



TOWARDS LIBERATION:

A GUIDE FOR RECONNECTING WITH
A CULTURE OF LIBERATION



FALL 2023

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- 3 INTRODUCTION**
- 5 DEFINING LIBERATION AND CULTURAL ORIGINS**
- 7 TOOLS FOR USING THIS GUIDE**
- 10 CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH CULTURE**
- 16 HEALING AND RETURNING**
- 19 FIGHTING FOR CHANGE**
- 20 BACKGROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**
- 21 GLOSSARY**



Introduction

At Colibrí, we believe that the problems we face and the crises emerging are rooted in a culture that severs our connection to our histories, ourselves, other people, and the natural environment. It doesn't have to be this way; we can learn from our ancestors, relatives, and those who continue to foster strong communities and maintain their kinship with the land.

This is a guide for reconnecting with and walking towards liberation. What we share here is not new. However, unlearning takes time, and there is both pain and healing in this journey. We are here to remind ourselves and re-member what has been here so we can heal, strengthen our connections, and define a loving, sustainable, and adaptive path forward.

This guide shares information through images, storytelling, and folklore. Like so much of this work, it may make you feel uncomfortable. As you read, pay attention to what feelings come up and why.



We call on our friends Coyote and Colibrí to share their perspectives throughout the guide. Coyote, (Coyotl in Nahuatl, one of the indigenous languages of México) the trickster, who teaches us lessons through adventure and, oftentimes, through mishaps. Colibrí, (Hummingbird in Spanish) a joyful creature, will remind us that our thinking is complex. We don't always act one way or fit into categories; rather, our identities and actions are a fusion of our experiences, cultures, histories, choices, struggles, and joys.





For thousands of years, humans and animals evolved together and learned from one another. This evolution and mutual connection is how we survived. Since humans came to the shores of the Americas from Europe, I have seen humans headed toward calamity. Colibrí and I can show you how to reconnect with a culture of liberation.

Ven conmigo -- Follow me.



This guide describes five critical characteristics of two distinct cultures. These cultures, the Culture of Liberation and the Culture of Dominance differ in their ways of being, thinking, feeling, and acting. Within the United States, the Culture of Dominance is pervasive. We encourage teams and individuals to release this culture's hold on us. We share the Culture of Liberation to nurture and rebuild ourselves and our communities.

We share the Culture of Liberation first as a way to acknowledge its prominence throughout our history and our world. We explore the Culture of Dominance as an acknowledgement that it is the current default culture in the United States. We introduce each characteristic's underlying worldview, then we describe how it appears in our everyday experiences. The descriptions of each characteristic are not meant to reflect our entire experience. However, we hope they can serve as a starting point or a bridge that connects you to yourself and others. There can be a misconception, however, that these differing characteristics are always in opposition to each other. Some of the characteristics can co-exist. For every organization or community, coexistence can look different.

Defining Liberation

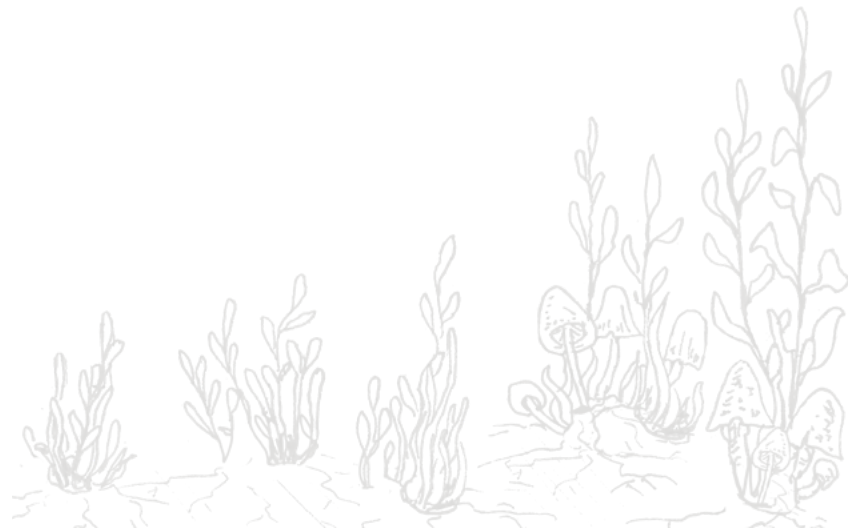
We define liberation as the ongoing process of accepting and appreciating everyone and everything around us, recognizing and acting in accordance with our individual gifts, valuing how we are each sacred, and honoring our kinship. Liberation encompasses (DEI) Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, anti-racism, social justice, and beyond.



Liberation is the ongoing process of accepting and appreciating everyone and everything around us, and recognizing and acting in accordance with our individual gifts, valuing how we are each sacred, and honoring our kinship.

Cultural Origins

The Culture of Liberation has existed across many lands for thousands of years before the Culture of Dominance became the default. The book [The Dawn of Everything](#) by David Graeber and David Wengrow describes a variety of Indigenous cultures in North, Central, and South America, whose culture and society reflected cultures of liberation and care-taking of each other and stewardship of the land. These cultures were diverse and used governance models that were values-driven, self-aware, and adaptive. The Culture of Dominance we describe here was brought by white European colonizers who laid the foundation for many of our default societal practices and structures in the U.S. today. The Culture of Dominance severed our unique identities from one another and with the natural environment, what some refer to as non-human kin. Rather than fostering mutual appreciation, this created a culture of division and hierarchies of control, concentrating power, resources, land, and dignity into the hands of a few. These enforced hierarchies destabilized the organic ways humans partnered with the natural world around and violently imposed European culture and ethos onto the people who lived here and were brought here.



Tools For Using This Guide: Our Bodies Hold Our Stories

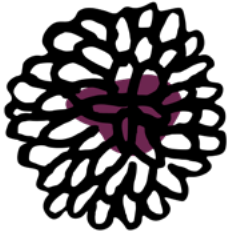
One reason we share our guide is to help our partners to identify trends in their organization’s culture, processes, and structures and to describe their intended and unintended impacts. Afterward, we support teams as they practice **awareness** and **acknowledgment** to take **action** for change and healing.

We must work for change at an internal, interpersonal, and institutional level. Internal work can bring about individual and community healing. This healing begins with growing our awareness, acknowledging how we have internalized both cultures and taking responsibility to create growth and change within and outside us. The emotions, thoughts, feelings, and dynamics we describe are possibilities and are not intended to encompass the entire human experience.

Throughout the guide, we describe ways that the effects of each culture may have on our bodies. In addition to the way we understand these cultures conceptually in the mind, they live deeply in the body as patterns that are passed down over time. In order to heal, we must recognize how they exist in each of our bodies and move through the layers of discomfort they cause. Feeling discomfort is human. The Culture of Liberation and Dominance differ in how they respond to discomfort. The Culture of Liberation encourages us to assess where our reactions come from, whereas in the Culture of Dominance it is common to react in a default way. Our reactions are cumulative; each time we react to what our body feels, we create new patterns or perpetuate old ones.

A tool for this healing is somatic awareness, using the “mind-body connection” to help us survey our internal self and listen to our body’s signals without judgment. This practice allows us to access more information about how we hold on to our experiences in the body. To try this out, we encourage you to use the steps below as you read through and process the guide.





Practice Awareness:

Pay attention. Set aside time and space between reading this document and anything that may be stressful. Build body awareness. As you read, watch your body and its responses. Pay attention to what makes you feel constriction (anger, anxiety, frustration, fear, etc.) and what makes you feel openness (wonder, awe, joy, etc.) Pay attention to where you feel that emotion (heart, hands, feet, stomach, etc.). Note what ideas cause you to feel excited, angry, worried, etc., and, if possible, where you feel those sensations in your body. Acknowledge where those feelings come from.



Practice Acknowledgment:

Assess yourself without shame or blame. Which characteristics do you demonstrate? Are they part of a Culture of Liberation or Dominance? Define your positionality: reflect on how your stories, experiences, social position, and identities shape your access to power and resources. Depending on your positionality, you may have to concentrate more time, energy, and healing in different areas of this guide to change your internalized Culture of Dominance. Resistance to change may surface for all, including BIPOC and other marginalized communities, because we have all had to learn ways to adapt, appease, and survive within the Culture of Dominance.



Commit to Act:

Take responsibility for change. It will be uncomfortable, and you will make mistakes, but it is necessary. Define your areas of targeted growth. Begin to gather resources and tools to support you, and practice connecting with your body and the natural world. Find ways to name and celebrate where the Culture of Liberation is present and even thriving. Build community. Identify people who can support your journey without putting work on marginalized communities. This can come from affinity groups, "buddies," or communities of accountability who are committed to stretching you and can help you share your challenges honestly. Continue to read and learn from the leaders we name in the Background section.



This work is a practice of persistence, one step at a time. You will make mistakes; find joy and healing in learning from them. Those mistakes will bloom into new lessons and actions.



Journal

- What experience do you have with using the “mind-body connection”?
- What came up in your body as you read the Introduction to the two cultures and the definition of liberation?

Characteristics of Each Culture

In this section, we will describe these cultures in more depth so that we can understand the worldviews they represent and how they show up in our day-to-day actions. We present these in the order we have seen transformation occur. This process is not linear. Like a river, it follows in a general direction with ebbs and flows. Sometimes, the current even goes in the opposite direction. We start by looking at our relationship with the individual and the collective. After that, we build awareness of our relationship to change and how open we are to different realities and ways of being. As we realize that the Culture of Dominance is not the only way to live, we can acknowledge what is true and what is possible. This allows us to turn a tide towards embodying the characteristics of fluidity and curiosity.



Throughout time, some civilizations had a Culture of Dominance and some had a Culture of Liberation. Among some peoples, they cross-pollinated in ways that fortified adaptability. Let me show you how some of these can co-exist.





Let's begin by understanding motivational factors in cultures. Who does our culture promote that we prioritize: the community or the individual? I am one of the few mammals who can spend part of my time alone or in my family group. I adapt based on the environment and needs. Strengthening my connections to other Coyotes and species has contributed to my survival and power.



Culture of Liberation: Interdependence and Collaboration

Worldview: We recognize and honor the power of being in connection with and depending on each other. We trust that we can find creative and enduring solutions to challenges together. We experience wonder, relief, and strength in connection to all living beings.

Practices & Structures: We make conscious decisions by considering how they impact others. We ensure that everyone has various means of accessing information and a voice in decision-making. Our plans are shaped by listening to those most impacted, incorporating multiple perspectives. Our agreements and conversations help us to listen deeply and make connections with the ideas and perspectives of others. We treat each other and the world around us with dignity, appreciation, and respect. When things are challenging, we seek insight and wisdom by listening and paying attention to the natural world, the birds singing, trees, starry nights, etc. These moments remind us we are all connected and are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Culture of Dominance: Individualism

Worldview: We highly regard individual contributions and individual problem-solving. We focus on production, the bottom line and individual success. Our value as people is often connected to what we look like and what we produce. This focus promotes the illusion that we act alone and are separate from others and nature.

Practices & Structures: We tend to measure our success by looking at how we're doing compared to others. We focus most on what we can acquire for ourselves and those closest to us. Sharing information, power, and voice is not a regular practice. Addressing complex and interrelated issues may feel overwhelming and out of our control. We struggle to acknowledge how we may also perpetuate problems in our community.



While we believe we must increase collaboration, our individuality is also important. Collaboration and aspects of individualism can co-exist when we define who is responsible for each aspect of the work, our intended outcomes, and trust each other to shine through our individual contributions.



Much has changed about my world. I continue to thrive because I have evolved and adapted. Your world is also changing, and you must embrace that fact. As you adapt, realize that you also shape the world around you.



Culture of Liberation: Adaptive and Emergent

Worldview: We understand that change is always happening, and it's something we need. We work to adjust and accept both small and big changes, both by ourselves and as a group. We acknowledge we cannot control everything and we have the bravery to trust and appreciate the journey as much as the end result.

Practices & Structures: We are open enough about our discomfort with change and ambiguity to be responsive and compassionate to ourselves and each other. We are self-aware and transparent about our actions and decision-making, working to align them with our values and needs. We prioritize clarity and alignment in our mission and objectives and can therefore maintain flexibility in our approaches to achieving them. We observe and explore tension and conflict as opportunities to learn and grow. We also learn from changes in the natural environment and how it establishes conditions conducive to life.

Culture of Dominance: Fear of Conflict or Change

Worldview: We fear dissent or conflict because it may bring about change and challenge power structures or our default ways of being. The world might feel safer when it is predictable or familiar.

Practices & Structures: We avoid certain conversations, tensions, and feedback because they might cause discomfort or impact our relationships and status. We emphasize being "nice," "polite," and "professional" over acknowledging our humanity and more complex or difficult ways of being. During moments of tension, we may easily feel upset, guilty, or ashamed, which shuts down our ability to engage. Instead of being curious and open, we may feel "on guard," an acceleration of our pulse, closed up in our chest, seized up in our throat, or anxious in our gut. Those with less power may go along with this culture to survive or maintain status. The pressure to fit in may cause us to normalize ongoing stress levels.



Too much change can be difficult; predictability creates a sense of security. Identify what is known and can be predicted and then take action based on what is within your control.

Find balance by recognizing when you are over-accommodating and compromising your values and dignity.



As a Trickster, I sometimes make mistakes. This is part of growing, but those mistakes can sometimes hurt others. Healing begins with acknowledgment. Individual healing begins with introspection of how we experience the world, and collective healing unfolds as we embrace a diversity of perspectives and realities.



Culture of Liberation: Acknowledgment

Worldview: We recognize our kinship and connection with all of humanity and non-human kin. We acknowledge the impact of our individual actions, our history, and power dynamics. We accept responsibility and take action.

Practices & Structures: We repair harm by first acknowledging how those who were hurt experienced it and taking responsibility for the impact of our actions. Then, we work consistently to make things right. We welcome the perceptions of those whose lived experiences differ from ours so that our actions encompass a more comprehensive reality. We share openly about how our backgrounds and identities affect the power we hold. We're not afraid to question even our deepest beliefs about how we see the world. We know that opening up can be tough, but we prioritize connecting with our feelings and our bodies when we're tense. We find ways to stay present and open so we can keep learning about the dynamics that help us move forward or hold us back. This can be freeing.

Culture of Dominance: Denial

Worldview: We deny that our beliefs (unconscious or conscious), actions, or policies are racist, sexist, heteronormative, classist, or reflect any systems of oppression despite evidence to the contrary. This denial is driven by our fear that accepting these truths will challenge our self-perception as "good" individuals. In doing so, we uphold and perpetuate America's social system and established ways of living by refusing to confront oppressive structures.

Practices & Structures: It can be difficult to understand or be receptive to others when we believe our culture, habits, or language are the standard. Therefore, we often intentionally or unintentionally, uphold our version of reality as the only one. We struggle to empathize, learn from, or be open to those who are different from us. If we see that someone with less positional power has a good idea, we may act on that idea, taking credit for the idea and erasing its origin. Some of us might reject our identity or deny the oppression we see or experience to accommodate the default structures or to protect ourselves. The more our reality is challenged, the more we may experience physical tension and tightness in our bodies.

Culture of Liberation: Fluid Ways of Thinking

Worldview: We expand our thinking by questioning our perceived limits and exploring complexities in our world, work, and identities. In doing this, we may experience awe and wonder that supports us to overcome our fear. We recognize our histories and identities are layered, intersectional, and dynamic.

Practices & Structures: When faced with a decision, we gather many possibilities. Dissent or diverging points of view enrich our perspectives and push the edges of what we think is possible. We ask for other people's perspectives and needs instead of assuming. We create structures that encourage each of us to express our full identities and evolve our thinking. We notice and question where there are binary or rigid ways of thinking (good or bad, right or wrong, etc.). We recognize how these ways of thinking have a negative impact on our individual and collective health.

Culture of Dominance: Binary Thinking

Worldview: We often draw hard lines, categories, and labels because it makes us feel like we have things under control. We operate by defining what is "right" and "wrong," explicitly or implicitly. This judgement is often, but not exclusively, imposed on others by those with positional power. Those without power may also perpetuate this thinking to gain recognition and belonging.

Practices & Structures: We favor efficiency, checklists, productivity, surface-level solutions, and urgency. When people have different opinions, it can lead to conflicts and push us apart. Sometimes, we might hold back our true selves or our ideas because we're worried that the environment won't accept what's outside the norm, even if the norm is not explicit. When things get complicated, or we encounter differences, it can make us feel anxious or that our hearts are racing. To deal with this anxiety, we tend to look for simple and immediate solutions to calm ourselves down.



Be fluid in your actions while standing firm in your values and commitments. Practice adapting and be creative toward a clear purpose.



Our ability to adapt and survive depends on the limits of our imagination. Most of the barriers that hold humans back are self-created—look beyond those barriers.

Culture of Liberation: Curiosity

Worldview: Our curiosity broadens our imagination of what's possible. We are open to our own ideas and others' ideas and feel the fire that comes from seeking and building with others.

Practices & Structures: We seek to understand, even if what is being shared seems impossible or outside of our experience. We assess where judgment arises and ego might hinder our ability to take on differing perspectives. We openly ask questions, question our motivation or reactions, and investigate assumptions. We establish and sustain supportive spaces and processes (personal and professional development) that encourage people to try new skills, make mistakes, and reflect on what worked and didn't. When taking on big problems or the unknown feels overwhelming or constricting, we practice listening to our bodies' responses and pausing to wonder where they come from so that we can get to the underlying issue. This might happen in the moment or later upon reflection.

Culture of Dominance: Perfectionism

Worldview: We are motivated by competition, hoping to achieve "the most" idealized standard. We may find comfort and safety in control. It's hard to imagine doing things differently.

Practices & Structures: We work towards the ideal standard, although often impossible to attain, even for those who have money and privilege. We are not encouraged to question or make mistakes, and when we do, we tend to feel like we're not good enough. Retribution for making mistakes is normalized. When we face big challenges that seem too hard to get "just right," we focus on what we can immediately control and prioritize doing things quickly. We do more and check off tasks without making sustainable change. This contributes to an ongoing cycle in our bodies leaving our nerves and expectations heightened. And yet, underneath, we feel we are never enough.



Questioning everything can lead to stagnation. We pair our curiosity with action and experimentation, embracing creative solutions and accepting that not all solutions will be "right" or "perfect."

Healing and Returning

We do not intend to tell people how to “fix” themselves. The Culture of Dominance has already tried to tell us what is moral and what is not. This is not that. Rather, we believe we are supporting communities to gain resources and skills to return to themselves. We believe we are enough and have the inherent capacity to make intentional adjustments similar to those made by our ancestors as they adapted to a changing environment. Those who have lived in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) or other marginalized communities are likely to have experienced some aspects of the Culture of Liberation and can more easily imagine and practice it. For those of us for whom the Culture of Dominance has felt like “the only way,” we will have a harder time envisioning change and we may grieve what we are letting go of. It is the responsibility of all of us to make these adjustments and challenge those who have benefited most from the dominant culture to learn, practice, make mistakes, and grow. Unlike freedom, liberation is an ongoing process. We may never permanently reach liberation in this society. Some days we may be aligned with liberation while other times we may find ourselves embodying the characteristics of dominance. Our work is to consistently practice awareness and acknowledge where our reactions come from, then take intentional action. We hope you will join us in returning to yourself and walking the path.



Journal

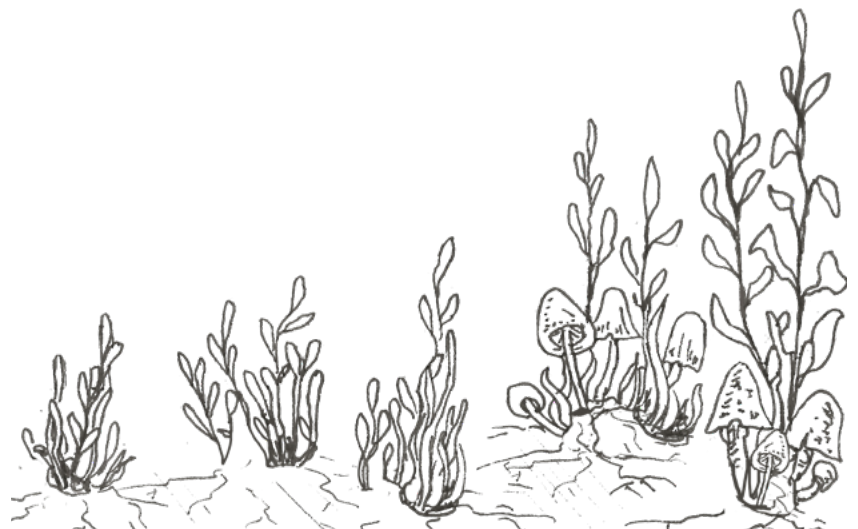
- **Body check-in:** Now that you've read the characteristics, tune in to your body and its responses. Pay attention to what made you feel constriction (anger, anxiety, frustration, fear, etc.) and what made you feel a sense of openness (wonder, awe, joy, etc.)
- **Acknowledgement:** What are you noticing about yourself as it relates to the characteristics? Where are there places where you show up more in one culture or the other? Where might they co-exist and why?



We can heal from the harm done to us or that we have caused. We can go back; it's not too late.

Fighting For Change

The Culture of Dominance is part of our historical legacy of racism in the US and part of our economic and political system. This way of thinking and acting has been used to perpetuate separation among and violence against Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), lesbian, gay, transgender or non-binary, and queer (LGBTQIA) people, workers, immigrants, people who are neurodivergent or are differently abled, or identify as women. This separation and violence concentrated power, resources, land, and dignity into the hands of a few while promoting a feeling of separateness both from other humans and the natural environment. It enshrined a system of capitalism as the only and inevitable way, negating thousands of years of cultures and governance based on principles of cooperation. We see it today in pervasive inequality, gun violence, racist police violence, differing outcomes from the pandemic, political extremism, voter repression, mental health challenges, the destruction of the land, water, and air, and the extinction of other living beings. While the foothold of these oppressive conditions is growing, the number of people willing to move forward on this path of liberation can also grow. We each must take individual and collective action.



Background

Our purpose for developing this guide is to explicitly celebrate anti-colonial and fluid ways of thinking, using embodiment tools to support our journey toward liberation. It also encourages us to find freedom, grounding, and meaning in the practice of de-centering humans as species.

We have learned from and gathered resources from elders and emerging leaders who describe sustainable, loving, and connected communities that have and continue to flourish. Some primary contributors are teachings on [Challenging White Supremacy](#) by Sharon Martinas and Elizabeth “Betita” Martinez, [White Supremacy Culture - Still Here](#) by Tema Okun, [My Grandmother’s Hands](#) by Resmaa Menakem, [The Dawn of Everything](#) by David Graeber and David Wengrow, [Be the Change](#) Consulting, [Other People’s Children](#) by Lisa Delpit, and ongoing offerings and writings by [Nkem Ndefo](#), [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), [Rowen White](#), [Prentis Hemphill](#), [Alok adrienne maree brown](#), and the natural world around us. Additionally, this guide encompasses our personal, professional, spiritual, and somatic practices and experiences.

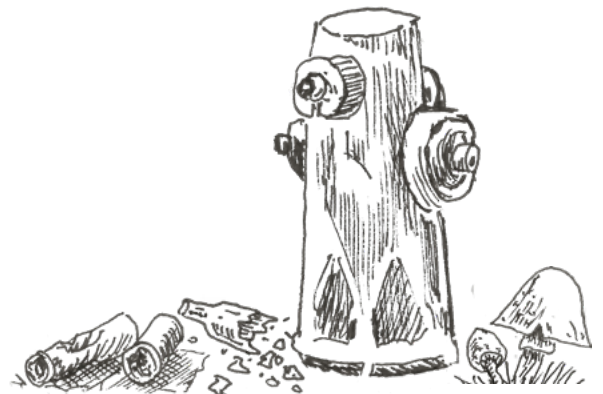
As we learn and evolve, so too will this guide.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for our colleagues who provided feedback and guidance as we shaped this guide: Neha Bangar, Bela Bhasin, David Boone, Makeana Durias, Seewan Eng, Paula Junn, Shelley Kuang, Lauren Martinez, Fiona Mason, Sonya Mehta, Naomi Ruth Boone, Ng Meixi, Laila Jenkins Perez, Ryan Beck Turner, Andrew Knips, and David Yusem.

Copy editing credit to Naomi Ruth Boone.

We are also grateful to Lina Pelayo and Sergio Garrido-Ramirez for the elegant design.



Glossary

Coyote: Coyotes are native to North and Central America. Throughout these regions, Coyote has had a special relationship with humans. The word Coyote is a derivative of the word Coyotl from Nahuatl, one of the indigenous languages of México. In this guide, we share the character of Coyote as it is known in Mexican mythology. We grew up knowing Coyote as the trickster, the smart, mischievous, and sometimes hapless creature who fell in love with the moon. Coyote teaches us painful lessons and helps us laugh at ourselves and learn. Coyotes are resilient and have adapted with humans, even in urban environments. As we wrote this guide, we encountered and heard coyote howls and yips at night. We took this as a sign. Coyotes are resilient and have adapted with humans, even in urban environments. As development in our communities has increased, Coyotes have moved into our neighborhoods. Since completing this guide, we have come to find that for many indigenous people of the San Francisco Bay Area [Coyote is the creator](#). We look forward to learning more about and from Coyote.

Trickster: Tricksters are common characters, often animistic, in human mythology. They are [often portrayed](#) as shape-shifters, smart, humorous, and unpredictable heroes who remind us about the complexities of life.

Colibrí: The word Colibrí means Hummingbird in Spanish. Colibris represent joy, beauty, connection, and action. They are known as messengers, opening our souls, expanding our imagination, and embodying adaptable change. By flying backward and forward, they teach us to learn from the past and move forward purposefully.

