Who Should Wake Coyote?
The Role of 'Exemplary Stories' in a Time of Climate Change

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Abstract

This article explores Lucy Wright and Joseph Beuys' creative engagements with folklore and traditional knowledge. It considers the degree to which these European artists' work might mitigate or promote resilience to the impacts of climate change globally. If there is potential to be gained from engaging creatively with folklore to support more sustainable life ways, who has the right to do this and what are the potential challenges around this kind of work? While recognising that intangible cultural heritage traditions often display vital human interconnections with local landscapes, such that their protection may also constitute a form of environmental protection, it asks whether supporting, or perhaps rather shifting European reactions to climate change need always be achieved with reference to European folklore, or whether trans-continental work may also be valuable. Reflecting on the Anthropocene, the article asks how it frames, supports, elides or limits action on climate change. It then turns to indigenous stories of coyote as exemplary stories, pedagogical narratives which initiate creative processes of personal and collective interpretation and guide people to a sustainable relationship with their environment. Finally, it draws on Randazzo and Richter's recent work to consider how such traditions might be turned to in ethical ways to critique the Anthropocene thesis, opening up other possible ways to support ongoing life on earth.

Keywords

Anthropocene, coyote, folklore, Joseph Beuys, Lucy Wright

The question of who can appropriately tell which stories at 'end of times', and to what ends, is important to raise in the urgent context of climate change. In this article, I consider two professional artists' creative engagements with folklore and the degree to which their work aims to either prevent or mitigate ecological damage or to promote resilience to the effects of climate change. I then turn to indigenous stories, particularly stories of coyote, considering their relevance as creative and pedagogical processes of engagement and interpretation in a European context. Finally, I draw on debates around the value of

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considering indigenous knowledges as a counter to what T. J. Demos refers to as 'the Anthropocene thesis'. According to Demos (2017: 13), the Anthropocene discourse evades justice claims around which entities and people are the source of the problem. It is often visualised through piecing together satellite imagery, obscuring action on the ground and creating narratives around techno-fixes that sustain corporate interests rather than the variety of different approaches needed to help prevent the traversal of dangerous tipping points.

Lucy Wright: Folklore Is a Queer Thing Indeed

Through her PhD and subsequent practice-led research, artist and Visiting Fellow at Herts University Lucy Wright has developed a practice that explores folkloric narratives with a view to rendering them more inclusive for people. An ethnomusicologist by training who 'combines approaches from ethnography and social art' (Wright n.d.a.) Wright has already engaged with folk traditions as a folk singer and Morris dancer, so to some extent she has an emic perspective on the folk traditions she works with. Drawing on years of documenting female-led and queer folk practice, Wright's art sits at the intersection of folklore and activism and is a welcoming one, inclusive in terms of both queerness and ethnicity (Wright n.d.b.). Her practice opens the doors to those who may have been interested in British folkloric traditions, but have, for various reasons, felt less welcomed within the folk community, whether that be amongst Morris dancing sides, in groups of folk musicians, as part of ritual performances, or as contributors to other forms of intangible heritage. There is an implicit ecological sensitivity in her performance of colourful and creative land-related rituals that invite us to consider the potential of vernacular traditions, not only to support a sense of belonging but also as a form of resistance and a motor for social change.

In one work (Figure 1), Wright engages with the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance (Figure 2), 'widely reported to be England's oldest surviving ritual custom' (Wright n.d.b.), which takes place annually on Wakes Monday in Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire. Performed by an all-male group in the roles of six Deer-men, a Fool, a Hobby Horse, a child with a bow and arrow, and Maid Marion, the Deer-men hold up reindeer antlers to their faces, which are set in a wooden block, and all perform a series of defined dance movements, accompanied by an accordion player and a young person with a triangle,

Figure 1. Artist Lucy Wright, photograph of 'Non-Fertility Ritual', 2023

Figure 2. Photograph of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, taken by Sir Benjamin Stone. In Stone, B., (1906), *Sir Benjamin Stone's Pictures – Festivals, Ceremonies and Customs* (London: Cassell & Co). John Benjamin Stone, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

at various places along a ten-mile journey through the village, surrounding farms and pubs, collecting funds for the church and parish (Bullen 1987: 2–15).

The dance is thought to have originated in the 1500s, although carbon dating of the antlers to not long after Norse invaders brought reindeer with them in the eleventh century suggests it developed from a much earlier custom (Bullen 1987). Andrew Bullen (1987: 3) interprets it as a response to, and celebration of, the granting of grazing rights – by a local Abbey in what was then Needwood Forest – to five local families who farmed the rents of the manor in the early twelfth century. In 'Non-Fertility Ritual', Wright re-configures and re-performs the ritual in quite a different way. While the performance is not available on video, photographic documentation of the ritual she followed at York St John University in 2023 can be found on her website and shows her working alone with reindeer antlers and a number of other materials, including a box of small samples of plant materials – perhaps from the local area – that appear to be placed on packets of condoms. Gradually, the artist places a condom on each of the antler tines. There is a clear emphasis on women's agency here; Wright re-performs the dance as a non-fertility ritual by a woman who has no children out of choice. Indeed, Wright's work is, in many ways, a statement of opposition to a particularly heteronormative and male-dominated period of folkloric collecting. Writing in *The Sunday Times,* Kate Spicer (2024) describes Wright as 'an artist, academic and mainstay of a scene aiming to remove folk traditions from male, pale and stale hands and return them to the people.' Thus, while her emphasis is on gender and gender preference, there is also a swipe at the suggestion that folk traditions entirely sit within the ideological notion of a 'pure' nation. In interview, Wright explains: 'Folk has a problem because what we know as folk today is based on customs that were collected during what's known as the English folk revival, a Victorian patriarchal upper-class response to the idea that something of pure Englishness was being lost to urbanisation and industrialisation. Unfortunately, what they took was exclusively male. Women's folk traditions were ignored' (cited in Spicer 2024).

Wright's work both contests and aligns with the ideas of one of the few women folklorists of the time, Violet Alford, whose work decried creative departures from folkloric traditions for fear of their loss and argued that the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance was a fertility ritual rather than the hunting ritual it had thus far been taken to be (Armstrong 1973:110). Rather than be overly preoccupied with creating

an 'authentic' ritual which closely mirrors that of the past, Wright is more concerned to adapt and breathe new life into a tradition, with a socially progressive aim in mind.

In 'Folk Is a Feminist Issue', Wright articulates why broadening the welcome of the folkloric is important:

> My vision is of a new, more inclusive and far-reaching definition of folk that celebrates and empowers everybody, starting with women (we're half the population, after all). To me, this is a crucial step for folk to be recognised as the powerhouse that it is, *not just as a musical genre,* but as an agent for resistance and change in the arts and culture, and beyond! (Wright, n.d.c, Wright's emphasis)

The concept of folk as a 'powerhouse', a generator of people's energy, is compelling at a time when tipping points creep ever nearer and it is now widely accepted that collective dissent is and will be required to place a brake on corporations that remain bent on extractivism, despite the increasingly dire warnings of the scientists. This disastrous 'business as usual' may potentially find its counter-narrative in folkloric traditions, rituals that people can get behind. There is a definite sense of the harnessing of folklore for progressive ends in operation here. It may be that Wright is not directly addressing ecological emergency. Yet contentious as it may be, at this time a non-fertility ritual might constitute a valuable new form of custom, chiming as it does with feminist theorist Donna Haraway's contentious plea to humanity to invest in relations with living humans and non-humans, rather than have children. While recognising political dangers (and histories) of abuse around regulating women's fertility and making clear her awareness of the disproportionate number of resources Western children will use, Haraway (2016a: 224) exhorts us to face up to the projected rapid increase in world population and its environmental impact with the aphorism: 'Make Kin Not Babies!'

Another inclusive tradition Wright has created, that of 'dusking', dancing the sun down, is a counterpart to the dancing on May Day in the Morris tradition, a tradition she also celebrates in her work. 'Taking place instead on 31 October, at Dusking we "dance the sun down" while honouring the equal gifts of rest, reflection and replenishment associated with the darker months of the year.' The new tradition has gained some traction, largely via the artist's Instagram site, and been adopted by many 'and around 100 artists, Morris and hedge Morris dancers danced down the sun on 31st October 2023' (Tradfolk staff 2023), so we might ask whether this is one example of how new traditions are born. At the same time, Wright is not arguing for an erasure

of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance. Her work is at the nexus of folklore and art and constitutes folklore in the making. Working across ethnomusicology and art, she confronts the erasure of women's traditions, rendering women of the past visible, and the creative development of new rituals, are important aspects to creating forms of ritual that speak to the present and bring new potential for women to enter that space openly, rather than covertly, as Kate Bentley did when her father fell ill and she secretly dressed up in his clothing, leading the dance. 'No one was ever the wiser and she turned to her father in triumph' (Bullen 1987: 4).

While the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance is still a male-dominated ritual, a submission posted on its Facebook site (Various Horn Dancers, n.d.) in September 2022 reveals that one of the musicians supporting the dance that year was a young female member of the Fowler family, who explains that her aunts and sisters have also been involved. Although the dancers holding the antlers all remain men, it becomes clear that one member is not a direct family descendant but has been invited by the family to dance, which gives a sense of slight, if limited, inclusivity. The emphasis remains on it being a local tradition that welcomes both locals and visitors to enjoy it, and there is a clear sense in which it bolsters community well-being, identity and possibly resilience in the frame of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). There is certainly a sense that such traditions, both in themselves and in their creative re-interpretations, might be valuable vectors for social cohesion and environmental connection.

A Coyote Action

Wright is re-shaping the folklore of her own culture, whether framed as local, regional, national or British. The power dimension is, of course, quite different when an artist responds to traditions that sit outside their own immediate culture. The subject of much of my research in Visual Culture has been the work of Joseph Beuys, a twentieth-century German artist whose work with folklore in progressive ways has long fascinated me. Beuys engaged with folk knowledge emerging from his own German context; Nicole Fritz's PhD thesis details Beuys' use of a standard folkloric source, the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Handbook of German Superstition). Working in the field of Cultural Studies, Fritz engages with the artist's use of this source and notes that Beuys updated folk symbols in his work as he 'creatively transformed

the symbolic forms and rituals recorded in the *Handwörterbuch* by adding his own interpretations of the symbols – an aesthetically intricate way of rendering the past productive for the present' (Fritz 2002).This re-interpreting of folklore so that it speaks to, and is 'productive' for contemporary contexts is reminiscent of Wright's work. Yet Beuys went beyond a focus on German culture. In the context of this journal edition's focus on sustainability, I am particularly interested in a work he undertook in 1974, entitled 'I Like America and America Likes Me', often referred to as 'the Coyote action'. That action saw Beuys travel to New York to undertake a three-day performative work at the opening of the René Block Gallery, working with a coyote. Beuys requested that upon arrival at JFK airport he be wrapped in felt and placed on a stretcher and then driven to the gallery in Soho in an ambulance and guided to the area of the gallery where the coyote was. The artist wished to be isolated and insulated from the rest of the United States until he had met the coyote. Some accounts refer to the coyote as wild; however, he had a handler who called him Little John and thus had experience of humans.

Beuys brought with him a number of carefully selected items to use in a form of ritual: a triangle, a wooden staff, some rolls of felt, a torch. He also brought a recording of the roar of a turbine to be played in the gallery. The gallery supplied straw and copies of the *Wall Street Journal*. Beuys worked with all the materials in a cycle of repeated movements lasting over an hour. He undertook this around thirty times, and the coyote was free to subvert and dialogue with this cycle, which ended with the turbine sound. The large space was sectioned off by caging a smaller area for spectators, rather than coyote and man, and the performance was documented on video and in still photographs, many of which were taken by the then *Guardian* Arts Critic, Caroline Tisdall.

Beuys could be said to be paying respect to the worldview of indigenous peoples as well as conveying his intent to learn from coyote and contest the ignorant but all-too-common scapegoating of one group of human beings by another and ensuing ignorance about place. The coyote is, for many in the United States, a reviled animal, seen as a pest and an outsider. This betrays a malevolence towards First Nation peoples, since for many tribal bands, coyote is a mythical figure who is central to their sense of themselves, and stories about coyote and the outcome of his various transgressions are told to teach the community lessons about how to live in the right way (Cooper 1987).

In 'Beuys Coyote', Tisdall reminds us that it was with the coming of the white man to America that the figure of the coyote shifted from

Figure 3. Photograph of Joseph Beuys' 'I Like America and America Likes Me' taken by Caroline Tisdall. © DACS 2024

being one of the mightiest of many deities, to cunning coyote: 'He was reduced from being an admirably subversive power on a cosmic scale to what Jung in his preface to Pueblo Indian legends called 'the Archetype of the Trickster'. His ingenuity and adaptability were now interpreted as low and common cunning: he became the mean coyote' (Tisdall 2008: 10).

Beuys' action, then, is envisaged as a form of 'reckoning . . . with the coyote', an attempt to heal the trauma of this slight of First Nation peoples and the violent repression of their place-related worldviews by Western settlers, because, as Beuys put it in relation to the history of the United States, 'the White Man is a swine (Tisdall 2008: 10). There is also a clear interest in energetic and spiritual transformation embedded in the action's intention. In Tisdall's publication, Beuys elaborates on the spiritual powers he is working with in this action, which attempts to shift Western understandings and use of energy and find receptive places for his ecological and social sculpture ideas (Tisdall 1980: 10). As the coyote playfully engaged with Beuys and the materials, the spectre of the non-human animal's power comes into view, but the work also foregrounds the vital importance to Beuys

of learning from coyote in careful and reflective dialogue over the three days. This positioning resonates with some tribal stories about coyote from the southwestern United States, which show a belief that through right action and respect, a coyote may reveal its wisdom to you. There is a sense in this artwork that neither Europe nor America will heal without these forms of spiritual reckoning, and that the trauma of America is linked with Europe and derives from the movement of European values into an American context. Beuys was, as Warwick McLeod (2019) explains, 'to come to a sick America's aid by turning its attention around 180 degrees, from its default attitude – Europe-derived, Eurocentric – to contemplate its interior, its indigeneity'.

In this sense the action relates to both America and Europe, and Tisdall asserts Beuys' belief that coyote had a connection to the East-West crossing point of Eurasia. While questioning some of the artist's ideas, I remain interested in Beuys' practice because of its attempt at restoring balance and both psychological and ecological healing, and because it reflects a relatively sophisticated understanding of indigenous traditions and their work with concepts, essences and transformation to move things in a progressive direction. At the same time, the artist was deeply interested in liberating human energy – his first trip to the United States was a lecture tour entitled *Energy Plan for the Western Man* (see Rothfuss, n.d.) – and this conviction that working with indigenous understandings and stories liberates energy echoes Wright's conviction that folk traditions constitute a "power house".

In my book on Beuys, I drew from anthropologist Arnd Schneider's assessment of Beuys' work in terms of Rosalind Krauss' notion of soft and hard primitivism, as developed by Lynne Cooke:

> in contrast with 'soft primitivists' who draw from the surface visual appearance of the forms and symbols of indigenous cultures, some artists – and I would include Beuys among them – constitute a good example of Cooke's understanding of 'hard' primitivists, who 'become involved in the recreation of indigenous rituals, assume the indigenous on a more personal level, and show a greater interest in the cultural context' (Schneider and Wright 2006: 39, cited in Walters 2012: 226).

The cultural context of stories about coyote relates to a range of related knowledge traditions and a particular cosmology. The power of these stories also lies in their work with human imaginative potential; listening to them is an interpretative process that is creative in itself and reminds us of the importance of the audience where traditional knowledge is concerned. This sense of human beings as having

the potential to realise incredible mind power but requiring reminders of the dangers that come with this, resonates at a time of climate emergency, when technological developments, among them blockchain technology and AI, are pursued for profit despite their huge drain on energy resources. They also prove therapeutically compelling for Beuys because for many tribal bands they are healing traditions. As Lewis Hyde reminds us, Navajo Coyote stories 'are a kind of medicine' (Hyde 1998: 12).

It is important, I think, to direct readers to at least one example of an indigenous story of coyote to avoid the problematic tendency to discuss indigenous stories generally without referring to the stories themselves or to their narrators. While narratives about coyote vary among tribal bands, I would strongly encourage readers to view a video of former Professor at Okanagan College Bill Cohen telling the story of Coyote and the Eagle, following his discussions with Okanagan Syilx and Secwepemc people who live in the Northwest Plateau, British Columbia (see web link in College Relations, 2020). Cohen explains that this beautiful story teaches about maintaining a sustainable balance with the regional ecology and relates that the image of "bringing Coyote back to life" concluding the narrative is "a foundational metaphor for the praxis and positioning of humans within a very diverse and interdependent natural world that is continuously intelligent and creative." In view of the discussion to follow, it does not feel appropriate to tell the story myself even in the context of this article, not least because, as coyote finds out in the story, it is unwise to claim ways that are not your own, but also because a story of coyote is so connected to who the community are that I would not feel able to tell the narrative without consent. Finally, listening to the story being told is part of its pedagogic power.

What Could it Mean to Work with Coyote?

Waking coyote, or perhaps rather understanding the process of bringing coyote back to life, would seem a vital form of ICH in need of protection in a North American context. However, it is arguably an imperative source of wisdom in a European context in this time of climate change. The narrative gives a picture of the kinds of participatory processes of research, reflection, dialogue and co-production that are needed to re-establish balance and to confront both the positive potential of technology and its dangerous 'people-eating' manifestations. In

some respect, the work that is already being done on the ground in relation to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH could be seen as an example of careful, collective, dialogic practice, preserving both traditions and their respected and often connected ecosystems. Yet what are the ethics of turning to traditional knowledge for guidance on how to live sustainably, or as to how the Convention might reach its full potential?

In *Challenging Anthropocene Ontology: Modernity, Ecology and Indigenous Complexities,* Elisa Randazzo and Hannah Richter recognise the potential danger here:

> A number of both Western and Indigenous critiques have drawn out how aiming to learn from Indigenous communities in a global context where the divisions of power and wealth, between those who own land have the right to form a sovereign state and those who do not, are still those of settler colonialism, is simply another form of colonial expropriation, this time in the register of ideas (Randazzo and Richter 2024: 5).

Even in a European context, it would seem dangerous and potentially unjust to draw on indigenous knowledge traditions for precisely this reason, especially where they are not our own local traditions. One way, as we have seen from Wright and Beuys' work, might be to approach them through art. In some sense, it could be argued, artists perform forms of strategic transgression, sometimes at great cost to themselves, in order to expand the possible. But great care is needed here, and it is important to ask what the intent of such practices are.

The work of Randazzo and Richter leads us to another possibility – that it might be more germane to consider these cosmologies as a way of contesting the dominant narrative being adopted about the Anthropocene. Although the concept remains dominant, key criticisms have included a failure to recognise the role of capitalism, the denial of agency to individuals on the ground while bolstering faith in techno-fixes (Demos 2017), and the concept's complete denial of the degree to which 'White Geology' has been foundational to extractive economies under colonialism and slavery (Yusoff 2018), the latter proposing that since the notion of the 'Anthropocene' entirely obscures that history of violence and dispossession, there must be 'A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None'.

Randazzo and Richter draw from indigenous stories carefully to cautiously contest the Anthropocene discourse itself, rather than to leave disparities of power and wealth uncontested, or worse still, reinforce them. The theorists do not claim ownership or knowledge that would emerge from an emic (insider) perspective but assemble

indigenous ecology as a 'critical mirror' with which to face Anthropocene narratives. They clarify their understanding of the complexity of the term 'Indigenous' and the dangers of grouping diverse and complex communities under this term, emphasising that it is not their intention to present 'pure' forms or claim knowledge that is not their own. Instead, they aim to show that placing a Deleuzian assemblage of indigenous ecologies up to the Anthropocene discourse opens up potential narratives that notions of the Anthropocene elide and may actively obscure. They argue that Anthropocene narratives tend to create an impossible binary between pure and impure, cutting off potential room for manoeuvre. For them, looking at Anthropocene narratives in the mirror of indigenous understandings demonstrates these communities' vast knowledge and pragmatism around politics. Their goal is 'to employ exemplary stories from the realm of Indigenous environmental thought and politics to render visible the excess of ontological forms and political pathways that by far transcends the determinisms of Anthropocene ontopolitics' (Randazzo and Richter 2024: 9).

Conclusion

The work of the two artists and the First Nation communities discussed here demonstrate the potential power of working creatively with folklore or wisdom traditions to make people aware of the importance of acting sensitively to create balance and sustain life. Wright's work foregrounds the potential that creative work with folklore traditions offers diverse communities, supporting them to engage with earth-based practices, reclaim and benefit from folklore's power and create new traditions. Beuys' work also seeks to initiate creativity and energy, but sits within the broader context of his anthropological expansion of art and methodology of social sculpture. Both artists work in a therapeutic way. Their artistic narratives are valuable, and both owe much to past traditions and exemplary stories. But where the cosmologies of indigenous communities are concerned, we must also see the wisdom of these stories and their related ecosystem knowledge as forms of pedagogy and healing that show great artistry in themselves and furthermore, understand that listening to them constitutes an interpretative and holistic creative process in itself. As College Relations explain, "The practice of generating meaning and deciphering the wisdom, values, beliefs and meaning from the stories

involves an active reflection and engagement of your mind, body and spirit." (College Relations, 2020).

Drawing from these understandings, whether for artistic or onto-political ends, must be undertaken with great care, such power is not to be messed with. Randazzo and Richter remind us to work very carefully and respectfully in relation to indigenous understandings. It is clear that the stories of coyote are creative indigenous tools for teaching and learning about people's creative and sustainable living within complex places and amidst technological developments which can easily set things out of balance. In asking again 'who should wake coyote?', I would say indigenous communities themselves and those they trust and give consent to, but that artists who are 'hard primitivists' – and ideally those who nurture and are nurtured by the place that gives rise to the stories – may play a role where they act with respect. The figure of coyote reminds us that these stories and traditions are, in themselves, living beings to be treated with great sensitivity. They are core to people's identity and their sustainable 'ongoingness' (Haraway) in place. This positioning sits appropriately alongside, and underscores the importance of, the emphasis of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on ICH as 'a living, breathing element of human existence'.

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