and its history so unusual created a moral obligation to play a dominant role in the world stage in order to enforce American values of equality, dignity, fair play, democracy, and personal freedom. Issues of corporate self-interest and colonial expansion were shrouded in this myth. In the case of wars, has been difficult to untangle the economic vested interests with the moral and "exceptionalism" arguments.

Myths of the final frontier / space: The exploration of outer space is extension of the dream of boundless, limitless self-transformation with possibilities re-invention. Space is viewed as not only a place to potentially populate, but also as the way into an understanding of the cosmos, and a platform from which to unveil, develop, unleash transformative, utopian technologies.

The American Dream: Myth of boundless self-actualization and upward mobility

Almost all the American myths of the twentieth century are utopian, and the most potent one is that of The American Dream. It's grounded in the idea of freedom and economic access. With hard work, intelligence, and honesty it is possible to achieve economic prosperity, not only for the individual, but for the family and future generations. It is a powerful motivator and gives recent immigrants the ability to endure extreme hardship, grueling conditions, and economic privation. The fact that it has been possible to achieve the dream has kept it alive, even as social inequality began to increase in the 20th century and the actual achievement of the dream is by no means a given, regardless of personal effort and entrepreneurial spirit.

Dystopian myths: Conspiracy theories, the Illuminati, UFOs, Reptilian Alien World Leaders

While utopian myths abound, their dystopian counterparts have been an important part of twentieth century myths and mythos. Dystopian myths often bring together the idea of a shadow world which is the obverse of the philosophies of individual freedom, liberty, self-expression, and equality. They have a unifying preoccupation with an anti-democratic force that seeks to undermine the defining official myths of America. They also focus on the misuse of new science and technology, so that the same technology used to enable economic prosperity, social mobility, and improved health and welfare, is turned against the people in order to enslave them and reduce their numbers, thereby "culling the herd." Conspiracy theories, many promulgated on social media, include suggestions that a group called "the Illuminati" controls the world, there have been sightings and contact with extraterrestrial crafts and beings (UFOs), and that the world's leaders are, in fact, space aliens of the shape-shifting "reptilian" class.

Discussion/Questions

1. The North American civilizations before the arrival of Europeans had a number of similarities in their myths. Describe some of the myths of origin and their unifying elements. How did the myths origin tie together with trickster figures. Identify three tricksters and describe their roles, functions, and the kinds of animals or beings that were allied with them.
2. Colonial and post-colonial America was a place of many different myths. Describe the myths of origin and also those of the people who were made into heroes. What did the invented heroes share in common? What were their prevailing characteristics, and what did they reveal about the way that the new American republic wished to see itself?
3. In the 19th century, myths existed to reinforce American values and sense of self. Select three main myths and explain how there might be both a positive and a negative side to the myth. For example, Johnny Appleseed was transformed into a kind of plebian "everyman" fertility god of the harvest when in fact he was something of cross between a scientist and a shrewd businessman. What are the pros and

cons of believing the myth over the reality? In the case of Johnny Appleseed, how was the myth useful? How would the reality have been more effective? Or, why might have been useful to downplay the self-interest of Johnny Appleseed in favor of a more philanthropic persona?

4. It can be argued that rapid industrialization and technological change create great social instability and the only way to combat it or harness it for the good is to have in place a series of myths that reinforce the notion of individual agency and the possibility of self-actualization. In other words, people have to believe that they can plunge into the fast-moving stream of rapid change and use that force to create wealth, security, and freedom for themselves and their families. Describe just how the twentieth century myths encourage such activities, and how even the dystopian myths can be harnessed to control rapid social, economic, and technological change for the good.

Readings

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Illustrations:



Kokopelli as depicted in contemporary culture

Source: Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokopelli#/media/File:BigKokoCV.jpg>



Painting by Edward Percy Moran depicting the story of Betsy Ross presenting the first American flag to George Washington

Source: Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betsy_Ross#/media/File:RossBetsy.jpg



Johnny Appleseed commemorated on a U.S. postage stamp (1966)

Source: Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johnny_Appleseed_stamp_5c_1966_issue_.jpg