

Misuse is Abuse 11

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by
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This paper consists of four voices speaking about representation and the Trickster.

Gerald Vizenor, Chippewa, is a professor of Literature at the University of California, Berkeley campus. His voice is in bold type and is excerpted from his article, "Trickster Discourse".

Peter Blue Cloud, a Mohawk, is a writer of contemporary Trickster (Coyote) stories. His voice is in regular type and is excerpted from his book The Other Side of Nowhere.

My own voice is in italics and is excerpted from ruminations and mumblings in my mind.

The fourth voice, on the transparent overlays, is the Trickster voice, also known as Coyote Woman. She exists in all of us.

Four voices, four points of view. Tribal discourse, farting bugs, process and journey.

Narrative wisps, wrote Jean-Francois Lyotard, are "stories that one tells, that one hears, that one acts out: the people does not exist as a subject but as a mass of millions of insignificant and serious little stories that sometimes let themselves be collected together to constitute big stories and sometimes disperse into digressive elements."

The tribal trickster, [wrote Gerald Visenor] as a comic holotrope, deconstructs even narrative wisps in the elements of culture.

I was shocked to learn that a relative down in L.A. lives close to a house and skulks in once a day to nibble dried dog food.

Then I remembered who it was. As a pup once, he played a game of "jump-over-Badger's-house." And Badger, that grouch, was in a really mean mood and just up and bit the young fellow's stones off, pouch and all. A great loss for any male, so I can understand his strange behaviour. But dried dog food? Yuck!

Graduate school, 1990, the series of paintings that I had worked on for six years was gasping its last breath. Panic, self doubt, what if I had nothing more to say? What if there was nothing left to paint...bowls of fruit...nice

landscapes...seascapes? I did have something to say but Thumper kept whispering in my ear, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." How I hated that rabbit!

Lyotard uses the word postmodern to describe "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" and to designate "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts.

I remembered too that it was a very strange time back then, with days of jumping-sun, when the sun does its sky dance. And the season was really hot and everyone began acting in an unusual manner.

Tortoise Old Man, that quiet and slow moving person we all respect so much told us, "I'm going back to the ocean. And when I get there I'm going to walk across the waves all the way to where the sun goes down. Sun will teach me many songs and stories, and one day I'll come back here from the sunrise mountains walking on cloud feet." We begged him to wait a few days, and he did so, being very polite. He went into the shade of Old Person's shelter, and all of us began to sing him a very strong sleep song. And he slept for many, many seasons,

Quite accurate - to a point - things & times
are changing - your attitude may be true
but let it die - most whites don't feel
this way - I find Indian people much
more prejudice than whites & I know
a lot. Even have some married into my
family. Your attitude makes me angry -
you are helping nobody."

Anonymous White

Comment Book Jan 26/92

are we suppose
to help?

Who?

Indian?

White?

Her in-laws?



and when at last he reappeared, he was smiling. "Well," he said. "I went there. And I found out that where I am is just as good as where I had been, and maybe even better." We were happy to hear this, though I myself have often wondered what it would be like to walk over the ocean.

I came to a place in my work where I was starting to question my own involvement. Was I going to make beautiful paintings with my messages hidden among the paint and images? Was there a way I could say what I needed to say without revealing too much of myself? Could I somehow remain anonymous?

Visenor describes the word postmodern as "a clever condition, a narrative wisp in a new language game, and an overture to amend the formal interpretations and transubstantiation of tribal literatures."

Chuckwalla, too, did a strange thing at that time. He announced that he was going to teach us a very powerful song, then he went to the foot of Blackrock Mountain and went deep into a crack. He sucked in great gulps of air and began bloating his body. He grew fatter and fatter, and we went down to the valley for fear of his blowing apart. We waited and waited, and soon the ground beneath our feet and the mountain before our eyes began to rumble and shake. It was indeed a powerful song, a fearful song which few have ever tried to

repeat.

As for Chuckwalla, he was never seen again. It must be that he merged with the mountain at that time. Chuckwalla Woman, who'd been pregnant at the time, gave birth just as the great rumbling began. She had more children than can be imagined and each looked just like their father.

I started to paint on paper, hoping that by working smaller, I would find it easier to take a risk with my work. Smaller paper, smaller brushes, only made me work smaller and more carefully. This was not working out.

I started to imagine, to pull the idea, to stretch it, until it became a narrative, a story. The story began to take shape, I could not tell it in a few images, nor could I simplify the narrative. The relationship between the White Liberal and the Indian was not as easy as it seemed. How could I tell it? Only by "wisps of narratives"...by one instance after another.

Native American Indian literatures are tribal discourse, more discourse. The oral and written narratives are language games; comic discourse rather than mere responses to colonialist demands or social science theories.

I too did strange things then. I was just a young pup, of course, but anyway, I was doing a Toenail-click-dance because Coyote Young Girl was so close by. I danced and danced until

I became very dizzy. I became so dizzy that the whole valley floor turned over once. "Hey, don't do that!" the creatures shouted, as sand blew and fell all around them.

I had the idea, the narrative, or rather wisps of it. Now to find a way to express it without giving too much of myself. How to do it, in a subtle way. A few bad paintings later, I still didn't have it. By now it was December and I had nothing to show to my graduate committee. I tried to articulate my ideas to the committee and the frustration I felt. I was told to try something different, draw for awhile, get away from painting.

Drawing was the furthest thing from my mind, I remembered all the drawing classes I had ever taken. Charcoal on paper, ink on paper, scratchy things on paper... I remembered being in graduate school in Montana, when the Department Head wanted me to learn to draw, remedial drawing, rendering, making oranges round, volume, space, shading, darks and lights.

I was told to do bad drawings, I knew I could handle that.

Tribal narratives are discourse, and in this sense, tribal literatures are the world rather than a representation...It shows what it cannot say and says what it cannot show.

Next, I took my coyote gourd rattles and began shaking them

and singing a very loud love song. As a matter of fact everyone who was present insists to this day that it couldn't have been a love song because it was too loud. So loud, in fact, that the sleet pebbles inside the gourds pierced the skins and went flying all around, covering the ground with a thick layer of ice. I came to myself, laughing, as I watched all the creatures slipping and sliding around. It was very funny to see.

I started to define what I wanted to say with my drawings. As the ideas began to develop I realized that text was necessary. A visual representation was not going to be enough. Text, how could I use it effectively? Would it be handwritten or stencilled? I thought about the written word and the power of published text. If it was printed, it must be true. I decided stencils would be the best form, hand writing would be more personal and therefore could be ignored.

What to say with the text, how to talk about something without coming across as victimized Indian? Who was I talking to? Was I going to use humour? How was I going to construct the text and visuals?

Native American Indian literatures are unstudied landscapes, wild and comic rather than tragic and representational, storied with narrative wisps and tribal discourse. Social science theories constrain tribal landscapes to institutional

values, representationalism, and the politics of academic determination.

The creatures really got tired of it all. They asked that I end it all, all the craziness happening all around. I didn't really know how to stop it, of course but when others have faith in your power, it gives your power more power. So I walked all around until I saw Ground Squirrel sleeping in a burrow. "You!" I shouted, "Stop all this foolishness!" he blinked at me, yawned, looked at me again and said, "Okay, if you stop shouting I will!" So I stopped shouting and Ground Squirrel looked all around then stamped a foot and yelled, "Stop!"

And it worked! Everything went back into balance. Well, almost everything. Because as you know, to this very day, the two-leggeds are still kind of crazy.

A strange thing happened when I tried to define audience. Who exactly was I talking to? I realized that I did not want to talk to a white audience. Talking to them took too much time and long explanations and some where in there the intent was lost. I decided to speak to myself and no one else, that way I would be able to use my sense of humour. I really like to play with the English language and use silly puns. I knew I would get the jokes!

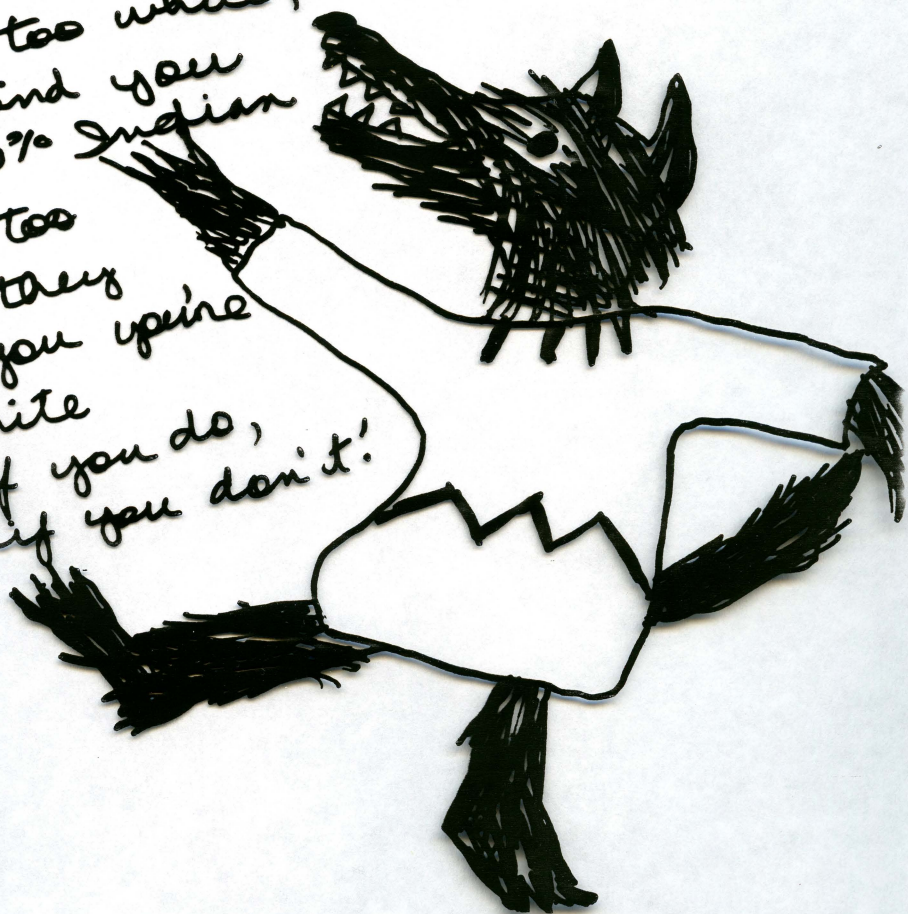
"Are you in denial of the fact that
50% of your genetic makeup is
White. Yes some of this abuse
is still present, not like in my
youth though. — I feel you've jumped
on a band wagon Poor quality of
work for Masters"

Anonymous White
Comment Book Jan 26/92

If you're too white,
They remind you
you're 50% Indian

If you're too
Indian, they
remind you you're
50% White

Damned if you do,
damned if you don't!



I selected large smooth paper and graphite sticks. I felt I needed to work with smooth materials, I wanted something that would soothe my loathing of drawing. I also needed a safe place to work, where no one would see the rude, crude drawings I was going to do. The first four drawings were done in my basement, next to the hot water heater.

As I was drawing and doing the text, I started to ask myself if I was being clear enough. Would the text be clear enough? Would other Indian people identify with the images and words? Suddenly I knew that through a very strange way I had finally identified my audience. Once I realized this, the humour in the text became freer, Indians would get the joke!

Any narrative that predetermines all responses or prohibits any counter-narratives puts an end to narrative itself by suppressing all possible alternative actions and responses, by making itself its own end and the end of all other narratives.

Fox Young Man was sitting by a mountain pool watching waterbugs circling one another, first one way, then the other. He thought they resembled half shells of small, black nuts. They moved so swiftly that it was hard to keep focused on them. The edge of the pool was shallow and the shadows of the waterbugs went faster than their owners, having to climb stones and plants.

Coyote was passing by and came over to sit by Fox Young

Man. He looked at the pool to see what was so interesting. All he could see were waterbugs and water. "Uh, what are you looking at, Fox Young Man?"

I wanted to make the ideas very clear, so I decided to work with images that would immediately say "Indian" and "White". The image of the Indian as a doll, with long braids and 'tribal' dress, was a visual representation of how I often felt while in the work place. A brown body, an Indian employee, not a grown person with ideas or opinions. The image of the white woman was a lot of fun to develop, if you could knock down a person and a culture to a few visual representations, how would you do it? Skinny woman, with a pointy nose, long fingernails, dark lips and pointy shoes. All in all, she was a sinister figure. The first white liberal that I drew, looked too much like the real woman that she was modelled after. Would the real woman sue me?

Stereotyped figures, some text, all the basics I needed to say what was on my mind. In the beginning the doll figure didn't say anything, then about half way through she started to speak, usually with a snappy comeback. I moved the work out of my basement and up to the graduate studios. The reaction from my fellow students was interesting, one got the jokes and would laugh along with me, while I thought up new drawings. Another student put her head into my space and said, "Right,

you're angry, go with it." and ducked back out. Another student just walked by as fast as he could and never looked at me.

The work was angry and funny, there was no way it could be seen as trivial or pitiful. I was not an Indian beating my breast and saying, " Look what you did to me, I'm a victim again."

Comic world views are communal; chance is more significant than "moral ruin". Tragic modes are inventions and impositions that attend the "discoverers" and translators of tribal narratives.

"I'm watching those waterbugs. They sure move fast. I wonder how they do it? Do you suppose they paddle around with legs? If they do, their legs must really move. Or maybe they have underbelly fins and a tail so thin we can't see them, huh?"

When the work was completed and went out of the studio and into the public, I was not prepared for the reaction of the white audience. During the process of creating the series, I had an Indian audience in mind and had not given any thought to non-Indians. (Which is something I am sure my White colleagues never think about...race.) One woman (white) told

me she was shocked by it and said it was like finding her husband in bed with another woman. Another woman (white), a teacher, took her class of students (mostly native) to the gallery to have them tell her that what I had to say wasn't true! Then she gleefully told me that I was wrong.

I thought about the role of the gallery in Canadian society, and came to realize that the viewing public is largely White. As a "minority", "marginalized" or "othered" artist, the expectation of the gallery patron was that I was somehow supposed to explain to them or make the work for them. I was not to speak directly to other Indian people, who do not go to galleries very much. How much of this was my responsibility? I had to re-think the institution and my role in it. It was suggested that my work should go into Friendship centres, band halls and other places where Indians were. All I wanted was to do the work and show it. Suddenly I was having to think about the implications and the politics. My head hurt.

"The comic rites are necessarily impious," muses Wylie Sypher, "for comedy is sacrilege as well as release...We find ourselves reflected in the comedian, who satisfies our need for impieties...So the comic spirit keeps us pure in mind by requiring that we regard ourselves sceptically. Indeed this spirit is an agent of that civilizing activity Matthew Arnold called 'criticism', which is essential to 'culture.'"

Coyote sat awhile watching. The waterbugs really were kind of fascinating. He motioned across the pool to where a stream entered: "See that grass over there? Well it's kind of salt grass that's covered with tiny bugs that live on the salt warts which grow around the roots. That's all those little bugs eat of course, and that's why they live underwater, 'cause if they ever surfaced they'd probably turn into salt crystals.

I showed slides of my work to students, at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, who were taking my Indian Art History class. We laughed, made fun of white liberals, and shared stories of subtle racism. I felt like my views had been validated by my own community. It didn't matter what white people said any more, my community, my audience had said keep doing it. One of my students took her friend (white) to the gallery. Her friend looked at the work and the student told her that, that was how she felt. The work was not only my story but also the stories of others.

Some Natives did not like the work, they felt that Indian Art should be an educating agent for non-Indians. The 'Super Indian' image, of being red-noble-close-to-the-earth, is one that is still encouraged by some in Indian country. Voices that are different are seen, by some, as a threat to the representation of the whole community and not as individual view points. Is the artist responsible to their community?

"I was hoping for something a little more mystical ??? Didn't expect the "Kick" in the solar plexus. My immediate feeling was one of shame + embarrassment as I recognized myself. Good show!" M. McPhail

Comment book, Jan 30, 1992

The intention was not to hurt or
embarrass the white liberal...
they just want to be!



The trickster is as aggressive as those who imagine the narrative, but the trickster bears no evil or malice in narrative voices. Malice and evil would silence the comic holotropes; there would be no concordance in the discourse, the narrator, characters, and the audience, would not share the narrative event.

"If you went over there, you could see little bubbles always popping from those bugs burping. Yes, those bugs are so small we can't even see them. They're called "carbonated buggers" 'cause there's so many of them.

"And those waterbugs, that's all they eat are those carbonated buggers. So, of course they're always full of gas. And that's how they swim so fast. They just fart themselves in circles all day long. You can actually hear them farting if you stick your head underwater, close your eyes and listen."

After the first public showing of the work, white liberals wanted me to speak: a radio interview, a panel discussion, and guest artist. Somehow I felt like I was being manipulated by white liberals, to show how really liberal they were. I started to resent the attention, I felt like my audience was lost and suddenly I was thrown into a position where I had to explain myself to others.

I also discovered that I had deeply offended some white feminists. Some felt that I shouldn't speak about racism

between women because men might get the idea that they were off the hook. Others felt it was not an appropriate thing to talk about in such a public forum. Some naively believed that we were all on the same team and there was no racism between us. How did all this happen? I felt like I was on a run away train and I wasn't driving it. Finally, I started my talks by talking about the comments made about my work by some white feminists, suddenly they had to be liberal too! All in all, once I caught on, I could counter all the stupid comments, by setting up the audience to be liberal!

I wanted to scream at the white liberals and tell them that the work was not made for them. I felt I didn't owe them anything, no explanations, no absolutions and I was not going to save them from themselves. I got tired and bored, same questions, same debates and same audience.

The trickster is a communal sign in a comic narrative; the comic holotrope (the whole configuration) is a consonance in tribal discourse. Comic signs and tragic modes are cultural variations, the mood and humour in a language game; but not structural opposition.

Fox Young Man looked at Coyote. "Coyote, I think you're making it all up!" he said

"No I wouldn't do that. It's an old, old story. Coyote Old Man himself told it to me. It was back when World-Maker was

creating everything. He was working so fast one time, without resting, that he got what's called 'verbatim', which is when you get suddenly real dizzy and start talking to yourself. He got spots in front of his eyes swimming around.

December 1991, I was participating in the Heard Museum 5th Biennial, in Phoenix, Arizona. Twelve Native American artists from Canada and the U.S. were invited to participate in the show. My series "Living-Post-Oka-Kind-Of-Woman" was chosen. It was strange to have my kind of work in the heart of "Indian Art" country. The mystique of the American South-West, where Contemporary Indian Art first exploded in the early 70s, still pulls Indian artists, even twenty years later. Phoenix, Scottsdale, Santa Fe and Taos are sort of the mecca for Indian artists. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. The Heard Museum has played a big part in promoting contemporary Indian Art in the U.S. Being invited to participate in their Biennial was really exciting. I had been to the South-west before but not in this context.

When I first walked into the show, I was struck by how different my work was from the others. There were sculptors, photographers, painters and even a glass artist. Colour all over the place and right across from the main door, my black and white drawings. Did someone make a mistake? My work seem totally out of place... once I met the rest of the artists I felt more like a part of it. They were really interested in my

work and the American artists talked about the lack of political art in Native American country. We were from different tribes but all speaking about our experiences through art.

Arthur Koestler observes in "The Act of Creation" that there are various "moods involved in different forms of humour, including mixed or contradictory feelings; but what ever the mixture, it must contain a basic ingredient which is indispensable: an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension..." He writes, "Replace aggression by sympathy." as liberal humanists and postcolonial interpreters have done with tribal cultures, "and the same situation will no longer be comic but pathetic, and evoke not laughter but pity."

"Now, because he was World-Maker, he figures that he's created those spots for a reason. He was at a pool at the time, just making the first frog. So he took some of the spots swimming before his eyes and put them on Frog Person. But they weren't circling around on Frog Person's skin of course. They were just setting there, but they looked okay, so he left them on Frog Person.

Phoenix, palm trees, saguaro cactus, Spanish architecture and vans. We were there for five days but it seem like weeks. Most of us had been removed from the cold December into the warm

weather of Phoenix. The museum kept us busy during the day and we kept ourselves busy at night, eating and talking.

Surprisingly we did not talk about anything that required much thought. We didn't wrestle with trying to define Indian art or our roles. We just enjoyed each other's company. The museum had us on a tight schedule every day. In the mornings we would tour the facility and give talks in the afternoon and at night endure openings.

One morning we had to give a public talk about our work, fifteen minutes each. The audience was mostly old retired white people, who came to hear wonderfully talented Native American artists speak. In the audience were two hard of hearing ladies, during the talks they would give their opinions of the artists. "Oh, isn't he a talented boy", they would shout out. Will we ever be seen as grown ups?

Freedom is a sign, and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sign; comic freedom is a "doing", not an essence, not a museum being, or an aesthetic presence. The trickster, as semiotic sign, is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious, which is comic liberation; however, the trickster is outside comic structure, "making it" comic rather than "inside comedy, being it". the trickster is agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation, a "doing" in narrative points of view, and outside the imposed structures.

"As an Indian I got a good laugh out of it, enjoyed it, very wry humor... I'm glad someone has finally put the bleeding hearts in their place....

P. Favel

P.S. The work here I'm sure will not be well appreciated by "whites", but Aborigines will get a Kick out of it."

comment book, Jan. 30, 1992

My audience
speaks!!

unfortunately
not one Aborigine
from Australia
ever saw
the show!!



"But he took the rest and turned them into waterbugs. And that's why so many pools of water look like eyeballs, reflecting the sky and having waterbug spots swimming around in them. Yes, that's probably just how it happened."

Coyote got up then and walked away, saying over his shoulder, "Well gotta be going home for some mush. I guess I'll see you again if I ever run into you." So Coyote went over the hill, then circled back and looked at the pool from behind some brush. Sure enough, there was Fox Young Man with his head underwater, being very still.

One afternoon, we took a trip to Scottsdale, a suburb of Phoenix, into the heart of the Indian Art Market...the Horowitz Gallery...Gallery 10...Margaret Kilgore Gallery, all featuring the very best in Indian Art. In the U.S. the Native American is seen as a romantic figure, part of their mythology of the Wild West. The Indians who fought against expansion...Sitting Bull...Crazy Horse...Geronimo are considered heroes. The work that is seen in Scottsdale is a very limited representation of what is being produced in Indian country. Where are the other voices?

Later that afternoon, I had a four hour discussion with Margaret Archaleta, curator, Mario Klimiades, librarian and Jonathan Yorba, doctorate student, UCLA. We talked about the way art works in the States, why Indian artists are trapped by

commercial galleries, the representation of Native Americans and the lack of funding agencies. We talked about Canada and how there is more freedom here to make political art.

The trickster is a comic sign with no histories, no political or economic signification, and no being, or presence in the narrative. The trickster is "nothingness" in a narrative voice, an "encounter" that centres imagination in comic holotropes, a communal being; "nothingness" in consciousness and comic discourse.

Coyote walked over the hill and met Flicker. "You ever want to know about waterbugs," he told Flicker, "just go ask Fox Young Man. He'll tell you all about them."

"What?" said Flicker. "Coyote, what are you talking about?"

"Me?" answered Coyote. "Oh, I'm just letting you know how stories are born, that's all."

I moved to B.C. in January, to work at the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology in Merritt. I was Department Head for Fine Arts. The school was full of non-Indian faculty and they were white liberals to boot. Was this a kind of penance for me? At the same time I was finishing my M.F.A. show. I had proposed to do drawings of white liberals on frosted mylar that were ten feet tall. The only space to work was by the

back door of my house. I could draw about four feet at a time, so I never really saw the giant white liberal drawings until they were up on the walls of the gallery.

The show, for me, was anti-climatic as part of it had already been seen several places before. I didn't really consider that it would cause controversy and of course it did. The writing in the comment book, about the show, bothered me because they were made by anonymous, white liberals. I felt that I had put my name to the work and they didn't have the guts to identify themselves. Indians started to write in the book too, which was really great because I didn't have to defend my work. This dialogue started to happen between my audience and the other audience, it was like the book was part of the show.

This whole experience with the show has been trying, fun, joyful and a pain. In some ways I feel I got suckered by the white liberal and fell into the minority/majority thing that happens. I would like to think that I connected with the audience, that I defined. I'm glad I didn't know what was going to happen after I started to draw by my hot water heater.....

What's next.... another narrative wisp...Pez dispensers?

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