



## Michif Women 'Making Real' with the Roogaroo

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### Background

Legendary folklore and mythology often posit shapeshifters as humans who naturally transform into something divine, or into a demonic form or shape, through a possibility of spiritual intercession or sorcery and, perhaps, even through a process of physical human adeptness. We see stories of Indigenous cosmology highlighting deities and natural phenomena, and some of notable mythology portraying characters reflecting human to animistic transformation. Often these mesmeric storylines are laced with lessons of morality based on human actions and re-actions mirroring stances of righteousness or deviance, and showing the subsequent emotive conditions bringing the human (and those near) to outcomes rife with humiliation, shame, sorrow, and on occasion, jubilation, healing and harmony (Barkwell, Acco Carrière & Rozyk, ND). Sometimes, and paradoxically, a super human life incident may lead to a form of enlightenment, or even fatalism; in a sense, it may give another human being the sanction to live or to die (Kachuba, 2019). Within our earthly realm, visual representations of artifacts, hieroglyphs, petroglyphs, celestial stone formations, and other symbolic marks and signs of Nature may possibly show the veracity of shapeshifters, deities and spirits found here on Earth (Bruchac, 2014).

Moreover, cosmographies holding oral knowledges of teachings often come in a 'passing forward' from a family relation or noted clan member to those still learning; these



repositories of orality are usually filled with ancestral messages embedded within matricultural knowledges, Indigenous languages, and cultural protocols and ceremonies of a kinship or nation (Bruchac, 2014; Ferguson, 2001). Forms of governance respecting natural law within Indigenous cosmologies as applied to all living beings, all relationality, are reflective of a spiritual truth-telling within the underworld, upon the earth, and in the skies (McAdam, 2015). The foundations of Indigenous cosmologies are mutually protected modes of knowing shared by Indigenous peoples globally (Pearce, 2012). Although the principles of mythology are heavily rooted within cosmology, there has always been variance among stories, and plenty of evidence of those which show anomalies between the foundations of cosmology and Indigenous knowing, and other worldly teachings based on folklore (Richardson, 2022). Indigenous ancestral knowings have connections with ethos and spiritual beliefs, cultural ceremony, and Nature herself. Many have central figures leading the way including those, for example, of the Inuit, the Haida, the Hopi, and the Miwok, where *Sedna* (Mother of the Sea), *Raven*, *Tawa* (Sun Spirt) and *Coyote* are integral to their creation stories and the evolution of their nations (Tchana, 2006; Wardle, 1990).

### **Shape Shifters All Around**

Historically, witches, wizards, and even fairies dominated Celtic, Scottish and old English tradition and were often noted as shapeshifters (Briggs, 1976). Similarly, in other parts of the world, akin humans took on animistic formations of creatures found in the skies, upon the earth, and within the seas: ravens, swans, serpents or snakes, dolphins, seals, bears, foxes, wolves, jaguars, and more are presented in these ancient stories. Although global in nature, the stories of those who transform are somewhat scattered and perhaps unfamiliar to many Westerners. Each of these beings is seemingly known to have the capacity to shape shift or to make a bodily change into another form and, when choosing, are able to resort back to human form or other physicality. Plants are included within the profiles of those who shape shift, change, hide, or intervene and they too may play a part in influencing the reality of humans in their realm (Richardson, 2022; Richardson in Kress, 2022). Those known as leviathans, alchemists, ghouls, and the *yee naaldlooshii* or the skinwalkers are all a part of a 'clan' which elevates the notion of shapeshifter to one who transforms (Lamb, R., 2022; Uehlinger, 1999). This reality is often connected to biblical Christian beliefs and the notion of sorcery and sinfulness. An example found in Trinidadian and Tobago folklore is that of the Liaghao; notably, this shapeshifter often keeps the company of African witch doctors. Comparable stories have been found among those from Haiti where persons who negate the mores of Catholicism and engage in religious deviance are delivered a powerful lesson by the Loup Garou (werewolf) (Besson, 2017). Closer to home, the Loup Garou's locality to Turtle Island finds it communing in places

where French Canadian Catholics live, primarily in the province of Quebec. The sibling of Loup Garou, best known as the Rougarou, finds its place among the Métisse, Métis, or Michif in the more western areas of Canada. Moreover, we see the story of the Roogaroo resonate among the Cajun French in the southern Bayou of Louisiana in locations where the many Métisse, mixed French Canadiens, or French-speaking Acadians travelled via the fur trade routes of the 1700s (Foxcurran, Bouchard, Malette, 2016). Stories associated with these shapeshifters are found to teach critical lessons to those around them, and although some are asserted to be folklore, there are creatives among us who say the noted orality of these stories provides us with another realm of understanding (Beaucage, 2023). For some peoples, these stories are certainly more than folklore—and for Indigenous peoples, they may move beyond notions of mythology to those of realism. Here these shapeshifters exist as entities within a cosmic metaphysical reality which encompasses multiple levels of Indigenous knowing, being and doing. Importantly, within this understanding of cosmology we know that for

most indigenous cultures ... the soul does not die but rather transmigrates from human to animal or plant or higher spirit forms, and because the soul is capable of living in natural entities such as rivers, mountains, the earth, etc., both the animate and the inanimate are revered (Nassau, 1904b in Akoto & Piésold, 2008, p.1).

### **Michif Women Making It Real**

Central to this notion of shapeshifter are those who tell the stories of these beings and their aliveness. Most notably in times past, many Indigenous women and men such as the *boté* (Crow) and the *winkte* (Lakota) were warriors, sages, and healers within their communities (History of Round Table, 2019). Those holding these roles were responsible for the protection of other members and for keeping ceremonies, medicines, healing traditions, and children safe. Much within these ancient ceremonies endured the severity of colonialism; however, some significant teachings and practices were retained and are made alive through the passing down of oral knowledges (Bruchac, 2014). Knowledges within a cosmology of a peoples' nationhood embody space and time and within these vortexes they encompass and are reflective of spiritual influence, ancestral divinity, and natural law (McAdam, 2015). Each of these entities are integral features in the passing down of cultural practices and traditional lessons governing human ethos, mores, behaviors and values, as well as encounters, dealings, and clashes with other Indigenous nations and settlers. Today the stories of the Rougarou are primarily used as teachings and are kept alive by elder keepers, oral historians, linguists, and ceremonial healers through

blood memory and the re-coding of the passing down (Beaucage, 2023; Flammand, 2023; Richardson, 2022; Ziarkowska, 2015).

In a similar vein, Métis oral tradition ensures Indigenous spirituality is kept alive through the stories of the ancestors and through, for example, the influences of culture, ceremonies, and traditions. These include, most notably among the Algonquian speaking peoples, those of the Cree, Ojibway, Saulteaux, and even the Crow, which interfaced with the practices of spirituality among the Michif (Bruchac, 2014; Foxcurran et al, 2016; Barkwell, Dorion. & Hourie, 2006). This praxis of a melding or a mixing of Cree spirituality with, for example, a Roman Catholic religious influence brought about a finely-tuned adoption of both Catholic religion and Indigenous spirituality which saw Michif prayers being said in and outside of churches, during masses, and in the homes of the Catholic Métis (Richardson, 2022), while in many families traditional spiritual Cree practices continued, albeit for some behind closed doors (Richardson, 2022; Flammand, 2023).

For these Michif, the preservation of the soul and sanctity of life was foremost and the elevation of spirit happenings integral to the lives of themselves and their kin was and, in some cases today, continues to be central to life itself (Beaucage, 2023; Richardson, 2022). Family was sacred and foremost in the minds and hearts of these Michif. Adherence to moral conduct and principled living as directed by their ancestors was never far from their minds and its influence impacted what transpired as *joie de vivre* or *la zhway* within the human condition. Those who openly shared the stories that follow or who found a coming out after the underground years of Métis hiding attest to Michif survival and reclamation of language and culture (Flammand, 2022). For Indigenous peoples globally, higher directives through spirit and the power of natural laws were entwined within families; some believed that “ancestors become spiritual beings with the power to affect the fortune of the living for good or bad” (Nassau 1904a, in Akoto and Piésold, 2008, p.1). These realities embedded themselves within a Michif cosmology and are collectively noted in today’s recalling of the trickster characters, shapeshifters, and the Rougarou (Barkwell, Dorion & Hourie, 2006; Barkwell, Acco Carrière & Rozyk, ND).

Michif women and men have long told spirit-driven stories about their ancestors, their teachings, their religious practices, and, of course, the coming of Rougarou (Campbell, 2010; Letourneau, 2006). Within the story of the Rougarou a “syncretistic variation of the French-Canadian loup garou and the Cree shapeshifter [develops into a] person whom in some way has offended the Creator or has been possessed by evil spirits.” (Barkwell, Acco Carrière & Rozyk, ND, p. 10) Further, if you were the one to see one of these beings, you were told to keep secret the identity or you may, in fact, become a Rougarou yourself. In my teachings, those who see this shapeshifter may know the embodied positionality of that trickster and although they may not divulge that knowing, a good number who share

this collective story concur that this human transformer brings with it both a harsh lesson and an opportunity for the learner to do better. Currently and in very public ways, the Michif have resurged in the telling of these ancestral stories, those of creation and mythology, others of legends and fable, and certainly some of realism. In this public reclaiming of the Roogaroo, I believe the most prevalent of these storytellers, writers, filmmakers, musicians, and artisans to be those carrying a feminine mystique. Michif women and Two Spirit Métis are leading among those who seek to honour the memory of their ancestors in this way!

In Maria Campbell's depiction of the Rougarou, old time tradition and translation helps her distinguish her "Rou Garous" in *The Road Allowance Peoples* (2010). It is through her voice of the bush Metis that we learn about the ancestors and the Rou Garous as a shapeshifter:

My ole Grafawder he could turn hissself into a bear. An I knowed dis ole woman when I was a boy dat one he turned hissself into a kiyute. Bet dey do dat to doctor peoples dat was sick. Dese Rou Garous dey was different. Dey was bad tings from dah dark side of dah eart. (Campbell, 2010, 34, 35).

In this story, Campbell's words are buoyed up by striking visual images of the shapeshifter offered by painter Sherry Farrell Racette. Both the teller and the artist provide details which sanction life actions within a community of Metis believers, as they show how the reality of the Rou Garous' existence within feminine genders becomes an accepted modality. Readers soon recognize evidence of a Roman Catholic imposition from the priest of the community - and how his father-ruler disdain for the shapeshifter becomes established as all knowing "cause Josephine he don believe on dah Jesus an dah Virgin Mary" (Campbell, 2010, 36). Here, the narrator's mother may see Josephine as herself, and secretly knows she is beyond the "Catlic" influence (Campbell, 36), and in this realization, like Josephine, she retains her Indigenous fluidity of nationhood and gender. The notion of gender fluidity within Indigenous communities is tied to the ancient knowings of Indigenous knowledge systems (Beaucage, 2023; Sterritt, 2016; Wilson, 2015). In the case of Campbell's story, the connection of the Rou Garous to her own Nehiyawak (Cree) ancestors and knowledge system is seen as a powerful resistance to Christian indoctrination among the Cree and Metis. Cree Two Spirit scholar Alex Wilson sanctions the notion of fluidity found in Cree cosmology and in the shapeshifting friend of the Roogaroo:

Wesakecahk, the Cree trickster-shapeshifter who is neither man nor woman, but energy who can shapeshift into all and no genders, human and other-than-

human form including plants and animals, water and wind, constellations and cosmos (Wilson, in Scully, 2021, p. 56).

This is not to say that the Métis of today unabashedly accept gender fluidity or multi-gendered notions of the human, or the teachings of ancient life (in part due to the strong overtures of some French Catholic traditions). However, the return to multiplicity within the notion of gender is evident and there is new founded resurgence among Two Spirit Michif and gender diverse peoples (Beaucage, 2023; Sterritt, 2016; Wilson, 2015). In another way, the realism of the Roogaroo, along with its marked traits in story, art, film and other visualizations, is often projected through masculine characterization and by a counter-reality of fearlessness, which is almost always juxtaposed with dauntless feminine action and thought. The overtures of matrifocal governance within Métis society highlight critical factors of a feminine longevity within the culture and traditions of the Michif. Within the collections of this Roogaroo story, we see Michif literary and visual artists delineate the shapeshifter as one who imposes on both ancestral lineage and kinship sustainability. In times of trouble or injustice, when a familial or kinship disruption occurs among Métis families, we sometimes anticipate and understand emotive responses and can innately feel the rage and see the persistence of other Michif matriarchs in the protection of their children or other living relations.

Two vital tellers of the story today are Michif Two Spirit Elder Marjorie Beaucage of Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, and Métis storyteller Cherie Dimaline of Georgian Bay, Ontario. In a mix of exposing injustice, racism, religion, and culture, each conveys the coming of the Roogaroo as a lesson in learning more about the resilience of the human condition. In Dimaline's story, *Empire of the Wild* (2021), young boys understand that they too might become one of these beings if they mistreat women or girls and family whisperings warn young girls that they must stick together, stay off the roads, and out of the woods! Dimaline tells the story of Joan, who, while searching for her missing husband (who after a great argument left her to check his traps, never to return), runs into the righteous Reverend Eugene Wolff in a revival tent. We wonder if perhaps her grandmother's story of the past gives some credence to her development of the Reverend or the 'Rogaroo' in that tent! In this writing, Dimaline propels the shapeshifter into a creature who scares the *bejusus* out of the young and, as we learn about this being who is man and dog, vicious and tricky, charming and sullen, we see the slight variations from the Roogaroos of many other Michif storytellers. As Dimaline unravels her Métis cosmology of fiddle and charm, we weave through the disconnections of ancestral influence and diminishing morality, and we stay attentive to her threads of burning Métis fierceness within a memory-back approach to projects of both justice and life change.

Comparatively, in Beaucage's film *Rougarou* (2014), her storytelling with grade students presents a mystic Michif cosmology in which the moon's appearance is a necessity before the story can take its rightful shape. In the dark of night the Rougarou is almost revealed in this brightness and we learn that a really old man - a traditional Métis keeper, a friend, and a card player - is the one responsible for the teaching of compassion, a necessity so needed within all humanity and among the Métis. In this participatory story, the very young learn that life itself has turns and twists; there is always somewhat of a mystery presented in respect to what or whom we might encounter and what we might do on a life path when we recall this meeting. The mystique in all of who we are and whom we become has connections to blood memory and ancestral influence, and it will always be this way (Ziarkowska, 2015; Richardson, 2022). It is within this story of the *Rougarou* (2014) that Beaucage shows children that a life journey helps them learn lessons of kindness and wisdom in the reach for new possibilities of transformation.

These stories, as mine, are based on interpretations of real happenings, familial encounters, or a passing down of teachings from Michif ancestors. My knowledge of the Roogaroo was one founded within mythology until it became solidified several years ago on a hot August day, when a trip to the river with my sister, my son, and my daughter turned into the unexpected. From this one encounter, the notion of shapeshifting has become very real to me—and herein lies the beauty of Michif women and all their stories of the Roogaroo as shapeshifter, and life changer.

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*shape shifter*

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*you don't look like an indian she said  
admiring her high cheekbones  
briere nose, old passport photos.  
you really don't, not like me.*

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*one time, up the river she saw windigo  
in the willows  
near the cree burial grounds  
perched up on the bank  
of the west weir on amisk.*

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*she watched him  
and he watched her back.*

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*you don't look like an indian she said  
and maybe she is right  
'cause i don't shape shift like her  
and i've never seen the rougaru.*

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tahkwahni wapikwani iskwew (Margaret Kress) in *Honouring Indigenous Women*, 2012, 65.





Figure 1: Shapeshifter; © tahkwahni wapikwani iskwew (Margaret Kress) 2023

### About the Author

Margaret Kress is Saskatchewan-born woman from Treaty Four and the Métis Homelands who honours her Michif/French/English/German ancestors. Her role as Adjunct Professor at the University of New Brunswick supports students in the study and reclaiming of Indigenous historical, ecological, and cultural knowledges and systems. As a scholar, teacher, and researcher, she elevates transformative, inclusive, and Indigenous storywork and engages in academic and community-based research to support initiatives led by Indigenous communities.

## Notes on word variation

In this writing, Michif may be presented interchangeably as Métisse, Métis, Metis or metis, and may be used in the plural or singular form to describe a peoples, and in some cases it defines the language of the peoples. The descriptive old word of the peoples was “Michifs” or méтчifs which came from a variation of méтif or mitif.

Roogaroo has noted variations within the spelling including Rougarou, Rou Garous, Rogarou, Rugarou, and others.

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