

# Trickster Lessons in Early Canadian Indigenous Communities

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## Abstract:

This article compares the trickster stories of *Ainishaabeg* (Ojibwes) and *Ininiw* (Cree) people, specifically the Swampy Cree or *Omushkegowak*, in northern Canada. Focusing on one storyteller from each culture – *Omushkego* Louis Bird from the west coast of James Bay and *Anishinaabe* William Berens from the east coast of Lake Winnipeg – the article demonstrates that the long-term practice of telling sacred stories taught Indigenous peoples how to survive and thrive in their harsh environments. Although *Omushkego* stories highlight the importance of individual resourcefulness for survival, stories from both cultures emphasize that people should live together in communities to achieve the best life. The article also emphasizes the importance of appreciating local distinctiveness, listening carefully to Indigenous voices, and seeking guidance from Indigenous people.

Keywords: Cree, Ojibwe, tricksters, oral narratives, Canada

In 2009 two scholars of Siberian Indigenous history, David Anderson of the University of Aberdeen and David Koester of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, asked me to join a panel exploring the lived experiences of the individual and the social for the BOREAS conference in Rovaniemi, Finland, funded by the European Science Foundation and the National Science Foundation of the United States. Delighted by the opportunity to hear about parallel scholarship far away from my area of geographical specialization in subarctic and boreal Canada, I was excited to explore trends and commonalities in Indigenous communities from around the circumpolar north. This article, based on that conference paper, is written in the spirit of engaging conversations around the globe about questions cutting across region, language, and culture to portray the experiences of Indigenous peoples from similar physical and colonial environments. It thus seeks to introduce Indigenous peoples from present-day Canada to an unfamiliar audience.

I take up the question of how some Indigenous peoples in Canada consider individualism and community through the lens of storytellers from culturally related peoples I have been studying for over 15 years. These are the *Omushkegowak*, also known as the Swampy Cree, a subgroup of the larger ethnicity of *Ininiw* or Cree, and the *Anishinaabe*, also known as the Ojibwe, Saulteaux, and Chippewa.<sup>1</sup> A common problem in North American Indigenous histories is that many different names refer to the same group of people. These two peoples live in the geographic centre of North America, north of the Great Lakes, occupying vast regions of northern plains, parklands, boreal forests, and the edge of the tundra. The challenges of their environments led to these cultures wrestling with the impulse to cultivate collectivity for community security and cultivating individualism for self-reliance. This paper explores how stories with trickster figures taught humans the value of communalism.

Indigenous groups in Siberia and northern North America share many similarities. In both places Indigenous peoples are fighting the effects of colonization and struggling to maintain their sovereignty. David Koester has observed that the large areas of pristine wilderness in Siberia have led to scholars examining the original inhabitants in terms of resource use, focusing on how to extract traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) from them to assist settler colonists' quests to develop (and ironically impose on Indigenous peoples) models of environmental sustainability.<sup>2</sup> The same holds true for North Americans, who struggle against the stereotype of the "Ecological Indian" while fighting off southern developers intent on raping their lands and waters for marketable commodities.<sup>3</sup> The stories, songs, and art of northern Indigenous peoples also face the threat of colonization: developers searching for wealth, environmentalists harvesting TEK, academics mining for data, governmental bureaucrats searching for

models of governance, and art collectors appropriating creative expressions. Koester offers a framework for respectfully (and thus more accurately) studying the Itelmens of Kamchatka that takes seriously their principle of fun and creativity. This article follows Koester's lead in striving to see Indigenous history from Indigenous perspectives, and shifting lens of analysis to categories emerging from Indigenous cultures.

Today the *Ininiw* or Cree are a large Indigenous group living across the subarctic, boreal forests, and northern plains of Canada in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta and in a few U.S. states: Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana. In Canada they number over 200,000 and have 135 registered bands. Scholars divide them into eight major groups: Naskapi, Montagnais, Atikamekw, James Bay Cree, Moose Cree, Swampy Cree or Omushkegowak, Woods Cree and Plains Cree (both often called or *Nêhiyawak*). Outsiders developed the generic term "Cree" and its use spread in the 1800s, but people had more specific localized terms for themselves. They speak a variety of dialects of the Cree language (sometimes called *Nêhiyawewin*), which currently has the highest number of speakers in Canada (approximately 117,000).

*Anishinaabeg* is a self-designation used to describe Ojibwe, Odawa (Ottawa), Potawatomi, and Algonquin people who all speak various dialects of the *Anishinaabe* language known as *Anishinaabemowin*.<sup>4</sup> Both *Anishinaabemowin* and *Nêhiyawewin* belong to the same language family and share many similarities. The term "*Anishinaabe*" is also widely used to recognize an alliance of Three Fires (Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi). *Anishinaabeg* live around the Great Lakes, and to the west and north, covering the Canadian provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta and the U.S. states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. In Canada today the *Anishinaabeg* number roughly 140,000 and in the U.S. the number is roughly 200,000.

Many cultural parallels exist between *Anishinaabe* and *Ininiw* history and culture. Aside from similarities in language, both traditionally lived in small foraging parties for most of the year, traveling according to seasonal cycles to make use of resources on their lands. They both became involved in the global fur trade with French and British traders by the seventeenth century, and they faced devastation wrought by the spread of diseases from Europe, increasing encroachments on their lands by settlers from Europe, and eventual dispossession of their lands by colonial governments, first British, and then American and Canadian. For both groups, spirituality was deeply important for surviving and flourishing in harsh environments because they called on spirits of animals to secure food.<sup>5</sup> But some important differences existed between *Ininiw* and *Anishinaabeg*. The *Anishinaabeg* seem to be more communally oriented than northern *Ininiw*, especially the *Omushkegowak*. Most *Anishinaabeg* expressed their identities and communities through a clan system, whereas the all *Ininiw*, including *Omushkegowak*, did not.<sup>6</sup> *Anishinaabeg* organized their contacts with the spirit world into medicine societies, which tended to be hierarchical (not precluding the individual relationships *Anishinaabeg* formed with dream helpers and spirits in shaking tent ceremonies), whereas most *Ininiw* tended to communicate directly with the spirit world on an individual basis.<sup>7</sup>

But I have to admit I am uneasy exploring the differences between *Ininiw* and *Anishinaabeg*. A conversation keeps replaying in my head that I had in 2008 with a woman named Blanche Cowley-Head, a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in northern Manitoba. She is the descendant of a man that I had studied, Joseph Constant, who was a Metis free trader of French and *Anishinaabe* parentage.<sup>8</sup> I had been confused about how Joseph Constant could so easily move among worlds and seemingly change his identity at will—from a French-Canadian voyageur, to a Metis freeman, to the husband of an *Anishinaabe* woman, to a Roman-Catholic "convert." One of his sons became a leader in the *Anishinaabe* *Midewiwin*, or Grand Medicine Society, another son became a staunch Anglican, and then both of these children became *Ininiw* tribal leaders. To further add to my confusion, Cree and Ojibwe people had been moving in and out of one another's territories and frequently intermarried, and anthropologists and linguists identified an ethnic group that emerged in the mid to late eighteenth century called Oji-Cree (*Anishinini*), a combination of the two (sometimes called Northern Ojibwa or Severn Ojibwa). And so I was having a lot of trouble figuring out who belonged in which ethnic category. Blanche Cowley-Head patiently

explained to me that descendants of the Constant family did not care about ethnicity or tribal affiliation. Her ancestors did not ask whether they were Ojibwe, Cree, Oji-Cree, French, or Metis; rather, they cared that they lived and flourished in the area around The Pas in northern Manitoba and that they were proud that their families and community grew and supported one another over time.<sup>9</sup>

Indigenous studies scholar Robert Innes (member of the Cowessess First Nation in southeastern Saskatchewan) explains that before they were forced onto small reserves by the Canadian government, Indigenous peoples on the northern plains of North America lived in small “kin-based communities that relied on the unity of their members for survival. Band membership was fluid, flexible, and inclusive.” People became band members in a variety of ways and all assumed a kinship role with specific responsibilities. Bands formed alliances with one another as protection against hostile neighbors, environmental challenges, and tough economic times. Because the bands were multicultural, these alliances cut across ethnic and language groups. Innes goes on to explain that the kinship and band structure of these ancient multicultural bands has persisted to the present day and warns us that “classifying Aboriginal people has had profound impacts on the ways that non-Aboriginal people view them, and on how Aboriginal people view themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

Tribal and ethnic designations are mutable and potentially meaningless to the people who supposedly enacted them in the past. The ethnic categories certainly became important when scholars used them to make sense of Indigenous history, and today the categories are enforced through the Canadian government’s administrative recognition of band structures with specific membership lists and status designations of individual Indigenous people. Historians’ categories of Indigenous groups are certainly shaped by the primary sources and documents they used to construct their histories. But before that time, people’s lives were primarily shaped by family relationships, sense of community, common languages and alliances, and for the *Anishinaabeg* totems or clans. Innes worries that the emphasis on creating and maintaining the fixed categories of tribal groups (made up of ethnic categories) prevents scholars from seeing the cultural similarities among them.<sup>11</sup> I think we are stuck using these generalized ethnic markers, but we need to recognize that *Ininiw*, *Omushkegowak*, and *Anishinaabeg* are flexible categories with no firm lines separating them. I join Innes in seeing Indigenous ethnic categories as fluid identities that are constantly being enacted.<sup>12</sup> In her excellent essay on using categories in Indigenous studies, historian Nancy Shoemaker teaches us that we need categories to make sense of the world, but we must be cautious about our assumption of universal categories that work in Indigenous cultures, and that we must look within Indigenous cultures and languages to find categories that make sense to the people we study.<sup>13</sup>

A specific strategy to embrace the constantly shifting process of identity formation is to focus on individual tellers of stories located in specific communities. This paper puts the stories of two men in close conversation. These are *Omushkego* Louis Bird from the west coast of Hudson Bay and *Anishinaabe* William Berens from the east coast of Lake Winnipeg.

Louis Bird, born roughly in 1930 (and he is still living), is a distinguished *Omushkego* scholar, collector, and teller of stories that illuminate the worldview and history of his people. Bird has been collecting stories for over 40 years. He said, “It is my wish and my hope to save the stories that had been told to us when I was young and that have been passed on to us by our grandfathers and their grandfathers and so on and so on.”<sup>14</sup> In 1999 he began working with a team of scholars at the Center for Rupert’s Studies at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba to digitize his collection of audio cassette recordings, create new recordings of the stories, and make them available to Cree and English audiences. To date, Bird and his collaborators have published two English books -- *Telling our Stories* (2005) and *The Spirit Lives in the Mind* (2007).<sup>15</sup>

*Anishinaabe* William Berens, who lived from 1866 to 1947, grew up on the east coast of Lake Winnipeg and was the chief of the Berens River Band from 1917 to 1947. In the 1930s he shared his life, his stories, and his personal and dream experiences with the famous anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell, who wrote them down. These have been published as *Memories, Myths and Dreams of an Ojibwe Leader*.<sup>16</sup> Berens was descended from the earliest *Anishinaabe* families to move into the Lake Winnipeg

area from the Great Lakes, and his paternal side includes spiritual leaders, while his mother's side includes some *Ininiw* and French Canadian cultural mixing.<sup>17</sup>

The *Anishinaabeg* and *Omushkegowak* are traditionally oral cultures, developing, preserving, and sharing their communities' information in stories. They each have many different types of stories to reflect their sophisticated, extensive, and varied epistemology. Roughly, the narratives are divided into two general categories. One is *atanookanak* in the *Omushkego* language and *aadsizookaanag* in *Anishinaabemowin*, which means very old tales, where no one living knows the people involved. These tend to be mythic or sacred stories. The second is *tipachimoowinan* in the *Omushkego* language and *dibaaajimoowinan* in *Anishinaabemowin*. You can hear the real similarities in the names of those words. Those are younger narratives in which people can remember or claim a connection to the people in the stories. Often *tipachimoowinan* stories become *atanookanak* stories over time.<sup>18</sup> *Anishinaabe* Elder Basil Johnston teaches us that it can take a lifetime to learn the cultural fluency required to understand sacred stories. He explains that all stories, and in fact all words, have three levels of meaning. The first is "surface meaning that everyone instantly understands," based on the direct meaning of words; the second is "fundamental meaning" that can be derived from contextual analysis; and the third is "philosophical meaning," which most directly expresses worldview.<sup>19</sup>

Let us turn our attention to spiritual practices. Although both Louis Bird and William Berens are Christians (I will use the present tense for simplicity's sake), they have clear connections to the world views of their people. Louis Bird's stories emphasize that a person must develop an individual relationship with the spirit world to survive and thrive in harsh environments. He explains that young people go on spirit quests or dream quests to form special relationships with spirits called *opawachikanak* and these spirits give them distinct powers.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, over half the stories that Berens told Hallowell involve dream experiences that either constitute the core of the narrative or mark a key turning point. A common theme was the need to exercise strong mental powers to overcome some kind of adversity in the form of a fear, adversary, or to escape a difficult situation. Boys went on vision quests to garner strong spiritual power (occasionally girls could receive the help or blessings of spirits through dreams, although they did not seek them). Their dream visitors or *bawaaganag*, who appeared to the fasting youths in their sleep, had great power to protect and help, or to hurt and hinder. In the dream quests, youths sought the blessing of a *bawaagan* and hoped they would become guardian spirits.<sup>21</sup>

A key difference emerges in the *Anishinaabe* spiritual practice: expert spiritual power was developed within the *Midewiwin*, or Grand Medicine Society. Some scholars argue that it emerged only in the eighteenth century but others argue that it is as old as *Anishinaabe* culture itself.<sup>22</sup> The trickster and culture hero *Nanabozho* is believed to be the founder of the *Midewiwin*. The *Anishinaabe* *Mide* members met as a society or group in *Midewiwin* lodges and regularly scheduled gatherings throughout the seasonal ceremonial cycle. At meetings they recounted the heroic deeds of spirits and shared stories that taught hunting skills and information about medicine.<sup>23</sup> *Midewiwin* structures and practices varied in different locales, and men could develop strong spiritual powers outside of those structures.

William Berens's grandfather, Yellow Legs, was a powerful leader in the *Midewiwin*. Yellow Legs was probably the first *Anishinaabe* to move into the Lake Winnipeg region and probably introduced the *Midewiwin* to that area, although it had declined in Berens's time (from the 1870s on). Some *Anishinaabeg* also practiced the *Waabano* (or *Waabanowin*), sometimes called the Dawn Ceremony, which split off from the *Midewiwin* and became its own spiritual and healing organization, especially under the direction of a powerful shaman named Fair Wind.<sup>24</sup> William Berens did not have access to the *Midewiwin* or *Waabano* in his community, and he chose not to go on a dream quest, but he nonetheless encountered the other-than-human spirit who had blessed his grandfather, and these powers were open to him if he had wished to pursue them. In Louis Bird's community, people used the term *Mitewiwin*, but he explains that "Mi-te-wi-win was developed individually. A person would develop it for his own capacity as much as he can acquire. And sometimes when he has his own power, he doesn't share it; what he knows he doesn't preach..."<sup>25</sup> The *Omushkegowak* developed their spiritual gifts individually through the dream quest, reflecting, according to Louis Bird, the more individualistic, less communal nature of

*Omushkego* society. The organizational structure of the *Anishinaabe Midewiwin* (and to a lesser extent *Waabano*) at times was a distinguishing feature from the *Omushkego* spiritual practices. For both *Anishinaabeg* and *Omushkegowak*, the *Mi-te-wak* were individuals who were gifted with spiritual powers developed through dream quests and other ceremonies, but for the *Anishinaabeg* in various times and places, the *Midewiwin* lodge and society provided a physical and social structure in which to develop spiritual gifts.

Let us turn our attention to stories. Is this difference of individualism versus communalism reflected in trickster tales, which were important sacred stories for *Anishinaabeg* and *Omushkegowak*? Trickster tales are common in many cultures and folklores. In the context of Siberia, “Raven,” explains Alexander D. King, “is the main mythological cultural hero of the Koryaks and the Chukchi neighbors to the north and the Itelmen neighbors to the south” and tales about them share many characteristics with the Raven stories of Indigenous peoples on the Pacific coast of North America.<sup>26</sup> Among northern Indigenous people, tricksters are spirits or divine beings with a physical manifestation who are both creators and destroyers who wander seemingly aimlessly, governed by their appetites, usually for sex and food. Stories of the trickster are told individually or as part of a cycle of tales, like heroic episodes. And trickster tales are usually both didactic and highly entertaining.<sup>27</sup> Mac Linscott Ricketts identifies three qualities of the North American trickster: a) “a worldly being of uncertain origin who lives by his wits and is often injured and embarrassed by his foolish imitations and pranks, yet ... never takes himself too seriously and never admits defeat;” b) a transformer whose actions shape the world; and c) a culture hero who engages with the spirit world at great risk to make the world a better place.<sup>28</sup> Robert Innes tells us that “*Wisahêcâchk* and *Nanabush*, in Cree and Ojibwe/ *Saulteaux* oral stories respectively, are also known by the kinship term *Elder Brother*,” and that these stories “form the basis for the Law of the People [and] guided people’s social interaction with all of creation, including kinship practices.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, *Anishinaabe* scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair (member of the St. Peter’s / Little Peguis First Nation) posits that “trickster narratives are part of what define *Anishinaabeg* claims to spiritualities, laws, and aesthetics. ... These stories formulate part of a living, ever-changing, and evident *Anishinaabeg* notions of justice, nationhood, and even a Constitution.”<sup>30</sup> Scholars disagree whether the trickster was a supernatural creature or a human in the distant past, but most agree that in acting as a mediator between humans and spirits, stories of the trickster reveal Indigenous understandings of the universe.

Some scholars are dubious about the term “trickster,” worrying that it belittles the entity as a fun-loving buffoon who is not taken seriously, and that using the term “trickster” can be an act of overgeneralization and intellectual colonialism. For example, Sinclair warns scholars against overgeneralizations of trickster stories that essentialize, or manufacture simple, widely-applied ideas about Indigenous peoples. He urges scholars to always pay careful attention to the specific local contexts in which trickster stories are told and heard. He chastises scholars, even those with good intentions, for engaging “in the process of Native intellectual dispossession by denying aspects of their specific locations, histories, and subjectivities.”<sup>31</sup> In another example, *Nêhiya* scholar Neal McLeod (member of the James Smith Cree First Nation), insists that this sacred entity should be called “*wisahkêcâhk*” and not “trickster” to avoid the implication that the entity is full of tricks or “devoid of truth,” observing that using the term “trickster” is part of the trickery of colonialism.<sup>32</sup> Robert Innes, however, tempers McLeod’s critique of the term, suggesting that tricksters intentionally perform a great deal of trickery as part of their method for teaching and that the stories are meant to entertain as well as educate. He suggests also using other more neutral labels, such as Cultural Hero, Deceiver, and Transformer, to shift emphasis to tricksters’ other qualities, and he uses the term “*Elder Brother*” in the title of his book to represent the central role of the trickster in holding *Ininiw* values.<sup>33</sup> This article heeds the warnings of Sinclair, McLeod, and Innes and situates a discussion of trickster stories within the specific context of storytellers from the past, comparing their stories to search for both differences and similarities among culturally related peoples who lived in proximity to one another.

The same problems with overgeneralization have occurred with the term “shaman.” Alice Kehoe explains that the term “comes from the Tungus language of central Siberia, where it designates religious

leaders, men and women who serve their communities by using hand-held drums to call spirit allies.” She traces how the term has come to be used for all spiritual practitioners in Indigenous communities around the world, which reflects the racism inherent in early anthropologists looking for universal categories of human behavior in their attempts to distinguish the ranges of behavior between “civilized” and “primitive” peoples. The techniques of communicating with the spiritual world through the use of drums and intense concentration have been practiced throughout the circumpolar north by peoples who rely on reindeer for food and clothing, including Saami in Scandinavia, and Indigenous peoples in northern Russia and North America. But the Indigenous rituals that resemble those practiced by Siberian shamans must be recognized for their diversity and specificity to avoid supporting universalizing racial tropes of human development.<sup>34</sup>

Returning to our stories of northern Canada, Louis Bird’s stories of the *Omushkego* trickster, *Wisakaychak*, or as Louis often called him, “the pain in the neck,” focus on *Wisakaychak* tricking people and animals to get his own way and then being beaten “by his own making.”<sup>35</sup> In stand-alone stories, strange landmarks are attributed to the foolish doings of *Wisakaychak*, such as large random boulders in the muskeg and configurations of oddly colored rocks. Other stories focus on his stupidity about women and his duplicity in trying to have sex with them.

One very well-known cycle of stories is about *Wisakaychak* tricking geese by offering to show them his bag of stories, but only inside of a lodge where he encourages them to dance with their eyes closed. He manages to kill a large pile of them before the others catch on and flee. In the next story in the cycle *Wisakaychak* decides to take a nap while his geese are roasting in the sand upside down with their feet up in the air. He leaves his bum in charge of keeping watch. Next, some humans manage to sneak the geese away by cutting off their feet and leaving them stuck in the sand. When *Wisakaychak* wakes to discover the theft, he beats his bum in frustration. His bum takes revenge by farting every time *Wisakaychak* tries to hunt.<sup>36</sup> In another cycle of stories, *Wisakaychak* tricks a bear by making him believe that his eyesight was poor and that the only remedy would be to squeeze berry juice into his eyes. When the bear was rolling around in pain from the juice in his eyes, *Wisakaychak* killed him by dropping a large boulder on his head. *Wisakaychak* was so excited about eating the whole bear that he convinced some tamarack trees to squeeze his stomach so that he could digest his food more quickly. When the trees had him in their grasp, they then held him and invited all the animals to come and feast on *Wisakaychak*’s bear.<sup>37</sup> The moral of these stories seems to be that one should live moderately and not become greedy about taking food from the environment, and if you are greedy you will always lose out in the end.

There is some debate about whether *Wisakaychak* is the only trickster. He has company in the sacred stories. Another well-known character named *Chakapesh*, known as the dauntless little man, was an intensely curious shaman who lived with a wise, older sister who constantly worried that her little brother’s curiosity would eventually lead to his death. The pattern in *Chakapesh* stories is that he sees or hears something that excites his curiosity, he reports back to his sister who warns him to stay away, he disobeys and wanders into arduous situations, but he always manages to extricate himself until the final story in the cycle where he is drawn up into the moon after staring at it too hard and too long.<sup>38</sup>

The *Anishinaabe Nanabozho*, on the other hand, features as the only trickster and a culture hero in *Anishinaabe* stories, and he is acknowledged to have created the world as it is. He is viewed as a human, a spirit, a hare or a wolf, taking on many different forms and personalities, so he is seen as a composite, synthetic figure with complex and contradictory characteristics. He is widely believed to be responsible for the great flood because he angered the water serpents who then tried to drown him. He managed to fashion himself a raft and rescue a few animals. He sent one after the other down to retrieve soil from the bottom of the sea so that he could fashion a new land. He invented totems or clans, central to *Anishinaabe* cultural identity. He taught humans how to survive in the world, how to find food and medicine, and invented an array of tools to assist them in their survival. The cycle of stories about *Nanabozho* involve his birth, his theft of fire, his battles with his brothers (who were the winds and flint), his travels with wolves, his altercations with the underwater spirits, the deluge, and the earth-divers, and his re-creation of the world after the great flood. The lessons from the *Nanabozho* stories seem to be striving for balance

within oneself. The stories also emphasize that humans should strive for alliances and share with one another to survive.<sup>39</sup>

William Berens's stories follow these patterns. He related a clear cycle of trickster stories to Hallowell: a man magically impregnates his daughter, who gives birth to the four winds, flint and the hare (who is *Nanabozho* or *Wisakaychak*). Flint kills their mother during the birth with his sharp edges and in revenge the hare breaks him up into small pieces.<sup>40</sup> In the next set of stories the trickster takes revenge on the great lynx who murders his stepson, a young wolf, and the lynx then floods the earth, and the trickster, with the help of other animals, notably the successful earth-diving muskrat, and recreates the world on a floating raft.<sup>41</sup> This story also turns up in some *Omushkego* communities. In Berens's stories the trickster is actually named *Wisakaychak* rather than *Nanabozho* (as in other *Anishinaabe* communities), even though the stories follow typical *Anishinaabe* patterns, and likewise Louis Bird notes that some *Omushkegwak* call *Wisakaychak* "*Nanabush*." The use of *Wisakaychak* in the Berens River area likely reflects the close *Anishinaabe* and *Ininiwe* connections in the area. Some of Berens's trickster stories share more than a common name; some of them clearly echo *Omushkego* tales of *Wisakaychak* and *Chakapesh* (perhaps to be expected, considering Berens's mixed ancestry). Both sets of trickster tales contain the story of men asking *Wisakaychak* to grant their wishes to live forever. *Wisakaychak* turns them to stone, ensuring indeed that they will endure. The biggest difference in stories about *Nanabozho* and *Wisakaychak* is that *Nanabozho* works in conjunction with others, whether they are wolves or earth divers, while *Wisakaychak* seems to operate more in isolation. Yet these divisions cannot be made so simply. The stories of Louis Bird and William Berens show overlap between characters, plots, and morals. And in *Omushkego* stories, *Chakapesh* always works in conjunction with his wise older sister, even though he gets in and out of trouble on his own.

In the examples of stories from these two storytellers, we see the hint of a pattern that those living in more northern places with a harsher environment tend to value individuality slightly more than communalism. Communities on the James Bay coast were smaller and farther from one another than those on Lake Winnipeg because the environment could only support a small population. Although they live at a similar latitude, *Omushkegowak* on the coast of James Bay can be considered as "north" of the *Anishinaabe* communities on the coast of Lake Winnipeg. The former's ecoregion of the Hudson Bay Lowlands is considerably colder than the latter's ecoregion of the Boreal Shield, and it is considerably closer to the treeline and permafrost zone. In the Hudson Bay Lowland, people had to be prepared to survive on their own if necessary. In the Boreal Shield, where the environment is richer, people could afford to live in larger communities and generally be more populous, as the land could support them. They then could develop more social institutions and group-oriented activities, which we see in the *Midewiwin* and *Nanabozho* stories. People could afford to specialize and this included spiritual specialization. Further "north" the harsher environment did not allow people to congregate in groups that were too large or congregate for too long. Stories paid more attention to individual spiritual development; every person had to find the will and the strength to survive alone and in small groups. Perhaps William Berens's stories echo those of Louis Bird because his community of *Anishinaabeg* was on the northern fringes of that cultural group, as well as the long-time mixing with *Ininiw* in the area. And, as Blanche Cowley-Head explains, people did not necessarily think of themselves as *Anishinaabeg*, *Ininiw*, or *Anishinini*, but they thought of themselves in terms of kin relations: mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and children, and of course they thought of themselves as the younger siblings of both *Nanabozho* and *Wisakaychak*.

Although I have seen some differences between Berens's and Bird's stories of the trickster, their similarities are more striking than their differences. The trickster teaches people how to be human beings, which is primarily a social state. In Robert Innes's words, tricksters may seem to wander in "exile outside the social group as a consequence of their socially unacceptable transgressions" but the heart of their stories teaches people kinship roles and responsibilities, instructing people how to interact with one another, with animals, with the land, and with the spirit world.<sup>42</sup> Thus as a student of trickster stories, I strive to follow Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair's advice for scholars to "recognize the humanity of

Indigenous peoples[; situate] stories in specific times, places, and contexts[;] legitimate a long-standing and wide-ranging Indigenous intellectualism and recognize this intellectual history[; and be] responsible to an audience that *includes* real-life, modern Indigenous peoples in it.”<sup>43</sup> I urge scholars of the circumpolar north to do the same.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview, see entries in June Helm, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 6, *Subarctic* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 1982). Also see the *Canadian Encyclopedia* entries for “Cree” <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/cree/> and “Ojibwa”

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ojibwa/> (both accessed 24 January 2016).

<sup>2</sup>David Koester, “When the Fat Raven Sings: Mimesis and Environmental Alterity in Kamchatka’s Environmentalist Age,” in *People and the Land. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*, ed. by Erich Kasten, 45-26 (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, Verlag, 2002), 45.

<sup>3</sup>Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>All of these groups are part of the large linguistic and cultural category known as “Algonquian.”

<sup>5</sup>For examples, see Michael Pomedli, *Living with Aminals: Ojibwe Spirit Powers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014) and Robert Brightman, *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup>On the *Anishinaabe* clan system Heidi Bohaker, “‘Nindoodemag’: The Significance of Algonquian Kinship Networks in the Eastern Great Lakes Region, 1600-1701,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 23-52. On Nêhiyawak categories of thought and language, see Richard J. Preston, *Cree Narrative: Expressing the Personal Meanings of Events*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>On the individualism of *Omushkegowak*, see Louis Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind: Omushkego Stories, Lives, and Dreams*, compiled and ed. by Susan Elaine Gray (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 68-69.

<sup>8</sup>Carolyn Podruchny, “Un homme-libre se construit une identité: Voyage de Joseph Constant au Pas, de 1773 à 1853,” *Cahiers franco-canadiens de l’Ouest, Numéro spécial sur La question métissage : entre la polyvalence et l’ambivalence identitaires* 14, no. 1 et 2 (2002): 33-59.

<sup>9</sup>Email correspondence and discussions by telephone between Blanche Cowley-Head and Carolyn Podruchny, 23 to 29 October 2008.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Alexander Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People: Contemporary Kinship and the Cowessess First Nation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 7. Michael Witgen has also explored the themes of ethnic fluidity in the context of the long-standing alliance between the *Anshinaabe* and Dakota in his book *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Innes, *Elder Brother*, 9-11.

<sup>12</sup>Innes, *Elder Brother*, 14.

<sup>13</sup>Nancy Shoemaker, “Categories” in *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*, ed. by Nancy Shoemaker, 51-74 (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>14</sup>“Our Voices. ca: Biography of Louis Bird.” <http://www.ourvoices.ca/index/louisbirdbio> (accessed 30 August 2009).

<sup>15</sup>Louis Bird, *Telling Our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay*, ed. by Jennifer S. H. Brown, Paul DePasquale, and Mark Ruml (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2005); Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*.

<sup>16</sup>William Berens as told to A. Irving Hallowell, *Memories, Myths, and Dreams of an Ojibwe Leader*, ed. by Jennifer S. H. Brown and Susan Elaine Gray (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup>Brown and Gray, “Introduction” in Berens, *Memories, Myths, and Dreams*, 11-13.

<sup>18</sup>I have used Louis Bird’s spelling for the Cree words. Bird, *Telling Our Stories*, 22, 25, 60-61. Also see Preston, *Cree Narrative Structure*. On the *Anishinaabemowin* words, see Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, “Bagijige: Making an Offereing” in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, xv-xxvii (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup>Basil H. Johnston, “Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature” in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam Jam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 3-12 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>20</sup>Bird, *Telling Our Stories*, 38-9.

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<sup>21</sup> Berens and Hallowell, *Memories, Myths and Dreams*, 82-3.

<sup>22</sup> William Warren and Walter James Hoffman report that the *Midewiwin* was formed immediately when *Anishinaabeg* were created. See William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibwa People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1851] 1984); Walter James Hoffman, "The Midewiwin, or 'Grand Medicine Society', of the Ojibwa" in *Smithsonian Institution, U.S. Bureau of Ethnology Report* v. 7, pp. 149-299 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891). Later scholars believe the *Midewiwin* was developed to deal with the crisis of European colonialism and disease. See Harold Hickerson, "The Sociopolitical Significance of Two Chippewa Ceremonials," *American Anthropologist* 68 (1963): 67-85. For a discussion of the scholarly debates on the origins of the *Midewiwin*, see Michael Angel, *Preserving the Sacred: Historical Perspectives on the Ojibwa Midewiwin* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> A. Irving Hallowell, *The Role of Conjuring in Saulteaux Society* (New York: Octagon Books, [1942] 1971); Ruth Landes, *Ojibwa Religion and the Midewiwin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968); Selwyn Hanington Dewdney, *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibwa* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and its Historical Changes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 174-190; Basil Johnston, "The Story of Medicine/ Midewewin" in *Ojibwa Ceremonies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 93-112; and Theresa S. Smith, *The Island of the Anishinaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in Traditional Ojibwa Life-World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 28-30, 185-187.

<sup>24</sup> Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion*, 191-192; Jennifer S. H. Brown and Maureen Matthews, "Fair Wind: Medicine and Consolation on the Berens River," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 4 (1994): 55-74; and for more on the *Wabano*, see Maureen Matthews and Roger Roulette, "Fair Wind's Dream: Naamiwan Obawaajigewin" in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, ed. by Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, 130-160 (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Bird, *Telling Our Stories*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander D. King, Introduction to "Koryak: Raven Tales from Kamchatka" in *Voices from Four Directions: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, ed. by Brian Swann, 3-10 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>27</sup> For a general overview see Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). For a critique of this work see Niigonwedom James Sinclair, "Trickster Reflections, Part 1" in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, ed. by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, 21-58 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 28-35. Note that the author spells his name as Niiigaanwewidam James Sinclair.

<sup>28</sup> Mac Linscott Ricketts, "The North American Indian Trickster," *History of Religions* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1966: 327-350): 343.

<sup>29</sup> Inness, *Elder Brother*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Sinclair, "Trickster Reflections, Part 1," 26.

<sup>31</sup> Sinclair, "Trickster Reflections, Part 1," 34. Also see Kristina Fagan, "What's the Trouble with the Trickster?" in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, ed. by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, 3-20 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 5, 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory from Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2007), 97.

<sup>33</sup> Innes, *Elder Brother*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Beck Kehoe, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2000), especially 8, 66-67, and 92-3; quote from 8.

<sup>35</sup> Bird, *Telling Our Stories*, 26; Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*, 175-197.

<sup>36</sup> Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*, 184-190.

<sup>37</sup> Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*, 190-193.

<sup>38</sup> Bird, *Telling Our Stories*, 152-157; Bird, *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*, 23-37.

<sup>39</sup> The best published collection of *Nanabozho* stories is William Jones, *Ojibwa Texts*, edited by Truman Michelson (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1917).

<sup>40</sup> Berens, *Memories, Myths, and Dreams*, 127-132.

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<sup>41</sup>Berens, *Memories, Myths, and Dreams*, 135-141.

<sup>42</sup>Innes, *Elder Brother*, 30.

<sup>43</sup>Sinclair, "Trickster Reflections, Part 1," 43-46.