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Historicizing the Horse (IV). Untitled story told by the Diné (Navajo) and *Ghost Stallion* (Yinnuwok)

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Abstract: This is the fourth study in a series dedicated to analyzing the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures and it focuses on its representation in two stories: un untitled story told by the Diné and Ghost Stallion, recorded from the Yinnuwok. None of them is a creation story (in the sense of explaining how the first horse was created), but both fall into the category of stories that narrate how the historical legitimacy of the horse was constructed, following a recurrent pattern that first de-historicizes and then re-historicizes the horse. In this process, the structural identity of the horse, internal and external, is changed though an act of mythicization, which allows it to be logically enculturated in a tribe's narrative.

Keywords: *horse, mythicization, historicity, historicization.*

The present study continues the investigation of the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures through an analysis of two stories: an untitled story told by the Diné /Navajo, and *Ghost Stallion*, told by the Yinnuwok/Cree. In my previous three articles on the same topic (all published in Meridian Critic), which focused on four Blackfoot horse stories (*Thunder's Gift of Horses*, *Water Spirit's Gift of Horses*, *How Morning Star Made the First Horse and The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog*) and a Choctaw one (*The Tale of the Wind Horse*), I explained in extenso the pivotal role that the acquisition of the horse played in changing the historical rhythm and cultural pattern(s) of most of the cultures it got enculturated into. Benjamin Capps concluded that "as each succeeding tribe first caught sight of the horse, its people reacted with astonishment and wonder, since the only domesticated animals they had ever seen before were their scruffy dogs." (Capps 1973: 50) In most cases, this feeling of astonishment, inevitably generated by the unheimlich-ness of the horse, generated a distinct type of story, focused on the creation, meaning(s), care and use of the new animal. Since stories were the repository of tribal knowledge, the image of the horse immediately penetrated at the core of storytelling, which helped logically encompass the horse in daily life. But stories also functioned as mnemonic devices and, as such, they helped the members of each tribe constantly reassess and reengage the role and the meaning(s) of the horse. It is this didactic function of storytelling in Native American cultures that represents the common point of the two stories to be analyzed in this article; otherwise, they are thematically different – the Navajo one is centered on the creation of horse, while the Cree one investigates the relationship between humans and horses, through a behavioral observation of this interaction and of the risks involved.

Of all Native American horse stories analyzed in my previous studies, the one told by the Navajo[1] seems to be the most lacunar and linear. It opens with a very abrupt statement, which lacks the usual temporal contextualization usually present in such stories – "The god Begochiddy originally created the horse for the Diné people." In Navajo mythology, Begochiddy was a child of the Sun, referred to as being both a man and a woman, and the main creator of the first four worlds, who made mountains, rivers, trees, animals, birds and lightning. The idea the horse had been originally created for the Diné fits a recurrent pattern in such stories and it demonstrates how the process of historicizing the horse inevitably began with one of mythicization – the horse was infiltrated and encapsulated in a tribe's creation story (or the cycle of creation stories) and was contextualized within a preexisting framework, one that was already culturally and historically familiar. In most stories, the process of transforming the horse from unheimlich-ness to familiarity triggered, culturally speaking, a double response: first, giving it a name, and second, infusing it with appropriate meaning(s). Naming the horse was a challenging task, captured in a discussion David Thompson had with an old warrior and published in the *Narrative of His Explorations in Western America 1784 – 1812*, quoted by B. Capps:

> […] and we were anxious to see a horse of which we had heard so much. At last, as the leaves were falling, we heard that one was killed by an arrow shot into his belly, but the Snake Indian that rode him got away. Numbers of us went to see him, and we all admired him. He put us in mind of a stag that had lost his horns; and we did not know what name to give him. But as he was a slave to Man, like the dog, which carried out things, he was named the Big Dog. (Capps 1973: 50)

Thus, identity of the horse is constructed through cultural association or similitude, a process that annihilates its unheimlich-ness. Once named, the horse is identifiable as a distinct component of the tribe's body of collective knowledge and its cultural assimilation begins. This second response, which consisted in incorporating the horse in creations myths, functioned as an intermediary stage in historicizing it. To the Native American mind, the horse was historically possible only through myth. Therefore, myth was an instrument which helped them first de-historicize (a process of extracting it from otherness and disposing it of its meanings in an unfamiliar context) and then re-historicize the horse (reconstructing its identity within the tribal cultural framework). Returning to the opening statement of the Diné story, it can be inferred that they assumed primacy over other tribes in their knowledge of and interaction with the horse.

As the story progresses, the idea of the supernaturality of the horse is reinforced by placing it directly in the company of the Sun and superposed over the spatiality of the Diné universe: "The Sun rode a favorite horse as he crossed the sky and kept herds to the north, south, east, and west of his home." The fact that the Sun kept horses in all four cardinal directions alludes to the idea that the horse not only defined the Diné universe, but it also marked the limits or the boundaries of that space; it was not only a tribal asset, but one of the tribe's cultural pillars. At this point, the motif of the journey appears, as the character of the story, Turquoise Boy goes to see the animals; based on the color of their coats, the horses he discovers clearly belong to the mythical realm:

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[1] Available at https://americanindian.si.edu/exhibitions/horsenation/blessing.html (accessed on September 4, 2023).

> Mirage Man showed him the corrals, with white-shell horses to the east, turquoise horses to the south, yellow abalone-shell horses to the west, and spotted horses to the north. They were the colors of the four directions – the colors of morning, noon, afternoon, and evening.

The presence of the horses and their colors are associated with the four directions, which carried a primordial function in southwestern Native American cultures (and not only); four was considered to be a sacred number and its symbolism covered a wide spectrum: the four seasons, the four stages of life, the four aspects of life, the four elements of nature etc. Therefore, this space of primeval inter- and transconnectivity between the horse and other sacred elements of the Diné universe indicates a process of deep mythicization, one in which the animal is projected at the very core of the tribe's definitory beliefs.

This cultural enframing of the horse concludes the first part of the story; the second part explains, in a similarly laconic manner, how the horse was historicized, in the sense of being transferred from the mythical world to the historical one. The process begins with another journey/quest, this time of a more pragmatic (which can also be read as historical) nature, as Turquoise Boy is in search of a means of travel. His quest leads him to the original Diné homeland, a detail which implies that he must return to the realm of myth in order to extract and transfer into the historical realm not the horse itself, but the recipe and the ingredients needed to make a horse:

> Turquoise Boy then undertook a quest to find a means of travel for the Diné. After several false starts, he finally visited a mesa in the Dinetah, the original Diné homeland, where he found a fat man and his family living in a hole in the ground. The fat man turned out to be Mirage Man, who gave Turquoise Boy the bead, pollen, and horse saliva fetishes needed to produce horses.

If the first part of the story focused primarily on the contextualization of the horse as a mythical animal, the second part constructs the didactic dimension, which is layered within the process that explains how the horse was historicized. Whenever told and retold, the story reminded the members of the tribe that at one point, in the illo tempore, they knew how *to make horses* (an action that implies an act of creation) in order to use them at the historical level – a means of travel for the tribe. Compared to the texts that I analyzed in my previous articles, where the historicization of the horse is usually explained through an act of gift offering, the Diné text describes it as the result of a collective need, that of a means of transportation. The mythical horse becomes the historical horse by means of a historical need of the tribe; historicity is the result of a necessity.

The second part of this article will focus on the story of the *Ghost Stallion*[2], told by the Yinnuwok/Cree. Like so many other Native American stories, it opens with a geocultural contextualization of the events to unfold, which places them in the tribe's historical location – Cree Valley. But, although "this is a story from a long time ago", it is not a creation story; the events occur at a time when horses are already historicized. They not only represent a familiar presence, but are a very valuable asset and an indicator of one's wealth. Horses as wealth is an aspect analyzed in detail by John C. Ewers in his book *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, where he explains how the animals were an indicator of social status and could function as a decision factor in various tribal matters:

> Contemporary observers of the Plains Indians in buffalo days noted that these people reckoned their wealth in horses. Some tribes appeared to be rich in horses. Others were obviously poor. Within each tribe there were individuals who were relatively wealthy in horses. Others were desperately poor. The individual's status as an owner of horses conditioned his use of these animals and helped to determine both the nature and degree of his participation in many aspects of the life of the people of his tribe. (Ewers 1967: 20)

As stated at the beginning of the article, these observations indicate the fact that once historicized, the horse modified the dynamics of social and historical patterns among neighboring tribes or within the community of a single tribe. Such is the case in the Yinnuwok story, where the main character, named The Traveler, is described as a wealthy chief, with horses being one of his valuable assets:

> Long ago, The Traveler was a wealthy chief. A warrior in his young days, he had taken many scalps, many horses, many another trophy of value. And he had increased his possessions by hard dealings with those less fortunate, and by gambling with younger men who were no match for his cunning.

He was not a popular presence among his fellow tribesmen because he mistreated most of them, including his wives, who abandoned him, and his children, who hated him. He only cared for his horses and he took every opportunity to increase their numbers.

> There was only one thing he cared for – his horses. They were fine horses, beautiful horses, for he kept only the best; and when a young warrior returned from a raid with a particularly good horse, The Traveler never rested until (whether by fair means or not) he had it in his possession.

The story then explains how his love for horses was in fact contingent on the animals' having certain physical qualities, as "he loved only the ones that were young, and handsome, and healthy; a horse that was old, or sick, or injured, received only abuse." At this point, it becomes evident that the story aims at giving insight into the relationship between humans and horses, focusing on the morality and the rules of interaction and adequate behavior. This alludes to the idea that the acquisition of the horse did not only ensure historical and cultural progress (at the macrohistorical level), but also generated, directly and indirectly, intracommunal disruptive and reprehensible behavior (at the level of microhistory), which is described as incondonable. This type of unacceptable bevior is introduced through a detailed presentation of the Traveler's interaction with an old and tired looking horse: he beats the animal unmercifully and leaves it to die, only to discover the next morning, to his astonishment, that all his horses disappeared. In this context, we learn that the old horse was, in fact, a mythical horse, as it "slowly turned into a beautiful horse, shining white, with long mane and tail - a horse more lovely than any The Traveler had ever seen." If one takes into account the idea that, to the Native American mind, a shapeshifter was directly connected to the ancestors and usually associated with qualities such as loyalty, courage, and strength, it becomes evident the horse in the story is a primordial one, able to transgress the border between the realm of history and that of myth and coexist in both. When history errs and slips out of control, myth becomes an instrument of self-calibration which, sometimes, can only be obtained through punishment and/or elimination of the source of damage. In our story, gloating and cruelty are punished and The Traveler loses all his horses:

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[2] Available at https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Legends/Ghost_Stallion-Yinnuwok.html (accessed on September 4, 2023).

> Then the Stallion spoke: "If you had treated me kindly," the stallion said, "I would have brought you more horses. You were cruel to me, so I shall take away the horses you have!"
>
> When The Traveler awoke, he found his horses were gone. All that day, he walked and searched, but when at nightfall he fell asleep exhausted, he had found no trace of them.

Seen from this perspective, the events in the story resemble a boundary situation – as theorized by Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1991) –, in which the values of a community are challenged and threatened because of the inappropriate behavior of one individual. The fact that a mythical horse intervenes in the events indicates that myth is needed to regulate history. Thus, the resurgence of myth is the instrument through which dysfunctional history can be controlled, adjusted, and rebalanced. When historical behavior is extremized, myth becomes a poising factor. When identity is challenged, the punishment consists in the very loss of the challenged identity. As a result, the chief in the Yinnuwok story becomes an outcast and spends the rest of his life searching for his lost horses, that is, for his lost identity.

> And never again did he have a horse; never again did he see his own lodge. And he wanders, even to this day, the old men say, still searching for his lost horses.
>
> Sometimes, they say, on a windy autumn night when the stars shine very clearly, and over on the Cree Jump the coyotes howl, above the wind you may hear a rush of running horses, and the stumbling footsteps of an old man. And, if you are very unlucky, you may see the Stallion and his band – and The Traveler, still pursuing them, still trying to get back his beautiful horses.

Thus, as the story ends, the didactive function becomes prevalent and it instructs the collective mind to avoid unacceptable behavior while interacting with horses. It also accentuates the fact that norms and societal facts should always function appropriately in order to support collective intentionality in what concerns the relationship with the horse. In other words, when the historicization of the horse is disrupted, myth becomes the regulatory agent that reasserts order and reinstates functionality of the system.

To conclude, both stories narrate events that are connected to the historical and cultural construction of the horse in Native American cultures, spotlighting the original approach most tribes took in subsuming it into a preexisting body of knowledge. The response to the initial uncanniness of the horse was one of cultural immediacy, obtained by means of creating new stories, targeted at retrospectively fostering affiliation and reducing the psychological distance between communities and horses. Such stories do not only assert the historical legitimacy of the horse, but they also foreground the didactic function of storytelling in Native American cultures as they often encompass a moral lesson meant to remind the audience of the dangers of trespassing cultural and historical norms.

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